WAR GAMES: EGM PICKS THE TOP 20 BATTLES OF ALL TIME!

ELECTRONIC GAMING MONTHLY

XBOX 360 / PLAYSTATION / Wii / DS / PSP / PC / iPHONE

NEW PREVIEWS
FAR CRY 3
ENEMY FRONT
SPEC OPS: THE LINE
ASSASSIN'S CREED III

THE EGM INTERVIEW:
TOMMY JACOB

COMPANY KILLERS
HOW BIG GAMES ARE HURTING DEVELOPMENT

MEDAL OF HONOR WARFIGHTER

OUR EXCLUSIVE LOOK BEHIND ENEMY LINES...

GAMING 101
EGM TOURS THE TOP GAME SCHOOLS

20+
MULTI-PERSON REVIEWS INSIDE

EGMNOW.COM
$6.99 US/CAN
NUMBER 255.0
0 70992 06960 6
06
MAY/JUN 2012

THE WITCHER® 2

ASSASSINS OF KINGS

ENHANCED EDITION

ONE OF THE

HIGHEST RATED RPGs

JUST GOT BETTER

AVAILABLE NOW

XBOX 360 XBOX LIVE

CDPROJEKT

WB GAMES

KINECT, Xbox, Xbox 360, Xbox LIVE and the Xbox logos are trademarks of the Microsoft group of companies and are used under license from Microsoft. The Witcher® is a trademark of CD Projekt RED S. A. The Witcher game© CD Projekt RED S. A. All rights reserved. The Witcher game is based on a novel of Andrzej Sapkowski. All other copyrights and trademarks are the property of their respective owners.

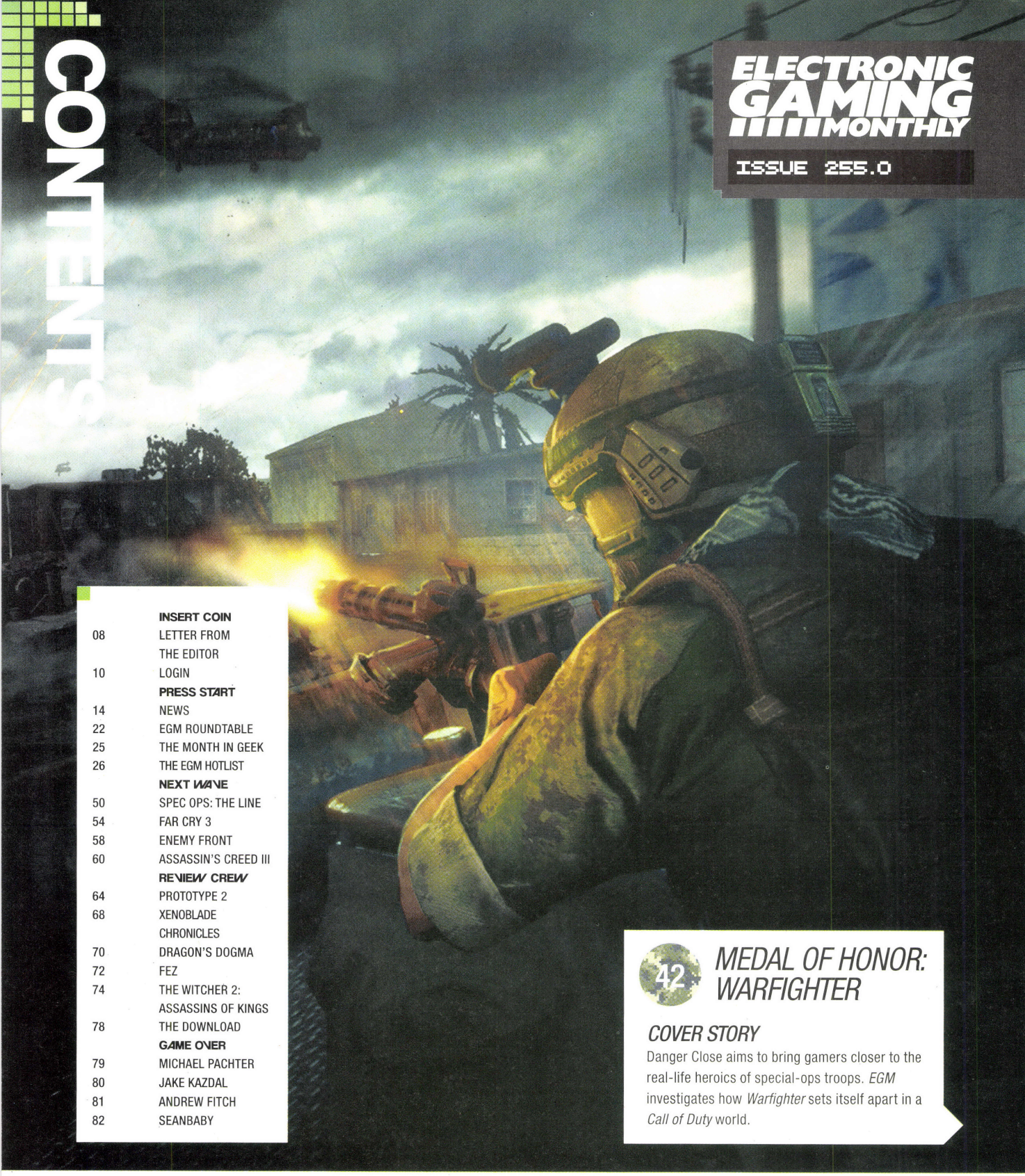
WB GAMES LOGO, WB SHIELD: ™ & © Warner Bros. Entertainment Inc.
(s12)

WWW.THEWITCHER.COM
"...EXACTLY WHAT XBOX 360 NEEDS"
IGN
"...ONE OF THE MOST GRAPHICALLY IMPRESSIVE 360 GAMES EVER MADE"
1UP
"...LIKE NOTHING ELSE IN MODERN RPGs"
GAME INFORMER
MATURE 17+
M
CONTENT RATED BY ESRB
Blood and Gore
Intense Violence
Nudity
Strong Language
Strong Sexual Content
Use of Drugs

CONTENTS

ELECTRONIC GAMING MONTHLY

ISSUE 255.0



INSERT COIN

08 LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

10 LOGIN

PRESS START

14 NEWS

22 EGM ROUNDTABLE

25 THE MONTH IN GEEK

26 THE EGM HOTLIST

NEXT WAVE

50 SPEC OPS: THE LINE

54 FAR CRY 3

58 ENEMY FRONT

60 ASSASSIN'S CREED III

REVIEW CREW

64 PROTOTYPE 2

68 XENOBLADE CHRONICLES

70 DRAGON'S DOGMA

72 FEZ

74 THE WITCHER 2: ASSASSINS OF KINGS

78 THE DOWNLOAD

GAME OVER

79 MICHAEL PACHTER

80 JAKE KAZDAL

81 ANDREW FITCH

82 SEANBABY

42 *MEDAL OF HONOR: WARFIGHTER*

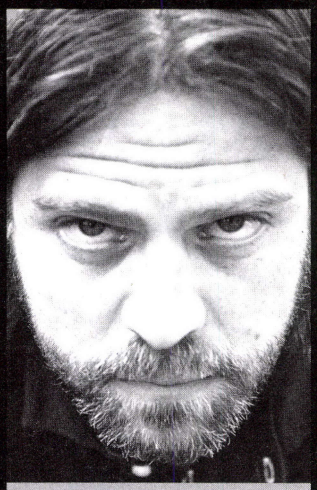
COVER STORY

Danger Close aims to bring gamers closer to the real-life heroics of special-ops troops. *EGM* investigates how *Warfighter* sets itself apart in a *Call of Duty* world.

