

## Colosseum: Road to Freedom

### I. The Game We Wanted

Hey, so after the last video I had two games I wanted to do and an inability to decide which it would be. The fact there's a video on your device may lead you to think I made a decision but no! You made it for me! Or at least you were meant to!

Like I did once before I put it to a vote, only revealing the first letter of each game to make it a bit more fun, the problem is you guys had too much fun. At first E took an early lead so I spent a weekend recording E, but then you guys worked together towards a common end, and after a week it was at 50/50! You clever bastards! Well I know what you want, you leave me with just one choice. (*Halo music kicks up, a spartan rises from the bottom of the screen, only to be replaced with a gladiator*) (Why did Spartans have to be greek)

Colosseum: Road to Freedom! Yeah you guys can't get one over on me that easily!

This poll may say 50/50, but we can all see that C is more 50% than E. It's fitting! Neither of the games are perfectly balanced either! And this one didn't just sneak up on you, it snuck up on me too, years later than I'd have liked!

You ever have a game you just wish existed only to discover that it had always been there?

Well Colosseum is that game for me. As a kid I loved Shadow of Rome, A Riproaring Roman Romp where we tear our way through arena battles while uncovering a conspiracy to... (*stealth*) Oh, oh yeah, suppose it's more accurate to say I love half of it. One half is a really, really meaty brawler where you fight through crazy and intricate arena battles.

The other half is made up of laborious stealth puzzle sections starring Raiden's ancient Roman Ancestor trying to exonerate his friend of crimes he never committed while never answering for his own crimes of ruining the game he's in, then he celebrates by naming a month after himself the bellend.

But man the half of this game I loved left a desire in me, the brutal and creative combat, the variety of arenas and weapons, I especially adore how the audience was worked in, play well and they adore you in turn! (*cheer*) (*audience tosses in a giant sword*) This is why I don't have a PO box. Fun fact about Shadow of Rome is this was the base Dead Rising was built on! As a planned sequel morphed into the game we know and love today! Playing Shadow of Rome you can feel that mechanical lineage right down to the wrestling moves and eating mechanics. The crowd is a lot less adoring though, more agoring.

But to time travel back, kid me was baffled, why were there no games about just being a gladiator? Okay there was Gladius but I was an impatient twelve year old, I had no interest in a tactics game! In the years since we've had Domina, a game about running a Gladiator stable made by a not so stable guy, and the excellent We Who Are About to Die which I am at risk of getting addicted to at any moment so that's a thumbs up from me, at least I think it is there's some disagreement on whether thumbs up or down was actually the good one back then. (*do a gladiator thumbs bit*) Regardless these came out well after they'd have captured kid mes imagination.

But it turns out, there was a title in the Shadow of Shadow of Rome, released not only the same year, but the same month, developed by little known team Goshow and published by Koei and Ertain. Entertainment for life! And death if this game has anything to do with it! The gladiator game I'd have been glad to have was there all along, waiting for me to chance upon nearly 20 years later! And that's what we're covering today! Let me take you on a journey through Colosseum: Road to Freedom!

## II. In Medias Res

We get a cool main menu with a few geezers waiting for us to get in. We got famous gladiator new game (novus ludum), the scribe load game (Onus Ludum), the desk jockey Arena (Arena), and our options are lit by candle light. Awkwardly translated violence on by default, that's what I like to see.

If we wait around for a moment we get a text crawl giving us the lay of the land. It's 192 A.D. Following the death of Marcus Aurelius 12 years earlier his son Commodus ascended to Emperor, and is so thoroughly useless the Pax Romana packs it in, ending 200 years of Roman Peace and Prosperity. A fun coincidence since Shadow of Rome stars Augustus, the emperor who snuck Rome into this golden age, meanwhile Colosseum takes place just after its end, and it's a pretty good or downright terrible time to be a gladiator depending on how you look at it. To distract from political failings and widespread corruption games are being held daily!

This pleases Commodus, who has got it in his head he's the reincarnation of hercules and regularly partakes, and we'll be joining him real soon!

## III. Cagey Character Creation

The game begins with a meeting. (*Magerius Speech*)

Welcome to character creation! We're asked where we hail from, what we used to do for a living, what god we believe in, and if we follow the path of destiny or survival, standard job interview stuff.

It's simple but I'm rather fond of this setup. For one this bloke builder is a bit of a black box. These options determine stats we're not even aware of yet and we're not told for love or money how. Works for me, it means I'm not agonising over numbers before I even know what's valuable and just going with what takes my fancy. This primes you to go with your gut and figure things out later, an instinct the rest of the game will build on so this obfuscation serves a good purpose. I did check afterwards and naturally people have looked under the hood but I think it's in the spirit of things to be a little blind going in, all I'll say is Britons are average across the board and Germans have weak necks, which is probably why they weren't fit to be head of the Holy Roman Empire.

Something else I like. (*making Magerius say stuff*) I like messing with this guy, his patience and parchment both seemingly limitless, though I can hear his limit approaching ("You're from nowhere?") Alright you got me I'm from Eboracum, I figured nowhere said as much. Besides that I'm a farmer who believes in love. (*Amor, the god of love*) I'd have picked Gaia cause we've had a couple of run ins but she isn't available, then again she was always a bit of a terror (*terra*)

Lastly, our name, well years ago I played a Gladiator named Crixus in a tabletop campaign, he was a pompous celebrity who one day got it in his head his skills were wasted on entertainment and it'd be better if he went out into the world and slew actual monsters, so he ditched his school to make his mark on the world and boy did he! So lets carry on his legacy.

(*we'll meet again*) This tickles me cause usually when this is said it means we'll cross paths again after a good amount of time or following some big event. But no we're gonna run into this guy five minutes from now while he's out shopping. It'd be like turning up for work and the receptionist says "our paths will cross in the future" then yells "as the prophecy foretold!" when you head out for lunch.

#### IV. An Enslaved Intro

Anyway, Rome may not be doing too well but we're doing a whole lot worse.

That's us! Our farm days are over as we've been picked up by a slaver, because if you weren't Pictish the Romans weren't picky. We've been brought to the Largus Arena and it isn't much of a mystery what's in store for us. (*Largus explains "you'll soon know the reason you've been brought here."* → "*To entertain the crowd and make me money.*") That was pretty soon!

And it's not much longer before we're thrown into gameplay, and I do mean thrown! We're put through a few mock bouts with wooden blades as the intensity grows. One of our fellow prisoners tries to make conversation. (*Memnon shuts up*) Nice talk man, and it isn't long before the two of us are set against each other in a battle to the death (*Don't go easy*) It's fine, you strike me as a guy who doesn't try very hard, meanwhile I strike you... (*beat him*) Yeah, like that.

After which... Ah, there you are! We're purchased by Magerius to be shipped off to his school, and on the way to Rome, we're given our goal. (*Magerius says we can earn our freedom*) And that totals too... (*Debt*) MM! Sorry, I mean a million. You showed Largus some largess didn't you! We got a lot of money to make, and a long road to freedom ahead!

And it's at the training camp we're finally ran through the incredibly long list of moves at our disposal. All capped off as trainer Gneaus nails us with a Gladius. Throwing us into one last bout that is rather hard on a first go around but gives us a reward if we come out on top. Which Crixus doesn't quite manage.

So after messing that up we have our last stop of the day, the mess hall! (*Crixus – Ki-ri-Cos*) Oh, oh, uh well anyway my name's Crixus! It's a small consolation but Crixus having his name said wrong, by the guy who made him up, for years, is far from the worst thing to happen to him. He was crushed to death while high on fantasy crack battling B-Balling hill giants on a quest to regain his lost arm and even that wasn't the worst thing that happened to him. When I suggested he left a mark on the world it was really more of an imprint.

