

MARVEL VS.
CAPCOM 3

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DOWNPOUR

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DRAKE'S DECEPTION

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ELECTRONIC GAMING MONTHLY

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RETURNS TO
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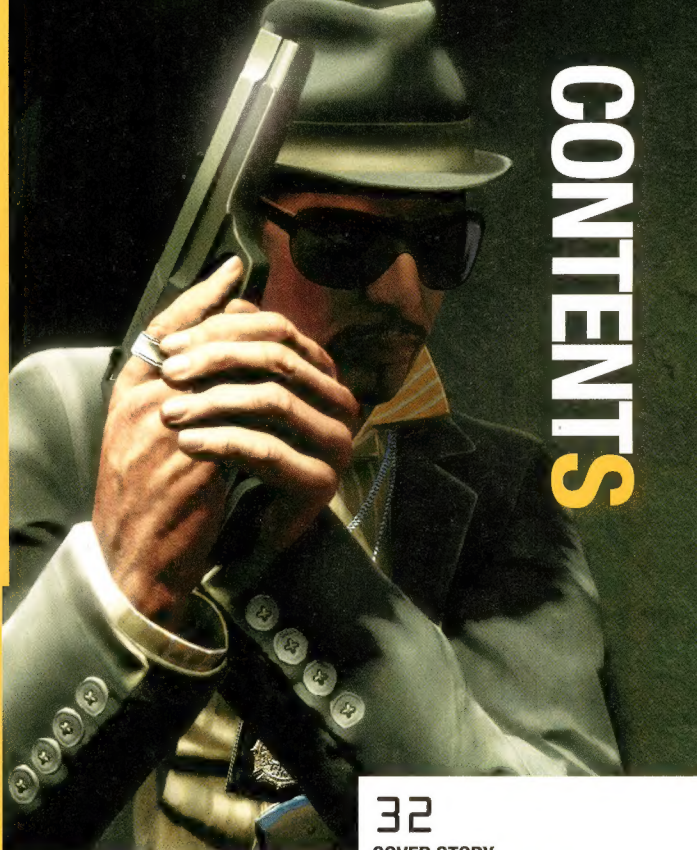
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BRADY FIECHTER
EXECUTIVE EDITOR, EGM

“MAYBE THE BIG IDEA OF THE YEAR IS HOW TO HAVE FUN, HOW TO RETURN TO THE PURITY OF FUN.”

COMPLICATION OF LABELS, THE RETURN OF FUN

Andrew Pfister makes a great point in his column this month. In fact, he makes a number of great points, which you can read about on page 79, but the one I'm using as a talking point proclaims that "We—by which I mean the Royal You of the audience and the Royal Us of the media—are still stuck on the same old arguments and tired debates that prevent us from figuring out what the new issues are."

Part of why we get locked into a hamster wheel of conversation is because we haven't really brought any closure to many of the debates that circulate in the industry. It's like our political system, which throws around the same rhetoric driving the same issues to the same dead-end conclusions. It can be entertaining and engaging and provocative to tackle the familiar and ageless issues, but where do we ultimately end up after the conversation simmers down and we go back to business as usual? Safe, perhaps, but not satisfied.

The gaming landscape is becoming too complex and, dare I say, important, to continue to retrace the same issues without some solid answers to push us forward.

But while I've got your attention, let's talk about Games as Art, because...

Okay, okay, so let's not do that, because it's 2011 now, and that's for Andrew to flesh out, as he does quite slyly and succinctly—the art is in making games better forms of expression, no matter how slight, and understanding the source of that expression. There are only so many new conversations that can be had about Games as Art that didn't occur in 2010.

Forms of expression often come with neatly packaged labels that act as identification. Labels are becoming broader yet ironically defining and personalized as we step into a widening realm of gaming tastes and choices. More and more, marketing departments and the machine that drives them are going to want to label us and try to figure out what we're buying, playing, saying and doing on all these different gaming devices—label us, then feed us what they think we like. Facebook is the evolution of this process, a new breed of monster that will take the social aspect of our entertainment into new territory.

What does this do to the process of making the games, delivering the games, and enjoying the games? Most game designers will tell you they're still perfecting the basic craft of what they do. While the debate about "story" and "art" and "importance" plows forward, the label gun keeps firing away, defining the casual user, the hardcore user, the heavy user, the social user, the indie user, the mobile user, and on and on.

As someone who's continually barked about wanting games to be so much more—feel free to label me as "that guy" who keeps resurrecting the art debate—the truth is that we're starting to see more games that are stripped-down, basic fun, and this is good. They're becoming more like classical games again, thanks in no small part to the Apple generation. It stuck with me, playing board games with family and friends over the holidays, just how worked up we all get in communal competition, the fun of simple victory and simple games. It's the fun factor that lines the best games, and that's an old idea I hope becomes a new one this year. ☐



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Judging... By the Look Of Things.

LETTER OF THE MONTH

I'll never understand why people are always looking to point the finger at entertainment/media for the "deviant behavior of children." I just finished reading the "Supreme Concerns" article in your January issue, and it gave me the chills. Senator Yee's statement that the proposed bill on extremely violent content would simply give parents more control about what their kids can and cannot do screams of ignorance. One would think that, in the long history of humanity, people would be able to understand that if a person wants to do something bad enough, youth or elder, they will find a way.

The only thing this bill would accomplish would be to stifle the voice and imagination of the industry. I'm not saying games should be rife with violence and nudity, simply for their own sake, but if the IP utilizes adult themes for artistic expression, whose right is it to censor them? If a developer/publisher becomes forced to slap an additional, superfluous label on their product, all it will do is cause uninformed parents to shy away, sales to decline, and a lack of willingness to stock the product on the part of vendors.

Looking at industry trends, especially in this economy, it would be a ballsy developer at best that would make a game that fits what could only be called a taboo criteria, and an even ballsier publisher to have their name attached to a game that is essentially guaranteed to fail, as far as revenue is concerned. And then what? No one takes chances anymore? Everyone becomes afraid to push the envelope? I suppose, at least, there'd still be some Cliff Bleszinski out there, but it would be a sad state for gaming. And in time it would crossover into our movies and music, even books,

comics or otherwise.

I'm all for the ESRB, and holding parents accountable for not paying attention to what their children are doing/playing/watching, but why hand out a mass-sentence to our freedom of speech? If some kid out there is carving up animals or stocking up on Nazi literature, maybe their parents should take them to a doctor instead of blaming Madworld, the Matrix, and Marilyn Manson.

I'll end this with a page from JFK's book: "Some people look at games that are and ask why. I don't want to have to look at games that never were and ask why not." — Kamron Capps

EGM Response: Excellent points Kamron, even if many of the issues you raise may seem obvious to those of us sitting on this side of the issue. The need to pin the blame on every abhorrent event in society, be it on ideology, belief, or absence, is not a new reaction, but even the attempt to segregate gaming from the rest of the creative arts is another alarming example of misplaced concern as you point out. There are other countries where the application of such restrictions have already been taken to similar unbelievable extremes (in Germany, for instance, there are many games that are forbidden by law to be sold, or even written about), but the fact remains that those who would seek to temper our right to experience the full imaginative juices of a Bleszinski or David Cage or Christian Cantamessa are likely the same crowd that can't understand the reasons why it is important to allow the creative expression that gave us *Saw* to exist next to *Schindler's List* or *American Psycho* next to *Moby Dick*. And that's

what should truly frighten everyone, whether they play games or not.

Scrolling Into the Future

First off, let me just say I love EGM and am glad it's back!

Up until now, I've loved the design of EGM. However, the new scrolling layout really irritates me. It's not only clunky, but I find it really detracts from the "digital magazine" aesthetic and experience. I loved feeling like I was looking at a real magazine. Having to scroll to read articles is atrocious.

But I still love you, EGM.— Kevin Long

EGM Response: You probably didn't realize it at the time Kevin, but what you are seeing with those new EGM scrolls is actually the first step in our (long overdue) migration to the iPad. On the tablet devices you can "swipe" those areas to reveal more text, photos, and more. It's all part of the process, and you can expect to see new functions—as well as fewer scroll boxes—by the time you read this issue.

System Bias

I read through your 21 Most Anticipated New Games of 2011, and I could only count two from Nintendo. In fact, the whole issue seemed to have a minimal amount of Nintendo-related articles and reviews. You guys should allow more Nintendo stuff, because you don't want to be like Game Informer Magazine, which is very biased against Nintendo. That is the reason I cancelled my subscription and considered EGM. I, along with many other people, left that magazine to read something that focuses on all three companies equally. You should take this into account and not make the same mistake.— Patrick Finnigan

BACKGROUND NOISE

We're digging the latest trailers for *Battle: Los Angeles*, hoping it delivers a much-needed dose of big-budget alien intervention while we continue to recuperate from the abomination that was *Skyline*. Mass destruction, Michelle Rodriguez as a hot military grunt, and intergalactic gun platforms tearing into surfers at the Santa Monica pier—what's not to love?



EGM_Response: As a multi-format magazine that covers the entire gaming industry, there's sometimes a perception that we're playing favorites. In the case of our 2011 preview, however, there were several titles that were "sure things" on many of our editors' ballots like *Metal Gear Solid: Rising* and *Devil's Third*. Unfortunately for those titles (and quite possibly even one of the two we DID pick—*The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword*—now rumored to be slipping into next year), they're going to have to be profiled in our 2012 preview.

Shortchanged by EGM

This is my response to Tom Russo's [EGM] interview with Cliff Bleszinski: Five questions? Oh, really? All I see is two questions and some conversation in between. If you're going to call the feature "5 Questions..." you should at least follow through with it and present readers with 5 questions. Don't just ask two things and then prompt some answers to your own ideas. You could have called the piece "A Conversation with Cliff Bleszinski" and it would have been more accurate. Just sayin'. — Spencer Gregory

EGM_Response: We appreciate your feedback Spencer, but would like to ask you five questions of our own: Did you like Tom Russo's article and would a different title have really changed that fact?

About To Bust

I enjoyed your article in issue 243.0 entitled, "Gaming By The Numbers." The one problem that I have is that, when we talk about what games would cost in the past with today's dollar value, the

percentage of peoples' earnings that are spent on the necessities of life are never mentioned. How big of a percentage, of their paycheck, went to food, shelter, utilities, etc. and what percentage went to gaming?

I think that these necessities are taking an ever growing percentage out of our paychecks ever year in relation to how much came out of our earnings in the past. As that percentage goes from 60%, 70%, 80% of our earnings the amount left for entertainment continues shrinking. This is something I want gaming publishers to keep in mind when they want to charge us for every individual element of a game. Thanks for a great magazine and website. — Jonathan Tomlinson

EGM_Response: You're right Jonathan, we do have less to spend. It helps explain why the girls never talk to us at the strip club.

'What If' Revisited

What if...they made *Little Big Planet* of the Ages?— Giuseppe Contelli

EGM_Response: Thanks for the laugh Giuseppe, even if it was lifted from Games Radar.

Dear Letters...

May you have the best Christmas ever with discount Uggs and a Mario flat pan. Register [at my site] now get \$20. — Mister Oka

EGM_Response: We appreciate your generous offer to trade Andrew Jackson for our important banking information, but we have to ask: What the hell is a Mario flat pan? ☹

Gaming by the Numbers

FROM THE GUINNESS WORLD RECORDS GAMER'S EDITION 2011

85

Age of gamer
John Bates, who bowled 2,850 perfect games in *Wii Sports Bowling*

5,400

Number of Mario-themed items owned by
Mitsugu Kikai

50 Hours, 1 Minute

Time it took three gamers to finish
Little Big Planet 2 and break the "longest marathon playing a platform video game" record

18 Minutes, 52 Seconds

Longest gaming session while indoor freefalling

26 Years 10 Days 10 Days

The time EGM Publisher Steve Harris held the world record on the Nintendo video game *Popeye* before losing the crown to Perry Rodgers

Ask Quartermann...

What are the chances that we'll see a new *Resident Evil* in 2011?

— Justin Sommers

The Q-Mann Responds: *The Q* hears that fans of the *Capcom* series may be in for a treat: not one, but TWO new entries in the RE franchise. The first is thought to revolve around a squad-based scenario, while RE6 is believed to hit in 2012...

I just got done reading your SSX:

Deadly Descents issue and although the new direction looks interesting, I wish EA hadn't strayed so far from the franchise's roots.

— Paul Carr

The Q-Mann Responds: Yours truly has heard rumblings that those disappointed by the visual style of SSX: Deadly Descents may be in for a pre-launch treat: a downloadable update of an earlier SSX title rendered in full HD glory. Personally, the Q-Mann is hoping for Tricky...

Have you heard anything about a sequel to *Mirror's Edge*?

— Jeff Templeton

The Q-Mann Responds: Actually, I have, and details may be forthcoming sooner than you think. What do you think about the possibility of Faith having a side-kick along for the ride, er, run, in round two?



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THE TRANSMEDIA EXPERIENCE AND A NEW LEVEL OF GAMING

The future of entertainment expands within our gaming worlds

by ADAM ROSENBERG

M.I.T. professor and noted voice in game studies Henry Jenkins coined the term "transmedia storytelling" in a 2003 article for *Technology Review*, in which he spoke to "a growing realization within the media industries that what is variously called transmedia, multiplatform, or enhanced storytelling represents the future of entertainment." Now, seven years later, the trend that Jenkins spoke to continues to gain momentum. The biggest sign of a

successful franchise these days is one that fans consume in multiple entertainment spaces.

"Transmedia franchise" may be an ugly pairing of corporate buzzwords. But look deeper and the creative possibilities are endless. Develop an entire universe and then color it with multimedia products that explore different stories within that fiction and you're onto something richly engaging. When executed correctly, there is nothing more fulfilling for the dedicated fan, an

additive experience that elevates the sense of immersion incalculably.

THQ vice president of core games Danny Bilson has been both a theorist and a strong supporter of the idea for more than a decade. While he acknowledges that the idea of transmedia in entertainment goes back as far as the days of Jules Verne and Mickey Mouse, *Star Wars* is the epochal success so many of us relate to.

"The most obvious example of robust transmedia in most of our lifetimes is *Star*

New Gaming Worlds, The New Hardcore, and The WinWare Slump





Batman: Arkham City faces the exciting task of living up to the expectations created by *Arkham Asylum*...

Wars," he points out. "It absolutely has succeeded on all cylinders in that from movies to games to books—the tremendous series of books—the action figures back in '77, '78, we first started buying those action figures and they're still making them today, [allowing] kids to apply their imagination to that universe."

Bilson also cites *The Matrix: Path of Neo* as a key example of transmedia being done right. Remember, while that particular game was not without its flaws and had its justified critics, it did succeed in painting another part of the *Matrix* story, one that both lived alongside the film and yet existed in its own space. The adventures of Vin Diesel's Richard B. Riddick character, which started with David Twohy's 2000 film *Pitch Black*, also represent a successful transmedia leap. Not only was *The Chronicles of Riddick: Escape from Butcher Bay* one of the strongest original Xbox titles, it also further fleshed out the backstory on characters who were only touched upon in the movie.

More recently we have the example of *Tron: Evolution*, a game which released alongside *Tron: Legacy* in December, offering a prequel story to Disney's much-hyped blockbuster film. Propaganda

Games' Darren Hedges, the director of *Evolution*, believes fans appreciate taking that deeper dive into the universe. "I think the big allure from the consumer perspective is continuing that feeling of wish fulfillment," he says. "As a consumer myself, if I see something I like in the cinema I often would like to continue that experience in other media."

In the case of *Tron: Evolution*, Propaganda worked closely with the *Legacy* team to ensure continuity across the two stories. "The game team spent a lot of time on-set seeing how Joe Kosinski, the director, and the production team were putting the film together," Hedges points out.

Kosinski himself admits that it's an important part of the process, finding parity between the different creative teams. "From the very beginning we wanted to make sure [*Evolution* had] a consistent tone and look and feel across all of the different properties they wanted to surround this movie with," the *Legacy* director explains. "Whether it's me turning over

all of the digital assets to the videogame company or the writers working on the storyline for the television show, we've tried to make sure everything fits together in as cohesive a way as possible."

The *Tron* franchise started in movie theaters and eventually crossed over into the gaming space. More exciting for gamers are those stories which are born of an interactive narrative. Perhaps no other publisher is pursuing projects like this more aggressively than THQ. *Homefront*, *Darksiders* and *Red Faction* have all gone or are going transmedia in some way while the publisher's handling of the *Warhammer*, UFC and WWE licenses continue to engage gamers. Most recently *Hellboy* director Guillermo del Toro's partnership on *inSAVE* speaks to the growing trend.

"The arena of gaming is immersive in a way that no other medium is," says del Toro. "No better or worse, just different. It is not vicarious or empathic, [it] is very visceral and immediate and puts you in the moment in a radical way."

FIVE FAVORITE TRANSMEDIA SUCCESS STORIES

Quality transmedia shies away from the straight adaptation in favor of standalone narratives that further color in the fictional universe of one franchise or another. While the trend is growing now at a rapid pace, this is not a new idea within the videogame industry. Here are five exceptional examples of transmedia properties getting it right.

BATMAN: ARKHAM ASYLUM

STAR WARS: KNIGHTS OF THE OLD REPUBLIC

THE CHRONICLES OF RIDDICK: ESCAPE FROM BUTCHER BAY

KINGDOM HEARTS

ALAN WAKE



Embracing transmedia has been Bilson's singular goal as the VP of Core Games. "THQ was the first company to really let me have the opportunity and embrace the idea of it," he says. "It was easy enough to sell them, once I made them understand that if we generate the properties, it costs us basically nothing and we get a lot of reach...different and interesting ways to make our games more important."

While the dollars and cents have to make sense, THQ's ultimate goal in this business—and this is true of any publisher—is to please the gamers, and it's something Bilson keeps in his head. "If I were a fan of this property, what would I like? How would I want to experience it in more ways?" Applying gamer logic to the transmedia puzzle is critical and it helps drive those important decisions. "The

creative strategies all come out of it. If I'm a fan of it, what would be cool? That's how we build our stuff out."

In terms of the process, it varies wildly. The common thread tying the strategies for each of THQ's major transmedia campaigns together is stated simply enough: Start by building the world. "On *Red Faction* we contracted Starlight Runner in New York, which is this specific transmedia company," Bilson reveals. They built the "bible" for the game's universe, which is now guiding production on the 2011 SyFy TV movie *Red Faction: Origins*. "On *de Blob* we have another group building out that bible, [WorldWide Biggies, run by Spike TV founder Albie Hecht]."

"Each [property] is a different story," continues Bilson, "but it's something that's essential to keep verisimilitude and all the

pieces together."

The most unusual of the bunch is *inSANE*, which has been in development for some time even though it was only announced in December. "We've been videotaping every single meeting with a professional video crew," Bilson says. "We'll have some really cool developer diary stuff to post on the web a couple years down the road of Guillermo working with the team."

Del Toro certainly seems primed for the unique task ahead of him. "Developing a videogame is intellectually stimulating," he says. "The creation of atmospheric and physics reminds me a lot of animation, where, in order to create the simulation of any reality, you have to entirely fabricate things that happen at a 'ground level' in everyday life: gravity, particles of dust, light, a moment of hesitation, etc. But in the writing of a gaming project I am reminded of strategy games, be it chess or board games, where you need to anticipate your opponent's moves and the consequences of them in order to move forth."

The most immediate example of an aggressive transmedia push is the upcoming *Homefront*, a new IP launching in March with a story written by *Apocalypse Now* co-writer and *Red Dawn* writer John Milius. In addition to a *Homefront* novel from Random House, which follows a reporter across the game's future vision of a North Korea-occupied America, there are also plans for the series' future games. "Hopefully we'll have a miniseries coming between *Homefront 1* and *Homefront 2* that we're working to whip up right now," Bilson reveals. "We've got a major filmmaker too looking at that right now with a big producer, so that could be really neat."

Looking at what's ahead in the growth of transmedia, the most appealing aspect of the narrative possibilities for us, as gamers, is that by definition it requires that those on the creative side pay attention to the desires of the fan community. As Bilson says, "It's not how many studios you have or how many employees you have, it's how many brands you have that matter to the fans."

And of course, it's the quality and richness of those brands that will ultimately keep us attached. Few will achieve their own *Star Wars*, but as the transmedia machine grows with more creative weight, the efforts will only continue to reveal more success stories.

"The arena of gaming is immersive in a way that no other medium is..."

Hellboy director Guillermo Del Toro

IN SEARCH OF THE **HARDCORE**

Is the familiar gamer stereotype a relic of the past?

by DAVID THOMAS

Raymond "Stallion83" Cox has a job and a girlfriend. He eats healthy and doesn't wear game character t-shirts.

He's also probably the most hardcore gamer you'd ever meet. "Everybody perceives me as the guy who lives in my mom's basement," says Cox. "And that's not the case."

But with a jaw-dropping Xbox Live Gamer Score soaring over half a million points and a number-one leaderboard ranking backed by two Guinness Book of World Records entries, no one can argue that this 27-year-old Tennessean isn't serious about his gaming.

Like Bigfoot and the Loch Ness Monster, the hunt for the stereotypical hardcore gamer turns into a search for a creature of myth and legend. Nacho cheese-stained controllers and unemployed couch potatoes wrapped in vintage Sonic attire have given way to a

whole new approach to thinking about hardcore gaming.

According to the NPD Group, "hardcore" denotes a demographic they call "extreme gamers." These players game 39 hours a week, compared to 29 hours for the next highest segment, the "avid PC gamers." Extreme gamers also play more games, tend to be male, and have an average age of 29.

"Extreme gamers spend a remarkable three hours and 45 minutes a day gaming on consoles or portables, more than twice as much time per day as any other segment," explains David Riley, NPD's executive director of corporate marketing.

On face value, these numbers challenge the notion of the hardcore gamer as a teen with loads of free time. The Electronic Software Association also takes on the stereotype, noting that the average age of a game player has soared to 34-years-old with 26 percent of Americans over the age of 50 playing videogames.

As games increasingly become a mass-market product, what's changed is less how much the hardcore loves playing games but rather the growing variety of people who love games.

"If you just substitute 'hardcore' with 'heavy,' you can pretty much define somebody that way," says Tony Key, Ubisoft's SVP of sales & marketing. "And heavy gamers come in an increasing number of shapes and size."

Mia Consalvo, a visiting associate professor at MIT, studies the casual game market. She's noticed an increasingly hardcore inclination with the card and puzzle games set, especially among women. This has led her to coin a new classification, the "hardcore casual."

"Some people who would never even define themselves as 'gamers' are actually pretty hardcore in how they play certain games—things like Farmville or Frontierville, for example."

Your grandma may not consider herself hardcore. But if she hits the online bridge circuit four or five hours a day every day, she looks like a hardcore gamer to the industry.

"It used to be so simple to define a hardcore gamer—typically a male between 12 and 24 who played videogames for 10 hours a week and spent \$100 a month,

bought two or three games a month," says Key. "Nowadays, it's not males 12-24 anymore. ...The definition of the heavy gamer hasn't changed, it's how he looks that's changed."

For a company like Ubisoft, the focus on psychographics and demographics allows it to segment the growing gaming audience into different kinds of players. *Assassin's Creed* and *Ghost Recon* might appeal more to a traditional hardcore audience. But a TV fan addicted to the *CSI* game on Facebook or a group of teen girls hooked on *Just Dance 2* actually define other hardcore gamer segments.

"There are heavy users in almost every demographic you can image," says Key.

This turns out to be good news for game makers and game players alike, because rather than simply turning its back on the traditional hardcore market, publishers like Ubisoft are making the most of finding the people that love games the most and making products that appeal to these groups. In order words, rather than disappearing under a wave of watered-down mass market titles, the hardcore matters more now than ever.

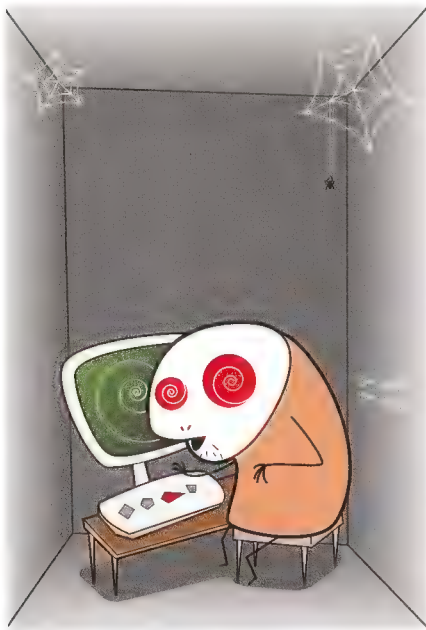
"Ultimately it's the heavy gamer that keeps us in business," says Key. "If you don't have heavy users of your game, it's probably not a good one."

And Cox is clearly at the forefront of the new hardcore. A scan through the over 470 games on his Xbox Live profile shows complete achievements for such stalwart hardcore titles as *Gears of War 2* and *Fable III*, mixed in with maxed out scores in *Family Game Night* and *Kinectimals*. You don't climb to the top of the leaderboard obsessing about *Black Ops*. You have to love games enough to play everything.