© Copyright 2012, EGM Media, LLC, all rights reserved. ELECTRONIC GAMING MONTHLY (ISSN #1058-918X) is published bi-monthly by EGM Media, LLC, 8840 Wilshire Blvd, Third Floor, Beverly Hills, CA 90211. Subscriptions for 12 issues are $24.99 US. In Canada, please add $10.00 US. International orders outside US and Canada, please add $30 per year for surface mail, US funds only. Application to mail at Periodicals Postage rates is Pending at Beverly Hills, CA and at additional mailing offices. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to Electronic Gaming Monthly, PO Box 433132, Palm Coast, FL 32143. For subscription service questions, address changes, or to order, please contact us at egm@emailcustomerservice.com (for customer service) or at http://www.egmnow.com/subscribe (to order). Phone orders can be placed in the US and Canada at (800) 829-7830. Please allow 6-8 weeks before receiving your first issue as well as for any subscription changes to take place on an existing subscription account. We sometimes make lists of our customers available to mailers of goods and services that may interest you. If you do not wish to receive such mailings please write to us at: EGM, P.O. Box 433132, Palm Coast, FL 32143. The editors and the publisher are not responsible for unsolicited materials. Without limiting the rights under copyrights reserved herein, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in, or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form, or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise), without the prior written notice of EGM Media, LLC, Electronic Gaming Monthly, EGMNOW, EGM, and EGMi: The Digital Magazine are registered trademarks of EGM Media, LLC. TM and (c) for all other products and the characters contained therein are owned by the respective trademark and copyright owners. All materials listed in this magazine are subject to manufacturers' change and the publisher assumes no responsibility for such changes. Reproduction in whole or in part in any form or medium without express written permission of EGM Media, LLC is prohibited. For permission to reuse material from our publications or websites, or to use our logo, contact EGM Media, LLC's Rights and Permissions Manager at permissions@egmnow.net.

dk bicycles®
RIDER: KEVIN TEETS | PHOTO: TREVOR GAY
CHECK OUT THE
GENERAL LEE & OTHER
GREAT DK BIKES
AT WALMART &
WALMART.COM
01
GENERAL LEE
DK BICYCLES
Available at
Walmart
Save money. Live better.
*Closed course, professional rider featured, always wear a helmet. ©2011 DK Bicycles

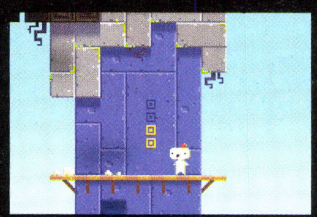
CONTENTS



28
THE EGM INTERVIEW
Red Storm creative director Tommy Jacob

36
TOP 20 WAR GAMES

50
SPEC OPS: THE LINE



72
FEZ

EDITORS

BRANDON JUSTICE
MANAGING EDITOR

TWITTER FEED @Jokeontheworld
FAVORITE GENRES Action, Sports, Adventure
LIKING: The fact that E3's almost here!
NOT LIKING: The realization that E3 planning is already upon him.
CONVINCED: That much like the cake, the Dog Whisperer is a lie.

ANDREW FITCH
ASSOCIATE EDITOR

TWITTER FEED @twittch
FAVORITE GENRES RPG, Action, Simulation
LIKING A trip back to the Bay Area with a certain gaming nerdette
NOT LIKING Going all that way to see Tim Lincecum's flowing mane go down in flames at AT&T Park. Never cut your hair again, Timmy!
MUSÉE MÉCANIQUE All gamers should take a trip to this San Francisco shrine to ancient arcades.

MARC CAMRON
CONTENT EDITOR

TWITTER FEED @RkyMtnGmr
FAVORITE GENRES Adventure, RPG, Platforming
LIKING The beginning of baseball season, when hope springs eternal. Unless you're a Cubs fan...
NOT LIKING Hockey and basketball playoffs diverting attention away from the start of baseball.
CONFUSED BY The lack of buzz surrounding this year's E3. Even though Sony and Microsoft aren't announcing consoles, there's still plenty of great games, people!

RAY CARSILLO
ASSOCIATE EDITOR

TWITTER FEED @RayCarsillo
FAVORITE GENRES Action, Adventure, RPG
LIKING Giving a score to every game he plays
NOT LIKING Sacrificing his fledging L.A. social life to play these games
PUPPY LOVE Brandon's new dog is infatuated with Ray. We believe this is because he often smells like bacon.

ERIC L. PATTERSON
NEWS EDITOR

TWITTER FEED @pikoeri
FAVORITE GENRES Survival-Horror, games hated by Phil Fish
LIKING *Soul Hackers* coming to Nintendo 3DS may mean the game will finally come to the U.S.
NOT LIKING *Grand Knights History* no longer coming over.
DARK SOULS PC A sneaky way to win Game of the Year a second time!

MATTHEW BENNETT
ASSOCIATE EDITOR, EGMNOW.COM

TWITTER FEED @mattyjb89
FAVORITE GENRES RPG, Action, Driving
LIKING Getting the sought-after white lightsaber crystal in *SWTOR*.
NOT LIKING How much of his life was sacrificed in order to get it.
FEELING Alone, as he bravely defends the mainstream and modern gamers. There were good games made after 1995, you know!

EGM MEDIA, LLC

8840 Wilshire Blvd.,
Third Floor,
Beverly Hills, CA 90211
www.egmmediagroup.com

PRESIDENT:
Steve Harris
ASST TO THE PUBLISHER:
John Emdall

ART DIRECTOR:
Michael Hobbs

INTERNATIONAL LICENSING INQUIRIES:
licensing@egmnow.net
NEWSSTAND DIRECTOR:
Ron Sklon
LEGAL COUNSEL:
Bob Wyman
ACCOUNTING:
Oz Abregov, John Whorfin

