

REVIEWED: Lair, Mario Strikers Charged, & Blue Dragon!

THE No.1 VIDEOGAME MAGAZINE

E G MTM

ELECTRONIC GAMING MONTHLY **1UP.COM**



INSIDE:

METROID PRIME 3

HEAVENLY SWORD

LITTLEBIGPLANET

TONY HAWK
VS. SKATE

THE EVOLUTION
OF 2D GAMING

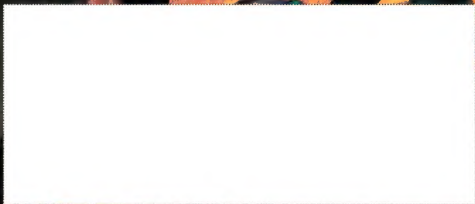
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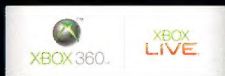
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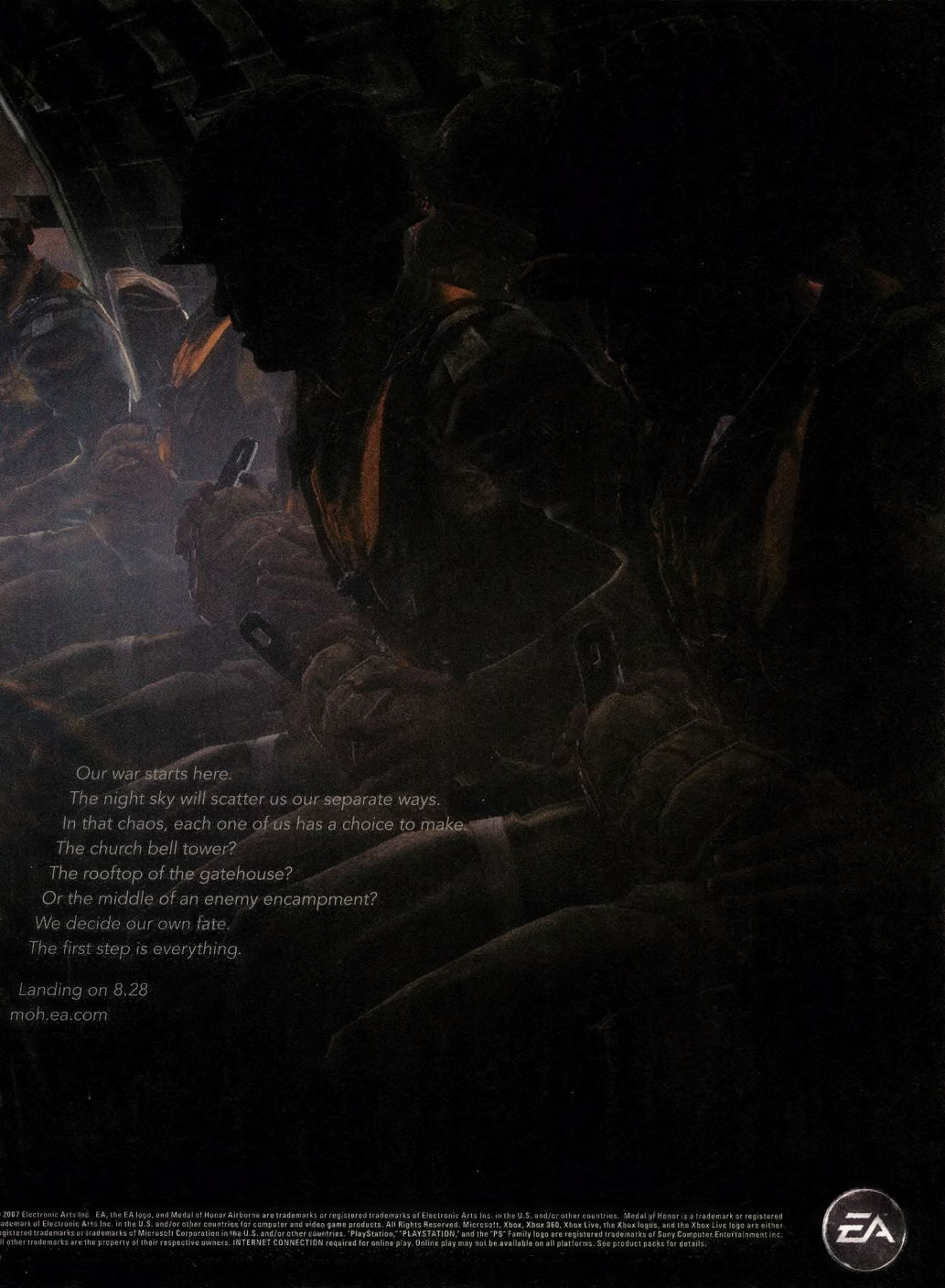


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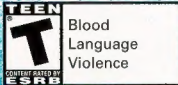
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The background of the cover features a soldier in full combat gear, including a helmet with a night vision or thermal imaging overlay. The soldier is holding an M4-style assault rifle. On the soldier's right shoulder, there is a patch with a skull and the word "GHOSTS". The scene is set in a war-torn environment with smoke and fire in the background.

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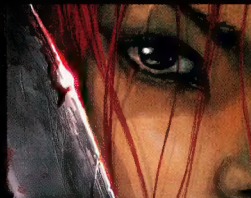
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Videogames FTW!

SHOCKER: VIDEOGAMES ARE MAKING me nerdier! Yeah, we all know that they'll do that—nothing new there. But recent releases on Xbox Live Arcade have turned what used to be a social activity for me into one where I can really limit my contact with real-life people.

You see, here at the 1UP Network offices, we have a group of guys and gals who get together semiregularly to play card and board games. No, not those of the poker/euchre/Clue/Monopoly variety. I'm talking *Carcassonne*, *Arkham Horror*, *Puerto Rico*, *Caylus*, *Gloom*, *Illuminati*. (Never heard of them? See www.boardgamegeek.com.) You won't find these at your local Wal-Mart or KB Toys.... They're all tucked away in rare "unplugged" game-specialty shops, to be played by bearded men in the safety of their basements/dungeons. We call our office group "Nerd Club" and these games "nerd games" because for whatever self-loathing reason, we deemed this activity to be dorkier than our normal videogaming. No offense, bearded men.

Recently, Xbox 360 picked up two of these nerd games. I was never a huge fan of the popular board game *The Settlers of Catan*, but on Xbox Live Arcade, *Catan* is awfully addicting. I am a big fan of the "real-life" *Carcassonne*, but discovered it's even better on XBLA with the quicker pace and streamlined scoring. Uh-oh...those are two fewer reasons I need to see my Nerd Club friends now (and it only cost me 1600 Microsoft points! Bargain!).

It looks like videogaming is making me more antisocial than ever before. And it can't just be me—I'm sure a few folks out there are playing real Texas Hold 'Em with real friends less and less with the proliferation of computer and videogame versions of poker, too. But the good news is, not all these nerd games are available electronically (yet), so I still have many years left to be a social human being with my pals. So until *Ticket to Ride* turns into a videogame, I'll see you, in person, on the folding chairs in my basement. Oh, wait—*Ticket to Ride* is an online PC game....

—Dan "Shoe" Hsu, Editor-in-Chief



■ Our Halo 3 issue is available in three collectors-edition covers. Sweet stuff, huh?

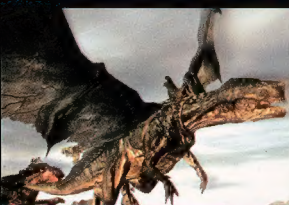
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► THIS MONTH'S EGM EXTRAS

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Halo 3 Overload
Don't forget to visit the EGM 219 hub, where you'll find additional screens, developer interviews, and hands-on impressions of this hugely anticipated first-person shooter.



SuperGuides
Cheat your way through *Lair* and *Blue Dragon*.

EGM Live*
Oddworld Inhabitants founder Lorne Lanning talks about his next big movie/game project.

Tony Hawk vs. Skate
Compare clips of these competing shredfests.

Stranglehold
Watch videos of John Woo's shoot-through-doves sim.



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LETTERS

> multiplayer, remedial ballistics, and what happened that one time at rock band camp

> TRIVIAL ISSUE

This month's EGM question:

How tall is *Halo's* Master Chief when wearing his armor?

E-mail the answer to EGM@ziffdavis.com

(subject head:

Trivia: EGM #219) for a chance to win something potentially awesome.

.....

Letter of the Month Playing with yourself

I wanted to comment on a trend that I noticed in EGM #217. In both your *BioShock* and *Splinter Cell: Conviction* previews, you stated that you couldn't wait to see a multiplayer feature. But is multiplayer even a good idea for these games? *BioShock* seems to be a game where a lot of thought was put in to the weapons and plasmids, allowing for experimentation and exploitation of the subtle nuances of each. Does this lend itself to spazzy Xbox Live deathmatches? Should it? Isn't it enough to have a compelling single-player experience without trying to shove that whole system into a multiplayer environment? It seems that the people behind *BioShock* wanted to create an interesting world with interesting characters. Wouldn't trying to make some setting where people could jump around, grenade spamming and "pwning fools" with their 1337 plasmids sort of cheapen the whole thing and make it corny?

We lucked out with *Splinter Cell*. Ubisoft managed to create a compelling, unique experience in its multiplayer. Didn't that sort of get ruined, though? Didn't the multiplayer eclipse the single-player for most? Sort of like what has happened to *Halo*: Most people couldn't care less about the story and the art of creating compelling gameplay; they just want to jump online and twitch and trash talk.

If that's what you're into, fine. But I think some games were never meant to have some sort of multiplayer that just cheapens the world and the story of the single-player experience.

Maybe I'm just getting old and these damn kids are too fast on the trigger for me. —Jordan Hill

We dig multiplayer because deep down, in the darkest recesses of our black little hearts, we are lonely and want to be loved.

The day the music died

I've been hearing about Harmonix's new *Rock Band* a lot lately, and it got me thinking. Sure, it seems like a natural step as the successor to *Guitar Hero*. But sometimes the next logical step in something can be so wrong.

Have you ever been in a real band?



■ Tonight we're gonna Rock Band you tonight.

It's hard to keep it together. Lead singer egos, carpal-tunnel-syndrome drummers, and party-hard guitarists can make it impossible. I can't imagine anyone older than 24 or so convincing their friends to purchase costly toys and to come over to practice for a fake band when all their friends have jobs, wives, and so on.

Although the hype is huge and the potential great, will anyone beside night club owners and rich kids purchase it? —Chad Johnson

One of the reasons why Rock Band's been getting so much hype is that you won't have to invite your friends over for fake band practice—you can do it through the miraculous medium of the Internet. This adds another nice feature: When your guitarist's wife starts

trying to break up the band, or your drummer steals your girlfriend, you can drop 'em without a second thought, knowing you'll be able to take your pick of replacements from all over the world.

The league of extraordinarily anal-retentive gentlemen

In EGM #217's *BioShock* column, you wrote that you were going "leagues deeper" than before. But if this is a reference to 20,000 Leagues Under the Sea, it is mistaken. The book takes place actually only a little below sea level or, at times, about three to four leagues below. (A league is 5.556 kilometers.) The "20,000" is a reference to the distance traveled across the ocean. If it had been "deep," they would have traveled through the Earth and out the other side. Leagues are >

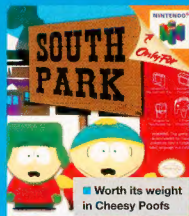


For writing this month's winning letter, Jordan gets a copy of *Warhawk*. Unless we don't have one handy, in which case he gets something worse.

> YOUR BIGGEST MISTAKE

Eight years ago on my 13th birthday, my mom bought me a copy of *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time*. Being a little rascal, I threw a fit, saying it looked boring and bland. She returned it, gave me the \$70, and told me to go buy something myself. Here's the embarrassing part: I used that money to buy the wretched N64 *South Park* game. Ugh. *Maybe* if *Zelda* had more cussin' and fartin', I wouldn't have made that mistake. —Brady Johnson

You're a brave man for admitting that. Who's next?



■ Worth its weight in Cheesy Poofs

We want to hear about your biggest gaming mistakes. Did you buy a stupidly expensive racing chair that's now collecting dust? Did you knock your PS3 out a third-story window? Don't be ashamed—send your story (and photographic evidence!) to EGM@ziffdavis.com, subject head: "My Biggest Mistake."

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■ Tables: better at holding dinner than stopping bullets.

used to measure depth as well, but it is an obsolete measurement.

—Terrence Gartland

Thank you, Terrence, for that incredibly thorough and almost entirely useless bit of knowledge.

Simple physics

In *EGM* #217, you featured *Splinter Cell* and its "intelligent" A.I. and then showed a random dude jumping behind a folding table. Then you said something like "watch out, the enemies can use cover, too!" As anyone will tell you, a folding table will not protect you against bullets. And as any *Counter-Strike* player will tell you, that just makes you a sitting duck.

Think about it: He's stationary behind one piece of cover that can be shot through, and you can be anywhere in the room shooting through the table. So actually, if you think about it, that's extremely stupid A.I. That's the kind of sloppy, irrational A.I. that you expect in games like *Crackdown* (where rationality isn't a issue), but not in games like *Splinter Cell*.

—George Lu

Well, you see, the pressed chipboard that makes up the folding table creates a crumple zone—much like in the front of a car—that slows the bullet to such a degree that, while it may penetrate, it will be traveling at such a low speed that it would inflict negligible damage. When you factor in the inverse-square law and basic gravitational ballistics, it becomes obvious that, after passing through said object, the bullet's human-skin penetration

coefficient approaches zero.

On the other hand, we just completely pulled all that out of our asses, so you could be right.

Every man for himself

Back in the early days of first-person shooters, when circle-strafting was considered the apex of technique, deathmatch was the only multiplayer mode in town. Then along came capture the flag and everything changed. All manner of new and exciting team-based modes came to be. But no matter what kinds of team-based modes were included, little old deathmatch was always there as well.

But now a disturbing trend has surfaced—that of leaving out any every-man-for-himself modes altogether. I'm a 42-year-old husband and father who has very limited time to indulge my gaming habit. I also don't have very many friends who play online. This means that I can't really learn all of the intricate tactics required to be an effective teammate. It also means that I'm almost always playing with strangers, and strangers don't always play so well together. Poor communication, team killing, and all manner of jackassery can add up to a frustrating experience, especially when you're getting your hats handed to you for the eighth consecutive time by the guys from Clan b0NgH1tZ. I like relying on me, and me alone. And now, with online co-op quickly becoming the new black, it seems plain old deathmatch has no place.

So developers, please include a solo mode in your online plans. I want it. I need it. I know it's simplistic and somewhat dated, but then so am I. And believe me, you really don't want me on your team anyway.

—Dave Gherman

The trick to a good deathmatch is to avoid shooters that are too realistic (e.g., anything with "Clancy" in the title). These serious shooters tend to be too highbrow for simpler every-man-for-himself action.

Magna cum what now?

I wanna be a game journalist, but my grades aren't awesome. I'm good at writing about games, not school! Did you guys do well in college?

—Ben Montgomery

What is this "college" you speak of?

It's all about priorities

During one of the sex scenes in the movie *Knocked Up*, you can see an *EGM* #204 on the head of the bed ("Zelda + Revolution" on the cover).

That being said, you can go ahead and make fun of me now for paying more attention to what was on the bed rather than in it. I don't mind.

—Yoshi AI

Are you kidding? Why on Earth would we make fun of you for having your attention focused so admirably on the important things in life? Hey, you'll probably see thousands of sex scenes over the years, but how many of them will involve a copy of *EGM*? Wait, we just kind of grossed ourselves out a little there.

Spies like us

I have noticed quite the bond forming between the videogame industry and our nation's military. We already know how big military shooters and even flight-combat games have been ever since they could feasibly be done in games. Combine that with the fact that the military incorporates games into its training and the recent studies on how games affect your hand-eye coordination, reflexes, and so on.

Now think of all those stories you heard about how the CIA will spy on potential recruits within everyday society and suddenly approach them in some unexpected way. So, taking all that into consideration, do you think maybe someone out there is keeping an eye on all our crazy online battles over Xbox Live and so forth, just looking for a new government spy? Maybe I'm crazy, but look at all the remote control spy planes—they could use someone with some mad gaming skills for these type of missions. I'm just saying...think about it.

—Brad Ballew

We sincerely doubt it. All it would take would be a game or two with the typical *Halo 2* crowd screaming obscenities over the headset before they deduced that videogamers aren't smart enough to be spies. As provocative as you may think gamertags like "Da C.I.A.," "Spy Daddy," and "The D3c1der" are, we doubt those folks are really who they claim to be.

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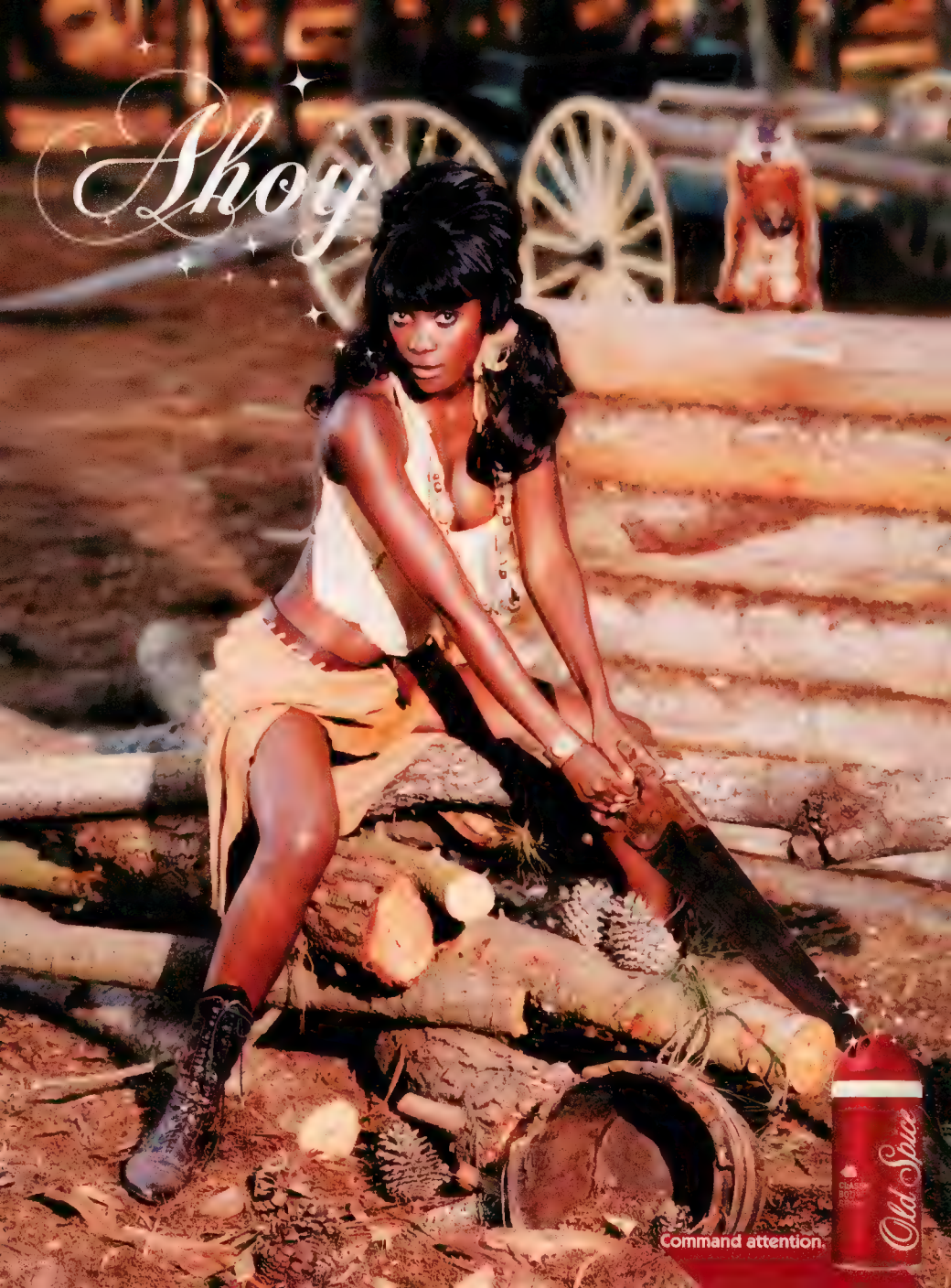
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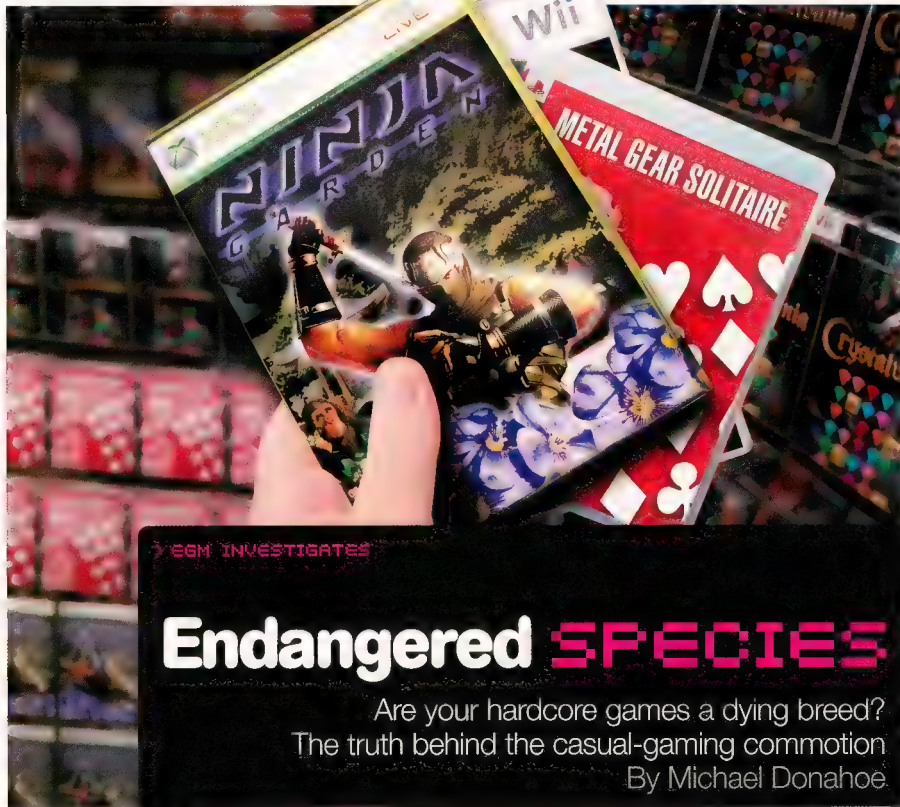
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Endangered SPECIES

Are your hardcore games a dying breed?
The truth behind the casual-gaming commotion
By Michael Donahoe

Nongames may be a new thing here in the states, but over in Japan, they're big—really big. Overseas you can find dozens of DS games that teach you bizarre things like how to be a comedian or how to take better care of your skin. Ha! Good luck finding FAQs for those games....

MOVE YOUR KEISTER, KIDDO—MAMA WANTS TO PLAY. And Daddy. Hell, even Granny, too. Seems like everyone is gunning to game nowadays, and it's not because they want to (finally) save the Earth in *Halo 3*. Or bang a hooker for health in *Grand Theft Auto IV*. Nope—these videogame virgins are more content doing the simple things: cooking dinner, learning new languages, petting puppies, and, well, anything that resembles real life, really. And you can thank (or curse) Nintendo for this—the current champ of the next-gen console and portable wars is transforming

former apathetic onlookers into game-obsessed junkies thanks to the popularity of the Wii and DS. And now that publishers and developers are realizing the mad money that can be made satisfying the casual thirst of these newcomers, it might mean game over for your favorite hardcore franchises. Or is paranoia simply playing games with us? We find out if casual games are really going to kill the competition...or simply bake a cake for it.

Rated M for Mommy

No, the Wii didn't create casual games. Nor did the DS. Simple, easy-

to-play games have been around since Pac-Man gobbled up ghosts in the arcade. But Nintendo just so happens to be leading the casual charge to bring in new gamers. "I think what you have now is big numbers of a broad demographic of people coming on board," says Mike Suarez, vice president of casual-games publisher MumboJumbo. "I think conventional wisdom says that Grandma, kids, and adults who are not hardcore gamers find casual games to be easy to play and really fun."

The Wii is proving this on the console side, but the DS is what really



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Preview:
Hell of a
hottie



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Preview:
Samus
returns



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Feature:
Lights, cam-
era, game

started the casual trend. Nintendo made a ballsy decision with its dual-screened handheld: release nontraditional games like *Brain Age: Train Your Brain in Minutes a Day!* and *Nintendogs*. Both titles proved accessibility combined with simplicity was the key to attracting an older audience. So once these games sucked 'em in, the DS did the rest. "The DS was key in reintroducing casual games as a mainstream activity, but also [prompted] the realization that casual games came cheaply and that they were also a lot of fun," says KBC Financial Analyst Hiroshi Kamide. "The stigma attached to playing casual games also fell away as a result."

New ways to play

Nintendo may have neglected to push graphics as a priority this generation, but the gamble netted them a massive jackpot of casual consumers. But gamers aren't the only ones taking notice. "I think game companies latched onto consumer preferences and sought to outdo each other with respect to the trend of graphical excellence and overall high production value," says Elea Capital Hedge Fund Manger Martin Shkreli. "The consumer became exhausted with this paradigm and now the pendulum has swung to other facets of gaming—playability and enjoyment of the products." So now that players have decided what's popular, publishers are shifting their focus to meet the demand. Some companies, like Majesco, decided to ditch hardcore games altogether. The former publisher of big-budget games like *BloodRayne* (PS2/Xbox) and *Advent Rising* (Xbox) realized more money could be made making cheap fare for the Wii and DS instead of pricey titles that don't always recoup the costs. Smart thinking—the company proved this notion with its recent hit *Cooking Mama: Cook Off*. The casual cooking game has sold over 93,000 copies since its release in March, which is already more than the 88,000 units the big-budget flop *Advent Rising* sold in its entire life span.

Yeah, Majesco isn't the biggest publisher around, so its change makes sense. But when monster publisher EA recently announced it was starting a casual division, it made one

thing clear: The fad certainly ain't fake. Kathy Vrabec, president of EA Casual Entertainment, readily admits the Wii and DS are not meant for hardcore gamers. "The entertainment experience on the Wii and DS is not about delivering a high-def graphics or audio experience," she says. "They are about accessibility, ease of use, great gameplay, and having lots of fun." So who is the audience for them? Basically anyone who breathes. "We're making games for people who don't self-identify as core videogamers," she says. "So for sure that's kids. I think we can also put middle-aged women in that group."