For Cox, what separates him from more casual gamers is simply how he likes to spend his free time. Because where some might game a little, and spend lots of time watching TV and going to the movies, Cox spends his time in front of the console. "It's not what you play," he says, "it's your mentality, and how you think about games that makes you hardcore."

Five years into his goal to reach a Gamer Score of 1,000,000, Cox figures it will take him another four years to reach that accomplishment. And when he does?

"When I get to a million, I'll probably slow down and have kids."



TIME CAPSULE



YEARS AGO

March, 2001

What a difference 10 years can make. In issue 20, we gave a momentary salute to Sonic as an eye-catching emerging character. Now, in issue 191, Speedy Gonzales' spiritual cousin snags the cover and a lengthy, splashy feature paying tribute to his decade-long legacy. Considering how tarnished Sonic's reputation is now, yet another 10 years later, it's a sobering reminder of how characters can burn brightly and then fall out of the public's favor. Then again, Sonic was never one to play it safe—he hails from the era of finger-wagging mascot animals with arched eyebrows. In any case, we painstakingly detailed the impetus of Sega's crack team to deliver Project Million Seller, the internal nickname given to Sonic since the Genesis had to prove itself formidable against Nintendo and its plumber.



YEARS AGO

March, 1991

Sonic makes his debut. A Dick Tracy game is reviewed. There's gossip debating whether the Super Famicom would get a name change when it hit America. Hell, *Battletoads* is on the cover. This being our 1991 spring preview issue, over 100 games get an early look. Most of them are obscure even by today's standards: *Blue Almanac* for the Mega Drive, shmup *Aero Blasters: Trouble Specialty Raid Unit* for the Genesis, and *Noah's Ark* for the NES all enjoy excited copy. Best of all, there's a blurb about canceled NES title *Mike Tyson's Intergalactic Power Punch*. It's like an Adult Swim show that never quite got off the ground: The heavyweight champion leaves earth forever after suffering his first-ever defeat by Little Mac and travels around the galaxy fighting robots and eyeing bikini-wearing anthropomorphic slugs.



YEARS AGO

March, 1981

This was a transitional month for gaming, which is a nice way of saying not a lot was going on. The games coming out didn't really stand the test of time, but you could make the case that what was released actually was important since developers are often inspired by what came before. Indeed, Activision co-founder David Crane, who would create *Pitfall* the next year, unleashed *Laser Blast* for the Atari 2600 in March 1981. Sure, Atari games by definition aren't especially complex, but at least they always delivered on what their titles promised. *Laser Blast* is essentially *Space Invaders*, only you control the invading spaceship and attempt to, yes, blast lasers at three turrets.



Developers discuss the ups and downs of Nintendo's flagship download service

by PATRICK KLEPEK

It didn't take long for Nintendo to establish lofty expectations for WiiWare, its downloadable distribution platform. Combined with Wii's mammoth and seemingly unrelenting sales, it looked like a potential goldmine.

"Independent developers armed with small budgets and big ideas will be able to get their original games into the marketplace to see if we can find the next smash hit," said Nintendo of America's bombastic president Reggie Fils-Aime in a June 2007 press release. "WiiWare brings new levels of creativity and value to the ever-growing population of Wii owners."

WiiWare has been home to some absolutely fantastic games, including Gajjin Games' eclectically nostalgic (and brutally difficult) *Bit.Trip* series and 2D Bio's addictive *World of Goo*. But Nintendo has done little to evolve WiiWare since its launch in early 2008. It's easy to excuse a poor interface or forgive the lack of a proper demo policy at launch, but three years later? Frustration mounts.

"The WiiWare store is just hugely cumbersome to deal with," explains a visibly disappointed Alex Neuse, CEO of Gajjin Games. "My parents can't buy games. They bought a Wii so they could buy my games. The bummer is that the potential is there. 70 million Wiis. The potential is huge."

Gajjin Games has been the most prominent and consistent supporter of WiiWare. When others moved to more

polished and supported platforms, Gajjin finished what it had started with *Bit.Trip Beat*. Neuse's comments reflect the most basic complaint about Nintendo's platform: its fumbling lack of usability. How many times have you accidentally backed out of buying Wii Points, since Nintendo randomly swaps the "yes" and "no" confirmation buttons? Worse, the forms don't save any of your information.

There was some hope the slumbering Nintendo was ready for change when it revealed a demo program for WiiWare. Unfortunately, not everyone could participate in the demo program, and the demos were simply a promotion, not even a permanent part of the service. Yet for the privileged few, including the tragically overlooked *Kid Icarus* style platformer *NyxQuest*, it worked.

Over the Top Games director Roberto Álvarez de Lara looks at the bright side. "[The demo] was huge for us," he says over e-mail. "That is why I think these kind of promotions are good for WiiWare, the Wii and the players. We saw an increase of about 800% in sales during the demo program!"

As WiiWare enters its fourth year, however, the consequences are becoming more apparent. 2010 independent platforming darling *Super Meat Boy* became a smash success on Xbox Live Arcade last fall, but the hardcore run-and-jump was originally announced for WiiWare. Now, it's not happening.



"There will not be a WiiWare version of *SMB*," announced developer Team Meat via Twitter in late December. "We are looking in to retail Wii, but it's also looking grim. Still looking though."

Team Meat eventually clarified that the 40MB size limit would require *Super Meat Boy*'s design to be altered to a state unsatisfactory to Team Meat. Instead of hacking it to pieces, they're cancelling it.

There's always another side to the story, though. Over the Top Games embraced the restriction.

"This [40MB size limit] can be seen as a bad thing," says de Lara, "but for us it was very good, because it meant that we had to keep the game size controlled and we could make sure that the project didn't get out of our hands. Limited quantity [allowed us to] center our efforts on the quality."

What happens next is anyone's guess. With Wii sales flattening, it's unlikely Nintendo will reform WiiWare. 3DS, with a revamped DSiWare store, will provide the first look into what Nintendo's taken away from the WiiWare experiment. And as frustrated as some developers (and consumers) have become with WiiWare, the large audience on offer with the 3DS will likely prove irresistible, all over again.

"The WiiWare store is just hugely cumbersome to deal with."

Gaijin Games CEO Alex Neuse



input output

DAVID JAFFE



The creator of *Twisted Metal* and *God of War* takes your questions on the download

space and the unnecessary push to be different.

MIKE LEE ASKS

Would you ever consider making another 2D game for the download space? As a child of the arcades, I have a very warm, soft spot in my heart for pure mechanics based, 2D games. We got our noses bloodied a bit with *Calling All Cars* which—in essence—is a 2D game for the download space. It was brilliantly executed by the team, but the design needed to be better. 2D arcade-style games seem like they'd be easy to make but present primarily 3D developers with a whole host of fresh challenges. While it was a blast to work on, it was naive of me to assume that just because we'd had some big successes in the 3D space, we'd be able to effortlessly become hit makers in the 2D world.

JOSHUA BENNETT ASKS

There was a period in the history of games where a lot of games started to fall into a generic mold of dark heroes; level up, fight some more and they were usually broken down to seeming like reskinned versions of another game. As a creator, how important is making substantially different characters and game types, or is it just an afterthought? Different for the sake of being different means little to me. I don't pursue innovation, I pursue entertainment and fun. If we feel a game design is going to be fun, that's all that matters. If it's playing to the recent trends, great, but that's not the goal. Fun is the goal. If it's a totally new idea that no one has ever heard of, great, but that's also not the goal. Entertaining the audience and/or engaging the audience is the goal. Always, always, always. The rest doesn't mean s**t.



Creative Director Epic Games

Oh god, that's a tough one. Was it 1973?



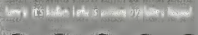
I don't know. Let me come up with something. No, I shouldn't, I'll look like I know less about jazz than I really do. I give up.



It's in Pasadena.



No, he's Bender. Well, he might be Leia as well. You never know with those guys. The cast of Cleveland is white. I'm going to say, "True."



Gears of War features a new mod called Boast. When you hit someone with the X-men have.

He started off not blue but then became blue.



FINAL SCORE: 7/5

MOD A CONSOLE...

And face a new string of legal consequences

By KYLE ORLAND

At a technical level, videogames and the consoles that play them are just like any other computer software and hardware. But at a practical level, game and hardware makers place some heavy restrictions on the way users can alter and use the products they own.

More and more, the game industry has been enforcing that difference legally using the Digital Millennium Copyright Act (DMCA), a 1998 law that, among other things, made it illegal to circumvent copy protection mechanisms on any hardware or software.

The controversial law has been lauded by the entertainment industry, and is increasingly being brought to bear in cases involving videogames. For instance, the DMCA was used to bring first-of-their-kind federal criminal charges against a California man who was caught installing an Xbox 360 mod chip for an investigator hired by the Entertainment Software Association. The case was later dropped for technical reasons, but it shows the industry is willing to use the DMCA to go after not just those who sell pirated software, but also those who sell the hardware modifications that make piracy possible.

Of course, hardware modification isn't always about piracy. Some freedom-to-tinker advocates worry that this kind of litigation can also limit folks who want to modify their systems for totally legit (read: legal) purposes.

Timothy Lee, an adjunct scholar at the CATO Institute and an expert in technology policy, points out that unauthorized modifications to the original Xbox let owners use the system as a fully functional Linux computer, and stream audio and video to their TVs through the Xbox Media Center program.

"While I don't have a ton of sympathy for people who are simply helping people pirate videogames," he says, "I think it's important to see that the precedents in these cases don't foreclose, potentially, other useful but unauthorized uses for these games and systems. The problem with the DMCA is it doesn't do a good job of drawing these kinds of distinctions. It just says 'no tinkering, period.' It doesn't really have a useful exception for cases where you're doing something that isn't otherwise illegal."

It's a distinction that hardware makers don't seem to consider, either. Sony recently cited the DMCA, among other laws, in seeking a temporary restraining order against a hacking group called fail0verflow. The group managed to hack the previously secure PS3, exposing and publishing the "root key" that prevents the system from running unauthorized software. That includes both homebrew software (such as the versions of Linux that Sony recently removed as an officially supported, installable option) as well as pirated games.

Practically, the law is of little use here—now that the root key is public, there's no injunction

or gag order that will stop it from being passed around (and it's unclear that there's a technical fix short of replacing the millions of PS3 systems already in the market). Given that, Electronic Frontier Foundation Intellectual Property Director Corynne McSherry thinks Sony's lawsuit might be intended to create more of a chilling effect.

"I think the point may be to scare other people, to send a message to other people that Sony is going to try to use the legal process to stop anybody that does anything they don't like with the machines they're selling," she says.

While McSherry says she understands the desire of companies like Sony to stop software pirates, legally the pre-DMCA copyright laws did a fine job of putting penalties on such illegal copying. Under the DMCA, she worries companies are overstepping those valid concerns to place overly burdensome restrictions on what people can do with the products they've bought. "If this was anything else but software, everyone would realize that was ridiculous," she says. "Wait, so I bought my car and I can't tinker with it, I can't put in the lock system of my choice? People would find that to be outrageous, and rightly so."

Of course, the ability to upgrade your car's engine doesn't mean you can put mounted guns on the roof and drive it around on the street. This seems to be the analogy Blizzard would prefer in arguing a recent case surrounding a *World of Warcraft* bot program called Glider, which was used by thousands of players to automate the more tedious, level-grinding aspects of the early game.

Blizzard argued that Glider's circumvention of the company's anti-bot Warden technology made the bot more than a mere violation of *WoW*'s terms of use, but also a full-on violation of the DMCA, with all the harsh potential penalties that come with it. An appeals court recently agreed with that argument, a move Lee says is a bad sign for those who see the power of entertainment companies expanding dangerously under the DMCA. "Certainly I think the way it's being used there is more aggressive than the way it was probably sold to Congress," says Lee.

Despite lots of grassroots support for changing the DMCA in the tech community, activists agree that there doesn't seem to be enough political support to force Congress' hand in the near term. But the issue may be moot anyway, as the increasing move to online games, subscription models and titles stored in the cloud may give game companies the total software control they desire without any legal maneuvering.

"If you sell copies of games, you have to prevent your users from making those copies," Lee points out. "But if your users are paying you a monthly fee, in a sense you don't care if people are making copies of the games because people can't do anything with the games unless they're signed up for your online service." **B+**

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EGM
THE DIGITAL MAGAZINE

Fun things to do when you're not playing games

the month in geek

by TRACEY JOHN, ANDREW PFISTER, PAUL SEMEL
AND REBECCA SWANNER



plastic army men evolved

Move over Marcus Fenix, there's a new badass in town. Grayson Hunt—the protagonist of Epic Games' new, appropriately named shooter *Bulletstorm*—is a drunken, gun-toting space pirate who makes Zebeesians look tame. And now Hunt's embodied in plastic thanks to NECA in this detailed, articulated action figure, which comes with wearable goggles and his Peacemaker Carbine Rifle. (\$13.99; NECAonline.com)

breathe with us

Gaming is stressful sometimes. That's why Paul Cosca created these "Keep Calm and Carry On" posters (\$30.00; etsy.com), which he modeled after vintage 1939 posters created to boost morale in British citizens during World War II. While the originals were printed in limited numbers and lost to history until they were rediscovered in a small book store 10 years ago, Cosca's versions are easier to come by and available for fans of the 360, Wii, Dreamcast or NES.



flying high again

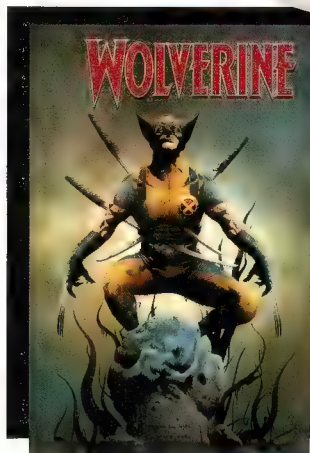
Given how important the story is in *Deus Ex* games, it's fitting that Random House is releasing *Deus Ex: Icarus Effect* (\$15.00; delreybooks.com) to coincide with the new game, *Deus Ex: Human Revolution*. But *Icarus* isn't just a retelling of that game's plot. Written by James Swallow—who's penned the *Sundowner* series as well as novels based on *Warhammer 40,000* and *Star Trek*—the novel is set in the same world as the game but is actually a parallel tale told with some of the same characters you'll meet in *Revolution*.



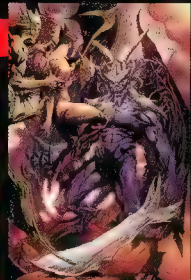
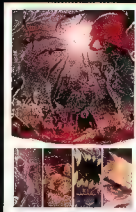


ice cream sniper

Like the Wii before it, the PlayStation Move is perfect for games where you "shoot" your TV. But if you want to avoid the strange sensation that you're pointing an ice cream cone at the screen you'll need the rifle-shaped Sharp Shooter (\$39.99; us.playstation.com). Compatible with *Killzone 3*, *Dead Space: Extraction* (which is included in the PS3 version of *Dead Space 2*) and *SOCOM 4: U.S. Navy SEALs*, the Sharp Shooter has an adjustable shoulder stock and the ability to switch from a single shot to burst fire to rapid fire.



hellacious



Of all the Marvel superheroes, Wolverine probably gets told to go to hell the most. Well, except for maybe Spider-Man. But in a new comic collection from Marvel, our favorite X-Man is actually going down. Written by Jason Aaron (*Wolverine: Get Mystique*) and illustrated by Renate Guedes (*Supergirl*), the hardcover edition of *Wolverine Goes to Hell* (\$24.99; marvel.com)

finds Logan's soul stuck in the underworld while his body, which is still topside, is possessed by demons.

getting into gear

Anyone in love with the automobile should already know the BBC show *Top Gear*. Hosts Jeremy Clarkson, Richard Hammond and James May present their extensive car knowledge in a surprisingly accessible way, and with wickedly funny chemistry, which explains why fellow car-freak Kazunori Yamauchi integrated *Top Gear* into *Gran Turismo 5*. Available on DVD and Blu-ray, *Top Gear: The Complete Season 14* (DVD: \$24.98; BD: \$29.98) and *15* (DVD: \$19.98; BD: \$24.99) feature the usual "Star in a Reasonably Priced Car" segments, beautiful short-film car reviews, and an experiment in which the boys build their own electric car, name it "Geoff," and proceed to muck up the streets of downtown London while listening to Belinda Carlisle.



the EGM HOT LIST

10

Things You Didn't Know About *Dead Space 2*

by PAUL SEMEL

01 DEMOLITION TANGO

Prior to the game's release, EA released a demo of *Dead Space 2* on XBLA and PSN. But unlike some game demos, this one didn't exactly show you what playing the game would be like. "When we were constructing the demo," Papoutsis explains, "we realized that it might give away parts of the story, which we didn't want to do. So we changed the demo so it would show the different facets of the game but wouldn't spoil anything."

02 GOATS HEAD SOUP

Making a game doesn't just require computers. You also need food, beverages, and, apparently, dead livestock. According to Papoutsis, "We used a real goat, which we got from a butcher, as reference for parts of the game, in terms of gore and viscera." As for which lucky member of the development team had to explain that one to EA's comptroller, Papoutsis laughed, "It was on the team's expense report."

03 TOILET HUMOR

With *Dead Space 2* set on a space station, the dev team had to make up a ton of products that you'd see advertised as you walked around. But while Papoutsis says they had a lot of fun making up names for tasty snacks and refreshing beverages, there was one inspired by a real-life incident that was neither tasty nor refreshing. "There's a movie poster for a horror film called *The Clogger*," he admits, "which is a reference to...uh, a situation we had with the plumbing. I'll just leave it at that."

Having played both games, watched both animated movies, read the novel and the comics, and made up your own adventures using the action figures, the soundtrack CD, and your little sister's Barbie, you probably think you know everything there is to know about *Dead Space 2*. But according to franchise executive producer Steve Papoutsis, what you don't know about the scary sequel might kill you. Or interest you.



04 THE ELDER GODS

While it's well known that *Space* man Isaac Clarke gets his name from legendary sci-fi writers Isaac Asimov and Arthur C. Clarke, they're not the only literary references in the game. "We love science fiction and we love horror," Papoutsis says, "so any time we can have fun with those kind of combinations, we'll go for it. One of the more obscure ones is that there's a character you'll discover in the middle of the game named Howard Phillips, which is a nod to H.P. Lovecraft [a.k.a. Howard Phillips Lovecraft, the writer of "The Call of Cthulhu" and other horror stories]."

05 CHECK YOUR REFERENCES

While the *Dead Space* games are obviously inspired by such films as *Aliens* and John Carpenter's remake of *The Thing*, there are other films that influenced the series that aren't so obvious. "*Blade Runner* was big in terms of the way *The Sprawl* looks in the game," Papoutsis notes, "*An American Werewolf in London* inspired a specific scene in the game. And in terms of the bigger, over-the-top moments, *Die Hard* was also a bit of a reference."

06 1 2 3 REPEATER

Here's something you might not know about *Necromorphs*: They've recently learned that those who don't learn from history are doomed to repeat it. "In the original game, *Necromorphs* always jumped out of the same vents every time," Papoutsis admits. "But with *Dead Space 2*, we wanted to keep people on their toes, so we put a lot of emphasis on making it random in terms of what kinds of *Necromorphs* you'll see in a setting, how many of them will be there and where they'll come from."

07 SKINS GAME

Perhaps the biggest addition to *Dead Space 2* is a competitive multiplayer mode that pits humans against the Necromorphs. But according to Papoutsis, there are actually some special humans you can play as, if you pay attention. "If players follow me or lead multiplayer programmer Louis Gascoigne on Twitter [[@leveluptime](#) and [@codecow](#), respectfully] and you play a match with us, you'll unlock these unique human skins." Sadly, said skins do not look like Papoutsis and Gascoigne. Or H.P. Lovecraft.



08 PHOTO OP

While *Dead Space 2*, like its predecessor, has an achievement for finding the Peng statue (and no, we're not telling you where it is; that's what the Internet is for), there is something else in *Dead Space 2* that you might want to look for. "This kind of embarrasses me a bit," Papoutsis admits, "but if you're in the shopping area of *The Sprawl*, towards the beginning of the game, and you go to the hair salon, there is a picture of me modeling a hairdo."

09 ADVENTURES IN BABYSITTING

Part of the reason *Dead Space* and *Dead Space 2* are so scary is because you're almost always on your own. But according to Papoutsis, that almost wasn't the case with the sequel. "At one point," he points out, "Isaac was going to have some people following him around. But we quickly realized that it would've taken away the tension and the horror. It really changed the flavor of the game and added this kind of babysitting element that just wasn't that fun and would've taken focus away from Isaac's story."



10 DEAD OR ALIVE 2: HARD CORE

While a lot of games have a hard difficulty that only unlocks when you beat the game once, the one in *Dead Space 2* might qualify as cruel and unusual punishment. "In Hard Core mode," Papoutsis explains, "players are only able to save their games three times. And if you die, you go back to your previous save, not to the last checkpoint. Though you do get a cool item for beating this mode" Oh, and lest you think you can play the game on easy, get all the upgrades, and use them to beat Hard Core, Papoutsis says, "No, that doesn't work."

THE WIZARD OF ODD RETURNS

by TOM RUSSO

FIVE YEARS AGO, Lorne Lanning, the president of Oddworld, Inc. had one last mission before he left the game abyss. He had a special favor to repay: the very magazine that had put him in the spotlight. Prior to his studio's closure, Oddworld had a 13-year run which resulted in four games that were highly regarded for not only their gameplay but for their thinly veiled jabs at modern society. Given today's headlines full of massive oil spills and financial crises, Oddworld's satire proved more prophetic than any of us dared hope.

In these troubled times it should serve as some comfort to know that Oddworld is back, and the visionary architect and artist behind Abe, Munch, and the Stranger has returned from his self-imposed exile. In the following conversation, he generously takes us behind the curtain (and into his home) to reveal what's next for Oddworld and his new company, oddmob. He also has a few things to say about where he's been, what he's learned in the process, and why we should be asking for better games from the industry.

It's been five years since Lorne Lanning shuttered Oddworld's San Luis Obispo-based production studio. Fed up with

the no-win bureaucracy associated with making the kind of games he wanted to make, he and partner Sherry McKenna left the sleepy central-coast town for a home in Berkeley hills, perched above the San Francisco university that was a hotbed of counterculture and activism. In Lanning's house on the hillside, a surging stream runs through the woods of the property, and Lanning feeds the squirrels that visit during his morning routine, which he feeds a bit of the stream was polluted in drambles. Lanning took over the property, clearing the brush and designing the landscaped landscape around it became an

Photos by LYDIA CHEN



occupational therapy of sorts in the two years following his move to the Bay Area.

It is here we meet to discuss Oddworld, and its place in an industry still desperate for creative direction. It doesn't take me long to remember why his presence in gaming is so sorely missed. Throughout the afternoon, the conversation veers into his many interests: Chinese medicine and the study of the human iris, the reclaimed wood which provides his home's interior, the art on the walls, and Burning Man, just to touch on a few.

And it shouldn't come as a surprise that a man who created a brand called "Oddworld" would live a life less ordinary. Growing up the child of divorced parents in Connecticut, Lanning later trained as a photorealist painter and worked for artist Jack Goldstein in the '80s. "I learned how what I call the con-art world works," he says. An interest in the emerging world of computer graphics led him from New York to California and Cal Arts. At the time he thought, "If I don't get into CG, I'm going to be poor."

This led to a job working for TRW Aerospace on the Star Wars program, visualizing the strategic defense program, or "making commercials for the Pentagon," as Lanning likes to call it. "There was a chasm between what this new high-tech weaponry systems were doing, and what generals understood," he explains.

This would lead to more computer visualization work, and ultimately, to Sherry McKenna, who was pioneering CG in the advertising space. One afternoon during a poolside chat he convinced McKenna, then his coworker, to help him start Oddworld. A no-nonsense negotiator with a love of art, she was sold more on the grandeur of Lanning's creative vision of the Oddworld universe than on the prospect of games being the future of entertainment. Together they launched the company and ran the studio for 13 years. And while Oddworld's been seemingly dormant these past five years, it remains wholly owned by the two of them.

Which brings me to their couch at the time of this interview. And while Oddworld may be quietly relegated to history in consumers' minds, in Lanning's mind, Oddworld is very much alive. With the revolution of digital delivery upon us, and social media changing the landscape of technology and content, Lanning has been very active, quietly planning his next move. Quiet, that is, until now.

INTERVIEW

LORNE LANNING

Our readers will be happy to know you still control the fate of Oddworld. How would you describe what Oddworld is now?

Oddworld is now an IP holding company that's funding development and largely going through a resurgence of getting the existing library up to various platforms and making them available to more gamers.

And so you've partnered specifically with UK developer Just Add Water to handle the technical responsibilities of making them ready for downloadable formats.

To us, it's more about working with passionate people who want to stay true to the brand, who want to build sustainable businesses. We're not looking [for external parties] to turn them into big hits, that's not important to us. We know the people who really like our products like them for a reason. We don't want to start f***ing with that reason. We would like them to get more, but we don't want the conditions to be such that we have to give up control of the property. So we're doing incremental steps, to help build it as an independent business—as a true indie. Oddly enough, we've become our own publisher.

