

GM Reviews

The Final Verdict!

HOW WE SCORE

0-39 Awful Avoid it as you would a bullet with your name on.
40-59 Poor Major issues here that won't be solved with a hug.
60-69 Decent A mixed bag filled with sweets and sharp stones.
70-79 Good Some flaws, but still a very enjoyable experience.
80-89 Excellent Buy it, love it, thank us when you're done.
90-100 Outstanding A rare and essential piece of brilliance.

The small print: We rate games in comparison to what else is available on the same system, in the same genre, and for the same format at the time of release. So this year's FIFA might score less than a FIFA from three years ago, but still be a better game. Because time, and our expectations, move on. Hey, you're smart, you get it...



Not awarded based simply on score, but rather given to games that possess a special blend of qualities. For instant classics that you won't regret owning.

Format PS4, XO, PC (reviewed) **Publisher** Gearbox Publishing
Developer Compulsion Games **ETA** Out now **Players** 1

WE HAPPY FEW

Keeping the British end up with a bit of Union Crack



During our 25 hours with *We Happy Few*, we've filled in for a male model on the catwalk, thrusting our hips while flashbulbs popped. We've listened to German jokes on the radio for ten minutes straight in an underground tunnel. We've

choked out a policeman for whistling the national anthem too loud, slipped into a rubber catsuit to infiltrate a kinky cattle prod party, and pulled the trigger on a gun that literally fires bees. It is, at its best, a bizarre series of unlikely events. Unfortunately, what happens between those events is inescapably - almost offensively - boring.

It's set on a fictional collection of British islands in an alternate history 1960s. The Allies lost World War II, but the residents of Wellington Wells avoided occupation by doing something *very bad* that they *do not want to remember*. This self-inflicted atrocity left the community so ashamed and traumatised that they started taking a mind-altering drug to make them feel better. It's called 'Joy', and 20 years later, everyone is still addicted to it. Popping a few pills a day is mandatory, and any objectors are taken away and... ahem... cheered up.

It's a depressing set-up, but Wellington Wells is actually a very pretty place to be. When you take Joy, which is unavoidable if you want to pass certain checkpoints, the cobbled streets burst into colour, with

rainbows appearing from nowhere in the sky and butterflies circling your feet. And even when you're off the drug, the world oozes old-school style. Smartly-dressed policeman clomp down roads lined with Union Jack bunting, passing beeping, whirring machines packed with chunky monitors. Every five minutes you'll want to stop whatever you're doing and drink in the view.

We like the game's sense of humour, too. You'll hear exaggerated versions of virtually every British accent you can think of, including the ever-so-Cockney 'bobbies' (police). One of them literally says "Wink wink, nudge nudge, say no

more, say no more", and we can't help but smile.

Three's a crowd

You control three different characters, one after the other, each with their own ten-hour story to complete. There's Arthur, an office worker wracked with guilt about his part in the fate of his younger brother. Then there's Sally, who's a drug dealer to the police force. The third person you play as is Ollie, a Scotsman living in a tower who spends all his time speaking to his long-dead wife.

Through their eyes, you find out more about what happened at the end of the war, and what part they played in events, all the while unpicking a conspiracy unfolding in the present day. The trio meet at various points, and it's fun to see their interactions later replayed from another perspective - especially



"YOU'RE TOLD EXACTLY WHERE TO GO, WHAT TO DO AND WHO TO TALK TO. IT'S MINDLESS"

How many "non-lethal kills" did *We Happy Few* credit us with? One. How on earth...?





GM Review

The Final Verdict!

Fail to obey the rules - by sprinting in the street, for example - and the 'bobbies' will descend on you.



intriguing because some of the details of the events actually change. Hmm...

While it's a story-driven affair, it plays like an open-world action game. You must explore the islands of Wellington Wells, meeting other oddballs (given how peculiar this society is, that's saying something), sneaking past guards to steal valuable items from chests, solving simple puzzles, and whacking policemen with lead pipes. You can fast travel via a network of underground tunnels that unlock as you explore, and between the various towns are some procedurally-generated locations and side-quests, though these are largely forgettable.