Not sure what she means by that? Well, ask *Spinter Cell* publisher Ubisoft. Along with EA, Ubisoft is also supporting the Wii and DS with a slew of software aimed at people who just want to improve their lives...with, uh, a videogame. Those interested can pick up the *My Coach* self-improvement line, featuring nongames like *My Word Coach*, *My Spanish Coach*, and *My Life Coach*. In addition to the language-lover demographic, Ubisoft is also hoping to attract young gals. At this year's Electronic Entertainment Expo (E3), Ubisoft announced its new line of girly games called *Imagine*. The DS-based games will strive to

tickle the interest of female tweenies with no-nonsense titles like *Fashion Designer*, *Master Chef*, and *Figure Skater*. OK, so you probably won't be putting down preorders for these games, but Ubisoft doesn't care. All it cares about is making money, and it realizes aspiring fashion designers will help rake in the dough just as easily as wannabe spies.

Hard to lose

Now that publishers are starting to make more casual fare, does this spell doom for hardcore games? Ha—yeah right! "Any major publisher who stops making hardcore games because they think the casual-games business is more profitable is a publisher who is making bad hardcore games," says Ubisoft Vice President of Marketing Tony Key. "If [publishers] are great at making hardcore games, [they're] not going to suddenly stop doing that, no matter what else is working." But even so, some developers, like *God of War* series Director Cory Barlog, admit that making hardcore games is getting tougher each generation. "We're like the dinosaurs eating each other," he says. "We're making ourselves extinct just by the sheer expense of these games."

Yeah, making heavy hitters is a huge

➤ The Wii—and this works out perfectly because of the name of it—is like weed.

—God of War Director Cory Barlog



■ With the *My Coach* line from publisher Ubisoft, you can expect to (maybe) learn different languages. Hell, it might even be fun in the process. Or not. But at least it debunks the claim that videogames rot your brains.

blow to publishers' purse strings, but that actually might be a good thing. "Development costs—more so than ever—are a filter to reduce the number of bad games that come to market," says Jeff Reese, director of software marketing at Sony Computer Entertainment America.

This may be why we haven't seen a lot of terrible hardcore games on the Wii (though there's plenty of casual crap). But the few meaty titles we have got (namely *The Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess* and *Super Paper Mario*) have been supersuccessful. Mark Rein, vice president of Gears of War developer Epic, points out that Nintendo probably won't stop making the games that, y'know, make tons of cash. "The best-selling title on Wii, by far and away, is *Zelda*," says Rein. "Nintendo probably spent several times what we spent on *Gears of War* to make that game and it is most definitely a hardcore players' game. Sure *Wii Sports* is amazing and drawing lots of people to the Wii but the biggest-selling games are hardcore titles like *Zelda* and *Mario*."

Rein ain't lying—*Twilight Princess* is currently the top-selling Wii game with sales of over 1.5 million copies. That's not nearly as impressive as the 2.4 million units *Gears of War* has sold, but it's still big. Of course, both *Zelda* and *GOW* are triple-A games backed by millions of marketing bucks. So what about lesser known upcoming games with large budgets like *Cipher Complex* and *Dark Sector*? Can big titles like these survive without a sizeable publisher push? Sure. "I don't think big games are going to die," says Barlog. "I just think that they're going to change, and people's perception of them is going to change."

Change, eh? Into—gasp—casual games? "I can see it now: Kratos popping balloons as he sits on a giant flower!" says Reese. Don't have a heart attack—he's joking. "Seriously, the market needs both types of games," he says. "We are investing in all types of games to meet the various market needs; we see them both growing along with the industry."

Casual relationship

So don't worry—there's room for both types of games. Bryan Trussel, director of content and portals at Microsoft Casual Games even thinks the two may get cozy with each other. "In the past you've had two fairly vertical silos," he says. "On one hand you had a hardcore ecosystem. On the other hand you had what was actually

a larger but less visible audience of "casual" players playing casual games on the Web. Now, these two audiences, the developers, and the content are starting to overlap, blurring that line between hardcore gamers and casual gamers."

Zelda series Director Eiji Aonuma feels the same way. In a recent issue of *Nintendo Power*, the famed Japanese developer tried to calm whiny fanboys who think Nintendo is giving up on them. "It's because of gamers that games have come as far as they have—it's not Nintendo's intent to alienate those people," said Aonuma. "We think we can involve everyone—people who played games in the past and people who were never gamers."

This doesn't mean hardcore developers will all of a sudden start making simplistic games. It just means they aren't against it. "There could be something fun about getting a few folks together for a short time and putting together a fun new game mechanic or [applying] a solid formula to a fantasy that hasn't been tackled yet," says Randy Pitchford, president of *Brothers in Arms* developer Gearbox. "I don't think we're specifically closed to [developing a casual game]—we may even enjoy doing it." Even Bungie, developer of the *Halo* series, admits it'd be nice to have the freedom to create something nutty. "Sometimes, when you have a team as big as the one working on *Halo*, you don't have the same flexibility and

agility that you would have with smaller teams," says *Halo 3* Multiplayer Design Lead Tyson Green. "A lot of the fun is in that flexibility, and the ability to say, 'I just had a crazy idea; let's try that crazy idea'—being able to just do that."

Gateway to gaming

With all the fear about casual games taking over, people tend to forget the one positive thing about the influx of new players: the possibility they will graduate to more complex games. "The Wii—and this works out perfectly because of the name of it—is like weed," says Barlog. "It's a gateway gaming console because they have all the casual games suck them in, and then they have the serious games where people are like, 'Yeah, I'll get that, too!'"

Think about it: The more people who buy games the better, right? Um, yes. "Any time we can find ways to grow the market, it means we will become more profitable as a company and we can take more risks," says Ubisoft's Key. "Not only are we maybe converting nongamers into hardcore gamers, but we're also maybe going to be able to take bigger risks to make more and better products for the hardcore guys."

See, folks—casual games aren't going to kill your favorite titles. It's actually the opposite: They're going to help them survive—and maybe even teach you a foreign language in 15 levels or less. **✪**



ALTERNATE REALITY

What would happen if hardcore games suffered the casual curse?

Imagine a bizarro world where Microsoft and Sony forced developers to turn their hardcore hits into casual games. Scary, right? Well, we asked developers from the two companies' biggest franchises—*Halo* and *God of War*—how they would turn their complex beasts into mommy-approved fare.

Halo: "I'm not sure—the 2D-shooter thing doesn't really do it for me. I would like to do a racing game, like those old Super Nintendo racing games like *Rock n' Roll Racing*. The isometric-view ones. You could do something like that in *Halo*."
—*Halo 3* Multiplayer Design Lead Tyson Green

God of War: "It would be modeled after *The Sims* and *Animal Crossing*. You'd basically have the entire pantheon of gods, and you could choose to play as any given person. You can then shag and cheat on all the people within the pantheon—marrying somebody, then having kids with somebody else. Maybe even mix in *The Real World* aspect of it, so you have to bunk with four of the gods

together. So you have to hang out with Hades, who kinda stinks. And you're constantly trying to get him to take a shower. So it would be this completely wacky collecting thing. Because casual gamers either like the quick two-second thing or collecting a ton of s**t. And shopping."
—*God of War* Director Cory Barlog



Living Kratos's life in *The Sims* would be pretty darn depressing.

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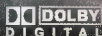
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PlayStation 2



XBOX 360





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PREVIOUS PAGES: 100-101

Heavenly SWORD

Her path no fury like a heroine scorned

By Shane Bettenhausen



■ In some areas you'll control Kai, Nariko's crossbow-wielding adopted sister.

Platform:
PS3

Publisher:
Sony Computer
Entertainment
America

Developer:
Ninja Theory

Release Date:
September 2007

A FEW MONTHS BACK, the industry buzz surrounding Sony's action-adventure opus *Heavenly Sword* sounded overwhelmingly negative. Despite initially turning heads with a snazzy playable demo at 2006's E3 game conference, the game distressingly slipped off the radar for a full calendar year. As press events came and went with nary a peek at flame-haired ass-kicker Nariko, our anticipation morphed into concern...why would Sony debut new footage of the game on NBC's hit series *Heroes* while keeping the press in the dark?

By Sony's own admission, the title wasn't in the best of shape until very recently. But thanks to some crafty coding, the various aspects have luckily come together in the crucial final months. *Heavenly Sword*, with its big-budget Hollywood pedigree, lush visuals, and epic scale, now stands poised to fill a massive Kratos-shaped gap in the PS3's library. And those nearly constant comparisons to Sony's other block-busting slash-a-thon, *God of War*, aren't going anywhere. "We're not upset when people call it *Godless*

of *War* anymore," says Sony Santa Monica Producer Kyle Shubel. "There are certainly worse games to be compared to."

Having finally spent some quality time with the game, we believe it's an apt comparison. Like *God of War*, *Sword* offers a gorgeous world, instantly accessible combat, and a melodramatic storyline. In fact, much like Kratos' quest, Nariko's journey begins at the end—rather than flinging herself from a cliff, she falls while wielding the titular blade in a last-stand battle against 4,000 enemy troops. Yet Nariko's resilient will refuses to give up, so fate gives her a chance to relive the final days of her life in hopes of reaching a better outcome.

With that climactic conflict fresh in your mind, you emerge in Purgatory—aka the game's surprisingly subtle level-select screen. From there, you return to your clan's mountain hideout moments before an assault by the nefarious King Bohan's soldiers. "Since you've gone back in time to change your fate, Nariko doesn't have the Heavenly

Sword yet," explains Shubel. The weapon's absence limits your repertoire, but allows these early stages to serve as a gradual tutorial for the game's increasingly deep combat system. Initially, you can chain combos together, pull off pinpoint reversals, and build up a meter that unleashes powerful Superstyle finishes. One thing you can't do, however, is jump. "You don't miss it after you play it," says Shubel. "Yes, I was surprised when I first picked up the controller, but really, the context of jumping would change the entire dynamic of the combat." Instead, you use the right analog stick to perform evasive acrobatic maneuvers, perfect for lithely linking combos across multiple foes. These early stages also introduce the concept of Aftertouch, a brilliant Sixaxis-powered projectile minigame that provides plenty of time-wasting amusement (see sidebar on the next page).

But it isn't until Nariko willfully brandishes the cursed Heavenly Sword (knowingly repeating her own doomed history) that the combat system's true complexity becomes

HERO SEQUENCES...NOT EVERYONE'S A FAN

Rather than include traditional platforming bits in *Heavenly Sword*, developer Ninja Theory has created "Hero Sequences": cinematic events where you have to quickly input specific onscreen commands in order to proceed. Now, we're not going to pretend that this concept constitutes innovation...hell, *Dragon's Lair* kicked it off. *Shanmue* ripped it off, and *Spider-Man 3* tried to pass it off as fresh by calling it a "Cinematic." We weren't fooled.

Ninja Theory creator Tomonobu Itagaki goes on the record as an outspoken critic of *Sword*'s Hero Sequences: "I've never played a good game where the developers put a big icon of the button you're supposed to press onscreen," Itagaki says. "I look at *Heavenly Sword*, and it seems really half-assed, because it's asking you to do all these button-timing sequences but you're not getting much payoff from it." Unsurprisingly, *HS* Producer Kyle Shubel sees it differently.

"My response to Mr. Itagaki would be that the intent of the Hero Sequences is to empower the player to experience events that would be nearly impossible to play in a natural platforming state...for example, making the player run down ropes, leaping from rope to rope as they're being cut from underneath you, all while dodging other objects—that would be a frustrating experience to 99 percent of our users if we were to force them to do that manually."

apparent. Equipping the blade unlocks two additional stances—ranged and power—accessible by holding down the L1 and R1 buttons. This puts a sizable arsenal of moves (that evolves as you amass Glyph Points by stylishly offing baddies) at your disposal, and creates a rock-paper-scissors hierarchy for offense and defense. Nariko will autoblock if you're in the right stance, and a handy aura around encroaching enemies will alert you to the proper defensive posture (blue for speed stance, orange for power, and red for ranged). Sure, newbies can pull off some impressive feats by simply mashing, but mastery of the combat

system's intricacies manifests in jaw-dropping midair juggles and crotch-clearing deathblows. Even though the swordplay feels remarkably fun and rewarding, players shouldn't necessarily expect *Ninja Gaiden*-level challenge here—bosses aside, most adversaries here provide little beyond enjoyable cannon fodder.

That addictive swordplay, so artfully illustrated via lifelike animation, truly provides the game's main draw. Exploration barely exists (the game remains completely linear due to its flashback nature), so if you're not fighting you're either solving simple environmental puzzles or engaging in quick reflex-test Hero Sequences

(see sidebar on previous page).

Having played through roughly a third of the game, we're definitely impressed—the combat, narrative, and pacing all feel highly polished. Little quibbles still need to be addressed, though: An occasionally flaky camera and infrequent visual hiccups (slowdown and lighting problems) still plague our unfinished version. But the team remains dedicated to cleaning up everything in time for a September release, and they're already setting their sights on Nariko's future ventures. "Dude, I can't wait for the sequel to this now that we've gotten all the crap ironed out," says Shubel. ★

YOU'VE GOT THE AFTERTOUCH

On the surface, *Heavenly Sword* isn't a particularly innovative action-adventure game...just a superbly polished, cinematic one. But pick up any object in the game's densely detailed, largely destructible environments and you're treated to a profoundly fun minigame. Whether you're hurling a dropped shield, tossing an enemy corpse, or firing a crossbow bolt, you can hold down the Y button and control your projectile's flight with the Sixaxis. "All of the Aftertouch training is on-the-job style," says Shubel. "You could use analog control, but once you embrace the Sixaxis method you can get creepily good, steering cannonballs around corners

to clock guys in the head. Aftertouching even has a use beyond just being stupidly fun, as weapons thrown this way do triple damage. Plus, there's an intangible thrill to expertly ricocheting a renegade's turkey leg into the skulls of four different foes. In fact, messing with this feature is so much fun that it could cause problems. "I really think that people are going to go nuts tossing stuff around the environments, and it scares me because I have no idea what that's going to do to the game," says Shubel. "After you throw the 712th shield in this box, what's going to happen?" Game-breaking, that's what.



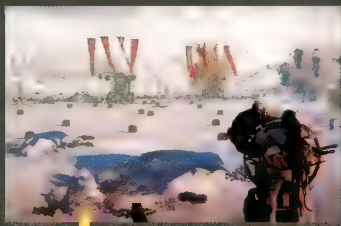
Outside of that 1-vs.-4000 fight, Nariko generally faces about 15 foes at a time...

WETA YOUR APPETITE



When we heard that *Heavenly Sword* developer Ninja Theory had entrusted New Zealand-based special-effects house WETA (the guys behind the phenomenal visuals in Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* flicks) to handle the game's motion capture, voice acting, and cut-scenes, we were suitably impressed. Now, having witnessed the final results, we're blown away. The facial animation and lip sync appear eerily realistic, and

top-notch voice acting imparts serious drama to what could otherwise be cheesy proceedings. The spectacularly lifelike eyes deserve special mention. "WETA is the first team to ever get in-game eyes right," says Shubel. "That's something that games always mess up, with that weirdly glassy wandering-eye thing." Still, we spied a fair bit of smoke and mirrors with the cut-scenes: Some are real-time graphics, while others are actually full-motion video of in-game assets. Of course, the fact that we generally couldn't discern between the two is impressive on its own.





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> THAT'S COOL



DAMN, THE DS IS SCORING some doozies. Sega announced Mass Effect developer BioWare is making—get this—a Sonic role-playing game. Not surprising enough? Well, Konami is making Contra 4. How's that for ya?



NERDS ARE GETTING something new to play with—both Nintendo and role-playing masters Square Enix are going to start selling kitschy knickknacks here in the States. Square Enix is opening an online shop, while Nintendo inked a deal with toymaker Corgi to release trinkets based on its popular franchises.

> OVERHEARD

"The action has more to do with digital effects than true martial artistry, and is targeted squarely at adolescent boys too young to rent porn and gamers too lazy to yank their own joysticks."

—Critic Ken Fox sums up the DOA: Dead or Alive flick on TVGuide.com. We couldn't have said it any better, Ken.



Quote source: TVGuide.com

> TAKE THIS JOB

Game Consultant

Our monthly look at the industry's most interesting gigs. By Evan Shamoon



This month: What's the job? Recommended education? Salary range?

What's a game consultant?

Basically a titleholder based mainly on his help on a particular project. It's the old line job, under the line, it's done all right—concretely. Being a game consultant is sort of being something that you can't find at a game. Think of that as another... The main source for... (more getting, more an inner getty, and possible too for all)

What's a typical day?

"As a consultant, you'll prepare... (the rest of the text is blurry)

... (the rest of the text is blurry)

How'd he get the gig?

... (the rest of the text is blurry)



► PREVIEW: HEAD-TO-HEAD

Skate or **FLY**

Will *Skate*'s realism have *Tony Hawk* fans doing a 180? By Todd Zuniga

TONY HAWK MAY BE TURNING THE BIG 4-0 NEXT YEAR, BUT THE SKATEBOARDING LEGEND isn't showing any signs of slowing down—both in real life and in videogames. The man soars again

this fall with *Tony Hawk's Proving Ground* (Wii/PS3/XB360/PS2), but for the first time in a long time, he won't be the only dude on the gnarly halfpipe. EA steps onto a four-wheeled deck with *Skate* (due out in

September for both the PS3 and Xbox 360). Can this new entry perform well enough to make Mr. 900 finally share the spotlight? Here's a complete breakdown of these two extreme sports.

ON BOARD



The angle for the skateboarding in *Skate* is authenticity over audacity, realism over ridiculousness, and practice makes perfect. You won't find any upgradable stats—just real-life physics that will keep you grounded while you use nothing more than the two analog sticks to thrash.

Tony's exquisite new feature last year, Nail the Trick, was a perfect way to burn up an hour trying to fit in *one...more...trick*. *Proving Ground* expands the slow-mo, dual-analog control with Nail the Manual and Nail



the Grab. Both bring the entire game to a new level, as you never have to exit "Matrix" time if you play your kickflips right.

Our two cents: *Skate*'s control feels plenty innovative—but after 10 minutes, we were starved for a 40-foot grind or the opportunity to hop a trailer park. Hardcore skaters may dig the realism, but *Proving Ground*'s impossible tricks had us, once again, feeling the fascination.



PARK IT

Tony Hawk games have sent us around the world, turning Berlin, Tokyo, and Rio into massive skate parks. *Proving Ground* drops players on the Eastern Seaboard with three distinct locations: Baltimore, Washington, D.C., and a return to Philly.

While *Skate* angles for real physics, the game goes fictional for its first-ever locale. San Vanelona is a magical mashup of San Francisco's crazy

hills, Vancouver's bowl-filled skate parks, and Barcelona's wide-open plazas. Plus, the X Games make an appearance.

Our two cents: We're psyched about *Proving Ground*'s three-city tour, but flying down the equivalent of SF's Nob Hill in *Skate*—especially in a nose manual—is a total rush.



MOTION CAPTURE

As feature-heavy as the flick-building software iMovie, *Proving Ground*'s editing system lets you split apart the last 30 seconds of your run, add all kinds of bitchin' effects, alternate between cool camera angles, and even time your tricks to the beat. Creating smart skate videos will also earn you sponsorships along the way.

Once you turn out a run you're really proud of in *Skate*, it's easy to pluck the prime footage from the last five minutes of gameplay and slap it onto EA's YouTube-style rating website for all to see.

Our two cents: While *Hawk* allows you to manipulate footage like a next-gen Spike Jonze, your efforts go no further than the limited eyes of your console's online community. *Skate*'s editing feature is bare bones, but at least you can spam your best mates with movies.



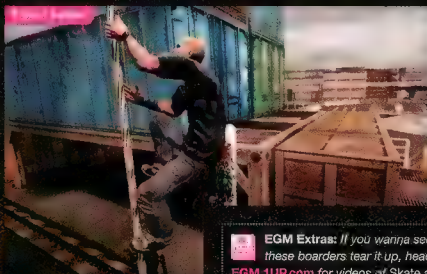
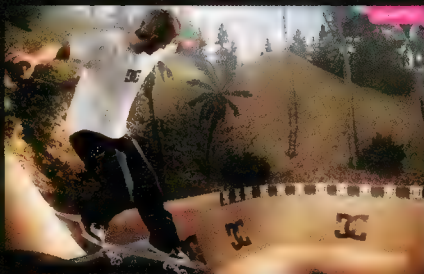
END GAME

Proving Ground impresses with a whopping nine different storylines, and how you play (like, say, going the hardcore skater or rigger route) affects what you unlock (which adds up to more than 300 items).

In terms of story, *Skate* is pretty straightforward, as players aim for pro status by conquering San Vanelona's various challenges. Win enough attention street skating and you'll end up on the cover of *Thrasher*.

Dominate vertically and you'll see your mug on the cover of *The Skateboard Mag*.

Our two cents: *Skate*'s story is simply too simple, while *Proving Ground*'s branching paths will keep things fresh for a while. "Contentwise, it's a \$100 game," says developer Neversoft's Co-Project Director Chad Findley.



EGM Extras: If you wanna see these boarders tear it up, head to EGM.1UP.com for videos of *Skate* and *Tony Hawk's Proving Ground*.



▶ PREVIEW: EXCLUSIVE Q&A

LittleBigPlanet

The straight dope on Sony's do-it-yourself platformer
By Shane Bettenhausen

Platform:
PSS

Publisher:
Sony Computer
Entertainment
America

Developer:
Media Molecule

Release Date:
Spring 2008

A CAPTIVE AUDIENCE OF GAME CREATORS went totally gaga over *LittleBigPlanet* at March's Game Developers Conference...but that's not terribly surprising, as it's ostensibly a game about game development. It's certainly a fresh concept: You (and up to three friends) converge online to design and play side-scrolling platformer levels in real time. From its cuddly customizable avatars to its promise of a YouTube-style community, the whole thing feels remarkably original. But will the average gamer be as enamored with this quirky toolkit when Sony drops an interactive demo later this year? We cornered Media Molecule Senior Producer Pete Wilson for the scoop on this wacky new gaming concept....

EGM: Since we aren't all game developers, will you include some type of in-game hint system so our creations don't suck?

Pete Wilson: Actually, you'll be introduced to the creation tools just by playing the premade levels. We call it creativity by stealth—you won't even notice it but, after playing *LBP* for a while, you'll probably be pretty good at making stuff. You definitely don't need to be a game developer to make stuff in *LBP*—there is no separate editor for example; you just create everything very physically using your character, in-game. And we want to keep the creation systems very simple so that users aren't daunted by the prospect of making a level. Because we know that, although people do like to create stuff, we don't want anything as complex as a *Quake* level editor.

EGM: That GDC demo stage wasn't terribly long...how complex can our user-created levels be?

PW: Well, in terms of scope, you're currently only seeing a hint at what's

possible. The true scope is, in my opinion, truly mind-blowing. Right now, using only the simple in-game tools, our guys are creating the most fantastic levels. Not just with lots of platforms and tough jumps, but with plenty of weird and wonderful objects combined together, multiple paths, and even multiple exits. It's all about creativity: All you need is something as simple as a pivot joint, a spring, or a piston, and then people can combine objects to create all kinds of new machines that totally alter the flow of the stage. The designers are showing that with a little creativity the opportunities are endless.

EGM: Will there be any limitations placed on what pictures you can import as stickers, or will this become *LittlePornPlanet*?

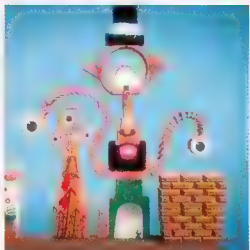
PW: This definitely will not become *LittlePornPlanet*. *LBP* is all about a



Photo: EGM



■ Once you've unlocked an object, feel free to drop copies wherever you choose.



community and we have features—such as peer review and level rating—that will make all the good stuff “bubble to the top.” We also have a number of feedback systems in place—both to help players filter whilst choosing what to play, as well as for all the usual grief reporting, moderation, and blacklisting.

EGM: What about enemies? Can we put beasties in our levels?

PW: It's funny—I don't think we've actually mentioned this previously, but yes, we will certainly have enemies in the game; I think that's a fundamental part of good gameplay. They will range from little robots that simply roam from left to right to spectacularly complex beasts that pose quite a challenge. We've recently built this big, huge giant, and, as with other objects in the game, he's composed entirely of materials that you wouldn't

expect. He's quite intimidating, and shows the possibility of what the designers can create.

EGM: How will the users' levels be sorted? Can we avoid crappy ones?

PW: We'll be announcing the details later, but we'll support many kinds of search that allow you to “drill down” and find the right levels for you.

EGM: Can you even play single-player? And ■ so will levels change or be limited in some way?

PW: Yes! The single-player experience is great fun. We're building our levels so they can be enjoyed alone or with friends. You're rewarded for playing together, and some side quests will require ninjalike skills to complete without friends. You can play single-player through online downloaded user-created levels, too.

EGM: How will LBP take advantage of the Sixaxis controller's motion-sensing abilities?

PW: We've got something in there called “acting.” You can take direct control of your character's body language—both arms, facial expressions, and head—by tilting the Sixaxis. We love how this allows a kind of unique nonverbal communication that really helps when you're playing together.

EGM: How will LBP work with Sony's upcoming Home online community for PS3?

PW: It's still too early for us to comment on that, but ever since we first met the Home team, we've been bouncing some pretty cool ideas around. Because both Home and LBP can evolve over time, I'm sure we'll find lots of ways to work together. 🐼



> PREVIEW: EXCLUSIVE INFO

Metroid Prime 3: CORRUPTION

A bounty hunter's guide to this long-awaited galaxy

By Bryan Intihar

Platform:
Wii

Publisher:
Nintendo

Developer:
Retro

Release Date:
August 2007

THESE DAYS, SPACE HUNTRISS SAMUS ARAN has had all the time in the world to needlepoint and pop in her favorite workout DVD, *Morph Balls of Steel*. The blonde-haired savior of the solar system seems like she's been out of work for forever now, but that's all about to change.

A new mission, codenamed *Corruption*, has finally appeared on the bounty hunter job board. And unlike previous gigs that took her on a whirlwind tour across the

GameCube galaxy, this first-person adventure has Samus exploring an unfamiliar Milky Way: the Wii. The scenery ain't the only thing changing, either. So before you dig out that Varia Suit from the back of the closet

(you know, the one with ridiculously oversized shoulder pads, bulbous helmet, and right-sleeve sidearm), let's catch up on the new stuff with the help of Samus' contractors, developer Retro Studios.