You mention you had opportunities to sell the brand in 2005, but decided to retain the IP.

We left money on the table, we didn't want to sell the IP because we believe so much in it, and it's only becoming more and more relevant. We believe the *Abe* motion picture would be like a new *Star Wars*. It would be so hard-hitting, nut-kicking and hilarious, but also relevant. We believe the property has all kinds of possibilities, but the idea of trying to still make AAA games that are going to be a Christmas hit is kind of crazy in terms of your likelihood to succeed.

It's been awhile since you've had any news to pass along; fans must be excited to see these games being digitally distributed.

We get reminded every day—"where the f*** are the new games?" As time goes on, the unique signature of the Oddworld brand, I think is more indi-

vidually distinctive, because less has been done just like it. I'm not saying it's better than anyone, but it's unique. We knew it would be confusing for our fans to understand, while we were off figuring some things out.

So the Oddbox collection just launched on Steam—a pack of all four of your games, *Abe's Oddysee*, *Abe's Exoddus*, *Munch's Oddysee*, and *Stranger's Wrath*.

Yes, and *Munch* and *Stranger* at like, quadruple the resolution, at least in terms of rendering. It's on PC, not NTSC [TVs], so they feel like the original, but look better. We didn't go back into the games, these aren't director's cuts. We look at them like classic movies, we just want players to have that classic experience.

And the *Abe* titles went up PSN last year.

PSN's been great, Sony's been fabulous. They were like, "You know, *Abe* was a classic here, and we'd like to support it," and they've done some great stuff in Europe, and it's been embraced. By the end of last year, the *Abe* games on PSN alone were heading towards 300,000 units. They are 13 years old! No marketing! No advertising! We see what the fan community does, the different things they need. So who do we hire to help us? The guys who did the best job managing our fan community.

What's going on with XBLA?

We have *Stranger* all ready to go on XBLA but the answer keeps being no, we're still talking to them and we're hoping to work it out.

And you're bringing *Stranger* to the PSN network, and have some optimization plans for that release?

For *Stranger*, it's the same game, but being re-done. All the normal maps and the PS3 rendering tech is being taken advantage of on all the characters and on the environments, so it's been really cool to see how well that's coming along... We never had it on [PS2], and the rendering capability of PS3 speaks for itself, so if we can get that game experience on there, there's nothing else like *Stranger* on Sony. Now there're other shooters and

they have multiplayer and they are great, but it's totally unique. So let's give it some more "oomph," let's just redo those characters, let's get those normal maps in. Let's really make it shine, and you look at it and go, "Wow! Real-time Stranger looks like pre-rendered Stranger," and the other characters do too.

Beyond the visually optimized Stranger for PSN, do you have other plans for your past games?

So *Abe HD* is going into production. It's basically *Abe's Oddysee* being redone in a 3D physics engine as a 2D side-scrolling platformer. So the way Just Add Water wants to approach it, we thought was very smart, they are not trying to reinvent any wheels. It's like, "Can we make that experience in a new engine, with new tech, in the old way?"

So the design elements won't change at all, it's just a massive graphical conversion.

There will be some, because we know... in *Stranger PS3*, there really are no design changes, it's an art upgrade, and economically that made sense. But in *Abe HD*, in being able to readdress it, we go, "Where can we better tune?" It will be a redo in new tech, totally new rendering, normal-mapped characters, we're going

to take the existing animation files out of *Alias* and plug them in, so it will be a retro refit on new tech. But what we're finding is so few games focus on that little niche of hand-stitched quality, that it is still unique in that place, and people want more of it.

So will there be new content in *Abe HD*? Maybe some levels you design?

There will be some new stuff, because the new tech will enable some flexibility.

Anything you might have wanted to do in the original *Abe* that you might not have been able to realize thirteen years ago?

Ahhh... [thinking] Because we're dealing

with the actual three dimensions rather than bitmaps, the answer would be yes. It's like retelling the myth in new tech, there were a lot of limitations back then.

So you might embellish the story in places, but you aren't going to change the flow of the story.

Right.

So as the voice of *Abe*, will you be adding new voice? And can you match your voice to *Abe's* of 13 years ago?

I don't know, that's a good question. It was tough making the voice match from '97 to '98. [laughs] The idea of this is not to overinflate expectations. We're saying: We like building games like that. Some

WHEN ABE'S ODDYSEE CAME OUT, PEOPLE USED TO SAY, "THIS IS AN ANTI-CAPITALIST MESSAGE." AT WHICH POINT I HAD TO SHUT UP... BUT TODAY I'LL SAY, "IT WAS ALWAYS A F*ING ANTI-CAPITALIST MESSAGE!"**



LORNE LANNING

people liked playing them, we want to build more like that, and we need to do it very cleverly so we don't have to deal with the big boys... That's the model and so far it's working.

So let's shift gears a bit. As a younger man, you had very diverse experiences in working in the New York art scene, and then later as a CG artist for the military-industrial complex. You mention you learned a lot working in both areas. How did those experiences shape your goals as you moved into game making?

For me it became about creating modern myths, and weaponizing pop media, for the better. Anything any of us can do help, whether it's Oprah talking about health solutions; anyone telling any of us what's wrong with our water, how we should eat better food—that's weaponizing information for the better. And that's what it became about for me, and that's what the formation of *Oddworld* was. It was about building a property of integrity that we cared about, that talked about the issues going on in the world today, and we thought that could be relevant pop media. To me, that was more interesting pop media. I'm not the guy who bullets the Marines shooting Iraqis or other poor brown people game—when I say “weaponize,” I don't mean for destruction, I mean for penetration. How do we get the line point that is punching through the thick ozone of ignorance?

Sure, all the *Oddworld* games are allegorical in nature, but was there a reason you chose games as the delivery mechanism for these messages?

Art hanging on walls and in galleries around the world isn't going to change

the world, that day is long past. Where is the new trends in public consciousness going to occur? It's a very simple equation—where is the most mindshare being spent? Is it in a book, in a movie, in a game? The first talk I gave at GDC touched on this, it was, how many hours of public mindshare are going into the experiences we're creating? How many times did you see the movie *Star Wars*? The biggest fan might say, 50 times, about 100 hours invested in that IP. That is the average user of *Call of Duty* today. Back in 1994 I ran that math, and in the United States alone [games] generated 60 billion hours of mindshare a year—so where better? On a museum wall today, you will never ever capture 60 billion hours of public mindshare. That's the landscape to penetrate, that's pretty ripe territory, you can grow some good grapes in that soil.

Given that, how did you determine what the important messages were?

It was like, “Okay, so what are the stories I care most about? What affects me the deepest, what makes me lose sleep at night? How many people feel like me?” And I think the numbers are higher than any market research is going to show. I think a lot of people feel a great discontent with what's going on in the visible landscape. And I think where they get confused is they get impassioned to take sides. What I wish is that everyone would stop taking sides and look at the real problem. If we can figure out how to use mediums where 60 billion hours of mindshare are going in 1994, and it's 2011, maybe the medium is more than just a moneymaker.

So how did your first game, *Abe's*



Odyssey, tie into that mission to enlighten your audience?

Abe's *Odyssey* was conceived in the '80s. In the '80s what I saw as one of the biggest threats to humanity was the fast food nation had such a demand for cheap meat that it was financing the wholesale burning of rainforests for the sake of cheap grazing ground—so we could have our 99-cent happy meals. Now, a lot of people kind of relied on those to keep their kids alive because that's all they could afford, it was a vicious circle.

But I can't talk about McDonald's financing that, and I can't talk about how [big media] is misrepresenting that, because then it's no longer a product, it's a statement. And who gives a s*** about some guy on a pedestal, preaching. I don't want to preach anything, I just want to say, "look what's going on" and you know what, it's pretty good entertainment, when you understand it's that f***ed up.

In the time that the Oddworld studio was active, did you feel it was successful?

In very earthly, physical ways, it was successful, and we benefited and I'm grateful. [And] I know it was successful on personal levels where people came back from the brink of suicide, because somehow they were able to laugh for prolonged periods of time with content they identified with—feeling like losers in the world. We got a few testimonies to that. I don't know how many brands in gaming can claim that, but Sherry and I feel good about that one. And then there's the value, which is the intent of it in the first place. Which is, how did it inspire? Did it inspire people to do a better job in the future...

Better job?

Better job making content that inspires. [laughs]

Ah right, how you directly affected other game developers.

Yeah! Did I inspire to inspire? Did I inspire to not give up, and to do something to cause others to be inspired? Hopefully. In the artists communities that we speak at occasionally, the feedback has been such that I feel pretty good... When you see people who think you were the s***, and you're like, "man, you are taking it further."

You've said to me in the past that people will buy crap, but that doesn't mean you're obligated to make it.

That used to be a bragging call. Now I think we're living in a landscape where people are realizing, "We've been had!" I don't care if you call yourself left or right, or moderate, or extreme, or whatever,

GAMEOGRAPHY

2005

Oddworld:
Stranger's Wrath

2001

Oddworld:
Munch's Odyssey

1998

Oddworld:
Abe's Exoddus

1997

Oddworld:
Abe's Odyssey

here's the one thing we all agree upon—we've been had! [laughs] And we're all in the same "got f***ed" pool. And that's pretty well observed today, no matter what you're leaning. Even if you are still watching network media, which is pretty much a joke.

Let's talk about *Stranger*, your last game. Wasn't it going to be an Xbox first-party exclusive?

It was set to be, until [former Xbox head of first-party] Ed Fries left, and the whole world changed at Microsoft, and then the game went to EA.

Right, it became one of the early EA Partners game.

It was one of the early EA Partners absurdities. I mean, they didn't promote the game! They couldn't get it to run on the PS2 like they were supposed to. Anyway, that's water long under the bridge...

Come on! What exactly happened?

Stranger was planned to be a multi-SKU title in the [Electronic Arts] relationship. But one of the SKUs broke down under their care. Then all of sudden it's not a multi-SKU title, and, "We don't really market exclusive titles." So, that's a piece that broke on the way to market. Would people like to have the game? Absolutely!

But the process is riddled with these hurdles and thresholds.

So, *Stranger* was being ported externally by another developer.

Under their command.

And because they failed to produce, and didn't have the additional PS2 SKU to market, they basically said, "We're going to scale back our entire promise to you to push this title." Entirely.

Wow. That's pretty crappy business.

But this is what we call capitalism. Like when *Abe's Odyssey* came out, people used to say, "This is an anti-capitalist message." At which point I had to shut up, because that was not a cool thing to say. But today I'll say, it was always a f***ing anti-capitalist message, because capitalism isn't working for the rest of us—do we have to screw each other so frequently and regularly, and as a standard operating procedure? I look at the world and go, I don't think we have to. I'm more interested in building sustainable businesses. Why can't we just be sustainable? Why do we have to run over 20 other bodies just so we can say, "We're king!"

Hmm, I'm suddenly seeing the image

of the cigar-chomping chief of the Glukkons.

Yeah! The Glukkons! [laughs]

The guys at the top getting rich on the back of slave labor, Abe and his fellow Mudokons.

The exploited.

So you felt like development was a no-win scenario after *Stranger*?

It basically extinguished our desire to play that role in that dance that is the current boxed product scene. It just extinguished that incentive. Because when you see that happen, and so...it was a blessing, because it caused us to rethink and readdress what's happening on that landscape, and how to deal with it.

Yet, you already had another game concept in the works with Majesco, called *The Brutal Ballad of Fangus Klot*. What was it going to be?

So it was a first- and third-person shooter. I was excited about it, and so was the team. We had the *Stranger* engine, which we loved, and we loved the tools. I hadn't seen anything technically work that well in my experience, the tools, the pipeline, everything. *Fangus* was an opportunity to try something new, on an engine that already worked that we had the tools for.



I THINK A LOT OF PEOPLE FEEL A GREAT DISCONTENT WITH WHAT'S GOING ON IN THE VISIBLE LANDSCAPE.

It was an attempt to do multiplayer. It was set in another part of Oddworld, that way, if we f***ed it up, we didn't kill Abe. Everyone always fought us on that. "Use the IP people know!" But Oddworld was a planet we wanted to develop, and if we're going to take risks, let's not take it on the IP that is a greater risk to risk on...and we wanted to separate the characters because we were going to go darker, more hardcore.

So what was the game more to be about?

I really wanted to take on the lifelong battles between certain gene pools, like cats versus dogs—no matter what, that's a gene pool battle! They will never like each other. So how do we take that basic notion and extend that into more human conditions? So we set up Fangus, and he's going to be like the shepherd, and he's the canine. But the cat guys are going to be like the Russian mob. They are going to be like KGB, or like a CIA underground drug trafficking operation, and they are going to invade the country, and do what we did to Afghanistan. Which is invade, ruin the infrastructure, increase the opium production. That was the inspiration, this meth-lab type of culture that were ruthless Mafiosos taking over ■ more indigenous population.

So Fangus is like this dog at the pound who has been forced to fight, and was really just a pooch. Except he gets pushed too far. I wanted to give the user ■ [running] clock, where you are enslaved, and start off in a pit fight, and have to escape. But in that fight in the beginning, right before you escape, you get bitten by the opponent, and you get this form of rabies. And you have to change this landscape before it takes you over.

So you're dealing with this infected hero, who can use this infected condition as ■ power-up, but his normal state becomes weaker. Almost like a vampire, or you're dealing with an addict...I thought we could use that addiction as a sympathy mechanism. So that you felt for this character who had to fulfill certain things in order to function, but every time you did it, it brought you closer to your ruin. And I wanted you to feel that. I was excited about that, but then, you know, market conditions, realities, relationships. Ultimately, we said, "Okay, we can't do this project."

And that was when you decided you

were done making games?

Yeah, well, that's how it got reported. What we said was, we're going to focus on understanding this new landscape. Right? And we're going to shut down the development studio. And building games the way we had been building games, we weren't going to continue doing. That was a wake-up call because it reinforced certain patterns that we saw happening in the business landscape for small developers. Which is basically, your risk was going up, your reward was getting smaller, and your effort was becoming much bigger, and the incentives were just diminishing. So why are you doing this? And is this the smartest thing you can be doing?

If you are really honest with yourself, and you're asking yourself those questions at that point in time...We really love our property, do we want to sell it? Which is where all this is heading towards, and you see most of the big developers sold if they could. You go, things have moved so fast, it's time to reevaluate. Why not reboot, forget everything, and start studying why free games are making more money than the games you pay for?

What was the most difficult thing about shutting down the studio in 2005?

The hardest thing about it for me was caring what other people would think, that's the honest truth. I knew it was the right thing to do, but, there's the, "So-and-so is going to say you guys are losing." You know, all the natural insecurities guys tend to have, and I don't claim to be outside of that possibility. [laughs]. But that was the hardest part, how I dealt with it internally in a lot of ways, Oddworld the entity, at the time, in my own mind, equated a lot of my own sense of self-worth. That was a major issue in my life all along.

You were too tied to your professional identity?

Yeah, and even with successes you never feel like you're necessarily hitting them. Your own judgment of yourself is probably harsher than ■ person who knows about you but doesn't know you. And I suffered a lot of that.

You've mentioned you didn't have what I would call a typical game designer upbringing...

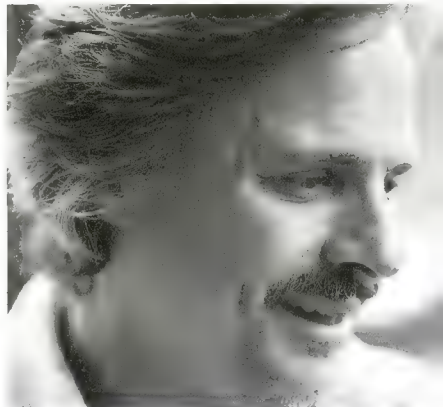
I wasn't a geek, I was into Pink Floyd, and getting into trouble, getting laid, chasing girls, and getting into fights. I was

just a wreck as a kid! [laughs] I grew up around what I would call all-American true outlaws, and for whatever reason, and my own disharmonies at home, I was always close friends with kids whose parents or fathers spent time in prison. And it's hard for a lot of people to understand what that culture really is, but I saw that poor people have different ways of fighting for their own integrity. And one of my closest friends from elementary school through high school became president of the Hells Angels in Connecticut...

And I thought a lot of things were normal, I thought prejudices were normal, racism was normal, I thought homophobic behavior was normal, I thought various elements of crime were absolutely common. And my parents were divorced, and my dad was an alcoholic, so when he got himself cleaned up, I went to see him on the weekends in Essex, which is totally bluebuck Connecticut, from the time I was nine until I was about 16, and I didn't really fit in with that culture of kids. I went to Alcoholics Anonymous meetings with my dad. But there was a lot of great fishing. I spent all my time outside with the dog, and the fish. I was a pretty angry kid, for various reasons, but I found a lot of peace being alone in nature.

So aside from your recent digital distribution efforts, what else has been going on since 2005?

In 2005 we stopped the operation of our studio to come up here and have since started a new company, called Oddmob





Incorporated. That name may change going forward, but that's the founding name of our new operation that we started with venture capital backing. We set that up in Emeryville so we're right down the street from Pixar, Will [Wright's] Stupid Fun Club. It reminds me of being in SoHo [New York] back in the '80s when it started changing from industrial to artists living in lofts, and cool galleries and cafés opening up, and you still had this old industrial feeling. I think Emeryville captures that sense, and I love that... And that's where it's getting exciting now. It's not like we'll be able to bear the fruits of five years of production, but we're going to be able to bear the results of five years of learning.

What can you tell us about your Oddmob project?

We saw the smart models that have emerged, the Facebooks, the eBays, the iTunes, the YouTubeS—it's anybody, anything, at any time, just don't cross certain lines. We started looking at that and saw there are two massive trends, people [being] social, and content [being] social. How do we make people and social media the medium for games? How does it become "playing"?

Instead of building a game like *Abe* out of CG on Maya, [you play] on your Xbox, instead of that, how does *any content* out there, out of the pool of 100 million photos being uploaded a day to Facebook, two billion YouTube videos being served a day, 24 hours of linear video are being uploaded to YouTube every minute, how does that become the fabric by which we can play games together? That's the problem we solved.

So this is like a social media gaming experience?

Instead of me saying, "Here's my characters, and here's my theme, this is game-play" this is, "Who are your friends? What content do you like? Here is a template and a format that we will be providing."

We have over 100 patents in motion right now—and what you love about great social experiences in real-time, except that you are experiencing people and content in a new way together.

So it sounds more like a service. You mentioned it was content- and genre-agnostic.

Why should it be any genre? Google is not a genre, YouTube is not a genre. They filter to whatever, whomever, and whenever. How do we capture that, with the sensibilities of what makes games great, the chemistry between people in multiplayer gaming? How do we capture that essence? And turn that into an exper-

HOW DO WE MAKE PEOPLE AND SOCIAL MEDIA THE MEDIUM FOR GAMES? HOW DOES IT BECOME "PLAYING"?

ience that is easy for people to engage in, and have access to? Maybe it's free. And how does anything they are attracted to become the thread, the fabric of their experiences with one another?

Can you be more specific?

It is a way to share the media experience en masse, online. Whether it's epic-scale, like the Super Bowl, or intimate, like you want to watch a movie with your girlfriend, except she's in New York and you're in Tokyo. We're making the spaces online, where media can be shared, live together, en masse. And we're using game tech to build that.

And you've mentioned it will be in 3D. That sounds kind of like *Second Life* or *PlayStation Home*.

It's nothing like *PlayStation Home*. What we've found, in what we've been building, [is that] people will come for people. [In] *Second Life*, the virtual world, the geek factor is too high, not enough people can jump right in. I want to find a solution where your social network, at the push of a button, gets turned into an expressible avatar, and you don't have to do anything. And when people look at it, they know it's you, just like that. If we want to have 15,000 people in one space, experiencing an event, we can do that [snaps his fingers] just like that.

It's not *PlayStation Home*, but it still sounds more like a virtual world. Is it a game?

We're looking at it this way, the chemistry of people and content together forms play. Now exactly what that is, that is what the patent applications are out there doing. But it is very simple, very fast, and very addictive... This time I don't want my audience's experiences to be dictated by the predetermined IP I'm bringing it. Instead, I want them to bring it, and give them a place where what they bring can be more exciting, more social, and more live.

And it's completely interactive?

Yes. But what I'm saying is the chemistry that makes games successful is in this, I'm not saying, "Hey! play this new game." Instead it's, "Experience this with people

you like, and see what falls out." It's already proven to be pretty eye-opening. **So when will people get their hands on it?**

This isn't something that everyone is going get to run on everyone's browsers overnight. I know I'm not being super-specific, but we'll be looking for people to be beta testers soon. We welcome interested readers to email us at signup@oddmob.com if they want to participate.

You mention some VC funding and a pretty talented group of people working with you. What do you think the chances are for Oddmob's project?

I feel like we're sitting at the perfect place on the planet, and we know there is going to be a total solar eclipse. Why wouldn't you have a camera? Our knowledge of computer graphics, our knowledge of interactivity, our knowledge of characters, and making people feel like they're in fun spaces, our knowledge of properties, the changing landscape of what's happening online, all these different things are such that we'd be crazy if we didn't do this part now. And if we do this well, and it takes off, it facilitates all kinds of new possibilities.

And if not?

If we don't, we crash on our face, and we move on. And in many ways, I haven't been willing to crash on my face before. So life is really tense, I don't want to say "I'm willing to fall now," but I see it differently. Now it's really about taking advantage of this moment in time, to create a platform that is another mechanism for harnessing mindshare and people connecting. And if we can do that well, we can prosper well, and we can finance *anything* we want. If we want to finance the *Abe* movies ourselves, we'll be able to do that. And that's where we want to be.

The *Oddworld* movie—there was an *Oddworld* movie in the works right? *Citizen Siege*?

I don't want to compromise on the *Oddworld* story. If we make an *Oddworld* motion picture today, and the studio pays for it, then the studio owns the property, period. That's what happened with *Citizen*

Siege, the studio would have owned the property... *Citizen Siege* we wanted to do as a film, and we wanted to do the game. Basically, the producing partnership we set up, for creative differences, didn't really work. The concept and intent was dead on, and a number of people thought that. I wish I could tell you the guys who were interested in writing and directing it. David Franzon [writer of the film *Gladiator*] was interested in it. He got it, he's a cool guy.

So it was going to be live action?

We first started talking about it that way, we wanted to sell the live-action picture rights and retain the game rights. What happened was, we got the development go-ahead as an R-rated animated CG motion picture, but we didn't get production go-ahead.

The financial crash of 2008, among other issues, really limited your ability to move forward with the project. Was that tough?

Personally, I think Sherry and I would be much better business people if our hearts weren't in the IP... We love the proper-

ties. If *Oddworld* is like a 1984 with a funny bone, *Citizen Siege* is 1984 with a brutal kick in the nuts. I mean, it went for the jugular, it was f***ed up. The idea of *Citizen Siege*, there are several working script treatments, there are hundreds of production paintings. When we thought we could do it as an R-rated motion picture, the climate was really changing, and it was dark. And it didn't seem like the timing was right—people were looking for hope. Still, we have it, and if we can have other successes, then we can parlay those really passionate IPs and make it all happen.


So let's talk about you and Sherry. You started as co-workers many years ago. But now you share this house together.

Part of the thing that brought us together is that we always had hard times in relationships with other people because we were working all the time. All the time! And then we found even when we weren't working we were still talking until two in the morning. Every day! Then eventually something made sense. But it wasn't

what was on the table in the beginning—and other relationships were difficult because there's such passion towards the storytelling, content, and pioneering technology. And so—we don't have kids, we're never going to have kids, life is good. And we don't have to worry about things, but there's a lot I want to create, and it's going to take a lot of money. **You're ramping up Oddworld again, you've got Oddmob going, it seems there have been a lot of lessons learned in each.**

I used to tell people in the Oddworld production studio, we're not getting paid to build games, we're getting paid to build hits. You know, "That's not good enough!" But now the new wisdom is, you want to swing for as high a quality as you can, but you really want to swing for what works for your audience.

Given the choice, you'd always rather be great than big?

Yeah, I'd rather be great than big. I'd rather be relevant than huge. Relevant and inspiring. 

PARTING SHOTS

What kind of car are you driving?

As I'veer 2001-BMW 740iL. I bought it when it was two years old, because that's the policy. [I believe in]; let somebody else pay full price, and buy it for half two years later. My next car will be something electric and fun, and the Tesla is not it. So I'm waiting for the solution.

What are you listening to?

Right now we are listening to Barn Owl. These guys are hot, [laughs] it's drone electric guitar/electonica, and it's slower than most RfPMs can measure. This is one of my recent favorites and the other thing I'm listening to, lately is Acid Crunk, DJ An-ten-nae, I saw him at Burning Man. I like electonica because it's where the most experimental sounds are taking place.

What are your favorite TV shows?

