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CriticalMess.com

#4

#1 (01-05-2026)

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03.03.2025

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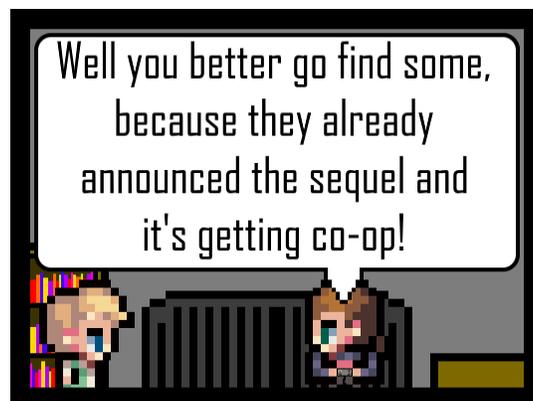
Mess

C.E.Hood.II

#24



I can't believe you still play
The Long Dark. I just don't
have the patience for that
game like I used to.



Well you better go find some,
because they already
announced the sequel and
it's getting co-op!

03.07.2025

Critical 1 Mess

#25

So you're alone in the vehicle and there's a strange scraping noise outside.

My character gets out to check on the noise.

That's probably a bad idea...

What's the worst that could happen?

Really? Okay then...

2 Minutes later.

Your character is being disemboweled by the creature after being dragged far away from the vehicle.

Sons of the Forest (255.9 hours)

You know, there's a special kind of zen you can only achieve by dedicating a significant portion of your finite existence to a task that is, objectively, a complete and utter waste of time. I'm talking, of course, about my 255.9 hours spent playing digital lumberjack in a cannibal-infested hellscape. And as I placed the final stone on my magnificent, pointless fortress, Linkin Park, plays in my head with a moment of clarity: "I tried so hard and got so far. But, in the end, it doesn't even matter." Never has a whiny, over-produced lyric so perfectly encapsulated the feeling of becoming a master architect in a world that fundamentally does not give a shit about your floor plan. So, let's celebrate this masterpiece of architectural addiction and narrative neglect.

Act I: The Premise & The Promise

The promise was so seductive, wasn't it? A sequel to The Forest that would be bigger, scarier, and smarter. We were promised a gripping survival-horror experience. What we got was Extreme Home Makeover: Cannibal Island Edition, hosted by a mute guy, his weaponized simpleton of a helper, and a weird, stalkerish girl with more limbs than a bucket of chicken. I, of course, befriended the three-armed and three-legged woman five minutes in, because when you're stranded in hell, your standards for companionship plummet to "anything that doesn't actively try to eat my face."

Oh, look! A glider! Designed by someone whose only experience with aerodynamics was throwing a brick off a roof. It makes nosediving off a cliff the most frustrating mechanic. My partner and I, needing to cross a continent-sized canyon to get to the next mission so we prepared for a brilliant tactical maneuver that would make the Wright brothers weep with shame. I launched myself into the void and achieved something resembling flight and subsequently dove towards the beach but cleared the mountains. My partner, however, launched himself directly into the loving embrace of a single, strategically-placed tree. He went down faster than a developer's promises on launch day. I landed on the other side of the mountain, alone. He was super thrilled to now have to trek out and meet me by the beach. Needless to say, he was angry at how clunky it really was and how did I manage to get it off the ground and almost glide with no problem.

Act II: The Mechanical Heart

This game's design is a masterclass in psychological warfare. First, it gives you the Architect Simulator. It lets you spend a hundred hours building a stunning lakeside log cabin, a monument to your own rugged competence. Then, winter hits. And the game casually informs you, "Oh, did you know mutants can walk on frozen water? And that logs have the structural integrity of wet toilet paper? SURPRISE!" What a fantastic, non-infuriating teachable moment, forcing you to tear it all down and start again with stone. It's not bad design; it's a profound metaphor for the futility of all human endeavor. Deep. Kelvin, come fix this now!