Magerius has his barbers make us look less cool and that's our intro! and it's one I'm quite fond of. I like how we're tossed into gameplay *before* we even know our left from our right attack. Only after we make it through does it give us a proper tutorial. it's an unusual set up but it does a good job making us inhabit our character. We're playing some unfortunate sod who has had all control taken away from him and been thrust into an impossible life or not quite death situation. The first time you play these battles will feel clumsy and trepidatious both because you're playing a non-fighter, and because you the player are playing a non-conventional fighter. Colosseum features a control scheme that's quite unconventional: Not only a far cry from its already eclectic contemporaries but I can't name any game since that plays quite like it and your first brush will most likely not be a smooth one. It's almost like its self-awerely weaponising its weirdness against you. I can imagine the shock of these controls turning some away right away but I was immediately enamoured. While this effect is lost on repeat visits this does have the benefit of letting you get to the actual game much quicker on revisits.

The game only teaching you how to fight after this scramble for survival leaves a distinct impression. Having these lessons just after learning our goal lends a sense of progression and sudden stability and makes for a powerful incentive. We've gone from just trying to make it fight by fight to having an objective and being formally introduced to the tools we'll need to get there. This intro does have some shortcomings however.

For one it does break its own stride a little to teach the player how to pick up and put down objects. Which could probably have been resolved by having weapons forced onto you in cutscenes, reinforcing our lack of freedom and making our relative autonomy under Magerius more appreciable.

Alongside that this intro sets up a lot of plot which goes nowhere and is actually quite minimal from here on out which I don't mind at all as the actual story of Colosseum feels made up of your gameplay experiences and while a good amount of this intro does a solid job putting me in this mindset. It also having a greater amount of set in stone beats which go nowhere is a little odd.

We get introduced to all of our trainers, Caladus, Gneaus and uh, Decimus (appears) Who doesn't even make up a 10<sup>th</sup> of the scene. And you might think their disrespect is setting up an arc of winning them over but all it amounts to is their greetings becoming less bitter as the game goes on. Part of me wonders if this is down to cut content. Food for thought, as Crixus (ki-ri-cos) has a lot of dummied out dialogue where he fills you in on rival gladiators and political rumours. All that's left of this feature is him explaining a small selection of optional event matches the day before they happen which is a bit of a mockery.

Lastly, you can't actually fail the first two brawls carried out with wooden weapons. It's small beans as frankly you have to be trying to lose but I figured the point of these is to have a couple rubber rings before they get popped by real steel.

If the difficulty of these fights were cranked up a bit and the player could lose them before being tossed into a no holds barred death match it could make for quite an intense intro. It's even stranger then that it does end with a match you are allowed to lose. Offering a bonus for those who come out on top.

And yes I was trying to see if I could get battered so Magerius didn't have to pay as much. But no dice, freedom isn't free, literally!

## **V. A Structured Life Sim**

Before we start I'm gonna go over the structure of the game and then zoom in as from here it's a rather cyclical and structured experience.

Unbeknownst to us we have 50 days to pay off our debt and earn one of several endings. There's a lot of things not explicitly told to the player which I feel are withheld or only half-explained for good reason, this rather arbitrary time limit is not one of them. Many of the systems encourage short and long term strategising, knowing we have a deadline would feel contrived but also allow us to plan around said information while adding a dash of tension.

Days are either training or Arena days. On Training days you do exercises to try and gain points before cashing them in at the mess hall to build your stats. On arena days you enter bouts to earn money, acquire gear, work off debt and raise your stat cap.

At first training and arena days alternate. With the occasional opportunity to choose how to spend a day, enjoy that while you can! Cause as the days go on the games ramp up and opportunities to train become rarer. This is why I wish the time limit was known as it would give weight to this choice. Time is money and we're sacrificing both for greater stats.

One small thing is that each day we wake up and have to manually leave our room and go to training. At the arenas we have to exit the cart and walk through multiple screens to get to the bailey. There's a slow physicality to this game that could be called lumbering but I think it adds to the vibe. We're not just trying to survive, we're going to work.

Beyond that it is betting it all on the enjoyability of its combat and depth of its systems and it just about manages. My playthrough was made up of roughly 140 bouts over 20 hours and I wasn't tiring until close to the end where the promise of a conclusion carried a satisfied me to the finish line.

## VI. Training

But that's a ways away. This is where it all begins. though this is less Ab Initio and more Abs Initio cause it's time to get wedge! On training days we can undertake two of a variety of options. We can do dummy and combat exercises with Caladus, Dodge & throw training with Gnaeus, bodyweights with Decimus.

Depending on how well you perform in your two activities you receive points that are cashed in at the cafeteria. "Eat and build your strength." Strength build you say? All meat! Naturally the better you did during training the bigger a portion you get.

There's probably a fitness influencer who subscribes to Ki-ri-cos's theory of fitness. Where doing squats all day then guzzling down grapes will make you grow faster. No hypertrophy But hypersonic!

It's a pretty standard stat array. Strength is damage, Dexterity lessens the chance of having items knocked from your hands, agility makes you faster, Vitality lessens the chance of a blow being fatal, and endurance increases your stamina. They also seem to have unstated extra effects with some seeming to work off a sum total of multiple stats. The easiest to track being equip load, which I think is calculated from a mixture of strength, Vitality, and stamina. I apologise only being able to guess but some mechanics gods only know, case in point:

You can offer food to the buggers but the effects of this are not immediately apparent. Just like real fitness there's room to argue which makes this the most realistic bodybuilding sim ever made. Reading up on the actual gladiator's diet reveals most fighters here would have been an endurance build by Colosseum's standards, with a diet primarily made of grains and legumes. Their staple meal being a filling yet unfulfilling barley polenta or mashed beans. Earning them the oddly cuddly nickname of Hordearrii (hor-de-ar-rii) or 'Barley Men'. The sad thing is no I can't start calling my beans on toast gladiator grub.

Early on Caladus's and Gnaeus's training regimes are pretty handy as they drill gameplay concepts that you otherwise only experience under pressure with potentially high costs for failure. Early on I'd end arena days feeling that I had to do more dodge training to lock the timing in which this served to do. Likewise Celadus's sparring let me feel out stance movesets in a **Semi**-consequence free environment. The fact we have limited training time means that while relatively stress free, there is a push to pick up as much as you can in a very limited window, and you are losing out on other potential gains for the privilege.

Which does lead to a downside, which is that as the game goes on I found little reason not to just go with Decimus. His minigames are not only relatively easy and give out good points. But they're also the only means of permanently strengthening your limbs, essentially boosting your max health!

The moment you've learned the practical lessons Celadus and Gnaeus provide they don't compare. Getting a perfect run of dodge training does have the highest points payout I'm aware of but is absurdly difficult and one flub immediately tanks the days earning. Or you can wager yourself against a high class sparring partner, one of the toughest opponents available sans the final boss and one I cannot consistently beat, all for the opportunity to win less than half of what I'd pull doing some passable pushups. Decimus is comparatively consistent with much greater margin for error all while granting further margin for error in battle thanks to his health upgrades.

Perhaps the other trainers could have had unique bonuses, improving fist damage, widening the dodge window, or perhaps unlocking unique skill moves to compensate. I still like the idea of the training a lot: It is a nice mental breather and growth is noticeable, rewarding and strategic. I'd end arena days thinking what weak points needed improvement or what skill I could be working on and in short order feel those kinks ironing out while always leaving me wanting to improve something, and despite the activities simplicity and imbalance they slot nicely into the overall rhythm. It's enjoyable but just like my inputs, a little imbalanced (*get smacked/get outta here dodge*)

## VII. Arena Intro

The following day marks our debut (*You'll be fighting at the Atillius Arena!*)

So fun fact: I went and looked up the Atillius Arena to see if it was real, and while I couldn't find anything under that name I did come across an interesting historical anecdote.