Anything made by Bad Robot: *Lost*, *Fringe*. But you know, I don't believe in cable anymore, so I have to get it on DVD or watch it on Hulu. Cable TV is dead to me. I watch shows on the internet. *Entourage* is classic, and I wish *Deadwood* would come back. I'm also addicted to whistleblower testimonies on the Internet—that is quality drama. You have to search weird things to find them. Try "Canadian minister of defense" or "U.S. minister of intelligence retired" to see where that takes you. These little code words can take you to red pill pieces of information that will rip the roof off of your reality. That's the stuff I'm addicted to! [laughs]

Favorite all-time movie?

The movie I've watched more than any other

movie—*Ghost in the Shell*. One of the best movies I think that was ever made, and I've only watched it once, and I don't want to watch it twice—*Schindler's List*.

What are you currently reading?

I just bought *Family of Secrets*, which is an extremely well-documented history of the Bush family as a criminal organization in this country. It's not like I'm a Democrat, or a Republican, I'm a political atheist. I believe everyone is full of s***. They are all making me sick.

There's a lot of art in your home, and as an artist yourself, whose art inspires you?

There's a young guy, Andrew Jones. I've given a few talks on his work, as I believe whether, completely consciously or not, he's riding the threshold of man's consciousness. His work is quite interesting; he's sort of left doing illustration and game design; he's one of the founders of Massive Black, and one of the founders of conceptart.org. And he's finding his own spiritual path, and [his] work is reflecting that. And I believe he is pretty right on.

Say you were chosen to colonize Mars, but due to luggage limits, you could only bring two personal items. What would you want to take with you?

You know what's really strange? I have a few boxes in storage, and they're taped up and closed. But I've never pulled out the contents to make anything intelligent with them, even as a display. They are photographs of family. From Latvia after the first World War, from the Pony Express in the U.S., from the plate-glass photographs of family, as it was taken around

the Civil War period. All these moments in lineage, right? And I know that those boxes, the reason I have them is because I asked my family, who I didn't believe would actually archive this stuff, to give them to me. And I didn't know what would happen to this stuff, if it weren't. And now I'm the last of the gene pool in my family, my brother's dead, my mother's dead, my father's dead. Everyone is dead, that I know of, and these boxes represent all these plate glass old photographs, that I've never really looked through. But if you asked me what is the most sentimental object of value that I'd want to have with me, it would be those boxes. Because they represent the most history that's irreplaceable. Even though they are in storage and I don't even have them visible.

You've been sentenced to death for a crime you didn't commit, and you can pick your last meal. What do you have?

[I was in for a crime] I didn't commit, I'd go a hunger strike. As a testament to, "I didn't do this, I don't want your f***ing steak. Okay, so let's just say it wasn't a crime-based scenario, but you had the opportunity to pick your own last meal, as a way of surmising what your favorite meal might be. So framed that way, or let's say I was guilty, [laughs] and it was the last meal, it would be shellfish—it would be lobster, steamed clams, mussels, and butter! A real Maine meal, corn on the cob, blueberry pie, apple pie.

The full clambake.

Yeah.



CALL OF THE WILD

With guns blazing, *Call of Juarez: The Cartel* puts a new face on the Wild West

by EVAN SHAMOON

T

echland art director and writer Pawel Seilinger looks tired, and not just because, as his dual titles indicate, he's doing the work of two men.

Rather, as you discover today, his first child is due "any day now," and the deep purple rings beneath his eyes betray a profound lack of sleep. To make matters worse, he and his teammates have spent the past several weeks working overtime to ensure that their game looks good for its public unveiling, which you're currently holding in your hands.

PUBLISHER
UBISOFT
DEVELOPER
TECHLAND
PLATFORMS
XBOX 360, PS3, PC
RELEASE DATE
SUMMER 2011

Slated for release this summer, *Call of Juarez: The Cartel* is Techland's most significant project to date. It's arguably the studio's first game to be properly positioned on the world stage, with Ubisoft investing heavily to turn *Call of Juarez* into

a major international franchise. And to provide some sense of production scale, the developers tell me that a single level in *The Cartel* will require more art assets than the entirety of *Bound in Blood*—previously its biggest game to date.

Unlike the previous two *Call of Juarez* games, it's set in the present day, trading "Old West" for "New West" but keeping "Wild West" decidedly intact. It concerns itself with the ongoing, shockingly bloody conflict in Mexico—one that has now taken more than 30,000 lives since 2008, including great numbers of police, soldiers, judges and civilians. Consider it



a child of globalization: A Polish development studio creating a game set against the backdrop of the Mexican drug war that heavily references the American Western, published by a French company and co-written by an American screenwriter in Los Angeles.

The premise is itself rather ominous and, frankly, not impossible to envision: One of the Mexican drug cartels makes a successful bombing assault on a federal law enforcement agency headquarters, killing thousands. As Techland's international brand manager Blazej Krakowiak rather succinctly explains, "There's a big explosion, and big repercussions." Immediately after the blast, hard-line U.S. politicians advocate military intervention in Mexico; in a last-ditch effort to prevent full-scale war, however, the Department of Justice forms a special team that stretches across several agencies in an attempt to solve the case by somewhat more understated means.

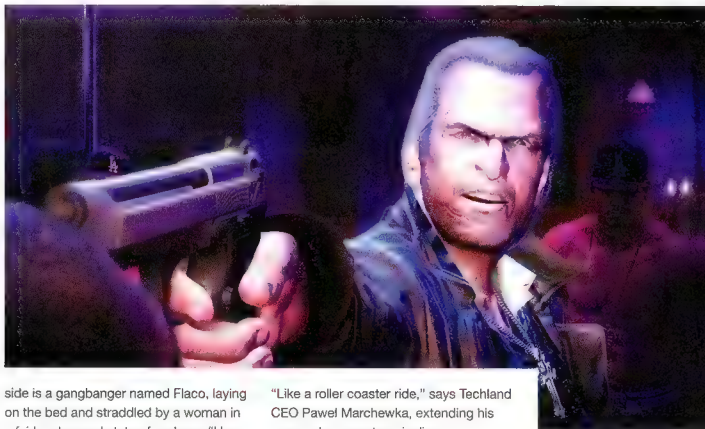
Said means are, perhaps unsurprisingly, the ragtag trio printed on the cover of this magazine: FBI agent Kim Evans, DEA agent Eddie Guerra, and LAPD officer Ben McCall (see sidebar). And while the subject matter and locations may be topical, the tone is fiction of a rather pulp variety. The cast of characters is ethically



dubious, torn both by antagonistic personal interests and some very short fuses. The likes of television serials like *The Shield*, *Sons of Anarchy*, and the recently revitalized *Southland* are cited as references, and the fast-talking, one-liner dropping antiheroes certainly have their precursors across all forms of media. Westerns remained a major source of inspiration, and the influence of contemporary American comics seems readily apparent.

While the ripped-from-the-headlines backdrop may be sensitive, the tenor is decidedly more Tarantino than *The New York Times*. Techland refers to *The Cartel* several times as an "action shooter road trip," and judging by what I've seen that description seems rather accurate. "We are more following Hollywood action movies than we are following news," says Techland CEO Pawel Marchewka. "You feel like you're in Hollywood movies, more than like playing the actual events."

The adventure begins in Los Angeles, and runs through mountain ranges, canyons, 19th-century western ghost towns, and even the Sequoia National Park, eventually terminating south of the border on the cartel's home turf. My demo took place several hours into the game, beginning with the trio of protagonists kicking open an LA apartment door. On the other



side is a gangbanger named Flaco, laying on the bed and straddled by a woman in a fairly advanced state of undress. "Hey Flaco, sorry for the cock-block," says Guerra. "Game's over, mamacita," chimes in Evans. Eventually, Flaco's coerced into wearing a wire, the sitch goes south, and I'm forced to intervene.

In terms of both attitude and appearance, a helpful point of reference might be *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* or *Saints Row*, as experienced through the first-person perspective. But the similarities do not extend to structure, as this is not an open-world game; while you'll be able to tackle the odd "ambient" crime taking place on the streets around you, the game is a decidedly linear, narrative-driven affair.

"Like a roller coaster ride," says Techland CEO Pawel Marchewka, extending his open palm up a steep incline.

Amid the strings of strip malls and Technicolor California sunsets, I'm suddenly assaulted by a cluster of brawling Mexican gangsters. When faced with non-lethal weapons, you're expected to react accordingly via the game's new first-person hand-to-hand combat system. While it's still being refined and balanced, the fighting recalls Namco's *Breakdown* and Sega's *Condemned*, with your punches, blocks and disarms made all the more personal by the POV.

Techland intends the physicality of these fights to provide a more varied experience, as well as to satisfy a par-







tical need. "I really wanted to fulfill the fantasy of meeting really bad, huge guys in the street that you're usually afraid of... you are basically not afraid of anyone, and you can beat anyone...even with your bare hands," says Pawel Zawodny (and yes, everyone at Techland is named Pawel). But it's there to further a more narrative conceit as well: "We really wanted to depict the situations to make sure that you feel like a cop during an investigation, rather than a soldier shooting everything," says Marchewka. "It's not another military game, it's a cop story. A cops story," he says, placing the considerable weight of his Polish accent on the plural.

This serves to highlight what may be the game's most significant new feature: namely, three-player online co-op. It will be of the "drop-in, drop-out" variety; should players wish to, they can go it alone, letting computer AI handle the other squad members. Teaming with friends is clearly the preferred way to play. It was one of the most requested features from fans of the series, and required rewriting of much of the engine's code to accommodate.

The protagonists will split up at certain points, finding their own way and then

rejoining later, but for the bulk of the game you'll be side-by-side with your partners. "It's one story, but each character has his own experience," says Ubisoft producer Samuel Jacques, "and some side missions have twists on co-op." Each protagonist is distinguished slightly by his or her areas of weapons expertise (Agent Evans is rather handy with a sniper rifle, for instance), but don't expect anything like the disparate character classes found in other titles.

Working together will be key to success. A "synchronized entry system" requires two players to place themselves on either side of a doorway before entering and picking off enemies in slow motion, while the somewhat awkwardly named "Move Moving" mechanic brings more tactical strategy. Essentially, when overwhelmed by enemies, one player can tell another to move, providing covering fire in order to let his or her comrade flank enemies.

I see both maneuvers demonstrated in the demo's most impressive scene, which takes place inside an LA nightclub. The previous *Call of Juarez* games featured particularly elegant, expressive gunplay, and this flair will certainly return in *The*

Cartel with a whole new set of weapons. On the tail of some ne'er-do-wells, I'm obliged to take some of these weapons out of their holsters, and using the synchronized entry system burst through the double doors to the club's main room, unveiling a scene more impressive than any I've seen of its type.

Several hundred partygoers are getting their virtual freak on beneath the flashing lights of the dance floor, which comes to a slow-motion halt as my partners and I take aim and fire at perps, sparking bedlam in every direction. Here, "police protocol" is more *Beverly Hills Cop* than *Law and Order*, and I quickly racked up the body count to prove it.

The firefight spills out into a parking lot full of steel horses, which provide both effective cover and explosive danger. The action is frenetic and intense, with emphasis clearly placed on the physical form of the gunfight. If it hasn't yet been made clear, this is blood-soaked first-person shooting. The game runs on Techland's own Chrome Engine 5, and while perhaps lacking some of the polish of the industry's more doted-upon tech, it proves itself more than capable. Dual-wielded pistols provide some rather



NO COUNTRY FOR OLD GENRES

The team is quick to point out that the move to present day doesn't negate the possibility of the series returning to the Old West. According to Krakowiak, the success of *Red Dead Redemption* in particular may just have broadened the audience. "The brand has brought some new players to the Wild West idea. We might get back to [that]; during the [marketing] campaign for *Bound in Blood*, we kept telling players that the Wild West was universal. And now we are actually proving this, by shifting to modern times and still retaining the Wild West flavor and elements of the genre."



spectacular moments, and the environment appropriately reflects my misfires.

The last portion of the demo takes place on the 101 freeway that bisects the city (here, however unlikely, free of traffic), as my team pursues suspects who escaped the crime scene on wheels. It's a common videogame refrain: One player drives as the other shoots, and after a series of near-catastrophes we catch up to the speeding SUV, finally cuffing him in a closing cut-scene. How this action will work with three players remains unclear, but I'm told that no one will ever have to sit out very long. (While competitive multiplayer modes haven't been detailed yet, the team assures that it will include

options in line with previous games in the series.)

The Cartel is not an attempt to reinvent the wheel. It's as unlikely to surpass *San Andreas*' sense of place or scale as it is to eclipse the emotional arcs of the television serials with which it shares its narrative DNA. The game is rather, Techland's attempt to recreate the classic Western in a modern milieu, borrowing form and function from cinema. It has been intensely studying and synthesizing for nearly 10 years. And if it can continue to do that with the sustained pace seen in the demonstration today, *The Cartel* will clearly be a pony ride worth taking.



Kim Evans

FBI Agent

Age: 25

Gender: Female

Kim grew up in South Central LA and was raised by a single mother who struggled to put food on the table. She lost two brothers to gang violence and her third brother is still involved with a local gang, the Rolling '50s. Determined to turn her life around, Kim earned scholarships for her education and was recruited by the FBI as part of a new training program. She's a rising star; a tough, no-nonsense, by-the-book agent who always gets the job done. She is loyal to the bureau and motivated to seek justice.



Eddie Guerra

DEA Agent

Age: 37

Gender: Male

Eddie grew up in East LA and served in Iraq with the U.S. military prior to joining the DEA. Eddie is one of the DEA's top agents in Southern California and has recovered more drugs, cash, and made more arrests, than anyone in the LA office. A bona fide risk taker, Eddie is not afraid to play a little dirty to get the results he needs. Eddie is well connected with gangs in LA and is the most knowledgeable about the drug cartels in Mexico. Though Eddie is a natural-born detective, he has a compulsive gambling habit that puts him in debt (and in a lot of trouble).



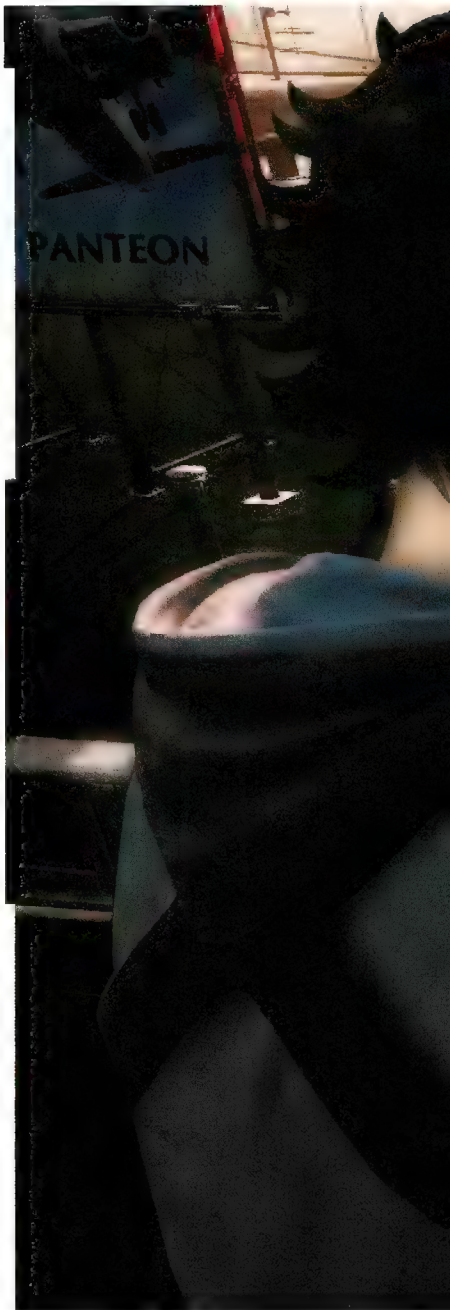
Ben McCall

LAPD Homicide Detective

Age: 57

Gender: Male

Ben, a descendant of Billy McCall (aka Billy Candle), served in Vietnam where he saw injustice on a massive scale. Following his service in the war, Ben joined the Los Angeles Police Department to protect the innocent and bring justice to corrupt and violent criminals. He is a decorated L.A.P.D. Homicide Detective and the leader of the three-person task force charged with hunting down and putting a stop to the Mendoza Cartel. Ben is a cynic and will stop at nothing to seek justice, even if it crosses moral lines.





INTERVIEW



Paweł Solinger
Techland Art Director and Writer
of *Call of Juarez: The Cartel*

Is it difficult for a Polish studio to make a game about Los Angeles and Mexico?

We have lots of reference material from the Internet, from pictures, from books—there is a lot of source material available to us without being there in person. But it is absolutely never our goal to re-create

“Games need to tell a serious story to be relevant, because if it’s just entertainment, then it’s empty.”

TECHLANDIA

Wrocław, Poland isn't exactly a hub of cutting-edge game development, but for 20 years it has been the unassuming home of Techland. The company began as a distributor in 1991; it wasn't until 2000 that it released its first internally developed game, a PC title called *Crime Cities*, and until 2006 that it received its first real taste of international acclaim with the original *Call of Juarez*, and then again with its 2009 prequel, *Bound in Blood*. The company has grown slowly but steadily since its meager beginnings, and now employs some 200 people across its Wrocław and Warsaw studios.

an ultra-realistic reality. It's not about that. It's the vision. We're not going 1:1 from Google [Street View] to the game—those are just places that have some meaning. I see the Western as a tale about the basic values in life, that is at the same time exaggerated and also a bit understated. We are creating the Western vistas, not recreating reality.

In a graphical sense, though, are you aiming for realism?

Our engine is very good at realistic graphics, so basically when you go for real life, this is what you get. I call it hyperrealism—it exaggerates certain things, and synthesizes them into what you experience.

Stepping back a bit, what is the most important thing you want to achieve with this game?

Paradoxically, because it's a new setting and it's not obviously a western, we're trying to exaggerate certain elements of the Wild West. The scorching heat of the desert, the sweat on your brow—this is the type of small detail that appears, and we sometimes want to focus on that. This modern setting obviously has a huge variety, and a completely different level of visual intensity. The number of assets from a single level exceeds [that] of the whole *[Bound in Blood]* game. Where you had a saloon, which was the centerpiece of so many western scenes, now you have the strip club—this is the disreputable place where you go for drinks and girls. You have much more movement and colors in this establishment, but the basic role of this establishment is like [it is in] the Wild West. This, for example, shows in the tiny decorations—if there's a neon sign or an ad in the disco, it's shaped as a sheriff's star or a running mustang.

Do the Mexicans in this game essentially parallel Native Americans found in classic Westerns?

For me, it was the Sergio Leone movies, and there were Mexican bandits, as such, there. And actually, the “anti-Indian” Westerns weren't very big. It's a natural transformation of the Mexican bandits into the cartel. At the start of every investigation, it begins with human nature—your greatest enemy is yourself. This is how I approach writing these characters. There is no focus on the [members of

the] cartel—the focus is on the [main] characters. The main antagonist is just the antagonist; the real test is overcoming what's inside [you]. This is the truth I am seeking.

What were your primary influences for the game?

Well, too many to name, of course. But *Training Day*, for me, is about people—not about police and bandits. It's a duel. Also *Heat*, and *No Country for Old Men*. So many others. There is a Polish action movie called *Dogs*. It's a cult movie; when people were part of the socialist state's repression, they had to become real policemen, when before they were really criminals and thugs. Another is a TV series called *Pitbull*; it's very realistic, because the director was actually making a documentary about the police, carrying a hidden camera with them for four years. The characters and dialogue are based on real people and events. I'm always attracted to extremes. When a movie shows something I can't really look at—and it's not gore or brutality, just how people can react in a situation. It can be an abolition or cleaning of sorts when you watch and absorb something so extreme.

Is it difficult for you to get into the mind and understand the subtler sensibilities of American and Mexican characters?

Harris Orkin is doing much more [for the game] this time. Last time he was supporting me, this time his contribution is greater. That's why I can focus on the things important to me—the universal values, the human nature. The context, the relations of agencies and politics are Harris Orkin's job. Also the language, the nuance of how the characters speak.

You know, some people call Poland the Mexico of Europe, for some reason. I saw this in a documentary about Americans, actually. It's because it's a lawless land, in a way—of course it's an exaggeration, but that's what they called it. But [Poland] is a young democracy—20 years is not much, and there are still people who are morally and internally destroyed by communism. The “dark period.” The history is very troubled—the 100 years under rule of three separate powers, then there was the war, and then the betrayal of communism. And then the spirit of people just got demeaned and damaged, and people became more bitter. They became anarchists, trying to find pieces of the young democracy for themselves. The spirit is numb. The faith in man is lower, and I think it shows in my stories in some way. Oh, and please don't post this recording online, because I'll get in trouble with the

nationalists. [laughs]


Are the themes you want to explore similar to those in the past games? Is the cowboy's story different from that of an FBI/DEA/LAPD officer?

It's the perfect match, except for the fact that the price of freedom is much higher.

How did you come to be creating videogames?

When I was a child, I knew I would be doing three things in life. Special effects (optical effects at the time), videogames, and the third thing I forgot. [laughs] I've been making games since Atari, for more than 20 years. Then when the time of high school and studies came, I stopped playing and stopped believing it could be done in Poland. And then Techland appeared—the only company in the region interested in making games. And so I ran to them.

Are you still hopeful that videogames can achieve the same narrative punch as movies and books?

For me, it's already a wrong question. It won't be long before you're asking if books and movies can be as good as games. Because you're involved in games, and nothing is as important as involvement. I draw a metaphor that entertainment is like chewing gum: First it's sweet, and then you forget about it. And that's it: Games need to tell a serious story to be relevant, because if it's just entertainment, then it's empty. This is why games sort of hurt their own chances in this race—they deal so much with the light "entertainment" themes, and this is why people don't see their potential. 



EVIL DOWNPOUR

Don't forget your booties. Or your axe.

by DAVID WOLINSKY

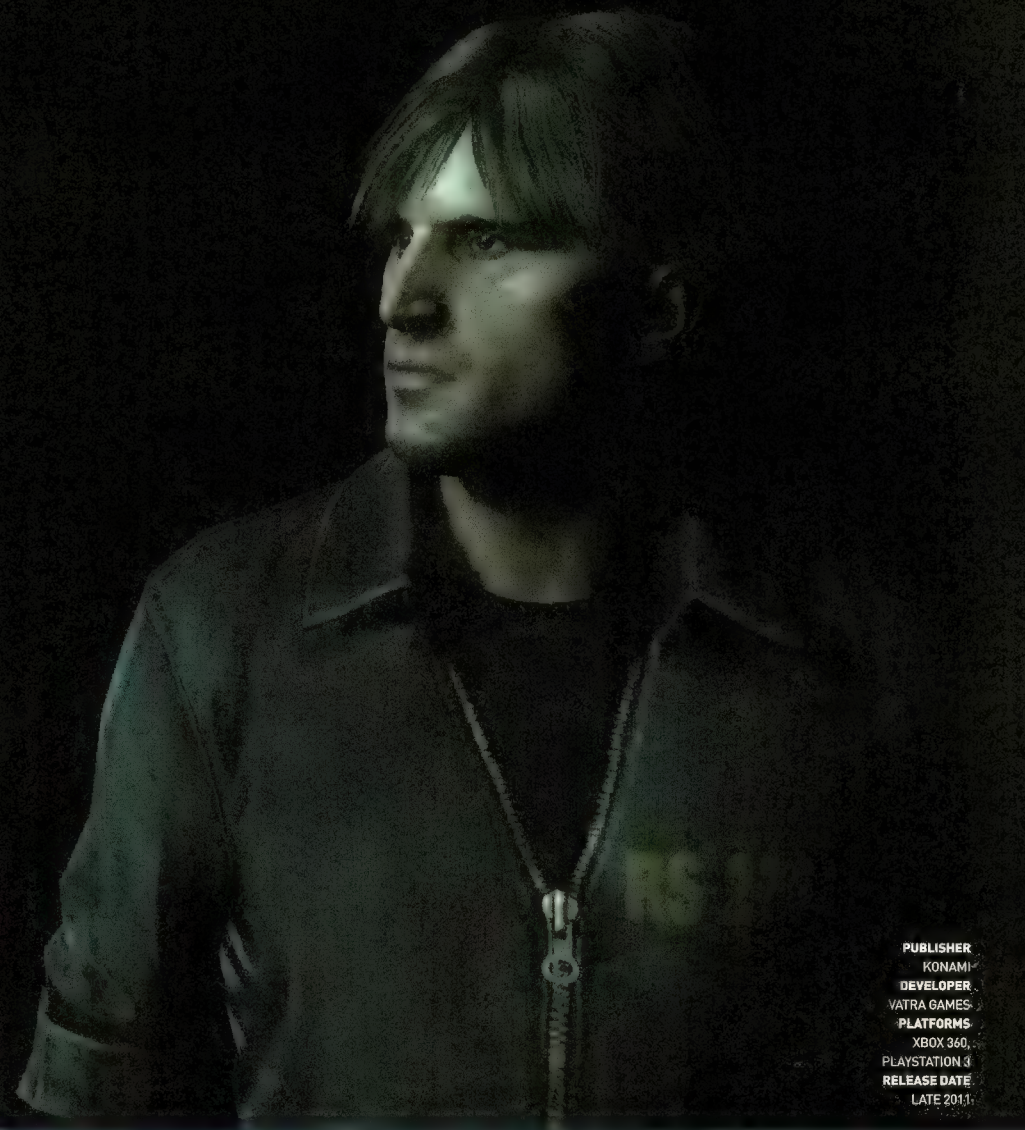
"It's never gonna be a clear, bright day in Silent Hill," Vatra Games design director Brian Gomez says with a knowing smile. To be sure, *Silent Hill: Downpour's* forecast calls for lots of precipitation, but there are plenty of reasons other than getting a little damp that the series' eighth entry is poised to rattle your bones.