Then there's the Survival Game. This is a survival game for people who find the concept of 'consequences' a bit too stressful. Don't worry if you ate all your snacks or used all your meds! The magical fairies of convenience will restock every single suitcase on the beach the next time you load in. Scarcity is for suckers. Here, you're never more than a short jog away from a feast of ramen noodles, MRE's and sprinkle in some ammo. The only thing you're truly surviving is the crushing boredom.

Act III: The Narrative Soul (or Lack Thereof)

Oh, the story! It's a gripping tale of... uh... well, there are some bunkers. And a cube, I think? Look, the plot is a series of cryptic emails and radio locations that are a one hit wonders. It's a story so deep and compelling that I routinely forgot it existed until I accidentally stumbled into a cave and interrupted the local "Fingers" mutant's interpretive dance practice. The real narrative is your slow descent into madness as you realize you've spent actual days of your life perfecting the aesthetic of a treehouse that will be seen by no one but the screaming cannibals who want to wear your spleen as a hat.

Act IV: The Krazed Verdict

As a game about escaping reality to engage in Sisyphean construction projects, it is an unparalleled success. As a survival horror game, it has the tension and narrative depth of a pop-up book. The endgame is its most honest moment. Once your impenetrable, mutant-proof castle is complete, the game has the decency to just give up. The suspense is gone. The challenge is gone. You are a king with no subjects, a god in a world of respawning candy bars. Congratulations. You've won. Your prize is a beautiful, empty, monster-proof monument to your own wasted time. You are promised eternal youth by the plot, but delivered eternal boredom by the game design. Enjoy the crippling ennui.

The Krazed Critic

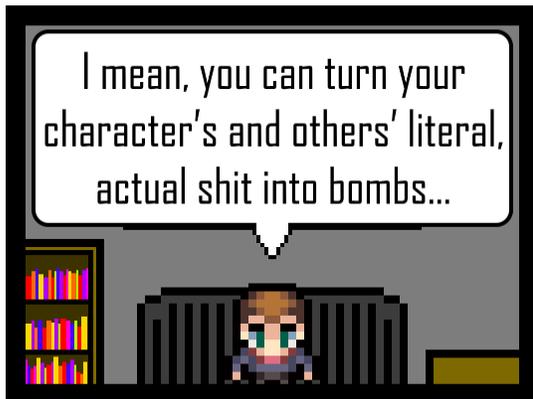
(KrAzE SaRaH)

03.10.2025

Critical 1 Mess

C.E.Hood.II

#26



Payday 2 + All DLC / Payday 2: Crimewave Edition Game Review **(450 hours Playtime)**

The heist that just keeps paying out.

9 / 10

After spending more than 450 hours across both the Xbox One Crimewave Edition and the full PC version of Payday 2 with all its DLC, I can confidently say: Payday 2 remains one of the best cooperative shooters ever made. It's wild that a game first released in 2013 still outpaces its own sequel in both player count and overall fun factor, but here we are.

I started with the Crimewave Edition on Xbox One, and while it was a good introduction to the life of digital crime, the PC version simply leaves it in the dust. The difference is night and day, they're almost completely different games at this point. The console version feels like a demo. If you want the definitive Payday 2 experience, then you should get the PC version.

It says a lot that Payday 2 still dwarfs Payday 3 in player numbers. Overkill might have moved on, but the community hasn't. Payday 3 launched with fewer heists, less content, and more frustration. Payday 2 is still overflowing with missions, weapons, characters, and years of balance tweaks. Honestly, Payday 2 is so good that after Payday 3 dropped, Overkill rolled out a subscription service for the second game just to keep the money flowing. That's not a knock. It's kind of hilarious, and proof that the old dog still runs the streets better than its shiny new sibling.

Mechanically, Payday 2 nails the feel of its combat. Every weapon has heft, from silenced pistols for quiet jobs to LMGs that chew through waves of cops when things inevitably go loud. The gun play has only improved with DLC and balance updates, giving players endless tools to experiment with.

Then there's the music. It's definitely something worth talking about. It ends up making each firefight feel cinematic. Honestly, even after hundreds of hours, the soundtrack still pumps me up like it's my first job. I honestly don't know of any other fps with a better soundtrack to it than this game.