After Emperor Tiberius's ban on gladiators was lifted the Entrepreneur Atillius quickly tossed together an amphitheatre at Fidenae. The crowd, hungry for a spectacle filled the place to bursting, which it did. Resulting in the greatest stadium disaster in history with 20,000 fatalities. Two lessons here: 1. Entrepreneurs have always been trouble and 2. We've got our work cut out for us if we want to leave a bigger impact!

We may just be getting off the cart but the games have already begun! You see, we don't have any weapons. They're sat waiting in the bailey but it's first come first serve and your mates aren't going to wait on you! I love this, It's a pretty cruel joke to play on the player and one I'm in favour of, I kind of wish it was even more of a scramble with our boys charging off the cart to make sure they get something to use. This is already a mean game but I think it could only benefit by being meaner. It's in here we also have a healer, a chest to store equipment we find, and a billboard where we can set our moves, I guess it's more of a skillboard. A short walk away is a little armoury where we can purchase and upgrade equipment but right now we haven't a penny to our mispronounced name.

Luckily there's a crowd right here we can try and woo for money! (*rock*) Ow!

Yeah, these guys are best hit up at the end of the day particularly if you've put in a good performance. However late in the game where we're more well known they'll start lavishing you with stacks instead of stones from the moment they see you which is a nice touch. Right now we're a nobody, we'll show them!

From the Bailiff we can enter matches. Each day has six events and these go in order, jump ahead and you wipe out all the matches before it. You don't have to enter everything and they're also gated by rank so early on we can only enter the bronze bouts. Which can be pretty humiliating. (*do you want to leave*) Yeah dad, I wanna go home, eat beans and get big!

Anyway, lets get into it, there are several match types but most just vary how many people want to kill you in particular. Duels, Free for alls, team deathmatches, and wave survival. As we advance we'll see hunting rounds against animal opponents and mock battles which I'll mock later. No objective modes and very little variance, rounds are either ended by time or kill limits and team death matches do occasionally have VIPs but overall the selection is meagre.

This is an area where I wish there was more variety but colosseum is once again banking everything on the depth and enjoyability of what it does have and well, we've got a big bloody mechanical deep dive ahead for a reason.

### **VIII. Combat Begins: A Cornucopia of Controls**

*(Battle intro)* At its base, Colosseum is brawler with lite-RPG mechanics. It features stamina management, locational damage, high dedication attacks, and my god is this combat HEAVY (*heavy whack*) and that's good because I've got a lot to lay on you and if I do my job right you'll be asking for more weight. While there are downsides my time in the ring here was well spent and if you like beat-em-ups and want to try something different this may well provide.

My experience in the arena went through an arc. I was obviously hooked in by the setting and then kept invested by the surprising versatility of the combat, but goddamn does it feel cumbersome to start with! Like me Crixus is sluggish and awkward, yet unlike him I'm having a good time! A Toribash one might say! Keeping on top of foes is tricky and each encounter feels like a scramble for survival, being out of my depth in a way which was thrilling and made the hard won victories genuinely relieving moments.

The enemy AI is a little lumbering but never stopped feeling dangerous, aided by the inability to reliably heal mid-match and the capacity for any blow to deal great damage, particularly to my wallet! Wounds don't heal between rounds and the healer is extortionate, even light wounds will have this guy trying to take you for a ride and all I can think is man, Charon's cheaper. So yeah, wounds are costly, if I drop my guard my bottom line will limbo even lower. So the AI is a little slow but they never stop feeling dangerous. Each and every hit cuts deep.

What's neat is game is rather modular, with me and my foes functionally the same and possessing the same moveset. One which I've said is pretty atypical and expansive so lets dig into it, and Jesus Christ... sorry, Jupiter Christ there's a lot here and I wanna touch on it all. Luckily each move does have something unique going on and highlights at least one other system.

First up, every face button is an attack with cardinal directions determining the swing. North hits high, south goes low, and east and west are your side to side. Armours, shields, and even weapons can deflect a hit to whatever limb they're attached to and I'm sure this is handled via dice roll. This could have easily rendered the game frustrating but is tuned just so that it never does, with what gets deflected and what connects just subconsciously feeling right. Every blow deflected by my stuff was a palpable relief. It working just as much in the players favour creates a feeling of fairness and makes the combat just as much about opening holes in the enemies defence as... Opening holes in the enemy! It creates great moments of drama when gear is knocked loose, either sending you scrambling to recover or trying to capitalise now that the way is open. So positining, then finding or creating weak points to focus on is pretty much the basis of the combat. With limb damage and even breaking limbs being a possibility.

Obviously we have power attacks, oddly enough these only work overhead which I feel is a little limiting. While slow they're useful for breaking defences as this game does have staggers and knockbacks. There are plentiful ways to force openings all with their own benefits and drawbacks.

The opposite of these are jabs, by quickly tapping a direction and a face button you can execute a quick thrust attack and this works omnidirectionally. Not only useful if you find yourself surrounded but want to keep your armoured side towards a certain foe, but there's also a countering system where if you hit a foe while they wind up you deal extra damage and potentially interrupt them. Also the two handed back attack is so cool as to be almost out of place.

Following on from that are turn attacks, same basic input but the face button is held. This does lead me to wonder if at some point the handling was heavier to necessitate the existence of a simultaneous action like this as changing your facing is instantaneous if you're not mid-attack. It's an option that almost feels like the game needs to handle worse to justify its existence.

Though to give it some props it is slightly faster than turning and executing a normal, and it does allow you keep your armour facing a certain way up until the very moment you strike.

By alternating the left and right face buttons you can execute a chain attack. This is our only real combo option, and with that the most costly and useful tool at our disposal. An overwhelming crowd pleasing move which can not only shred but strip opponents.

It does have some considerations as it requires high commitment for both the player and player character. It's rhythmic input takes concentration and a long wind down makes it high commitment. It's also high cost, burning through stamina fast. Yes this game has stamina and you'll want to conserve it. Act recklessly and get wrecked, you'll be dead tired and not necessarily in that order! All too often I'd knock an opponents weapon flying just as Crixus ran out of gas. It's a move where you really have to pick your moment to break it out, but use it right and you'll demolish foes.

One neat thing the game never teaches is that once you have a rhythm going you can start tapping low or high attack to pivot your chain that way, though maybe they figured people would learn that naturally since the chain attack is very capable of knocking opponents prone and it's only natural the player would reflexively follow, learning that this move has greater flexibility.

Then there are jump attacks, chains aside this is your only means of moving while attacking, it's high commitment and hard to aim. Crouch and jump are bound to the same key, with jumping being sticky, hard to control, and unreliable to trigger. It's a shame.

And well, we can also toss stuff, even our helmet! This is our only ranged move, an utter desperation attack, nice to have but I feel it's nicer to have my weapon!

Then there are skills. Opponents drop tablets of two kinds, passives which grant stat and health bonuses, and Skill Attacks. There's a wide variety, I can't cover all of them but they give a lot more flexibility and flashiness. You got stuff like dodge attacks, sidestep strikes, disarms, shield bashes, and even launchers! These are either combo defense/offense moves or greater means to manipulate the enemy, force openings or create advantages.

You can only equip four at a time and they're stance locked to boot.

This leaves the player with a conundrum, spread out your skills so you'll always have access to at least one or go all in on your primary style. Maximising its versatility but cutting yourself off if you wind up needing to change gear mid-round.

## VIII-II. Combat: A Deluge of Defence

The game also boasts a bevy of defensive options, though there is an immediate snag and that's pretty much all defence is bound to the same button, and that button is also the lock on! R1 is both the lock on and dodge! Locking on also puts you in guard mode, and once there, all buttons become the parry!

This marks the first time I've seen a lock on lock us out of all offensive options, which limits so much of its use in combat. There's an irony that our most nimble moves are bound to or behind the most overburdened button, yet once you adapt it works surprisingly well.

