

## GAME REVIEW


**HORIZON**  
ZERO DAWN™

# A TRUE SYSTEM SELLER

**TAMIM BIN ZAKIR**

Since 2004, developer Guerrilla Games has been chasing Halo. Tasked by Sony with producing a big-budget first-person shooter to compete with Microsoft's flagship series, the studio has cranked out half a dozen visually striking but critically underwhelming Killzone games. So it's refreshing to see the Dutch studio give up the shooter arms race and trade in the grays and browns of Killzone for a colorful new property. Horizon Zero Dawn is clearly the game the developer yearned to make for years, and it reveals a rejuvenated studio that has much more to offer than its resume ever led us to believe. The third-person action-RPG is a towering achievement that is easily one of Sony's best exclusives, even if it's held back at times by a mediocre story and the scope of its ambition.

Set in a post-apocalyptic far future where nature has reclaimed civilization and feral Machines rule the land, you play as Aloy, a young hunter outcast from her tribe who's on a quest to discover her place in the world and uncover what led to these dire conditions. Armed initially with a bow and arrow, you'll eventually unlock a plethora of powerful weapons and abilities as you traverse the sprawling open world in search of answers and many fetch quests.

And what a stunning world it is to explore! Running on a either PS4 or PS4 Pro, Horizon is arguably the most gorgeous console game ever created — more so than last year's graphical showpiece Uncharted 4 — and it's all the more impressive because it's such a gigantic open world. The sheer size of the map is staggering, and it's littered with things to do and secrets to uncover. Throughout the ap-

proximately 30 hour adventure (which you could easily double if you chose to tackle the game's numerous side missions), you'll traverse everything from lush green meadows to barren wastelands to snow-capped mountains, with dynamic weather effects and a full day/night cycle. Each location is more beautiful than the previous.

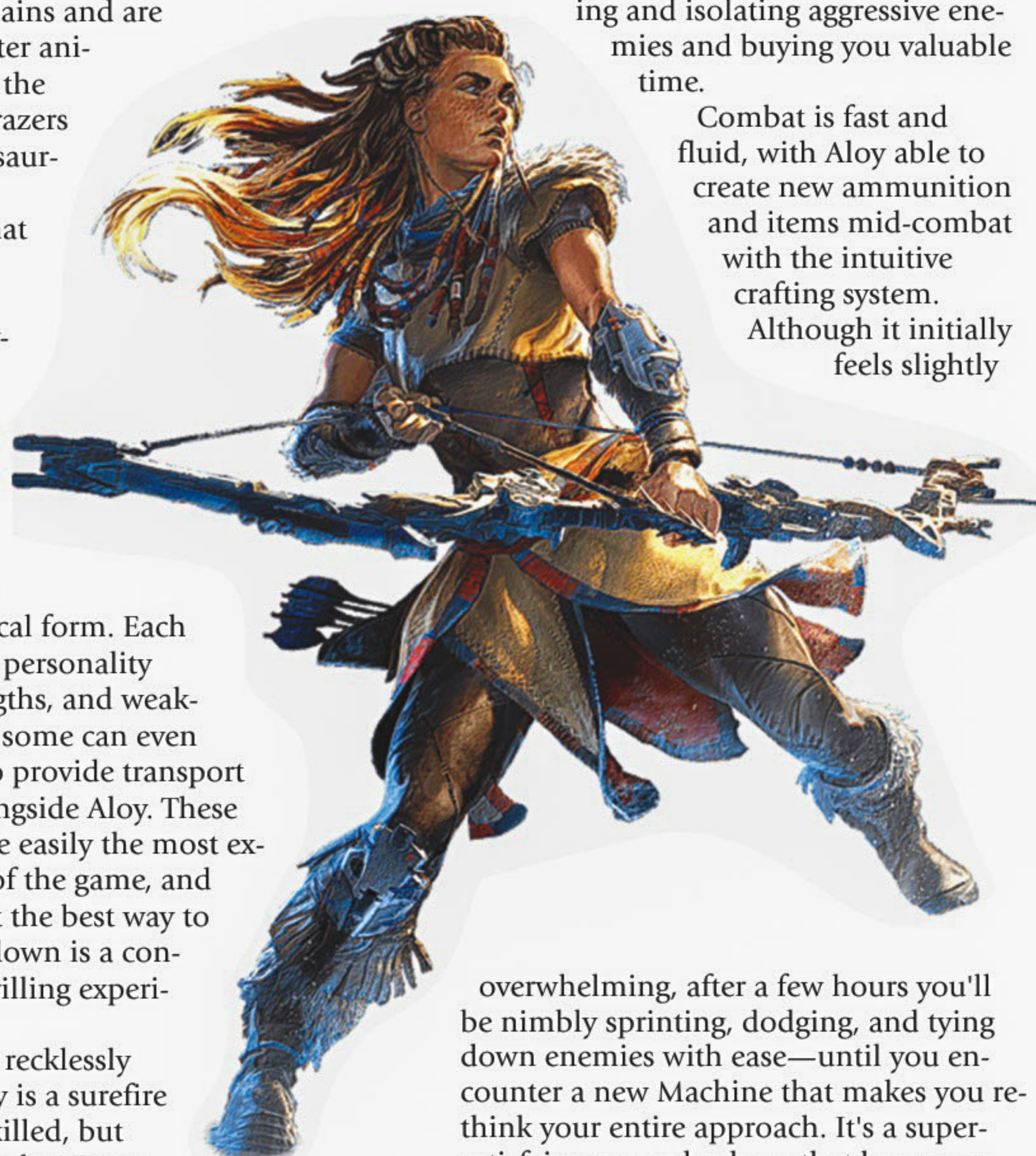
The world is full of awe-inspiring Machines, mechanical beasts that roam the plains and are modeled after animals. From the deer-like Grazers to the dinosaur-based Tallnecks that lumber around like walking skyscrapers, much of the animal kingdom is represented in mechanical form. Each has its own personality traits, strengths, and weaknesses, and some can even be tamed to provide transport or fight alongside Aloy. These creatures are easily the most exciting part of the game, and figuring out the best way to take them down is a consistently thrilling experience.