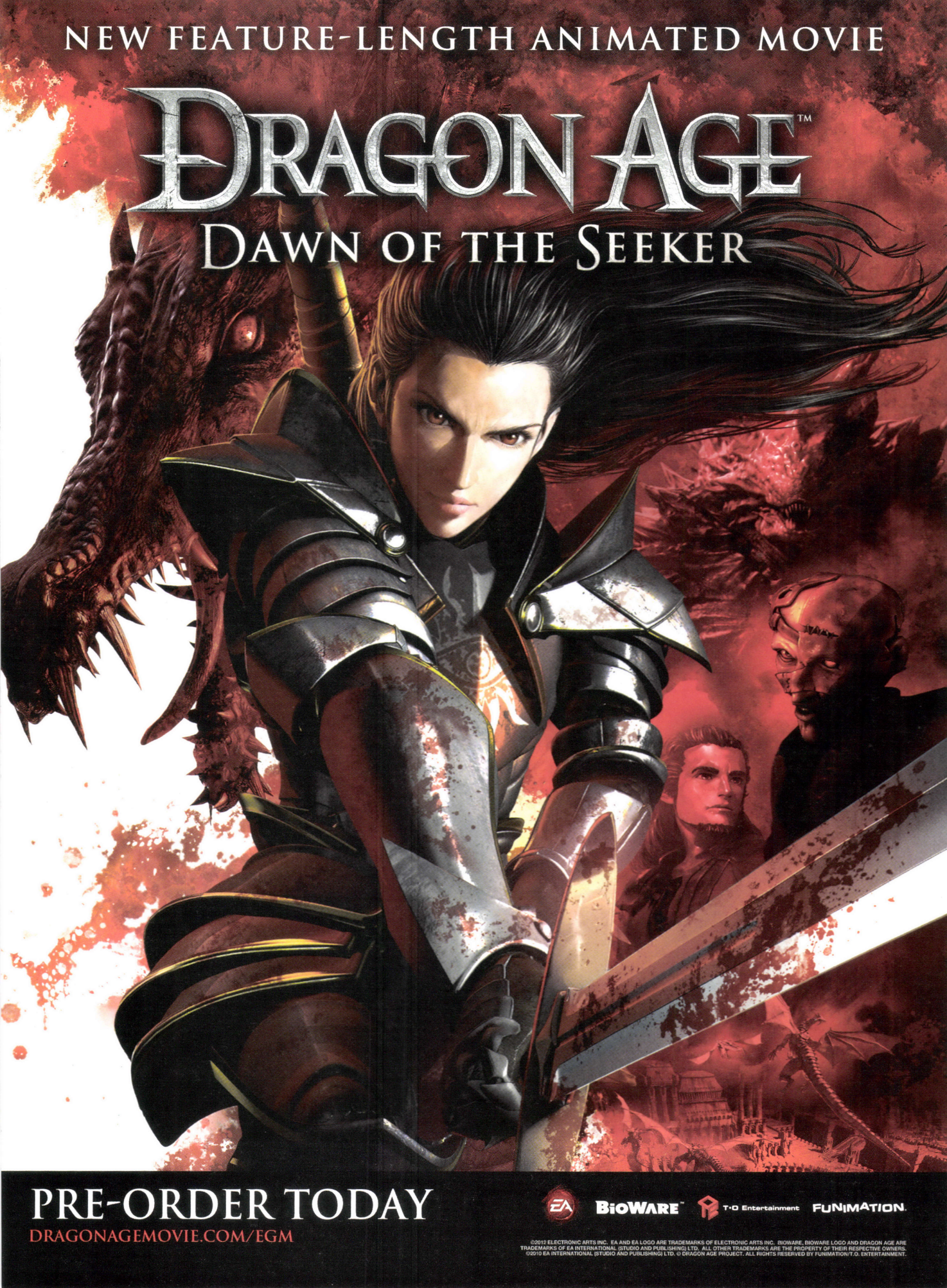
NEW SUBS:
www.egmnow.com/subscribe
SUBSCRIPTION INQUIRIES:
800-829-7830
egm@emailcustomerservice.com

ADVERTISING

ADVERTISING DIRECTOR:
Jeff Eisenberg
ACCOUNT EXECUTIVES:
Kristian Byrne, Jason Fishman
ADVERTISING INQUIRIES:
800-557-4165
sales@egmnow.net
PROMOTIONS:
Elizabeth Scott, John Bigboote
TRAFFIC MANAGER:
Alicia Prater

ScreenPaper
www.screenpapermedia.com

Digital Technology Powered By
ScreenPaper Media, LLC
8840 Wilshire Blvd., Third Floor
Beverly Hills, CA 90211
sales@screenpapermedia.com


NEW FEATURE-LENGTH ANIMATED MOVIE
DRAGON AGE™
DAWN OF THE SEEKER
PRE-ORDER TODAY
DRAGONAGEMOVIE.COM/EGM
BIOWARE™
T·O Entertainment
FUNIMATION.
©2012 ELECTRONIC ARTS INC. EA AND EA LOGO ARE TRADEMARKS OF ELECTRONIC ARTS INC. BIOWARE, BIOWARE LOGO AND DRAGON AGE ARE TRADEMARKS OF EA INTERNATIONAL (STUDIO AND PUBLISHING) LTD. ALL OTHER TRADEMARKS ARE THE PROPERTY OF THEIR RESPECTIVE OWNERS.
©2010 EA INTERNATIONAL (STUDIO AND PUBLISHING) LTD. © DRAGON AGE PROJECT. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED BY FUNIMATION/T.O. ENTERTAINMENT.

EDITOR'S LETTER

ISSUE 255

WHO SAYS WAR NEVER CHANGES?

BRANDON JUSTICE
MANAGING EDITOR

For a relatively peaceful dude, I sure seem to get thrust into the middle of my fair share of global conflicts. I'd label it odd, but as the staff's resident digital jarhead, I've found that—more often than not—peace tends to hang precariously in the balance in most virtual worlds. And, as fate would have it, the only thing that rights the scales is an itchy trigger finger and a healthy addiction to sending an endless horde of faceless goons into oblivion via the business end of my boomstick.

I like blowing things up as much as the next ambassador of ass-kicking, but I've gotta wonder if we'll ever start diving deeper into experiences that are more than just a collection of fleshsacks waiting to be whittled away by five clips of ammo before they finally own up to their ill-equipped artificial intelligence and drop to the ground. Will we ever care who these guys are—and why we're at odds? More than that, what will it take for us to get away from yet another attempt at liberating the world in favor of finding a sense of satisfaction from rescuing a friend...or simply saving our own skin?

When we decided to put together an issue of *EGM* wholly dedicated to the future of war-themed games, I wasn't so sure there'd be anything inside that would actually inspire any of the above ideals. Honestly, I expected a host of empty experiences that flailed aimlessly in an attempt to catch the *Call of Duty*s of the world—but what we ended up with was, thankfully, quite different.

Whether it's the intimate, authentic approach found in EA's upcoming *Medal of Honor: Warfighter*—featured in this issue's cover story—or the heavy moral implications weaved throughout 2K's *Spec Ops: The Line*, it's clear that many folks have abandoned the idea of fighting Activision on their own turf, opting instead to exist in the vast reaches of themes and ideas we've been too timid to conquer.

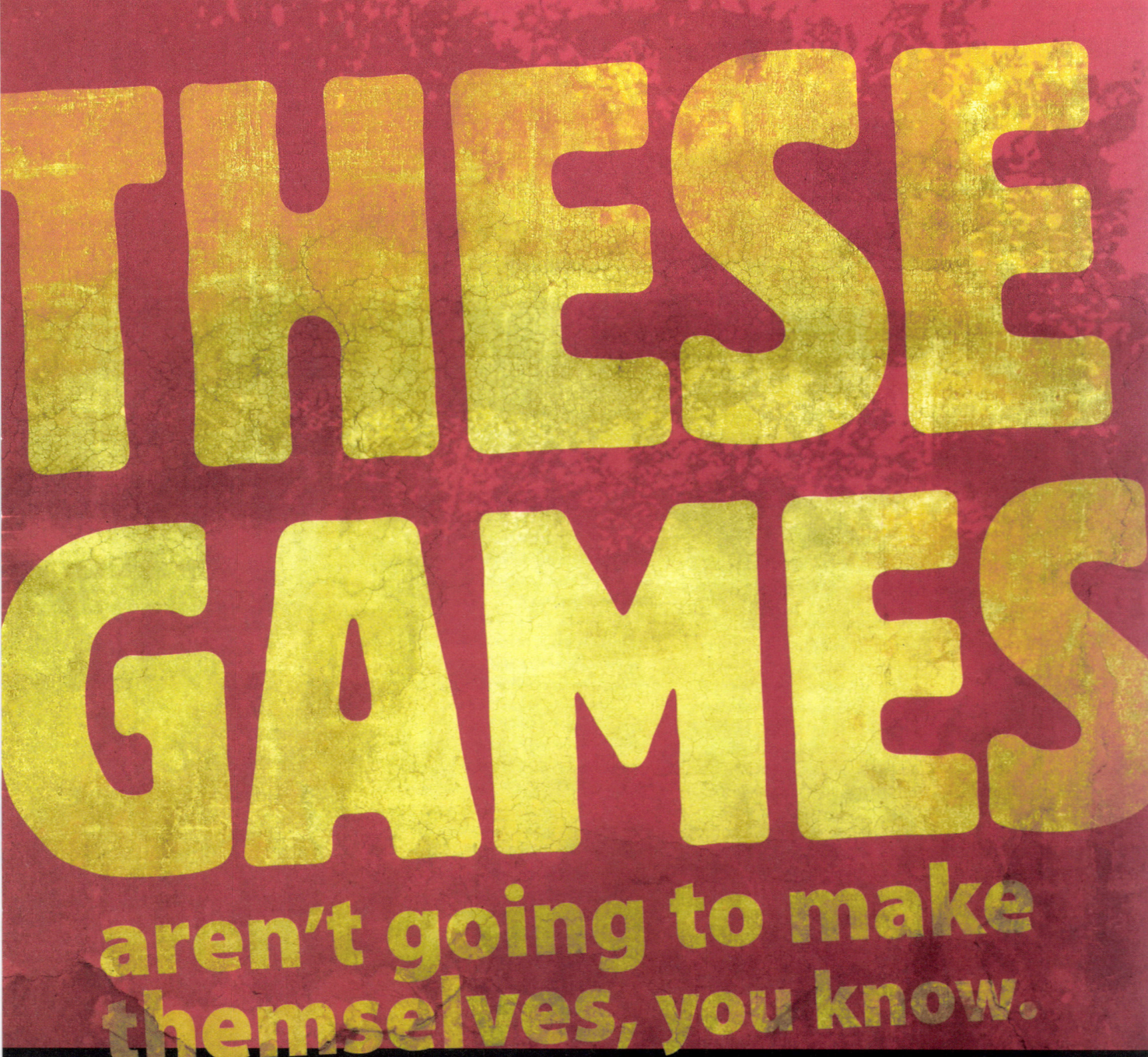
But as *Ghost Recon: Future Soldier* creative director Tommy Jacob enthuses in this month's EGM Interview, these are the trenches many designers have been dying to dive into, which will undoubtedly lead to a much-needed evolution in the way we approach the battlefield. Luckily, it seems that publishers are finally catching on to the viability of these desires, which means we'll start seeing more games like Ubisoft's *Far Cry 3* pushing the boundaries of storytelling and AI in one compelling package. More games that explore the nature of man itself, as opposed to the new and exciting ways we can leverage physics to level a building—that's a change that'll undoubtedly take years to fully embrace, but one that seems long overdue to career gamers.

