IMAGINE A WORLD in peril. Kyros, the overlord, dominates everything in the known world—except for one tiny realm, that is. Known as the Tiers, this last bastion of goodness, of freedom, holds out in the face of impossible odds. Armies clash, and Kyros’s overwhelming forces handily dispatching the desperate populace until all hope seems lost.

In a normal video game, this would be the point where your untrained, unskilled, and unknown Joe Nobody enters the picture to save the day, to beat back the tides of darkness, confront Kyros, and eventually defeat him.

Not in Tyranny (tyrannygame.com), though.
Sympathy for the devil

In *Tyranny*, the latest isometric CRPG from Obsidian (following *Pillars of Eternity*), you work for Kyros. You are the bad guy, or at least one of his many servants. You play as a Fatebinder, an enforcer of the empire’s (often heinous) laws. Obsidian likened the Fatebinders to Judge Dredd the first time they showed us the game, and I’m going to stick with that. It’s an apt description—police force for a brutal and absolutist regime.

How brutal? Well, you start the game by going through the brief “Conquest” section. It’s essentially a Choose Your Own Adventure where you make key decisions about the invasion of the Tiers—what cities did you visit, which tactics did you use, that sort of thing. Two purposes are served here: 1) You’re setting up the state of the actual world you’re about to play in and 2) It gives you an idea of the stakes involved.

One place you could potentially visit is the proud realm of Stalwart, ruled by a group of Regents. Annoyed that those regents are holed up in a castle and refuse to fight, Kyros sends you to proclaim an Edict, a powerful piece of magic that in this case summons a storm. And “storm” is putting it lightly. The maelstrom sweeps up entire armies in a whirlwind, vaporizing the soldiers and leaving only their weapons and armor behind, half-buried in the dirt.

Proud Stalwart becomes known as “The Blade Grave.” What’s more, the storm still rages. It’s perpetual, unending. Only when the last Regent dies will the terms of the Edict be satisfied and the storm die down.

So yeah, pretty brutal. But it’s an interesting sort of evil. What drew me to *Tyranny* in the months

---

**Tyranny**

**AT A GLANCE**

*Tyranny* is flawed, but more in the vein of a future cult classic than a failure. It’s got great ideas, just not the depth to let them shine.

**PROS**

- “Evil” path is more complex and fleshed-out than in most games
- Bronze Age–styled world is a nice break from rote medieval fantasy
- Companion characters have interesting backgrounds

**CONS**

- Story ends on blatant sequel-bait
- Despite multiple factions, story seems strangely linear at times
- Combat can get a bit cumbersome and repetitive

$45

⭐⭐⭐⭐⭐
before release was the idea that evil can be complex, can be more than just the saint-or-devil moral paradigm we see in so many games.

I gave up long ago on playing the “Evil” character in most BioWare-esque games—not because of some moral aversion, but because it was boring. The “Good” characters always got long and engaging quests, full of dialogue and skill checks and intrigue. The bad guys usually got…well, to kill people. That’s it, really.

But Tyranny promised something more. Here in this world you would navigate between different evil factions, some chaotic, some merely tools of the bureaucracy, some overtly evil, some more insidious.

And to some extent that’s what Tyranny delivers. Especially in the first few hours. Oh, those first few hours are wonderful.

Once you’ve made your choices in the Conquest you’re kicked into the world your actions created. Out of six cities you’re allowed to visit three during the Conquest, and your actions in each city can be either merciful or murderous. In Stalwart, for instance, you can either read the Edict and summon the storm immediately or give the population three days to evacuate ahead of time. Any city you don’t visit? Assume the most murderous, horrible thing happened to those three by default.

That’s not your concern yet though. You’re sent to Apex, where a few
last bands of resistance have risen up in revolt. Immediately, your Conquest actions come into play. I’d managed to negotiate a surrender in Apex in my Conquest, so the rebels called me “Peacebinder” and were generally more willing to talk, while my own soldiers were annoyed with me—“If you hadn’t spared them two years ago, we wouldn’t have to fight them again.”

But they’re not doing much fighting anyway. Kyros’s armies are in disarray, thanks to a conflict between the two main factions—the organized, Roman-esque legions of the Disfavored and the chaotic horde of the Scarlet Chorus. Kyros sends you to read another Edict to the leaders of these two armies: “Defeat the rebels in eight days or everyone in the whole region, friend or foe, will die.”

