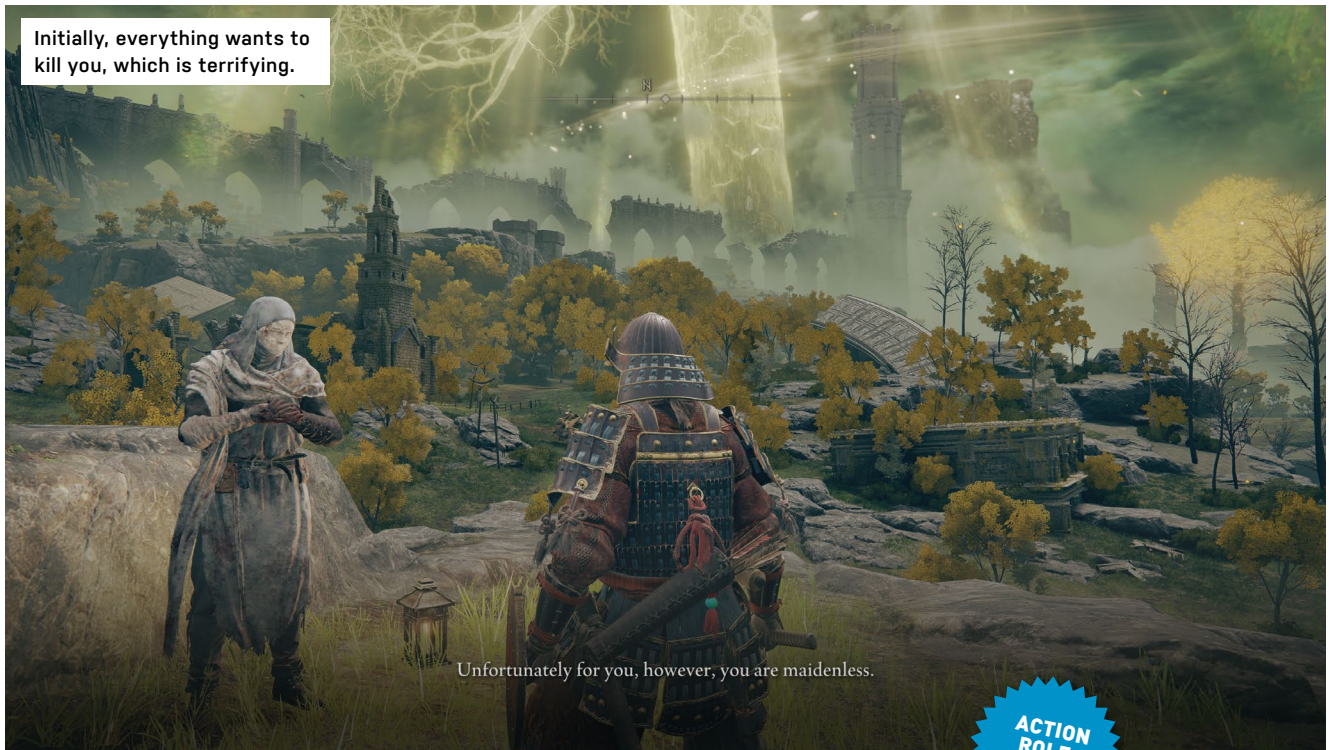


Initially, everything wants to kill you, which is terrifying.



Unfortunately for you, however, you are maidenless.

**ACTION
ROLE-
PLAYING**

Elden Ring

A game of souls and fire

LET'S GET THE elephant in the room out of the way first. *Elden Ring* is a Souls game. FromSoftware's string of action RPGs have a reputation for being brutally hard and unforgiving. From the original *Demon's Souls* in 2009, via the main *Dark Souls* trilogy and Eldritch spin-off *Bloodborne*, players have thrown themselves against the twin terrors of a game world designed to make them suffer, and gigantic bosses with matching health bars built to hammer home the point. Sometimes literally.

However, *Elden Ring* sees the Souls game, previously a *Metroidvania*-like dungeon-crawl that offered little sympathy to the underpowered character (or even those who found the controller a bit awkward to use) take a new approach. There's nothing as scandalous as an Easy mode, but the open-world setting does allow you to pick and choose who you fight and when, plus you can now run away more easily. Still, you move through this game in much the same way you did the others, pulling vague snippets of lore out of it as you give overpowered monsters a good thumping using nothing but your own skill and the tools you've been given.

There's a beautiful example of this just as you crawl out of the tutorial area and

into the game world proper. A knight in fabulous armor on a golden horse patrols up and down. You can see him past the site of grace (save point) and the NPC who mumbles something vague to greet you. Depending on which character class you've chosen, you may be naked with a pot on your head, or you may be in full samurai armor with a katana. It doesn't matter. That knight is going to beat you into the grass over and over again.