Where the game shines brightest is in co-op. No two heists play out the same, and success depends on communication, planning, and improvisation. You can try to sneak through a mission with surgical precision. Or embrace the chaos when everything inevitably goes loud. The difficulty modes, from Normal to the infamous One Down and Death Sentence, ensure that both newcomers and hardened veterans have plenty of challenges to tackle. And when you finally pull off a flawless run with your crew, it's a high no other shooter quite matches.

Payday 2 is messy, bloated, and still better than almost every other co-op shooter on the market. Including its own sequel. With hundreds of hours sunk between console and PC, I can say it's one of those rare games where the grind never loses its edge. The gun play, the music, the teamwork. It all comes together in a package that's still worth cracking open more than a decade later. Payday 2 isn't just the best heist game. It's the kind of game that keeps robbing your free time, years after release. And honestly? I'm still happy to hand it over.

The Fox - Vulpine Verdicts

(Dameon Fox)

03.21.2025

Critical 1 Mess

#29

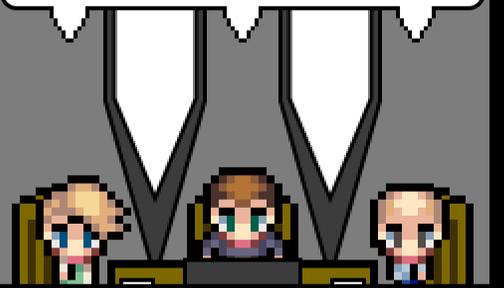
So your character has decided to enter the vent system to hide... And you're alone...



I mean if the alien is over there I'm going in the other direction.



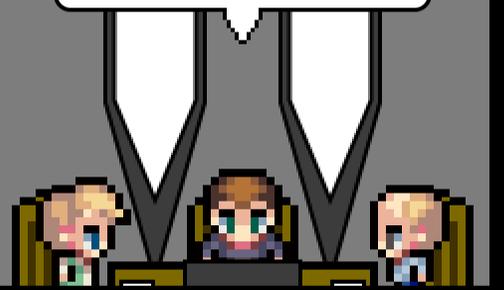
What if there's more than one?



What are the odds of that?



Higher than you think...



2 Minutes later.

Well now your character is unconscious and being dragged away to be a part of the ovomorphing process.



Hell Divers 2

Alright, let's wheel the patient into the operating theater. On the table today is Helldivers 2, the co-op shooter from Arrowhead Game Studios that has taken the world by storm. It's time to peel back the skin, check the organs, and determine the cause of awesome. This is The Autopsy.

Act I: The Premise & The Promise

The marketing for Helldivers 2 is a masterclass in propaganda. It sells you Paul Verhoeven's Starship Troopers: a vision of a glorious, united humanity spreading "Managed Democracy" across the galaxy with overwhelming force. It promises heroism. It promises camaraderie. It promises the righteous thrill of being an elite soldier, a Helldiver, the tip of humanity's spear. The trailers are all slow-motion shots of triumphant heroes standing over alien corpses as a stirring orchestral score swells. It promises you'll be a hero. It promises you'll be a legend. And that is the first, most brilliant lie the game tells you. Because Helldivers 2 has absolutely no interest in you being a hero. It's interested in turning you into a bloody smear on the side of a rock...Why??? for liberty!

Act II: The Mechanical Heart

This is where we examine the gameplay loop, the core systems that make the patient tick. And the heart of Helldivers 2 is a glorious, perfectly calibrated engine of chaos. The moment-to-moment gunplay is solid, sure. Guns go bang, bugs go squish, robots go clank. Fine. But that's not the magic. The magic is the Stratagem system. The ability to call down orbital bombardments, automated turrets, and heavy support weapons from your ship in orbit. This is where the game transforms from a competent shooter into a slapstick comedy of military-industrial fuck-ups. Because friendly fire is always on.

There is no purer expression of video game panic than watching your teammate, swarmed by giant insects, call down a 500kg bomb and then start running directly towards you. The game's greatest mechanic isn't shooting; it's the sudden, desperate, life-or-death negotiation you have with your own supposedly allied ordnance. I have been vaporized by friends, crushed by my own supply pods, and turned into patriotic confetti by a misplaced mortar turret more times than I have been killed by the actual enemy. And every single time, it is hilarious.