And that doesn't even get into games that didn't make it into the issue, such as City Interactive's *Sniper: Ghost Warrior 2*, Ubi's *Rainbow 6: Patriots*, and Defiant's recently released *Warco*, all of which focus on themes and approaches to the front lines that'll continue to push developers to expand their idea of what we'd like to play.

Granted, looking through the scope of a methodical, evasive sniper, logging time as a hostage in a terrorist attack, or playing as an embedded journalist attempting to tell the story behind a war aren't experiences for everyone, but the fact that the opportunity even presents itself has us at *EGM* excited for bold new entries into the genre, and we know many of you feel the same.

Be sure to let us know if you're ready for the revolution via letters@egmnow.com or on Twitter @EGMNOW—and, once again, thanks for enlisting in the *EGM* Army for yet another issue!

Many have abandoned the idea of fighting Activision on their own turf, opting instead to exist in the vast reaches of themes and ideas we've been too timid to conquer.



You should do what you love, and you can at the University of Utah. Let our nationally ranked Entertainment Arts & Engineering program show you how.

MASTER GAMES STUDIO
ENTERTAINMENT ARTS & ENGINEERING
THE UNIVERSITY OF UTAH

Brought to you by the University of Utah Department of Film and Media Arts & School of Computing

eae.utah.edu

letters@egmnow.net

LETTER OF THE MONTH

A DIFFERENCE OF OPINION

In Issue 253, Anthony John Agnello wrote a captivating article on choice in videogames—an idea that, depending on your perspective, has either plagued or cured originality in the industry.

My favorite part of the article had to be the quotes from *BioShock*'s Ken Levine and *Sleep Is Death*'s Jason Rohrer—two game developers most deserving of the title "artist." Yet these two respected developers had vastly

In gaming, separate opinions can now exist side by side...

different opinions on a subject that every person who plays videogames understands—and both had valid points to back up their opinions.

BioShock and *Fable* are beloved, and plenty of gamers are captivated with the choices Levine and Peter Molyneux give them. But you'd also be hard-pressed to find gamers who disagree with Rohrer's perspective that we don't yet have meaningful choices in games—otherwise, his games wouldn't be as popular as they are.

I loved this article because the difference in opinion of Levine and Rohrer perfectly represents the type of entertainment videogaming has become. Much like literature and film, it's now a form of entertainment in which separate—yet equally deep and philosophical—opinions can exist side by side.

MICHAEL O'NEILL

EGM_Response: Well said, Michael. We're definitely in agreement that the gaming world is in a significant state of flux, and that these changes are opening up exciting new opportunities for all sorts of titles, regardless of whether not they're sticking to the traditional script or branching out into uncharted territory in search of the Next Big Thing.

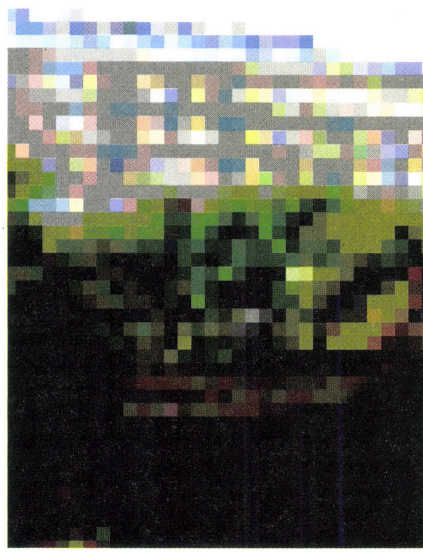
Luckily, as the industry continues to mature, the audience seems to be following suit, offering up a much broader perspective in terms of age and interest, giving publishers a greater opportunity to expand their horizons and still have hope that there's someone out there who can't wait to play what they're putting together.

