

In the big man's absence, Robin is at the helm of this ARPG.



**ACTION
ROLE-
PLAYING
GAME**

Gotham Knights

The latest Batman(ish) game keeps it in the family

A BATMAN GAME without Batman is a bit of a hard sell. Perennial sidekick Robin may be strong enough to lead the Teen Titans, but can he helm an ARPG? Robin (the Tim Drake version) is joined by Nightwing, Red Hood, and Batgirl (Barbara Gordon), and can be played in online co-op. Batman may be absent, but there's no shortage of vigilantes to take his place.

While *Gotham Knights* might look and sound like it comes from *Batman: Arkham Asylum* developer Rocksteady Studios, it's not that either. This game was made by WB Games Montreal, the developer behind *Batman: Arkham Origins*.

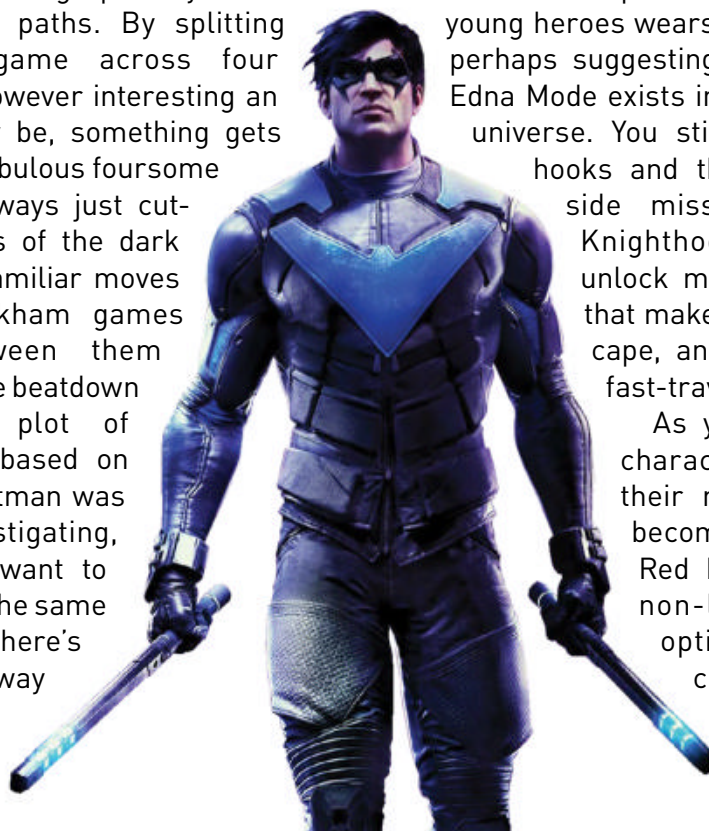
Jim Gordon's dead too, though exactly how terminal death can really be when you're a famous comic-book hero is a matter open to question. This leaves Gotham City open to a criminal takeover from the usual ludicrously named suspects, this time including the Court of Owls, a secret society of wealthy sociopaths intent on taking over the city with undead soldiers, which is as much urban myth as world-controlling supervillain conglomerate until proven by our heroes to be very real indeed. The League of Shadows is involved too, along with The Penguin, Mr. Freeze, multiple Man-Bats, and more familiar faces.

There's a lot going on and a change in priorities has turned the game from an action-adventure to an action-focused RPG, with an emphasis on leveling up and improving stats. Here, the young heroes make more sense than Batman being weakened at the beginning of the game.

In the big man's absence, the four junior crusaders attempt to take back the streets of Gotham in time-honored fashion—by beating up everyone who crosses their paths. By splitting a Batman game across four characters, however interesting an idea that may be, something gets diluted. The fabulous foursome are in many ways just cut-down versions of the dark knight, with familiar moves from the Arkham games divided between them (Batgirl has the beatdown move). The plot of the game is based on something Batman was already investigating, and they all want to fight crime in the same way he did. There's no getting away from the Bat.

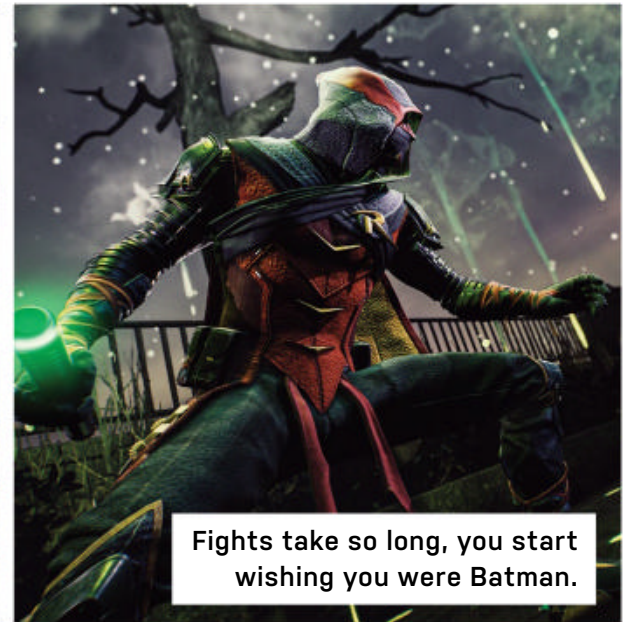
In the beginning, before you've had a chance to start unlocking their skill trees, all that differentiates the characters is their size and color (though Nightwing looks so much like Trent Reznor that you expect industrial metal to break out any second). One of the best things about the Arkham games, which date back to 2009, was Batman's cape snapping out behind him as he went for a glide between rooftops—the fact none of our young heroes wears one is a travesty, perhaps suggesting *The Incredibles'* Edna Mode exists in the DC extended universe. You still have grappling hooks and the Batcycle, plus side missions known as Knighthood Quests to unlock modes of transport that make up for the lack of cape, and you can unlock fast-travel points.