Blocking is the lowest risk with no reward beyond tiring an opponent out which is also possible with the other moves.

Dodging has the tightest timing but refunds stamina. Dodging is arguably medium risk as armour and weapons might still deflect a blow. Unlike parrying which leaves the player far more open if failed but has a more reliable input and easier timing, at the cost of requiring you to be facing the source of the attack.

Even the simple act of trying to run into and out of an enemies range feels accounted for as your back is totally unarmoured, mistime your move and it can bite you in the arse!

To sum up, when facing an enemy attack, I have at least 6 options. Block, dodge, parry, counter hit, reposition, and roll, which managed to dodge any mention until now because it's not that handy. If you're into hyperkinetic action titles like Devil May Cry or Bayonetta this may only have a fraction of the flash but for the scale and pace we're moving at this (*dodge/parry string*) Feels just as awesome in its own way, this is the ancient smoking Sestertius (ser-stersh-ious) style! And it gets that across through the intricacy of timing, systems, and how much pain I could be in for cocking up the timing just once. Plus well, all the hours of getting my ass beat it took to get here.

Dodging feels amazing, getting a sudden burst of energy and being able to retaliate immediately with a chain or skill move is great. It lends a great eb and flow to combat and gives the player more options. Break away to slowly recover stamina or risk letting an opponent get a hit in to get back into gear faster. It pairing perfectly with chain attacks feels deliberate. Both moves require the most precise inputs and concentration so juggling both allows for very risky but hyper aggressive play. And furthermore I adore the parry. It's open ended in its use, it's on the player how to use a successful parry. Push the opening you created, buy time, tire out the opponent a bit. Or bank on knocking their weapon sky high! That's always satisfying.

For the most part the fact that all of your defence moves are bound to and behind one shift function works surprisingly well after some adjustment. Though this does mark the first time I've seen a lock on lock us out of all defensive options. And while it works, it's an inelegant design.

## VIII-III. Extra Combat Stuff & Conclusion

So these controls are the foundation of the game and while there's still a ton more to it it's all building off of this base so now it's time I pump my own agility and speed up a little.

As mentioned the game has four stances, one hander, heavy shield, dual wield and striker.

All mechanically distinct and even within those stances weapon variety does further bulk out your options. I do find that one hander is maybe a bit too good in all ways to be called the balanced option. With heavy shield and dual wield having a few too many caveats to compare. I understand Heavy shield feeling inflexible, that's a good trade off for defence, the fact that dual wield feels limited in a similar way is strange. Both are relatively rigid stances which don't gain enough in offence or defence to compensate. Both are still very useable however just not as well put together.

All four stances can be levelled individually, and on a level up for reasons known only to Asclepius we recover all of our health. This is perhaps the most incongruous feature, it sticks out by being perhaps the only one that purely benefits the player and I find it a welcome aid.

It leads to these really exciting moments where on the verge of death you get a surge of power and are right back in the fight. In the early hours where money is tight this offers the player a hard choice between rounds. Lose some of your very limited funds or get back in there and literally risk toughing it out.

Naturally as the game goes on and the gap between level ups grow these bursts of energy become less frequent. Rendering it an early game crutch to help you adapt to the combat.

This also encourages mixing up your play style time to time. Maybe having a reserve style you switch to in a jam knowing the intervals between level ups is smaller.

This isn't even everything, know what else you can do? Just run! **(BUMP)** Simply crashing into an opponent may be enough to send them sprawling and yes even this is a valid means to get an opening. While the game may be slow it never feels lethargic because at any moment so much is going on and you have so many options to pick through, and based on the enemies equipment and fighting style I've got a lot of ways to get in or turn a bad situation around. Each and every action and system they contribute to has very flexible utility, interplay, and considerations which keeps the battles engaging, even when nothing is happening on the field, there's something going on in my head.

I don't think the AI is great but there is a lot I like about it, it's at a level where it knows how to put the pressure on but has holes a canny player can manipulate. It works well in groups to surround us and make sure I never feel comfortable. I also like how they handle dropped gear. They'll wait until you back off to try and recover it. You can use their own dropped gear to block them off, or let them try to retrieve their stuff for a sneaky backstab. You build a familiarity with it but it still has the capacity to surprise and throw me off guard.

None of this is to mention that Colosseum just feels good. Kinesthetically pleasing with... Hilarious sound effects (*SOUNDS*) Everything is so crunchy and metallic, I think they nicked their sound library from bloody BCV (*BVC clip*) this doesn't sound like a colosseum but a construction site!

I do think the combat has its foibles however. The animal opponents are awful. As gone over this is an intricate game and a lot of why it works so well is all these cool systems playing off each other. The animal enemies are comparably generic video game foes, high damage, repetitive, utter bullshit. I don't enjoy throwing Crixus to the lions. They do have a chance of dropping a trophy which can be sold for a lot of cash which makes the rounds bearable and... Hang on... thank god, no bears.

Only slightly less wild are my team mates and I trust them even less, I mean we got off to a bad start and their performance in the arena doesn't help. I don't think my feeling towards them ought to be panic, but friendly fire is on and at a certain point I stopped caring if they just so happened to wind up in the arc of my not so friendly flail. Luckily Magerius doesn't up my debt for doing this, in all honesty he's probably chuffed to bits because besides acting as bait they're basically useless.

There's also an adrenaline mechanic. Through damage and dodges you can fill up a bar to gain a temporary limit break. Slowing the world around you and rapidly refilling stamina. First off the requirements to fill this bar are demanding to the point that by the time I had the ability to top it up I had long forgotten the input to trigger it. When I finally did set it off it is great in a pinch, but kind of self defeating in the funniest way possible. Due to how the game handles damage, I'd overwhelm a foe, knock them off their feet, then usually juggle them outside of my attack range and waste most of the bar hitting air.

And well there are gaps in the defence. The game was smart enough to not allow dodge spam spam, if you mistime the prompt or hit it when no one was going to hit you there's an invisible cooldown before another attempt is allowed. A well considered one, as I always instinctually knew when it was back online and that gut feeling was never wrong. It's clever how the opponents idle animation even works in fake start ups and feints to bait you into defending. It's a cruel and clever bit of animation work.

However, opponents can whiff. If I dodge an attack that would have missed that cooldown is still triggered. When attacked by multiple opponents the game can also misread what I want to dodge and this is where it becomes a rather cutting problem. Another hilarious issue is that hitting a foe midswing can either cancel their attack or else only stagger it for a frame before it continues. While I don't mind the uncertainty it could be seen as a problem. Do I dodge or gamble that a counter will stop the attack? It also means I've had my dodge timings fumbled when teammates hit an opponent swinging for me and delayed their strike.

Parrying also has its perils. Because to parry I must hit what is also the dodge prompt I've hit defence, hit a face button, but then dodged out of the blow I wished to parry. But the input still seems to be buffered, leading to the parry I wanted to do a split but meaningful moment later. This rarely left me open long enough for the opponent to capitalise but it could happen, and during boss fights where they're often faster, more aggressive, and often able to take out a player in a handful of hits this could be ruinous.

And while I love how the parry can knock an opponents weapon sky high, with the possibility of it even landing back on a foe for extra damage. It can just as easily fall on the player, it's even more likely if you pounce on the opening you just created. You're effectively punished for a successful parry. Not to mention on some occasions, especially with highly damaging duel bosses, knocking a weapon loose instantly put them in the incredibly fast striker style where they'd recover from the parry and then hit me before I recover *from* me successfully parrying them!

And one last thing, I don't think opponents knocked prone should be incredibly dangerous! The rising attack is fast, hard to predict, and highly damaging. So following up on a downed foe can easily and spectacularly backfire!

Now, this is going to be the oddest defence I ever put forward for what are undeniably flaws, but many of them are just funny. They're slapstick in a way where I just can't be all to upset.