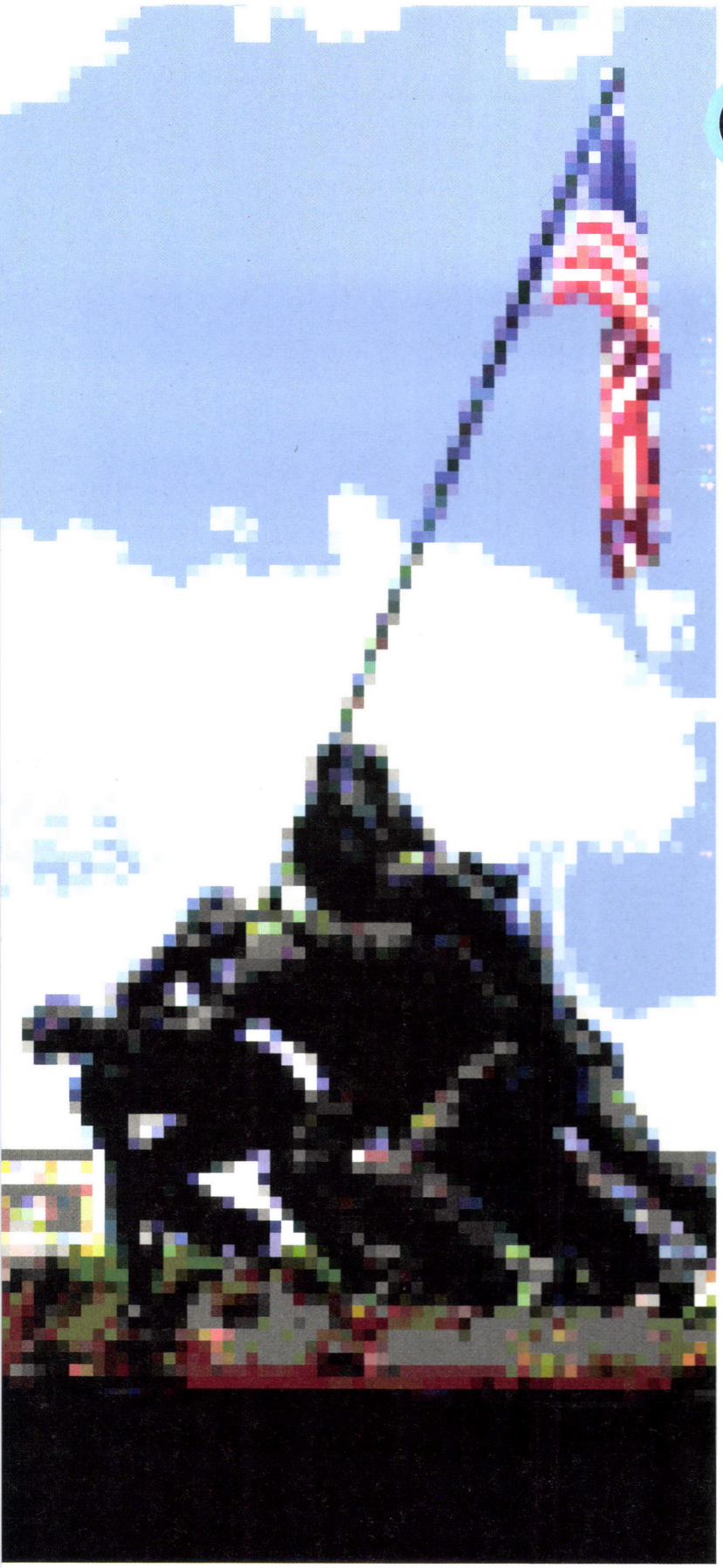
For evidence of that, you need look no further than the broad spectrum of games featured in our War Games preview special in this issue, which highlights a tiny fraction of the games we're seeing in 2012 that are hell-bent on defying convention in an effort to give us something new to play.

FIGHTING THE GOOD FIGHT

I just wanted to share a story about how gaming can bring people together—no matter where you go—as well as inspire gamers to help each other out.

I'm currently deployed to Afghanistan as a civilian contractor, and I love to play fighting games—whether it's *King of Fighters*, *Street Fighter*, or *Tekken*, I love it. When I first got out here, I found that most of my coworkers were bigger fans of FPS games like *Modern Warfare*, so I took my gaming to my local USO center. There, I met another *Street Fighter* fan—and, from there, more and more turned up. Soon, we got a whole group we called the "Kandahar Assassins" (we even had T-shirts made), and we met every night. We played so religiously that it was hard to find a challenge after a while. Soldiers would come in asking the staff about the games we played so they could check them out and jump on a PS3, but the USO didn't have them. The only copy of *Super Street Fighter IV* they did have was broken, and there was no telling when they'd get a new one. Then my pal got a great idea: Why not donate games to the USO? We bought a copy of *Ultimate Marvel vs. Capcom 3* and *Street Fighter X Tekken* for the USO—and, lo and behold, more and more soldiers started playing. Soon, we had decent competition, and we got a chance to get to know more and more people. Now, we're considering other ways we can give back to the USO. The friendly folks over at Hit Box actually offered to donate one of their awesome arcade controllers to our USO center here in Kandahar! It's going to feel great knowing that the Kandahar Assassins helped make that happen.





THE BIG QUESTION

*We asked our followers on Twitter to tell us their **favorite military-themed game**, and why. Here's what the EGM faithful had to say on the subject:*

Metal Gear Solid—it's based on stealth and strategy, so you have to think about how to go undetected.
Captain Snk @SegataSanshiro1

Medal of Honor, simply because no matter how many times I played, it never got boring. **Webster** @Renton98

Cannon Fodder, hands down. As for why, main theme says it all: "War! Never been so much fun!" **Morden** @M0RD3N

General Chaos on the Genesis. The multi-player was crazy unique for the time.
chocobomoshpit @chocobomoshpit

Battlefield 3. Why? Because it's different and fresh. Plus, the multiplayer portion's fun and enjoyable. **Tyler** @Tman7653

Herzog Zwei on the Genesis by Technosoft. Was a pioneering RTS and incorporated a cool futuristic transforming military theme.
Anthony *GIGA POWER* @VGnPizza

Iron Tank. As a kid, it let me drive a sweet tank with lots of weapons and steamroll everything. Was there even a story?
Pineapple @LookItsPineappl

Sensible Soccer Meets Bulldog Blighty on the Amiga. It was like regular soccer, only the ball would randomly explode. Amazing!
Alex Sergeant @colonelxanders

DEVELOPER TWEETBACK

When we're not tweeting with our friends over at @EGMNOW, we're pretending to get inside jokes from some of our favorite developers. Here's a few we think we understood:

Dan Teasdale
@deliciousbee

Nothing kicks off a productive Friday better then accidentally hitting "Remove from Workspace" instead of "Get Latest Revision."

Hideo Kojima
@HIDEO_KOJIMA_EN

At clinic, saw that blood-purification therapy can reduce bad cholesterol. Reminds me of white blood in Policenauts.

Brenda Garno
@br

The term "brogrammer" is often used by good coders to describe male coders that aren't very good.

Chris Wynn
@HammerOfWynn

Vacation makes me productive. Worked out, took kids to pool—before breakfast.

Cliff Bleszinski
@therealcliffyb

How would a free-to-play shooter do if the ones who had to pay for the next match were the top 3 players in the last match?

BACKGROUND NOISE

If there's one piece of computer equipment that dominates the drawers of *EGM*'s editorial team, it's the host of USB memory sticks sent to us by publishers chock-full of the latest screens and concept art on hot new titles. But this month, we got one that'll forever have a home in the record books as the most unwieldy memory stick every made: the severed arm of *Metal Gear Rising: Revengeance's* cyborg ninja, Raiden. While we have to give a ton of style points to the folks at Konami, we're not exactly thrilled about the prospect of trying to fit this thing in a carry-on when we hit the road.

We have a good group of players here, and it grows every day. It's amazing how the fighting-game community can get together, even in a warzone, and have a good time. The games they have in the library here at the USO really don't cater to fighting fans, so it feels good knowing that we can help fill that niche. It's nice to be able to sit back after a hot day and throw a couple hadoukens at what was a total stranger—who could turn out to be another Kandahar Assassin! It feels even better knowing that people are having fun in a place that can be rather inhospitable most of the time. All that said, I haven't gamed harder with such a diverse and amicable group of people, and it's all thanks to the USO and my new friends, the Kandahar Assassins. It really gives me something to look forward to every day out here!

JARVIS

EGM_Response: And who says fighting-game fans aren't friendly? Inspiring stuff, Jarvis. Thanks for filling us in!

YOU SHOULDA GONE WITH MARIO, MAN!

It's because of your magazine that I'm the crazy, 34-year-old gamer I am today. My mom couldn't afford the games that I wanted back then, but she somehow managed over the years to buy me an NES, an SNES, and a Genesis. Because of Blockbuster, I got to play most of the games you guys reviewed back in the day.

I think I've got about three boxes of old *EGM* and *GamePro* mags back home in Louisiana—at least 10 years' worth before I joined the Navy, which was 14 years ago. As much as I loved both mags, as technology progressed, it was easier for me to find my gaming news online. I was heartbroken when I found out *EGM* was shutting down a couple of years ago, and I partly blamed myself.

This mag's been with me for more than half of my life. Throughout every one of my deployments, my request back home was to send me *EGM*. Once I was financially stable enough to afford it, I went to flea markets, specialty gaming shops, and eBay to buy the old systems and play the games I never played. I even got Link tattooed on my chest when I was stationed in England.

