

Stall of the mountain king

After two decades, and having traded text for graphics, **Dwarf Fortress is coming of age**

For a while, **Tarn** and **Zach Adams** couldn't figure out a peculiar bug: why the poets, bards and other entertainers in the new release of *Dwarf Fortress* would saunter into a tavern, completely naked. "It turns out that they had left their civilisation for some reason – and if you don't have a civilisation, you don't have clothing, you don't have anything," Zach explains. "And so when [the game] tried to load them and say, 'OK, what kind of clothes are you gonna wear?', it [decided] they're all naked." A rather important detail – but one that, as the Adams brothers point out, wouldn't be noticed in the free ASCII version, where all you'd see is a blur of symbols, glyphs and fluorescent colours.

These kinds of bugs have long been a hallmark of *Dwarf Fortress*, a management game about a dynamic civilisation that describes itself, not unreasonably, as "the deepest, most intricate simulation of a world that has ever been created". (Other fashion-related shenanigans, plucked from the game's patch notes over the years: "made them care about clothes more", "fixed bug with animals picking out clothes to wear", "dwarf children die from embarrassment at not being dressed at age two".) Now, two decades after Tarn started development on it, *Dwarf Fortress* is being released commercially for the first time.

With such a strong tradition of characterful bugs, it's something of a relief – for players, if not the poor embarrassed dwarfs – to learn that they probably won't be going away any time soon. But in almost every other respect, this is a major overhaul, with the graphical interface, soundtrack and control scheme all being

completely reinvented. The new graphics are relatively simple, as you'd expect from a two-man attempt at simulating an entire reality, but with the same fixation on detail that has always characterised this project. Tarn enthuses that he has already seen "20 different gem cuts" being illustrated, as well as individual materials out of which various objects are made (including clothes, should you choose to wear them).

There's a real focus on improving the game's usability, with efforts that, as Tarn says, "go beyond just being able to use a mouse now". A tutorial for new players should be good news for anyone who's ever been curious but deterred from picking up the game by its legendarily byzantine learning curve. It should

certainly be a quicker onramp than the 238-page book on the topic released in 2012. Perhaps most transformatively, the game now even has an ending – or rather, one other than the eventual collapse of your dwarven civilisation. "If you want," Tarn says. "It's an opt-in end game that's more involved and interesting."

For all these changes, the foundations remain the same. "The new interfaces look like modern interfaces, but they actually live on an ASCII grid," Tarn says. This is why, Zach adds, the dwarves move around by jumping from space to space, rather than simulating the motion of walking, as in other games. "Because it's actually using the same grid as the original game – it just has nicer graphics."

Dwarf Fortress has been freely available to download since 2006, a decision inspired by the earliest days of the Roguelike genre, in the '80s, when games such as *Angband* and *NetHack*

TALLEST DWARF
Despite *Dwarf Fortress's* lack of obvious mainstream appeal, the game has been featured in the Museum Of Modern Art, alongside *Pac-Man* and *Tetris*, and has been cited as an influence on *Minecraft*, *Rimworld* and *Terraria*. "It's cool that [*Dwarf Fortress*] just joins the group of things that have actually managed to have an impact on videogames, at least, and hopefully beyond," Tarn tells us. "It's just really neat to watch it happen."

were distributed for free – and by the limitations of monetising such a game in the days before Patreon, Steam or even PayPal. (Tarn also jokes that, having come from an academic background, he's inclined to "give everything away".) The original ASCII version, the developers are keen to point out, will still see continuous updates alongside the commercial one.

