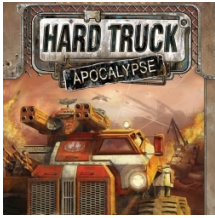


15 August 2006

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## [Hard Truck: Apocalypse](#)

### *Deus Ex Machina...*

It is a good thing that some of the small game studios around do not feel content with small solitaire brain-dead projects, but seek further, choosing to follow a more creative path. Hard Truck Apocalypse is such an example, born from the ambitions of a small group of men who had the strength to overcome the consequences of poor logistics support and a scarce resource base for their game. Such an overview will certainly forgive many of Targem's undoing towards its own child, Hard Truck Apocalypse a.k.a. ExMachina but it won't clear much. Now, it all depends on the player's expectations towards his games. For one interested mostly in a loose collection of innovative features rather than a polished and complete unoriginal game, Hard Truck will root and spawn on his HDD. Otherwise, this is your average failure, something like that woman with the "je ne sais quoi" that tears your eye balls from your head every time you meet her, without even being truly ravishing.

**Concept** Ex Machina should have been that dream gal to get out in town for an ice-cream, then proving to be nothing but a shrew. How come? After my first touch of keyboard, it did not take me much to realize that I was playing a cross between Freelancer (similar games are Starlancer, and the X series from EgoSoft) and the Mad Max motion picture (or better still, Black Isle's Fallout). Honestly, I was seduced on spot, even though it did not possess anything specific from the mentioned titles. So, there I was - admiring what a small group of enthusiasts were capable of, taking on my first mission and racing to finish it a.s.a.p., hanging to the belief I'll find a hefty sum of design aspects to my liking. First town, first vehicle upgrade, some fresh paint, a well deserved refueling and weapon change and off I went to unveil more of Ex Machina's universe. And that was the end of it all, as the following dozen of hours proved identical to the first twelve minutes: mission whoring, truck revamping and slow story progress. **Story** After the prologue score that tells us how our Home, the Earth has mysteriously become inhabitable by humans overnight, the hole script goes crazy bouncing between your father's death and a bi-named nymphet, a local riot and an oracle of alien origin defended by "druids". Whereas the intro manages to build up some steam around the plot, everything that follows it lets the whole thing steadily deflate into a sloppy and superficially prolonged script. Moreover, although the team is made up of non-Americans, the whole storyline is soaked in American stereotypes. Why? I mean, the Russian culture and folklore is not just good enough a source for the petty background of a game, but to cover for pretty much everything, including a hefty lot of top-notch art pieces. Should I recall some names? Like, what happened with the influence of some of the finest Russian artists with excellent sci-fi ideas like Andrei Tarkovsky, Arkady and Boris Strugatsky or Mikhail Bulgakov? Why do people run so hard from originality, or local specificity and tradition? I mean, for the sake of God, this is exactly what most of us appreciate: diversity and innovation. Why not show your one distinctive trait with great pride and vanity... At least one Slavonic letter on a rusty road sign... and I would have jumped off my chair with joy: the spirit of Mother Russia. How did humanity survive in the new, post-apocalyptic world? Not by wearing bio-hazard suits and gas masks (Fallout style) but some nerd-looking Ibiza masks that certainly eased the programmers work, thanks to the removal of "facial expressions". An entity of alien origin came down to Earth and began sharing these masks. I try to imagine how people, choking to death in the poisonous atmosphere, waited in rows to receive their free ration of masks. "Common alien scum, hurry up! Can't you see my limbs are all falling apart? If you keep up this way, I think I'll move my business elsewhere!" **Gameplay** As it was the case with Freelancer, HTA has an open design approach: you are free to go pretty much anywhere you wish, make use of a