The stupid team mates, adrenaline being too powerful for its own good, and the parry launch especially I find too amusing to dislike.

They contribute to Colosseum's madcap mix of slow tactical gameplay and rigid yet freeform chaos. The thing about teammates getting in eachothers way is that literally cuts both ways, I can bait enemies into killing eachother just as much as me trying to gang up on a lone foe has its risks. And well, the parried weapon flying up and not particularly caring as to which bounce it bounces upon is just funny.

On the one hand I want to yell "Oi bruv, the circus is just down the road!" But I know the game would be lesser by their absence.

I think I've shown this game has a lot going on, there's a reason it can bank on its combat systems for 20 hours. Big move variety with a lot of utility to discover and tons of considerations in a fight at any one moment. Your options are stacked!

And over many hours. the clunk clicks and it's not that the game is awkward, it's deliberate, there's a specificity to your attacks and precision that takes practice but once you're over that hump there's a oneness with your character. This is a game where I can start off feeling out of my depth but with mastery end up feeling like a genuinely proficient fighter in an arc that matches what my former farmer flagbearer would experience. To the point reviewing my old footage where I'm flailing around feels like watching another person, it's a wonderfully pronounced sense of mastery.

After a few days at Atilius we finally get to go to the Colosseum! It's alright, there isn't much to either arena beyond a couple traps which I did wind up getting attached to if only because there's so little in either one I got attached to what was there. Colosseum days tend to be better paid but with harder events, but by sticking it out we get our first promotion from rookie to journeyman, and it's here a new journey begins!

### **IX. Story Intro (and Outro!)**

A week into the game and the sun is ready to rise on a new plot. As we're summoned to Magerius's office. (*Marcia and Laetus*) Oh man I've been put on the spot, this is a fascinating moment. It's a short scene but there's a lot going on in my head.

For one, while as always we don't have a lot to go on, especially because the developers tightened Ki-Ri-Cos's lips. If you know your history you'll have a pretty good idea what these two are plotting and that getting involved may not be the wisest idea.

This is why you shouldn't learn history people, it can spoil video games. So I feel like saying no is the smart option.

*BUT* I feel pretty pressured to agree. I'm Magerius's property after all and it'd be improper to turn down what's obviously good business for him, even if it feels like a poisoned chalice for me. So of course I said yes. (*I'd be honoured*) Oh, we speak!

But that's only one part of what's fun about this choice, because in more technical terms what we're being asked is "Do you want this game to have a story?" If you just want to play a straight up gladiatorial life sim with no distractions you can turn them down and like Hadrian, you'll get off Scot free! Depending on what a player wants they're either rewarded or punished for their suspicion. These two will come back, repeatedly even, but you can fob them off until the time limit hits which is pretty funny.

Granted, even if you say yes the story remains minimal with plotpoints taking place entire weeks apart, but hey, these two clearly have pretty big designs so give them time.

## **X. Rank Up: Money, Gear, and Loss**

And I'm not done drawing attention (*Narcissus arrives*) Guess I'm not done drawing blood either. That's Narcissus, our opponent in the big match today.

With our rank up we're now able to join silver matches. This game has a good difficulty curve. The arrival of each new tier feels well timed and marks a solid jump in difficulty.

Enemies not only get stronger, better equipped, and more numerous but also just plain fight better. Making greater use of skill moves as well as being far more likely to dodge and parry your blows. Each time I got to a new rank was a humbling experience. Arriving just as I was starting to get comfortable if not a little cocky and smacking me down for my hubris. It keeps up a good cycle of struggle and relief and keeps things from getting stale.

It does make me feel bad for the bronze buggers I'm still battering though. You'd think the commissioners might take issue with me joining the beginner bouts and annihilating the newbies but no. And I'm not gonna going to stop because I need money! You see the prize listed for each fight, you're not getting that. Margerius takes a 90% cut and puts it towards our debt! So I'm sorry, your blood is on his hands, mine was forced.

Cash is tight for much of Colosseum's runtime. I've gone over how medical costs are extortionate and this is why, we're scraping by day by day. Rationing money for emergencies and as we get into this new bracket, to get some quality equipment to stave off such an emergency. We need an edge against the difficulty and the arma stocks plenty.

Another thing I have to give praise for is how Colosseum handles items. It's not only the variety but how low funds made each purchase significant. I was especially attached to my flail and bull skull. These became Crixus's signature look in the ring, it may be a placebo but I swear flails just circumvent shields a lot more often, and I was especially fond of the helmet in part because of how rarely it seemed to appear.

Between each round the shops stock is shuffled. It's exciting to go check it out but in all honesty shopping is a bit of a faff. To even go to the shop between rounds you must first put all your weapons away so the guards will let you exit the bailey. Then you trek over to the arma, and within is not a menu. Shopping is done by manually walking to each piece of equipment, checking and cross referencing stats, before carrying it over to the quartermaster.

Upgrading is done the same way and yes this game has an upgrade system! With blue then yellow tier gear granting stat bonuses! These can make a big difference. They also gain favour with one of the Gods but I have no idea if there's anything more to that.

One odd thing is that upgrading a weapon from blue to yellow doesn't strengthen its godly buff, but changes it completely. Maybe the previous god feels a bit put down that its blessing apparently wasn't good enough. This sucks because upgrading is expensive so a blind gamble rarely feels worth it.

By now armour feels like a necessity to get by. I'm literally weighing up what to take into each match thanks to a well considered encumbrance system which keeps the player in check. Some rounds I want offense, sometimes I want to cocoon up!

Some rounds, especially when I'm smurfing the bronze ranks became econ rounds where I'd go in with arena gear and hope to scoop up something valuable to either sell off for a bit more money or hold onto for its potentially high stats or useful buffs.

This brings me to one of my favourite innovations: the way Colosseum handles bodies. Rather than fade them out a cleaner will run onto the field to scoop up the dead and much more pressingly, any loose items lying around.

I've never felt more terror than having something of mine knocked loose only to see this guy approaching because he does not discriminate and it will not be returned. This is why I like the initial scramble for gear on our first days, it's getting you ready for him!

If you want something the enemy dropped you have to act on that fast because it will not be waiting for you when you need it.

It's such a cute way to have bodies diegetically disappear yet it brings with it yet more gameplay wrinkles.

Though one of those wrinkles is just a sign of age. Colosseum can't handle many people out on the field, with the cleaner and the corpses counting against the total as much as anything else.

In an effort to not have matches slow to a crawl the game is smart to despawn them when you're not looking, the thing is you only have to take your eye off them for a picosecond for them to piss off.

Bizzarely enough racking up the truly impressive and surprisingly *named* killstreaks more or less requires exploiting this technical shortcoming to get new bodies in fast enough.

On the other end, if you're in a tight spot in a timed round you can exploit this. Keeping an eye on the cleaner and making sure he carries out his custodial duties. Oh no, I'm not delaying new enemies or anything like that, I'm just civic minded. There's a lot to this mysterious cleaner.

Lastly, I want to talk about the penalty for failure. If you fall in battle three things can happen. You might just die, memento mori and all that. This means reloading a save and likely restarting the day. This obviously stings as match days can go on awhile but I'd say death is getting off easy.

Second is you survive but you'll lose any gear you had on you! I'd sooner lose my life than my stuff! I've taken a few cracks at beating this game before making this video and those runs all kinda spiralled after I lost my best gear.

Recovery is possible but it's painful, especially if you're dependent on really good gear, or if you've brought all of your blessed armour into a match.

Third, occasionally Prosperina will offer you a chance to undo the match if you sacrifice half of your coin. I'm fairly confident offering food is what gives this a chance of happening.

Again, all of this leaves the player with yet more interesting dilemmas. If a match looks hard you'll want take your best gear to give you a fighting chance, but this also makes the cost of failure way higher! Also the tougher matches are likely to have better prizes to pilfer, but I'd need a free hand to claim it.