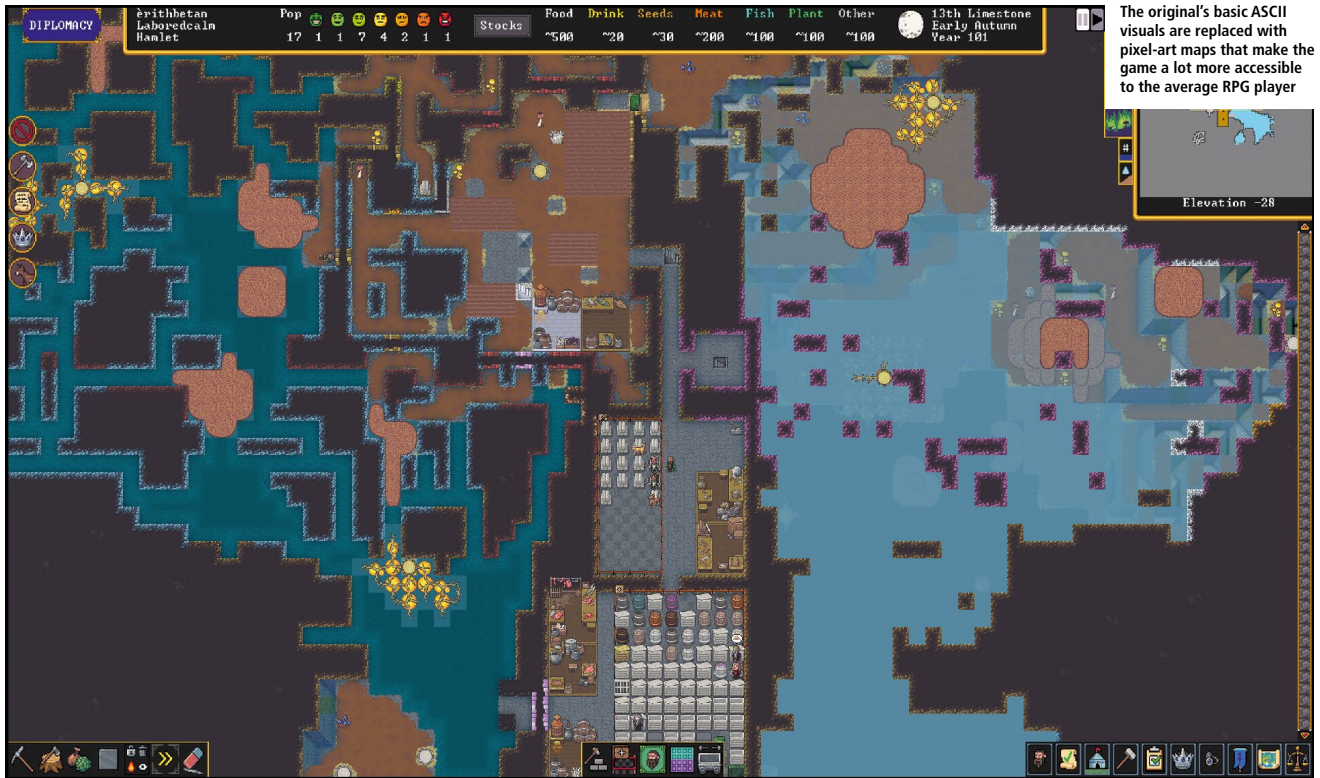
So, what drove the decision to publish a paid version after such a long time? Understandably, a need for firmer financial stability, especially in the wake of the cancer treatment Zach has been undergoing since 2019. "The health thing is a big thing," Tarn says. "The US healthcare system, you need to have money at some point – or you need to have that and an employer," Zach explains. "And it's gotten to the point where I was just not feeling secure." While donations are still flowing in via PayPal and Patreon, Tarn admits that this model can be unsustainable in the long run, especially since Patreon has been "floating ideas about changing their model". The commercial release, Tarn says, "was just another push towards doing something a little more traditional with the funding model".

It's a stirring step forward for a game whose unofficial slogan is "Losing is fun!" While we're speaking to the brothers, we have to ask, what do they think of that particular piece of wisdom? Zach says that it's the ending that gives it meaning: "You learn from it, or begin the next part of the story, then it's fun, sure." As for Tarn, he says that losing to *Dwarf Fortress* – where the cause can be anything from a stampede of were-mammoths to a tantrum that overtakes your fortress – is incredibly entertaining. "In life, maybe not so much. But you can learn, at least. And learning is fun. Except painful, sometimes." ■

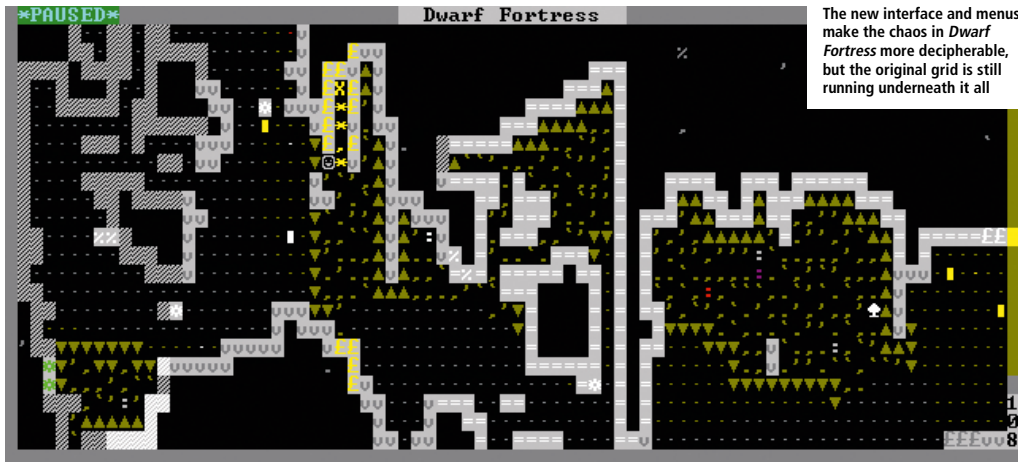
It now even has an ending – one other than the eventual collapse of your dwarven civilisation



Zach and Tarn Adams have been working on *Dwarf Fortress* since the original iteration's release in 2002



The original's basic ASCII visuals are replaced with pixel-art maps that make the game a lot more accessible to the average RPG player



The new, more welcoming Dwarf Fortress embark screen, where players can choose a site for their fortress and assign skills to their dwarves, before starting the game



DEEP CUTS
Revamped visuals deserve some new audio, too

Rather than the original game's looping guitar track, the soundtrack in the new paid version contains 15 complete songs, each between four and five minutes in length, together with 16 shorter tracks, composed by musicians Dabu & Simon Swerwer, as well as Agueda Macias. "With all of the people that tested out the game, the music is the first thing they point out. It's really a step beyond what we had before," Tarn says. "I think that's something that people would not anticipate when they heard this game was coming. It's an amazing surprise."