The ensuing hours, which constitute the game’s first act, are masterful. Not since *Fallout: New Vegas* has faction warfare been handled so skillfully, with you inevitably drawn into the machinations of both the Disfavored and the Scarlet Chorus’s leaders and forced to somehow rise above it, force the two to work together, and play the factions off each other.

It’s a complicated balancing act, and one I really enjoyed for five or
six hours. But *Tyranny* is less *Fallout: New Vegas* as far as I can tell and more like *The Witcher 2*. Rather than letting you continue to play factions off each other for the rest of the campaign, *Tyranny* soon forces you (as far as I can tell) into choosing a side.

From there, it’s all a bit downhill for me. I sided with the Disfavored, given that the Scarlet Chorus seem like an unholy nightmare. But the Disfavored have their own problems—think Lawful Evil to the Chorus’s Chaotic Evil. There were times the Disfavored asked me to do something so heinous that I would’ve gladly defected, and yet the opportunity doesn’t present itself. The Chorus would attack on sight, as well as any Rebel factions, leaving me to either finish the Disfavored’s quest as asked or…quit the game, I guess?

That’s not necessarily a bad thing—I rather like that *The Witcher 2* put a hard lock on its story, saying “Regardless of how you make this choice, you won’t see half the game.” And I am looking forward to replaying *Tyranny* at some point.

It does feel somewhat artificial though, in this case. Maybe I just didn’t figure out a way to get the two factions to work together for a longer period of time, but if I’m indeed not missing something (and I don’t think I am) the game forces your hand really early.

You’re often not even allowed subtle ways to undermine your
faction. A late-game Disfavored quest told me I needed to fight off some foes and then repair the damage they’d done for a spell to complete. “Ah,” I thought, “a chance for me to do purposefully-shoddy repairs and foil the Disfavored’s plan.” But no, there’s no moral salvation. Clicking on the device in question, I could either fix it and finish the quest or not.

Again, it felt artificial. There’s just not enough depth to *Tyranny* at times, and the remaining 10 to 15 hours felt a bit like being railroaded to an inevitable conclusion—one dependent on which of the three main factions I sided with, sure, but still inevitable.

This review is perhaps overly negative, in that I still enjoyed *Tyranny* quite a bit. The dialogue is excellent. There’s still a lot to digest, but it’s overall less cumbersome than *Pillars of Eternity*. The fact you can mouse over key terms in the dialogue to see background info? Brilliant. Plus the world and the locales are often creative as hell, though the maps themselves are a bit empty at times.

And I came to love the new Skill system. While some abilities are gained in the usual manner, by leveling, you attain some depending on
your standing with various factions. Getting the Disfavored to like you, for instance, might grant a spell that protects a party member from damage. This system also means there can even be a benefit to a faction disliking you, which is interesting.

Oh, and the companions. I’m disappointed there aren’t specific sidequests for each, but they’re some of Obsidian’s best work even as-is. My favorite is Barik, a man caught up in the storm at Stalwart who awoke to find out he’d basically been fused with his armor forever, but all six made a compelling argument for me to take them along on adventures.

There’s a lot of potential in *Tyranny*. A lot. I just don’t think all of it is fulfilled. Great premise, great world, great characters, but it feels like there needed to be twice as much inter-faction politicking in the latter half to keep the story lively. And it doesn’t help that the ending is blatant sequel-bait, dangling a bunch of loose threads right when it feels like you’re getting a glimpse of the overarching plot. It felt to me like the story needed maybe one more standout scene to wrap up properly.

**Bottom line**
There’s a lot to love here, though. *Tyranny* is flawed, but I suspect it’s flawed in the manner of *Alpha Protocol*, to cite another Obsidian
project—a game that garners a cult following despite some clear issues, a game that’s later hailed as an “important” experience.

Because I keep coming back to those initial few hours: A game where you’re the villain, but not in the usual mustache-twirling cartoon way we see so often. There is gray, here. This is a world where evil is the norm, where you’re the villain in an objective sense but not in the context of the world itself.

Those are ideas worth exploring, just as we might ponder the plight of Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment*. Is *Tyranny* on that level? Nah. But games owe evil—if players choose to take that path—a depiction of that caliber. Not just “The Guy Who Wears Black And Kills Puppies.” *Tyranny*, in that regard, is a step in the right direction. 🎮
Copyright of PCWorld is the property of IDG Consumer & SMB Inc. and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.