Each character has different starting abilities and unlockable perks that change how you play. For example, Arthur can blend in simply by sitting on a bench and unfurling a newspaper, which is handy for stealth, while Sally has a perfume atomiser filled with a vapour that turns perfectly normal people into

murderous monsters, which is a good way to cause chaos.

Too few

As we alluded to earlier, the variety of the scripted story missions keeps you on your toes, and we enjoy the wacky set pieces - riding down train tracks on a giant vacuum cleaner is particularly memorable. But everything else is disappointingly dull. For every model catwalk you tread, We Happy Few sends you to a distant waypoint to collect an item and trudge back, only to be told you have to visit another faraway spot straight after. For every catsuit you don, there's a gang of generic goons you have to beat up on the other side of the map.

For example, at one point Arthur is tasked with fixing a bridge so he can move between islands. He ends up at the home of an inventor, Dr Faraday, to seek advice. She'll help, but only if he fetches a luminous liquid called motilene, which

she needs for her experiments. It takes a full five minutes of non-stop sprinting to reach the waypoint marked on our map. We sneak through a house, suck up the goop, and run a full five minutes back. Dr Faraday immediately gives us *three more locations* to travel to, and at each we must extract metal from cars and bring it back to her. It's totally mindless work.

As well as being boring, quests are far too easy. You're told exactly where to go, what to do, and who to talk to, and puzzles are laughably simple. Essentially, the majority of the game is just following dots on a map and hoping that, when you reach the waypoint, whoever you meet will have an interesting story to tell (more often than not, they won't).

It doesn't help that We Happy Few's mechanics, particularly its melee combat and stealth, are sloppy. Smacking an enemy round the head with a cricket bat rewards you with a satisfying crunch, but there's no complexity to master: 90% of the time against a single enemy, simply swinging as fast as you can and then blocking when you run out of stamina is enough. However, when you have to fight multiple enemies, it feels awkward: you simply cannot parry all of them, so you're left trying to funnel them into a tight area,



BE MY BABY

The struggles of motherhood

Sally has a baby, and due to the rules of the city, has to keep the little one secret - while still keeping her healthy and happy.

At first this seems an interesting twist, but the game's flawed survival systems soon undermine it. Keeping young Gwen alive means periodically rushing back from missions to cuddle her, feed her milk, and change her nappy. That, in turn, requires crafting materials: metal rods for the water filters, or duct tape for the nappy. Layered on top of Sally's own needs, this responsibility soon becomes an annoying distraction in a game already full of busywork.

"RIDING DOWN TRAIN TRACKS ON A GIANT VACUUM CLEANER IS PARTICULARLY MEMORABLE"



Wellington Wells is a beautiful setting, especially if you're high on Joy, a drug that keeps the citizens happy.



Taking on a group of enemies head-on is hard, so most of the time you'll stay crouched in the shadows.

or using funky angles in the levels to artificially isolate one of them. Expect a general lack of polish throughout, too: enemies clip through objects, get stuck in looping animations and spasm uncontrollably when they die.

Happy meals

All that incentivises you to stay in the shadows most of the time. Throw a bottle and an enemy will obediently rush up to it, glancing around on the spot, allowing you to slip past unnoticed. You can also run faster than anyone else, so if you're rumbled, you can simply sprint away until you break line of sight. It feels like stepping back a decade and a half to the stealth games of yesteryear. Killing enemies while hidden, however, is frustratingly hard. You have to unlock a particular perk before you can kill a policeman from behind (they're taller than you, you see, which somehow makes it impossible), and you can only stealth-kill as Sally if you've crafted a particular syringe, which requires not-too-common ingredients.