As you progress, the characters grow into their roles, with Robin becoming stealthy and Red Hood a tank with non-lethal ranged options, and you can return to the central Belfry





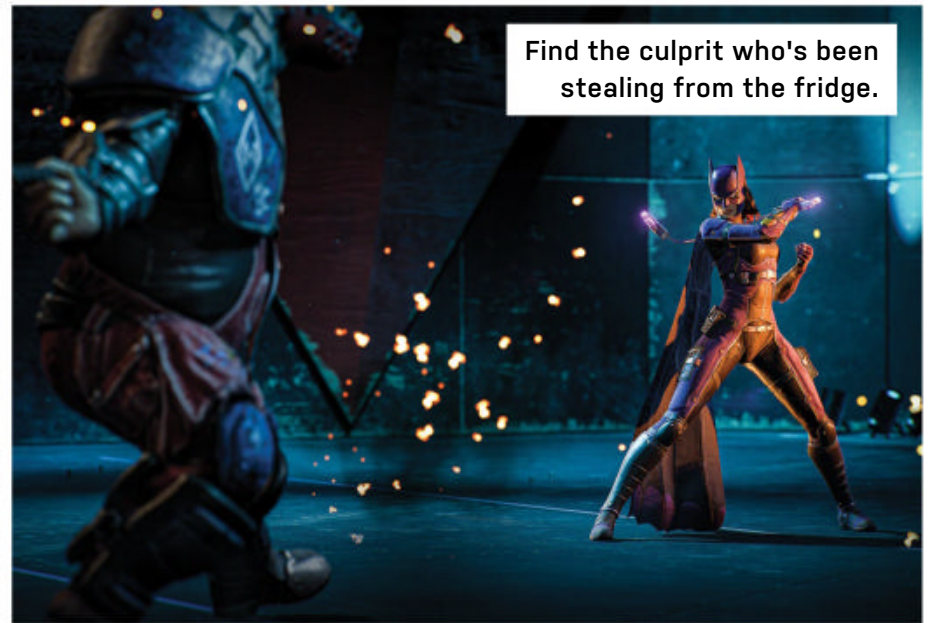
Hitting criminals until they're sorry—Batman's legacy lives on.



Fights take so long, you start wishing you were Batman.



A bizarre dancing game involving Red Hood and lots of green mist.



Find the culprit who's been stealing from the fridge.

location (a second Batcave Batman didn't tell anyone about) to swap characters if you find yourself in the wrong body. Once there, you can change costumes (a huge range is available for each character and the Batcycle, with outfits based on comic-book appearances) and weapons, as well as craft stat-improving accessories and play *Spy Hunter* on an arcade cabinet.

You also get to read our heroes' emails, which try to broaden their characters by portraying them as a bunch of roommates. Someone's stealing from the fridge, Nightwing likes annoying Batgirl, Robin wants to set up a podcast, and Red Hood plays a dancing game with green mist spraying from his hands. It's meant to be a manifestation of his trauma from a backstory that involves being brought back to life but comes across as bizarre.

Despite the four characters' emerging differences and the fact they level up together no matter which one you use, it's possible to progress through the game with the character you like the most. Nightwing makes a good all-rounder and co-op team-ups make the most sense during the supervillain boss fights where, despite the overlap, their abilities interlock in the classic interplay between healer and damage sponge, whoever is

being attacked concentrating on dodges while the other player brings the hurt.

Otherwise, there's a lot of punching goons in the face, and the game brings in the undead to provide a source of infinite fist-fodder with little individuality. You pick your character and head out on patrol in the rainy darkness, continuing Batman's legacy of hitting individual criminals until they're sorry rather than actually doing something about the systemic issues that forced them into crime in the first place.

While you're dealing with street gangs, something will happen and you'll be sucked into a story mission, but side quests continue to suggest themselves. Batman's Detective Mode makes a sort-of return in the form of AR, which helps mark targets but is mainly used to solve puzzles. Once you've mastered the controls and advanced a few levels, you get the hang of balancing crowd control with charging the Momentum meter that allows special moves. But then enemies with specific takedown routines show up to ruin your flow, boss fights are much too long as a solo player, and you start wishing you got to play as Batman.

Performance-wise, there is some controversy about the 30fps lock imposed on owners of the latest consoles, which

should be able to do better. There are no such limitations on the PC, but some players report stuttering that hasn't been fixed by the reinstatement of the Denuvo DRM software. Hopefully, another patch will be incoming by the time you read this—the first one, a few days after the game's launch, addressed UI and crashing issues but didn't alter the framerate.

Gotham Knights is a charming but unexceptional entry into Batman's videogame canon. While it's nice to see the foggy city updated for the newer generation of graphics hardware, the game's combat lacks the finesse of the earlier games, and *Gotham Knights* is far from the spiritual successor to *Arkham City* it would appear to be. —IAN EVENDEN



VERDICT

Gotham Knights

BATMAN Story-rich, co-op focused update to the Batman Arkham games.

MANBAT Lacks the focus and tight combat of the original games.

RECOMMENDED SPECS CPU, i7-10700K/Ryzen 5 5600X. RAM, 16GB. GPU, GeForce RTX 2070/Radeon RX 5700 XT.

\$60, www.gothamknightsgame.com, T-rated

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