

Your task is to hunt down Eothas, a long-dead god who has returned as a hulking reanimated statue.



Format PC **Publisher** Versus Evil **Developer** Obsidian Entertainment
ETA Out now **Players** 1

PILLARS OF ETERNITY II: DEADFIRE

Obsidian's old-school sequel is a stone-cold classic



he plan was to nip into the city of Neketaka, make for the palace, seek advice from the Queen about the god we're chasing across the high seas and then hurry back to our ship. But eight hours later, we're still busy within the city walls.

In that time, we've uncovered a smuggling ring, convinced the city governors to let it carry on, found mosaics depicting a mythical land, smuggled a woman and her children out of the city, and blackmailed a noble into handing over a magic shell. And we've still got a list as long as our poleaxe of other quests that we can't wait to start.

It's hard not to get pulled into the world of Pillars Of Eternity II: Deadfire, a party-based isometric role-playing game that harks back to PC classics such as Baldur's Gate and Planescape: Torment. It starts with Eothas, a long-dead god that rises again as an animated giant statue and crushes your castle, capturing hundreds of souls in the process. The rest of the gods, impressed with your efforts in the first game, bring you back from the dead to chase Eothas and halt his plans.

It'd be easy for the lofty premise to lose its grip on you, but it drip-feeds you just enough information about Eothas' plot to keep you guessing about his motives. It also asks you to align with one of the Deadfire Archipelago's many warring factions. Where some games can't help but show you 'good' and 'bad' groups, Deadfire deals in shades of grey, which makes it far more interesting.

We were planning to help the Huana, the tribal civilisation that controls Neketaka. We liked the people's apparent commitment to bettering their city while defending themselves against outside threats. But then we discover their soldiers leaching power from a dragon they've imprisoned underground, and get into a shouting match with the Queen that ruins our appetite for the alliance.

Write stuff

The story is supported by some of the best writing we've seen in the past five years. Not only is it poetic - "her eyes are as dark and cold as the voids between the stars" - but Obsidian doesn't waste a single opportunity to flesh out the world. Seemingly insignificant conversations will veer into politics, reference other quests, or go over your endeavours from the first game. It makes the whole world

feel alive, and connected, which in turn makes you interested in the side-quests.

Some are short tasks, but most are multi-step stories. When we first enter The Gullet, the poorest area of Neketaka, we see a man being pushed into a cage and dropped into the abyss below. We convince the guards to let us follow and end up on an hour-long dungeon crawl that leads to a moral dilemma about whether we should return a lot of money to its rightful owner. Not every quest will take your fancy, but we always have a handful that we can't wait to dive into at any one time.

These quests are full of tests of the long list of talents you're asked to pour points into at the start of the game, and as you level up. If you're good at athletics, you might be able to jump across a broken bridge to pursue a foe. If you're strong in arcana, you might be able to identify a magic object, whereas a good bluffer will be able to lie their way out of a tricky situation. These checks happen in dialogue all the time, too, giving you plenty of ways to solve problems without resorting to violence, and a reason to craft a character with a quick tongue.

But in some situations, flowery words aren't enough, so it's a good thing combat is solid. Think of it as a real-time strategy game in which you control five heroes and can pause at any time. That means you start combat, pause, decide which attack or spell a character should use, unpause, see how it plays out, and pause again to choose the next step. It's smooth, and you'll soon be working out the ways in which your characters' skills can complement one another.

Cutting party size down from six in the

NARRATIVE TRICKS

The five ways Pillars 2 tells its story

Deadfire is a story-driven game, and Obsidian lays the narrative on thick. But it never feels too heavy, which is mainly because the story's told in so many ways, from dialogue to cutscenes and choose-your-own-adventure-style picture books.



1 The game often transforms into a story book, asking you to pick the next step from a list of options.



2 After key plot points, you'll parlay with the gods to unwrap the events of the past few hours.



3 If you like dialogue, your luck is in, because Deadfire is packed with some of the best you'll find anywhere.



4 The cutscenes aren't the most detailed, but the game is pretty enough to carry them off.



5 When you're exploring, your party members will launch into amusing tirades, often aimed at one another.

"YOUR SHIP ACTS AS YOUR BASE AS WELL AS YOUR MAIN FORM OF TRANSPORT"

previous game to five here makes fights feel less overwhelming, but the biggest improvement is a detailed AI management menu that lets you predefine actions for each of your party members. As a simple example, you can tell them to switch to a defensive stance when their health falls below 40%, but the easy input-output recipe system allows for complex behaviours.

The reliance on percentage chances to hit - a hangover from the games it's based on - does mean it's less immediately satisfying than most combat systems. But even if it's not to your liking, you can simply turn down the combat difficulty and coast between the story bits.

Ship wrecked

The major new addition is a ship that acts as your base as well as your main form of transport. Ship combat is here, too, but naval fights aren't much fun. They play out as a mini-game on a static screen in



PARTY HARD

Choose your famous five

As you play, you add new characters to your party, and you select five of them to journey with at any one time. Each has their own motives for joining, and their unique backgrounds come across in their dialogue responses, or in the banter they engage in. Our favourite is Tekëhu, the fiercely loyal son of a goddess, though you might also be pleased to see Edér Teylecg return from the first game..

which each vessel takes turns to sail ahead, turn, or fire the cannons.

The system has some complexity: if you fire immediately after turning you'll lose accuracy, and if you spring a leak you'll have to reassign crew members to bail the water out. But the limited move set translates to a lack of tactical options. Most fights are wars of attrition, both boats chipping away with their cannons until their large health pool is depleted. We upgrade our cannons to long-range guns and sink ship after ship by simply keeping our distance, firing cannons on our starboard side, turning, and firing from port, waiting for reloads in between.

As a base of operations, the ship feels like a step down from the castle you were given in the first game. Caed Nua offered a robust base management, plenty of customisation, and a 15-level dungeon hiding some of the game's best loot. Your ship feels empty and simple in comparison, even after you've upgraded its hull and swapped out the sails. We had our best times in Deadfire on dry land.

It's a shame, but it shouldn't put you off Deadfire. It's got a main quest that hooks you, hundreds of side-quests that will try and tear you away, and a world that feels more complete than almost anything else out there. All aboard. ■

GM LOVES...

- ✓ The poetic, haunting writing pulls you into the world.
- ✓ The main quest keeps you guessing throughout.
- ✓ Dialogue is believable, well-voiced, and full of subtext.

GM HATES...

- ✗ A boat is not as good as a castle, and naval battles disappoint.

Better than...



Wasteland 2

Solid combat and punchy writing are held back by dated visuals and some frustrating bugs. It's still great, mind - the story outweighs the graphics.

Worse than...



Divinity: Original Sin 2

Fantastically written, and the solutions to its quests are full of imagination. What's more, it's got the best combat in the genre as well.

NEED TO KNOW



You can import your Pillars 1 save file into Deadfire, and this outing is packed with references to the previous story. Haven't played it? Constant recaps will keep newcomers up to speed.

GM JUDGEMENT

91%



A rich role-playing world that's brought to life by some of the best writing you'll see this year.
Samuel Horti