I won't make the mistake of abandoning *EGM* again. When you launch your new subscription-based app, I'll be one of the first to buy it (if I'm on land, that is). I figured it was about time I piped up and let you guys know how much I appreciate your hard work—and how much this gaming forum's meant to me over the years.

SMOKEFU

EGM_Response: We here at *EGM* always shed a little tear at letters like this. Not just because we're honored to have such dedicated fans out there, but also because it reminds us how frickin' old we all are!

Smoke, we definitely appreciate this trip down memory lane (even if you had to tug our heartstrings again by mentioning *GamePro*, whose recent closure's still a source of sadness for folks across the industry), and we can't wait to see what you think of all the hard work we've put into the new digital edition of *EGM*.

That said, man, it's too bad you didn't send us a photo of the tattoo!

STEP IT UP, SONY!

Sony's marketing—in America, at least—is horrendous. The PlayStation Vita released to absolutely no fanfare whatsoever, and before its release, the only semblance of an advertisement I saw was a Taco Bell $5 Vita Box promotion.

I'm really annoyed at how little they promoted the Vita. Because of their lack of marketing, I'm the only person I know with a $300 Sony handheld; it's the PSP all over again. Here's hoping word of mouth will do Sony's job for them.

ERIC G.

EGM_Response: Eric, we feel your pain. While some folks on staff are over the portable gaming scene after a series of heartbreaks, some of us feel that the Vita's one of the most promising portables we've ever seen, and it seems like Sony isn't quite sure what to do with the thing now that it's finally on store shelves—much like Nintendo's early struggles with the 3DS.

That said, gamers eventually caught on to the fun of the 3DS, and with a upcoming software roster that includes games like *Resistance: Burning Skies*, *Sound Shapes*, and an oft-rumored *Call of Duty* project, there's a good chance it'll bounce back, too.

If nothing else, you're welcome to send us a friend invite—provided you don't mind getting whupped at *Lumines*, that is...

CONTACT EGM

BY E-MAIL:
letters@egmnow.net

BY SNAIL MAIL:
8840 Wilshire Blvd. Third Floor
Beverly Hills, CA 90211

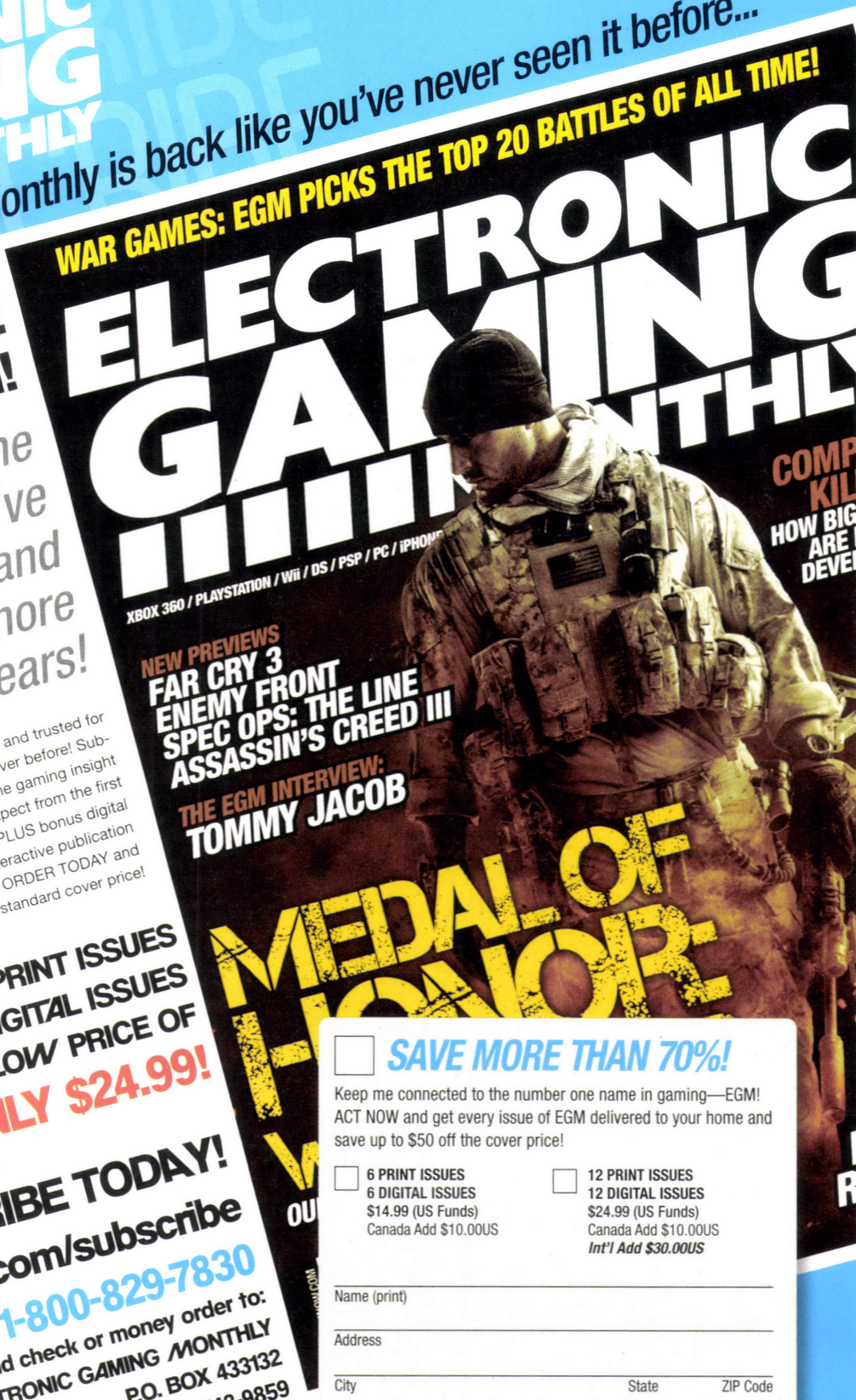
ELECTRONIC GAMING MONTHLY

Electronic Gaming Monthly is back like you've never seen it before...

JOIN THE EVOLUTION!

Subscribe to the name you've known and respected for more than 20 Years!

The independent voice you've known and trusted for more than 20 years is back like never before! Subscribe to the new EGM and get all the gaming insight and opinion you've come to expect from the first magazine to cover the category PLUS bonus digital coverage in our interactive publication EGMi: The Digital Magazine! ORDER TODAY and save more than 70% off the standard cover price!



GET 12 PRINT ISSUES AND 12 DIGITAL ISSUES FOR THE LOW PRICE OF ONLY $24.99!

SUBSCRIBE TODAY!

www.egmnow.com/subscribe

1-800-829-7830

or send check or money order to:
ELECTRONIC GAMING MONTHLY
P.O. BOX 433132
PALM COAST, FL 32143-9859

☐ **SAVE MORE THAN 70%!**

Keep me connected to the number one name in gaming—EGM! ACT NOW and get every issue of EGM delivered to your home and save up to $50 off the cover price!

☐ **6 PRINT ISSUES**
6 DIGITAL ISSUES
$14.99 (US Funds)
Canada Add $10.00US

☐ **12 PRINT ISSUES**
12 DIGITAL ISSUES
$24.99 (US Funds)
Canada Add $10.00US
Int'l Add $30.00US

Name (print) _____

Address _____

City _____ State _____ ZIP Code _____

MAIL YOUR PAYMENT TO: **ELECTRONIC GAMING MONTHLY**
P.O. BOX 433132
PALM COAST, FL 32143-9859

12-issue newsstand price $83.88. Canadian GST included. Allow 6-8 weeks for delivery. Electronic Gaming Monthly is published bi-monthly, except for occassional extra, special, combined or expanded issues. Combined or expanded issues may count as two subscription issues and extra or special issues may count as a subscription issue. Your subscription will continue without interruption for as long as you wish, unless you instruct otherwise. We will notify and bill you at the discounted renewal rate then in effect prior to each new subscription term.