In a pitch-black demo room, just before Thanksgiving last fall, producer Devin Shatsky showcased the first hour of a pre-alpha *Downpour*. And even though the Czech development team was cryptic and teasingly vague about what lay ahead, they shouldn't have much to worry about if the rest of their game

is as impeccably paced and patiently thrilling as the first 60 minutes.

PARTING THE FOG

So what the hell happens to inmate Murphy Pendleton and the prison transport he's in after it crashes near Silent Hill at the end of *Downpour's* E3 trailer?



PUBLISHER
KONAMI
DEVELOPER
VATRA GAMES
PLATFORMS
XBOX 360,
PLAYSTATION 3
RELEASE DATE
LATE 2011



Well, a lot. Problem is, I'm still just as in the dark as you, since the team intentionally skipped past the intro movie in demoing the game. I have no idea what crime Murphy committed, who that woman is visiting him in jail, or why he's even being transported.

In a post-demo interview, Gomez tells me that none of that is revealed

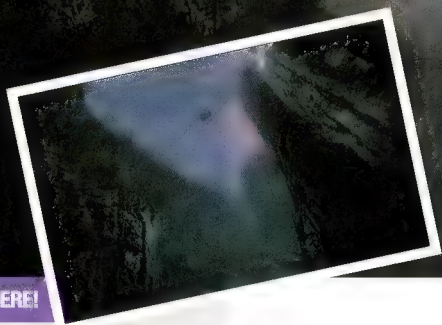
in the intro anyhow. What will be given a little more context and significance in that opening sequence, however, is *Downpour's* fixation on water.

"When it starts raining, look out," Gomez says. "You better get ready for bad s**t to start happening." That's putting it lightly. After Murphy dusts himself off from the wreckage, he tries

to seek out any other survivors in knee-deep freezing water. A bloody body lays face-down in the grass, which proves useful since it has a flashlight in its pants. Not far from there, there's a shipwrecked rowboat, with a newspaper inside bearing the headline "Freak Storm Hits Storm Hill."

Murphy presses on, and after





WISH YOU WERE HERE!

Back in 2009, the 11-year-old series got a spiritual reboot in *Shattered Memories*, a winning reimagining of the self-titled first installation that also came on the heels of 2007's prequel *Origins*. *Downpour* looks to be similarly back-to-basics, and couldn't have set down roots in a more appropriate location. Developer Vatra Games operates out of Brno in the Czech Republic. It's a lovely city (and it certainly has history: There are concert halls so old Mozart played them), though the region is notoriously bleak, foggy, and gray. Sound familiar?

On a tour of locales used as inspiration for *Downpour's* elaborate set pieces, I visited the roaming catacombs of the Capuchin Crypts and the 350-million-year-old Punkva Caves. The former is home to a mass grave and dozens of mummified corpses in glass cases, some of which were infected by the bubonic plague, and the tan-colored bodies have all been perfectly—and mysteriously—preserved just through normal exposure to Brno's air. The latter is an intricate series of caverns that have mostly been eroded due to natural wear and tear (some areas house truly bizarre stalagmites, some looking eerily and unmistakably like owls or churches), with some areas going as deep as 138 meters below the earth's surface. (And there's still another series of caves beneath the subterranean Punkva River.) Also: To date, 80 people have committed suicide by throwing themselves into the cave's abyss, which is featured in the game's second level, an abandoned amusement park called The Devil's Pit. Step right up!

carefully crossing a log bridging the gap along a chasm he eventually get to an abandoned gas station amid lots of wreckage. This being Silent Hill, the world subtly shifts from reality to freakish surreality, and one of the first weird things I noticed was a lost-dog poster, with a child's scrawled drawing instead of an actual photo. Odd.

The demo suggests that actual rain will be much more threatening, but events reach a boiling point when a diner's sprinkler system has to be switched on to put out an accidental fire. The ceiling disappears into the stratosphere, leaving only fluttering embers, and the restaurant slowly transforms into a dungeon. Paintings on the walls functioned as switches that can mechanically rotate. An indoor waterfall sits inexplicably next to a still-rocking chair as "Born Free" plays on an antique Victrola. Gears descend from the sky.

Murphy tries to run away, ducking into a hallway that goes on for forever, and when he attempts to double back, the room he came from is not the room he enters. About this sequence, Lead Designer Marek Berka says later, "[We want]

the player feeling like their character is a dungeon." Expect *Downpour* to play lots of tricks on you like this, and, really, not being able to rely on anything, ever.

TAKE BACK THE NIGHT

That same unreliability extends to *Downpour's* weapon and combat system. After taking a brief holiday in the combat-less *Shattered Memories*, you can again get up close, personal and violent. Not that you'll want to get too close all the time: breakable weapons are also returning. They won't be quite as filmy as before, but depending upon one weapon or weapon type too much can do you in. "It's a very fine line because [we want to] disempower the player, make him vulnerable," says Gomez. "By the time you're a few hours into the game, ideally we want it to be that if you see a monster, and you have a weapon in hand you go, 'I'll take you.' If you see two, 'Okay, I see the exit.' If you see three [deeply exhales], 'Ah, f*** it.'"

Not too much could be gleaned from that sole instance of combat in the demo, but Gomez insists the aim with *Downpour* is to exploit people's fight-or-



THE HILL IS ALIVE WITH THE SOUND OF MUSIC

Since the latter half of the past decade, a different studio has developed each *Silent Hill* game. *Downpour* is no different, though it breaks with another tradition by cutting loose composer Akira Yamaoka—who's scored every previous game—and hiring *Dexter* composer Daniel Licht in his stead. It's easy to see why. Licht's work on *Dexter* is exceptional at creating tension, building atmosphere, and bending moods mid-measure. Though not much of a gamer himself (before you cry foul, Licht has said in other interviews he's played *Silent Hill 2* and *Homecoming*), Licht's pedigree makes him perfect for the gig scoring *Downpour*, as his impressive credits include *Hellraiser: Bloodline* and *Children Of The Corn II: The Final Sacrifice*.

Going off the first hour of the game, I thought that Licht's varied score already felt like a perfect fit for the series. Ethereal organs wafted in the distance, barely there drops of water and faint heartbeats served as percussive lead-ins to more intense pulse-pounding, throbbing sections accompanied Murphy being chased and the town slowly morphed into the rusty Otherworld. Also noticeable was when Licht's score eased off, falling completely silent just long enough to let uncontainable suspicion rise and make my hair stand on end. And for a guy who's a self-proclaimed non-gamer, the harp arpeggios in what's presumably the tentative title track sure sound awfully reminiscent of *Zelda*'s classic dungeon theme. That can only be a good thing.



fight instincts. Murphy's not as nimble as *Homecoming's* Alex Shepherd, nor does he know how to expertly handle every weapon he might come across.

With a laugh, Gomez recalls that a lot of the guys they were using for motion capture, thanks to the Czech Republic's past policy of compulsory military service, were fighting too skillfully for the game's purposes. "There are some really fantastic martial artists here, and we had to have them dumb it down," says Gomez. It's unlikely that Murphy will be able to kill a man with a lunch tray, and don't be surprised if his precious crowbar gets stuck in a particularly fleshy enemy. And there's no shame in hiding, though senior associate producer Tomm Hulett says the monsters are more than willing to come looking for you.

Still, battles are nothing to take lightly. It was a good 45 minutes before the first enemy encounter, when a convulsing woman thrashing both her arms around like a deranged version of a windmilling Pete Townshend literally got the jump on Murphy and leapt on his back in an eerily serene courtyard. Shatsky had a leg up on the game by knowing where and when enemies and weapons were, but still got killed by the banshee even though he had an axe.

That extra challenge only adds to the town's ominous vibe, and necessitates

being wary of what's around every corner. Not much is known about what other enemies you'll run across, though the demo had a placeholder monster made entirely of smoke, the E3 trailer showed a glimpse of a silent and extremely tall... thing with sunken features, and just to keep things from being too predictable, Hulett confirmed that Pyramid Head will not be making an appearance in *Downpour*.

OFF THE BEATEN PATH

Since he's a regular guy, the team's taking great efforts to make Murphy feel like he's part of the world, and similarly, make the world itself feel real. "I think a lot of past games, not just *Silent Hill*, but games in general, stuff happens to your character and they don't react to it," says Gomez. "They can pass a dead body and be fine, or they've just been attacked by a monster and nothing seems to phase them." Murphy's body language doesn't just feed into how low his health might be; Gomez says they're building "several" walk cycles based on whether he was just attacked, near something scary, or even if it's just dark. It's going to be much more subtle than Murphy muttering to himself, "Boy, that was scary, wasn't it?" Gomez assures with a laugh.

Part of making the world feel more alive dovetails nicely with *Downpour's*

side quests. *Silent Hill* devotees won't be shocked to hear that the game will feature a variety of different endings dependent upon your choices—and the same holds true of *Downpour's* side quests. Just as you can't expect to see every ending the first time through, don't expect to have access to every optional quest. Their availabilities range from major, no-duh forks in the road (on your way to town, you have the opportunity to save or abandon a female police officer about to fall off a cliff) to more trivial ones, like whether you have Murphy favor wearing hoodies or brighter apparel. In other words, your choices affect much more than just the endings.

That said, side quests aren't instantly recognizable as such. "We don't ever want the player to find something in the world or interface that says, 'Here's a side quest!'" says Gomez. "Even if it's not related to the main story, it's still going to reveal things about Murphy and his past."

Since *Downpour* doesn't have an official release date other than "before the end of the year," this is a tad premature, but Gomez confirmed that there have already been talks about potential DLC for the game. Looks like *Silent Hill* won't go silent again for quite some time. This is one instance where a bit of rain in the forecast is more than welcome. **B+**

BIO SHOCK INFINITE

Rapture in the sky

by EVAN SHAMOON

BioShock *Infinite* does not take place 6,000 leagues under the sea, but instead high, high above it. It's a complete change of period, place, and persona from the original, but one that creative director Ken Levine sees as part of a larger theme. "We asked ourselves, 'What is *BioShock*?' and we distilled it down to two key elements," he says. "One is that you're in a world that's kind of over-the-top, kind of absurd and ridiculous, but also very much grounded and believable, the way that Rapture was. Columbia is this ridiculous city in the sky, but yet the conflict of the journey these people are on is also a reflection of the experience this country has gone through at many points in its history."

As was the case with Rapture, Columbia is a utopian city gone awry; constructed in the early 20th century, the floating metropolis was created to show off what a post-Civil War America was capable of. Corruption eventually intervened, and Columbia became a militarized city in the sky; it was eventually abandoned by America, and left to shape its own society. Just moments into the game's demo sequence, signs warn that "they'll take your gun," with barrels full of rifles lying nearby for the taking. Second Amendment, anyone?

"Columbia was a distillation of the American mission in the world," says Levine. "And I think what happened to Columbia is that two people can see the same mission, read the same set of founding documents, and take away two or three or four or a thousand different interpretations of those documents. And the interpretations are so diverse and so divergent that they'll kill each other over it. And I think that's certainly more what we're interested in talking about; not this interpretation's wrong or this interpretation's right, but more the dynamic of what happens when people encounter ideas, and how they relate to those ideas."

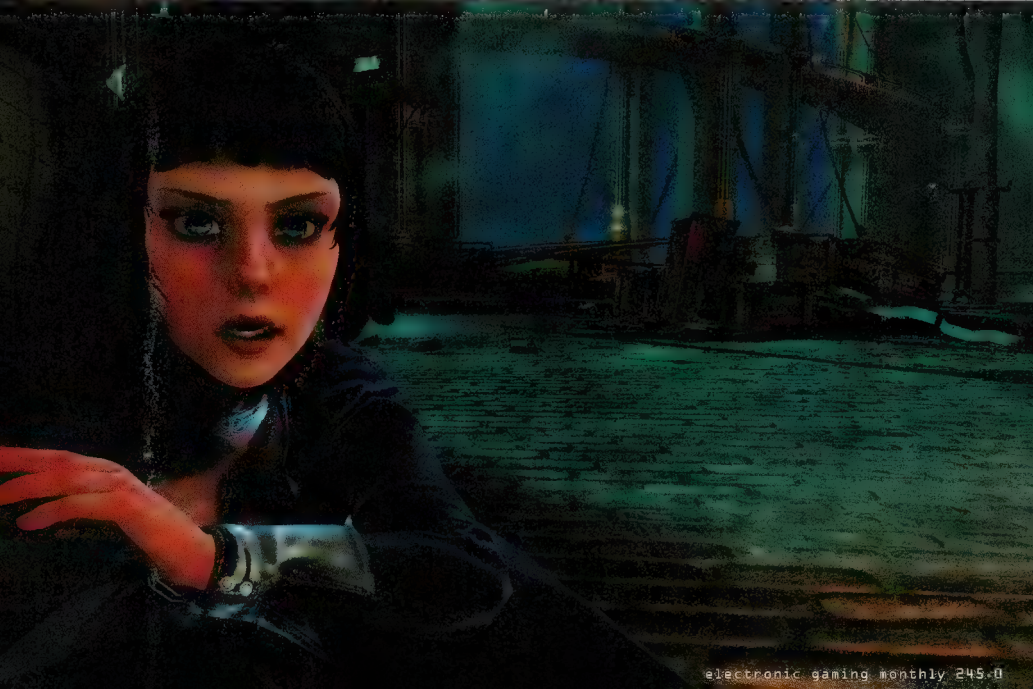
Infinite's gameplay also feels undeniably congruent with the original *BioShock*, in large part due to its core mechanic. "The other element is that we give the player dual-wielding—weapons in one hand and powers in the other," says Levine. "We were one of the first to do that back in the *System Shock 2* days, and we really followed up with it in *BioShock*. For us, dual-wielding isn't just having a second pistol, it's having very disparate powers in either hand, and I'm gonna have a lot of expression about how I approach the problems of the world through those powers."

Exactly how you choose to wield these powers, however, as well as the reactions of Columbia's many inhabitants, takes a turn for the unpredictable. "The second you saw a splicer in *BioShock*, they'd attack you right away," says Levine. "The Big Daddy and Little Sister were the only characters in the world that didn't do that, and they engendered a lot of interest in the game because you observed them in their native state." One challenge the team took on with *Infinite* was to extend that role to everybody: "Maybe it's hard to set them off," says Levine. "Maybe some guy has his lunch on the table and you touch that lunch and that's gonna set him off. Maybe he's just kinda crazy. It's much more of that Wild West feeling: You come to a space and you don't know what people are gonna do."

Asked whether his team will be dealing with sensitive issues in *Infinite*—slavery and gun rights come to mind after watching the demo, to name a couple—Levine affirms. "God I hope so," he says. "Because if you're not talking about something sensitive, what is there to talk about—chamomile tea vs. Earl Grey? You've gotta find something people are passionate about, or you're wasting your time." ☐



PUBLISHER
2K GAMES
DEVELOPER
IRRATIONAL
GAMES
PLATFORMS
XBOX 360, PS3, PC
RELEASE DATE
2012



THOR

GOD OF THUNDER

is ready to rock 'n' roll

by REBECCA SWANNER



“You could make the argument that Thor is the most powerful of the Marvel characters,” contemplates Rico Sablan, lead designer at Liquid Entertainment. “Well, some people would say Sentinel, but he’s right up there.”

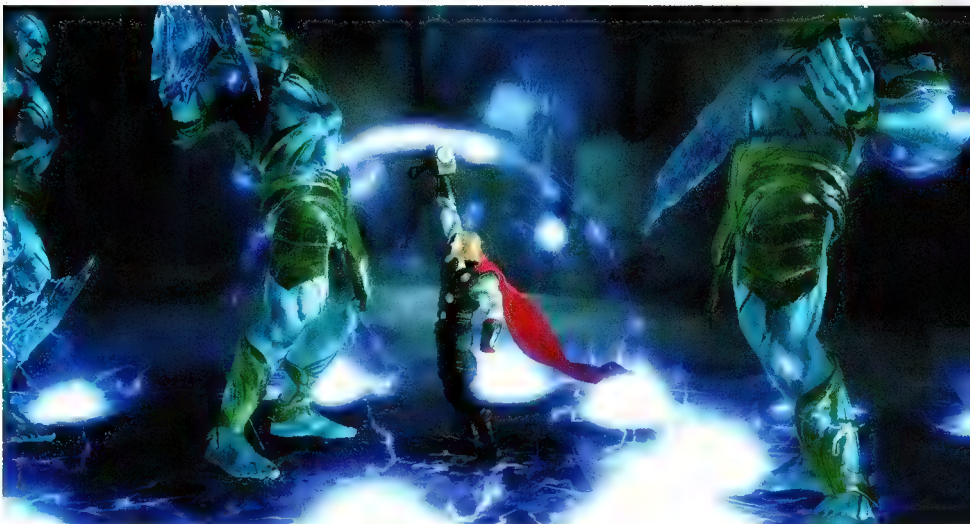
Whether you’re playing the HD version of *Thor* or the Wii version, that’s something you’ll definitely experience. You’ll wield lightning, thunder, wind, and of course, Thor’s mighty hammer as you crush all enemies. And, you can also breathe a collective sigh of relief because although the game is coming out just three days before the release of the *Thor* film, and uses the likenesses and voices of the lead actors, these are not movie-based games.

Remarkably, Marvel and Sega gave the two development teams—Red Fly (known for its underground hit *Mushroom Men*) and Liquid Entertainment (*Lord of the Rings: War of the Ring*)—an incredible amount of freedom to create their own *Thor* storylines. In both titles, the ever-mischievous Loki tries to initiate a conflict between his father Odin and his brother Thor by encouraging Thor to release the Mangog—a creature his father had imprisoned after it went mad—and

use it to take revenge on the frost giants destroying the Norse Gods’ home world of Asgard. Not surprisingly, things don’t go quite as planned, and Thor is left having to clean up Loki’s mess.

Thor’s quest will take you to four worlds—Asgard, Vanaheim, Muspelheim, Nifelheim—in the HD version and to five—Midgard—in the Wii version. In both, you’ll face off against the impressive bosses Ulich, Ymir, and Surtur before you finally go head-to-head with Mangog (for that battle you’ll team up with Loki and Odin in the HD version). It’s in the imagining of the realms and the moment-to-moment gameplay that the two versions stand apart.

The HD titles are gorgeous. The forest





VANHEIM HIM

Then there's the issue of the controls. "We don't have the four buttons or the camera stick and, because of where the Wii ends up skewing, we aimed the game to be a little more casual," Bolin says. "But, we still wanted to make the player feel powerful and like they were moving in sync with the guy on the screen so we kept the controls simple and incorporated gestures at key moments."

Most of the time, to initiate Thor's god powers (like when you bring down lightning for the Krack-a-Boom) or to whack an enemy with the Mjolnir hammer, you'll perform a series of A button presses. But, if you want to do a Ground Slam, a gesture with the controllers will make Thor pound the ground and send enemies flying.

While the graphics and control schemes are scaled back with the Wii title, Red Fly's creation lets you customize your character much more deeply through the use of runes. Where runes are used solely to regain health, experience, or magic in the HD versions, they're collectibles here.

In the first playthrough you'll unlock four rune slots and, depending on which of the dozens of runes you acquire during your journey you'll be able to enhance your melee, abilities, and magic powers in different ways. Swap these runes in and out as your play and you'll come across certain combinations that will make Thor exponentially more powerful.

I'd love to tell you what those are, but you wouldn't want me to give away everything, would you? ■

PUBLISHER world of Vanaheim looks like a lush oasis while Surtur's Muspelheim is fiery, dark, and foreboding. And Thor—whether in his classic costume, dressed in his *Ultimates* get-up or his Destroyer-themed gear—is ready to do damage, grappling onto his larger enemies and knocking them about in real time. As you progress, the experience you gain will let you unlock powerful hammer throws and intense god powers so you can execute brutal finishing moves and ram Thor's

hammer down the throat of an enemy, or pull a frost giant out of a frost goliath and deliver a crushing blow to his chest.

Red Fly had to take a different approach on Wii. Red Fly's creative director Craig Bolin explains that they went for a "stylized, hard, and colorful look. If you make a character with strong lines and strong colors, put some sweet lighting on them and get a bunch of particle effects crawling around on them, that guy is going to look great."



MMA SUPREMACY

A new mixed martial-arts game strives to be the ultimate fighting contest

by AARON BOULDING

All your favorite teams, athletes and sports leagues are polished, sanitized pageants. This is a problem for the folks at Kung Fu Factory and their *Supremacy MMA*. These veteran developers are looking to celebrate the human struggle and brutal dues-paying of cage fighting, to show that the culture around the sport is far more intense—and possibly appealing—than previous games have led us to believe.

Supremacy will be the Factory's first title as a standalone developer, a moment that lifelong friends Daryl Pitts (president) and Ricci Rukavina (CEO and creative director) have been preparing for over the last 35 years. Disparate experiences with big-budget movies (Rukavina worked for Spielberg's Amblin Entertainment on such films as *Jurassic Park*) and other fighting games—the WWF series, *Mortal Kombat*, and UFC games *Tapout* and *Undisputed* 2009—left the pair convinced that they were best equipped to make a mixed martial arts videogame that was grittier, less filtered,

and truer to the spirit of the sport.

"With this game we can go back to the roots of fighting," Rukavina explains at Kung Fu Factory's collegial offices in Santa Monica, California. "Bones break in MMA. If you go to a fight, things are different...it's even worse."

Like we see in golf and other participant sports, mixed martial arts features a high percentage of fans who fight and train themselves. The thinking is that these fans would demand authenticity in an MMA videogame because they're living the sport themselves. A focus on brutality of any kind

PUBLISHER
505 GAMES
DEVELOPER
KUNG FU FACTORY
PLATFORMS
XBOX 360,
PLAYSTATION 3
RELEASE DATE
SUMMER 2011





tends to scare away most game publishers, including ones holding UFC licenses. When Kung Fu Factory worked on some of the fight mechanics for the wildly successful *UFC Undisputed 2009*, it saw that there was another level of realism fans were missing.

Supremacy's fighting is more fireballs and dragon punches than sweet science. The whole system of strikes, combos and ground grappling is still being refined, though speed without being overly arcade-y is the target. There's also a rock-paper-scissors system where you'll always have a way to turn the opponent's advantage around, whether standing or on the ground. A strike beats a transition beats a setup/push beats a strike. Think of a setup or push as a major

move or takedown attempt that can neutralize an opponent trying to out-punch you, yet leaves you vulnerable to simple transition or counter moves. I've seen skilled players launch attacks and counter-attacks so fluidly it makes *Supremacy* look like a classic kung-fu movie, with lots of action but only an occasional solid hit.

Real life beginner-circuit MMA is full of fractured skulls and twisted legs that point in wrong directions like some mangled action figure. And Kung Fu Factory is putting this stuff in the game to "keep it real," as its devs say. "Fighting games get watered down," says Rukavina. "Whether it's *Fight Night* or an MMA game. There's blood on the mat at every fight. We don't want to

tone down our game for anyone."

Lightweight Jens Pulver is the biggest named real-life fighter associated with *Supremacy*, and he's going to be subject to the same stylized storytelling methods as the fictional mixed martial artists. The original characters are fleshed out through graphic novel-style animation with voiceovers that can be haunting at times. To the folks at Kung Fu Factory, "Lil Evil's" story, career and approach to MMA represents everything they want to put into *Supremacy*. He's fought through the ugly, dark side to the glamorous heights of MMA and lived to tell about it. We'll see if an unlicensed, unheralded MMA videogame can do the same. [E](#)





THE WITCHER 2 ASSASSINS OF KINGS

by OMAR YUSUF

Unravel the mysteries of women, a secret conspiracy and your own identity in CD Projekt RED's newest quest.

When a strange, new idea challenges the conventional thinking, one of two things will happen: The idea is either embraced or totally rejected. Luckily for developer CD Projekt RED, *The Witcher's* attempt to defy the boundaries of its genre found favor among RPG fans upon its October 2007 release. And with only a few more months of planned development left, *The Witcher 2: Assassins of Kings* promises to inspire even more devotion to the series.

Though CD Projekt RED originally intended to develop only an expansion for the original game, the powers-that-be upgraded the project into a fully realized sequel, much to the delight of fans. In fact, it's those same fans who are helping to determine the tenets of *Assassins*. Elements like the new combat system were directly inspired by fan suggestions.

Before getting ahead of ourselves, let's review the story so far: In *The Witcher*, you played as Geralt of Rivia, an ivory-haired swordsman who boasts supernatural strength and agility courtesy of body-altering mutagens. An amnesiac,

Geralt is complimented by a cast of brazen adventurers who, together, comprise what is left of an ancient, monster-hunting order known as The Witchers.