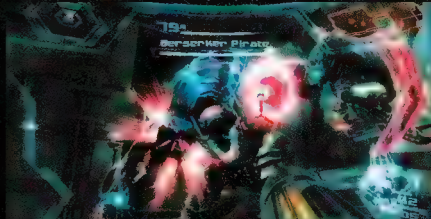
▶ **The Wii controller allows the combat to be better, more intuitive, and I feel we could incorporate more of that into the game.**

—Metroid Prime 3: Corruption Senior Producer Bryan Walker

> RETRAIN YOUR TRIGGER FINGER

As in your two previous *Prime* missions, exploration will play a key role in *Corruption* (which calls for you to save the Galactic Federation from your neon-lit doppelgänger, Dark Samus). Be prepared, though, to fire more rounds than ever before. "In the first two games, we never really concentrated on the shooting," says Senior Producer Bryan Walker. "The Wii controller allows the combat to be better, more intuitive, and I feel we could incorporate more of that into the game." A new control style, dubbed lock-on free-aiming, nicely merges the mechanics of *Metroid's* Cube titles with traditional first-person shoot-

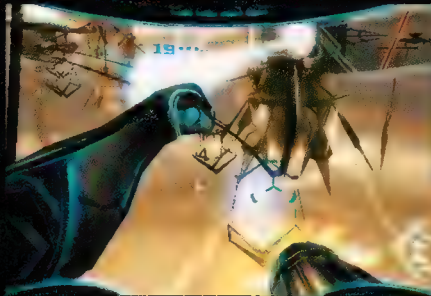
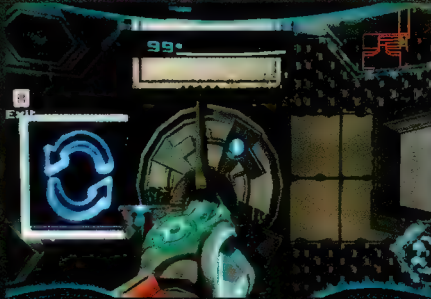
ing elements: Here's how it works: During a shootout, you can lock onto one enemy, which acts as your strafing point. But unlike before, you can now move the reticule (via the Wii Remote) and blast other threats onscreen. "Previously, we always had to keep the enemies on a similar level so people didn't get frustrated," says Game Director Mark Pacini. "The Wii controller allows us to be more flexible with how we present the game." It seems to be working—the routine firefights and boss battles we tried (such as a tall monstrosity with vulnerable antennas on his noggin) felt much more vertical.



> WHEN IN DOUBT, WIGGLE

Two items will be vital to this journey: the Wii-mote and Nunchuk. And don't worry: The folks at Retro are well aware of the problems that are sometimes associated with the console's two-part controller. "Unfortunately, I've seen a lot of games come out for the Wii and [the controls] feel really gimmicky," says Pacini. "The metaphor we've been striving to avoid is the cheap 3D movie. Just because you can do this all the time doesn't mean you should." So far, the Wii-exclusive mechanics we've tried in *Corruption* only add to the experience: twisting

and pulling the Wii-mote to activate machinery or open doors, pulling back on the Nunchuk to tear apart a minibot with Samus' Grapple Lasso, and flicking the Wii-mote to jump while in the Morph Ball. Expect other sensible moves as well. "When you get the Boost Ball," explains Pacini, "you'll be able to use the Wii Remote to point where you want to go and then actually lock onto enemies with it. Again, it's one of those simple little things that changes the way you play the game. With each one of the abilities, we really tried to see if it was viable."



■ Gimme that: Use the Grapple Lasso to rip off an enemy's shield.

▶ DON'T FORGET YOUR PILOT'S LICENSE

Previous *Metroid* missions have given you little reason to develop a Han Solo-esque attachment to your space vessel. But you may feel a ship-shape connection this time. "The ship is a pretty big thing in the game," says Pacini. "Just think of it as another Samus ability, to command her ship." Your flying saucer will now act as a mobile save station that you can call to come to specific points in a level. You can also go inside

the cockpit and have fun messing around with its buttons, one of which reads Samus' corruption level (more on that later). Being able to activate blast shields from the ship's dashboard hints at the possibility of aerial combat, but the developer ain't ready to confirm if *Corruption* doubles as a NASA-certified starship simulator. "The ship has a very limited capacity in the demo you played," is all Pacini will say on that front.



▶ DON'T SPEAK, EVEN WHEN SPOKEN TO

Up until now, it's been hard to prove the *Alien* tagline of "In space, no one can hear you scream" because barely a word has been uttered in the *Metroid* universe. In *Corruption*, though, people can't seem to shut up. "Having voiceovers in a game is a huge risk for us because it limits the amount of last-minute changes we can make," says Pacini. "We went to Nintendo and said, 'We really want to do voice in the game. What do you think?' And they came back with, 'Well, you

know, here are the problems that can happen, but if you really wanna do it...'" In addition to conversing with members of the Galactic Federation on the battlefield, you'll also hear mission updates through your helmet. Unfortunately, these will all be one-way conversations. "Samus doesn't have a voice. We want the player to be her," says Pacini. "I don't think Mr. [Yoshio] Sakamoto, who's in charge of the Samus character, is ready to commit to anything like that."

▶ TIPS FROM THE PROS

Check out what some other famous bounty hunters might have said about getting the job done.



Domino Harvey (*Domino*): "Informant ain't talking? May I suggest giving him a lap dance? It can work wonders."



Jango Fett (*Star Wars*): "Listen to me, kid: During a shootout, it's smart to keep your head on a swivel."



Duane Chapman (*Dog the Bounty Hunter*): "Like I always say, whatever doesn't kill you only makes you stronger. Why else do you think I sport this stupid 'do' Oh, and stay out of Mexico."



Johnny Blaze (*Ghost Rider*): "Who needs to stay in shape when you can have rock-hard CG abs like me?"



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> THERE'S NO "I" IN TEAM

Even though most of this job will fall on your shoulders, *Corruption* marks the first time you'll receive some backup—in the form of three bounty hunters who will have “an impactful role,” says Walker. “Samus will have some type of connection

to these characters.” While we appreciate the occasional help during enemy encounters, couldn't this trio be a little more...uh, stylish? Samus' attire looks like it was ripped from the pages of *Vogue*, compared to those silly get-ups (see below).



> MONITOR YOUR CORRUPTION LEVELS

It's no secret why this one is subtitled *Corruption*; at the very beginning of this adventure, Dark Samus infects you with Phazon, which Retro says is significant to not only the story but also the gameplay. “The corruption feature goes hand and hand with the entirety of the game,” says President and CEO Michael Kelbaugh. Retro isn't revealing how this all works just yet. (“It's not more substantial in the demo you played because it's a feature you can't just pop in and out of,” says Kelbaugh). But we know two things for sure: Your suit's appearance will change depending on your level of corruption (during our playtime, 25 percent corruption left Samus looking like Rainbow Brite), and at any time you can hop into your ship and check (with some Will Remote twistin') just how much Phazon has contaminated you.



■ A Phazon-infected Samus looks around for the nearest Walgreens.

> LAST-MINUTE MISSION DETAILS

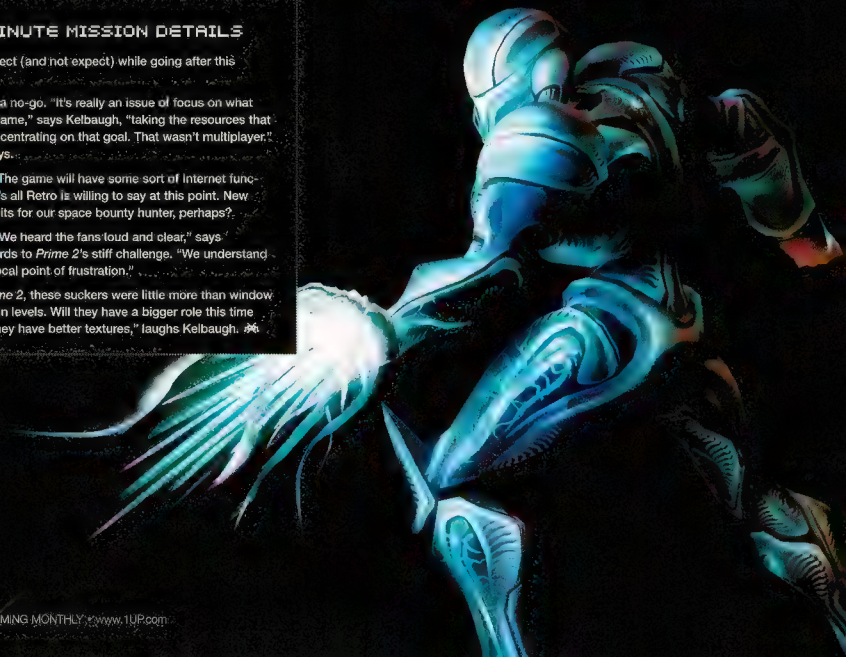
What else to expect (and not expect) while going after this bounty:

Multiplayer: It's a no-go. “It's really an issue of focus on what we saw for this game,” says Kelbaugh, “taking the resources that we have and concentrating on that goal. That wasn't multiplayer.” Good choice, guys.

WillConnect24: The game will have some sort of Internet functionality, but that's all Retro is willing to say at this point. New downloadable suits for our space bounty hunter, perhaps?

The difficulty: “We heard the fans loud and clear,” says Kelbaugh in regards to *Prime 2*'s stiff challenge. “We understand that was a real focal point of frustration.”

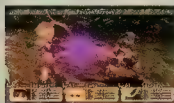
Metroids: In *Prime 2*, these suckers were little more than window dressing in certain levels. Will they have a bigger role this time around? “Well, they have better textures,” laughs Kelbaugh. #6



BRAVE STORY



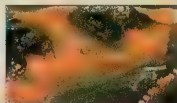
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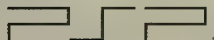
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Language
Mild Fantasy Violence
Suggestive Themes

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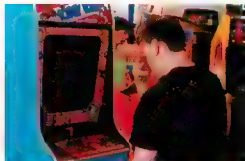


PlayStation Portable





Have a seat in front of that computer and queue up some of our favorite clips on GameVideos. You can find them at GameVideos.com/EGM.



OMG: The King of Kong: A Fistful of Quarters HD

Trailer for documentary chronicling Steve Wiebe's attempt to unseat Billy Mitchell as *Donkey Kong* world champ. Counting the days.



ONLY: BioShock "Origins" interview

BioShock developers talk about the evolution of the game's story and world. Heavy on the concept art.



LOL: Broken Pixels Episode 09

EGM's Seanbaby, Crispin Boyer, and Shane Betterhausen ridicule *Cho Aniki* and *Hooters Road Trip*. Hilarity ensues.



1337: Nintendo Museum Documentary

Awesome walkthrough of the Nintendo Museum, with interviews and original music by 6955.

ONLINE SCENE

Content Clash

Best of the downloads By Nick Suttner

Both Xbox Live and the PlayStation Network want your cash. So to see who is providing the best downloadable content for your monies, we take a look at how a few launch-window games stack up.



Defect: Dark Zone (XBLIVE)

Verdict: A free-to-play shooter with new 3D polygon cutscenes, *Defect* might succeed as a niche *Call of Duty* HD-style shooter, but has a steep learning curve for 3D37 users (80.0% of your Earth Dollars).



Defiance Fall of Man (PS3)

Verdict: *Defiance* (downloaded recently released) features original gun 3D37. And it also features a few features that a standard shooter wouldn't have: some "massive" online load & mission loadtimes.

Defiance (XBLIVE) has the same features as the PS3 version, but the PS3 version is more available to you. (You can't play it on PS3.)



Project Gotham Racing 2 (XBLIVE)

Verdict: Lots of gorgeous visuals with an auto-boost, 2-lane racing game, and best car physics for 3D37. (Remember, you can't boost 3D37 on 3D37.)



Metalstorm (PS3)

Verdict: This new *Troika* offers a masterpiece of a combat with a massive amount of your friend's help. It's the best you can get, and it's a masterpiece.

Metalstorm (XBLIVE) has the same features as the PS3 version, but the PS3 version is more available to you. (You can't play it on PS3.)



Geometry Wars: Retro Evolved (XBLIVE)

Verdict: A fun, fast-paced arena shooter for the most stylish and accessible. And it's a masterpiece.



Great Gatsby (PS3)

Verdict: A fun-to-play shooter for the most stylish and accessible. And it's a masterpiece.

Great Gatsby (XBLIVE) has the same features as the PS3 version, but the PS3 version is more available to you. (You can't play it on PS3.)

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Mild Blood
Mild Language
Violence

Game Experience May
Change During Online Play



> PREVIEW: EXCLUSIVE SCREENS AND INFO

John Woo Presents STRANGLEHOLD

Finally, a game whose movie influences are more than skin-deep **By Robert Ashley**

Platforms:
PS3/XB360

Publisher:
Midway

Developer:
Midway Chicago

Release Date:
September 2007

GAMES ARE ACTION MOVIES

of the future. Really, who would rather sit through three hours of non-interactive computer graphics and stiff acting just for a fleeting shot of adrenaline? Games let you live the action. Or at least they will someday. For now, we get a lo-fi version of the movie experience, all of the big

bangs and none of the subtleties. Just look at the works of Hong Kong action-movie director John Woo. His stunts are often likened to ballet performances, with Woo's favorite subject, actor Chow Yun-Fat, gracefully flying through the air, running up walls, and dodging doves...er, bullets. By contrast, how often have

you gotten hung up on a doorway or a piece of furniture while playing a game? *Stranglehold* (PS3/XB360), which is designed as a loose sequel to Woo's flick *Hard Boiled*, attempts to close some of the distance between the mediums by allowing players to act out some of the coolest moments from movies past.



SIGNATURE SPIN

Stranglehold finds Chow Yun-Fat (digitally) reprising his role of über-badass Inspector Tequila from Woo's *Hard Boiled*. The game makes use of one of the movie's signature moments: Tequila throws out both guns, spins in a 360, and takes out all the bad guys in the room. It's a modern version of the smartbomb, a special move used to remove all threats. Woo fans will also notice an homage to the director's peculiar bird fetish: "One in 10 times, doves fly up when you do the spinning attack," says Art Director Jason Kaehler.





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▶ DEMOLITION MAN

In the movies, gunfire doesn't just kill people: It smashes expensive vases, blows up gas stations, and—in *The Matrix*—explains why bank fees are so exorbitant. Action games have recently been in an arms race to out-destruct each other, but *Stranglehold* puts breaking stuff to good use. "It's great to see things erode around you," says Kaehler. "But it also comes into play on the design side." Because practically anything can be blown to smithereens here, you can't camp in a safe spot. "In *Gears of War*," Kaehler says, "you can sit behind a concrete block forever. We paid a lot of attention to the way cover erodes, how many hit points it would have, and how much bullet fire you would be under. We tuned it so that it functions as cover, but at some point you're going to have to move on."



▶ FACE-TO-FACE

You've seen it 100 times before in movies: Right in the middle of a hectic firefight, two...or three...or four enemies find themselves in a stalemate, staring down each other's barrels. It's a tension-building moment, the perfect place for a macho one-liner.

Here in the game, though, it's an excuse to pop a crowd of dudes in super slow-mo. "In movies, the way Mexican standoffs usually work is it's a surprise," says Kaehler. "We do the same thing. Tequila will turn a corner and—POW!—there's a gun in his face." Sometimes you'll enter a room to find seven or eight mobsters pointing their pistols at your skull. "You can lean to dodge the bullets they're shooting," says Kaehler. "And you have a few seconds to pick off each guy." So while it sounds like Mr. Pink and Mr. White's dramatic *Reservoir Dogs* standoff, it's really a Mr. Blonde massacre.



▶ EXTREME MARKSMANSHIP

The banister run is a good example of how the developers are bringing some grace to herky-jerky shooters. "We went a little *Tony Hawk* with it," says Kaehler. "You actually grind the banister."

Your movement up or down the line will be automatic, while you pick off enemies in slow-mo. It should feel like second nature, too. "Just hit the interact button and he'll automatically jump up," says Kaehler. "It's very fluid and seamless." Cross your fingers the extreme-sports reference won't be as dorky as Legolas shield-boarding down the stairs in *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers*.



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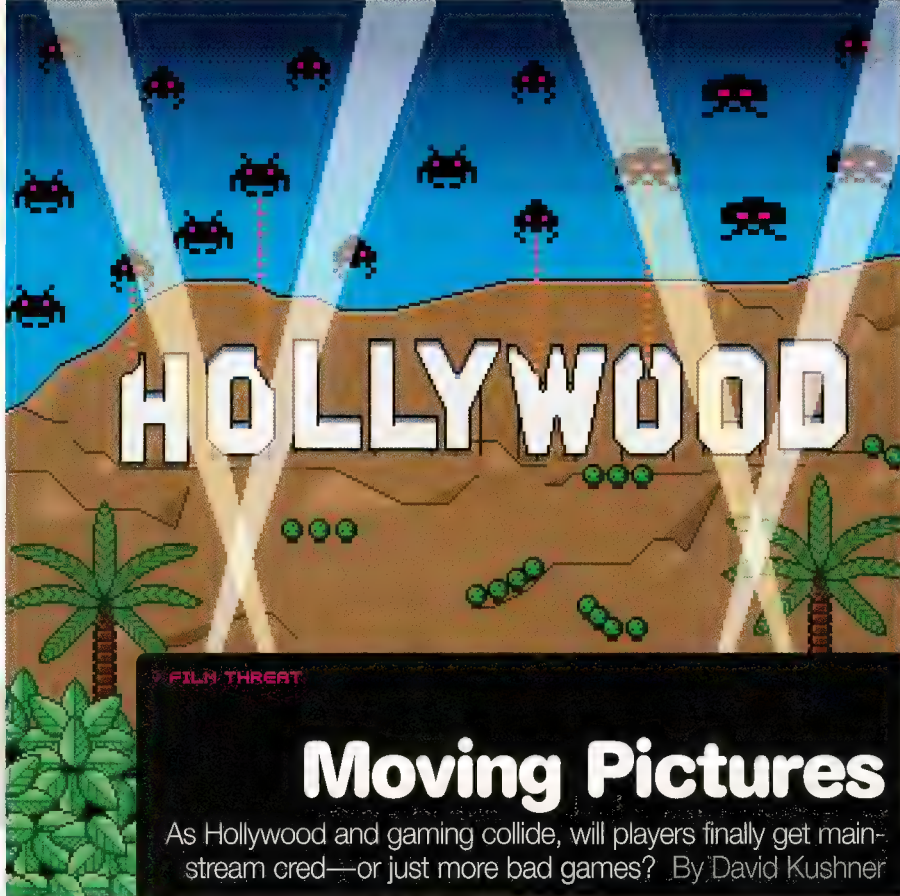
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 XBOX 360 LIVE



FILM THREAT

Moving Pictures

As Hollywood and gaming collide, will players finally get mainstream cred—or just more bad games? By David Kushner



Is the legend of all those buried *E.T.* Atari cartridges really true? "It makes for a good story, but I doubt it," says *E.T.* creator Howard Scott Warshaw. "If I knew where they were, I would fly anywhere in the world to get my picture on top of that pile."

YOU'VE HEARD THE LEGEND:

Take a shovel into the sands of Alamogordo, New Mexico, and you'll dig up the broken past of the video-game industry's ill-fated relationship with Hollywood. The evidence is out there beneath the landfill, the story goes, where, in September 1983, Atari buried 5 million unsold cartridges for the rotten game based on Steven Spielberg's blockbuster movie *E.T.*

It came to represent the end of Atari's golden age, and a legacy that seemed impossible to beat: Hollywood makes great movies. Gamers make great games. But put them together and—blammo!—they nearly always suck.

Today, however, a new generation is trying to bury that reputation

once and for all. The kids who grew up in the golden age are finally in positions of power, from the studios of Los Angeles to the start-ups of Silicon Valley. And this time they say they're going to make their collaborations pay off. The answer: pooling talent and technologies to create better entertainment experiences than ever before. That means better games, cooler flicks, and, maybe, that one thing that's been eluding the game industry for years: mainstream respect. "Four or five years ago, we had, as a collective industry, an inferiority complex," says Neil Young, head of Electronic Arts Los Angeles and one of the industry's chief liaisons with the new Hollywood. "What's different now is the generation that

grew up playing games has come of age as creators in lots of different mediums. Regardless of whether you found yourself making games or films or writing books or illustrating comics, there's a high percentage of people in those industries that accept games as a valid entertainment medium."

And it all starts with the guy behind the cartridges dumped in New Mexico long ago.

The big guy

After Steven Spielberg first played tennis with a Wii Remote at a 2006 trade show, he turned to Young and said, "We need to do something for the Wii. And I've got an idea."

This wasn't Spielberg's first foray into games, and other filmmak-

including Peter Jackson and James Cameron, have hooks in the medium. Michael Bay, director of popcorn spectacles *Pearl Harbor* and *Transformers*, announced his own videogame production company in May. The first offering: a first-person shooter with a budget of \$25 million.

Since the *E.T.* debacle, Spielberg had regained his gamer cred with DreamWorks Interactive, a studio that spawned the hit *Medal of Honor* series. In 2005, he announced a deal to develop three original games for Electronic Arts. The first game in development will adhere to what gamers expect from Spielberg—some big drama played out through a small cast of characters. But, after playing the Wii, Spielberg had a fresher idea for his second game.

Though EA won't reveal the exact nature of the Wii title (which will be the first to market, expected by spring 2008), Young offers a few clues: "[Spielberg] had a software toy he had been thinking about making, but didn't think it could be done until he got his hands on the Wii-note. The genesis of the idea is based on things that Steven loved to do when he was a child growing up...something fundamental and very visceral."

While players chew over whether that means *Wii Film Nerd* or *Wii Boy Scout*, Spielberg's Wii game symbolizes a much greater evolution for Hollywood: a shift away from making games that look like movies into creating experiences that are uniquely games. This doesn't just apply to heavy-hitting directors making games. Consider what's happening in the world of television. Just as in the film business, TV studios are filling with people who grew up clutching game controllers. And this is starting to reflect in the way they approach game spin-offs of their shows. Hits such as *Lost* and *Heroes*, for example, have made waves with online alternate-reality games based on their brands (see www.thelostexperience.com and www.nbc.com/Heroes/games). Instead of playing a knockoff version of the show, it's a new kind of seamless experience that lets fans further explore and investigate the fictional worlds online.

Jesse Alexander, co-executive producer of *Heroes*, says he and his colleagues are intimately plotting the game extensions with the same care they put into the episodes on the boob tube. "I grew up playing videogames," Alexander says. "I played *Empire Strikes Back* on the [Atari] 2600; I understand license gaming as a user." After seeing lackluster

games based on his previous show, *Alias*, Alexander is among those in Hollywood looking to create more meaningful interactive experiences.

"Now that I'm in a position to be involved in gaming," he says, "I come at it from a place of knowing my audience very well, and wanting to make the best game possible, and knowing how games are different."

Duppy Demetrius, a writer on *24*, took a similar approach when working on the game based on the show. Instead of just churning out a spin-off, he and his writing team scripted what was essentially a lost season of the series and put it out as a videogame. "It adds depth to the characters and story," Demetrius says. "This fills in the blanks."

Some in the industry, however, are skeptical of how vital the migration of Hollywood to gaming is in the long run. "I don't think it's important at all," says Yair Landau, vice chairman of Sony Pictures Entertainment and president of Sony Pictures Digital. "It's great that talented individuals like Spielberg and Jackson are engaged in the medium, but I don't think that will drive the evolution. The evolution

of gameplay is about talented people creating games.... The *Grand Theft Auto* guys have driven the medium more than Spielberg and Jackson."

The flip side of that story, Hollywood insiders say, is very different. "The game model is going to be the new model for Hollywood," says Alexander, "and, in my gut, I believe some of these game companies are going to morph into new entertainment-creation entities. People who have experience creating games will be some of the new content creators in Hollywood."

Oddworld's new order

If there's one game maker who's itching to make content for Hollywood, it's Lorne Lanning, outspoken cofounder of Oddworld Inhabitants. After churning out a string of quirky Oddworld hits—such as the *Abe's Odysee* series—over the last decade, Lanning abruptly pulled the plug on his operation in 2005 to reinvent both his company and the way games and Hollywood intersect.

Part of the problem in converging game and film talent, he says, is that gamemakers have limited control

➤ [It's] based on things that Steven loved to do when he was a child...something very visceral.

—Neil Young, general manager of Electronic Arts Los Angeles, on Steven Spielberg's Wii game



■ (Clockwise from top left): Directors Michael Bay, Steven Spielberg, and Peter Jackson lead Hollywood's game invasion, while Oddworld Inhabitants head Lorne Lanning goes the other way: His next project is a film, then a game.

over their products' destinies. Game publishers typically retain the film rights to games and cut the creators out from any sort of creative control or contribution. The resulting films based on games—and vice versa—go from bad to worse. "The typical model is, 'Here's the movie and now make [a] crappy version for the game,'" he says. So Lanning had an idea: Make the film first himself, retain the rights, then release the game he always imagined. "If we focus on the film first," he says, "we have more influence and impact on a brand.... When you have the game creator at the forefront of the [intellectual property] in both mediums—in film and game—you may see the quality standard rise." The flagship for this radical new strategy is *Citizen Siege*. The project is slated to hit in 2009 simultaneously as both a CG-animated film and a game. Details are scarce, but Lanning says the story will take place on a near-future Earth caught in a socio-political crisis. *Shrek* producer John Williams is attached.

But it's not just about the talent convergence—it's about the sharing of technology. Call it Machinima, Incorporated. Technology like the Unreal Engine from Epic Games is powerful enough to make visuals approaching Pixar quality but at a fraction of the cost. "We'll be using game technology as part of production for *Citizen Siege*, and all of production for other projects we can't reveal yet," says Lanning. "The audience won't be able to tell the difference. It looks like we delivered a \$150 million movie for under \$50 million."

They're not alone. "We're moving toward the holy grail of convergence between film and games," says Jim Ward, president of LucasArts and senior vice president at Lucasfilm. "We made great strides trying to bridge that. Rather than talk about convergence, we're doing it."

For the past six years, LucasArts has been developing proprietary technology from its special-effects firm, Industrial Light & Magic, to put into games. Some of the new software increases the biomechanical simulation of characters. Rather than using the standard animations, they infuse the characters with a sophisticated central nervous system. The artificial intelligence, then, drives the behavior, resulting in more realistic and convincing—or, one might say, more filmic—characters. They're doing the same thing for game environments in the form of digital molecular matter,

which will, say, provide for more realistic splintering when your character smashes through door.

Ward says the mission is to robustly cross-pollinate film and game tech to create more compelling experiences in both mediums. Gamers, he promises, will see the fruits of this synergy in the upcoming *Star Wars: The Force Unleashed* and the new *Indiana Jones* game. "The payoff for gamers is pretty amazing," he says. "Right now, the framework for videogames is limited in terms of story, and we believe characters are underdeveloped. The end benefit to gamers is they'll have simulation-based gameplay—more real, more compelling, and more fun."