There is an annoyance here I want to talk about, one which can cost you an arm and a leg armour. Any items you leave in the arena are left behind. Say I go in with a sword, a shield, a helmet, and two or more pieces of limb armour. I'm decked out!

If those armours are knocked off they can't be re-equipped. The only way to apply them is by taking them out of storage. So I would need to free up a hand to carry them out. Which would naturally mean losing my sword or shield. Unless there's a system to mark items on the ground for retrieval I'm unaware of, which honestly I wouldn't put past this game, the fact I have to lose something feels contrived in a way the rest of this games antagonism avoids.

Late in the game I did actually lose a lot of my very nice armour this way and it's by far the most frustrating this game gets. Even more annoying than Narcissus, the man talks a big game, but he's clearly in the wrong sport! **(Narcissus goes down)**

## **XI. A Clash with Commodus**

And with that earned the eye of Commodus himself! (*Commodus arranging bout*) The game, in a rare bout of being forthcoming, is very clear that we have to convincingly throw the fight. If you think you can take him, you probably can, but you'll be executed by an endless wave of guards for your arrogance. I know it's probably just guessing a point in his health bar where you should let him win but I love this fight for its inventiveness.

This has basis in history. Commodus would regularly partake in gladiatorial games. Likely to the frustration of the colosseum itself, as he charged a million coins for each appearance, of which he put in over 700. Kinda like what I do on Patreon. As a fighter he was undefeated as Gladiators had no choice but to surrender to him, kinda like what I do on Youtube. This was seen as behaviour unfitting of an Emperor, particularly annoying the intellectual classes, and this is only the beginning of his absurd and hedonistic exploits.

Besides having 600 concubines, renaming every month after himself the total cock, and throwing a guy into a furnace for making his bath water too cold. He apparently had people who'd lost their feet taken to the colosseum, tied together, where he'd beat them to death while pretending they were giants even though you'd think they'd be smaller than average. (*obvious observation pointed out by my mate Jack*) Then again it was a political rival who claimed he did that last one so grain of barley. The fact of the matter is if you've seen the movie Gladiator, Commodus was toned way down.

Either way, many suffered defeat at his hands and we've just joined their ranks. What stings more is Narcissus rubbing it in afterwards. Still Marcia is happy. (*"You'll be more useful than I thought."*) And this loss does nothing to halt our momentum. We rank up, get a swanky private bedroom, and the people tolerate us all the more!

## **XII. I Adore the Crowd & The Power of Not Knowing**

By now I feel like we have a pretty good handle on things, but there are several mechanics which kept me clueless for a very long time. The biggest, appropriately enough, is the crowd. And it's thanks to this that I love them a whole lot more than they love me. They bring the experience together and represent everything that keeps Colosseum intriguing.

First off, the crowd is enigmatic. I can kill 5 lions singlehandedly, but do it in a manner considered so boring that they actually subtract money from the prize pot. But then Commodus killed a hundred of them in a single day and people weren't exactly lionizing him either. Doing slightly better, I think, I take out 15 men in a row, once again by my lonesome, to receive an audience review of "has potential." Now I think anyone who has killed 15 people has far surpassed any reckoning of their potential, kinetically at the least.

Unlike Shadow of Rome, Gladius, WWAATD, and countless other games with crowd mechanics which gives you precise, moment by moment information on how infatuated they are with you. All Colosseum grants us is an incredibly vague review at the end of a match with only your bonus purse to help parse this appraisal. And this is a tough crowd, they can see me juggle a guy 15 feet high and his spirit is higher than theirs, metaphorically and metaphysically. At first I found this annoying but over time I realised it had a profound and ultimately positive effect on my playthrough.

Because we're not told what they like. It's a soft but meaningful incentive to vary up your playstyle. Meaning each and every match is also an opportunity to investigate different approaches and figure out what gets them going.

Colosseum differs heavily from how many games teach mechanics. Standard practice is to introduce gameplay in a low-risk environment before being tasked with executing under steadily increasing pressure. Only taking off the training wheels when you've already got momentum. Colosseum meanwhile plonks you on a unicycle then kicks you down a hill. All learning is done at speed under some form of pressure or cost. And even when it does teach you something it tends to only give you enough information to see there's more to it for you to puzzle out for yourself. Even now writing a big video there are several systems where I can only guess at their workings and this opaqueness is too uniform to be anything but by design.

This is a demanding game, I feel I've met that demand, and yet the crowd demands more. I've got the tools to survive, the reason I'm far from bored is because I was still pondering the question of how to thrive.

I'm playing the same game but it has been kept fresh by the fact it still has me interrogating its mechanics and over time I developed an inkling as to what the people wanted. While the crowd can be impressed by ending a match as quickly and brutally as possible. They are most receptive to successful dodges and parries, with skill attacks and chains following behind.

Now, assuming I'm near the mark, and my higher earnings point that way. I think this is a brilliant design as it capstones the games handling of risk and reward. Look at it this way:

The player has a task, that's to survive. But the player character also has a job, and that's to entertain. Both are valid goals and one contributes to the other, yet they are in conflict.

The optimal way to survive is to bait backstabs, exploit other fighters, do hit and runs, overwhelm opponents, grab a spear and aim low! I don't think it'd be reaching to call this overpowered but it's a very long crutch and even kind of balanced by being boring.

The thing is, your bodycount does not correlate with your bonus, I've had rounds with lower kill counts where I earned more. This is done by playing along with the opposition, giving them a chance to get hits in and well, putting on a show. That's incredibly dangerous but the crowd wants to see a spectacle, not a slaughter. Fortune favours the bold as these lot said, And we're rewarded for satisfying their mores.

This again has some basis in history. Crowds weren't just interested in bloodshed but witnessing bravado and skill in combat. Alongside this many prize fighters were celebrities and so their stables didn't want to lose their prized fighters. Some even earning their reputation on winning bloodlessly. With the unfortunate Noxii gladiators drawing the short, sharp end of the stick.

Obviously all gladiators lived a life of danger with death as an expectation and a pacifist run of Colosseum seems similarly impossible with many matches requiring kills, but it's cool how the audience rewards a bit of historically appropriate roleplay, few games encourage the player to take on the role of a showman in such a way.

And this could mean more money, but this also opens you up to more peril, a few errant blows can cost you more in healing than you earn in bonuses.

But this higher payout still moves you quicker towards paying off your debt! So the path of survival may also be one of enduring that risk! It's an impractical playstyle with practical benefits.

I love this push and pull for how fuzzy it even makes the idea of what is "optimal play"

A risk averse player may secure a lower yet more consistent income. Meanwhile those willing to play dangerously may arrive at their freedom sooner, albeit battered and bruised.

Both approaches make sense and I bounced between the two as my confidence waxed and waned.

Some lower paid lower tier rounds became time to put on a show and toy with my food, meanwhile the gold rounds with a big prize purse signalled it was time to stop playing and start slaying.

This is Colosseums great trick. This is clearly a budget title. It has a handful of areas, three rather simplistic arenas, a minimal story with a small cast, and is a highly repetitious game. But it kept tedium at bay by making me constantly interrogate and puzzle out its mechanics.

I'm in awe of how it takes a little gameplay and goes this far with it. By intertwining mechanics in such a way that it layers so many short and long term considerations onto each decision and leaves it to the player to figure out how best to act at any moment.

All of its systems, from money, to gear, to health, to the crowd itself, work together to make each match not feel like a repetitious yet isolated event but a tapestry of ups and downs flowing into each other. Each day a drama of successes, failures, surprises and rethought plans.

Always with something to discover, review, or rework.

Papering over the most paper thin of plots because the real story is one I carved out myself, through many many many men... Still we gotta wrap this story and presumably Commodus up.

