Return to Union City to take down the fake Utopia.

CYBERPUNK INDIE ADVENTURE

Beyond a Steel Sky

One of the great '90s adventures reimagined

ANYONE WHO'S BEEN playing PC games for 26 years will have come across *Beneath a Steel Sky*, the cyberpunk adventure from 1994 that set the scene for so much that came after it. At the peak of mid-'90s puzzling, *Beneath* had a wise-cracking robot, a totalitarian regime, and much to say about divisions in society.

That a sequel should come along after so much time had passed is unexpected, but certainly not unwelcome. It's come with some upgrades too—an Unreal 4 makeover that allows Dave Gibbons's comic book art to really shine, and the change from point-n-click to WASD controls is the right decision, but what's really surprising is how fresh and relevant this return to Union City is.

Robert Foster is from the Gap, the red Australian desert outside the few remaining super cities. Earth has undergone an unspecified disaster, and all those not inside a city are looked upon as savages. In reality, they might be the sensible people, because Union City, although ostensibly run by the benign Council, is a nest of problems.

First of all there's its structure: The city's towers are divided by social class, with industry and recycling banished to the tops of the towers while the lower levels are the domain of day spas, aspiration parties, and bars that serve only the local soda, called "Spankles." People wander around with fixed grins on their faces, which is no wonder, as they're constantly being monitored. A system known as "Qdos" assigns value to their actions, such as turning up for work and taking part in daily voting, and their social standing is calculated from the results.

Foster, who has returned to the city he left 26 years ago on the trail of some missing children, soon sets himself up with a counterfeit ID and a hacking device, and begins taking the system down from the inside by manipulating electronic information and the people he meets. Between trips to cyberspace he discovers the monstrous truth behind all the smiles, and the crimes of those in charge who are determined to keep things "happy."

Despite being deep in the shadow of the 1994 game—to the extent of having a museum dedicated to the world it depicted and sly references buried in its dialog trees—*Beyond* manages to find enough originality to break out of the darkness. Tearing down an outwardly utopian society turns out to be just as much fun as it was to set one up in the previous game, and for a game with no combat and very few opportunities to die, the stakes feel high enough to matter.

Puzzles rarely step over into impossible obscurity, although there's one at the beginning that will have many reaching for the comprehensive hint system. Near the end of the game they branch into the mathematical, particularly in the way you subvert the Qdos system, but you spend much of the game examining photos, locating toys, blowing up signs, and hiding from homicidal droids.

Returning to Union City after so much time away could have been a difficult marriage between ancient game design and modern gamers, but *Beyond* is instead a joyous experience, an adventure game tailor-made for 2020. **–IAN EVENDEN**

VERDICT

8

Beyond a Steel Sky

⊞ COSMOPOLITAN Future-set adventure with plenty of investigation and sneering bad guys.

⊟ OLD FASHIONED Some obscure puzzles; has some bugs to fix; occasional obvious lapses in logic.

⧉ RECOMMENDED SPECS CPU, i5 3470 / FX-8350. RAM, 6GB. GPU, GTX 970 / R9 280X.

$35, https://revolution.co.uk, not rated.

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