Cheap thrills

Whether or not the risky moves pay off, the pooling of talent and technology reflects the new Hollywood. It's a place in which film and TV execs look to gamers not as second-class citizens but as peers. Now the power brokers are busy trying to hook up the talent to make new projects together.

Larry Shapiro, who helped launch the videogame division of the powerful Creative Arts Agency in Los Angeles, jumped ship in April to join Brash Entertainment, a new publisher that has its eye on bridging TV and film projects with games. And they're schmoozing in the most unlikely of places. After buying the rights to make a film out of *Gears of War*, New Line film executive Jeff Katz messaged

a screenwriter about writing the film while they were both on Xbox Live.

Despite the new sense of collaboration, however, some developers say there's still some time to go before videogames truly hit the big time. "Are we a true mass-market entertainment medium yet? The answer is no," says Dave Perry, the game developer behind Tinseltown projects like the Wachowski brothers' *Matrix* game. Part of the problem, he says, is that games cost too much to be truly mass market. So rather than looking at increasing tech and talent, Perry and others are taking the opposite tack—creating low-cost, freely distributed online games (similar to those popular in Asia) that make their money on the back end through microtransactions and other services. "I wish Americans were thinking about prices and how to get them down," he says.

But Perry, who lives in L.A., says the synergy in this town is palpable. "What I'm hearing [from filmmakers] in Hollywood is they don't want a [game] publisher licensing their movie and then having to work with a random [developer]," he says. "They want their own videogame-production company. I don't think there's a director in Hollywood who doesn't want this now."

Just ask Spielberg. **db**

EGM Extras: We talk more about the Tinseltown invasion with Lorne Lanning on our podcast at EGM.1UP.com.

➤ The Grand Theft Auto guys have driven the medium more than Spielberg and Jackson.

—Yair Landau, vice chairman of Sony Pictures Entertainment



Movie-effects powerhouse Industrial Light & Magic helped develop LucasArts' upcoming *Indiana Jones* game.



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> THE WACK PACK

Gosh?

Seven licensed games that'll make you go "Wha—?"

By Jon M. Gibson



Most licensed titles suck, but some games, like *Star Wars: Jedi Academy* (GBA) and *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic* (Xbox), are both good games that retain the properties.

WE BET YOU'VE HAD IT WITH SORRY EXCUSES for licensed games that never quite live up to their source material. It's hard getting over the suckage that was *Enter*

the Matrix (PS2/XB/GC) or how Tom Cruise didn't appear in *Minority Report*. *Everybody Runs* (PS2/XB/GC). Well, we've compiled a list of games that just may change your mind—

proof licenses aren't always so bad. Wait, what are we saying? These games will probably suck. But good or bad, they're definitely one thing: totally f---ing out there.



NAPOLEON DYNAMITE

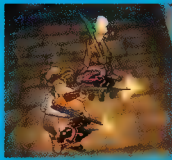
PSP/DS • September 2007

Yeah, the *Napoleon Dynamite* explosion ended three years ago, pulling licensed-videogame (and some publishers) just get constipated with crappy ideas. But hey, at least it's not a pointless platformer, right? Instead, publisher Crave's giving us a minigame collection that has Napoleon performing a slew of ridiculous tasks from the movie, like feeding Tina the llama, oggling in a dance competition, and kicking Kip's ass, among other do. We'd add this with a joke from the movie, but we forgot all the funny lines—dang it!



PENNY ARCADE ADVENTURES: ON THE RAIN-SLICK STREETS: PRECIPICE OF DARKNESS

Xbox Live Arcade / Fall 2007
Since the lancations are endless, it's worth replaying to ponder why Penny Arcade, the wildly popular webcomic that looks fun a games designer, can make one themselves. And from what we've seen, this role-playing game looks (and plays) like something Gabe and Tycho would actually skewer, which is actually pretty damn funny in an ironic way. Then again, this is an Xbox Live Arcade game, so it's not worth worrying over the quality—especially when you can just laugh at it.



JACKASS: THE GAME

PS2/PSP / September 2007

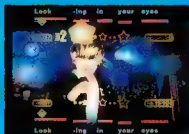
Of the 35 minigames in *Jackass: The Game*, let's rank the first few in order of utter stupidity: 1) Barreling down the hilly streets of San Francisco in a garbage car while dodging traffic. 2) Speeding around a golf cart, trying to destroy everything on the fairway around (not) anyone wearing plaid. 3) Drinking enough cherry-flavored cough syrup to actually get a giant tattoo of your face on your back. OK, that third one isn't real. We don't think, at least.



HAPPY TREE FRIENDS: FALSE ALARM

Xbox Live Arcade / Fall 2007

Funny how the *Happy Tree Friends* game—based on a sadistic cartoon series about disgusting deaths—tasks you with saving the little furballs from croaking. Um, isn't that like Elvis striving hard not to scold down a french-canapa sandwich... or Paris Hilton trying not to slit it up? If you want a more accurate representation of the show, you can always just make them suffer gruesome demises—just don't expect to win.



HIGH SCHOOL MUSICAL: SING IT!

Wii/PS2 / August 2007

To move to bring a little more sparkle into the lives of young tykes, Disney is cashing in on the success of the one movie that makes *American Idol* look straight. In the game, you can indulge karaoke-style in all your favorite tracks from the best musical since *Cambria*. The thing is, carnavals aren't very fashionable dresses or nearly as creamy as those veggie high schoolers—and that's just a dare shame.



ERASEHEAD: EXTREME METAL RACING

PS2 / September 2007

The planned Metallica soundtrack game never made it to the road, so this is probably your best consolation. If you've ever wanted to call it that, Regardless, British metal label Earache Records aligned the hardest of its hardcore bands for this *Twisted Metal* retread, featuring lots of crazy sci-fi rans blowing each other up. The game is derivative, sure, but at least these band names are pretty badass: Napalm Death, Hate Eternal, and Severe Torture.



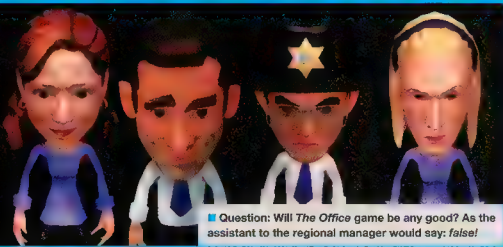
FOUR TEEN HUNGER FORCE ZOMBIE NINJA PRO-AM

PS2 / October 2007

Attempting to figure out this game is futile. Hell, just making sense of the show—a stone comedy starring ailing fast-food products—is pointless. So instead of doing that, we recommend a better option: laugh. And which is probably what you'll do when you realize this is a satirical golf game. Yes—after teeing off, you chase after your ball and then... well, beat the crap out of characters from the show. Weird.

REST OF THE RIDICULOUS

Weeding through all the wacky licensed games for this roundup left our senses dazed and abused. But, weirdly enough (or not, actually), the above games aren't the only bizame properties making the videogame leap. Casual-games publisher MumboJumbo is bringing the hit comedy *The Office* to both the PSP and DS. Don't ask how or why, either—just accept that it sounds better than this: Crave Entertainment recently announced that it's publishing an official PBR (that's Professional Bull Riders) game for multiple consoles. *Madden* is so screwed. ☹



Question: Will *The Office* game be any good? As the assistant to the regional manager would say: *false!*



Ghastly getup

Spotting cosplayers at conventions is scary, but witnessing an entire book full of 'em is beyond frightening—it's a sensory s***storm. Photographer Elena Dorfman's unintentionally horrific book, *Fandomania* (out now for \$35), profiles awkward folks dressed up like dorks. So unless you're into fat men in dresses (or nightmares), we advise you to put this book on your I-will-never-look-at-for-fear-of-puking list.

> IMPROV IDEA

Three's a challenge: Keiji Inafune

Whipping up game ideas is a cinch for *Mega Man* creator Keiji Inafune. Or is it? To see, we tossed three random items at him (a **mad scientist**, a **pretzel**, and a **treasure map**) and asked him to cook up a whole new creation for us. Here's what popped out:

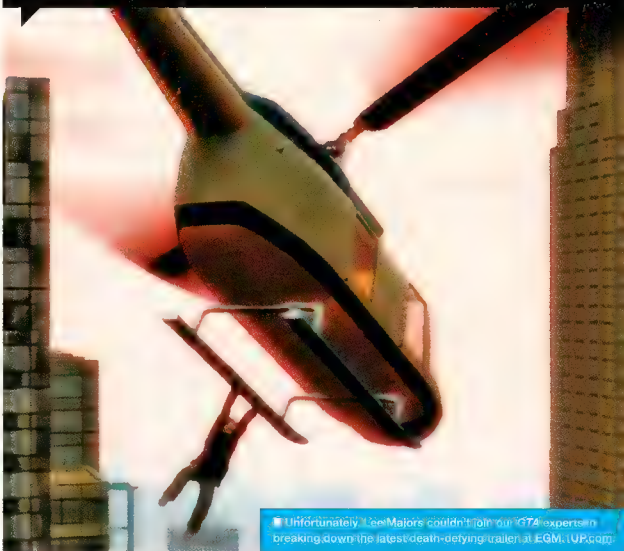
Keiji Inafune:

Let me think for a minute. You know, I'm usually pretty good at imagining these kinds of things. OK, here it is. I've got it: The hero is neither the pretzel, the map, nor the mad scientist. You see, the **mad scientist** isn't a human being at all. He's an alien that came to this world in a **pretzel-shaped** spacecraft and crash-landed somewhere on Earth thousands of years ago. Along with the alien, a mysterious power—the likes of which has never been seen by mankind—was lost as well. This sets the stage for our hero's adventure. The protagonist, of whom very little is revealed beforehand, must use the **map** to trace the location of the alien/mad scientist in the crashed pretzel and discover the secrets contained within. I hope that was good enough!



THE BIG ONES

The 411 on tomorrow's hottest releases



• Unfortunately, Lee Majors couldn't join our GTA4 expert in breaking down the latest death-defying trailer at EGM. (UP.com)

Grand Theft Auto IV

PS3/XB360 • Rockstar • October 2007

From all the trailers, it's pretty obvious that Rockstar has taken the necessary leap with *GTA4*'s graphics. Thanks to some news leaking outta Europe, we're finally starting to learn how the gameplay is making the same kind of progress. Apparently, the game will be display-meter-free, so you'll have to pay extra-special attention to the look of your character (you can now see bullet holes, and if he's wearing armor, it'll actually degrade as it takes fire). We also hear *GTA4*'s new damage system will have the A.I. reacting much more realistically to injuries (well, it's about time). For example, shoot someone in the leg and he'll limp. As for now, Rockstar will neither confirm nor deny these rumored features.

Super Smash Bros. Brawl

Wii • Nintendo • Fall 2007

Wondering exactly how you'll bust up Mario's big honker or Wario's gas-powered rear end? Well, any way you'd like. Nintendo recently revealed that *Brawl* would support four different play styles: the Wii Remote (held sideways), the Wii Remote/Nunchuk combo, the GameCube controller, and the Classic Controller. How you'll use the Wii's motion-sensing duo remains a mystery, but Director Masahiro Sakurai recommends the Cube method. "I like the feel of that powerful rumble," he said on *Brawl*'s official website.

Metal Gear Solid 4: Guns of the Patriots

PS3 • Konami • Fall 2007/Spring 2008

Solid Snake may look like an old geezer in No. 4, but in reality he's not even old enough to order a Budweiser. The stealth-action series turns 20 this year, and Konami is celebrating its b-day with a special boxed set that includes six classic *Metal Gear* games and sweet bonuses (such as the *Metal Gear Saga* DVD). But here's the thing: This sweet package has only been announced for Japan. As for a release here in the States, the folks at developer Kojima Productions will only say, "We're working on it." 🎮



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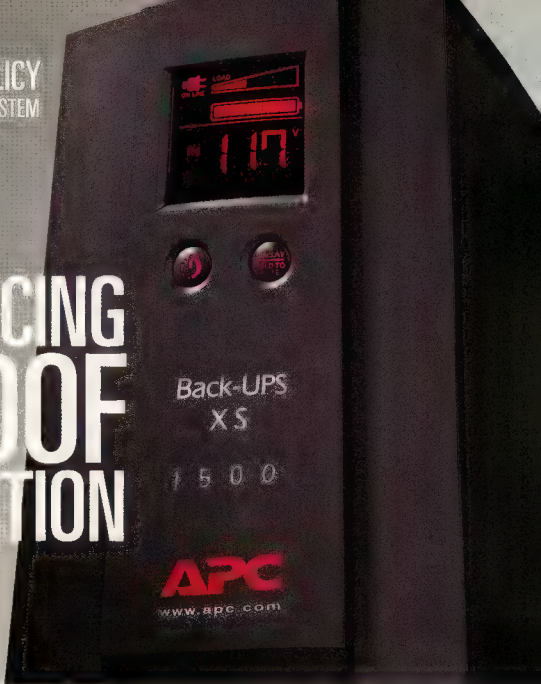
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September 2007

COMING SOON

What's showing in September



Juiced 2: Hot Import Nights

PS3/XB360/PS2/PSP/DS • THQ

Import racing according to THQ? It's all babes, money, and flashy cars. Oh, and drifting. A whole lot of it. Tokyo and London are just two locales you'll now drive through as you screech around turns and perform the perfect drift, prompting reward points similar to those in *Project Gotham Racing*. You'll also be able to download the "driving DNA" of celebs and race against them. Paris and Lindsay—we'll see you at the starting line (if your probation officers allow it).



Sonic Rush Adventure

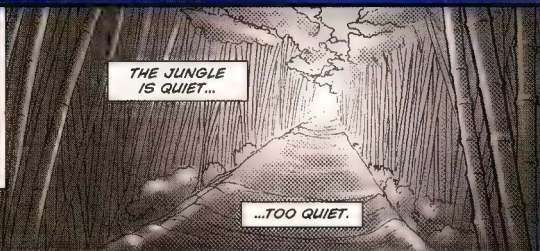
DS • Sega

As Sonic's frustrating 3D outings have recently demonstrated, the blue blur plays much better in two dimensions. Thankfully, that's the way of *Adventure*, which drops you in a pirate-themed water escape. While the idea of taking on Captain Whiskers—an uglier, mechanical version of Eggman—isn't revolutionary, the new touch-screen mechanics for performing tricks and running on top of the high seas will give the series a boost.

ADAPTATION BY

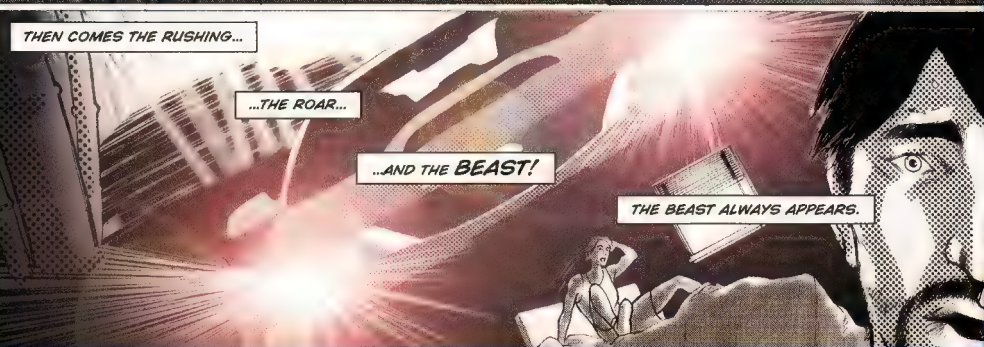


THE DREAM IS
ALWAYS THE SAME.



THE JUNGLE
IS QUIET...

...TOO QUIET.



THEN COMES THE RUSHING...

...THE ROAR...

...AND THE BEAST!

THE BEAST ALWAYS APPEARS.



TimeShift

PS3/XB360 • Sierra

Sierra's off-delayed first-person shooter is finally reaching the end of its dark tunnel. Hoping to differentiate itself from the pack of generically futuristic shooters, *TimeShift* features a "smart suit," which provides its hero with time-altering abilities: slow, freeze, or even reverse the hands on the clock. Enemies may stop in their tracks at your doing, but you sure won't, making it as easy as shooting fish in a barrel. Well, maybe—you still have to aim.



Monster Hunter Freedom 2

PSP • Capcom

Believe it or not, but the *Monster Hunter* franchise is a huge deal...in Japan, at least. Gamers on the other side of the Pacific camped out overnight for *Freedom 2*, which comes packed with a slew of new firebreathers, giant crabs, and other monstrosities for you and your friends to slay. Too bad that the series' popularity didn't convince Capcom to add online play to this sequel.

ART BY BENJAMIN

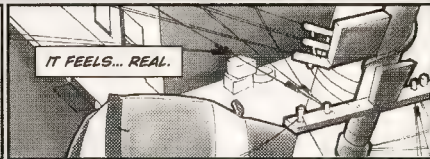
FOR WEEKS,
THE DREAM HAS
FOLLOWED HIM
EVERYWHERE.



BUT TODAY, SOMETHING IS
DIFFERENT.



IT DOESN'T
SEEM LIKE
A DREAM
ANYMORE.



IT FEELS... REAL.



IT FEELS... CLOSE!



BUT THE TIME... PERHAPS
IT IS NOT YET RIGHT.

COMING SOON (tentative)



Battalion Wars 2

Wii • Nintendo

After seeing early screens of *Battalion Wars 2* (which looked very GameCubish), several speculated that this one was simply another port with tacked-on Wii controls. But upon further investigation, this strategy game is indeed a true sequel with all-new solo and multiplayer missions, additional vehicles, a map that offers a bird's-eye view of the battlefield, and—most importantly—online play in the form of versus and co-op skirmishes.



Castlevania: Dracula X Chronicles

PSP • Konami

Dracula takes a break from menacing Nintendo portables to bring two of the most revered *Castlevanias*—the previously import-only *Rondo of Blood* (Turbo Duo) and watershed PS1 adventure *Symphony of the Night*—to PSP. *Rondo* appears in both its original and a newly remade form, and *Symphony* benefits from a fresh (and hopefully no longer embarrassing) localization.



Project Gotham Racing 4

XB360 • Microsoft Game Studios

Since the recently released *Forza 2* delivers a realistic racing sim, it's smart that *PGR4* takes Microsoft's other driving franchise in a more arcadey direction. This sequel introduces motorcycles, extreme weather conditions, and plenty of new cities to traverse. But the biggest change might be the overall track design: Expect far fewer unforgiving right-angle turns this time around.

REPRESENTATIVE





BlackSite: Area 51

PS3/XB360 • Midway

This *Area 51* sequel begins with a brief stint in Iraq of all places, but it won't be long before you're blazin' serious alien ooze back in the heart of Nevada. And, unlike last time, this ain't a solo mission. *BlackSite* has squad-based action, which is far less complex and intricate than, say, a *Ghost Recon Advanced Warfighter* (commands are given with one button). The shooter's biggest hurdle, though, may be that it ships alongside *Halo 3*. Hey, at least the PS3 version won't have much competition....

Photo: Midway

More September Releases

Brothers in Arms: Double Time

Wii • Ubisoft

Chibi Robo: Park Patrol

DS • Nintendo

Dewy's Adventure

Wii • Konami

DK Jungle Climber

DS • Nintendo

Drawn to Life

DS • THQ

Eternal Sonata

XB360 • Namco Bandai

Halo 3

XB360 • Microsoft Game Studios

Heavenly Sword

PS3 • Sony Computer Entertainment America

Hot PXL

PSP • Atari

Hellboy

PS3/XB360/PSP • Konami

NHL 08

PS3/XB360/PSP • EA Sports

NHL 2K8

PS3/XB360 • 2K Sports

Phoenix Wright: Trials & Tribulations

DS • Capcom

Sega Rally Revo

PS3/XB360/PSP • Sega

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PS3/XB360 • EA Games

Syphon Filter: Logan's Shadow

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HALO 3: SINGLE-PLAYER/CO-OP

CAMPAIGN TRAIL

As **Halo 3** nears its epic finale, we go hands-on with the Campaign mode—and Master Chief's last stand. By Jeremy Parish

EARTH'S IN A BAD WAY. The alien Covenant have conquered the planet, tearing a mile-wide scar in the pristine Kenyan wilderness in search of the Ark, an ancient installation that can trigger the six remaining Halo space rings and annihilate all life in the galaxy. Meanwhile, the all-consuming, parasitic Flood have set their sights on our humble world....

Thus begins *Halo 3*, the conclusion to the most influential first-person shooter series since *Doom*. With the multiplayer beta a distant memory, Bungie has buckled down to put the final wraps on *Halo's* Xbox 360 debut, adding new battlefields, new weapons, and a new map editor, Forge. (For a glimpse of the game's post-beta additions, see page 68). But *Halo 3's* story-driven Campaign mode is the game's true heart. Now, nearly three years after *Halo 2's* cliff-hanger ending, Bungie has pulled back the covers just long enough to give us a look at what's in store for what might well be the best *Halo* yet.

Bumped-up Brutes

Halo 3's graphics are gorgeous, of course—a perfect complement to the series' influential gameplay. All of *Halo's* conventions remain intact,

from the two-gun weapon system to the devious enemies. Each element has been refined, enhanced, and changed for the better. The excellent enemy A.I. is more dangerous than ever; Covenant warriors have always been cunning, but this time they're brilliant, even under normal difficulty. The massive Brutes have usurped the flappy-mouthed Elites as field commanders and are no longer predictable berserkers.

"[Brutes are] more in a leadership role now, so they'll usually stay at the back of an encounter and order people around," Sandbox Design Lead Jaime Griesemer explains. "They can't just fly off the handle anymore, although if you knock their armor off, sometimes they'll flip out and come after you—just as nature intended." Either way, you'll have your hands full; the Brutes now employ a wide range of weapons and tactics. Their new dual-wieldable shotgun (the charmingly named Mauler), personal shields, and energy regenerators make them tough targets as they issue commands to their subordinates. And they're not afraid to fall back when under fire, thanks to their new jetpacks.

The new Brute regime seems

to have emboldened all of the Covenant's ground forces. "I think you're going to find in *Halo 3* that the A.I. is generally more aggressive," says Griesemer. "Enemies will hunt you down better. They can basically climb on anything. So you'll be taking cover behind something; you'll look to the right, not see anybody, look to the left, not see anybody—and then they'll come over the top right at you." Even the enemy formations feel more sophisticated, with more varied and unpredictable encounters than ever before. Thanks to the game's new underpinnings, its world feels bigger, more varied, more thoughtfully crafted.

The difference engine

Bungie has crafted an impressive proprietary game engine to make use of the Xbox 360's additional processing muscle, making possible the biggest battles the series has yet seen. "There's an encounter at the end of the second mission that you play that has more enemies and allies in it than the entire first mission of *Halo*," Griesemer boasts. "And that's not even the largest encounter in the game." The *Halo* series has always balanced in-close melee encounters

with huge, open battlefields. For perhaps the first time, though, the experience feels truly seamless as skirmishes in tight quarters segue into huge vehicular shootouts.

The realistic lighting plays a significant role in *Halo 3*; exteriors are glaringly bright, while interiors are more delicately lit. Surfaces reflect realistically: Wood and stone are dull, while metal reflects light with a muted shine. In a word, it's subtle—a welcome change from *Halo 2*, where even rough stones and alien fur glistened like they'd been slathered with Crisco. And while you'll occasionally witness debris flying a little too far as characters kick it out of their way, for the most part *Halo 3*'s physics are as convincing as its visuals. For starters, water is modeled as a dynamically deforming surface. Knock a foe into a river, for instance, and he'll bob slowly downstream as the water flows around him.

Of course, immersion only works if all the senses are engaged, and *Halo 3* sounds as convincing as it looks thanks to Sound Director Marty O'Donnell's obsessive attention to audio detail. Gun reports muffle with distance and surroundings; a battle rifle fired in a distant field of soft soil sounds completely different than one a meter away in a cramped stone cave. The ping of every single spent shell casing corresponds to its actual trajectory and motion, and a bullet fired into stone results in a spray of pebbles that you'll hear clattering against the ground. Even the speed of sound itself comes into play: You'll hear the *whiz* of a supersonic sniper bullet passing by your head before the bang of the distant rifle.

All told, O'Donnell says the game currently features nearly 60,000 sound clips—roughly two-thirds of which are voice samples: The player's Marine companions are unusually chatty this time, although their mouthiness is being fine-tuned. (Bound to change: Flip your Warthog and they'll tell you what a dumbass you are; the fact that the heroic Master Chief outranks them



■ No longer just a big dumb target, the Scarab walker will hunt you down in its quest to deliver hurt.

> THE NEW STUFF



Mauler: This Brute shotgun comes with an extra-deadly bonus: dual-wielding. "It's not quite as powerful as the shotgun," says Sandbox Design Lead Jaime Griesemer. "If you had a dual-wieldable shotgun and a regular shotgun and they did the same damage, you'd never use the regular one."



RACES AND FACES

Refresh your memory with this guide to mankind's heroes—and the aliens who have it out for them

Humanity

Human beings, like the Hulk, just want to be left alone. (You'd feel the same way if everyone else in the galaxy wanted you dead, too.) Fortunately, they have the **Master Chief on their side**. The SPARTAN-II supersoldier was last seen hitching a ride back to Earth in a Covenant invasion fleet, although he'll eventually need to return to space to save his A.I. companion, **Cortana**.

"*Halo 3* is a story of about one man's absolute tenacity and loyalty to duty," says Writing Lead Frank O'Connor. "And you have this whole rescue-the-princess theme with Cortana. As an A.I., she doesn't have any physical structure, so it's hard to make her feel threatened. But it will become apparent early on in the game: Her fate is tied to the fate of the galaxy."

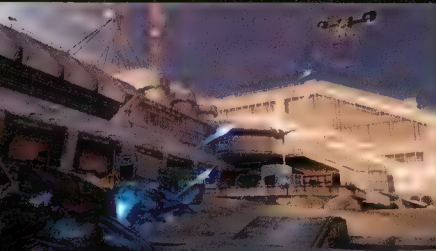
Also on humanity's side are Commander **Miranda Keyes** and Sergeant **Avery Johnson**. "The funny thing is, there's only a few weeks between all the games. But in *Halo*, Johnson is all spy, while in *Halo 3* he's practically a liver-spotted octogenarian," Writing Lead Joe Staten says, laughing. "We can do more with graphics now to make him look his age. Johnson was always intended to be this mentor character, and it helps sell that better when he's a little wizened."



HALO 3: CAMPAIGN



■ The rugged beauty of Sierra 117's jungle river demonstrates both *Halo 3*'s graphical chops and its impressive water physics.



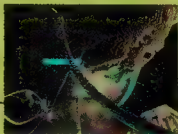
The Covenant

Even amidst a civil war, this coalition of alien races is more than capable of subjugating Earth. Granted, they're more interested in finding Forerunner artifacts than killing all humans, but since those artifacts will wipe out everyone anyway, it's pretty much a wash. Their leader, the ironically named **Prophet of Truth**, betrayed the Elite race—much to the annoyance of their former Holy Warrior, the **Arbiter**. The Arbiter hates humans so *hard*, but he hates the treacherous Prophets even harder.