Assassins picks up the storyline immediately where the first game left off. With the stability of the kingdom under threat, monster-hunting Witcher extraordinaire Geralt will have to investigate and eventually bring an end to a cabal of Witcher-like assassins who, as the title implies, are intent on taking out the king. Luckily, *Assassins'* in-game world has grown to reflect the newly epic nature of the narrative's more comprehensive size.





You'll be travelling more, engaging in more politics and, most importantly, will face the same kinds of agonizing moral dilemmas which will leave you pacing around your desk for an answer.

In revising the combat system of the original *Witcher*, CD Projekt RED faced conflicting complaints from the community bemoaning too much constraint and too much choice. In an attempt to appeal to everyone, the developer's crafted an even more dynamic combat system. So whether you prefer to run headlong into the chaos of battle or step back and strategize, *Assassins* should hopefully have you covered.

Part of *The Witcher's* appeal is con-

tained in its ability to confront mature subject matter, particularly themes like faith, sexuality and violence. Though the game took strides in the right direction, features like in-game, sexually explicit playing cards made the efforts feel juvenile. CD Projekt intends to remedy that problem by permanently embedding these themes into the story. As opposed to the hackneyed mini-games so often included in other RPGs, *Assassins* will force you to act on your own desires and aspirations during dialogue scenes. Don't expect to find any silly button-pressing events here.

Morality will once again play a considerable role, and CD Projekt is striving to move beyond the simple black-and-white

options of other games. After the release of *The Witcher*, the studio went straight to work on a new engine, replacing the technology it licensed from BioWare for the first game. The new RED Engine tech is specifically tailored to suit the needs of the new game, allowing you to change the course of events more often, in more ways, and with more variables considered. The result lets the studio tell its story while simultaneously giving you the tools to tell your own. That's the idea, anyway.

Slated for a mid-May release, *The Witcher 2* should give us all one more reason to avoid the unbearable summer heat in favor of the cooler (albeit blood-stained) pastures of Temeria. **B**

PUBLISHER
ATARI, CD PROJEKT
DEVELOPER
CD PROJEKT RED
STUDIO
PLATFORMS
PC
RELEASE DATE
05.17.11

SKULLS OF THE SHOGUN

The action-role playing experience for the haunted cartoon generation



by ALEJANDRO QUAN-MADRID

Skeleton samurais don't get much respect—maybe it's the got-no-skin thing. They'll get the rare chance to prove their worth in Haunted Temple Studios' inaugural game, *Skulls of the Shogun*. Lead designer Jake Kazdal is endeavoring to put a unique spin on the turn-based-strategy genre—emphasizing pick-up-and-play gameplay over the traditional layers of menus and statistics—and so far he and his team are off to a promising start.

"It's a cross between football and chess," says Kazdal. Football? Well, for one, you'll have to choose what kind of offense and defense to run in feudal-era Japan. Do you send your squad of undead soldiers—grunts, cavalry, archers, etc.—to gang up on the enemy for an early advantage? Or do you "haunt" the rice paddies and summoning shrines to control the map's resources and try to win by numbers? You can also have your warriors eat

the skulls of their enemies to gain extra hit points and eventually transform into a special demon with an extra attack. Conversely, you might want your fox monk to purify the skulls of your fallen comrades to keep your enemy from eating them.

And chess? Your army has a powerful, mustachioed general who is both an asset—he gets an extra turn in battle—and a liability, since his death means game over. This unit, along with the

enemy's counterpart (i.e., a rival general or Japanese other-world creature), is for the most part a mix between a chess king and queen.

Fans of *Advance Wars* should feel right at home. One of the key differences, however, is that you control your troops in a looser, freeform fashion instead of via traditional grid-based movement.

Skulls of the Shogun also features simplified stats. In the version I played, each shogun's hit points hovers in the teens, while sword and shield symbols represent attack and defense values. The controls are similarly straightforward. On the Xbox 360, each action command (attack, haunt, eat skulls) corresponds to a separate face button.

This all falls in line with Haunted Temple Studio's mantra of "arcade meets TBS (turn-based strategy)." Kazdal stresses that, "It's not necessarily as in-depth and

PUBLISHER
TBA
DEVELOPER
HAUNTED TEMPLE
GAMES
PLATFORMS
XBLA, PSN, PC
RELEASE DATE
SUMMER 2011






about stats [as other strategy games]; it's about each game, sitting down, and playing it."

What helps these digestible chunks of gameplay go down is the quirky humor peppered throughout. Working through the intro, I found that the playful, goofy banter between the simple-minded skeletons made learning the ropes a joy. Ironi-

cally, the title wasn't always supposed to be lighthearted. Haunted Temple Studios initially envisioned a more serious experience and added the comedic dialogue to serve as a placeholder. "People kept play testing it and laughing at it," says Kazdal, "and they were like 'this is really funny.'" He describes the text as "just this stupid s**t we threw in," but then, based off of

the feedback, he and the team decided to keep *Skulls of the Shogun* "on the goofy side of the story spectrum."

It might just be the humor that helps this project stand out. A strategy game that isn't afraid to show its funny bone could be quite refreshing, or at least as refreshing as a tale about mystical skeletons who cannibalize each other can get. 



The story of *FEZ*, a charming platformer coming to XBLA this year, began back at the 2008 Independent Games Festival. Montreal's Phil Fish proudly introduced his baby to the world in an irresistible single-level demo, and *FEZ* became an indie darling overnight—claiming the IGF's Excellence in Visual Art award in the process. He was suddenly faced with the enviable task of having to assemble a *real*, full game. He enlisted a tiny crew of specialized independent talent at the newly christened Polytron Corporation, and buckled-down to create a nuanced adventure for brave little Gomez, the would-be hero of *FEZ*.

Fish cites two critical trios as world-shattering gaming influences. "It was Christmas 1988. I received a NES with *Super Mario Brothers*, *Tetris*, and *The Legend of Zelda*. To this day, I consider this trifecta to be one of the most important and influential things to ever happen to me. Those three games taught me everything I know about game design. This will be painfully obvious to anybody who plays *FEZ*. They taught me the basics, the

more mechanical side of things—good controls, systems and world-building."

The other treasured trio may have saved his gaming soul. "Later in life, just when I was starting to get bored with games, three came along that redefined everything: *Rez*, *Ico* and *Katamari Damacy* are all sacred to me. They changed my idea of what games could be," proclaims Fish. "What this trifecta taught me was more about personal vision and art. Three games with unique, beautiful

and pure visions. Simple games, all of them, focusing on a few important things that they did better than most other games. They were all unique, trippy and completely different. I could tell they were the product of a few focused, brilliant minds."

Leaving loads of untapped game concepts on the table, Fish now devotes every waking minute to polishing and perfecting *FEZ*—which, at this time, is largely content-complete. Steeped in nostalgic game design and aesthetics, *FEZ* chronicles the adventures of Gomez, a 2D man on a voyage of discovery into the mysterious third dimension.

"The story really takes a backseat to everything else in the game," Fish explains. "It isn't a story as much as a lore, or internal logic. Almost nothing is explained, but there's enough information lying around for people to piece together what happened, and why. There's about as much story as *Super Mario Brothers*, but about as much lore and internal logic as *LOST*—except it makes sense."



It's Gomez time!

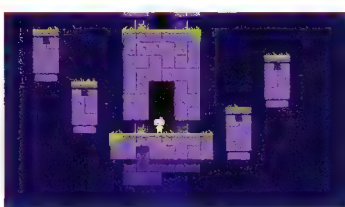
by MIKE GRIFFIN





THE POLYTRON TEAM

While personally overseeing all aspects of art and gameplay for *FEZ*, Phil Fish is aided by programmer Renaud Bedard, animators Paul Robertson and Adam Saltsman, Brandon McCartney on sound effects, and chiptune veteran Disasterpeace (a.k.a. Rich Vreeland) has composed an exquisite 8-bit soundtrack.



Gomez learns he's the chosen one, with a gift of vision into the third dimension. This presents itself in the form of 3D axis rotations in a 2D world, built inside Polytron's custom Trixel engine. The perspective-shifting rotations are beautifully executed, while triumphant discoveries and solutions erupt in colorful 3D effects. The goal, however, is to adhere to a minimalist aesthetic, with background wireframes and other primitive shapes. Fish makes it clear that these choices also tie into the story.

CUBES FOR THE WIN

"The game world isn't hostile. The worst thing that usually happens is you'll miss

a jump and fall to your death, but there's no consequence for death," says Fish. "No lives, no health—we just respawn you where you were before you died. There are no enemies and no bosses. No combat whatsoever. No bad guys. No confrontations, no antagonism. No gods or kings... only Gomez."

Sure enough, the primary goal in *FEZ* is to collect cubes. Sixty-four shiny golden cubes tucked away in vast, cleverly-designed platforming worlds. "They are our *Mario 64* stars, or *Zelda* Tri-force shards" explains Fish. "They're what you're looking for as you explore the world. It's very simple. Some cubes are floating here and

there, or placed inside treasure chests, and others are hidden behind layers of obscure meta-puzzles."

FREEDOM THROUGH FREEDOM

The Polytron team relishes its role as independent, self-sufficient XBLA developer, yet Fish isn't blind to the potential risks. "It makes some stuff a lot harder," he says, "but when I call Microsoft to tell them that *FEZ* is delayed, all they say is 'That's your call, you're self-published.' So that's very nice. Of course they could always drop us without any notice and we'd lose our XBLA slot, which is really terrifying. But hey, that's freedom! Horrible, horrible freedom!"

PUBLISHER
POLYTRON /
MICROSOFT
DEVELOPER
POLYTRON
PLATFORM
XBLA
RELEASE DATE
2011

04.18.11

MORTAL KOMBAT

360, PS3 - Warner Bros. Interactive

For the first real *Kombat* on the current-gen systems, you'll not only get Fatalities in high-def, but a deeper combo system, a three-tiered super meter for special moves and new online options.



04.18.11

PORTAL 2

360, PS3, PC - Valve

Not only will this stand-alone sequel have many more puzzles to solve, but it also boasts a two-player co-op mode where the problems are doubly hard.



LAUNCH POINT

LAUNCH POINT: GAMES OF NOTE

03.01.11

FIGHT NIGHT CHAMPION

360, PS3 - EA Sports

Besides changing the number of ways you can punch people, this boxing sim also adds one-punch knockouts, one-button blocking and a more dynamic camera. EA's first M-rated sport game will be brutal at the very least.

03.01.11

BIONIC COMMAND REARMED 2

XBLA, PSN - Capcom

While the 3D version failed miserably, this sequel to the downloadable *Commando* does add one of that game's mechanics: Nathan can now jump when he doesn't feel like swinging.

03.01.11

MLB 11 THE SHOW

PS3, PS2, PSP - Sony

Besides a new analog system for batting, pitching and fielding, the new *Show* also boasts a new co-op mode so you can play 2-on-2, 2-on-1 or even 2-on-the-computer.

03.01.11

RIFT

PC - Trion Worlds

In this epic fantasy MMO, cataclysms don't just happen once, they're ongoing, as the forces of evil use holes in time and space to invade your world.

03.07.11

MLB 2K11

360, PS3, Wii, PC, PS2 - 2K

Along with the usual updated rosters

every sports game gets annually, this year's model also features smarter and better looking players.

03.03.11

HOMEFRONT

360, PS3, PC - THQ

With a story that has North Korea invading the U.S., we're hoping this first-person shooter is more fun than it is timely. If not, hi Glorious Leader!

03.08.11

DRAGON AGE II

360, PS3, PC - EA

Besides adopting the conversation system from their brethren game *Mass Effect*, BioWare are also altering the combat and upgrading the visuals for this fantasy RPG.

03.09.11

ELEMENTS OF WAR

PC - Kalypso USA

While most real-time strategy games let you control the military, this one also lets you control the weather, attacking your enemies with earthquakes, tornados and other natural disasters.

03.15.11

TOTAL WAR: SHOGUN 2

PC - Sega

Though the original delighted RTS fans with its solid mix of strategy and tactics,

this sequel is still adding a fresh coat of visual polish, among other tweaks.

03.15.11

OKAMIDEN

NDS - Capcom

Like its big brother *Okami*, this playful *Zelda*-esque puzzler casts you as a furbal who must use the Celestial Brush to draw the shapes and patterns you need to get by.

03.15.11

TOP SPIN 4

360, PS3, Wii - 2K Sports

Not only does this tennis game have more pros than before—including Andre Agassi, Michael Chang and Boris Becker—but their egos will be satiated by the new TV-style presentation.

03.15.11

SWARM

XBLA, PSN - Ignition

If you thought *Pikmin* could've used more minions, and that those minions could've used more legs, and that those legs would be could move strategically, here we got a game for you.

03.15.11

GODS EATER BURST

PSP - 03

While the name says it all, for those in need of more explanation, let's just say that this action-RPG lets you be the *Hunter of Monsters* (hint, hint) in a *Final*

Fantasy-esque world.

03.22.11

CRYSIS 2

360, PS3, PC - EA

While yes, this is a sequel, its creators assure those of us who missed the PC-only original that we won't be lost, story-wise, when we start up this sci-fi first-person shooter.

03.22.11

THE TOMB RAIDER TRILOGY

PS3 - Square Enix

Besides 2006's *Tomb Raider: Underworld*, this collection also includes 2006's *Tomb Raider: Legend* and 2007's *Anniversary* (an upgraded remake of the original *Raider*) for the first time on PS3.

03.22.11

DISSIDIA 012[DUODECIM] FINAL FANTASY

PSP - Square Enix

A brawler set in the *Final Fantasy* universe, this sequel to 2008's *Dissidia: Final Fantasy* not only adds new fighting mechanics and characters but a RPG-lite single-player mode as well.

03.22.11

THE SIMS MEDIEVAL

PC, Mac - EA

Finally, a version of *The Sims* for people who spend their weekends at renaissance faires. Or *Lord Of The Rings* conventions. Or making obvious *Pulp Fiction* jokes...

04.19.11

SOCOM 4: U.S. NAVY SEALS

PS3 - Sony

While this follow-up to the online-only *Confrontation* has web-based battles as well, it's notable for being the first installment of this third-person tactical shooter series on PS3 to have a story mode.



03.08.11

UNCHARTED 3: DRAKE'S DECEPTION

PS3 - Sony

Besides an all-new adventure, *Uncharted 3* (and the other titles in the series) brings the action-RPG genre to the next level with its sequel as a series of awards in a Karaoke Bonanza (Charleston & Krawinkel's firm).

03.29.11

THE THIRD BIRTHDAY

PSP - Square Enix

The third game in the *Parasite Eve* series, and first in more than a decade, this action-RPG will let you control any member of your party as you work together to defend Manhattan from The Twisted.

03.29.11

SHIFT 2 UNLEASHED

360, PS3, PC - EA

It may have dropped part of its name, but this racing sim is indeed the sequel to 2008's respected, realistic and beautiful *Need for Speed: Shift*.

03.29.11

WWE ALL STARS

360, PS3, Wii, PS2, PSP - THQ

While their *Smackdown* series goes for (relative) realism, *All Stars* is taking a more arcade approach, with unrealistic moves and cartoonishly huge characters.

03.29.11

THE FIRST TEMPLAR

360, PC - Kalypso USA

Kind of like Assassin's Creed in reverse, this action-RPG casts you as a Templar and a heretic in 13th century France who must work together to uncover a conspiracy.

03.29.11

TIGER WOODS PGA TOUR 12: THE MASTERS

360, PS3, Wii - EA Sports

For the first time in this golf game's history, you'll be able to take a shot at The Masters. Which is kind of like golf's version of The Super Bowl. With less interesting commercials.

03.18A.11

GHOSTBUSTERS: SANCTUM OF SLIME

XBLA, PSN, PC - Atari

Picking up where the last *Ghostbusters* game left off, this isometric arcade shooter casts you—or you and three friends—as Egon and crew's new coworkers.

03.18A.11

ICO/SHADOW OF THE COLOSSUS COLLECTION

PS3 - Sony

Not only does this collection have both of these cult classics upgraded to HD, but it will also support 3D and, in the case of *Ico*, contains a different ending.

03.18A.11

VOOSTARZ

360, PS3 - Yoostar Entertainment

Using your 360's Kinect or your PS3's Eye, this movie karaoke game lets you star in your favorite movies, and then get judged on your performance like a real actor.

REVIEW CREW

DEAD SPACE 2

The scary sequel gets it really, really scary

By Tom Hogg

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Unlike so many other games tagged as "survival horror," the original *Dead Space* really was a horror you had to survive. Mixing gunplay, situational puzzles and genuine frights, it was like *Aliens* if Ripley had gone to LV-426 alone, the titular creatures were designed by Clive Barker, and director James Cameron was on a steady diet of Marilyn Manson videos. Thankfully, most of the basic elements are intact (to say the least) in this sequel, which once again pits poor Isaac Clarke against a horde of alien zombies, a

tattered environment, his own fractured psyche, and monsters of the human variety. But while *Dead Space 2* is every bit as invigorating, unnerving and involving as the original, it occasionally (though not critically) comes up a bit short.

It's been three years since the events of the original game, but they're all a blur to Isaac. All he knows is that his old pals the Necromorphs have turned up uninvited on a space base called The Sprawl. How he, and they, got there is a mystery.

From the get-go, it's clear that many of the things that made the first game so frighteningly good are carried over to this sequel, such as the disturbing imagery, the tight controls, and the horror movie scare tactics. More importantly, it has

THE CREW



PAUL SEMEL
Freddy Cut

Thanks to an unfortunate incident involving *Silent Hill 2* and a pair of arguing fellows, Paul can't play scary games late at night. Or early evening. Or when it's overcast.

Liking: *Black Rebel Motorcycle Club's Live in London*

Not Liking: State cupcakes

Reading: Richard Stark's *Deadly Edge*



STERLING MCGARVEY
Time Marches on Naveन्द्रing

With the third consecutive year of Capcom's 2D fighting games dropping in first quarter, Sterling's starting to think Christmas comes late every year.

Liking: Dante, Wolverine, Iron Man/Magneto/Ryu

Not Liking: Dr. Doom as the New Sagat

Wishes: He'd bought those Europe-exclusive *SingStar* discs (Motown) while he was across the pond



JASMINE MALEFICENT REA
Fight It Out!

Letting nostalgia rule your gaming experiences is the fastest way to lose a fight in a strategy RPG. Jasmine learned this after repeating the same fight eight times.

Liking: *DC Universe Online*

Not Liking: How much life she's losing to *DC20*

Currently Dreading: Doing her taxes



MIKE MINOTTI
Awesome Arsiana, Dude

Mike lost a lot of money this NFL season. Betting it all on the Lions wasn't the smartest move.

Liking: *World of Warcraft: Cataclysm*

Not Liking: Carpal tunnel syndrome

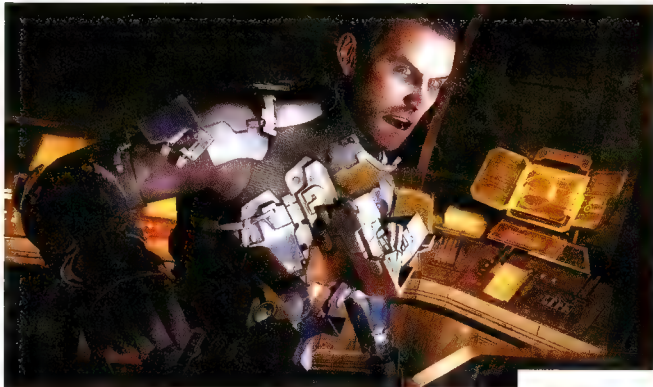
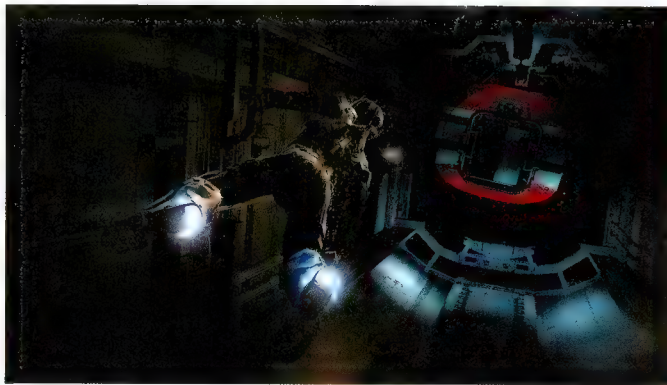
Arby's Sauce: Not just for roast beef sandwiches



the same genius sound design and light/shadow interplay that gave the original such a horrific atmosphere. You know a game has set a scary mood when the sound of a "Get Well" balloon popping makes you jump.

EA's even included an added bonus for PS3 people: a Move-enabled version of *Dead Space: Extraction*, the excellent light-gun game originally released on the Wii.

But while *Dead Space 2* has most of the basic elements that made the original so good, it's somewhat lacking in boss battles and clever situational puzzles. They're less common, less epic, and none are as taxing—physically or mentally—or as varied as those in the first



game. This time out you're mostly just running from point A to point B.

Not that going from A to B gets boring. There are plenty of enemies and other scary bits to keep you occupied. In fact, it isn't until you stop and think about it that you realize not a lot has happened. When you're going through it, you just get so caught up in the tension and the action that you don't realize what you're missing.

It isn't all the same old thing, however. For starters, Isaac has to contend with

some new Necromorphs. Stalkers will flank Isaac before running at him full speed, The Pack are like a bunch of six-years-olds at an all-you-can-eat sundae bar that's just run out of hot fudge, while The Puker and The Spitter are pretty self-explanatory. And gross.

Luckily Isaac's learned some new tricks. He can now hack terminals using a rather easy stick-wiggling maneuver like the one Batman and Sam Fisher use to pick locks. He's also traded in his magnetic boots for a pair with little jets

PUBLISHER
ELECTRONIC ARTS
DEVELOPER
VISCERAL GAMES
PLATFORMS
XBOX 360,
PLAYSTATION 3, PC
PLAYERS
SINGLE-PLAYER,
2-8 MULTIPLAYER
ESRB
M - MATURE
RELEASE DATE
01.25.11



Brett's been so into *Assassin's Creed* lately that he's playing the Facebook game—and it's not even good!

Liking: *Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood*

Not Liking: Debag console updates

Synergy in Action: Brett expects to see—and play—more Facebook tie-ins to major franchises in the coming year.



Eli is spending this month in Europe, enjoying wines, cheeses, and currency exchange fees.

Liking: Rumors of iPad 2 coming with a Retina Display

Not Liking: The fact that there isn't (currently) a mobile GPU capable of pushing that res in games

Economy Plus Seating Update: Totally worth every penny



Aaron recently ate a pretzel the size of his own head. If real life had Achievements, that's 20G alone.

Liking: That every new day is a day closer to the 3DS

Not Liking: The projected battery life of the 3DS

Gaming Memory: Playing "big monna" vs. "little kids" against his sister Christie, with *Combar's* planes on the Atari 2600



Brady's still whining about the Colts, but there's always next year—and the pleasure of remembering the Jets took out the Patriots. Good times.

Liking: *FuelTank Shooter 2*

Disliking: The end of football
Ready For: The summer weather to return when it's really summer

that let him zip around in zero-g.

Unfortunately, some of the other additions don't actually add much. By moving the action from a space ship to a space station, the game's environments gain some diversity. But while the school setting is particularly upsetting, in a good way, having a shootout in a food court just isn't as engaging as one in a cramped engine room.

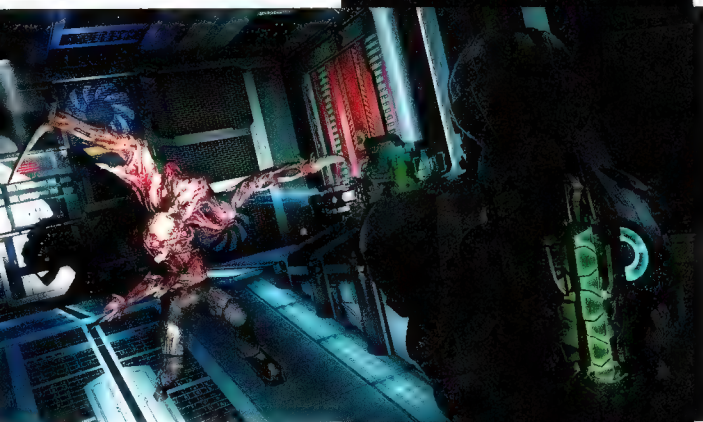
Then there's multiplayer. In it, four humans have to complete such objectives as gathering parts for a Shockmine, while four Necromorphs try to stop them. And then you switch sides. But even if you ignore the conceptual inconsistencies—Necromorphs are more instinctual than intellectual, and would never use strategy like a person would—and the fact that playing with others ruins the



scary vibe, the real problem is that it's just...meh. Sure, it has some depth: leveling up, multiple playable characters with different weapons or abilities, etc. And it gets points for trying to offer more than just Team Deathmatch. But with only the one mode, the objectives all being pretty similar, and most of the characters moving too slowly for multiplayer, it just isn't that compelling.

