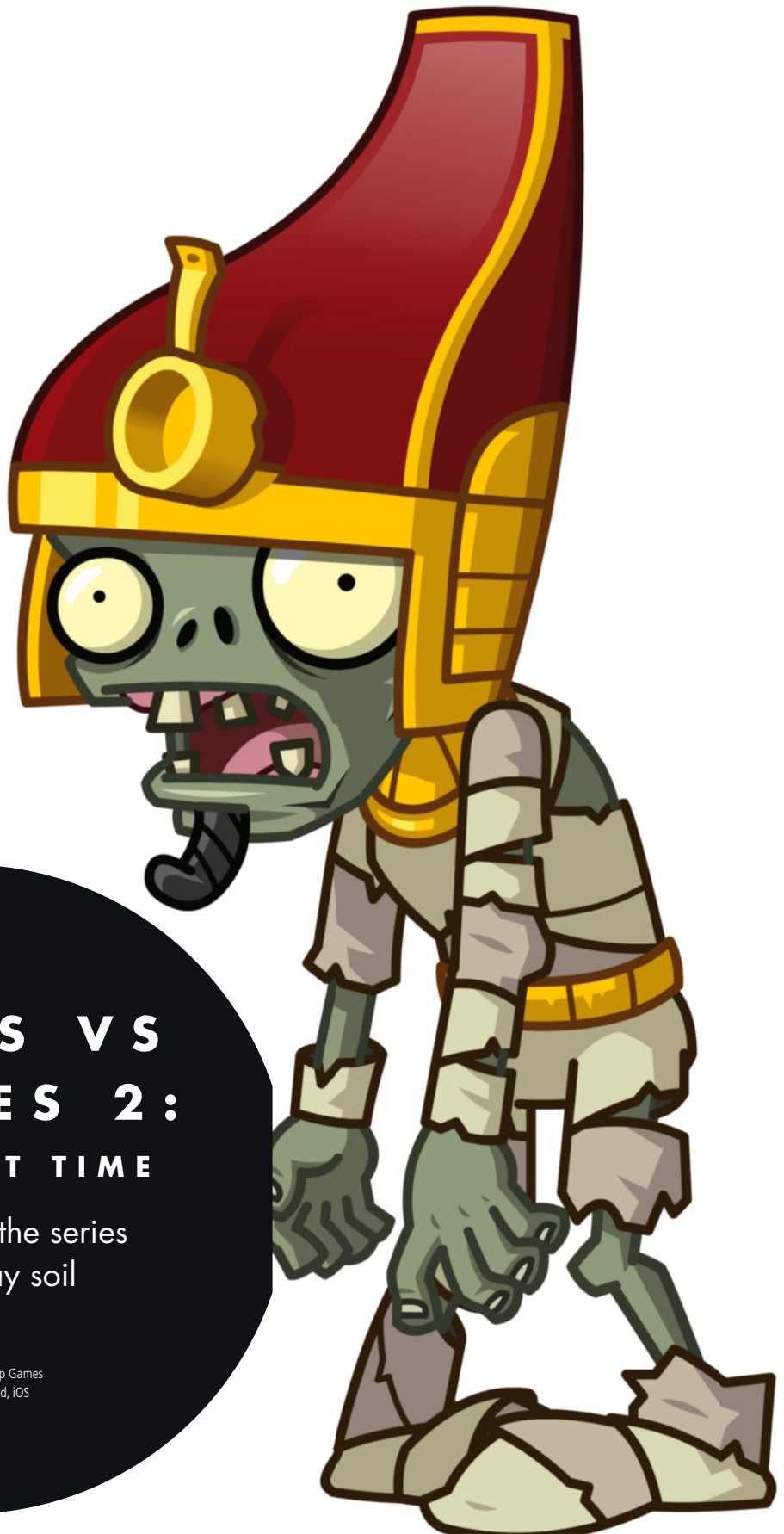


Plants Vs Zombies 2's central theme is time travel, and PopCap's flair for character creation is plain to see in the appropriately remixed zombie designs. But the change isn't just for show, with profound gameplay differences between worlds, too