This is the juxtapositional genius the blueprint talked about. The game presents this grand, heroic vision, but the mechanics actively encourage a kind of spectacular, collaborative incompetence. It creates emergent narratives of failure. You don't remember the clean, perfect missions. You remember the time Dave called down his mech suit and it landed on the mission-critical objective, destroying it instantly and failing the operation. You remember the time you threw a grenade, it bounced off a rock, and landed back at your feet in a moment of pure, uncut Wile E. Coyote brilliance. The game is a choreographed FUBAR. And it is magnificent.

Act III: The Narrative Soul (or Lack Thereof)

If you're looking for a deep, character-driven story here, you've come to the wrong morgue. The plot is paper-thin: Go here, kill this, for DEMOCRACY. But to criticize it for that is to miss the point entirely.

The narrative isn't in cutscenes. The narrative is the Galactic War map. It's the community-wide major orders to liberate a planet, and the collective despair when we lose it.

The story is what happens when you land. It's the desperate 40-minute struggle against impossible odds, culminating in a frantic sprint to the extraction shuttle while a Bile Titan, a sentient oil tanker full of acid and disappointment is hot on your heels.

Helldivers 2 understands that the best video game stories aren't the ones the developers write for you; they're the ones you write yourself through the simple act of playing. The game is a story-generating machine, and every mission is a new chapter in the epic saga of "How My Friends and I Royally Screwed Up This Time."

Act IV: The Krazed Verdict

So, we close the patient up. What's the final diagnosis? Helldivers 2 is not just a good game; it's a triumph of satirical design. It's one of the few games to understand that true co-op fun doesn't come from perfect execution, but from the shared experience of surviving a beautiful disaster. It successfully sells a power fantasy while its core mechanics are dedicated to ruthlessly, hilariously stripping you of that power. It's the gaming equivalent of being given a high-five by a god, a high-five so powerful and enthusiastic that it also breaks your jaw. It hurts, it's absurd, and you can't wait for it to happen again. It's a must play.

Cause of Death: Death by Glorious, Unrelenting, Patriotic Chaos. And I wouldn't have it any other way.

The Krazed Critic

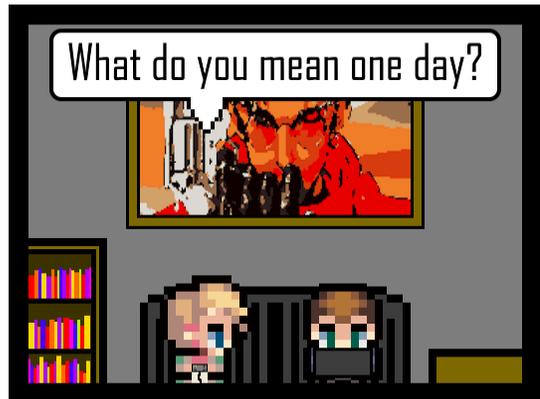
(KrAzE SaRaH)

03.24.2025

Critical Mess

C.E.Hood.II

#30



Mafia: Definitive Edition Game Review (7 hours Playtime)

A classic crime story, faithfully reloaded.

6.5 / 10

Mafia: Definitive Edition is a rare kind of remake. One that understands exactly why the original mattered, and updates it without sanding off its soul. Instead of chasing modern trends or bloating the experience, it focuses on retelling a tight, grounded crime story with contemporary presentation while preserving the tone, pacing, and themes that made the original Mafia stand out.

The original Mafia had an identity very different from its successors. It was slower, more deliberate, and far more interested in atmosphere and narrative than open-world chaos. Definitive Edition respects that. The city of Lost Heaven has been rebuilt with stunning detail, but it remains a backdrop for the story, not a checklist playground. Character models, voice acting, and cutscenes are dramatically improved, giving emotional weight to moments that once relied heavily on imagination. The story of Tommy Angelo's rise and fall still hits hard, and in some cases, harder than it did the first time around.