Then again, this kind of game just doesn't lend itself to competitive multiplayer, so it's hard to imagine someone being disappointed by something they probably weren't going to play anyway.

Dead Space 2 is not going to win over anyone who hated like the original. But for lovers of the first game, as well as fans of *F.E.A.R.*, *Resident Evil* and/or *Silent Hill*—this is a seriously solid sequel. Everything that worked the first time is intact, while the new adventure is just as compelling without being a rehash. Sure, it's a little shallow, but when you're slowly moving through a corridor, nervously twitching because some freaky space zombie might jump out at you at any moment, you won't miss a thing. **B**



DEAD SPACE 2

9.5

THE GOOD

Has all of the original's great mechanics

THE BAD

Could use more (and more involved) puzzles and boss battles

THE UGLY

The school section is unapologetically twisted

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MARVEL VS. CAPCOM 3: FATE OF TWO WORLDS

My God, it's full of stars!

by STERLING MCGARVEY

By all accounts, *Marvel vs. Capcom 3: Fate of Two Worlds* shouldn't exist. Between all the intellectual property entanglements and exclusivity deals and rooms full of lawyers it's a miracle that *Marvel vs. Capcom 3* ever got past concept art. Nevertheless, Capcom's slowly but methodically brought us to this release, first with *Street Fighter's*

triumphant return, then with its triumph over barristers and IP-holders by *Tatsunoko vs. Capcom*. And all those reissued classics on XBLA whetted our 2D fisticuff appetites for years, proving that there's still a market for these games. As the in-game announcer proudly crows, *Marvel vs. Capcom 3* is here, and it's a highly satisfactory package that beautifully complements its antecedents.

MvC3 continues the tradition of high-velocity team-based combat made so popular in the late '90s. It weds proven elements of the formula (lightning-fast attack combos, temporary aid from teammates) with adjustments and updates (a sense of persistence to its stat-tracking, 3D graphics) that bring it up to the needs and standards of contemporary fighting games.

Arguably the most noticeable update of *MvC3* is the transition from the sprite-based art of over a decade past to lush visuals that evoke both comic books





PUBLISHER
CAPCOM

DEVELOPER
CAPCOM

PLATFORMS
XBOX 360,
PLAYSTATION 3

PLAYERS
1-2 OFFLINE,
2-8 MULTIPLAYER

ESRB
T - TEEN

RELEASE DATE
02.15.11

and *Viewtiful Joe* in a broad swath. Back in the '90s there was a sense of real velocity to the action, but in this contemporary update there's a genuine fluidity that matches the speed. The HD visuals are imaginative, colorful, and aesthetically dazzling—though admittedly, it won't take long to realize why the game features a seizure warning. *Marvel vs. Capcom 3* turns the famous Wolverine quote on its head: "It's one of the best at what it does, and what it does is pretty."

While *MvC3* certainly shows off how today's consoles can rework a classic formula with contemporary graphical flair, it also includes some subtle gameplay tweaks that truly bring the game from 2000 to 2011. There's a new simplified control mode option—special attacks

real streamlining of the process.

It's also a more intelligent fighting game than its predecessors, thanks to small conveniences that keep up with the times. Now you have the option to save pre-set trios to quickly bounce back after defeats. Like *Street Fighter IV*, *MvC3* tracks your play data, determines (based on cumulative points earned across several categories) how defensively and offensively you play, and allows you to personalize your online identity with badges and nicknames. It stat-tracks which characters you lean on the most (apparently I've used Dante some 88% of my battles thus far). They're small things, yet they're important.

Despite my Dante dependency, the mix of characters is interesting. Granted, there's the possibility that well after this

review is published we'll see the likes of Zangief and Venom making their returns, but for now there's a sense of "Character X feels like he/she has elements of Character Y mixed with Z." The roster is packed with famous characters, past and present, who've never been in a fighter, such as Dante and Amaterasu on the Capcom side and Deadpool and Phoenix on the Marvel side. It's a solid mix of fighters. At the same time, I wonder how much the implementation and addition of new fighters via DLC will affect the game's long-term balance. Time will tell.

Marvel vs. Capcom 3 is a wonder to watch and a treat to play. If you've kept tabs on Capcom's fighting shenanigans over the last few years it's easy to see how things have evolved to reach this point. In the same way that *Street Fighter IV* resurrected the spirit of 1991 with its fantastic return to form, *Marvel vs. Capcom 3* evokes the frenetic, flashy pace of a by-gone era when arcades began to wilt but a few titles stood strong. It's an outstanding fighter that'll win you over easily. **A-**

MARVEL VS. CAPCOM 3

9.0

THE GOOD

Colorful, dazzling fighting fun

THE BAD

Boss fight may cause controller spiking

THE UGLY

Has a *Marvel vs. Capcom* game ever had a good soundtrack?



TEST DRIVE UNLIMITED 2

Roads? Where we're going, we don't need roads.

by AARON THOMAS

It has been nearly a half decade since *Test Drive Unlimited* surprised gamers worldwide, which feels like an eternity in today's annual update-driven industry. Eden Games has been at work on *Test Drive Unlimited 2* for some time, but whether this update was worth the wait largely depends on what you look for in a sequel. It's certainly evolutionary—the addition of Ibiza adds more exploratory options—but if you're looking for revolutionary, that's tougher to come by.

TDU2's rather awfully executed plot can best be distilled into the following concept: You're on the Spanish island of Ibiza where you must race against a variety of mentally-unbalanced drivers in the reality-TV Solar Crown championships.

The game world is massive. Between the new island Ibiza, and the return-

ing island of Oahu, there are over 1,800 miles of paved and un-paved road to explore—that's like driving from New York City to Denver. While the islands have been crafted using satellite data, they're not strict recreations—many, if not most, man-made landmarks aren't present. That's not to say that the islands don't have a lot of character. One quick jaunt from your house to a dealership may take you past gorgeous mountain vistas, lush rainforests, quaint villages, and sprawling farms. While the visuals don't push the envelope, they're well-evolved past 2006-era Xbox 360 aesthetics.

There's plenty of time to enjoy the scenery because you're unable to teleport from one spot to another until you've driven the route between your current location and future destination. This

encourages (read: forces) you to explore the islands, which is understandable, but by the time you find yourself back on Oahu, it's a bit of a slog—especially if you've played the first game. Even the addition of off-road paths and monetary rewards for reckless driving can't stave off boredom forever.

TDU2 isn't just about leisurely driving around tropical islands; it's about collecting, customizing, tuning, and racing exotic cars both on and off-road. It's about buying opulent homes, decorating the interior, and showing your home and vehicle collections to your friends. It's simultaneously a single-player and multiplayer game in which the transition from single-player championship to multiplayer follow-the-leader is seamless—you're always online with other drivers. Whether



PUBLISHER
ATARI

DEVELOPER
EDEN GAMES

PLATFORMS
XBOX 360, PS3, PC

PLAYERS
SINGLE-PLAYER
2-8 MULTIPLAYER

ESRB
T - TEEN

RELEASE DATE
02.08.11

you enjoy creating your own challenges, tackling a time posted by someone else, or checking out other peoples' rides in one of the social-oriented car clubs, it seems as if there's something new around every corner.

It's too bad that much of what *Test Drive Unlimited 2* does well is often undermined by what it does poorly. Off-road racing sounds like a good idea, and is seemingly a great way to make use of the wide open space on the islands. However, its appeal is significantly lessened by narrow paths, heavy focus on timed checkpoint races, and off-road driving that just doesn't feel quite right. Touchy controls and frustrating physics plague all aspects of the game, particularly while traveling at a high rate of speed, and during the overly-long and occasionally maddeningly-difficult license tests.

But the game's biggest issue is that much of what's new doesn't feel very new. Other than some traffic circles and hilly terrain, Ibiza isn't vastly different than Oahu. I understand that the developer wouldn't want to throw away all of the work that went into creating Oahu in the first game; however, its inclusion here feels like filler. The two islands' immense size is impressive from a technical standpoint, but it's hard to ignore the fact that they're mostly empty and devoid of life outside of some light traffic and the occasional hitchhiker. Lastly, while there's a new island and plenty of "new" challenges, you essentially do the same activities you did in the last game, albeit a higher percentage.

Much of *Test Drive Unlimited 2*'s success is dependent on the post-release support it receives from both the devel-

oper and the community. The groundwork for a robust online community has been laid, but only time will tell if the competition it spawns is friendly and bug-free. On their end, Atari has promised post-release support in the form of downloadable content and new challenges. Even if neither of these two things occur, *TDU2* is worth a look if you're a racing enthusiast. **C**

TEST DRIVE UNLIMITED 2

70

THE GOOD

Exotic cars in exotic locations

THE BAD

Handling is touchy at high speeds

THE UGLY

Some license tests are absurdly difficult

PUBLISHER
THQ
DEVELOPER
DOUBLE FINE
PLATFORMS
XBLA, PSN
PLAYERS
SINGLE-PLAYER
ESRB
E10+
RELEASE DATE
02.09.11

STACKING

I'm playing with dolls...and lovin' it!

by BRETT BATES





I can't imagine how the pitch meeting for *Stacking* went down. An adventure game involving Russian nesting dolls that's set against a jaunty Victorian-era backdrop of child labor and industrialization doesn't scream "blockbuster," but I'm sure glad THQ picked it up. Those unlikely elements have produced one of the sweetest, funniest, most enjoyable downloadable games I've ever played.

That shouldn't be surprising, considering that Tim Schafer and his team at Double Fine—makers of *Psychonauts*, *Brutal Legend*, and last fall's downloadable *Costume Quest*—are behind *Stacking*. Schafer revels in taking unlikely scenarios, like Halloween trick-or-treating, Mexico's Day of the Dead celebrations, and turning them into endearing games.

Stacking is no different. As told in a series of silent movie-style vignettes, the game follows Charlie Blackmore, the tiniest nesting doll in a family of chimney sweeps, on a quest to save his brothers and sisters from a life of indentured servitude at the hands of the industrialist (and child-labor enthusiast) known as The Baron. Heavy themes, to be sure, but while *Stacking* treads across some dark topics, it never wallows in them. Period music—mostly pianos and strings—lightens the mood, as does Double Fine's trademark humor. Heck, just watching Charlie wobble from place to place will elicit a smile.

While Charlie may be teased for being the smallest doll around, his diminutive size allows him to hop into the body of any doll one size larger than him, a conceit that forms the basis of *Stacking*'s gameplay. Once in a larger body, Charlie can then stack a doll a bit larger than before, and so on. Each of the nesting dolls that populate the trains, train sta-

tions, cruise ships, and zeppelins in the *Stacking* world possess a specific ability that can be used once you've stacked it. Some of these are merely silly, like the kid whose "Sugar Rush" spins him around at hyper speed until the world blurs and he passes out. Some are essential to advancing the story, like the key master whose key can unlock gates. Some are actually both, like poor Meriwether Malodor, whose farts can clear a room or ignite a flame in a flash. You'll want to stack every doll you come across just to discover their ability.

The smartest part about the nesting dolls concept is that the dolls provide all the tools you need for every puzzle. Figuring out what you have to do is as simple as looking around and, well, stacking. Double Fine smartly decided to include three to five solutions per puzzle, which encourages replay and experimentation while addressing my main complaint about many adventure games: If your solution to a puzzle doesn't follow the developer's often obtuse logic, you're screwed. One of the solutions to each of *Stacking*'s numerous challenges should jibe with your own personal logic.

Stacking will certainly inspire complaints about being too simple and short, and if your goal is merely to get to the end of the game, it is. But the point of it is to relish the adventure, to experiment with abilities, to take 15 minutes out of your day to simply goof off. There's plenty for you to do in *Stacking*'s four levels: alternate solutions to puzzle out, unique dolls to "collect" by stacking (some of whom you have to stack in a particular order to complete a set), and "Hi-Jinks"—non-essential objectives like scaring children with a menacing clown.

Above all, *Stacking* encourages you to

play. Fatherhood must have radically altered Schafer's creative mindset, because both *Costume Quest* and *Stacking* display a poignancy of youth I've not seen in any other developer. To play these games is to understand what it means to be a kid, when life is wondrous, unburdened, confusing, scary, unfair, funny, and—most importantly—fun. [G](#)

STACKING

9.5

THE GOOD

Brilliantly reinvents the adventure genre

THE BAD

Too easy for some

THE UGLY

Igniting a fart is necessary to advance the story



LORD OF ARCANA

The lord of mediocrity



by MIKE MINOTTI

It's easy to write off *Lord of Arcana* as publisher Square Enix's attempt at a *Monster Hunter* killer...because that's exactly what it is. Just like Capcom's hit franchise, you venture out on quests, alone or with friends, with the goal of collecting items and killing monsters (some bigger than others).

The bosses are the most enjoyable to fight, though they require the same type of pattern memorization necessary to beat all of the game's enemies. They can't be put away for good without an obligatory quick-time event, à la *God of War*, a modern gaming cliché that adds little to the experience.

Beating them is sometimes less dependent on your skill as on your level and equipment, meaning you'll be spending a good deal of your time grinding for

experience and crafting materials. So out your venture, fighting the same monsters over and over, most of which offer no real challenge once you've memorized their simple patterns.

Not that there's anything wrong with grinding. Crafting is the game's biggest joy, with the promise of new loot often being the biggest motivation for moving forward. But with grinding comes repetition, and *Lord of Arcana* does little to freshen its formula. Levels are reused for multiple missions, and the environments' muddy color palettes do little to dress up the bland locations.

It's disappointing that *Arcana* doesn't fix *Monster Hunter*'s biggest problem: the camera. Since character movement is mapped to the analog nub and the camera to the d-pad, it's impossible to control both at the same time. You do have the ability to lock-on to specific monsters, but changing targets requires the d-pad, which (again) is impossible to do while moving.

Combat is often just as clunky. Beating a monster largely depends on your ability to know when it's going to attack, so it's vital that you start blocking or dodging as soon as an enemy winds up for a blow. Unfortunately, your own combos are slow and impossible to interrupt. You'll often know that a hit is coming but have already committed to attacks that'll leave you vulnerable.

It's tough to go after an established franchise like *Monster Hunter*, especially when you bring few fresh ideas to the genre. *Lord of Arcana*'s combat may be a bit faster-paced, but it suffers from enough of *Monster Hunter*'s problems to keep potential new blood away, while offering too few innovations to convert the monster-hunting faithful. **D**



PUBLISHER
SQUARE ENIX
DEVELOPER
ACCESS GAMES
PLATFORM
PSP
PLAYERS
SINGLE-PLAYER
2-4 CO-OP
ESRB
M - MATURE
RELEASE DATE
01.25.11

LORD OF ARCANA

5.0

THE GOOD
Offers some mindless fun

THE BAD
Repetitive

THE UGLY
Go away, bright colors! You have no home here

TACTICS OGRE: LET US CLING TOGETHER

Marching on to save Valeria once more

by JASMINE REA

PUBLISHER
SQUARE ENIX
DEVELOPER
SQUARE ENIX
PLATFORM
PSP
PLAYERS
SINGLE-PLAYER,
2 PLAYER
(OFFLINE)
ESRB
T - TEEN
RELEASE DATE
02.15.11

The epic struggle to bring peace to Valeria lives on in the PSP remake of *Tactics Ogre*. At the time it launched in the late '90s, the PlayStation version was by far the most complex strategy RPG on the market. Since then, games like *Rondo of Swords* for the DS tried to claim that throne. *Tactics Ogre: Let Us Cling Together* is a remake of the best title in the *Ogre Battle* series and strives to reinstate itself as the most intriguing yet enjoyable tactics games to date. Fans of the series are sure to delight in the fresh presentation. While still sprite-based, everything has a fresh coat of paint and a wider range of animation. The iconic, stalky characters remain, but they are more lively and fluid-moving than before. Square also invested time into re-localizing all the character names and dialogue. While the Atlix version was definitely understandable and enjoyable, many conversations ended in strange non sequiturs that often undercut the game's intended tone.

The biggest change in this version is the new streamlined combat. Characters no longer gain experience directly by engaging in skirmishes on the battlefield. Any character present in a battle

who survives through the victory conditions is automatically allotted some of the net experience points. This is a time- and life-saving fix over the original game. Now parties can focus on completing the objective at hand rather than worrying about getting every character into the middle of the fight.

While combat mechanics are more accessible than ever, fighting is no easy business. Like most strategy RPGs, *Tactics Ogre* utilizes guest characters that you have no control over. Oftentimes they are more powerful and charge forward on

the map. The AI, as it happens, enjoys putting itself (and thus you) in the most dangerous situations possible. You'll often lose battles simply because an AI-controlled fighter threw itself into the middle of enemy fire.

The world, too, is complex and very confusing. The *Ogre Battle* series delights in its rich history and political intrigue, but a lot of the main action happens off-screen. Characters in the game reference events that happened long ago and it's up to you to scroll through endless pages of historical lore to divine some meaning.



Although it feels a tad outdated—not unlike the numerous existing PlayStation-to-PSP remakes, and that hurts it at times—*Tactics Ogre: Let Us Cling Together* is a gorgeous and fan-pleasing remake that improves upon an already-excellent game. **B**

TACTICS OGRE:

7.0

THE GOOD

Combat is streamlined and accessible

THE BAD

It's easy to get information overload

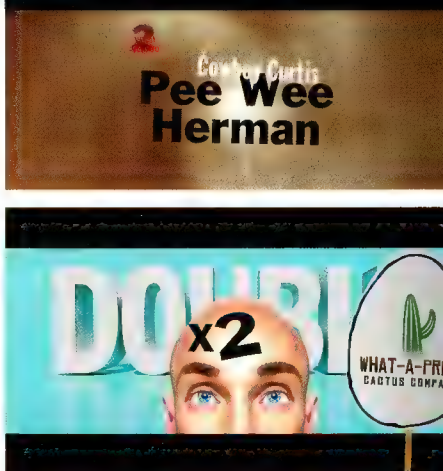
THE UGLY

Ally AI often puts itself in game-ending danger

YOU DON'T KNOW JACK

Jack is back

by BRETT BATES



If you don't know *You Don't Know Jack*, you're likely too young to remember the series of "irreverent" trivia games from the mid-to-late '90s that mashed up pop-culture references with more traditional noggin busters. Since the past decade of celebrity screw-ups and ridiculous new products has rendered the topical bon mots from those earlier games crustier than a KFC Double Down, developer Jellyvision decided to resurrect the series with updated questions and online functionality. Besides that, not much has changed in 10

years, so if you like your trivia with a hearty dose of snark, then you'll have fun with *You Don't Know Jack*.

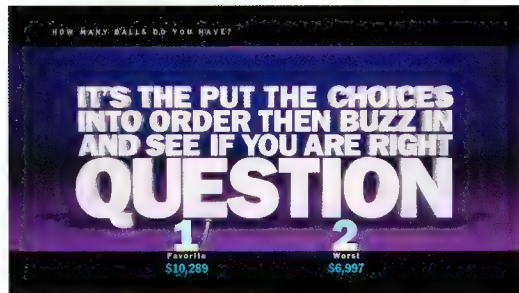
How does that mashed-up snark play out? A staid question like "How did Jackson Pollock create his paintings?" for example, becomes "Suppose Jackson Pollock had become a sandwich artist at Subway. What would his supervisor have noted about his performances?" (Answer: "Overuses the sauce squirters.") Or maybe you'll be shown a series of names and have to determine whether they belong

to a pope or a Britney Spears song. Half of the difficulty in answering questions is parsing just what the heck it's asking you.

What really matters in a trivia game is the quality of its questions, and *You Don't Know Jack's* run the gamut from "duh" to "how could anyone possibly know that?" It can make you feel brilliant for knowing a silly thing (the types of pizzas at Pizza Hut, say) and a brainy thing (that tortoises are vegetarians) in the span of a single question. The game also smartly changes up the subject after each question, so you won't end up out of the game just because there's an entire category on 18th-century fabrics.

You Don't Know Jack does stumble occasionally. The game doesn't provide any AI competition, which makes playing offline by yourself a lonely affair. Worse, you can't shuffle questions between episodes, so once you've completed an episode, you're pretty much finished with it (unless you want a leg up on your friends the next time they come over). These issues were also present in earlier editions, so it's both surprising and disappointing that they haven't been addressed. But until you start running into repeat questions, *You Don't Know Jack* deserves a place in the same party-game pantheon as *Rock Band* and *Wii Sports*. **B+**

PUBLISHER
THQ
DEVELOPER
JELLYVISION
PLATFORMS
XBOX 360, PS3,
Wii, DS
PLAYERS
SINGLE-PLAYER
2-4 MULTIPLAYER
ESRB
T - TEEN
RELEASE DATE
02.08.11



YOU DON'T KNOW JACK

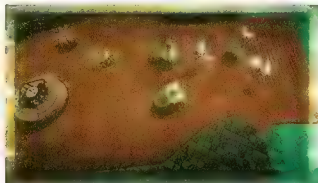
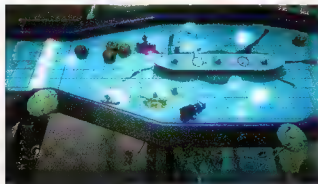
8.0

THE GOOD
Snarky humor in top form

THE BAD
No replay once you've finished an episode

THE UGLY
Pulling out a win by getting the "wrong answer of the game"

REVIEW RECAP



LITTLEBIGPLANET 2

The sequel manages to re-capture the magic and provides more potential for millions of ways to play.

AARON THOMAS: 8.5

GHOST TRICK: PHANTOM DETECTIVE

The team behind *Ace Attorney* delivers a satisfying adventure game that should possess you for hours.

NATHAN MEUNIER: 8.5

KINGDOM HEARTS: RE-CODED

It's great-looking, but the DS remake of the Japanese mobile game is loaded down with schmalz and bad platforming.

JAMES DEROSA: 5.5

LOST IN SHADOW

A tedious slog through artificially-padded levels that evoke *Ica*, but with less awe and more "awww."

BRETT BATES: 5.5

GRAN TURISMO 5

The legendary series return delivers sound racing, though its dysfunctional online and archaic feel blow a tire.

AARON THOMAS: 6.5

CALL OF DUTY: BLACK OPS

Though the plot borders on implausible, it's still an outstanding shooter.

PAUL SEMEL: 9.0
AARON BOULDING: 9.0

DISNEY EPIC MICKEY

The iconic mouse returns to gaming with a platformer that's less epic than antiquated.

AARON THOMAS: 6.0
MATT CABRAL: 9.0

DONKEY KONG COUNTRY RETURNS

Retro Studios' platformer evokes old-school charm and punishment.

ANDREW PFISTER: 7.0
PATRICK KLEPEK: 8.0

MAJIN AND THE FORSAKEN KINGDOM

The bond between you and a mystical Golem overcomes bland action platforming.

BRETT BATES: 8.0
STERLING MCGARVEY: 6.5

GOLDEN SUN:

DARK DAWN

Despite chatty characters, it offers a great balance of role-playing and puzzles.

NATHAN MEUNIER: 7.5
JOE DODSON: 8.0

SPLATTERHOUSE

Be glad the originals are on-disc, since the reboot offers little other incentive to try it.

JEREMY M. ZOSS: 5.5
DAN "SHOE" HSU: 6.5

ASSASSIN'S CREED: BROTHERHOOD

Outstanding multiplayer is a great reason to play *Assassin's Creed II: Part II*.

STERLING MCGARVEY: 8.0
ANDREW PFISTER: 8.0

DANCE CENTRAL

Harmonix's rhythm game is arguably the best reason to pick up a Kinect.

PATRICK KLEPEK: 8.0
STERLING MCGARVEY: 8.5

NEED FOR SPEED: HOT PURSUIT

The combination of *Need for Speed's* cop chases and *Burnout's* big crashes is a match made in heaven.

BRETT BATES: 9.0
AARON THOMAS: 8.0

HARRY POTTER AND THE DEATHLY HALLOWS, PART I

Cast "Expelliarmus" to keep this game out of your console.

JASMINE REA: 3.0
MIKE MINOTTI: 3.0

MARIO VS. DONKEY KONG: MINI-LAND MAYHEM!

Mario's mini-soldiers march on in a fun and challenging sequel to the puzzle series.

ALEXANDRA HALL: 7.5
DAN "SHOE" HSU: 8.0

KINECT ADVENTURES

Kinect's pack-in game is fun, but the strict requirements—

space, etc.—cloud the

entertainment factor.

PATRICK KLEPEK: 6.0
STERLING MCGARVEY: 7.0

GOLDENEYE 007

Bond returns to Nintendo platforms in a shooter that does a sterling job replicating the N64's halcyon days.

NATHAN MEUNIER: 9.0
ALEXANDRA HALL: 6.5

GOD OF WAR:

GHOST OF SPARTA

The follow-up to *Chains of Olympus* exceeds its already-excellent predecessor.

PAUL SEMEL: 8.5
BRETT BATES: 9.5

ROCK BAND 3

Harmonix's fantastic evolution of the series enables you to take play time to another level with real instruments.

PATRICK KLEPEK: 9.0
ANDREW PFISTER: 9.0

DJ HERO 2

The turntable series' encore weaves in more depth and strategy alongside the joys of working the decks.