H | Y
P | E

PLANTS VS ZOMBIES 2: IT'S ABOUT TIME

PopCap repots the series
in free-to-play soil

Publisher	EA
Developer	PopCap Games
Format	Android, iOS
Origin	US
Release	July



You can hold only three doses of plant food at once, so when a zombie drops more, you might as well use some to make room for it. It doesn't carry over between levels, either, so you can use the lot on the last wave

The subtitle says it all: it's about time. Four years after the PC release of *Plants Vs Zombies*, PopCap is at last ready to show off the sequel. That's a long time, especially given the game in question is an accessible spin on tower defence made by a tiny team. It seems even longer if you consider that the only new game the studio's released in the nearly two years since EA bought it is *Solitaire Blitz*. 'It's about time' is putting it mildly. What took so long?

In truth, lead producer **Allan Murray** tells us, PopCap hasn't spent the past four years on *Plants Vs Zombies 2*: it's been working on the original, too. Since its 2009 PC debut, that game has made its way to just about every platform around, and has been installed over 150 million times. "PopCap isn't really a place that rushes to do sequels," Murray tells us. "The first couple of years was just [spent] getting it out to DS, to console, to iOS, and eventually Android. A lot of care and attention went into those – they weren't just

quick ports. What you're playing now has been made by a team that's come together in the last year and a half to two years."

A lot of care has gone into the sequel, too, with the team – currently 26 people, making this PopCap's biggest project to date – keenly aware of the danger of making what could be seen as an expansion pack. But 'it's about time' is more than a mea culpa for the four-year wait, it's a concept that anchors the entire game. Partway through the first PVZ, players find a taco, for which Crazy Dave, their loose-screwed mentor, pays \$1,000. With the first game's undead invasion dealt with, Dave eats the taco, and loves it so much that he wants to eat it again. "Not just another taco," Murray explains. "The same taco. So he brings out his time machine – because, of course, Dave has a time machine – and you go back in time to find the taco."

Naturally, Dave being Dave, his time machine (named Penny) doesn't take him back



PLANTS VS. ZOMBIES 2

BELOW Having Tombstones block your shots makes a huge difference – in the first game you couldn't plant on them, and enemies might spawn on them, but they were rarely a threat. Now you must deal with them



Each world has a 'blacklist' that removes certain plants – we were thrown by having to start Pirate Seas without our go-to Potato Mine. Clear a world and you can chase Star Objectives with a full set



five minutes, but thousands of years. Thus players will travel through time to different worlds in different eras, three of which will be available at launch. It's a setup that allows PopCap to play with convention while staying true to what made the original so special. It also means world maps, with branches off the critical path leading to the minigames and challenges that the original buried in menu screens. Clear a world, and you'll be invited to replay its levels in different ways in exchange for stars. One such objective has us clear a level with a limit on the number of plants we can have onscreen at a time.

Each world sees standard enemies reskinned, has a few new ones of its own, and offers a spin or two on the original game's level design. In Ancient Egypt, trios of

A zombie modelled on Ra the sun god uses his staff to draw vital sun towards him

zombies try to pass themselves off as camels, holding up one-third of a crudely sketched tylopod each; another, modelled on Ra the sun god, uses his staff to draw PVZ's most vital resource, sun, towards him. Tombstones now block your shots and must be destroyed, while sandstorms carry zombies across the map at speed. In the Pirate Seas, zombies shamble across planks from their ship to yours. With only three or four planks to go around, there will be gaps normal foes can't pass, but you'll

need to watch out for the cannons that fire small zombies over large distances, as well as the canny zombie that rope swings over gaps. Wild West's central conceit is a mine cart that can be dragged along vertical tracks as enemy wave patterns dictate, the trade-off being that you can only plant on the cart, not the track. There's a spin on the original game's Disco Zombie, with a piano-playing undead who causes those around him to dance and switch lanes. And then there's the Chicken Farmer, whose flock rushes at you when you hit him.