The Flood

This semisentient fungal zombie parasite regards humanity as a delicious snack. Itchy. Tasty. The Flood isn't much for personality, mainly existing to propagate mindlessly. The sole exception is **Gravemind**, who was last seen making unfriendly overtures toward Cortana in the depths of the starship *In Amber Clad*.



The Forerunners

This ancient race has long since gone the way of Steve Gutenberg's career. Presumably, they died by their own hand 100,000 years ago when they fired off a Halo to stop the Flood. (Fat lot of good that did.) Forerunner A.I. **343 Guilty Spark** seems curiously familiar with humanity—and with Master Chief in particular. That could be due to the ancient Forerunner installation on Earth...or is there a deeper connection?





■ Halo 3's foes, like this Brute squad, are much cannier than their predecessors.

be damned. "These guys have been through a lot, and they're venting," Griesemer jokes.) The voice clips have a practical side, too, serving as a clue for predicting the actions of computer-controlled friends and foes. "If somebody takes damage and has to run for cover, he'll swear at the guy that took him out," Griesemer explains. "Then that guy might threaten him, then charge." And as usual, the running dialogue nudges you forward while offering additional story information—the ousted Covenant warrior Arbiter's

bitter musings at the sight of his treacherous former leader being a particularly effective example.

Telling tales

And *Halo 3*'s story needs to be good; its predecessor's dual scenario and cliff-hanger ending left many gamers alienated. Writing Lead Joe Staten acknowledges that *Halo 2*'s narrative risks didn't work out as planned. "We didn't get a chance to finish out the story," he admits. "And the Arbiter's story didn't work in the game, but it's great for *Halo 3*. Now we have all that information behind us and can tell a richer story for it."

Writing Lead Frank O'Connor feels that *Halo 2*'s story issues resulted from overambition. "Certain things should be mysterious," he says. "But there's a level at which that opacity doesn't serve us well, and we've certainly addressed that this time around. A good example is the [plant creature] Gravemind—we knew it was the Flood, but no character ever says, 'Gravemind is the Flood.' We

just expected people to get it. We've learned a lot from that. It'll be much easier to follow this time—there's no Raiden moment," he jokes, referring to *Metal Gear Solid 2*'s mess of a storyline. "We started off making *Marathon* [a mid-'90s Macintosh first-person shooter], where we could get away with compelling, arcane storylines. But with a game of this scale, you want the story to be accessible and enjoyable to a majority of people. We won't forget the hardcore fans, though—there's still going to be lots of extra story that they can find themselves."

Already, hardcore *Halo* followers have discovered a comic strip depicting the construction of the Ark in prehistoric Kenya and a group of modern-day Mulders called the Society of the Ancients—all part of *Iris*, *Halo 3*'s alternate-reality game (ARG). "We were too busy to be involved with *I Love Bees*," Staten says of *Halo 2*'s viral marketing ARG. "We told [JLB creators 42 Entertainment], 'If you want to do

> THE NEW STUFF

Gravity Hammer: *Halo 3*'s Gravity Hammer—based on *Halo 2* final boss Tartarus' weapon—should make players as giddy as *Halo 2*'s plasma sword did. "It will do a short lunge like the sword does, but mostly you use it to do area-effect damage," explains Griesemer. "If a vehicle's trying to run you over, you can hit the vehicle and send it flying. Or if someone throws a grenade at you, the shockwave from the hammer will send the grenade flying back."

something, it can't have anything to do with the game.' Which sucks. This time around, we had the bandwidth to go, 'Sure! Here's a cool artifact buried beneath the savannah, and here's an idea we have for a story you might do about that.' It touches on *Halo 3*."

The campaign experience

The ultimate question is whether or not these disparate pieces fall into place. The two single-player missions we've played give us plenty of reason to hope for the best. The first, called Tsavo Highway—actually the third level in the game—begins in the darkened ruins of a human base outside the Kenyan city of Voi, where Master Chief mounts up on a troop transport hog (a new variant on the Warthog vehicle) and heads to the highway, past the ruins of the New Mombasa space tether (destroyed in *Halo 2*), as Brutes, Jackals, and Grunts are waiting in ambush.

But wait, weren't the Grunts teamed up with the Elites at the end of *Halo 2*? What are they doing with the Brutes? According to Staten, their shifting allegiance is a matter of gameplay practicality: "There were great moments in *Halo 2* where you'd meet up with a pair of Hunters and they'd be on your side," he says. "But they were offset by all the times it sucked, when you'd be sitting there wondering who you had to kill. In *Halo 3*, we've clarified right from the get-go who your enemies are." And when you take to foot to navigate the shattered highway, the Brutes' new tactics are much easier to appreciate. Survive their gauntlet, though, and the results of the Covenant invasion become apparent: Beneath a violent sky, a fleet of cruisers is blasting away Earth's surface to reveal the Ark, a metallic installation miles wide.

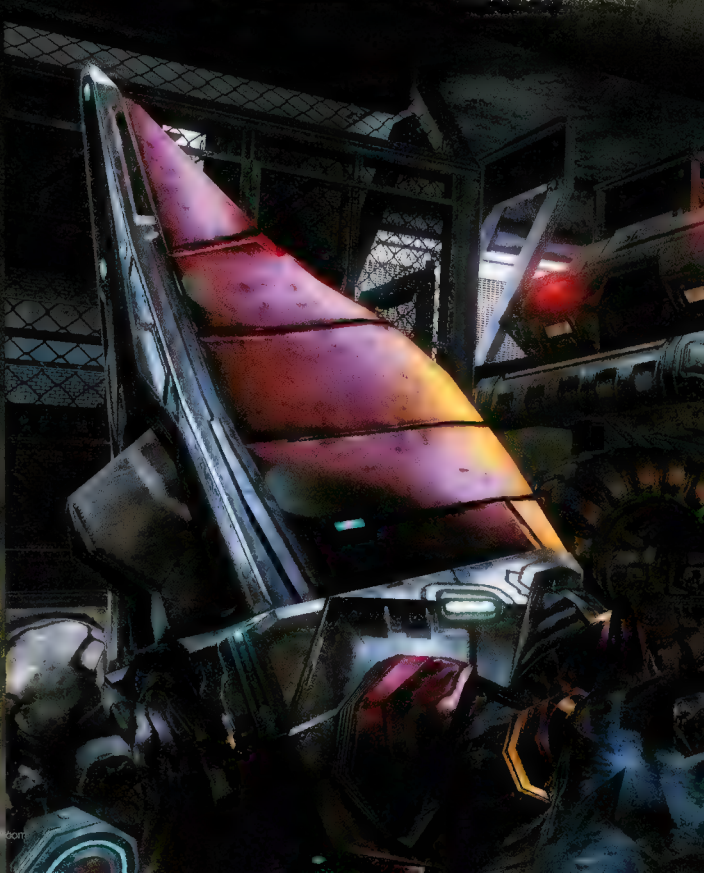
The next level, The Storm, kicks off with a Warthog convoy arriving in the city of Voi to mop up Covenant anti-air support, clearing a path for Commander Keyes' dropship to approach the Ark. A far more detailed cityscape than *Halo 2*'s



■ The Gravity Hammer is one awesome weapon. Of course, you'll have to survive it before you can use it.

» **The Arbiter's story didn't work in [*Halo 2*], but it's great for *Halo 3*. [We] can tell a richer story for it.**

—Bungie Writing Lead Joe Staten



» THE NEW STUFF



Hornet: This Marine aircraft zips around and takes on Covenant Berserkers in Campaign mode—we're betting it'll appear in multiplayer as well.

THE MARATHON CONNECTIONS

Could Bungie's old shooter shed light on Halo 3?

A vanished race with a legacy of destruction. An alien coalition determined to wipe out humanity and beset by civil war. A supersoldier fighting back with the help of sardonic A.I.s. A slumbering ancient intelligence with its own agenda.

No, not *Halo*—we're talking about *Marathon*, the series of Mac-based shooters that put Bungie on the map in the mid-'90s. The *Halo* games have always felt like a modern reinvention of *Marathon*, with overt story parallels as well as tiny, affectionate references. Some ties between the two series are so strong that fans think they can predict *Halo 3*'s finale based on the conclusion of *Marathon: Infinity*. There, the unnamed hero used the technology of a lost race to leap through time to alter history and prevent the enemy alliance from releasing a chaotic force that threatened to consume all life in the galaxy. Given certain story hints in *Halo*, a little time-hopping wouldn't be out of the question for Master Chief.

A stretch, perhaps, but fans can still revel in the little connections. *Halo 3*'s fourth mission features Traxus, an industrial corporation named after a rampant Martian A.I. mentioned in *Marathon*. More intriguing: the leaked *Halo 3* Achievement called "Marathon Man," which will reportedly grant 40 points to anyone who can "locate and access all Terminals in the Campaign." In the days before cut-scenes, *Marathon* used computer terminals to relay mission objectives and backstory. We didn't see anything of the sort in the two missions we played. "[Terminals] weren't supposed to be revealed yet," Bungie's Frank O'Connor says. "[Elements of backstory] are the kind of thing those terminals might be good for in *Halo 3*...albeit a little more ambitious." Handily, you can see how they work for yourself—*Marathon 2: Durandal* should now be on Xbox Live Arcade.



Same old story: *Marathon: Infinity* could be the Rosetta Stone to *Halo 3*'s plot.

The Brutes fill the role of *Halo 2*'s Elites with devastating effectiveness. Fortunately, they're still weak against speeding Warthogs.

New Mombasa, Voi consists of huge, open factory exteriors and loading docks connected by narrow corridors, and cramped interiors filled with beautifully detailed industrial decay. This varied scenery requires constantly shifting tactics to deal with each new situation—surprises that include Grunts riding Ghosts, or a Drone ambush in the midst of a firefight against Brutes. “The very first time you saw the Drones in *Halo 2*, they came out of the elevator shaft and swarmed all over you,” Griesemer says. “That was really the experience that we wanted to go for, but it was in a very small, enclosed space, and you weren’t fighting anybody else. In *Halo 3*, we can push a lot more—we can just throw 15 Drones at you at once while you’re fighting some other group at the same time.”

The Drone ambush is impressive, but it pales beside the encounter immediately following: a team of rocket troops on Mongoose ATVs taking on a contingent of Covenant military craft, including Wraiths, Banshees, and ultimately a giant mech-crab Scarab. “In *Halo 2*, the Scarab was scripted,” says Griesemer. “But in *Halo 3*, he’s an A.I. He’ll chase you around, he’ll acquire targets, and there are dozens of ways to kill him.” All this while its crew fends off the united attack of a dozen vehicle-mounted Marines. With the Scarab defeated, the mission culminates as Keyes’ team—including the Arbiter—joins up with the Master Chief for a vicious battle through a storage facility against a hammer-wielding Brute chieftain and his armored Hunters. Finally, all that remains is the climactic finale as a dozen humans rush the AA



■ X-button tools like the Bubble Shield are just as useful in campaign mode as in multiplayer.

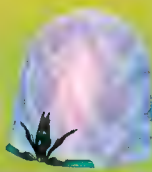


He'll chase you around, he'll acquire targets, and there are dozens of ways to kill him.

> THE NEW STUFF



Radar Jammer: Mostly useless in Campaign mode (enemies don't use radar), this device tricks enemies with false radar images and fake shield ticks to simulate random, phony enemy attacks.



Personal Shield: Unlike the 360-degree bubble shield, this is a stationary version of the Jackal's handheld deflector, and it only protects against attacks from one direction. Stand behind the shield and fire through to hit opponents on the other side.



BRING A FRIEND

Cooperative two-buddy play returns for the campaign, but it's still not online...yet

While most players credit *Halo 3*'s customizable competitive multiplayer as the series' greatest contribution to gaming, its cooperative multiplayer was certainly fun, too. So it's little wonder that Bungie is working to make two-player co-op for *Halo 3*'s campaign the best yet.

This time, the second player will control the Arbiter, the disenfranchised Covenant Holy Warrior—and since the story follows Master Chief from beginning to end, co-op is the only way to play as the Arbiter. Think of it as cosmic buddy flick. "We created the Arbiter in the first place because he's an absolute peer to the Chief in terms of ability," Bungie's Frank O'Connor tells us. "And he has completely different motivations. They're nice sides of a coin, I think."

Arbiter fans need no longer rely on split-screen gameplay; while Bungie's still working out the kinks, they've added co-op system-link support this time around. Unfortunately, online isn't supported—at least not yet, anyway. In fact, Xbox Live co-op is one of the last game components Bungie's wrestling with. "We're not dumb," O'Connor assures us. "We know that people want it, and we're trying to make it happen. I think the biggest problem for us for online co-op is that we have a situation where you can be in a Warthog with five troops, almost a mile away from the other player. That's a significant challenge. And there's lots of design things you could do to prevent that from happening, but they would make it not feel like *Halo* anymore. If we can make it happen in a way that works well, we will—and if it works badly, we won't."

Still, even if online co-op doesn't appear as an out-of-the-box feature at launch, Bungie hasn't ruled out the possibility of adding it later as downloadable content. And what of those rumors of four-player co-op? Bungie won't comment on them one way or the other, but given how snugly the two-player Master Chief/Arbiter dynamic fits into the campaign mode, we have trouble imagining how another pair of players would fit into the story. That doesn't mean we can't hope, though. We'll take all the help we can get when it comes to Legendary difficulty....



■ The Arbiter is Hutch to Master Chief's Starsky.



■ New vehicles like the vicious Brute Chopper lend to the chase of *Halo 3*'s enormous skirmishes.



■ Even with all its changes and enhancements, *Halo 3* still supports tried-and-true tactics. Poppin' caps, for instance.

emplacement while a soaring anthem blares. Here the deadliest Brutes seen yet make their stand, including one with the ability to make himself temporarily invincible. Their only goal is to prevent you from blasting the AA gun's weak point and clear the airspace over the Ark—which is where the mission ends.

The game within the game
Bungie also gave us one last hands-off taste of *Halo 3*'s Campaign mode: a look at the fifth mission, Sierra 117. It's a lovely level—a

Covenant encampment set up beside a gently flowing river deep in the jungle, sun-dappled ground below a canopy of trees...and the proving ground for something Bungie's calling "Campaign Scoring," a metagame that effectively turns the campaign mode into a competitive challenge similar to multiplayer. This metagame, which can be played solo or in co-op, tracks each player's performance and assigns points to each kill; the more impressive the performance, the higher the score. A normal Grunt kill might be worth 100 points, while a Grunt headshot would be worth twice as much. Killing a Brute will net more points than killing a Jackal, but taking down a Brute by sticking it with a plasma grenade or taking down its shields with an overcharged plasma pistol will multiply the score significantly.

Players also earn medals for certain actions, just like in multiplayer, and lose points for particularly bone-headed maneuvers like killing their co-op partner. At the same

time, you can boost your points by finding and activating hidden skulls, each of which unlocks a different aspect of the metagame. The Iron Skull, for instance, causes both players to be sent back to the most recent checkpoint when either dies; other skulls might double enemy hit points or cause them to attack only with grenades. Skull effects stack, so it's possible to have all of them on—although the resulting game experience would likely be impossible to complete. And, of course, all metagame stats appear on Bungie.net for all the world to admire (or mock).

Finishing the fight

In short, Bungie's goal is to make *Halo 3*'s campaign experience as popular as *Halo 2*'s enduring head-to-head mode. What we've seen of the solo game suggests they're well on their way—although the multiplayer bar has also risen considerably higher, as you'll see in the following pages.

> THE NEW STUFF

Brute Chopper:
A fast, single-man ground vehicle, the Chopper spits out exploding concussion rounds, and its boost and armor make it a mean, vehicle-crunching ramming machine.





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HALO 3: MULTIPLAYER

FROM
BATTLEFIELD
TO PLAYGROUND

It's the big (the Elephant!), the familiar (Lockout 2, sorta!), and the downright goofy (Jenga mode?) with **Halo 3** multiplayer. By Dan "Shoe" Hsu

A DOZEN MULTICOLORED SPARTANS are running around the desert. They're frantically taking swings at each other with heavy hammers that are as tall as they are, running at triple speed, their legs fluttering about, making these normally tough half-ton cyborgs look more like test rats in the Red Bull research labs...

Cue the *Benny Hill* theme song.

"So...how does this fit into Halo fiction?" asks Writing Lead Frank O'Connor, quite sarcastically, as he watches the saved-film replay of our "Hamster Crack" match. Answer: It totally doesn't. And as the most customizable multiplayer shooter around, picks up a ton more options for *Halo 3* (including a map editor), things will only get more interesting—and much, much sillier.

Hamster Crack (their name, not ours) is one setup that Bungie's artists came up with, and the multiplayer design team refined (settings: free for all, 300 percent speed, 50 percent gravity, and the only weapon is the new Gravity Hammer—see pg. 60). It's only one of infinite examples of how any user can radically change the standard gameplay. In another all-hammer match, Hammer Time, we played King of the Hill in the desert, with 75 percent gravity and players who are invulnerable when they're inside the designated-scoring area. How can you nab a victory when your opponents can't be hurt in the hill? Easy, just knock 'em out of the sandy ballpark with a big swing from

the Gravity Hammer so that they can't rack up the time needed to win.

These, however, are just the *standard* options that you can change in *Halo 3*. This is just the tip of the energy sword.

Map time

Before we go too far with all the ways we can screw with *Halo 3*'s multiplayer, let's look at the foundations on which the matches take place: the maps. The recently concluded *Halo 3* beta introduced the public to three maps: the rocky High Ground, the picturesque Valhalla, and the...uh, snowy Snowbound. We recently got to see four new multiplayer stages—Epitaph, Last Resort, Guardian, and Sandtrap—which puts us at seven total. Bungie won't say what the final count will be but assures us it will be comparable to what they've delivered in the past. By our estimate, knowing that one multiplayer designer is in charge of two unrevealed maps and another is working on one or two more, *Halo 3* should ship with 10 or 11 maps total, not including future-downloadable content.

Epitaph takes place inside a Forerunner structure (don't they all?), an ancient skyscraping temple in the middle of a desert.

The shield doors from Snowbound are here, except they look decidedly less futuristic. "[Shield doors] are actually Forerunner technology that the Covenant took and used on Snowbound," says Multiplayer Designer Lars Bakken. "This is where they originated." Inside, grand cathedral ceilings loom over tall pillars, haunting corridors, and walls embedded with holographic patterns that cast a soft glow in the dark—you'd think you died and went to the church of *The Matrix*. Catwalks and ramps wrap around the exterior, connecting various doorways, some of which have lost their shield-door barriers. "When this structure was abandoned long ago, desert winds and storms crept in and destroyed some of the old technology," says Bakken. "You'll see the sand has crept in on the sides, and the environment has taken a little bit of wear."

Last Resort is a remake of *Halo 2*'s Zanibar—you might have seen it on a leaked Internet video a few months ago. It's visually impressive, with a lot more detail in everything from the lapping water on the beach to the rust stains on the concrete walls to the intricate lattices of pipes and beams that accent this imposing

➤ **We're rather fond of Lockout, as are players, so we wanted to make sure we were covering that map scale.**

—Multiplayer Design Lead Tyson Green on a new map called Guardian

power station. The layout is essentially the same, with a few needed modifications like a second gate in the main building—another option for escape in Capture the Flag.

Guardian, lovingly referred to as “Jub Jub” on Bungie’s own website (you’ll see why in a sec), is the spiritual successor to popular *Halo 2* map Lockout. This maze of walkways and ramps sits atop a dark and misty forest, much like the homes of a certain woodland creature from *Return of the Jedi* (there you go: “jub jub”). The layout is very similar to Lockout’s, with a large gravity lift, a sniper perch overlooking a flat “common area” junction, and even a green-tinted dead end that houses a shotgun. “This is not a port of Lockout,” Multiplayer Design Lead Tyson Green clarifies. “This is just in the same vein. We’re rather fond of Lockout, as are many of our players, so we wanted to make sure we were covering that map scale.” As always, Bungie has a tale wrapped around this stage, and the graphics help tell the story. “This is a Forerunner installation,” says Green. “One of many. But this one is built into a more natural environment—or rather, the environment has sort of grown around this one.” Shiny, metallic paths melt into giant tree stumps, overgrown vines crawl up man- (or rather, Forerunner-) made towers... like Epitaph, the vibe here is certainly one of long-forgotten technology decaying in solitude (except for all the Spartans and Elites using the level as a Needler pincushion...).

Finally: Sandtrap, a huge, oval arena set on a desert world. “The Brutes were uncovering these ruins that were sticking out of the sand,” says Multiplayer Environment Artist Justin Hayward, “looking for ancient relics or things that they could use for their evil deeds. And the Marines came along, kicked ‘em out, and now we’re running around having a good time.” The ruins barely peek out of the ground, providing limited areas to run around in (mainly just long hallways). They’re mostly just there



■ The new, post-beta maps (clockwise, starting here): Guardian, Last Resort, Sandtrap, and Epitaph.

➤ This is by far the most vehicles we've had on any particular map at one time.

—Multiplayer Environment Artist Justin Hayward on new map Sandtrap



➤ THE NEW STUFF

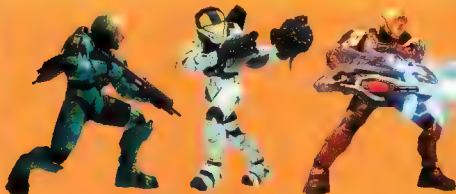
Regenerator: Its green field instantly recharges players' shields. "It's like the opposite of the Power Drain," Bungie's Jaime Griesemer says. "It's really handy in multiplayer. If you're standing on the hill, you're invincible unless they kill you in one hit."



CUSTOM JOES

Because cyborg shoulder pads are so 2552

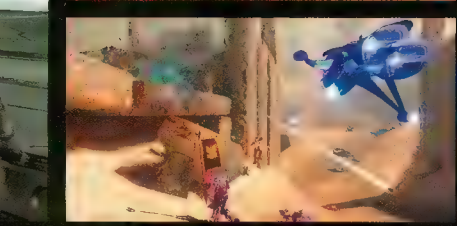
George struts the runway with his new custom Spartan armor, available in many colors with options for shoulder attachments, helmets, and chest pieces.



Meanwhile, Carl shows off this fall's new Elite line, with Combat and Assault armor configurations (of course, anyone can mix and match any of the different pieces—from many more choices than shown here—for a fresh, unique look).



Designer Tyson Green assures us that neither fashion line will have a significant advantage in multiplayer combat this time around. "Visually, [Halo 3's] Elite is larger than the Spartan," he says, "but as far as the game is concerned, he [detects hits] pretty much the same as a normal Spartan. It's very difficult to get it 100 percent, but we're pretty confident that if players like the way he looks this time around, they can use him without feeling like they're gimping themselves."



■ Taste the rainbow of dead Spartans.



■ Multiplayer hits the treetops (Ewoks, look out!) on Guardian, the spiritual successor to popular Halo 2 map Lockout.

> THE NEW STUFF



Flare: The Flare merely blinds, rather than hurts, anyone (friend and foe alike) who sees it—and that's OK. "If you have a short-range weapon, the Flare will blind opponents long enough for you to get close," says Griesemer. His favorite strategy? "See a bunch of people guarding their flag? Throw the Flare down," he says. "By the time the Flare's gone, their flag is, too." Just take care to avert your eyes—the Flare will blind the player who throws it, too.

Invincibility: Brute chieftains would be intimidating enough with the ability to command legions, but their temporary invincibility power puts them right over the edge. "They'll hit it and then start charging you with their Hammer, and you basically have to run away," Griesemer says. This powerful device will appear in multiplayer, but don't expect to see it too often.

to run—and drive—on top of.

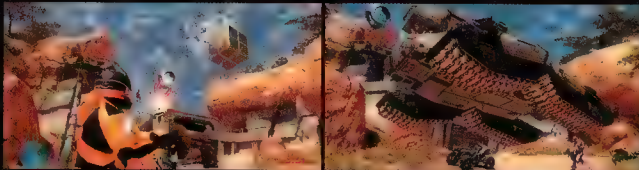
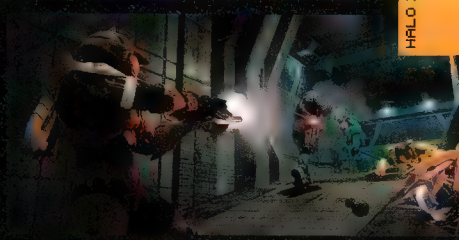
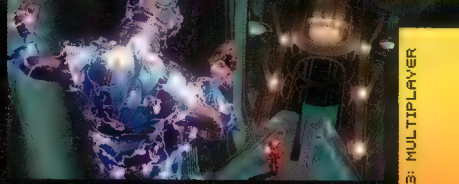
On each end of Sandtrap sits several rides, ranging from one-man Choppers to four-man Prowlers, all set by default to a speedy 15-second respawn, for lots of twisted-metal action. "This is by far the most vehicles we've had on any particular map at one time," says Hayward. "So when you get going on here, there are just vehicles flying back and forth. You never know what's coming around the corner, but it's relatively easy [on foot] to find a place where you can duck out of the way if somebody's bearing down on you with an evil Warthog." And if you decide you want to take on that evil Warthog, you can always pick up one of the many antivehicle weapons

conveniently lying around on the sandy rooftops.

But that Spartan Laser won't do much good against that monstrous thing at the back of the map...

Elephantitis of the vehicles

"This'll be the Elephant," says Green, pointing to a three-story-tall behemoth that's crawling along the sand much like...a Jawa Sandcrawler (confirmed: These developers love their *Star Wars*). "It's a human recovery and mobile operations vehicle. This is essentially a mobile base." The thing is big—big enough for about a dozen-plus soldiers to ride in or on, big enough to house a Mongoose ATV in its belly's bay, big enough to have a horn that sounds like it



■ Forge ahead: You can tweak existing maps all you want, in real-time, by yourself or with buddies over Xbox Live or system link. Combine this with custom games, and the possibilities are endless. Imagine building up barricaded areas for people to hide behind in *Infection*, the new zombies-vs.-humans mode included in *Halo 3*, for example....

belongs on the *Titanic*. It's drivable (but indestructible), has a mounted turret, can respawn troops, holds your home flag, and is the return point for the enemy flag. So picture your typical Capture the Flag session on a large map. Now picture it with bases that can move around the map (albeit *very* slowly). What used to be long, drawn-out matches now grow more frantic by the minute.

In one game, we learned the value of moving our base closer to the enemy's: We didn't have to go end-zone-to-endzone across *Sandtrap* to capture and bring back the flag. But we learned the follies of such a plan as well. In another match, we parked our *Elephant* right next to our foes'. Good idea in theory...unless

your side gets wiped out. While we were idly respawning, the other team formed a short Spartan assembly line to carry our flag back to their base. It resulted in three flag captures in less than 30 seconds for them and a lesson learned for us.

