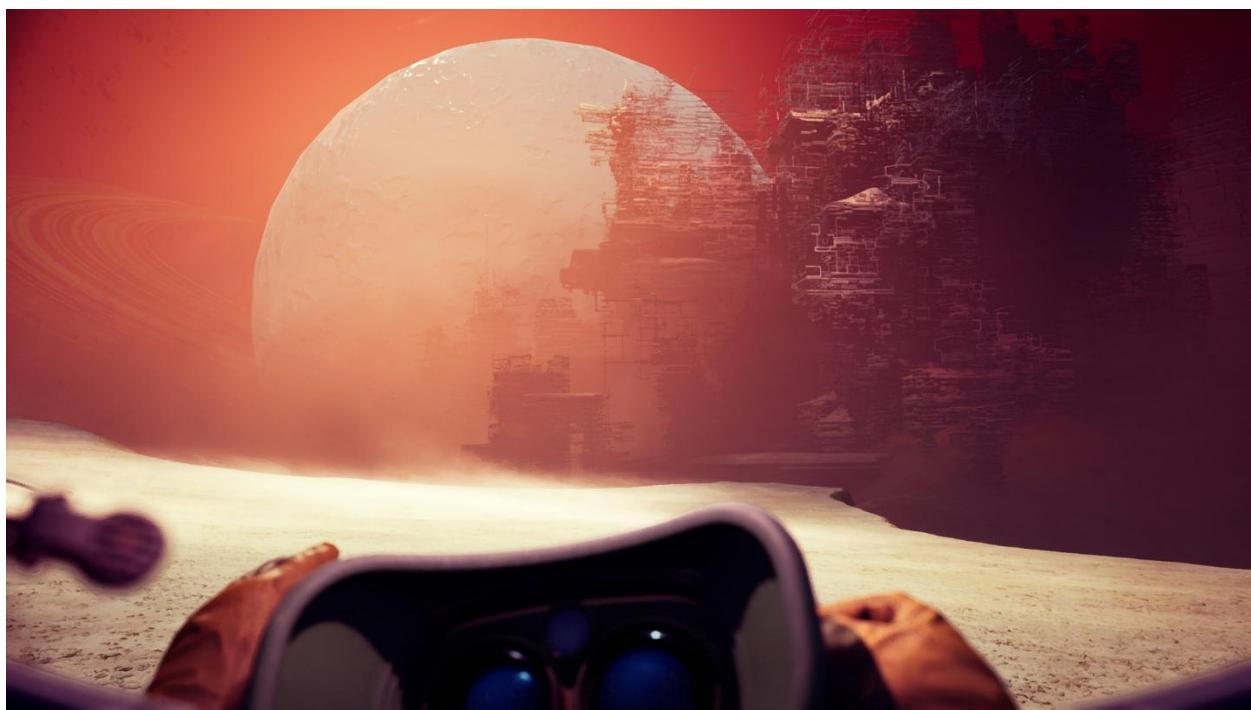


I've always admired the retrofuturism aesthetic — 1950s machinery in all its clunky glory against the backdrop of stunning planetary vistas. This imagery is what drew me into *The Invincible*, and it remains a gorgeous game from beginning to end. It certainly has no shortage of style, and fortunately, it also has plenty of substance to back it up.

Polish development studio Starward Industries based *The Invincible* on the 1964 sci-fi novel of the same name by Stanisław Lem, which explores nanotechnology and the philosophy that perhaps we shouldn't "interfere with everything alien to us," as the game's protagonist observes. You play as biologist Yasna, who finds herself on the uncharted planet Regis III with no memory of how she got there. Her amnesia serves as a method of getting the player acquainted with the game and Yasna's situation, but it doesn't overstay its welcome. Soon enough, her memories begin to trickle back as she explores her surroundings and discovers the remnants of her missing colleagues, who were conducting field research on this alien planet.

*The Invincible* is heavy on narrative and light on gameplay. It aims to translate a book into game form, after all, though it takes some liberties in this regard. Lem's novel follows a character called Rohan, who's a navigator from the impressive titular ship and part of the Alliance, a large interstellar political entity. The game, however, follows the aforementioned Yasna, who's part of a small research team from the Alliance's rival faction, the Commonwealth. Yasna uncovers what happened to the giant warship and its crew during her exploration, but her civilian mindset and scientific approach make for a welcome perspective, as opposed to Rohan's more politically minded and top-level view.