Not all the original game's plants have made it into the sequel – no night levels means no mushrooms, though the team hopes to reintroduce them at some point – but there are plenty of new ones to make up for it.



And yeti it moves

In *Plants Vs Zombies*, a yeti appeared on your second playthrough of the game's fog levels, and he'll be a similarly sporadic presence in this sequel. He'll appear on the world map for a set period of time – a day or two, perhaps, or even just a couple of hours – and Murray compares him to *Diablo III*'s treasure goblin. Kill the yeti, and he will drop his loot-filled lunchbox. It's a simple enough concept, but given its host platform, it's a masterstroke: a push notification will let you know where the yeti is and how long he'll be there, pulling players back into the game with the lure of a hefty loot drop.



The world map doesn't just show levels, but the plants you've collected on the way (as well as a glimpse of those you haven't yet acquired). Branches off the beaten track are behind gates, which are unlocked with randomly dropped keys

The Bloomerang's shots reach the far end of the screen and hit enemies a second time on their return. Bonk Choy punches enemies that draw near, the Snapdragon emits a wall of fire that hits zombies in three lanes at once, and any zombie eating the Chili Bean leaves a trail of paralyzing gas behind him. Meanwhile, Lightning Reeds fire bolts of electricity at enemies anywhere onscreen, and turn the farmer's flock into little buckets of fried chicken. The Coconut Cannon is a further deviation: you tap on it to fire, and wait for a cooldown before you can use it again.

That's emblematic of a game that is much more involved, and a good deal pacier, than its

predecessor. In *PVZ*, it was all too easy to settle into a groove, relying on the same plants and setting up in much the same way each time, with only certain enemy types requiring you to briefly change tack. Here, there always seems to be something to do – to the extent that the team is still debating whether coins and gems dropped by fallen zombies should be automatically collected.

The game has been built around multitouch – little surprise given how at home the first one feels on iPad – and the two biggest mechanical shifts in *PVZ2* have both been designed with its new interface in mind. Plant Food can be dragged and dropped



PLANTS VS. ZOMBIES 2

The special moves are nice touches, if you'll pardon the pun, but aren't essential. We'll admit to forgetting they were there till one final wave was dispatched almost entirely using Power Toss



onto plants to momentarily power them up: peashooters become gatling guns, while Wall-nuts get shrouded in iron. Then there are three special moves: Power Pinch, which decapitates zombies; Power Toss, where a flick upwards launches enemies into the air and a swipe flings them offscreen; and Power Zap, where tapping, holding and dragging between enemies electrocutes the lot of them. Your stock of Plant Food is replenished by drops from glowing green zombies; special moves can each be used once per round, and cost you the coins you accrue through play. Or both can be bought through in-app purchase.

Plants Vs Zombies 2 is free-to-play, and PopCap is keenly aware of the tightrope it walks. It is, after all, every serious gamer's favourite casual game developer, but the four years since the original have seen massive change, and many view F2P with suspicion now. Does the team feel the pressure to get it right? "God, yes," laughs Murray. "There's this 30-ton weight on our shoulders right now, we're hyper-aware of it. Frankly, it's been something that the team has really struggled with: how do we do it right? How do we do it in a way that we believe in? We're just trying to find a really good balance. We want people to play and enjoy the game, and not feel like they're being bilked all the time."

There are items for sale that can't be earned through play – permanent boosts that increase the amount of sun yielded from each sunflower, for example, or your stock of plant food – and a handful of premium plants. Murray insists, however, that every level in the game can be completed with the free tools with which you're provided. There are none of the content paywalls found in so many other App Store successes, and there's no energy system either. You can sit and play through the entire game in one sitting, if you've got about 15 hours to spare.