STERLING MCGARVEY: 8.0
AARON BOULDING: 8.0

KIRBY'S EPIC YARN

Don't be fooled by its syrupy-sweet aesthetic: It's an exceptionally sound platformer.

NATHAN MEUNIER: 8.5
ANDREW PFISTER: 8.5

FALLOUT: NEW VEGAS

There's enough RPG action going on in the Mojave wasteland to hook you for months.

STERLING MCGARVEY: 9.0
HAROLD GOLDBERG: 9.0

MEDAL OF HONOR

The FPS relocates to modern-day Afghanistan. If the lackluster story doesn't grab you, DICE's multiplayer should.

DAN "SHOE" HSU: 7.0
BRETT BATES: 7.5

REVIEW CREW REWIND

SILENT HILL

(EGM #115)



JOHN DAWSON

Probably the most genuinely disturbing "survival horror" game around, the story plays on psychological nastiness both in terms of the events that take place and the graphical content. The game seems to go out of its way throughout to make you feel uncomfortable. It's claustrophobic, dark, and disturbing. There are a few niggles with the gameplay; the collision detection for picking up objects is dodgy in places...and the few genuine puzzles are all explained by fairly obvious clues located in pretty much the same location. That said though, it's an enjoyable experience and there's some replay value thanks to its multiple endings.

JOHN RICCIARDI

The first must-own PS game of 1999 is here. *Silent Hill* is an awesome horror adventure that no fan of the *RE* series should miss. It's not perfect—controls could be tighter, and the writing/voice acting is a little weak, but the disturbing, truly frightening gameplay experience more than makes up for these minor flaws. Great story, too. Be sure to play it with a Dual Shock (trust me), and if you've got kids, keep 'em far away.

DAN "SHOE" HSU

Resident Evil is to Night of the Living Dead as Silent Hill is to Hellraiser. Talk about a creepy game! It starts off slow, but once you get an hour into it, things can get really tense (although you will run into long, drawn-out periods of uneventfulness). Speaking of *RE*, you can see the influences everywhere (and I mean everywhere), so if you're an *RE* fan, do not miss out on this one! By the way, do not let your children see this game.

CRISPIN ROYER

Even more so than the *Resident Evil* games, this thing pushes all your fear buttons. Its dim visuals, discordant music, jarring sound effects and twisted story are disturbing on so many levels. It all makes for an experience that's as frightening as anything else on the consoles. You'll need to fiddle with options before the game becomes playable, and I had gripes with the camera and control throughout the game.

THE DOWNLOAD

2010 Year in Review

by ELI HODAPP

2010 was an amazing year for gaming in general, but particularly for iOS gamers. When the App Store launched in July of 2008, I doubt anyone would have even guessed that it would become the behemoth it is today. The iTunes App Store is home to over 400,000 apps that have been downloaded over 10,000,000,000 times. Games on iOS devices have advanced from fairly simple 2D and 3D titles to ones with high-end graphics engines released by companies such as id Software and Epic Games. Additionally, developers are pushing the boundaries of the platform more and more, with massive open-world RPGs and games that support real-time online multiplayer via 3G networks with 16 (or more) players. If you've managed to go this long without buying an iPhone, iPad, or iPod Touch, 2011 might be the year to reconsider.

2010 IPHONE GAME OF THE YEAR

SPACE MINER: SPACE ORE BUST

PUBLISHER VENAN ENTERTAINMENT, INC.

Space Miner: Space Ore Bust strikes an almost perfect balance between classic arcade-style gameplay and RPG elements that keep you going for hours, then get you starting all over again for a second play-through on a higher difficulty level. The core of the game is highly reminiscent of *Asteroids*, as you fly through space blasting various space rocks to suck up ore with your tractor beam. Ore is sold for in-game money which you can then use to upgrade your ship in numerous ways, from souping up your fire power to strengthening your armor to increasing the ship's cargo capacity. You can also pick up secret alien technology, which provides additional benefits that persist through new games. A search for "space miner" on the App Store will yield the iPhone version, an iPad version, trial versions, and even a free pick-up-and-play iteration of the game called *Space Miner Blast*. I spent 2010 constantly revisiting *Space Miner*, which hopefully goes some small way toward illustrating its massive addictiveness.



2010 IPAD GAME OF THE YEAR

WORLD OF GOO

PUBLISHER 2D BOY

As I mentioned in a previous column about gaming on the iPad, the device really has yet to see a truly killer iPad-exclusive game. That's okay though, because the quality of iPhone-to-iPad ports grew exponentially over 2010. *World of Goo* was an absolutely fantastic puzzle game when it was first released on the Mac and PC, but the game really shines when mixed with the iPad's multi-touch interface. Previously, you had to build structures using the various goo balls with the mouse pointer. It worked fine, but playing with multi-touch allows you to grab as many goo balls as you have fingers, all while moving the camera around with whatever finger you have left to spare, making *World of Goo* hands-on fun. A recent update substantially improved performance, making it run silky-smooth. *World of Goo* is one of the highest-rated games on the net, and works so well on the tablet that it almost feels like Apple should just start bundling the game with its hardware.



2010 IPAD GAME OF THE YEAR RUNNER-UP

PLANTS VS. ZOMBIES HD

PUBLISHER POPCAP GAMES

Similar to *World of Goo*, *Plants vs. Zombies* had a long and successful life on both the PC and Mac before it graced the iPad. Still, this casual tower defense game is even better when combined with direct multi-touch input. It's good on the iPhone as well, but I felt the additional screen real estate really made *Plants vs. Zombies* shine on the iPad. Like all PopCap games, *Plants vs. Zombies* is immediately approachable, even to folks who've never heard of a tower defense game before. But it also boasts a shocking amount of depth for veterans, who'll enjoy unlocking the numerous plant types and experimenting to find the ultimate zombie defense layout. A surprising amount of strategy comes from the fact that you're limited to a set number of seeds on each level, forcing you to choose your favorites wisely. In short, this is a game that everyone with an iPad should own.



2010 IPHONE GAME OF THE YEAR RUNNER-UP

CARCASSONNE

PUBLISHER THE CODING MONKEYS

Board game adaptations are no strangers in the App Store, especially as EA continues to go hog-wild porting an endless stream of Hasbro classics. But *Carcassonne* is as good as it gets. The original version of the game has won numerous awards and revolves around placing cards on the table to build a medieval civilization. The virtual tabletop of the iPhone game totally captures the look and feel of the original while offering absolutely every game mode you'd ever want. *Carcassonne* can be played in single-player mode with various types of AI or in various multiplayer modes ranging from local device pass-and-play to local multi-device multiplayer via Bluetooth or Wi-Fi. It can even be

played in asynchronous online multiplayer powered by push alerts. To sweeten the deal, the game has also recently been updated with both high-resolution graphics for the Retina Display on the iPhone 4 and universal compatibility for native iPad play. If you want to see just how good a board game can be on an iOS device, look no further than *Carcassonne*. [Go](#)



SHOT TOPICS

It's time to advance our conversation

Executive Editor, EGM
ANDREW PRISTER

In writing this, my first column for 2011 (pay no attention to the month on the spine!), I dove into my mental reservoir of potential ideas...and came up empty. As funny as it'd be—to me—to let the text end there, an entire page of white space might tip off my employer that one of his editors was no longer capable of generating critical thought, or worse, lazy to the point of being unemployable.

It's not that there's a shortage of issues to discuss as we move into a new decade of gaming, it's that We—by which I mean the Royal You of the audience and the Royal Us of the media—are still stuck on the same old arguments and tired debates that prevent us from figuring out what the new issues are. That's the topic I've settled on for this first column: topics we're pretty much done talking about (in their current form).

1. "Are Games Art?" Yes. No. Some parts of a game are. Some parts aren't. *What-*

ever. We (again, the Royal We) spend so much effort on trying to force our chosen hobby and profession into already nebulous definitions, or hold it up against inherently different forms of media in an effort to legitimize our personal and professional investments, we forget to ask a simple question: As long as we care, who cares?

Our games can look beautiful. Their sounds can stir various emotions. They can impart a meaning or make a statement. Or they can do none of these things, and just provide thirty seconds of fun. That's okay, too. We shouldn't be preoccupied with defending the artistic merit of games, we should be celebrating and exploring their ability to awe us with their artistry, and how their scenes and soundtracks and stories combine in a way no other medium can: with us in control.

So let's stop talking about "games as art" as an issue, and start talking about "games as art" as art. Justification doesn't come by way of a movie critic's accep-

tance, a Congressional resolution or the Nobel Committee; it comes when the *New York Times* quietly adds a "Video Games" tab to its Arts section because it was the natural thing to do.

2. "Hardcore Gaming" Countless Wii fitness games. Eight million Kinects. *FarmVille*. The banner of "hardcore" that most of us grew up under is dead...but we didn't lose. Those who still stubbornly cling to that label as a badge of honor and refuse to cross-pollinate their genres, dink around on Facebook for a half-hour, or risk fleeting embarrassment dancing in front of a camera...they're the ones missing out on the fun.

Instead of worrying that old hardcore games are going away, let's start talking about new hardcore ideas. Let's examine why PlayStation Move limped out of the gate when Kinect has done so well, and what Nintendo could possibly do next in reaction. Let's talk about how our portable devices are becoming more powerful, and our powerful devices are becoming more portable. There are new technologies and new tools, new creators and new players. Let's experiment, free of labels.

3. Awards For the Royal Us, it's one of those necessary evils, because the Royal You shows up in droves to debate end-of-year choices. It's not even that selecting faves is "evil," it's just that we're in 2011 and it still hasn't sunk into the collective understanding that A) individuals have differing, unique tastes and B) it's silly to arbitrarily confine greatness into 365-day segments. Instead, using our publications and social interactions, let's improve our communication: no need to wait until December to tell each other how awesome a game is. Awesome lasts forever.



Instead of worrying that old hardcore games are going away, let's start talking about new hardcore ideas.

3b. Award Shows To the people in charge: You can do a better job. To the people who watch: The only authority they have is the authority you give them.

Now let's never speak of any of this again. ■



Reviews Editor, EGM
STERLING MCGARVEY

THE RETURN OF THE \$50 GAME

Are retail wars driving prices back down?

Every time I travel outside the U.S., I always visit a few videogame shops wherever I am. During my recent holiday visit to Europe I found myself in a conversation with my wife's old RPG buddy, who asked me what game platform I preferred. It's a loaded question at home, let alone in another language and country, where you have to also explain the number of non-gaming related streaming services and how they factor into choice Stateside. I decided to fire off a question back at him: "Why are games here so expensive?"

Consider this for context: At most Italian shops, a copy of *Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood* runs €70. Most new releases cost €65. A new DS game usually costs €35-40. That's before you factor in the U.S. exchange rate, which hovered between \$1.31 and \$1.34 during my trip. It's daunting to import a game as a tourist, and the used game market isn't nearly as big there. Even an Italian GameStop didn't have much of a selection. (I'm going to avoid the third rail of piracy prevalence, as that's another column for another month.)

He couldn't answer, and as he asked me about game prices in the U.S., I started thinking about how not only are videogames here cheaper by virtue of exchange rate, but due to the cutthroat sales of months past. Yes, the \$60 game has been the standard for five years, but an erosion of that price point has been slowly occurring amidst a highly competitive time for retailers. I don't think it's merely a holiday phenomenon.

This is armchair analysis from a jet-lagged writer, but I can't help but wonder if we're entering a new era of game pricing. A variety of factors—from overstock to desperate retailers looking to push forward during rough economic times—have driven this change.

Over these last few months I've been inundated with tweets and e-mails about the latest big must-buy deals. Well before Black Friday, Target was hocking Buy Two, Get One Free sales that let me snag three critically acclaimed titles I'd been




Amazon, especially, has been aggressive in its price-slashing efforts, to the extent that it seems to have emulated the "first-run, second-run" format you see in films.

meaning to try.

Amazon, especially, has been aggressive in its price-slashing efforts, to the extent that it seems to have emulated the "first-run, second-run" format you see in films. On launch day (if you haven't taken advantage of a pre-order deal that gives you a \$10 gift card), you might expect to see \$5 knocked off the price. It's a good deal for a game you've likely been anticipating. However, if you're willing to wait (and those of you in the throes of this past autumn's smash hits likely are), you can expect deeper cuts just a month or two later. It's not just Amazon, either. A look at Best Buy's website revealed *Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood* and *Fallout: New Vegas* for \$50.

We've all complained about \$60 games and waxed nostalgic for the \$50

price point of the PS2 days. Thing is, if you can muster some patience and do a little research we're practically back at that point. And frankly, given the massive variety of games we have to keep us busy these days, even in times when our wallets are tighter—from the blockbuster to the downloadable darling to portables—the wait truly that agonizing?

I don't mean to downplay the struggles of developers as budgets bloat and studios close in these hit-driven times, where the first week or two of sales usually determines a hit or miss. But revelations gained abroad can often grant new perspective. Mine is a sense of gratitude that I'm living somewhere that I can afford to subsidize my hobby. Now I just need to stop tweeting long enough to actually play something... 

I WELCOME OUR BROWSER-BASED OVERLORDS

Looking forward to the day when social and free-to-play games aren't mostly terrible

Lord of Ultima, EA's browser-based *Evony* rip-off, is the worst game I've been playing every day since May 2010. It's basically Navigating Menus: The Game. And yet, in between emailing, editing, checking Amazon's gold box deals, and whatever else it is I do all day, it's the perfect momentary distraction, always just one browser tab away. You know, like when updating my Facebook status about how much better CNN was with Rick Sanchez gets too intense, and I just need a minute to center myself and upgrade my Town Hall to level 10.

I'm ashamed that I've actually spent money on the normally free-to-play *Lord of Ultima*. Because in this game, you don't buy a fancy tractor with racing stripes or even a catapult with racing stripes—you have to pay cash just to make it sort of playable, to unlock the basic features that any city-building game should have. But as much as I love to hate *LoU* and also just regular hate it, it's something we're going to see a lot more of from traditional game publishers.

When Zynga and its fellow social-

gaming startups pulled an end-around on the establishment and got your aunt hooked on virtual agribusiness and animal husbandry, I think the phenomenon left a lot of us feeling a bit conflicted. It was great that people who used to consider anything with nicer graphics than *Solitaire* as a colossal waste of time were now setting calendar alerts to harvest digital corn, but did they have to play such painfully crappy games? More importantly, did they have to spam our Facebook walls with gifts of free ponies?

Well, hey, it got 'em in the door.

Zynga's latest, *CityVille*, eclipsed *FarmVille*'s userbase about three weeks after launch. By all accounts it's a significantly better game, which is nice considering that people who like games aren't really the target audience. I haven't played it, personally—after all, these cottages in *Lord of Ultima* don't build themselves (although they will for the bargain price of about \$1.10 a week).

Languishing way below *CityVille* in popularity is *Madden NFL Superstars* and *Assassin's Creed: Project Legacy*,

the vanguard of a looming wave of AAA "brand extensions" coming to Facebook from EA, Ubisoft, and other publishers who (maybe) aren't going to take this Zynga thing sitting down. *NFL Superstars* combines a collectible card game with a light football management sim, and hell yes you can buy more cards with real money if you want them, thanks for asking. *Project Legacy* is a bit more interesting in theory if not execution—it's not a blatant cash grab, and you can unlock new capes and other affiliated crap in *Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood* by playing. Unfortunately, like *Lord of Ultima* it's from the school of thought that considers clicking through menus as the lone bullet point under "core gameplay."

Even though *Project Legacy* doesn't actually count as enjoyable, it gives me hope. In the good old pre-2007 days, the designer's conundrum was always "how do I make a game that people will buy," and the answer was "make it fun." That's a system I can get behind. But in most browser-based, free-to-play games, the challenge is "how do I make a game where people will pay a quarter for an opalescent unicorn that doesn't really do anything?" And the answer is some mess about level-progression treadmills, and the right social hooks. *Project Legacy* is still mainly an interactive ad for a \$60 videogame, but the best way for it to succeed at its task is if it's a fun experience. It's not—I think I've established that—but it should be.

Microtransactions in browser-based games aren't going anywhere, and I'm okay with that. I just hope that traditional game publishers can figure out a way to make actively good social and browser games, or that Zynga and co. can raise the taste level and still manage to rake in the obscene amounts of cash that they're accustomed to. Because *Solitaire* is terrible and no one should play it.

Now if you'll excuse me, I need to go transfer 500,000 units of wood from one city to another in *Lord of Ultima* so I can feel like I just got something done. ☑

DEMIAN LINN

Editor, EGM





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REST OF THE CRAP

FOUR FORGOTTEN FIGHTER FAILURES OF '94

A Special Rest of the Crap Look at Nineteen Ninety-Four

1 1994 was a great year for fighting games, and most gamers spent the year beating each other up in *Mortal Kombat II*, *Super Street Fighter II Turbo*, or *Virtua Fighter*. But it's not my job to remember nice games, so I dug up the corpses of four of 1994's worst. Prepare yourself; these are the games that will be waiting for us in hell.

BLOODSTORM

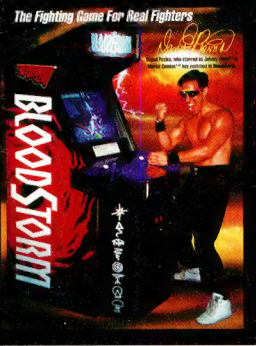
Arcade
Bloodstorm's graphics were hand-drawn by someone who hated their job more than Kirstie Alley's bikini wax. But in fairness to both, I doubt either of them expected their work to ever be scrutinized. *Bloodstorm* was an idiot's idea of hardcore violence. Its bloody limb-removing gameplay was so desperate to be controversial that they should have just called it *Facist Abortion Kombat: Rise of the Delicious Cigarettes*.

The characters in *Bloodstorm* looked like drawings your fourth-grade teacher would show the local news to explain why she searched your backpack and found faces. It was as ugly, uncreative, and useless as a photocopy of a McNugget. However, compared to its ad campaign, the game was a masterpiece.

The *Bloodstorm* ad proclaimed itself to be "The Fighting Game for Real Fighters." They proved it with a picture of a fake fighter from a fake fighting tournament next to the words: "Daniel Pesina, who starred as Johnny Cage in *Mortal Kombat*, has switched to *Bloodstorm*." From a celebrity product endorsement point of view, this was like seeing the Gerber baby endorse Hank's Discount Cat Parts for Babies. The ad didn't convince anyone to play *Bloodstorm*, but it did convince Johnny Cage's bosses to fire him. So if you have a job where you take off your shirt and nerds photograph you pretending to punch crotches, now you know how to get fired. Daniel Pesina says, "You're welcome."

RISE OF THE ROBOTS

SNES, Genesis, 3DO, Arcade, CD-1, PC, Amiga, Game Gear
Rise of the Robots tried to merge Street Fighter gameplay with cutting-edge 3D graphics, although maybe "tried" is too strong a word. The only selectable char-



acter was a featureless mannequin, and it fought other featureless mannequins. This is what deaf people experience when they listen to the radio. I don't even think they meant for *Rise of the Robots* to be entertainment; this was more like a group of atheists who got together to try and prove they didn't have souls.

Each featureless robot had about two karate moves at its disposal. You might think this would get old immediately, but it actually got old faster than that. A sleeping pill overdose has deeper gameplay than *Rise of the Robots*. The rendered graphics, however, were ahead of their time. With all the glossy sleekness of a high-end diaper genie, each frame of animation took weeks for their ancient computers to generate. And during that time, the actual humans involved in the game never once thought about how to make it fun. If these maniacs invented a gas-powered kennel that shot puppies into the ocean, it would have been a less tragic waste of resources.

WAY OF THE WARRIOR

3DO
Way of the Warrior looked like a *Mortal Kombat* fan movie made by bored programmers in their dorm room because that's almost exactly what it was. The developers had no money, so they cast each other and their friends as the game's warriors. Instead of deadly combat, it



looked like a sad argument over who should have gotten 89th runner-up in the costume contest.

To make the game more edgy, they added blood. Lots of blood. They figured their chubby math tutor would look tougher slapping their Chill's waitress if she was filled with 400 gallons of fluid. They were wrong. It looked so non-dangerous that cranberry juice bottling plants use this as a safety training video. *Way of the Warrior* is sort of like *Mortal Kombat* in the same way a kidnapped baby is sort of like a family—people are dressed in ridiculous disguises, one of them is squirting, and no one will ever see them again.

BALLZ 3D

Genesis, SNES, 3DO
They named this *Balz* to reference the hilariouslyness of testicles, and I don't see any reason to disrespect the *Balz* developers by reviewing *Balz* any differently. Not since *Shaq Fu* has putting your *Balz* in a Sega Genesis hurt so much. Yoda accidentally reviews *Balz* when he dirty talks because these *Balz* suck in every direction. Warning: *Balz* is a choking hazard and Daniel Pesina, the actor who switched to *Bloodstorm*, has switched to *Balz*.

Kicking someone in the balls is the international phrase for victory. So it was ironic that *Balz* taunted the player so ineffectively. The taunts like "SMELL THE MAT" are some of the strangest things I've heard anyone scream while playing with *Balz*, and I know Armenian goat farmers. I don't know about you, but when my *Balz* is spinning in the 3DO, I don't want to hear "NIBBLE SOME KNUCKLE." I was raised better than that. That's filthy, *Balz*. ☹



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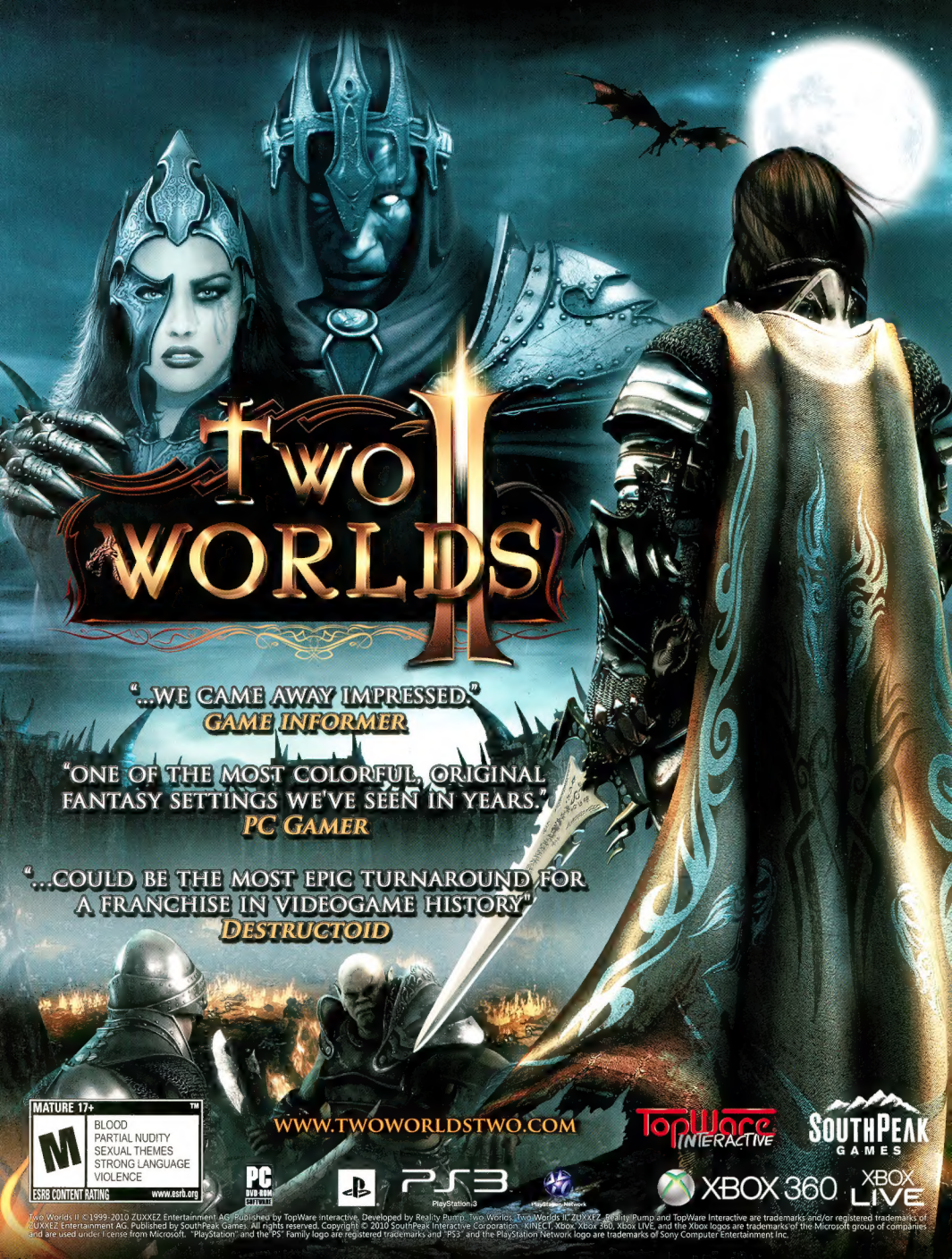
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