

THE BEST VIDEO GAMES OF 2017



By Simon Parkin December 28, 2017



In a tumultuous, exhausting year, ten titles—including PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds—gave us a glimpse of the spirit-enriching role that games can play in our lives.

PLAYERUNKNOWN'S BATTLEGROUNDS

These are tough times for the thoughtful fan of video games. Adult play, typically viewed with suspicion away from the golf course (where it's justified by networking), the sports arena (where it's justified by money), or the bedroom (where it's justified by, uh, wine?) seems especially frivolous in our put-upon world. As the climate goes haywire, as cracks appear in the patriarchal status quo that has enabled the systemic abuse

and oppression of women and minorities, as the body politic and the institutions that govern it are assailed through incompetence or ill intent, what meaningful role can a Super Mario or a FIFA Soccer truly play in the adult world? A reporter for the *Washington Post* summed up this critical view in May: “At the heart of any banality is an adult male who plays video games.”

The industry does little to answer to its skeptics. One of the worst trends of the year was the increasing popularity of loot boxes, which give players the opportunity to spend real-world money on a randomized assortment of virtual items, from the purely cosmetic (new hairdos) to the game-changing (new weapons). Earlier this month, likely responding to concerns that loot boxes turn children into proto-gamblers, Apple added a rule to its App Store guidelines stating that game designers “must disclose the odds of receiving each type of item to customers prior to purchase.” The sheer commercialization of it all often smothers the careful, patient work of those who still believe in the medium’s potential. Yet this year, like those before it, also gave us a glimpse of what video games can be, what spirit-enriching role they can play in our lives. If cynicism is a poison to the imagination, here are ten games that functioned as antidotes, turning world-weariness into delight.

What Remains of Edith Finch (PlayStation 4, Windows, Xbox One)

A young woman returns to her childhood home on a forsaken island. She is the only surviving member of what one newspaper describes as America’s “most unfortunate family.” Each bedroom in the house, left locked and untouched, reflects the character and, it follows, the destiny of its vanished inhabitant. There’s the child star betrayed by the arrival of puberty, the teen-ager’s shrine to weed and video games. As you discover mementos amid the dust and detritus, you enter a series of vivid flashbacks that slowly tell the story of the family and its demise. The game is an elegiac exploration of the way in which we inherit not only our ancestors’ likenesses but also, sadly, their traumas and taboos.

The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild (Nintendo Switch)

This was an extraordinary year for Nintendo, the Kyoto-based playing-card manufacturer turned Willy Wonka-esque video-game factory. The company's new console, the Switch, is its fastest-selling piece of hardware yet, its popularity driven, in no small part, by *Breath of the Wild*, a reimagining of the thirty-year-old *Zelda* series. In this game, Nintendo, which resolutely (and not always profitably) resists fashions, finally acknowledges the past decade's advances in mainstream game design—most notably the shift to a freeform style of play in which players direct their own adventures. Nintendo's careful improvements on the form make *Breath of the Wild* a paradigm shift, one sure to alter the way open-world games are designed.

Gorogoa (iOS, Windows, Switch)

Many games defy textual explanation, but *Gorogoa* is a special case. Here's an attempt: you explore four hand-drawn windows, laid out like panels in a comic book, zooming in and out on objects of interest and rearranging their positions in order to move your character from one scene to the next. The game plays with perspective in a way that M. C. Escher might have appreciated, though these whimsical mazes have meaningful endings. *Gorogoa*'s texture is simultaneously tactile and dreamy; unlike a dream, however, it will remain fixed in memory.

Everything (PlayStation 4, Mac, Windows)

This is a game about possession, though without the horror-movie connotations. Here you have the power to benignly inhabit anything in the cosmos, from a moose to a pebble, a tuba to a planet. Simply roll up to the vegetable, animal, or mineral you wish to occupy, and with a tap of the button, you assume its form. The camera zooms in or out according to your current mass, which ranges from the molecular to the galactic. The game's creator, the Irish artist and filmmaker David O'Reilly, superimposes

meaning through the use of archival audio clips, taken from a series of lectures that the British philosopher Alan Watts delivered in the nineteen-sixties. The message has a hippie whiff, but there are moments of insight that sound clear through the decades. “If we do not feel connected, as though we are identical with the universe rather than apart from it, then we will commit collective suicide,” Watts says at one point.