random mission generator to increase the weight of your purse and that of your truck. But to one's dismay, what the adjective "pretty" does not cover for is that the map setting is made up of passages - dungeon crawl game style - bordered by invisible walls. Moreover, moving his tardy behind to a new map location the player is prompted to advance the main quest to a new stage (in the purest GTA style), only to become a source of further frustration thanks to its abrupt ending. The game is not open ended - although I do not understand why it isn't. When you thought those gruesome errands are over and from now on you'll be allowed to freely explore the in-game world, the only thing you'll get is a big slap with a "kanietz filma" tag, and not even a gritty epilogue...With a bigger purse, there will be better paid missions. So you are actually forced to hold on to your credits with your doggy teeth and grind even more if some sexy gun caught your eye. Therefore, the game approach is rather simplistic if not absurd: mission whoring at its finest. And it would be just dandy if the missions themselves weren't an assortment of long waits for bad dudes to spawn and let themselves be blown to pieces before the hourglass ran out of sand, or play the errand boy between two distant settlements at the outstanding average speed of 60 mph - at least the first harsh half of the game. And because the cruise control "stereotype" has not been imported from the US to implement in the game, you will practically make a hole the size of a truck within your keyboard (weren't the beta testers disturbed by this aspect? I wonder...). These were painful news for me, ones that sucked up all my initial delight provided by the truck management and combat system. In time, you'll afford faster (100-120 mph), and better armored trucks (like the general purpose 6x6 Ural truck, or the heavy freighter Belaz). Only now the game will give something in return for your desperate credit farming. There are just five trucks in all. Variety is given by the possibility to change their cabins and freight space to accommodate either improved weapon slots or engine and freight capabilities. The arsenal itself is rather decent, but only three types of guns (machineguns - low damage, instant projectiles; shotguns - medium damage, low range, ugly spreads; plasma weapons - high damage, slow projectiles) spice up the gameplay. All the others, both inefficient and expensive will only torture you more by sending you back into the credit farming affairs. The vehicle combat is probably the only strong point of the game (besides the trucks themselves). The weapon mounts always follow the camera - or it was the other way around? - Whereas the truck is controlled independently. Although circling around your targets is a strategy written in stone, blowing up cars pumps your veins with exhilarating joy until the end. I have tried an immobile, dreadnaught style strategy using both cannons and mortars against my foes, but to no avail. Not even their horrid AI was enough to make them a more approachable target. **Video** Graphically, Hard Truck Apocalypse is fully able to seduce its auditory, but it fails childishly as a proof for what the storyline tells us. I cannot deny the sight of some really ravishing landscapes with country roads and skies in turmoil, settlements built in mountain rock, broken bridges and twisted railroads that scar the land, mute proofs of the forgotten human civilization. On the other hand, my freaking eyes witnessed more green and growing than the "Save the Ecuatorial Forest!" volunteers all together. And strangely enough, even though I have never had the opportunity to blow it out of the sky, the freedom cries of an invisible eagle bugged me the entire journey throughout the idyllic "post-apocalyptic" green lands. Asking for a Mad Max environment is probably too much, but how in the world did plant life survive Earth's toxic atmosphere? Are trees also wearing alien masks? Or what, what did I miss? The whole setting fits as does the cough with the chest pain. Dude, you even find a jungle out there with full Latino music scores coverage! In truck terms, the physics leave room for general improvement. Riding a 150 ton truck made little difference for the road poles that happened to cross my path. A hefty 250 points of damage taught me to forever run from those "guys". By the end of the game, I was still debating with a friend which were more dangerous, the blind, deaf and braindead truck "predators" or the seemingly innocent road poles. The masked tree problem was left for my metaphysics professor. I mean they were double-nasty: it left deep marks in my truck's cuirass while keeping a noticeable imperviousness to any calamity such as the

recent "Apocalypse". **Sound**The sound effects are pretty decent but they do not excel in any particular aspect, and some of the weapons' sounds are rather disproportionate. Powerful weapons like plasma guns won't blow you out of the chair as the BFG did when you heard it for the first time, and every machine gun bang is a potential ear hazard. The same with the music scores that even though are of good quality both in terms of composition and interpretation, they don't really fit anywhere. In my intention of having a conversation with what I expected to be an over excited soul (my conscience), I have found it sleeping at the wheel. I had serious focus problems throughout the entire game. The developers never gave me the chance to believe in any of their work elements. What was more significant: the death of a father; a nature that stubbornly thrived, mocking the whole fallout theme of the script; the metal-folk-disco sound themes; the alien masks? Someone had serious problems making up his mind and look what happened: prolixity at its best. The voice acting does not even deserve to be mentioned: my dude yells "there can be only one" as if threatened with a gun. Or better still, like he wanted to have breakfast and that was the secret sign for someone to lay the table. I am hungry, I think I am going to have breakfast: between me and the ham, there can be only one. Gulp! **Conclusion**By the time I reached the closing comments, I already felt sorry for being so harsh with this game. It is a shame for someone to work so hard to build something good and to fail so badly when prompted to do what it is required to actually be good. So much blowing in the wind, it may turn even the toughest of men cry with sorrow. Hard Truck Apocalypse will certainly rally a sizable number of fans. Against so many ill conceived design elements, it manages to preserve an undeniable grace. However, by its own it will never be able to shine. The player's passion is critically needed to make this one worthwhile. There are already far too many titles that circle around the same themes as Hard Truck Apocalypse, and they aren't guilty of a similar sloppiness in design. There is a faction system in our game that plays a minimal role. It has been promised that the future expansion pack of HTA, called "Rise of Clans" will activate this dormant feature. However, I was member of the Farmer's Union throughout the entire game, and the word "Farmer" was clearly visible on my ride. I believe that encapsulates my whole game experience: I felt like a farmer throughout the whole thing. **This review was made possible thanks to the support of Buka Entertainment.**