

Tails Of Iron 2: Whiskers Of Winter

The multiple lacerations, the snowy white but matted fur, the expression of contempt and defiance. They only point to one truth: Arlo, the hero of *Tails Of Iron 2*, is Geralt Of Rivia in rodent form. The similarities don't end there either. Consider the Witcher-like weapons that Arlo lugs around – one-handed swords, heavy axes and crossbows among them. Arlo can also wield elemental magic, casting fireballs and summoning hailstorms to pulverise his monstrous foes. Add to that the medieval grubbiness of the game's setting, backgrounds replete with derelict castles and charred trees. And most definitive of all, Doug Cockle, the voice of Geralt himself, is the game's narrator, his gravelly baritone turning every battle into a scene of solemnity. Comparisons between *Tails Of Iron 2* and the *Witcher* series thus feel near unavoidable.

But labelling *Tails Of Iron 2* a rodential recreation of the *Witcher* is also misleading. For one thing, it's a game of precision, its brand of punishing, exacting Soulslike combat hardly resembling the looser manoeuvrability of the *Witcher* series. Combat here is an exercise in restraint: hack away too maniacally and frequently, and death follows within seconds. Yet for all their ferocity, enemies are largely predictable, as they launch attacks with easily readable tells.

There are three ways to counter these assaults: parrying, blocking and dodging, each technique to be used only at the appropriate moment as you dole out damage. Attacks highlighted in yellow signify that parrying is necessary, whereas a red aura means you should dodge the impending barrage. This renders the combat more reasonably conquerable than in most Soulslikes, but also means there isn't a lot of variety. That said, the rigour is still deliciously rewarding. Encounters deftly perch on the blade of being just challenging enough, without being gratingly so. Save points are also fortunately plentiful, with kegs and herbs on hand for Arlo to refill his health potions.

These things will be already familiar to players of the first game. As a sequel, *Tails Of Iron 2* is more reiteration than progression. It marches along at a similar cadence, with the choreography of battles more or less in step with that of its predecessor. Also, once again, there's regicide and the death of a father figure at the heart of its plot; there's the rebuilding of a battered fiefdom and multiple side quests to complete. To a great extent, Odd Bug has reset the clock.

There are differences, though. A key feature is the addition of elemental magic and resistance, with Arlo's weapons and armour imbued with various upgrades. Gone is the first game's system of creature-specific resistance, such as to frog- or grub-type foes, whose purpose was a tad baffling when applied in conjunction with a separate defence stat. In its place, *Tails Of Iron 2*

Developer Odd Bug Studio
Publisher United Label
Format PC (tested), PS4, PS5, Switch, Xbox Series
Release Out now

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LIVING ON THE EDGE

Restoring the crumbling kingdom of Winter's Edge may seem like a big task even for his sturdy paws, but Arlo is not alone in this endeavour. Rebuilding entails recruiting a ragtag crew of companions, from an orphaned pair of blacksmiths to a chef whose dishes can give your hit points a boost. You'll meet such folk as you seek vengeance for the death of your guardian and the destruction of your ancestral home. And upon welcoming them to Winter's Edge, there's busywork to fulfil, such as gathering resources to construct your smithy and kitchen. Your efforts are rewarded with generous payoffs – you can even adorn the place with decorations, which goes a long way to making Winter's Edge feel truly like home.

offers a minor tweak by doing away with defence altogether, replacing it with a more generic resistance rating, along with elemental resistances such as to fire, ice or poison. Enemies, too, have specific elemental strengths and weaknesses, which Arlo can exploit. He can also cast magic, which is another nifty tool within his stacked arsenal. These are all improvements over the first game's systems, even if they don't dramatically change how combat plays out.

Indeed, this additional depth is invigorating only to a degree. There's poetry in hard-fought victory and – as Soulslike enthusiasts have long recognised – in the brutality of death, but any greater vision seems to get lost in the passages of *Tails Of Iron 2*'s design, as well as its worldbuilding. In reminding us of *The Witcher*, it can only do so as a pale shadow of CDPR's work. True, *Tails Of Iron 2* isn't lacking in charm – take its intricately layered setting inspired by block printing, characterised by thick lines and vibrant colours, or the cast of rodents and other creatures. Set against this backdrop, they resemble papercrafted puppets within a diorama. There's texture, too: in the once-prosperous kingdom of Winter's Edge, you see a huge cockroach scuttling in the background, clearly a sight familiar to the inhabitants, who are unperturbed by its appearance. While battling a venomous centipede, a crimson-eyed serpent slithers by in the background – an ominous sight that hints at constant peril. The world appears to be teeming with life beyond Arlo's personal journey. But the details are surface-level; this is a scenic representation of a medieval tale rather than a world of storied landscapes.

There was an opportunity, perhaps, to seize upon the disparity between the violence of Arlo's fate and the fairytale beauty of the game's countryside to conjure a sense of dread and decay. But the game falters here due to the one-dimensional nature of its characters and quests. Some may chalk this up as a side-effect of Odd Bug's focus on combat, which can be satisfying, even if it is largely about grinding until you can instinctively recall – and counter – your enemies' every swing. It means, however, that *Tails Of Iron 2* is a straightforward chronicle of such encounters. Companions and other friendly folk lapse into the categories of quest-givers, resource-hoarders and shopkeepers. And it's no surprise to discover that this monotone treatment extends across the breadth of its quests, which mostly involve eviscerating beasts in the wilderness, collecting their remains, and trading them for more resources.

Tails Of Iron 2 is held back by these restrictions, which is all the more disappointing given its potential for richer, more emotional moments. It's hard to see the game beyond its hack-and-slash sensibilities – or the grit beneath Arlo's bristly exterior. Arlo may have the grimace and mane of Geralt, but his game needs to be more than a series of narrow squeaks.



ABOVE Companions such as this owl archer sometimes tag along on Arlo's journey, but they mostly deal paltry damage during combat. Still, they might at least provide a useful distraction against more dogged opponents

MAIN Arlo can get stunned by the elemental magic from enemies – shake off the paralysis quickly or risk being mauled to death.

ABOVE To travel between locations, Arlo can ride with the sea captain, with waypoints unlocked when an area's main quest is cleared.

RIGHT A red circle indicates certain types of incoming attacks, its usefulness a tradeoff against its intrusion upon the visual design