6010NS

PULLING THE PLUG

Game cancellations and studio closures seem here to stay

BY ANTHONY JOHN AGNELLO

It's now an alarmingly common scenario: After rumors of cutbacks, a major studio working hard on a promising triple-A title becomes the next high-profile developer to suddenly bite the dust.

It's no secret that even industry giants like Sony and Activision have been struggling to keep developers from going under for some time now. With a still-flagging economy and a shifting paradigm between big-budget

You can see Tony Stark and co. at a theater near you, but THQ pulled the plug on the videogame.

releases and smaller titles, corporate losses and studio closures remain a painful—but certainly not unheard of—effect of the financially uncertain times we live in.

As if that's not bad enough, consider this: After closures, many of these teams' projects never even make it to store shelves—a shock that Christian Carriere, ex-level designer for THQ Studio Australia's cancelled co-op title, wasn't prepared for.

"You could hear a pin drop—and the silent disbelief and confusion of everyone there," he says. "No one knew it was coming, and some people made huge sacrifices because they were confident that we'd be there to release a triple-A title."

After Studio Australia's closure was announced in August 2011, leaked first-person gameplay of Iron Man and the Hulk fighting enemies in polished environments found its way to YouTube. One look at how far along in the development *The Avengers* was, and suddenly, the team's confusion makes sense.

"We were not given a reason beyond 'THQ corporate is restructuring,' which felt to us like, 'Because we can,'" Carriere says. "A few of us were initially worried that THQ might take the property and hand it to another team, but it doesn't look as if that will be the case."

Propaganda Games' *Pirates of the Caribbean* RPG, *Armada of the Damned*, suffered a similar fate when Disney closed the Vancouver-based developer following the release of *TRON: Evolution* in January of last year. The news of *Armada*'s cancellation and Propaganda's closure wasn't pleasant, says former *Armada* lead designer Devon Blanchet.

"This industry doesn't suffer fools or people who do things half-assed," he says. "You go all in on a project mentally, emotionally, and sometimes physically. At the time, it was incredibly hard to overcome, but you do—and then you get stronger."

Having moved on—Blanchet's now lead game designer at Vancouver indie studio Smoking Gun Interactive—he doesn't talk much about the corporate details of *Armada*'s fate but acknowledges the balancing act publishers must often make in deciding when to pull the plug on certain projects.

"I think studios have to stay flexible in the games that they can make and the projects they can accommodate and execute on, all things being equal," he says.

Bizarre Creations' *007* title, *Blood Stone*, actually made it to store shelves before Activision closed the studio's doors for good, even with team members already working on concepts for what they hoped would be their next big racing game.

"Activision's line was: 'There's no more money in racing games,'" says Bizarre ex-lead designer Matt Cavanagh. "Obviously, we can see that's not the case."

It was a sad end to the studio's 23-year history, particularly since Bizarre was just getting its feet wet with narrative-based action games.

"*Blood Stone* needed more time to reach its potential," Cavanagh says. "At the same time, the team had really cut their teeth making it; I knew they were ready to make a far better next game."

Like Blanchet and Carriere—now a level designer at Digital Extremes—Cavanagh's landed on his feet. His company, Totem Games, recently launched their first iOS title, *SpaceOff*. With no end to the instability of major studios in sight, perhaps small development like this is the safest solution.

> *"You could hear a pin drop... No one knew [layoffs] were coming."*

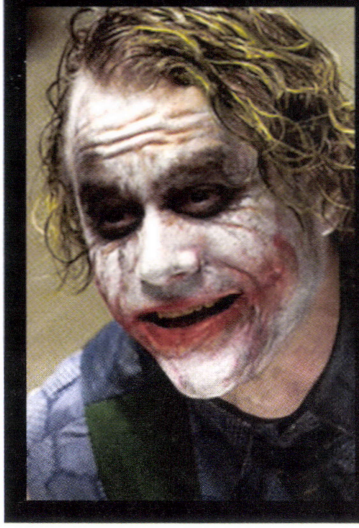
A CHANGE OF PLANS

Not every game makes it to launch—at least not with its original intent intact. Here are a few recent titles notable for changes (or cancellation) during development.

CALL OF DUTY: MODERN WARFARE 3
After *MW2*, ex-Infinity Ward heads Jason West and Vince Zampella were embroiled in a messy legal battle with Activision over *COD*'s creative rights—and a large sum of royalties. After a mass exodus of IW designers, Activision brought in Sledgehammer Games and Raven Software to finish development on *MW3*. Fans didn't seem to care, but the lawsuit's still pending.

I AM ALIVE
First announced in 2008 as Darkworks' next big project, *I Am Alive* was hyped as Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* in game form. Fast-forward to 2012—after years of delays and little information, Ubisoft Shanghai, taking over for the defunct Darkworks, developed the game as a significantly less-ambitious and somewhat flawed downloadable title.

THE DARK KNIGHT
Rumblings of a *Dark Knight* tie-in game from Pandemic Brisbane began in summer 2008. The project was a disaster of timing and inexperience with open-world games, which led to Pandemic AU's closure; what remained of Pandemic closed for good the next year. Let's hope if there's a *Dark Knight Rises* game, it fares better.



EGM's

GAME SCHOOLS GUIDE

Where's the best place for aspiring developers to get schooled?

BY STEVE HASKE

Achievement unlocked—you've decided to pursue a career in videogames. But unlike the stereotype of a lone coder in solitary confinement, there isn't really a typical game-student profile. Is your interest in aesthetics, theory, or gameplay systems? What's a prospective game designer to do—and, more importantly, where can you go to learn? Not to worry—*EGM*'s here with a list of gaming universities to help you score the gamer points needed for educational success.

DigiPen Institute of Technology
Redmond, Washington

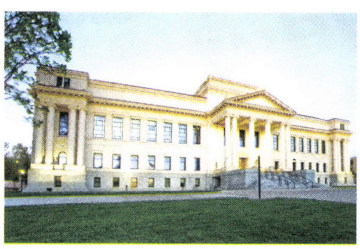
You are: Swinging for the fences. DigiPen has seven different college-level degrees and two graduate programs that run the game-development gamut—and it doesn't hurt that grads often go on to jobs with some of the highest-profile companies in the industry.
Games alumni have worked on: A laundry list. Kim Swift's *Portal* started off as a student project here; some other triple-A games alums have worked on include *Skyrim*, *Dead Space 2*, *Red Dead Redemption*, *EVE Online*, *Gears of War*, *Dance Central*, and the *Saints Row* series.
Notable guest speakers and faculty: Warren Spector was DigiPen's 2011 commencement speaker, GLaDOS' Ellen McLain has spoken about her work, and Disney's David Goetz has reviewed student portfolios. Speakers from regional staples like Valve, Bungie, and Monolith Productions also make appearances to talk with graduate students.
Age and size: The school's Redmond campus has grown to just over 1,000 students since its 1994 founding, with an additional 400 and 30 at DigiPen's Singapore and Bilbao, Spain campuses, respectively.
Internships: Integrated
Campus gaming culture: LAN parties for *Counter-Strike* and *StarCraft*, with lots of clubs for academic and personal gaming interests.
Tuition: $25,600 per year