### **XIII. Conquering the Road to Freedom!**

*(Receive Rudis)* Or not! On Day 34, after a solid month of fighting we've done it!

So appropriate that this landed on a Saturday too, what a day to earn our freedom! And yeah, we can do it. *(It's your life, enjoy it!)* This is a valid ending. I came, I saw, I Cashed Out. I find this especially amusing given how Marcia is plotting to use us. Crixus can leave the arena, and indeed the watchful eye of history into a life unknown.

But I don't think that's his calling anymore. Sure we could go back to the farm, but I feel like our fate has been sown and I wanna keep reaping. So we're now a free man in Magerius's employ.

*(Magerius)* There are a couple of benefits to being a free man. We now earn the entire prize purse for our fights! The money comes flooding in at this point, and that'll help with our other new feature! The slave market! Yeah... In exchange for a day and a hefty chunk of change we can get a helping hand. I hired Jim and Jimitha. Male slaves are kinda crap. You give them equipment so they can lose it on your behalf. Meanwhile female slaves grant massive stat buffs while Jim stands nearby and watches... What an odd bonus our freedom is.

At this point I'm just seeing how much money I can make while waiting for Marcia to put us and her plot into motion. The final string of days hits a bit of a doldrum with a couple last minute things to talk about.

### **XIV. Mock Battles & The Seven Boss Fights**

We're now of a high enough rank to partake in mock battles! These are the most extensive events in the game featuring charmingly ramshackle recreations of famous battles. Unfortunately for all of the pomp and circumstance they're by far my least favourite event. This is thanks to a small selection which repeats a lot. You may be thinking "Snake this whole game is repetitive."

Yeah but the issue is their more structured, objective based play exacerbates the repetition to a point where it can't be ignored. This was the only part of the game that felt like work, so I started clocking off early, having more than enough riches to my mispronounced name.

There is one last barely unexplained mechanic. Over the course of the game we've been earning Palma but not Corona. These act as thresholds to trigger story events, and it's at this stage we start seeing named gladiators pop up as duels. To see the ending sequence we must topple the seven boss gladiators, earning one corona a piece for our victories.

These guys are insanely tough, their stats more cranked than Tony Montana with absurdly powerful equipment. If you feel cocky you can claim these. I'm too fond of my own stuff to trade.

## XV. Clocking off Commodus

We're once again brought to Magerius's office. There's a big event being held tomorrow and Commodus wants us as his sparring partner. And it's on the way to his abode Marcia lets us in on her plot. (*Liberate Rome*) I've liberated myself, may as well keep the hot streak going. (*As you say*) Hey, a new area! And all we do is walk through it to Commodus's private quarters! Where much like the start of the game, we have to grab a wooden sword and get to work. Commodus is far weaker than the men we had to overcome to get here. And I easily turn the reincarnation of Hercules into a painful reminder of Icarus (*launcher*)

With the emperor beaten down Marcia gets us out of there so she can carry out the next part of her plan and oh man, I'd feel bad for you but I'm really just struck by how weirdly convoluted this is. Ah well, the next day we awake to the news that Narcissus killed Commodus and we can be the one to execute him. Sounds good, better tie up that loose end.

On the way over, Laetus gives us a pretty stern warning. (*Understand why it's him and not you?*) Not really. (*Only death is waiting for you*) The celebrity cycle comes for us all. I do actually feel kinda bad for the guy. He seems to have no idea why he's being framed but decides to go out defiant. Even though by this point he has no chance against me. (*If this is my lady's wish, so be it.*) Gotta respect the loyalty, even though it was somehow that and not the massive ego which did you in.

The next day we find Laetus meeting with Magerius. Septimius wants us to fight in honour of his inauguration and how could we say no! Besides pointing out that we've skipped over an emperor or two. I mean fair enough their reigns were shorter than this game is! Marcia turns up to say her goodbyes, wanting to leave the political squabbles of Rome behind, and those squabbles may be our future, as Laetus, our final opponent, makes us an offer. (*bring me to my knees, bright future under the new Caesar*)

You know, it's a minor thing but I thought it was said Kaiser? Ah well, when in Rome. I take him up on his offer and he takes me out! This bout even has a pretty mean cutscene for failure. (*death*) Yeah we beg for our lives, it's an oddly undignified end. This is brutal. Laetus is fast, has a ton of health, and can kill me in two hits. Forcing me to rewatch nearly 5 minutes of cutscenes to have another crack at it. My own Road to Freedom is still stretching out in front of me. Luckily Laetus is still like any other fighter and with a flurry of chain attacks I put him down for the count. Laetus is defeated, and Crixus wins not only his freedom, but a powerful position under Septimius, and yet he still disappears into the annals of history, damn. I guess Atillius wins.

Okay lets rewind a bit, there are multiple endings and many points along the way we have a choice on whether to take part. Though if you get too involved at a certain point refusal is pretty much suicide. I just blindly agreed to everything and I'm pretty sure that got me to the best ending. I find it hilarious that in this plot where we're thrown into the middle of a conspiracy, the route to the power is to just agree with whatever you're told and focus on nothing but surviving the fallout of doing so. If we turn down Laetus's offer. Septimius psychically knows something is wrong and sics the guards on us. Unlike with Commodus however, if we can defeat one hundred men a row we can escape! Becoming a boogeyman to the Roman people until we are once again, this time more deliberately, erased from history. I couldn't do it. So I had Crixus settle for a high powered job instead.

Lets talk about Commodus's actual death. From what I read what really happened was on Pius 31<sup>st</sup> Sorry, December 31st 192 A.D. Marcia, Commodus's mistress. Discovered by chance that he had

marked and Laetus for execution the next day. She hurriedly hatched a scheme to poison the mad emperor and managed it easily, but when she was worried the poison wouldn't do the job she and Laetus ordered Narcissus, who was actually a wrestler, to finish the job, strangling Commodus. In reality Marcia didn't undertake a months long plot to kill the man for the sake of Rome, it was a quick and dirty bid to survive.

So like the movie *Gladiator* Colosseum is being playful with history for the sake of its story, and the best part is that if you keep your head down, reject the conspiracy or just retire. The ending actually winds up closer to reality! Meaning Marcia totally didn't need us and we spent weeks humiliating Narcissus for nothing. All we do is inject ourselves into proceedings, make a real murder even more convoluted before framing the guy who would have done it anyway. All so our name can disappear from the history books. And really, isn't that true freedom?

## **XVI. New Game+, Remix & Sequels**

For beating the game we get a truly special new game plus option. We unlock the ability to be Roman! Or Greek! What's funny about this is that while Greeks are only slightly better than anyone else Romans are basically supermen. Along with that we get the ability to be a former soldier or gladiator, as well as believe in Jupiter. As well as carrying over our equipment and skill tablets.

Really, it just means starting a game with way higher stats. If you want a fresher experience that can be found in *Gladiator: Remix!* A Japan exclusive updated re-release with refinements, rebalances, new features, and a slew of new weapons and armour. The frustrating thing is this version came out a week before the base editions European release. I kinda feel like we got robbed when an improved version already came out but what can you do.

The big new addition are fist weapons. The ability to go all in on being a Cestus gladiator was a big draw to me which had me excited to do another run which is why I haven't talked about Striker combat until now.

It plays like a more traditional brawler with each face button having full on combo strings. You're overwhelmingly fast and even more impractical.

Your damage and penetration is on par with a partridge, and pairs disastrously with what you give up for this absurd speed. You severely stunt your ability to block, and lose the option to parry, power attack, and surprisingly to criss cross. You'd think this would be a big crowd pleaser to at least give it some niche. But really this style feels less like a trade and more of a self imposed challenge. You're banking everything on your ability to dodge, but me, I float like a hoverfly and sting like a butterfly. Still for a couple hours these were fun even if I had to give up, I'm simply not good enough at the game to make them work.