Elephants only make sense on huge, flat levels, which means as of right now, *Sandtrap*'s the only stage to have them. But they alter the pacing of large-scale games so much, even *Valhalla/Coagulation* haters will want to give them a test-drive.

Forging new maps

Elephants aren't even the big news coming out of Bungie HQ during our visit. "We were looking at ways to address some of the customizability

gaps in previous *Halo* games," says Green. "And we were also really excited about giving the community something that they could sink their teeth into...to make things, collaborate on things, share things with each other." Enter: Forge. It's not a map editor in the traditional sense: You don't create any new stages from scratch, you don't alter any terrain or geometry, and you don't color everything bubble-gum pink to match your new Volkswagen Beetle. What you do is run around a level and place and remove objects.

Sounds incredibly boring and unambitious, doesn't it? We thought so, too, but what's on paper is very different from what's on the screen. When you boot up Forge,



■ Three-car pile-up on Last Resort, under the big wheel. Saved film at 11.

you assume the role of a Monitor, those goofy floating-camera-ball A.I. guys who are always trying to start up trouble by getting someone to fire up a Halo (like 343 Guilty Spark). Your intentions are more innocuous, though—no all-life-ending motives here...just more fun multiplayer. You fly around the maps from within (like you're actually playing in a game) and place objects, grab and move them around, or delete them. The items range from crates, barricades, and spawn/capture points to any weapon, equipment, or vehicle in the game (except, sadly, the Elephant), and all can be modified as far as ammo count, respawn times, and other simple parameters. You only have a certain spending limit before you can't "buy" any more objects for

the level, though.

At any time, you can push up on the D-pad and turn your Monitor into your normal multiplayer character model and start playing in the level you're modifying. This allows you to instantly test out your creations. And you can do all this simultaneously with your friends over Xbox Live, system link, or splitscreen. (We tested this with seven players over system link, but the final headcount for Forge has yet to be made official.)

Did you just yawn again? We admit, it is difficult to describe why exactly Forge is fun. It's just something you have to try yourself to appreciate. But a lot of fun (and funny) things happen when you give people this playground to mess around in. It can be a simple, impromptu shootout: While your buddy's busy building that 50-foot tower of explosive fusion coils, why not transform into a Spartan, lob a grenade at the pile, and watch his work (and him) go boom? And when he respawns and comes after you for revenge, just become a Monitor again and zip away in the air safely. Oh, did we mention that Forge will keep score and keep track of the skills for you?

The Bungie developers found cre-

ative ways to play their own game within Forge. "One of the first things that happened on the first night that we had a playtest," says Bakken, "was these two guys just started playing Jenga. They were making fusion coils; then they would stack a big crate on them, and then they would stack more fusion coils. If you screwed up and dropped it improperly, the entire thing blew up in your face." Other ad-libbed game types at Bungie include Grab the Mongoose (one guy drives around the map; the other Monitors try to snag the ATV out from underneath him), Magic Carpet Ride (pick up a crate with a teammate on it and race him around the map without spilling him), and a real-time-strategy way of playing Team Slayer (each team of normal players has one Monitor to create weapons and vehicles for them on the fly, reacting to what you see—the other team equipping—or the Monitor can just fly over and start deleting the other team's gear). You won't see any of these "modes" in the final game; you'll just have to recreate them if you want—or create your own. "It's more than a map editor," says Green. "It's also a space where you can play these honor games."

► THE NEW STUFF



Prowler: This brute craft hoists a driver, a man on a forward-mounted turret, two passengers on the side, and looks like a jet turbine engine on a sled.

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Once you're done fiddling with a map in Forge, you can save it and pass it on to your friends through Halo 3's file share to use in normal custom games. Bungie.net will serve as a hub to find user-created stages as well. They'll have an area for Bungie-recommended maps that are made by the community, and they'll have a way for you to search out others. Once you mark a level for download on Bungie.net, it'll automatically transfer to your Xbox 360 hard drive the next time you log in to Xbox Live and load up Halo 3.

This is just the beginning

Endless customization options. Endless customization options combined with endless map configurations in Forge. Endless replayability in campaign mode. Endless replayability in co-op campaign. The possibilities are...well, you know. And with map sharing, new-map downloads, leaderboards for metagame high scores...Halo 3 seems primed to shatter all records again. Oh, no—we're not talking about sales figures here. We're talking *sleep deprivation*.

So get ready for long nights and missed school/work this September. And don't get grossed out if some stranger on Xbox Live wants you to go on his Magic Carpet Ride.

EGM Extras: Oh, we're not done. Check out EGM.1UP.com for our Halo 3 bonus content. We'll have more stories and details on stuff like the saved film feature, our hands-on playtime in Forge, how the game has changed from the beta, and lots more. Also, don't miss our story about how a designer at Bungie created a mode for us that went from bust to laugh-out-loud to totally awesome.

> THE NEW STUFF



The fourth grenade: Besides all these goodies, we also saw hints of a fourth grenade type, though it never actually appeared in action. Bungie won't give any details on this possible addition—or whether it will even be included in the final game.

To give you a sense of scale, we drew up the major Halo 3 vehicles and approximated their sizes based on hardcore research (lots and lots of multiplayer).

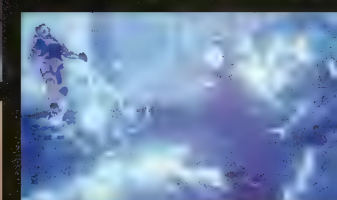
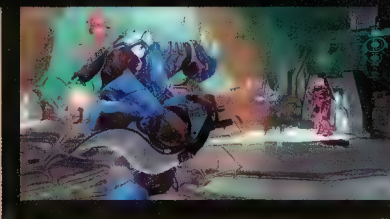
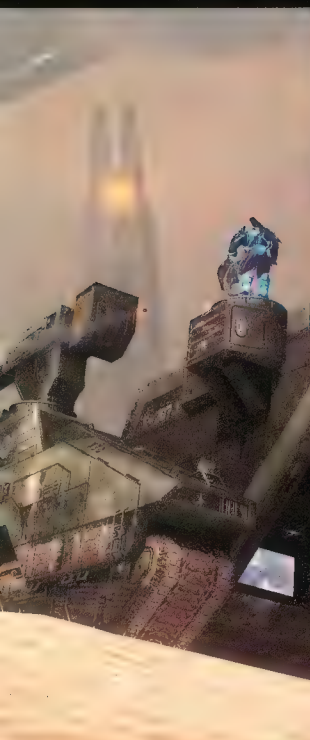


Spartan Mongoose Ghost Chopper Warthog Prowler Hornet Banshee

➤ One of the first things that happened...was these two guys just started playing Jenga.

—Multiplayer Designer Lars Bakken on the new Forge map editor

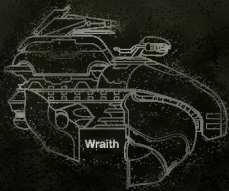




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Scorpion



Wrath



a real elephant



Elephant

Illustrations by Alex Wong

REVIEWS

> '80s hits, watching the blitz, dragons on the fritz, and brain farts

96

SHIN MEGAMI TENSEI: PERSONA 3



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> THIS MONTH IN REVIEW

Missing the Cut

Multiplatform problems

AS YOU CHECK OUT THIS MONTH'S REVIEWS, you may notice that a couple games you'd expect to be multiplatform releases aren't labeled as such. And yes, *NCAA Football 08* and *Stuntman: Ignition* are still coming to the PS3 as well as the Xbox 360, which is the version we reviewed in each case. Usually when this happens, the second version simply isn't ready. But with *NCAA* this year, we couldn't get the PS3 version because EA didn't want to send it because it didn't stack up. Specifically—and brace for jargon—while the XB360 version runs at a supersmooth 60 frames per second, the PS3 version runs at half that speed and will be shipping that way. We'll keep an eye on this situation (check 1UP.com for updates). But just know that we won't score multiple versions of a game if we can't confirm they're nearly identical.

—Greg Ford, Reviews Editor

> HOW WE RATE

- 10 to 9 Excellent
- 8.5 to 7 Good
- 6.5 to 5 Average
- 4.5 to 3 Bad
- 2.5 to 0 Terrible

> SCORES AND AWARDS

Reviews: You can also find the lead *EGM* review on 1UP.com. The second and third reviews—you'll find those here.

Awards: We dole out awards to games based on their scores. Platinum: all 10s; Gold: 9.0 average and up; Silver: 8.0 average or higher. Game of the Month goes to the highest-scoring game with unanimously "Good" scores, and Shame of the Month is the reverse. Simple.



THE VERDICT
OUT OF 10

HOW MANY:
9.0
EXCELLENT

AVERAGE:
6.5
AVERAGE

LOWEST:
1.5
TERRIBLE



PAGE
80

Strikers:
Nearly nabs
a hat trick



PAGE
82

Lair:
It's a
trap!



PAGE
88

Brian Age 2:
Stay in
school



THIS MONTH'S REVIEW CREW

Just look at those mugs—faces only a mother could love...



Dan "Shoe" Hsu

Editor-in-Chief

Shoe's taken a dorky hobby (German board games) and made it dorkier by moving it over to Xbox Live Arcade with the games' online counterparts. Now he doesn't need to see his friends in person ever again!

Now Playing: *Carcassonne*, *Catan*, *Planet Puzzle League*
Blog: egmshoe.1UP.com



Jennifer Tsao

Managing Editor

Guitar Hero Encore: Rocks the 80s' weak song list reminded Jen that if she went back and practiced playing real guitar, she could rock out to any song she wanted, no licensing required!

Now Playing: *Carcassonne*, *Picross DS*, *Titan Quest* (PC), "Stairway to Heaven"
Blog: egmjennifer.1UP.com



Bryan Intihar

Reviews Editor

Reviewing *All-Pro Football 2K8* reminded Big B of the days when sidearm-slingin' Bernie Kosar came this close to leading his Brownsies to the Super Bowl. Who knew reliving the past could hurt so much?

Now Playing: *NCAA Football 08*, *Mario Strikers Charged*
Blog: egmbryan.1UP.com



Michael Donahoe

News/Features Editor

Michael is pretty smart when it comes to solving games, but he's clueless when it comes to the basic math found in *Brain Age 2*. Give him a calculator, though, and he'll solve those problems like a pro. Hey, he needs all the help he can get.

Now Playing: *Luminous Arc*
Blog: egmshoe.1UP.com



Jeremy Parish

Features Editor, 1UP.com

Torn between his love of the classics and the cutting edge (*Falco 3*), Jeremy found himself trapped in a mind-bending paradox this month...until he remembered it's cool to like both old and new games. Crisis averted.

Now Playing: *Picross DS*, *Halo*
Blog: jparish.1UP.com



Shane Bettenhausen

Executive Editor

Shane's gotten so deep into the twisted high school drama of *Persona 3* that we're getting slightly concerned. Kids, please do not attempt to summon your inner emo demons like this.

Now Playing: *SMT: Persona 3*, *Heavenly Sword*, *Planet Puzzle League*, *LittleBigPlanet*
Blog: egmshane.1UP.com



Crispin Boyer

Senior Editor

Crispin—a hardcore metal fan since before Metallica cut their locks—was terrified his old headbanging crew would catch him playing glam-rock tunes in the *Guitar Hero* '80s edition. At least he's not taking fashion tips from Bret Michaels. Much.

Now Playing: *Pac-Man CE*
Blog: egmcrispin.1UP.com



Greg Ford

Reviews Editor

Disappointed by the merely average *Lair*, Ford hit the Santa Cruz boardwalk and its lavish arcade—complete with old (*The Simpsons*) and modern (*Time Crisis 3*) classics—to play some games that didn't leave him wanting to chuck the controller.

Now Playing: *The Bligs*
Blog: egmford.1UP.com



Garnett Lee

Managing Editor, 1UP.com

Apple's iPhone vs. Hello's Ocean vs. Nokia's N95. That's the platform war being waged in Garnett's world right now. Knowing him, it will be a short-lived reign for the victor.

Now Playing: *The Darkness*, *Forza Motorsport 2*, *NCAA Football 08*
Blog: g4.1UP.com



Andrew Fitch

Staff Reviewer

Persona 3's Japanese high school setting made Andrew nostalgic for his own exchange-student days in Osaka—just like in the game, he saw kids shoot themselves in the head to summon monsters on a daily basis. Ah, the memories.

Now Playing: *SMT: Persona 3*
Blog: copydesk-fitch.1UP.com

Also on deck...

John Davison
Editorial director
1UP Network

James "Milkman" Mielke
Executive Editor
1UP.com

Andrew Pfister
Reviews Editor
1UP.com

Ryan Scott
Reviews Editor
Games for
Windows: The
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Demian Linn
Managing Producer
GameVideos.com

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MyCheats.com

Brooks Huber
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Joe Rybicki
Staff Reviewer

Greg Sewart
Staff Reviewer

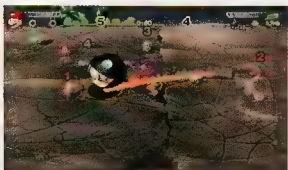
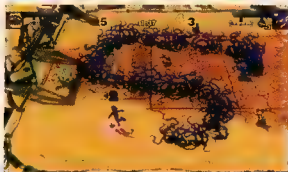
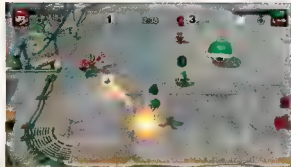
Nick Suttner
Staff Reviewer

Todd Zuniga
Staff Reviewer



The Review Crew is the 1UP Network's onsenble cast of writers from all of our publications, both online and in print. We believe that games are more than the sum of their parts, so we tackle them subjectively, as experiences.

Head over to ReviewCrew.1UP.com to meet all of the 1UP Network's expert reviewers. And check 1UP.com for reviews of games we didn't have enough time or room for.



■ Minutes after this match, the soccer board suggested Mario retake the urine test.

Wii

MARIO STRIKERS CHARGED

■ Publisher: Nintendo ■ Developer: Nintendo ■ Players: 1-4 ■ ESRB: Everyone 10+

THE VERDICT'S
(OUT OF 10)

ANDREW P.
7.5
GOOD

BRYAN
7.5
GOOD

G. FORD
7.5
GOOD

The Good: Natural (and restrained) use of the motion controls
The Bad: "I know, it's sometimes possible to be too extreme"
The Awful, Awful: Music

This one's got some kick

➔ **ANDREW P.:** *Mario Strikers Charged* isn't a soccer game. It's hardly even an indoor soccer game. It's a chaotic war of dispossession, body-checking, and garbage goals. So yeah, it's the most hockeylike soccer game you'll ever see. But as long as you're cool with that, you'll really enjoy *Charged*.

The game is a much messier affair—in good ways and bad—than its GameCube predecessor. The best improvement is the new sidekick system: Instead of a generic set of similar teammates, you can select individual sidekicks that have their own offensive- or defensive-minded attributes. They also have their own special moves and kicks, and when you add that to the already busy mix of captain power-ups, special items,

random environmental hazards, and the modified Megastrike (score multiple goals on one shot), it's clear that whatever subtlety the series had was left on the GameCube. But if you're in the mood for crazy, grab a friend (the computer A.I.'s just a little too good) and go nuts.

➔ **BRYAN:** Andrew's right—*Charged*'s super-duper sidekicks really do make all the difference on this arcade pitch. It's also great to see a game that doesn't go overboard with the Wii controls. The two motion-sensing mechanics here (wigglin' the Wii Remote to check opponents, feverishly moving it around the screen from a first-person perspective to stop Megastrikes) complement the

gameplay rather than unnecessarily complicate it. And while I'm happy the Mushroom Kingdom is ably taking soccer online, I still feel like *Charged* needs something else. Anyone got some spare minigames?

➔ **G. FORD:** Yeah, Bry, some minigames could be fun. But c'mon, do you really ever play them more than once? What *Charged* does offer in terms of cup-chasing alternatives—a collection of increasingly demanding challenges (win by shutout, score at least seven goals, et cetera)—is solid. The game also delivers the typical Nintendo suite of unlockable characters and stages. Like you guys say, *Charged*'s over-the-top but balanced play gives it some decent legs. 🍄



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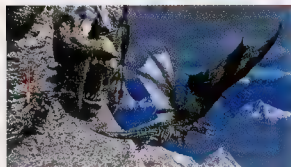
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■ Unlockable combos liven up these showdowns' otherwise simple attack-counterattack mechanic.



PlayStation 3
LAIR

■ Publisher: Sony CEA ■ Developer: Factor 5 ■ Players: 1 ■ ESRB: Teen

THE VERDICTS
(OUT OF 10)

CRISPIN
6.0
AVERAGE

G. FORD
5.5
AVERAGE

GARNETT
5.0
AVERAGE

The Good: Graphics, the sea-snakes boss
The Bad: Confusing gameplay, the final boss is...a building?
Listen Up, Rich AV
Buffa: Lair supports 7.1 HDMI receivers

What a drag

➔ **CRISPIN:** As you'd expect of a fantasy-flight sim brimming with volcanic vistas and foreboding cumuli swarming with winged reptiles—and all from the tech-Jedi developers of the *Rogue Squadron* (N64/GC) series—*Lair* fills you with swoony wonder. Unfortunately, it'll also make you wonder what the hell's going on. Because along with the clash-of-thousands battles and Peter Jackson-esque production values comes strictly nonstick motion control and a confounding combat system.

I overshot targets too many times because my dragon mount boosted forward instead of looping back when I jerked the Sixaxis. The lock-on system often sent my beast in random directions when I sought a special kill.

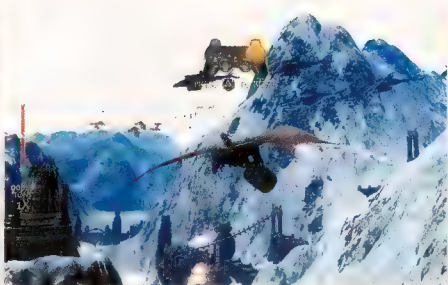
Even the frequent midmission cinemas left me disoriented.

Buy this game if you want to justify all the thousands you spent on your PS3 and that 1080p HDTV you can see from orbit. Don't buy it if you want a dragon that does what it's told.

➔ **G. FORD:** Yeah, it's funny that even with all these technological wonders around, *Lair* still feels like it's trapped in a cave. It's not just the air-based combat that'll make you want to send your controller into actual flight, though. The more traditional claws-to-the-earth, analog-stick-controlled but-ton-mashing ground skirmishes are an unsatisfying struggle with the camera. You'll likely find it easier to hover and use strafing runs to wipe out foot sol-

diers. *Lair*'s potential creeps through in wide-open levels, where the margin of error is more forgiving and you feel like a dragon-mounted badass...but that's not a regular occurrence.

➔ **GARNETT:** Oh, I swooned all right—like a first-year med student the first time they cut open a cadaver. Free to create an original project, how does Factor 5 wind up building a cliché-riddled *Lord of the Rings* reinterpretation of its *Star Wars* games? At least those titles had a radar; *Lair*'s single guide arrow makes trying to find the next objective, much less managing multipart missions, an exercise in futility. Some battles offer a few "wow" moments, but those only punctuate an otherwise frustrating disappointment.



Defending his lair

Factor 5 President Julian Eggebrecht tells us why *Lair*'s gotta be like that

EGM: *Lair* supports only motion control in-flight. Why not at least give players the option to use the analog sticks?

Julian Eggebrecht: We debated that a long time, but we didn't want to offer worse control—and *Lair* does control worse and less precisely with the stick control for the air. It also destroys some of the connection to the feeling of gliding with a living creature.

EGM: Despite the objective-highlighting Rage Vision and mission arrow, it can still be tricky to figure out what you're doing and discern enemies from allies. Why not just go with a radar system?

JE: We really did not want to turn this into a craft

game. *Lair* is about a living creature, and a radar pulls it way too far into tech territory. It destroys the sense of natural flying.

EGM: The lock-on system is complex and seems to have a mind of its own sometimes. Why not opt for a simpler system?

JE: It is quite simple—hit L1 or R1, and you lock an enemy that is lit. You can also hold the buttons to lock, but I prefer the quick tap of the button.

EGM: And finally, why does every beast in this game explode? Seriously, do they all have nitroglycerin for blood?

JE: Hydrogen. It's like zeppelins from the 1930s, and they blew up all the time. ☹️



EGM Extras: Need help figuring out what to do? (Hey, we got stuck, too.) Go to EGM.1UP.com for our SuperGuide.

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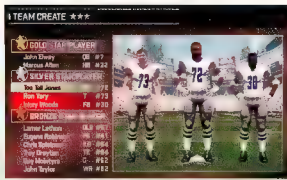
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 XBOX 360 LIVE



PS3/XB360

ALL-PRO FOOTBALL 2K8

■ Publisher: 2K Sports ■ Developer: Visual Concepts ■ Players: 1-4 ■ ESRB: Everyone 10+

THE VERDICTS

(OUT OF 10)

TODD

6.5

AVERAGE

BRYAN

6.5

AVERAGE

GARNETT

7.0

GOOD

The Good: Fresh football experience, choosing legends

The Bad: Limp feature set

The PS3 Version: Runs less smoothly than the 360 version

These legends have lost some of the magic

➔ **TODD:** It feels like it's been way longer than two years since *Madden* hijacked the NFL license and tackled 2K's football efforts for, I thought, good. But my inner Nostradamus failed me again, which is happy news for the 2K faithful. *All-Pro's* selling point may be the inclusion of 240-plus NFL legends and former players (we're talkin' Joe Montana, Jerry Rice, and...Andre Ware?), but by my count, the game's best asset is simply offering an alternative to *Madden*. But as good as the gameplay is here—and it's damn good—*All-Pro* doesn't have enough window dressing and depth to make the cut. I love throwing on the run with John Elway, dancing with Walter Payton, and kicking and blocking in general. Also, I seriously dig the

cheesy fictional stadiums. But a bare-bones season mode offsets some of these positives, as do crappy play-call menus and receivers who run their route and then stop until your QB gets sacked. The game's solid, but it has rust in many of the wrong places.

➔ **BRYAN:** I'm totally pickin' up what Todd's puttin' down here. *All-Pro* is definitely 2K's best-playing (albeit not very innovative) football sim, and I really enjoyed the strategy that goes into choosing your legendary lineup (you get 11 studs per team in gold, silver, and bronze tiers). It's a real shame, though, that the developers thought that simply putting the name of a Hall of Famer on the jersey was enough. The game's greats barely

resemble the real thing (Barry Sanders doing the "Dirty Bird" after a TD—are you kidding me?!). Toss in the shallow feature set and graphics that gave me *ESPN NFL 2K5* flashbacks, and I'd say this pigskin feels a bit deflated.

➔ **GARNETT:** The moment I started putting together a team of Hall of Famers, my fears that 2K's attempt to get back in the football mix would amount to an NFL-like gimmick disappeared. *All-Pro* makes a perfect play on the cliché that "football is a game of matchups," but it needs a whole lot more legends, particularly at the skill positions. Still, those that are there should make for some potentially epic online battles. Offline, though, the lack of options and dated look hurt. ❌



Xbox 360

NCAA FOOTBALL 08

■ Publisher: EA Sports ■ Developer: EA Tiburon
 ■ Players: 1-2 ■ ESRB: Everyone

Back in title contention

➔ **BRYAN:** Forget about being merely bowl eligible; after an uncharacteristic subpar season, EA's collegiate pigskin returns to BCS form with *08*. You'll notice improved run blocking and secondary A.I. (the defense finally covers the deep ball), subtle yet sweet animations abound (for example, players now put their hand on the ground to regain balance), and—thanks to the refined right-analog hit stick—it's supremely satisfying to send a receiver head over feet with a perfectly timed tackle.

08 excels away from the gridiron as well. The new recruiting system (which has you calling prospects, feeling out their likes/dislikes, and then pitching them on stuff like playing time) even had this documented *Dynasty* hater completely hooked. I also found the ego-driven Campus Legend mode a welcome diversion now that EA's fixed the position-specific cameras. Online still remains the game's last hurdle, though—what do series vets gotta do for a *Dynasty* mode across the Internets?

➔ **GARNETT:** This game needs in-depth online options—EA has to do whatever it can to make it happen. Even without them, though, the perfected *Dynasty* and *Campus Legend* modes threaten to soak up hours from college football fans. But I wound up autosimring most of that stuff simply because the football was so damn good—I just wanted to get back on the field. Along with the improved fundamentals Bryan mentioned, the responsive controls and smooth onscreen action create one of the best gridiron experiences in a while.

➔ **TODD:** You guys nailed it: This game is just plain fun...except on defense. Sure, I'm in love with turning ball carriers into helicopters by going low with the improved hit stick, but you'll find nothing new about playing D (a historical problem with football games). Still, it's not much of a problem because of the genius Super Sim feature, which allowed me to press a button that took me to the next change of possession. Beyond that, the highlight reel, which lets you save your best moments, is superrad. Two necessary fixes, EA: *08* needs more online options, and let my QB get some air under the ball. Otherwise, this is brilliant.

THE VERDICTS (OUT OF 10)

BRYAN:
8.5
 GOOD

GARNETT:
9.0
 EXCELLENT

TODD:
8.5
 GOOD

The Good: Now plays as well as it looks, recruiting

The Bad: Lack of online options

Save: Highlights and send the video clips to your football buds

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Xbox 360

STUNTMAN: IGNITION

■ Publisher: THQ ■ Developer: Paradigm
■ Players: 1-8 ■ ESRB: Teen

Cuts to the chase

+ **GREG S:** I loved the last *Stuntman*...and yes, I know I'm in the minority there. Sure, it's ridiculously difficult and not even remotely realistic: What kind of stuntman does a 15-minute action scene without knowing the stunts beforehand? But what it lacked in those areas it made up for with excellent controls, precision driving, interesting level designs, and an incredible sense of accomplishment when you *did* finally perfect a level.

Stuntman: Ignition delivers a similar experience—all those things I liked about the original remain, mostly for the better. Of course, it has some issues as well. As unreliable as the directors were in the original game, they tend to be even worse here. Sometimes, they'll give an order the exact moment it needs to

be executed. Also, the context-sensitive action-button sequences can be hit or miss.

But the satisfaction remains, and it includes some fun multiplayer and a level editor, where you can set up some completely insane stunts.



+ **MILKMAN:** Ugh, Sewart, I don't even know what to say. "Precision driving"? Problems like *unforgiving* controls, horrendous load times, and a director who didn't give you a lay of the land before the cameras started rolling killed the first game. Thankfully, *Ignition* addresses all these complaints. The game loads quickly, features better controls and more obvious objectives, and is packed with speedy, fun action—it's more forgiving all around. Only the not-as-awesome-as-they-could-have-been graphics stump this patched-up stuntman.