Gameplay has been modernized just enough to feel comfortable without betraying the original's design. Gunplay is smoother, driving is less punishing (unless you want it to be), and checkpoints ease some of the frustration that once defined the experience. Importantly, these updates never undercut the tension or consequences baked into the narrative. This is still Mafia, a game where violence feels dangerous, loyalty is fleeting, and success often comes at a steep personal cost.

At roughly 6 to 12 hours, Mafia: Definitive Edition is a short ride by modern standards. But that brevity is part of its strength. There's no filler, no padded side content, and no unnecessary detours. Every mission pushes the story forward, making it feel more like a tightly edited crime film than a sprawling sandbox. If you're expecting dozens of hours of open-world distractions, this isn't that game. And it's better for it.

For players who loved Mafia II or Mafia III but bounced off the original due to its age, Definitive Edition is the perfect entry point. It bridges the tonal and mechanical gap between the first game and everything that followed, making the entire series feel more cohesive. Mafia: Definitive Edition succeeds because it knows what not to change. It modernizes presentation and controls while preserving the heart of a classic crime story. It's short, focused, and confident. Qualities that feel increasingly rare today.

The Fox - Vulpine Verdicts

(Dameon Fox)

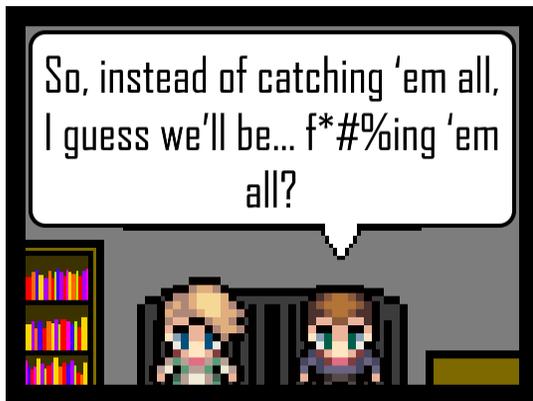
03.31.2025

Critical Mess



C.E.Hood.LI

#32



Deep Dive: Prison Architect

“The Sims for Sociopaths.”

Interesting, addictive, captivating, and fun! Those are the words you use to describe a game about building a theme park or a zoo. But we aren't building a roller coaster here. We are building a cage. Welcome to Prison Architect, a game that takes the modern play styles of The Sims and melds them with Sim City, then sprinkles a heavy dose of for profit industrial complex dystopia on top. It is my new favorite simulation because it asks the tough question: How many toilets can you remove from a holding cell before the occupants start a riot? The answer is three.

Act I: The Premise & The Addiction

The premise is deceptively simple. You build a prison. You manage a prison. You try not to let the prison burn down. But the trap is in the execution. It starts with the most dangerous phrase in the English language: “Just one more cell block.”

You sit down at 8 PM, planning to just optimize the kitchen workflow. Suddenly, it is 4 AM, your eyes are bleeding, and you are obsessing over the placement of a solitary confinement wing because you want it to be feng shui compliant. You convince yourself that one more workman will solve your logistics issues. One more guard will stop the stabbings. This prison will surely bring in money, right? Wrong! This is an economy of misery, and the margins are razor thin.

Act II: The Mechanical Heart

The mechanics are a beautiful, chaotic mess of logistics and violence. You aren't just an architect; you are a babysitter for hundreds of violent pixelated men who have an uncanny ability to turn a spoon into a lethal weapon.

The most essential mechanic? The Shakedown. You cannot trust these people. You have to shake them down and check the place before you wreck your face. Literally. If you get lazy, if you think your prisoners are happy just because you gave them a TV, you are a fool. I did a shakedown after three days of “peace” and found enough contraband to start a small cartel. They had shivs in the toilets, drugs in the library, and a tunnel starting behind the pool table. It is a constant game of whack a mole where the moles are armed felons.

Act III: The Narrative Soul

There is no grand story here, only the emergent storytelling of your own incompetence. The narrative is found in the little bio of Prisoner 402, who is in for piracy but keeps stealing forks from the canteen. It is found in the moment you realize you forgot to build a drain in the shower block and now your maximum security wing is a swimming pool.

My personal narrative arc usually involves a slow descent from “Rehabilitation Focused Warden” to “Iron Fisted Tyrant” the moment the first guard gets punched. Oh, you want to riot because the food is cold? Enjoy the new electric chair I just bought with the grant money intended for your education program.