The crowd has been made a lot more generous, with them tossing you bags of coin post-match! They're still not tossing me greatswords but we're still in the Shadow of Shadow of Rome!

The flow of the game has been reworked to make progression faster. You not only earn more points during training, you are occasionally lavished with bonus points on top of that, as well as free passive slabs. Ki-Ri-Cos meanwhile has gotten a lot more grub this time around, with the costs of raising stats also lowered across the board.

To go with this the healers healing now levels up damaged limbs, he still costs a lot but you get more bang for your bruises.

On the other hand stronger weapons and tougher enemies are introduced far sooner. This made revisiting a lot more palatable as the game ramps up far more quickly.

It's funny that a lot of what I find praiseworthy about Colosseum is its black box nature which this version undoes. This one puts information everywhere so the player knows what's going on. Lucky for me I can't read a word of it! The only translation patch out there was slapped together by some guy on Reddit who can't even promise it works. Luckily much of the game is still playable in this state. The biggest confusion I had was that Circle and X have been swapped around as the Japanese do. I Can't be too cross about that. However this also flips what buttons positive and negative gestures are bound to and led to me basically flipping off the audience. (*stoned*)

The upgrade system is also completely overhauled. There are upgrade materials as well as the ability to directly transfer an upgrade from one piece of equipment to another. As well as a complex system where you can directly modify how much each god favours your items. I'm pretty sure that even if this was in English I wouldn't quite understand this, but the long and short is you have a lot more control and the ability to move blessings directly is a good add. Besides that it's more of the same, I kinda wish we got both versions. The original is a little harder and slower paced, but obviously I like the extra weapons and player models.

In 2010 the series got a PSP prequel with Gladiator Begins because by now they weren't scared of Russell Crow in the West, and the series ended with fantasy spinoff Gladiator VS. Known or more accurately not known in the west as Clan of Champions. Which looks to have gone from poverty as a gameplay mechanic to poverty as a monetisation system. It's also just awful, a downgrade in every way. Not a good note to end on.

## **XVII. Conclusion**

So that was Colosseum: Road to Freedom! It gets a thumbs down from me... Or up, sideways, a turn of the thumb! Sod it, you know what I mean, I like it! I had a fascinating time!

It's funny how all of its endings have our name stricken from history in one way or another as it feels like Colosseum suffered the same fate as its protagonist. An unconventional and inventive battler coming into the picture too late, its age already past, and to be forgotten by time. It's a cult classic, fondly recalled by the few that did play it. But one which struggled in most professional reviews of the time and was quickly memory holed. Coming out in 2005 just as the next generation was about to kick off. All eyes were on the future and this game already felt like the past. Its graphics were unimpressive. It's control scheme and lack of typical lock on made it more demanding than was deemed necessary, it's repetitive structure bored. It's opaque nature frustrated. And it's abundance of downtime was seen as either poor design or outright padding. You could call its design antiquated but hey, it takes place during antiquity! Could have been coded by Pliny the Elder himself! Joking aside, this is where I want to parry these parametres.

Over the last few years I've come to have a distaste when it comes to calling a design dated, by the same token I've become frustrated with putting games into genre boxes and then using those as cudgels to condemn a game for not fitting rather than trying to see it for its own merits. It's an approach that's easy to fall into and mentally stagnant.

An idea I scrapped early on was to compare this heavy, stamina based combat and obfuscation of systems and story to Demons and Dark Souls. As a semi-ironic "Wow it's a lot like Dark Souls innit!" making a crotchety stab (*crotch stab*) at the fact that the games which often get the mark of being original are rarely the true innovators but the popularisers. I resisted the urge not only because Dark Souls comparisons are such a trite thing to do when covering games but because it's an unfair comparison. Not due to a difference in quality but because it's not really talking about how Colosseum toys with these mechanics to its own ends.

But I'm bringing it up now because it's a game that succeeded by in spite of industry trends. By being a game that succeeded in part thanks to its opaque systems and story which put the onus on the player to figure out the world.

It feels a little unfair that when a unique game is misunderstood or received poorly it's judged against the standard of its parent genre. Not seen as a deviation but a deviant that should have played it safer.

When a unique game is taken well a new box is made for it to fit in, and really all we get is a whole new genre of arguments.

This is the part where if I was a bigger wanker and even more of a hack youtuber hoping to make a mark I could invent a new genre, hail Colosseum as a Survival-Action title and pat myself on the back because I've done it. I've fixed all the games problems by inventing a nice box where all its flaws turned out to be strengths. But that's arbitrary and doesn't get us anywhere. The warehouse just gets a little more full.

Over time action titles have trended smoother which makes sense, improvement is generally seen as taking out what is seen as unnecessary frustrations. Offering greater aim assist, quashing downtime, making sure the player knows the ins and outs of every system before they need to get in and out of trouble and so on. Smooth experiences are seen as premium experiences. This being more popular isn't hard to understand.

But what I like about Colosseum as a seasoned action gamer geezer is that it makes a great experience through its rough idiosyncrasies. It makes me feel like a gladiator in a way a smoother experience would gloss over. Its seeming apathy to the player is what makes it so intriguing. This is a masterclass in how to withhold information in such a way as to make the player inhabit the world, to question. We're stuck as a Gladiator in a dangerous situation and we have to use not only our brawns, but our brains to get us through, and it makes success all the more satisfying.

I mean yeah, it had an advantage with me that I've wanted it for years, the irony is I'm pretty sure if I had got this as a kid I'd have unfairly compared it against the sharper, smoother, Shadow of Rome and hated it, perhaps it's lucky I took so long to find it.

A quick note about Colosseum's director, Masafumi Horiuchi. There isn't much out there about this guy as by all accounts he has an unimpressive resume albeit one with an absurd beginning and end. First credited for program design on Ehrgeiz and ending on special thanks from Knack! And he seemed to have a Knack for winding up on games with atypical control systems. This man was a Character Designer on the Bouncer! I don't know much about him beyond a list of credits but you look at what he worked on and Colosseum as a directorial work makes an odd amount of sense. It's a weird fighter from a guy who seemed to only ever wind up with weird fighters.

The PS2 was a great console for a lot of reasons but part of it was we were still in an era of experimentation and discovery, backed by a strong middle and shovelware market that would taper off as the generations wore on, game design became more codified and exponentially rising budgets made studios more risk averse. We're seeing a return now as tools to make games of this scale fall into the hands of an indie scene. We Who Are About to Die is this concept brought back to life, whether the developers knew of it or not.

Overall, a great game which offers something unique, it doesn't have a broad appeal but if you're in the same market as me you don't have many options. I just want to let you know how much I enjoyed my turbulent, tricky, and occasionally annoying time with this game.

Thank you for watching, if you enjoyed this video please spread it around. If you want to support me more directly please toss me a couple bob on Patreon. Everyone who supports is scrolling by now, thanks a lot lads. For £3 you get access to scripts and notes, and for £5 you can ask questions

and watch afterthought videos where I answer said questions and go over anything that didn't make it into the main video.

As for next time, I think it's time we once again try and be a little like a Dragon.

## **DESC (COLO)**

Today we're playing Colosseum: Road to Freedom! A PS2 Gladiator Action Life Sim game forgotten by time starring a Gladiator also forgotten by time! Turns out the life of a gladiator is hard to control, doesn't have good food, and is largely confusing. It's our job to overcome all that, lets go.

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#playing #colosseum #PS2

## **DESC (HALO)**

Today we're submitting to popularish(?) demand. We're playing Halo: Combat Evolved! The game that did arguably evolve FPS by making it work on a controller! Did we want that? Apparently yes. I mean I like the game but it's more like Halo: Combat Mutated. Man there are a lot of games out there with interesting combat systems that haven't been covered to death, perhaps we could talk about one of those instead?

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#playing #videogames #sorry