Running recklessly into the fray is a surefire way to get killed, but Aloy can use her Focus

tool to spot the Machine's weaknesses, which shows their vulnerable parts and what they're most susceptible to. Aloy can further tag enemies, set traps, and devise a plan of attack, stealthily picking off smaller enemies until inevitably something goes wrong, and all hell breaks loose. Fortunately, she has some wonderful tools at her disposal, such as the Ropecaster, a weapon that tethers enemies to the ground, which is useful for halting and isolating aggressive enemies and buying you valuable time.

Combat is fast and fluid, with Aloy able to create new ammunition and items mid-combat with the intuitive crafting system.

Although it initially feels slightly



overwhelming, after a few hours you'll be nimbly sprinting, dodging, and tying down enemies with ease—until you encounter a new Machine that makes you rethink your entire approach. It's a super-satisfying gameplay loop that keeps you

eager to press on and see what new wonders lies ahead.

So I find it awkward and disgraceful when the story compels you to take on human enemies in heavily manned bandit camps, because these encounters are absolutely mundane compared with taking on giant robot dinosaurs. What's worse is that the humans have some truly terrible AI, making these too-frequent battles a joyless obstacle to getting back to the good stuff. After a promising start, the story devolves into a forgettable and increasingly tedious slog where poorly voiced characters repeatedly task you with finding missing people or items and spout vaguely spiritual catchphrases like "May the sun shine light upon you."

While Aloy is winningly voiced by Ashly Burch (Borderlands 2), she's really the only character who feels fully realized. Even Rost didn't feel all that pivotal and I don't think I could name a single supporting character in the game and I frequently found myself skipping the hours of optional dialogue so I could just get back to the hunt.

But all of that starts to fade away when you're riding atop a mechanical steed, galloping alongside a babbling brook through a glistening meadow, the sun beginning to set overhead as you spot a herd of hostile Machines in the distance. Horizon, by no means, is perfect, but it shows the work of a passionate team who clearly cared deeply about creating a fantastical new world that isn't Killzone. It's the dawn of a new day for a liberated Guerrilla Games and the start of an exciting new franchise for PlayStation.

*Tamim Bin Zakir aka Shwag\_Lord (PSN ID) is an enraged individual who seldom thinks of being generous to others. Feel free to devour his tranquillity at niloy.tbz@gmail.com*