+ **DEMIAN:** That last *Stuntman* left a lot to complain about, but Milky's right; most of the bad stuff is fixed. And *Ignition* also adds online multiplayer modes for up to eight racers: You can play through single-player stunt stages against human-controlled ghost cars or race around jump-heavy "backlot" tracks. The third (and best) mode combines both disciplines: You'll race the backlot tracks while hitting stunts to rack up point combos. Smash into another driver and you'll steal his stunt string. In single-player, some of the sequences run pretty long, so if you botch that last jump over the flaming tanker, it's kind of a bummer.

The Good: Intense, precision driving, more forgiving than original
The Bad: Tardy directions, unimpressive graphics

PS3 Version: Supposed to be the same, but we couldn't get our hands on it yet to confirm

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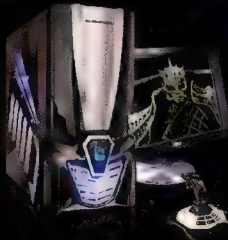


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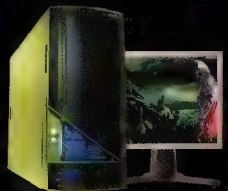


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PS3/XB360

DYNASTY WARRIORS: GUNDAM

■ Publisher: Namco Bandai ■ Developer: Omega Force ■ Players: 1-2 ■ ESRB: Teen

THE VERDICTS

(OUT OF 10)

JOE

6.5

AVERAGE

BROOKS

5.5

AVERAGE

MILKMAN

5.0

AVERAGE

The Good: You can play repeatedly until your Mobile Suit is absurdly powerful

The Bad: Your thumb will fall off

Déjà Vu: Hope you like remakes!

Gundam? Damn near killed 'im

➔ **JOE:** I can't tell you much about this game that you can't deduce from the title. It's *Dynasty Warriors*. With *Gundam* characters. If you've played any of the previous *Dynasty Warriors*, this will be familiar territory: vast fields of look-alike enemies, the occasional distraction in the form of a boss character, and the threat of carpal tunnel from mashing the attack button.

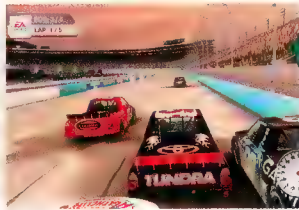
Gundam makes the most of its license with a broad cast of characters and two separate campaigns, but it's really just a coat of shiny metallic paint slapped over the aging *Dynasty Warriors* formula. The ability to play through repeatedly to continually upgrade both your pilot and your Mobile Suit ought to lure you back for more, but the limited, repetitive com-

bat makes starting over a hard sell even if this is a decent *Gundam* game.

➔ **BROOKS:** I'm with you, Joe. Giving the *Dynasty* series a robotic mech upgrade doesn't exactly make for groundbreaking material. Sure, you can scour the battlefield from the air, speed-burst via rockets, and clash with lightsaber-esque swords, but all this equates to a short-lived thrillfest. At about minute 30, repetition starts getting the better of you. The enjoyment quickly nosedives thanks to bland environments, mash-happy combos, and the difficulty in keeping allies safe. And the boss battles you speak of are nothing more than ruthless slugfests that wear thin as you block then counter ad nauseam.

➔ **MILKMAN:** Well, for what it's worth, *Dynasty Warriors: Gundam* wins the distinction of being the first game that made me fall asleep while playing it. While I enjoy the spin on the *Dynasty* formula, I don't ever remember thousands of *Gundam* and *Zeon* forces running around in any *Gundam* anime. Of course, that's not nearly as problematic as pressing the attack button 15,000 times per overly big level or listening to grating *Gundam* sound effects for hours on end.

DWG is brainless and requires less skill than your average *Dynasty* game, but like those games, it delivers a serviceable level of fun escapism. It's too bad the spitscreen multiplayer is pretty much a waste of time—though it's nice the game offers co-op.



PS3/XB360

NASCAR 08

■ Publisher: EA Sports ■ Developer: EA Tiburon
■ Players: 1-12 ■ ESRB: Everyone

THE VERDICTS

(OUT OF 10)

GREG S.

6.5

AVERAGE

DEMIAN

6.5

AVERAGE

JOHN

6.5

AVERAGE

The Good: Excellent controls and setup options

The Bad: Confusing, unsatisfying career mode

MIA: Carl Edwards, Featherlite Series

Insert "driving in circles" joke here

➔ **GREG S:** Now that the *NASCAR* series has finally made the leap to the newest generation of consoles, in some ways it's better than ever. Shiny new graphics, the series' deepest level of car tuning, and bountiful pre-race options add to what was already a competent, great-controlling game.

But like Dale Earnhardt Jr.'s current season, inconsistency really hurts *NASCAR 08*. In particular: the unpredictable A.I. of your fellow weekend warriors. Opponents are superaggressive, often doing stupid things like bump-drafting through the turns at Daytona, chopping you in every turn at Bristol, or randomly brake-checking you down the straights at Martinsville. It's like learning the best line around each track is secondary to learning

what bizarre moves the other drivers are going to make at each venue.

Also worth noting: We were unable to try the game online; we'll let you know if it has problems.

➔ **DEMIAN:** Special note to the guy who thought that putting 55 license tests into a *NASCAR* game was a good idea: Stop screwing up. Never mind that these tests repeat the same handful of objectives; the big problem is that you fail if you barely tap another car, which is nigh unavoidable while trying to slice through the field in eight laps at Martinsville.

Greg tells me it's "realistic" that the cars all pull to the left. I believe him, but that doesn't make it any easier to stay on the road (although crank-

ing the steering sensitivity way down helps). *08* gives good fan service, but the car nut in me is more satisfied with the recent releases of *Dirt* and *Forza 2*.

➔ **JOHN:** I've got to agree with Demian on those damn license tests. I get that they're clearly some kind of concession to more of a videogame-esque structure, but they're mostly obnoxious fun-killers with sometimes ludicrously difficult objectives. Honestly, they detract from the real meat of the game, which is a remarkably thorough simulation, if somewhat psychotic in the A.I. department.

Unlike Greg, I wasn't impressed with the visuals, and only the spectacular *MotorStorm*-like wrecks save it from a more thorough roasting on that front.



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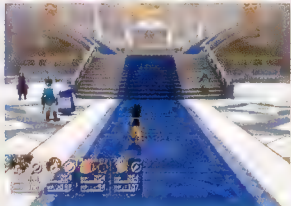
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■ The Blue Man Group takes a turn for the worse.



Xbox 360

BLUE DRAGON

■ Publisher: Microsoft Game Studios ■ Developer: Mistwalker/Artoon ■ Players: 1 ■ ESRB: Teen



The Good: No random battles, gorgeous locales
The Bad: Slow story, lame characters
Boss Battle Theme: Crooned by Deep Purple lead Ian Gillan

Finally, a Japanese fantasy

→ **A. FITCH:** Role-playing fans expect a lot from industry giants Hironobu Sakaguchi, Nobuo Uematsu, and Akira Toriyama (see sidebar). After all, this trio last worked together on the beloved SNES classic *Chrono Trigger*. While *Blue Dragon*—Sakaguchi's first release at Mistwalker, his post-Square Enix studio—captures the look and feel of old-school Japanese RPGs, it illustrates that truly great roleplayers are built on a foundation of strong characters and gripping storytelling. *Blue Dragon* has neither.

The game sabotages things right from the start by sticking you with four of the most vapid, unlikable protagonists I've seen in my 20 years as an RPG fan. Just as bad, it commits the cardinal sin of failing to hook the play-

er with its story; you spend the entire first act (about 20 hours) wandering the countryside, just waiting for some interesting developments.

Still, exploring never feels like a chore, thanks to *Blue Dragon*'s lack of random confrontations; all enemies are visible on the field. And once battle starts, things really get interesting: You call upon "shadow" beasts such as dragons and minotaurs to attack the enemy, using a charge meter to determine your battle order. This brings a welcome element of strategy to the traditional JRPG confrontation—should you power up and risk getting pounded by the enemy, or is it better to get in a few quick strikes?

If this stellar battle system were accompanied by a compelling story

and characters, we'd be talking about a classic. *Blue Dragon* does have its moments, but, given the pedigree of its developers, I can't help but come away disappointed.

→ **BRYAN:** C'mon, Fitchy—plenty of exciting events happen in the first 20 hours of this stunningly beautiful game. You're telling me you didn't enjoy the enemies that literally s*** gold after you kill them? Seriously, though, I think you're being a little too rough here. I agree that you'll want to strangle characters like the annoyingly high-pitched hornball Marumaro, but the beginning ain't nearly as boring as you say. It may take a while for the story to actually get rolling, but at least you're not aimlessly wander-



Scintillating 'Staches

It's no wonder *Blue Dragon* has an old-school feel: Two-thirds of the game's dream team of developers sport facial fuzz straight outta the mid-'80s. Here's a look at the legendary men behind the game—and the fine facial coifs that inspire us all.



Nobuo Uematsu (composer):

This revered *Final Fantasy* maestro left Square Enix in 2004 to go freelance, but don't worry—his trademark stately lip blanket ain't goin' anywhere.



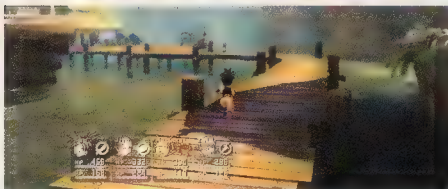
Akira Toriyama (character design):

Dragon Ball mastermind and *Chrono Trigger* alum Toriyama may sport a bare upper lip, but we can't help but think he's living vicariously through his *Blue Dragon* characters: Robo-general Szabo's mustachioed look is totally '80s—the 1880s, that is.



Hironobu Sakaguchi (producer):

Creator of *Final Fantasy*. Head of Mistwalker. Those accomplishments pale in comparison to Sakaguchi's greatest feat: making a finely groomed porn 'stache look fashionable in the 21st century (er...OK, maybe not).



ing around some town for the first 30 freakin' minutes like in the beginning of so many RPGs (snooze!).

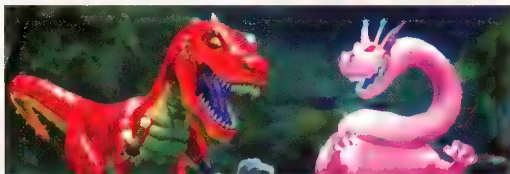
And speaking of battles, I'm really digging this game's skimishes. Aside from having complete control over customizing your party members' attributes, fun mechanics such as strategically charging attacks and using the combat circle to pit enemies against each other add some novel twists. I only wish *Blue Dragon*'s mon-

ster squad presented more of a challenge (this one should be a cakewalk for most RPG players).

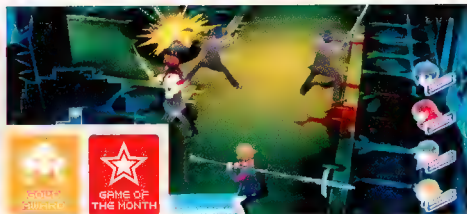
➔ RAY: I've spent quite some time wondering if *Blue Dragon* is wonderful or closer to average. Its super-traditional style cries out to longtime JRP fans like me, but it seems like Mistwalker purposely shied away from the deeper stuff. Basically, *Blue Dragon* wants you to believe it's epic,

yet it stays as safe as it possibly can.

At least its awesome art design matches what we'd expect from today's technology—the Mural Town, with its painted-stone aesthetic, is one of my favorite areas in any RPG. But it's not so impressive when that tech interferes with the gameplay. Case in point: Every battle could be significantly shorter if you were able to skip the special skill animations. They slow down fights considerably, forcing you to watch your shadow swipe at the air for the billionth time. (I gotta give props to that charge gauge, though—a clever mechanic.) Considering these problems along with the weak plot Andrew mentions, I can't say *Blue Dragon* is wonderful...or even good. ☹



EGM Extras: Stuck on how to customize your shadow? Head to EGM.1UP.com for our SuperGuide.



PlayStation 2

SHIN MEGAMI TENSEI: PERSONA 3

■ Publisher: Atlus ■ Developer: Atlus R&D1
 ■ Players: 1 ■ ESRB: Mature



The Good: Creative, addictive, fresh, the social sim aspects (seriously!)

The Bad: Gets a bit repetitive

Teenage Suicide: Don't do it

Plenty of school spirit

➔ **SHANE:** After extending the delightfully evil *SMT* brand in intriguing (but not always successful) directions with *Nocturne*, *Devil Summoner*, and the *Digital Devil Saga* games, Atlus wisely revisits the quirky charm of the cult-classic PS1 *Persona* role-playing games in this sequel.

At its core, *Persona 3* plays like any other randomized dungeon hack—you're gradually leading your party through a central monster-filled tower, amassing loot and experience along the way. Its stylized visuals, speedy battles, and deeply customizable magic system make for addictive grinding, but *Persona 3* also packs plenty of surprises that catapult it far beyond predictable genre norms. Those nocturnal dungeon expedi-

tions constitute only half of the fun: Prepare to spend your days chasing skirts, making friends, and failing exams in a full-featured dating sim that makes recent PSP offering *Brooktown High* look downright shoddy. Who knew that mashing a hardcore, 70-plus-hour dungeon crawl together with a touchy-feely relationship game could be so fun?

➔ **RAY:** Popular RPGs don't usually include the "dungeon-hackiness" and A.I.-directed friends that *P3*'s battles do, but don't let that stop you from trying it. Its style is unmatched: An excellent soundtrack and top-notch dialogue mix with a visual design that raises the bar for the already attractive *SMT* series. And don't let the

words "dating sim" scare you, since being *everyone's* friend enables the creation of more *Persona* companions. *P3* proves RPGs don't need big budgets to be all-around awesome.

➔ **A. FITCH:** I fully agree. *P3* blends social-sim aspects and RPG elements as smoothly as any game out there. The Japanese high school setting is incredibly immersive (you even have class on Saturdays!), thanks to *P3*'s minimalist (but expertly crafted) localization, which assumes knowledge of many Japanese cultural and linguistic terms. But even if you don't know Golden Week from Golden Hour, you'll still have a blast—cliques, bullying, love, and rejection are universal themes, after all.



PlayStation 2

GUITAR HERO ENCORE: ROCKS THE 80S

■ Publisher: Activision ■ Developer: RedOctane
 ■ Players: 1-2 ■ ESRB: Teen



The Good: Poison, Extreme, Ratt

The Bad: Acts that would never have hit the Sunset Strip

Honorable Mention: Best use of '80s fashion sense in a game

Better '80s mix CDs can be had on late-night TV

➔ **GARNETT:** I know I'm not the only one who strummed their first note in *Guitar Hero* and had a flood of '80s songs come to mind. It makes for such a natural fit: Take the ultimate air-guitar game and feed it some serious headbanging tunes. Hell, I half expected to hear Riki Rachtman emceeing the proceedings.

To my chagrin (and probably Riki's, too), this sounds more like an Adam Curry set. It tries to please everyone and winds up satisfying no one. I could take a bucket of '80s rock, fling it against the wall, and come up with a better selection. That denies the game its rightful place as the definitive version. It does mix in enough good tunes, though, that PS2 guitar owners will want in their library...but

maybe when the price comes down ■ hair. Even scalpers don't get full ticket price for the encore.

➔ **CRISPIN:** Hark! Retire to your fallout shelter before the sundry factions of music fans wage war over *Encore's* blasphemous intermingling of miles-apart '80s genres. Aqua Net posesurs sharing megabytes with British metal pioneers? Anthrax thrash betwixt synth-pop? Be this a mix tape from hell! Alas, the series-true jab-the-colored-fret gameplay is starting to feel tired. That's not to say *Encore* isn't fun for half a fortnight. It's just an obvious attempt to extend the *Guitar Hero* brand with a cobbled-together playlist built for the lowest-common-denominator music fan.

➔ **JENNIFER:** I'm old enough to remember the '80s vividly, and I'm a big music geek. So to come up with an '80s band I've never heard of—as a "bonus" track, no less—is an accomplishment (though not a proud one). Joke band Limozeen may have Spinal Tap-esque ironic cred, but to me, it just exemplifies *Encore's* poor music selection: forgotten B-level tunes from hair bands mixed in with an inexplicable assortment of alternative. Who decided A Flock of Seagulls was the right new wave band for a guitar game? That person needs to be brought out back and assaulted with a crimping iron. Crispin says the gameplay's getting old, but I disagree: It's still fun rocking out on a toy guitar, but only if you actually like the songs.

JEANNE D'ARC

■ Publisher: Sony CEA ■ Developer: Level-5
 ■ Players: 1 ■ ESRB: Teen



Flame-broiled to near perfection

► **SHANE:** *Jeanne d'Arc* attempts an ambitious task—morphing the real-life tale of Joan of Arc's involvement in the Hundred Years' War into a *Final Fantasy Tactics*-inspired strategy-RPG—and succeeds admirably.

Historical fact-checkers (and Jeremy) will scoff at the immense liberties taken with the narrative (odds are the English Army didn't actually employ lizardmen), but a swift-moving plot, interesting characters, and top-notch anime cut-scenes keep things moving.

While it certainly doesn't reinvent the genre, *Jeanne's* gameplay wisely blends aspects from other successful tactical-RPGs. It owes the largest debt to the aforementioned *FFT*, but also lifts elements from classic franchises *Vandal Hearts* (players and enemies

move in discrete phases) and *Fire Emblem* (everyone always counterattacks). The combat isn't simply a piecemeal affair, though—innovative concepts such as strict turn limits, *Sailor Moon*-esque character transformations, and the Unified Guard/Burning Aura systems (which give offensive and defensive bonuses for skillful troop placement) propel the game beyond its initial me-too status.

► **JEREMY:** Tactical-RPGs often suffer from excess complexity; *Jeanne* takes things too far in the other direction. Its limited character customization, emphasis on transforming heroes, and timed levels force players to employ a fast, offensive approach to battle. The story is tough to swallow, too,

featuring a fanciful take on French history and a bizarre localization that turns its supporting cast into cartoons. (Literally—one even talks like Scooby-Doo.) It's good but sure to be out-classed by the upcoming PSP ports of *Disgaea* and *FFT*.

► **A. FITCH:** I'm with Shane: This bizarre blend of history and fantasy works. The surprisingly gripping story makes *Jeanne* a likable and sympathetic figure despite her absurd super-powers. The transformation element also adds a new wrinkle to the tactical combat, and the imposed turn limits ably capture the hectic nature of the real Hundred Years' War—yes, even when the "English" ranks swell with lizardmen and catgirls.

THE VERDICTS (OUT OF 10)

SHANE
8.0
GOOD

JEREMY
7.0
GOOD

A. FITCH
8.0
GOOD

The Good: Solid gameplay, spiffy visuals, \$30 price tag, bizarre setting

The Bad: Slightly easy, no job system
Better Than: *The Messenger*



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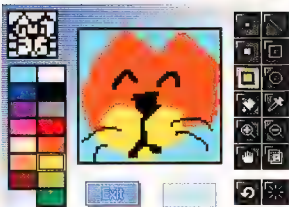
SPIKE
 GET MORE ACTION



KONAMI



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DS

PICROSS DS

■ Publisher: Nintendo ■ Developer: Jupiter
 ■ Players: 1-4 ■ ESRB: Everyone



The Good: Addictive, challenging, great DIY tool

The Bad: Multiplayer is only 50-50

Never Thought We'd Say This: Math is fun!

If only algebra had been this enjoyable

→ **JEREMY:** It would be easy to dismiss *Picross DS* as some lame mash-up of sudoku and *Minesweeper*, but you shouldn't for two reasons: 1) The series has been challenging Japanese brains since the Super NES days, and 2) it's way better than sudoku. *Picross*—"picture crossword," in case you were wondering—is a deft blend of mathematics, logic, and intuition. Each of the game's hundred or so puzzles begins with a blank grid; by comparing rows and columns of numbers, players determine which squares should be filled in to create a picture. It's trickier than it sounds, especially in higher difficulty levels where deduction is absolutely essential. The game's touch-screen interface works perfectly, the "daily challenge" option

is great, and the ability to download and create new puzzles creates effectively infinite gameplay opportunities. *Picross* is a true puzzle game—and one of the best available.

→ **JENNIFER:** "Picdoku" seems a more appropriate label for the numbers-based grid game here, and that's fine—*Picross* is challenging and elegant, with steadily increasing difficulty and a hefty load of puzzles. But I can't agree with Jeremy that the interface works "perfectly." As the grids get bigger, you have to zoom in and out constantly, and the way you switch between zooming and filling in the grid leads to too many accidental mistakes. Simplicity is bliss, and these puzzles are satisfying, but *Picross*

requires patience of both the mental and physical variety.

→ **NICK:** *Picross* is indeed a fantastic game, offering a hearty, addictive challenge for all manner of number nerds. Unlike Jeremy, though, I had nagging issues with the touch screen. Tapping the wrong space by mistake (even while sitting absolutely still, with the DS on a table) cost me precious time. Also, I was never able to find a fast, intuitive solution for switching between the "fill-in," "rule out," and "scroll" modes, which was frustrating. Those problems aside, it's a helluva portable package for 20 bucks, and you'll never run out of online challengers (especially Japanese players, who will break your brain).



DS

BRAIN AGE 2: MORE TRAINING IN MINUTES A DAY

■ Publisher: Nintendo ■ Developer: Nintendo
 ■ Players: 1-16 ■ ESRB: Everyone

Dr. K's gonna train you!

→ **JENNIFER:** That wacky brain doctor is back with 17 new mental minigames, and whether you're making change or counting a runner's ever-changing place in a footrace, they all provide a nice intellectual workout—much more so than the original. In this way, *Brain Age 2* is a big improvement; few of these games struck me as too easy, and it's now harder to quickly ace the tests and rocket right up to the ideal brain age of 20, which adds some replay value.

Multiplayer is better, too. You have four activities now, and the interactivity is more creative—my fave is where you get to vote on each other's drawings. Unfortunately, while some old problems are gone (you'll no longer need to shout words over and over

to be understood), new hiccups are introduced—good luck learning to write Dr. Kawashima's way without a couple of dumb screwups.

→ **MICHAEL:** Jen's right—the new mind games are a helluva lot harder this time. But while they may have beaten the crap out of my brain, they're just not as fun as the original's mind benders. And if you're thinking Nintendo fixed the annoying handwriting issues, think again, bub. Just like the original, *Brain Age 2* is not too smart when it comes to analyzing your scribbling (especially if you're a lefty like myself). Still, like the original, it's highly enjoyable to exercise your noggin in quick spurts. Plus, I just like the idea that I can play a videogame and

not feel guilty about wasting my time doing so...even if the game tells me things I don't want to know—namely, that I'm an idiot.

→ **RYAN:** *Brain Age 2* suffers from something that I like to call *Nintendogs Syndrome*: You hear all about it, marvel at its unconventional nature, and plunk down some cash, thinking "This is gonna be awesome!" Then you play around with it for a couple of days and quickly forget it exists. Admittedly, it is only \$20, with more variety and better voice recognition than its predecessor...just be aware that you're essentially buying a creative tech demo with some sudokus puzzles (the best part of the game) thrown in for good measure.

The Good: Harder exercises mean more replayability

The Bad: Handwriting recognition *The Dr. Mario Clone*: Slowed down for the senior lane



EGM LIVE

"XforeignerX" from IL
"Great Show, Shane and
Bryan are hilarious..."

"cruzin510" from Alameda, CA
"Wow, it was comedy gold!"

"Lukezilla" from OU
"Great podcast!"

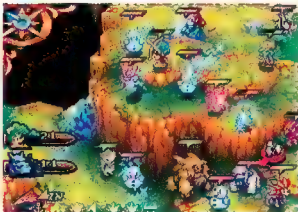
"zalemaie" from IL
"Excellent, Entertaining
podcast. Enjoyed the
stuff and the reminiscing."

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DS

HEROES OF MANA

■ Publisher: Square Enix ■ Developer: Brownie Brown ■ Players: 1-2 ■ ESRB: Everyone 10+

THE VERDICTS

(OUT OF 10)

JEREMY
7.5
GOOD

A. FITCH
5.5
AVERAGE

SHANE
6.0
AVERAGE

The Good: Better take on *Mana* than *Dawn*

The Bad: Poor path-finding and interface. **Huh?** Very similar to upcoming *FFXIII: Revenant Wings*

We can't all be heroes

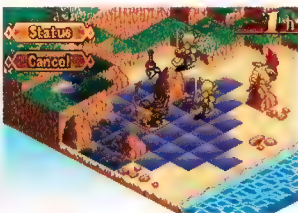
➔ **JEREMY:** The DS gets plenty of grief for its collection of “baby games,” but *Heroes of Mana* really is a baby game—it’s a beginner’s real-time strategy game for people who suck at strategy. Me, I suck at strategy like a hole in a starship’s hull, but *Heroes*’ simplified tactical combat and relatively unthreatening speed (foes often don’t go on the attack until you lift the fog of war around them) make it perfectly manageable for my turn-based brain. RTS nuts can crank up the speed and difficulty, although they may not want to; 50-unit battles, complete with bases and resource gathering, is a lot to cram onto the tiny DS screen, and while *Heroes*’ streamlined interface does the trick, sometimes it feels as though it’s doing too much

and too little all at once. Still, while it’s hardly perfect, *Heroes* is the best thing to happen to the once-beloved *Mana* series since *Secret*.

➔ **A. FITCH:** Wow, Jeremy—I think the decidedly subpar *Dawn of Mana* (PS2) set your expectations a little too low, buddy. Yes, *Heroes* is a moderately enjoyable step up from that game, but it’s not even the best “My First RTS” released this summer—that’d be Vanillaware’s superior *GrimGrimoire* (PS2). From its suicidal A.I.-controlled “buddies” to units that freeze up if anyone (foe or friend!) stands in their path, *Heroes* is more trial-and-error than solid strategy. And since the game revolves around exploiting the enemy’s attributes, it baffles me that

you can’t actually view said attributes during battles.

➔ **SHANE:** Geez, how many disappointing *Mana* titles will we have to suffer through before Square Enix puts this once-proud franchise out of its misery? *Heroes* bravely (foolishly?) attempts to morph the action-RPG series into a real-time strategy experience, but some crucial gameplay aspects don’t quite gel here. The dull tutorial missions drag on for far too long, selecting units feels weirdly imprecise, and your troops’ A.I. often breaks down at critical junctures. At least the developers get the surface details right—charming characters, vibrant visuals, and a stellar soundtrack recall the *Manas* of yore.