Act IV: The Krazed Verdict

Prison Architect is a masterpiece of management simulation. It forces you to balance your checkbook against your morals. It is captivating because it gives you absolute power and then laughs when everything goes wrong anyway.

It is addictive because you always think you can do it better next time. You think you can build the perfect, escape proof facility. But you can't. Chaos always finds a way. And honestly? Watching your perfectly designed cafeteria turn into a battle royale because you cancelled free time is the most fun you can have with your clothes on. Guilty as charged.

The Krazed Kritic

(KrAzE SaRaH)

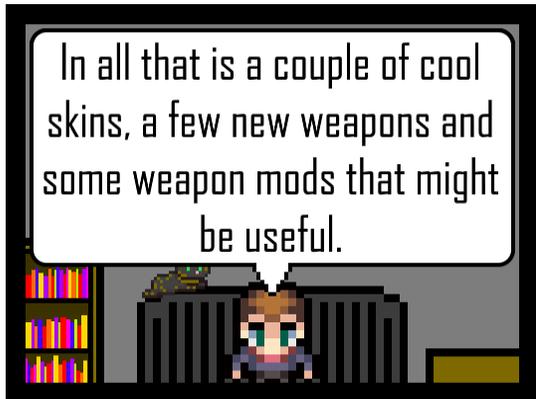
04.04.2025

Critical Mess



C.E.Hood.LI

#33



BattleTech Aces: Scouring Sands Game Review (40+ hours Playtime)

When the OpFor finally fights back.

8.5 / 10

BattleTech: Alpha Strike has always excelled at delivering fast, cinematic mech combat without some of the flavor of the classic game. With Aces: Scouring Sands, Catalyst Game Labs takes a decisive step forward. They have transformed Alpha Strike from a primarily head to head tabletop experience into something far more flexible, accessible, and solo/co-op friendly. This expansion doesn't just add content, it fundamentally changes how and who can play.

What is Aces: Scouring Sands? Aces introduces a card-driven artificial intelligence system for Alpha Strike, allowing players to face off against automated enemy forces without the need for a game master or second human opponent. Scouring Sands builds on that system with desert themed scenarios, environments, and mission structures that emphasize attrition, positioning, and tactical restraint. The result is a toolkit that supports solo play, cooperative games, and narrative campaigns. All areas Alpha Strike previously struggled with.

The Aces system is elegant and surprisingly smart for what it is at its core. The heart of this expansion are the Aces AI decks. Instead of dense flowcharts or lookup tables, enemy behavior is determined by cards that dictate movement, target priority, aggression levels, and other tactical decisions. It's fast, it's readable, and most importantly, it feels right. Enemy units act believably without becoming predictable, reacting to battlefield conditions in ways that simulate an experienced opponent.

"Special Orders" cards change the dynamic of play at certain points as well. Such things as a forced withdrawal, or indirect fire are covered by these "Special Orders" cards that supersede other cards' rules. There are also a few sets of cards for the "Commanders" deck. This deck helps determine certain things like priority targets, or how emplacements act, or how the OpFor uses Battlefield Support at the end of the round. The "Commanders" card has the potential to change at the end of each round depending on certain factors. This can alter the whole flow of combat. For example the enemy side could act more aggressively or defensively in response to losing units or destroying opposing units.

The campaign itself is interesting and based off of previous materials published. The scenarios/missions are well written. The whole thing reminds me of those old days with the choose your own adventure style storybooks. "If you choose this option go to mission 2-B, if you choose this other option go to mission 2-C" kind of thing. There are a number of different choices throughout each segment as well, not just before and after the engagements. Options range from sending out scouting parties to help determine what the players are up against in the next mission, to building emplacement guns to fortify locations before they're attacked. There's also such choices as which assignment to choose next, or how to deal with certain mission objectives such as capturing or destroying enemy supplies.

The players can also earn certain "Keywords" during play that change certain events, missions, and waypoints later on depending on the choices they make. This ensures no two campaigns will ever be the same. In fact most playthroughs will only have you going through a fraction of the 20+ missions included. None of it is too complicated, but it ends up working very well.