PlayerUnknown’s Battlegrounds (Windows, Xbox One)

The game takes its premise from Koushun Takami’s 1999 novel “Battle Royale,” later popularized by the Takeshi Kitano film of the same title. You and ninety-nine other players are dropped from a plane onto an island, where you must fight to the death. So begins a frantic dash to accumulate resources—weapons, ammunition, clothing, fuel, a vehicle. An incoming electrical storm encroaches further every few minutes, herding players toward a central point. The game is compelling not only to play but also to watch, which may account for its phenomenal popularity; it is reportedly the first video game to have more than two million players simultaneously online on Steam, the computer-game equivalent of iTunes.

NieR:Automata (PlayStation 4, Windows)

Designed by Yoko Taro, the closest Japan has to a Tim Burton, NieR:Automata is a scrappy, eccentric game that breaks with convention in fascinating ways. Humanity has taken refuge in the stars, driven from Earth by its silicon creations. Meanwhile, on terra firma, two distinct mechanical species—robots and androids—wage a proxy war through the planet’s overgrown, abandoned cities. You play as a combat droid, sent to Earth to draw that war to an end, either by force or by negotiation. NieR:Automata is, in part, a slick action game, but one whose balletic fights are complicated by the surrounding drama—vignettes that draw you into the stories of the robots you meet along the way (one asks for help nursing its sickly pet moose)—as well as Taro’s restless, impatient approach to design, which leaves the player both disoriented and exhilarated.

Night in the Woods (iOS, PlayStation 4, Windows)

Mae Borowski, a feckless, bass-playing college dropout, goes to live with her parents in the former mining town of Possum Springs, an impoverished community without hope or identity. Borowski, who happens to be a cat, is similarly adrift; she (and, by association, you) whiles away her days shoplifting, puttering around town, and rehearsing with her shot-less band. Your response to the time-waster role in which you're cast—solidarity or exasperation—will largely depend on your temperament and background. This moment of revelation turns the game into something more than its fairy-tale styling implies—an interactive novel, perhaps.

Persona 5 (PlayStation 3 and 4)

Persona 5 adopts the familiar literary trope of a group of misfit children (“those who have been robbed of their places to belong,” as the game puts it) banding together to challenge and expose the exploitative behavior of the adults who hold sway over them. Here, however, the villains are uglier than in most children's fiction—a sexually abusive politician, a physically abusive teacher, a psychologically abusive art mentor. The confrontations are made palatable by Persona 5's structure and atmosphere: it moves to the rhythms of teen-age life, and you choose how to spend your out-of-class hours. Long and involved, it's a game best approached like a multi-season TV series (each “case” takes around ten hours to solve), one that builds into an intricate work of contemporary young-adult fiction with a clear yet unobtrusive moral message.

Super Mario Odyssey (Switch)

Through the decades, Mario—Nintendo's evergreen, unlikely mascot (who would have bet on the longevity of a tubby, porn-mustachioed plumber?)—has seen his horizons expand with each new game. Super Mario Land begat Super Mario World, which begat Super Mario Galaxy.

With nowhere else left to go, Nintendo has, with its latest game, moved from the fictional Mushroom Kingdom to the pigeony grime of New York City (well, New Donk City, as the company would have us believe). You travel to Earth's major cities in a hot-air balloon, on a quest to foil Princess Peach's forced marriage to the antagonist dinosaur Bowser, a consummation devoutly to be avoided. This is achieved via Mario's cap, an accessory turned tool, which allows you to possess any creature on whose head it lands. The mainline Mario series has always been the place where Nintendo's crack designers let their talents show, and Odyssey is no exception.

Divinity: Original Sin 2 (Windows)

For decades, video-game designers have attempted to translate the rangy, electric (albeit stigmatized) drama of the tabletop role-playing game—dungeons, dragons, and so on—to the small screen. Divinity: Original Sin 2 comes closer than any. Though the high-fantasy styling may put some players off, the writing is clever and the combat is joyously flexible. In its most stimulating moments, it requires chess-like foresight, as you nudge your characters into feints and flanks. But it's the way in which the game accommodates invention and imagination, allowing you to test hastily hatched ideas and, sometimes, see them succeed, that proves its most enduring delight.

Honorable Mentions

Resident Evil 7: Biohazard (PlayStation 4, Xbox One, Windows)

Typeshift (iOS)

Mario + Rabbids Kingdom Battle (Switch)

Uncharted: The Lost Legacy (PlayStation 4)

Sonic Mania (PlayStation 4, Switch, Windows, Xbox One)

Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice (PlayStation 4, Windows)

Tacoma (iOS, Mac, Windows, Xbox One)



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Video

Never Alone

Could a video game help to preserve Inuit culture?

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