Review: Horizon Zero Dawn

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Developer: Guerrilla Games

Publisher: Sony Interactive Entertainment

Release date: 28.02.2017

Platform: PS4

Horizon Zero Dawn certainly grabbed our attention when concept art first leaked ahead of E3 2015. Images of primitive characters battling robotic dinosaurs were just as intriguing as the news that Guerrilla Games were the creative minds behind this new open-world adventure. After more than a decade of releasing linear sci-fi shooters for the hit-and-miss Killzone franchise, could the studio deliver a compelling experience to match the impressive scenes shown in its announcement trailer and successive gameplay previews?

The answer is a resounding yes. 'Zero Dawn' proves a particularly apt tagline for this newest Playstation exclusive, with its vast environments, immersive story, and rewarding gameplay hallmarking the enthusiasm of a team eager to be working on a new intellectual property.

The game is set centuries after a long-forgotten apocalyptic event, with humanity's new tribes grappling for survival amid an ecosystem of deadly, beast-like machines. Created in a specially modified version of the Decima engine, Horizon's visuals are stunning in both their scale and attention to detail, with lush jungles, snowy plains, and sun-baked canyons rendered in flawless detail even over long distances. Individual leaves rustle ominously as metal predators prowl through the forests and overgrown ruins of abandoned cities. The result is easily one of the best looking games the PS4 has to offer.

The player journeys through this disparate world as our protagonist Aloy - a skilled machine hunter raised as an outcast from her own tribe. Gaining a curiosity for the 'metal world' at a young age, Aloy is assisted in her search for answers by her Focus; an ancient device that lets her see things beyond the naked eye. Horizon's story forgoes the bleakness of many post-apocalyptic games, and instead provides a thrilling tale of mystery and discovery that left me genuinely shocked on more than one occasion.

While its main quest tends to focus on the past, Horizon's side quests are rooted in the here and now. There are several ongoing stories for Aloy to get embroiled in, from tribal politics to personal favours, each introducing interesting characters and expanding upon the game's lore. Unfortunately, there are also many uninspired side quests to slog through, tasking you with tracking missing persons or collecting components. This is nothing new in the open-world genre, but the repetitive gameplay and clumsy cutscene animations feel like a missed opportunity for Guerrilla Games to introduce some innovation.

Horizon's core gameplay consists of exploration, scavenging, and hunting, with a host of mechanics borrowed from other popular franchises. If this sounds like criticism, it isn't. Horizon handles climbing as intuitively as Uncharted, investigations with Aloy's Focus are on-par with Geralt's Witcher senses, and stealth plays out like a less-buggy version of Assassin's Creed. The game excels at taking well-known features and making them its own, the most impressive example being its twist on climbing towers to reveal sections of the map. Horizon's towers aren't simply buildings, they are enormous, roaming machines called Longnecks. Scaling them is a puzzle in itself, requiring the right vantage point and precise timing. It's a refreshingly fun update on a tired mechanic, and one that I found myself neglecting quests to actively seek out.

| "The thrill of the hunt never gets old"

Easily the most enjoyable part of Horizon's gameplay is its combat system. Each 'species' of machine behaves in a truly unique way and requires a different set of tactics to take down. By scanning a target with Aloy's Focus, players can reveal the best parts of a machine to stick with an arrow, or reveal its tracks and hide for a stealthy spear takedown. Machines can also be overridden to briefly turn them into an ally or a mount.

The surprisingly large weapon variety allows players to plan ahead when hunting specific enemies, with each class of weapon featuring three craftable ammo types, and modification slots to boost certain stats. When fighting flying Glinthawks, I used the Ropecaster to tie them down, followed by fire arrows to damage their ice-based weaponry. When up against the burrowing, sound-sensitive Rockblasters, the Tripcaster's wire taps and explosive Blast Sling become a more useful set of tools. Horizon does an excellent job of encouraging players to diversify their tactics, with tutorials for each weapon acting as quests that familiarise the player with the weapon's uses and reward them with XP.

Certain machines, like the Thunderjaw featured on the game's box art, can be fought by removing heavy weapons from their armour and turning them on their previous owner. 'Tear' ammo is useful when fighting the game's bulkier machines – sacrificing damage for quick removal of armour and components, while elemental ammo affects machines in different ways. With so many options at your disposal, the thrill of the hunt never gets old.

The biggest criticism I have with Horizon is its shallow RPG elements. One particular issue is that rare items are readily available from almost every merchant reasonably early on in the game, and shards – used as either currency or as a crafting resource – are never hard to come by. I found I was able to upgrade from Aloy's starting gear to the highest tier without even bothering with the common or uncommon items. What's more, it's impossible to stumble upon weapons and armour out in the world, they are only available from merchants or as rewards for specific quests.

Horizon's dialogue choices are also a little lacklustre. Every so often, you will be prompted for a strong, empathetic, or intelligent response. Your choices appear to have no lasting impact on Aloy's personality, and are often quite misleading. Many times I've selected the

brain icon and watched instead as Aloy gave more of a passionate response. I'm all for giving the player choice, but the system frequently feels redundant.

Overall, Horizon Zero Dawn's minor flaws are a reminder that this is Guerrilla Games' first rodeo in the open-world RPG genre. The game is an exceptional debut into unfamiliar territory for the Amsterdam-based studio, with exhilarating gameplay, intelligent writing, and incredible visuals creating a polished experience for players. It's rare that an exclusive game feels good enough to be considered a system seller, but Horizon Zero Dawn certainly lives up to that title.

Score: 95%

Highlights: compelling story, breathtaking visuals, challenging gameplay, interesting world and characters

Letdowns: poor merchant system, shallow role-playing elements, repetitive side quests/errands