Balance will be key: in free-to-play games, difficulty spikes can be great revenue streams. *Plants Vs Zombies 2* is pacier, and at times tougher than its predecessor, but we see nothing in our time with the game to suggest that PopCap is turning to the darker side of free-to-play design. Murray says EA, which presumably would like a return on its \$750 million investment, has been surprisingly hands-off. "Honestly, it hasn't affected our day-to-day development. The question we get asked is, 'So, you're part of EA now. They made you make it free-to-play?' We were

"We want people to play and enjoy the game, and not feel like they're being bilked"

already leaning towards that; it's something PopCap has been doing for quite a while. There wasn't any sort of top-down mandate."

Murray is full of praise for the logistical support available within EA – in QA and networking, as well as a network of studios that openly shares knowledge and experience. It also means the studio has a presence at E3. But he is fully aware of the stigma that comes with being part of EA; that there will be a vocal minority openly wanting *PVZ2* to fail. "It's one of the reasons we're talking to you today. We want to address this issue head-on. Anyone who has issues with it, I just want to sit down with them, give them the game and say: 'Try it. Play it.' It's a great game, you'll have a good time, and it's free."

PVZ2, then, is more than just a sequel that's been a long time coming: it's a game that seeks to prove that free-to-play doesn't have to be evil, and that despite being part of the supposed worst company in America, PopCap is still PopCap. Meeting both of those goals would be worth the four-year wait. ■

Q&A Mohan Rajagopalan Lead designer



What did you do to ensure you made a sequel, not an expansion?

It took us some time to get right. We tried a few things that just weren't feeling like they were going in the right direction. We explored changing seasons, and lawns that were much bigger. But every time we went too far we realised it wasn't feeling like *Plants Vs Zombies* any more. We needed to find a way of having the plants from the first game, but make things feel new and fresh, and that's part of how Plant Food got created. We realised if we have this ability to buff up the plants, give them fun new animations and powers, then we can have old and new at the same time.

How do you ensure you don't effectively punish those who don't pay up?

It's actually not any harder than just balancing the game as a whole. The dividing line is: what are the plants that are really essential to the progression of the game? The plants that we put in the premium store are really fun ways to change the game up that fundamentally don't change the balance so much.

Some F2P developers claim tutorials put players off. How have you handled that?

You don't want people to feel like they're in a tutorial mode. People don't want to feel like they're in school, but learning is great. And that's actually the fun of *PVZ*: the discovery, how different things work, finding new combinations you hadn't thought of before. Learning is the essential, central part of the game.

The flow of the game has changed – it's a lot more reactive. Was that deliberate?

We wanted to break people [away] from doing the exact same thing every single level, because in the first game it was really easy to fall into that trap. It's just comfortable, right? You've got something you know works, you stick to it. We wanted to put little nudges into the game to try to push players to experiment a little bit more often.

What can you say to reassure players who think of free-to-play as exploitative?

Our goal is absolutely to ensure that no matter what amount of money you're spending in *PVZ2* that you're having a really great time, and that when you do spend money on it, you feel like you got something out of it. If you don't feel that way, then we're not doing our jobs, and to players that aren't interested in spending money, I'd say don't. Don't, unless you feel like we're giving you something that you really want.

BELOW Time-travel means PopCap's artists can have fun with the zombie designs, but whatever the era a traffic cone's still a traffic cone



ABOVE Existing plants have been redrawn from scratch; their animations have twice the frames and are more full of character than ever. RIGHT Bonk Choy is the most immediately likeable of the new plants, perhaps because in the demo's absence of the first game's Chomper we were hankering after something that could do big damage at short range



RIGHT Mummies, pirates and cowboys are three rich sources of inspiration for the game, and the team has countless options of what to follow them with. Murray hints at months, if not years, of post-launch support

Design showcase

How four years and three eras have changed PopCap's most characterful creations



RIGHT The world maps are one of many nods to games of yore. The mine carts are another, while Galaga is also mentioned during our demo