You don't have to fight it. That's the lesson it's been placed there to teach. Far better to circle round, kill some animals, pick on a soldier or two that's closer to your level. *Elden Ring* isn't a Ubisoft game. There's no rash of objective markers, enemies don't telegraph their level with a number above their heads. You can't even pause the game without a mod or fishing around in menus. Eventually, you'll get a horse to make traversal faster and some boss fights easier, but initially, you don't know where you're going and everything wants to kill you—it's terrifying, especially for a newcomer.

And you're right to be terrified, because FromSoftware has been making games for a long time, and will use the assumptions you've built up from playing other games against you. Take the

Twinblade. It's a really useful early-game sword for Strength-based characters, but you'd never know where to find it unless you Googled. It's just in a chest in an unmarked location. So the developers have placed another treasure chest nearby, which is a trap that teleports you to a cave full of tough enemies you can't fast travel out of.

ENORMOUS LANDS

The fast travel system is essential because the Lands Between, as the setting is portentously called, is enormous. It's as crammed with things to do as any *Assassin's Creed*, with something to fight, or a character to speak to, around every corner. Our favorites include the Pope Tortoise, or Miriel, Pastor of Vows; the smithing master with horns growing out of his skin, and the NPC who offers to hug you, nipping off a bit of your max HP as she does so.

Much has been made of the involvement of George R. R. Martin in the creation of the game's lore, but you'd be hard-pressed to find a trace of the occasional novelist beyond the four main antagonists' names beginning with G, R, R, and M. Martin's most famous world was a generic fantasy setting in which characters behaved



The knight on a golden horse is there to teach you a lesson.



Like *Dark Souls*, there are wolves with swords here.



Elden Ring's open world is a grand project elegantly resolved.



Don't fight everything! Pick on soldiers close to your level.

realistically, and therefore dreadfully, to one another, but here there's little sense of a society or a hierarchy at work. There are lots of soldiers, sure, even some foes who use frost powers, and a whole group called the Night's Cavalry. But it's hard to see a single mind behind the characters with multiple arms grafted to their bodies, spear-wielding skeletal birds, and a fire giant called 'Fire Giant'. Who came up with that one?

There's something else at work too, *Elden Ring* acts as a greatest hits compilation of moments that have gone before from the *Dark Souls* games. There's a wolf with a sword you may recognize, a poisoned swamp you might not want to get lost in, the sites of grace are very much like the bonfires of the past. It even reuses its own character models, palette-swapping them and mixing up moves.

All the while you're playing, especially at the start, you'll see ghosts flitting about. These, as long as your PC is connected to the internet and you haven't opted to play completely offline, are the shades of other players. What they're doing there isn't fully explained, but they're key to the game's multiplayer system. The first thing you notice are the notes left everywhere,

messages from other players explaining what's ahead... or more likely trying to send you in the wrong direction or into the teeth of a ferocious boss.

DISTRACTION NOTES

Almost every creature in the game now has a player note in front of it calling it a dog. There are hints about breakable walls and secret areas where none exist. Thanks to the automatic censorship, you'll frequently find notes that read simply 'but hole'. Safe areas have notes warning of bosses ahead, holes have notes encouraging you to jump in. The real multiplayer is the summoning system, which allows you to call for help with bosses if you're getting overwhelmed, but the *Elden Ring* community, even in the first few days after launch when we were playing, has both a sense of humor and a liking for player suffering that mesh nicely with FromSoftware's.

Of course, it's not perfect. As we played, the amount of stuttering as textures were loaded into graphics memory was noticeable. A fix is promised, but there are deeper problems including a lack of accessibility options, few PC-specific graphics settings, UI quirks such as opening and closing the map screen using

different buttons. Then there's the way being dropped into an open world full of hostiles with no idea where you're going beyond a vague story intro about a shattered ring makes you feel.

But persevere, and the game has plenty of great sights to show you. Not only is the open-world beautifully made, but its inhabitants are also full of grandeur and imagination—the way bosses draw their weapons is a particular highlight. *Elden Ring* has become beloved of games journalists and players for a reason, sparking hundreds of online pages of discourse, analysis, and opinion. It's a grand project elegantly resolved, and it's not often that we see many games of this quality. —IAN EVENDEN

VERDICT
9

Elden Ring

BOSS FIGHT Gorgeous open world; lots of interesting things to fight and kill.

BOSS KEY A lack of direction; performance issues; can be very difficult.

RECOMMENDED SPECS CPU, i7 8700K / Ryzen 5 3600X. RAM, 16GB. GPU, GTX 1070 / RX Vega 56.

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