The game looks absolutely magnificent. I can't get over the way Regis III is presented. Although the landscapes are barren and you don't encounter much life throughout the game, the distant landforms on the horizon and heavenly bodies in the turquoise sky are so breathtaking that I found myself stopping often just to admire the view and take a quick shot with the game's photo mode. There may not be much life around, but the environments are dotted with various vehicles, robots, and equipment — all in that built-for-function, retro '50s style. You can interact with most of them, whether it's accessing a probe's camera to view the photo slides it captured or switching on a vehicle's data box to hear its former occupants' last broadcasts.

Yasna does have a companion on her journey. The astrogator of their mission, Novik, remains onboard their ship but guides Yasna through comms and keeps her company as she delves deeper into Regis III's mysteries. The rapport between these two characters is one of the most well-developed and interesting parts of the narrative, accompanied by some brilliant voice acting. It's easy to tell that Yasna and Novik have deep respect for one another as colleagues, and they're concerned for each other's safety, but they often get into intellectual sparring matches that are a joy to listen to while Yasna navigates the planet's rough terrain. At times, you can choose whether to pursue these discussions or let them go, and I always pursued them because I enjoyed hearing the conversations as they added depth to the story.

Unfortunately, I did run into situations where the dialogue was cut off because I kept moving forward and a new narrative event triggered. This means that sometimes you have to stand still to let a dialogue thread play out, which can be frustrating. The dialogue is easily my favorite thing about *The Invincible*, and I wanted to be privy to every word of it. Being cut off from bits of it simply because I decided to move Yasna forward felt unfair and broke up what would otherwise be a smooth narrative experience.



*The Invincible* is an entirely linear game, focusing on developing its narrative more than complex mechanics or puzzles. The few light puzzles the game does have are simple, and most of the interaction consists of pushing buttons and fiddling with knobs and switches. The equipment in *The Invincible* is advanced but bulky, like Yasna's electronic journal, which looks kind of like a kid's tablet. Everything has weight to it; there's no slick, airy, lightning-fast future to be found here.

Even Yasna's movements have heft, as she struggles to get around the planet both on foot and in the abandoned rover she finds. As you move her forward in first-person view, she'll climb the rocky terrain and slide down small hills, often grunting and breathing heavily. Sometimes you can see moisture building up on the inside of her helmet as she exerts herself. This is a walking simulator that you really feel. It focuses heavily on movement, and getting around is no joke.

Getting around is also difficult by virtue of the overly confusing map. My one complaint about *The Invincible* is that its map is nearly inscrutable at times, making it tough to know exactly where to go. I'm not sure if this is intentional, as navigating the landscape is a significant part of the game and its only real challenge. You'll have to rely on the various scanners and detectors at your disposal to help you get around, and your next destination is never immediately apparent. You're often just left to wander, finding your own way using your map, your tools, and your wits.



*The Invincible* has replay value in the form of dialogue choices you can make throughout the game. There are certain points that branch off, and you can see this clearly in the companion comic that the game illustrates for you as you play. It's a nice little touch, with the retro illustrations complementing the aesthetic quite beautifully and providing extra insight into the story.

The soundtrack does a lot for the game as well. A few segments of *The Invincible* consist of Yasna by herself. She has a habit of humming a little tune and singing, which is a lovely bit of characterization, but alongside her singing and muttering to herself, the music weaves in with haunting synths and atmospheric noise that heighten the feeling of being lost on a barren planet.

The term “walking simulator” is a bit fraught. At best, it means narratively focused. At worst, it’s used to denigrate a title for being boring. I hesitate to call *The Invincible* a walking sim for that reason, but it is what it is. It just happens to be an exceptional one, in the vein of *Firewatch* or *What Remains of Edith Finch*. Narratively, *The Invincible* is one of the best games I’ve played, a worthy adaptation that surpasses its source material in many ways. It kept me hooked from beginning to end, hanging on to every word Yasna and Novik said, wondering what would become of them and their mission. The art direction is utterly breathtaking, and you can tell a lot of care went into the development of the game simply by the way it looks.



I hope more games take cues from *The Invincible* and provide single-player narrative experiences with distinct aesthetics like this. I appreciate that it remained grounded not only in its storytelling but also in what it wants to accomplish as a game. I don't always need my sci-fi to be a bombastic, triple-A cinematic experience. Sometimes I just need a good, meaningful interactive novel, and that's exactly what I got from *The Invincible*.