And yes, there is crafting in *We Happy Few*. A number of other survival game elements also get in the way of the fun, including hunger, thirst, and sleep

meters. You've got to forage for food, fill up water canteens at taps, and sleep in beds. Ignoring these resources won't kill you, but you'll move and attack more slowly, so you feel compelled to keep on top of them - if only to get rid of their annoying flashing icons. Finding the right ingredients can be a chore: we spend a good half an hour searching for a water canteen just so we can filter the water and mix it with milk powder in order to feed a baby (see *Be My Baby*, left).

But worse than the resource management is the way the citizens of Wellington Wells respond whenever you break one of their many rules. If you wear clothes from another neighbourhood, they'll get angry. If you sprint in the street, they'll get angry. If you're out past curfew, they'll get angry. If your Joy runs out and you go through withdrawal, they'll get angry. At some points, we're sprinting through the streets with a line of 50 pissed-off townsfolk in tow. The only saving grace is that the AI is stupid enough to leave you be if you duck into an alley and hide in a bin for 30 seconds.

In fact, the best perks in the games are the ones that let you break curfew, sprint without making anyone angry, and ignore hunger. As a developer, when the



ON HIGH ALERT

How to blend in with the crowd

Every time you step onto the streets in Wellington Wells, you risk the wrath of the authorities. They're on the lookout for any abnormalities, including whether the clothes you're wearing fit in with those around you.

Most people, including police, are easy to fool, but machines like the one pictured above are tougher.

You're supposed to be taking the drug 'Joy' all the time to make sure you're happy in your '60s psychedelic dystopia, but in reality that's not practical. If you keep taking Joy you'll overdose, with heavy penalties. Thankfully, people won't notice if you're off Joy - a so-called 'downer'. Machines, however, will still catch you out, and sound a siren.

The police set up various checkpoints across the islands, which you can only pass through if you've recently taken a Joy. Later in the game you can unlock drugs that mimic the effects of Joy, but most of the time, you'll just have to swallow the pill, and deal with the withdrawal later (people can tell when you're in withdrawal, which creates further problems).

Even more troublesome than the machines are the lanky 'Doctors' that roam the streets. They can literally smell Joy in the air, and if they notice that you're strangely odourless, they'll attack with a scary spinning saw that can kill you in two shots. They're hard to take down, and if they go on alert, so will everyone else nearby. Avoid them at all costs.

rewards you offer players literally negate your game's core systems, you know something has gone badly wrong.

Beneath all these missteps is buried the story. Cutscenes are well acted, but with such long breaks and tedious action between them, any sense of pace evaporates. By the time we finish any given objective, we've already forgotten what the point of it was, and lost our place in the tale. And not only do we have three characters to keep up with, but each character has multiple things they're worried about. Arthur is guilty about his brother, but also thinking about Sally, a love interest, while the overarching conspiracy also vies for his attention. Individually, these threads pique our interest, and we admire Compulsion Games for putting together a story that spans so many hours. But by focusing on lots of different stories, none of them are told fully, and the threads never properly come together.

This is a game that's great to look at, but not to play. If you like quirky settings, and can put up with endless fetch quests, then it might be worth picking up just to peek at the world the developers have created. But if you're hoping for more, you won't find any Joy here. ■

GM LOVES...

- ✓ The setting oozes retro style, and is a joy to walk around.

GM HATES...

- ✗ Really repetitive fetch quests ruin the pace.
- ✗ Both combat and stealth are lacking in polish.
- ✗ The story tries hard, but doesn't tie loose ends together.

Better than...



Agents Of Mayhem

Another open-world game that suffers from repetitive quests, but its world, a futuristic Seoul, has far less charm than *We Happy Few*'s.

Worse than...



Bioshock Infinite

We Happy Few goes for a similarly strange dystopia, and at times reaches the same heights, but *Infinite* is a far stronger experience overall.

i NEED TO KNOW



A lot of your loot will come from robbing houses, and that's best done at night. You can creep in a back door, sneak up the stairs, and smother the inhabitants with pillows. Charming.

GM JUDGEMENT

64%



A pretty world, unique setpieces, and promising story are ruined by unnecessary filler.
Samuel Horti