There is also a “Waypoint” system that triggers different story based events at certain times. About a third of these “Waypoints” are in your favor, a third are in the enemies favor, and the rest are more neutral in nature. Various events like taking damage from stepping on a landmine, to the enemy mechs having seen better days and are taking a point of automatic damage due to wear of the desert. Sometimes this feels cheap, sometimes it makes sense or works in your favor enough that it seems balanced to a degree.

One of the biggest successes of Aces: Scouring Sands is how approachable it is. New players can jump in with minimal setup, while veterans will appreciate how easily it slots into existing collections and campaigns. You don't need anything else to play through the prewritten Aces: Scouring Sands campaign besides the core Battletech: Alpha Strike box set. The mechs that come in the Aces set end up being the enemy OpFor's Jade Falcons. While the mechs in the core Alpha Strike box act as the mechs you can use yourself, in game, as a mercenary company. This is nice because most people that would be interested should already have the Alpha Strike box set. If you don't you should go get it now...

After many games, both small and large, I can say that the system scales well. Larger forces don't bog the game down, which keeps Alpha Strike's signature speed intact. Even the systems in place for in game bookkeeping, such as training/hiring hero pilots and mech rearmament/maintenance/repairs, are all very simple and light mechanically. But they all work very well for what they are. This system really is a game changer for solo players and those looking to play with friends, not against them.

BattleTech Alpha Strike: Aces Scouring Sands is more than an expansion, it's a missing puzzle piece. By introducing a smart, flexible AI system and pairing it with thematic, well designed scenarios, Catalyst has dramatically expanded Alpha Strike's appeal. Whether you're a solo player, a co-op tactician, or a longtime BattleTech fan looking for ways to get even more mechs on the table, this is an easy recommendation. Aces: Scouring Sands proves that Alpha Strike didn't need to slow down to go deeper, it just needed an opponent that can fight back.

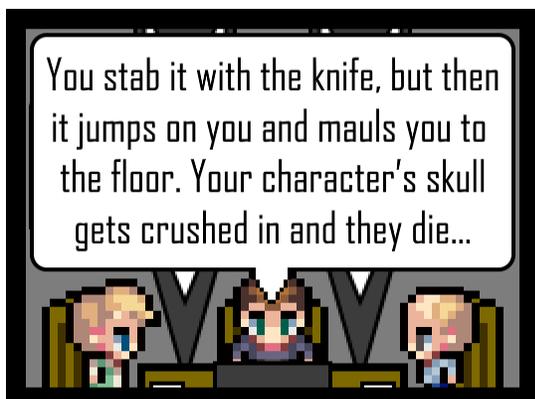
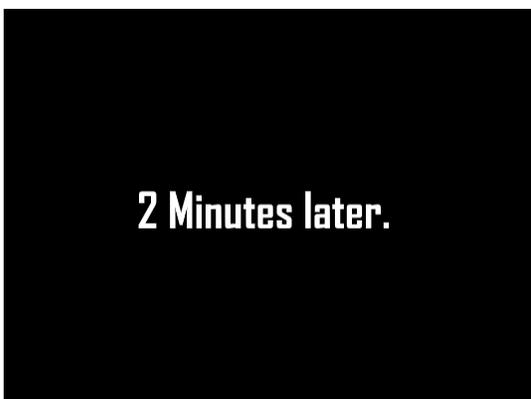
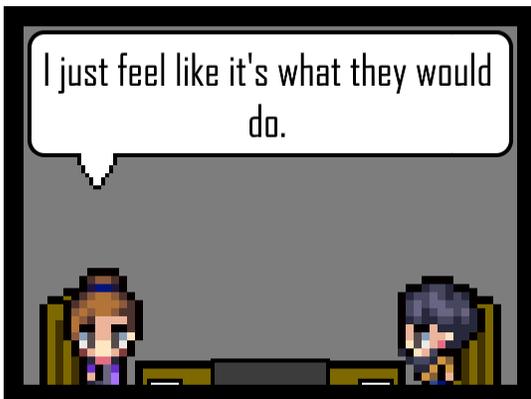
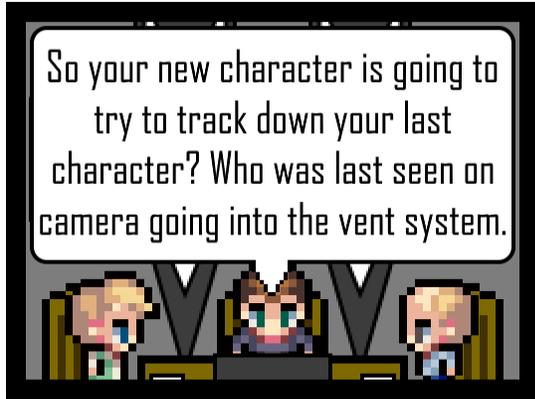
The Fox - Vulpine Verdicts