DS

LUMINOUS ARC

■ Publisher: Atlus ■ Developer: ImageEpoch ■ Players: 1 ■ ESRB: Teen

THE VERDICTS

(OUT OF 10)

RAY
5.5
AVERAGE

MICHAEL
6.0
AVERAGE

A. FITCH
6.0
AVERAGE

The Good: *FF Tactics* diehards will feel right at home

The Bad: Spotty touch control

Stick Around For: The bizarre “Life of Kopin” intermission

A tap in the dark

➔ **RAY:** If you absolutely, positively cannot wait for the next *Final Fantasy Tactics Advance* on DS, *Luminous Arc* might satisfy you, as this grid-based strategy-role-playing game shamelessly cribbs from Square Enix’s hit franchise. But like any knockoff, it can’t shake the “cheap” feeling: The music is lame, the menus are ugly, and the story won’t enthrall you with its drama. Sure, many cut-scenes are voiced, but it’s practically a novelty. What’s worse, *Arc*’s touch screen control—ideally a boon to any game of this type—is totally screwy. You’ll furiously and repeatedly tap your stylus to select a (usually barely visible) square on the map, only to have the game decide you were pointing somewhere else. On the bright side, you

can switch to superior button controls, but with your mind then on the rest of the game, that might accentuate the other flaws. Sure, the core game gets the job done, but you might still consider waiting for a brighter spot of strategic swords-and-sorcery.

➔ **MICHAEL:** Satisfy me? Nah, it just made me frustrated. Because even though *Arc* is horribly ho-hum, it actually had a teensy bit of potential. How so? Well, it seemed liked it tried something new with the intermission conversations—basically, you choose a character after a battle and try to answer their random question correctly. Choose the right response and you increase your relationship (and get a present). Sadly, I actually had more

fun trying to perfect my friendships than I did killing monsters. So for a random-question simulator, it’s great. As a strategy-RPG, it’s merely a’ight.

➔ **A. FITCH:** It’s clear that *Arc* desperately wants to be *Final Fantasy Tactics*, but from the eerily similar battle fanfare to the predictably nefarious church at the center of the plot, it plays store-brand cola to *FFT*’s Coke—this ain’t the real thing. Sure, it’s mildly enjoyable, but the gameplay is way too simplistic for strategy-RPG vets like myself (you can’t even arrange your units on the battlefield—where’s the strategy there?). It’s rare that the PSP has the superior entry in a given genre—this month, though, go with the far better *Jeanne d’Arc*.

IF THE GOVERNMENT HAS ITS WAY, YOU WON'T BE ABLE TO PLAY HALF THE GAMES IN THIS MAGAZINE.

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REVIEWS WRAP-UP

The games that were too late...or too little

XB360

BIOSHOCK

■ Publisher: 2K Games ■ ESRB: Mature

We had to deep-six our plan to review this thinking man's first-person shooter when the final game didn't surface, but extended time with a preview version left us even more wild for *BioShock*'s sunken city. Despite its sea of superpowers and multipart mission goals, the game doesn't drown you in details; it lets you dip your toe into character customization a few powers at a time, while an arrow keeps you on track. The best moment so far: Using telekinesis to batter baddies with a dead cat.

➔ **BOTTOM LINE:** Brace the yards for one last nautical pun: *BioShock* is a sunken treasure.



PS3/XB360

MADDEN NFL 08

■ Publisher: EA Sports ■ ESRB: Everyone

If you thought *NCAA Football 08* was a big comeback this year, just wait till you step onto Johnny's pro gridiron. After a couple inconsistent seasons on the new consoles, *Madden NFL 08* seems to be headed in the right direction, with more accessible play, several additional off-the-field options (the hardcore should cream their pants for the deep-as-hell Front Office mode), and all the subtle animations that made *NCAA* move so well. Just don't expect too many fireworks from *Madden*'s online offerings.

➔ **BOTTOM LINE:** EA's prize pigskin sim is finally returning to form.



PSP

BRAVE STORY: NEW TRAVELER

■ Publisher: XSEED ■ ESRB: Everyone 10+

Based on the well-regarded manga/anime series of the same name, *Brave Story* excels by delivering a completely predictable yet expertly produced role-playing adventure. Nothing here feels remotely innovative or original (save for the tacky onscreen onomatopoeia that erupts during battle), but anyone who digs classic *Final Fantasy* or *Dragon Quest* titles will feel instantly at home.

➔ **BOTTOM LINE:** Detailed 3D visuals, fast 'n' fun battles, and snappy loading times make this a joy to play, even if the characters and plot feel stale. Considering the competition, it's easily the best straight-up RPG on PSP.



Wii

BOOGIE

■ Publisher: Electronic Arts ■ ESRB: Rating Pending

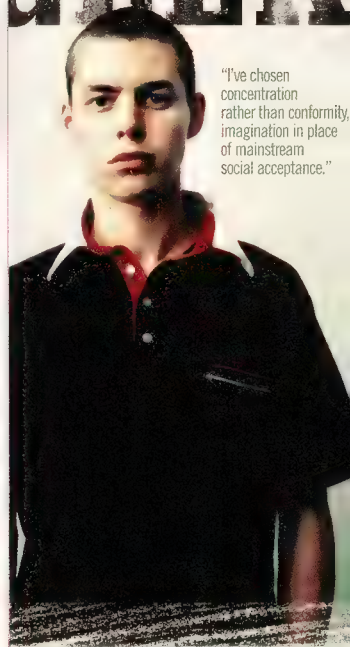
Got no rhythm or harmony? Then you definitely don't want to play *Boogie*, EA's dance-to-the-beat and sing-your-heart-out simulator. So far, the vocals seem to be the better half of this party package (a mic's included), as it delivers a satisfactory karaoke machine...provided you like your Pussycat Dolls and MC Hammer. The dancing portion ain't lookin' so hot, though. You wave the Wii Remote and Nunchuk around to move your onscreen character, but you'll receive little direction on how you should get down.

➔ **BOTTOM LINE:** *Boogie* could use some butt-shaking lessons from Shakira.

THE SALES CHART

Amazon.com's Top 20 for June

UAT GEEK



"I've chosen concentration rather than conformity, imagination in place of mainstream social acceptance."

Name	Platform	EGM Scores
1 Mario Party 8	Wii	5.5 7.5 6.0
2 Wii Play (with Wii Remote)	Wii	4.5 6.0 5.0
3 Forza Motorsport 2	XB360	8.5 8.5 9.0
4 Pokémon Diamond  <p>And you called it a fad! Pikachu and pals can't be stopped: <i>Diamond/Pearl</i> is expected to become the year's best-selling game across all platforms.</p>	DS	8.5 9.0 8.5
5 Resident Evil 4	Wii	8.0 9.0 9.0
6 Pokémon Pearl	DS	8.5 9.0 8.5
7 Guitar Hero II (Bundle with Guitar)	PS2	9.0 9.0 8.5
8 Odin Sphere  <p><i>Odin Sphere's</i> hand-drawn 2D visuals are pretty freakin' impressive. Even more impressive? Only 12—yes, 12—people made the game. Damn!</p>	PS2	8.5 9.5 9.0
9 Super Paper Mario	Wii	8.0 9.0 9.0
10 New Super Mario Bros.	DS	9.5 10 8.0
11 Brain Age: Train Your Brain in Minutes a Day!	DS	8.5 9.0 9.5
12 Guitar Hero II (Bundle with Guitar)	XB360	Not Reviewed
13 The Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess	Wii	10 10 10
14 Mario Kart DS	DS	9.0 8.5 8.5
15 Tomb Raider: Anniversary  <p>Though this is currently only available on the PS2, you'll soon be able to download it for the 360 (if you happen to own <i>Tomb Raider: Legend</i>, that is).</p>	PS2	8.5 8.5 8.0
16 Big Brain Academy	DS	9.0 8.5 7.5
17 Big Brain Academy: Wii Degree	Wii	Not Reviewed
18 Gears of War  <p><i>Gears of War</i> is revving up to appear on PC with new features (including a badass boss). Hey, Microsoft: downloadable content, please. Thanks.</p>	XB360	10 9.5 9.0
19 Final Fantasy XII	PS2	8.5 9.0 9.5
20 Nintendogs: Dalmatian & Friends	DS	7.5 8.0 9.0



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GAME OVER

press continue for talking shrooms, undead kojak, and tie-wearing apes



CRAP

> SEANBABY'S REST OF THE CRAP

Legion of Suck

The worst superhero games of all time



If Seanbaby likes superheroes so much, why doesn't he marry them? Or, barring that, attempt some sort of common-law living arrangement?

AS SOCIETY GROWS MORE and more nerdy, we're forced to break off into nerd subsets to maintain our individuality. Nerds who can't admit they're nerds have fantasy football. Nerds interested in genital atrophy have anime. And nerds simply interested in being awesome dress up in animal suits for sex. Comics, however, suffer from simply being generically nerdy. Which may be why I have an easier time boning a giant human-shaped duck than I do finding a second person who reads comics.

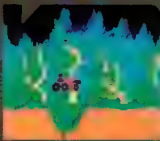
Even if no one reads superhero comics, we've agreed as a people

that we love superheroes. Every summer a superhero-movie break box office records, and these movies aren't even good. Every lingerie store in the world sells a Wonder Woman costume, and those come as big as a size 25. Although, honestly, if you're a size 25 and someone's sleeping with you, that person's understanding enough to forgive any underwear

choice you make. In fact, you might as well wear salmon filets and braise them as you exist.

Back to the subject at hand: I've put together a group of terrible superhero games—heroic titles that have combined their forces into one unstoppable Legion of Suck. I'll discuss each game's role on the team and how it's used its fantastic

> **Every lingerie store in the world sells a Wonder Woman costume, and those come as big as a size 25.**



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Retronauts:
A timeline of
2D gaming



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**Grudge:
Vampires
vs. Prince**



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**Hsu & Chan
Halo, how
are you?**

abilities to make the lives of you and your videogame systems worse. And for the minority of comic readers reading, I'll also rate how well the game captured the original comic—a rating useless except to show an extra aspect of failure.

Superman 64 (N64)

Main Team Role: Overall and Supreme Leader of All Bad Superhero Games in the Multiverse.

Superpowers: Hula hoop navigation. Hindered only by a total lack of responsiveness to any controls given to him, *Superman 64* was granted the ability to fly through rings at minimal speed and maximum frustration. Our Earth's yellow sun also grants him nothing else.

Capturing the Comic Rating: 0/10

Batman once fought a man named Prometheus whose hat was programmed with karate and neurologically linked to his actual karate. Batman got the upper hand by reprogramming the hat with the karate of renowned physicist Stephen Hawking. So there is a precedent for why someone in that universe may be suddenly stricken with a debilitating muscular disease. As for flying through hula hoops, I think the only reason Superman hasn't solved more problems through clumsy air-salami events is because it's such a controversial issue for writers to tackle.

Aquaman: Battle for Atlantis (GameCube, Xbox)

Main Team Role: Aquaman, if you're putting together a suck team, the first step you take is Aquaman.

Superpowers: Fish-talking. And since tiny fish brains erase themselves after 30 seconds, every conversation goes like this:

Aquaman: "Hello, fish! Has there been any ocean crime? I have time if there was!"

Fish: "Holy crap alarm! Is you speak fish? Amazement! Glub."

Aquaman: "Yes, I speak fish! Now, as your king, I request crime knowledge!"

Fish: "Holy crap alarm! Is you speak fish? Amazement! Glub."

Capturing the Comic Rating: 5/10

This game is based on the postcartoon Aquaman in which they tried for

a gritty and regal undersea badass with a beard and a grappling hook for a hand. To most people raised on the Super Friends, this felt like casting Rob Schneider as Rambo. I guess that confusion and bad decision-making comes through in the game.

X-Men (NES)

Main Team Role: If *Superman 64* is trapped in another dimension, *X-Men* steps forward as our universe's most powerful force of suck.

Superpowers: Cosmic. *X-Men* has indefinable and possibly limitless failures. The box-shaped something you're constantly fighting move and shoot at speeds so far beyond your character's capacity to react that it's almost like they were from a different game. Or there was a math error somewhere in the programming. Either way, the only thing the game did right was name one level FUTURE CITY STREET FIGHT and another SEARCH&DESTROY THE ROBOFACTORY. Fans recognize both as two classic *X-Men* locations.

Capturing the Comic Rating: 0/10

In this game, Wolverine kicks. With his feet. Now I understand there isn't really an elegant way to translate, say, Nightcrawler into a videogame. But when a character's main power is knives growing out of his hands, I can think of a couple of ways to incorporate that into a gameplay feature. Step one: Don't make it a kick. Step two: Kart-racing minigame with stealth elements.

Fantastic Four (PS1)

Main Team Role: Inspiration.

Fantastic Four says, "If you can perceive it, it's close enough to be better than you."

Superpowers: None. Every super-team has a member who has no powers but uses his or her wits to fight enemies. Unfortunately, the people in charge of these wits are usually failed authors writing to their idea of a child's intelligence. So their brilliant outthinking maneuver probably involves knowing that a caterpillar can turn into a butterfly or remembering to pack glue solvent in their belt. So *Fantastic Four* is certainly very crappy, but without any enhanced abilities, it's held back by the limits of

human crappiness. Which may mean that it's often only dull rather than hilariously bad.

Capturing the Comic Rating: 6/10

We did silly things after 9/11. Maybe you joined the Marines or put together a music video of yourself singing in front of a sunset superimposed with firemen. Well, J. Michael Straczynski wrote a comic book explaining the WTC tragedy from superheros' perspective. And in it, Dr. Doom cried. Yes, the evil mastermind who shot the Fantastic Four's building into space and who contributes to 80 percent of the world's daily-robotdeath...he was really broken up by this slight variation of his every waking moment. Even this game, however, couldn't capture how lame that was.

Captain Novolin (SNES)

Main Team Role: Public safety, service, and relations.

Superpowers: Gains health and nutrition knowledge at a spectacularly normal pace. You see, *Captain Novolin* has one purpose in life: learning about and then spreading diabetes safety. For example, a man like *Captain Novolin* might insist you have peanut butter for breakfast. And then get killed by a donut. I probably should have mentioned before that sentence that the enemies in this game are space donuts. Although I think regular donuts kill you if you have diabetes. Who knows? I never got that far in the game. I did play *Rush 'n Attack* long enough to treat a gunshot wound, though.

Capturing the Comic Rating: 10/10

There never was a *Captain Novolin* comic, but I have read a comic where a boy's female babysitter tries to touch him and Spider-Man talks him down by sneaking in his window and telling him a story about a white-haired teenager named Skip who tried to have gay relations with a young Peter Parker. Try to imagine listening to that story as that little boy's parents: "Mom, my babysitter tried to molest me and then a stranger in a body stocking with a swimmer's build crawled into my room to discuss the touch of a man. That's sort of what *Captain Novolin* is like to anyone who witnesses it."

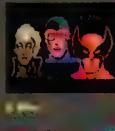
LEGION OF SUCK: ROLL CALL



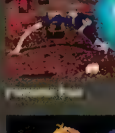
Superman 64
Chairman



Aquaman: Battle for
Atlantis



Captain Novolin



Fantastic Four



X-Men

10 Years Ago...

GAME COVER



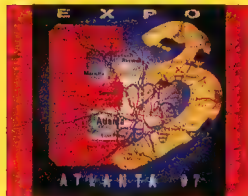
On the cover: Tomb Raider 2

As if Lara needed yet another excuse to flaunt her junk, here she is again, in all her ball-busting glory. "Lara Croft gets wet and wild," we proclaim. Well, she did get wet. But wild? I guess it depends on what you consider that to be. And judging by y'all's dirty minds, we're assuming she didn't get quite as wild as you sickos wanted.



Game of the month: Warcraft II

Yeah, the console copy of this hit real-time strategy game wasn't quite as spiffy as the original PC version, but we didn't care too much. We did care that the game foolishly had no multiplayer. Dumb move, guys.



Convention crazy

The place: Atlanta. The year: 1997. EGM conducted a few interviews, including one with Mario creator Shigeru Miyamoto. He was quoted as saying, "Mario 64 2 might be ready next year." Ha-ha, right...

The Evolution of 2D

Tracing back the flat details of gaming's history

By Jeremy Parish

Before jerky, mechanical polygon men flopped lifelessly through the uncanny valley, games were drawn by hand, with love and care invested into every sprite, every tile. Remember those days? No? Well, pilgrim, maybe you should join us as we look back at the life and times of 2D graphics and their evolution through the years.



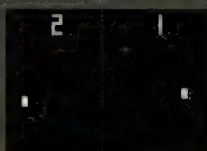
1962

Spacewar

PDP-1 • Steve Russell, et al.
It's only the first game ever (approximately). Aside from its pioneering nature, *Spacewar* was notable for featuring vector graphics—mathematically plotted lines of light against a black screen. Simple now, yeah, but crazy at the time.



1972/1975



Tennis

Odyssey • Magnavox

Pong

Pong console • Atari

Which came first, *Tennis for Two* or *Pong*? There're a couple of men willing to argue the point to death. Whichever arrived first, the important thing is that it introduced television compatibility to gaming, while the arcade version of *Pong* used a vector screen, the home machines had to work on standard TVs and thus introduced the pixel-based raster visuals that have become an industry standard.

1982

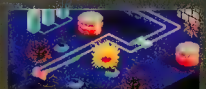
Moon Patrol

Arcade • Irem

Moon Patrol was a great game for a lot of reasons, but it perhaps stands out as the first known game to feature parallax scrolling—that is, objects in the foreground moved past more quickly than those in the background, giving the impression of depth and distance. Before true 3D, parallax was a popular fake out.



1982



Zaxxon

Arcade • Sega

Sega's cool (but difficult) shooter used real flight-style controls to make its dogfighting action feel double-awesome. *Zaxxon* didn't just play great, it looked amazing, too, thanks to its slick graphics. Using a three-quarters (aka isometric) perspective, *Zaxxon* was able to simulate combat with three axes of motion, quite literally, adding new depth to gaming.

1983



Journey

Arcade • Bally/Midway

A game based on the band Journey. Yes, it was awesome—awesomely terrible. Not only did *Journey* revolutionize gaming by playing a tape cassette that warbled a short loop of the band's caterwauling, it also introduced digitalization with in-game images of the members. Funny fact: The high-score table was originally slated to include photos of top players, but that was brought to a screeching halt when one particularly crass fan flashed his little Steve Perry at the camera.

1983



Dragon's Lair

Arcade • Cinematronics
Lots of games claim to be interactive cartoons, but *Dragon's Lair* actually was. Consisting almost entirely of theatrical-quality animation by Disney expatriate Don Bluth, *Dragon's Lair* was more cartoon than game, but its use of full-motion video to depict gameplay was so dazzling that we didn't care. Our wallets weren't quite as dazzled—the trial-and-error mechanics made us a bunch of poor putzes.

1989



Prince of Persia Apple II • Broderbund

An adventure as difficult as it is gorgeous, *Prince of Persia* gives players an hour to escape from prison and save a princess. *POP* didn't invent rotoscoping, the art of creating ultra-realistic animation by tracing live footage. But no game has ever put it to better effect, mixing lifelike motion with precise controls and deviously challenging platforming and combat. And if you missed out on the original, publisher Ubisoft recently released a spiffed-up version on Xbox Live Arcade.

1991



F-Zero Super NES • Nintendo

F-Zero used the Super NES's unique technology to give console gamers an experience even more visceral than could be found in the arcades. The Super NES featured a tech trick called Mode 7, a unique hardware feature that allowed it to stretch, skew, and rotate a single bitmap graphic to fake a 3D environment—put to use here to create the fastest, most convincing racetracks that had ever been seen on a home console.

GAME OVER

1994



Donkey Kong Country Super NES • Nintendo

Developer Rare's platformer didn't just remind gamers about Nintendo's original mascot—it was also a technical marvel that gave the Super NES a fighting chance against Saturn and PS1. *Donkey Kong Country* featured ACM, advanced computer modeling—tech babble for 3D graphics turned into 2D sprites to offer far more detailed and realistic graphics than had ever been seen on a 16-bit system. (Admittedly, they were a bit lifeless and plastic, too, but it was a fair compromise for the spiffy visuals.)

1997



Castlevania: Symphony of the Night PlayStation • Konami

Konami's PS1 masterpiece revitalized its flagship series and proved that 2D visuals still had some life in them yet, even in the age of 3D. Although *SOTN* didn't do anything technically new, its visuals consisted of a sophisticated mix of sprites and polygons that looked strictly old-school but performed tricks that would have been impossible on a lesser system. It's just a shame no other PS1 game managed to pull off the same level of detail.

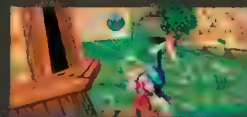
1997



Street Fighter II Arcade • Capcom

The true sequel to *Street Fighter II* was a long time in coming—and didn't catch on until a few years later, when gamers finally began to appreciate its finer qualities. And there's no quality finer than *SFII's* movement, which is easily the pinnacle of traditional hand-drawn 2D sprite animation. Sure, *Guilty Gear* has a higher resolution, but *SFII* moves like nothing else.

1998



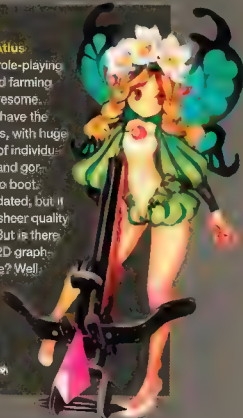
Klonoa: Door to Phantomile PlayStation • Namco

No, developer Namco did not invent the 2.5D game (the art of mixing 3D backgrounds with traditional 2D platforming), but it sure did perfect it with *Klonoa: Door to Phantomile*. Using polygons instead of old-fashioned flat backgrounds allowed the developers to create some fancy (and fresh) visuals. Not just for show, the polygons allowed players to interact with objects in the background and switch to alternate paths through the stages—a cool new twist on a classic genre.

2007

Odin Sphere PlayStation 2 • Atlus

A sleek hybrid of role-playing game, brawler, and farming sim. Really, it's awesome. *Odin Sphere* may have the prettiest 2D visuals, with huge characters made of individually jointed limbs and gorgeous animation to boot. Sure, it may look dated, but it stands out for its sheer quality and expert craft. But is there anywhere left for 2D graphics to go from here? Well, yeah—we hear *Odin Sphere* was originally designed in high definition, come drooling.



> COMMUNITY REACTION

The American Medical Association has recently proposed recognizing "videogame addiction" as a legitimate medical disorder. What do you think?

GAMES OVER



Kratos:
Bah, everything's an addiction to those a-holes. Smoking, gambling, hardcore threesomes....



Pac-Man:
Finally, this will get the regulation of recreational activities out of the hands of parents and over to harsh prescription pellets where it belongs.



Dr. Light:
I agree—all videogames do is turn innocent boys into robots. Cute, delicious little robots....



Toad:
Anything that keeps the kiddos from trying to chow down on my hallucinogenic head is fine by me. I think. Wait, where am I?



Exploding Barrel:
Kabooooom!

> GUESS WHO



- 1 Egg-lovers really scramble my brain. Chow down on that cholesterol, fatties.
- 2 I'm not a drunk, but I sometimes—OK, a lot of times—fall on my ass.
- 3 My best bud is pretty fly...even though he can't keep up with me.
- 4 I don't care about cars—using your feet should not be so far-fetched.
- 5 What's the fuss over the coveted One Ring? Looks like all the others.

Who am I?

© 2010 The Hedgehog

> GRUDGE MATCH

Stormy Weather

It's raining some jazzed-up men

Ridding the city of vampires ain't easy, but neither is showering a crowd of swooning ladies with pop songs. So when it's all over, which Rain will reign supreme?

Vampire Rain VS. Purple Rain



Well, vampires, duh

Enemies



Prince battles Morris Day and the motherf***ing Time!
Advantage: Purple Rain



Splinter Cell, Metal Gear, Vampire Night
Advantage: Vampire Rain

Influences



R&B, New Wave, Funk

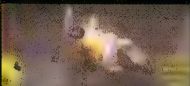


Thermal images, zip lines

Gear

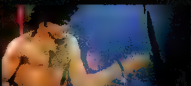


One hell of a fruity suit
Advantage: Purple Rain



Missing people are actually secret vampires you should kill.
Advantage: Tie

Plot



Prince battles personal issues with music, rocks house
Advantage: Tie



Vampires just kinda look like Kejak with eczema

More goth



Prince even makes Dracula look like a yuppie
Advantage: Purple Rain

Winner: Purple Rain

He looks scrawny and just a tad feminine, but mess with Prince and you'll get the business end of that crazy, pointy guitar.

Halo, How Are You?

By Jeremy "Norm" Scott

THE COLD DAWN LIGHT SHINES ON THE CROWD:
THE SECONDS, TICKING SLOWLY PAST
UNTIL THE BLACK CORPORATE SHROUD
OF SECRECY BE DROPPED AT LAST!

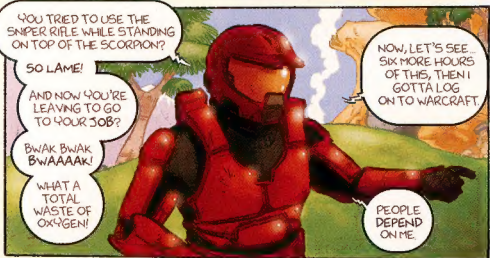
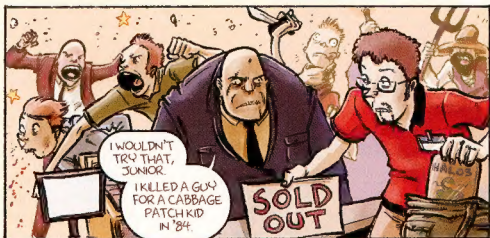
THE FAITHFUL WAIT BEFORE THE STORES.
THOUGH WEEKS HAVE PASSED, NO SPIRITS SANK;
THEY MAKE THEIR CAMPS BESIDE THE DOORS
AND DEVOUR THE WEAKEST OF THEIR RANKS.

A LIGHT GOES ON; THE TIME IS NEAR --
A THRILL FOR THOSE WHO HAVE SURVIVED!
THE DOORS FLV OPEN -- THE MOMENT'S HERE!
HALO 3'S AT LAST ARRIVED!

PUSHING, FIGHTING, STABBING, TEARS!
CALL THEM NAMES! PUNCH THEIR GROINS!
"LIMITED QUANTITIES!" CRIED IN FEAR
BY THOSE LATE TO THE BATTLE JOINED!

THE WAR IS DONE; THE BLOOD IS DRIED.
THE WINNERS RETURN TO THEIR LAIR
TO CELEBRATE THEIR FORTUNE-TIDE
BY PWINING NOOBS IN MULTIPLAYER!

SEE THEIR LUST FOR BLOOD BE SATIED!
SEE THEM JUMP WITH PHYSICS EXAGGERATED!
SEE THE COVENANT BROUGHT TO GRIEF --
HAIL THE RETURN OF MASTER CHIEF!





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Staff Sergeant Jeremy Mutart

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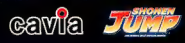


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PlayStation 2



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