(Dameon Fox)

05.02.2025

Critical 1 Mess

#41



Fallout 76 + Burning Springs Game Review (700+ hours Playtime)

From cautionary tale to genuine comeback.

8 / 10

Seven years ago, Fallout 76 launched as one of the most infamous releases in modern gaming. Buggy, empty, and often frustrating, it felt like a bold experiment released far too early. Fast-forward to today. With years of updates, expansions, and now Burning Sands Fallout 76 is almost unrecognizable from its launch version. Not perfect, but undeniably improved, and in many ways, genuinely good.

At launch, Appalachia felt lonely in the worst way. The absence of human NPCs made the world feel static, with terminals and holotapes doing far too much narrative heavy lifting. Over time, Bethesda corrected course. Expansions like Wastelanders and Steel Dawn brought life back into the world, slowly adding npcs that have migrated back into the area with their own quests. Burning Sands builds on that foundation rather than trying to reinvent it. Now, Appalachia feels inhabited. Full of factions, stories, and reasons to explore. The game finally feels like a Fallout world instead of a Fallout-themed experiment.

Burning Sands doesn't try to shock players with radical changes. Instead, it leans into what Fallout 76 now does best: environmental storytelling, quest-driven exploration, and flexible character builds. The new content fits naturally into the existing map and systems, offering fresh locations, enemies, and challenges without disrupting the flow longtime players have settled into. That restraint is a strength. Rather than feeling like a detached add-on, Burning Sands feels like the next chapter in a world that's finally confident in what it is.

Combat, crafting, and progression have all been smoothed out significantly over the years. The perk card system had a major overhaul since its initial inception, builds now feel more meaningful. Many small quality-of-life improvements have also helped smooth out some of the experience. Inventory management is still very much a Fallout problem, and I'm guilty of having a Fallout First subscription to alleviate this issue.

The multiplayer aspect, once the game's most controversial feature, now feels like an optional enhancement rather than a burden. You can team up for events, trade, or just coexist peacefully, but solo players can comfortably experience most of the game without friction. The addition of casual teams is also a great benefit to all, even those that prefer to play alone.

The most impressive thing about Fallout 76 isn't any single expansion, it's the long-term commitment to fixing what was broken. Compared to its launch state, today's version is richer, more stable, and far more enjoyable. Burning Sands is proof that Bethesda understands what players want from this game now: more Fallout, fewer gimmicks. The addition of new events, legendaries, enemies, locations, quests, and items are all welcome additions to the game at this point. I've heard some complain about the difficulty of the new enemies in the expansion, but I feel like that's justified and something people have been asking for. I've also heard complaints about a lack of content, which I don't agree with at all. Bethesda has stated that more content will come to the new area in the future. So at the moment I'm optimistic about the future of Fallout 76. This isn't the Fallout some fans originally wanted, but it has grown into something worthwhile in its own right.

Fallout 76 in 2025 is a redemption story few games ever get to tell. With Burning Sands, it stands as a reminder that even deeply flawed launches don't have to define a game forever. If you bounced off it years ago, it's worth another look. And if you're jumping in for the first time,

you'll find a Fallout experience that's finally earned its place in the series. Fallout 76 may have started as a wasteland, but seven years later, it's a world worth surviving in.

The Fox - Vulpine Verdicts

(Dameon Fox)