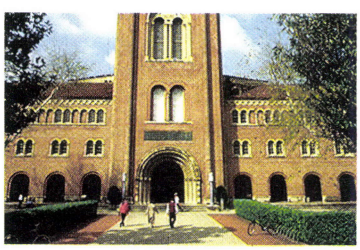
School: University of Utah
Salt Lake City, Utah

You are: Looking for a top-tier gaming education without a private-school pricetag—Utah's ranked No. 1 in public-university game-design programs. You're also not afraid to see how the other half works: Artists work among programmers and vice versa, with interdisciplinary game projects starting freshman year.
Games alumni have worked on: The student-made XBLIG title *Minions!* has been featured in *Official Xbox Magazine* and *Famitsu Weekly*; *PE Interactive*, a Move title designed for kids fighting cancer.
Notable guests speakers and faculty: With computer-science history dating back to the '60s, Utah sees alums like Nolan Bushnell and Adobe founder John Warnock visit campus.
Age and size: Undergrad: 2007, at around 200 students; Graduate: 2010, 55 students.
Internships: Required for Master's program
Campus gaming culture: The university hosts game competitions and has an Xbox lab, where students can try out the work of their peers; several projects are available for $1 each, which goes back to its creators.
Tuition: $5,500-7,500 per year

School: University of Southern California
Los Angeles, California

You are: Unafraid to challenge conventions; you like to talk with people to gain insight into alternative ideas, then put everything together to come up with an innovative finished product.
Games alumni have worked on: thatgamecompany founders Jenova Chen and Kellee Santiago went on to make *Journey* (among other games). *The Misadventures of P.B. Winterbottom* and the *StarCraft*–centric Day[9] TV are also the work of USC grads.
Notable guest speakers and faculty: Heavy hitters like Hideo Kojima, Will Wright, John Romero, Amy Hennig, and Richard Lemarchand have spoken here, while a motion-capture class with Robert Zemeckis is complemented by faculty made up of industry vets from EA, Activision, and others.
Age and size: 2002; 110 students.
Internships: Integrated
Campus gaming culture: Game salons for





Which gaming school is best for you? It really depends what you're looking for.

critiquing the form occur regularly.
Tuition: $21,081 per year

Gnomon School of Visual Effects
Hollywood, California

You are: An art-school type with a strong work ethic. Studies focus heavily on creation of form—character models, vehicles, environmental design and the like—with a side of technical classes to put your artistry in context.
Games alumni have worked on: With a 97-percent placement rate, Gnomon grads are cherry-picked by industry leaders like Naughty Dog, EA, and Blizzard, among countless others.

Notable guest speakers and faculty: Recently, Gnomon hosted developers from Infinity Ward and Sledgehammer Games to discuss visual effects and art processes; the Gnomon stage houses regular presentations like these from all over the industry.
Age and size: 1998; around 80 enrolled students
Internships: Optional, but you won't need them
Campus gaming culture: Your friends, who are all working as hard as you are.
Tuition: $3,500-8,000 per term

Massachusetts Institute of Technology
Cambridge, Massachusetts

You are: Enthusiastic about research, theory, and coding. The campus' Singapore-MIT GAMBIT lab acts as an experimental space for students to hone their skills in specialty areas related to game design and development while simultaneously exploring various critical and creative questions that'll help you get a leg up in your career. Forty interns from Singapore also show up during the summer to help work on game projects.

Games alumni have worked on: MIT grads have a long history of creating games—*Zork*, *Fallout*, *Thief*, and *Rock Band*; GAMBIT grad Eitan Glinert made *Slam Bolt Scrappers*.
Notable guest speakers and faculty: Persuasive Games' Ian Bogost and Quantic Dream's David Cage have spoken here about innovating design and alternative uses for games. Looking at the medium outside the box, journalist Heather Chaplin recently discussed game literacy and emergent thinking. Heady stuff.
Age and size: 1982 (GAMBIT lab, 2006); about 100 students.
Internships: Yes
Campus gaming culture: GAMBIT hosts weekly looks at niche and mainstream releases with rants from staff and guest speakers, as well as a regular talks with interactive fiction authors.
Tuition: $40,732

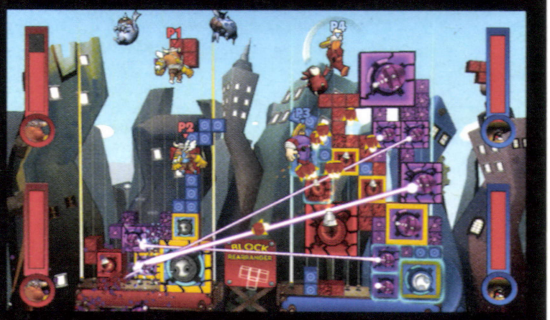
Full Sail University
Winter Park, Florida

You are: Interested in the process from start to finish. You want to know everything there is to know about how games are made, from the basics to the final product that hits store shelves—Full Sail's admirably thorough program will run you through it all.
Games alumni have worked on: Full Sail grads have worked on *Red Dead Redemption*, *Uncharted 3*, *Modern Warfare 3*, *L.A. Noire*, and the upcoming *BioShock Infinite*—to name a few.
Notable guest speakers and faculty: Microsoft, Blizzard, and Vicarious Visions are some of the companies that have given talks here. IGDA board members Wendy Despain and Susan Gold are also on the faculty at Full Sail.
Age and size: Full Sail's first full-fledged game-design program started in 2004, with new concentrations added since. Around 1,900 students are currently enrolled.
Internships: The career-development department helps alums find jobs after graduation.
Campus gaming culture: Hosted the Red Bull LAN camp for top *StarCraft II* and *Halo: Reach* players.
Tuition: $439-633 per credit hour

PROFILES IN EXCELLENCE

JENOVA CHEN
GRADUATED: 2006, USC
PORTFOLIO: *Journey*, *Flower*, *flOw*
INTERESTING SCHOOL PROJECTS: Training levels of Iraq troops, educational game on Russian postmodernism, IGF projects
CAMPUS EXPERIENCE: "At one point during my time at USC, I had five part-time jobs in one semester while putting every remaining hour toward alpha tests. I spent a lot of time worrying I wouldn't be able to afford tuition, since I couldn't apply for student loans as an international student. It was a crazy time—but also a fun time."

JOSH HERMAN
GRADUATED: 2009, Gnomon School
PORTFOLIO: Character artist on *Uncharted 3*
INTERESTING SCHOOL PROJECTS: Working on the short film *Plus Minus*
CAMPUS EXPERIENCE: "Being around the campus so much was good, because I got to meet a lot of people. It allows you to grow faster and gain those connections for later; I've never had to show a demo reel because of all the people I knew."



EITAN GLINERT
GRADUATED: 2008, MIT
PORTFOLIO: *Slam Bolt Scrappers*, *Go Home Dinosaurs!*
INTERESTING SCHOOL PROJECTS: Working on projects for blind and visually impaired gamers
CAMPUS EXPERIENCE: "The best part of being a student at MIT is the culture of 'What's your stupid idea? OK, let's make it happen.' When I thought I might want to start my own company, instead of laughing me out of the room, people gave me the support I needed and asked tough questions that helped me get the framework set for starting Fire Hose Games."

BEYOND CDS AND CAT HELMETS

Artbooks, figurines, downloadable extras, cloth maps, SteelBook cases—here in the States, we're often offered all kinds of goodies as a part of special-edition releases for the latest games. All of that's small potatoes, however, to some of the crazy collectables Japan's come up with.

Take, for example, the Premium Edition of *Resident Evil 6*, announced by Capcom Japan and coming in at a cool 105,000 yen—or roughly $1,300. In addition to a copy of the game and four mysterious "tablet covers," you'll get an authentic replica of the leather jacket Leon S. Kennedy will be wearing during his zombie-shooting adventures.

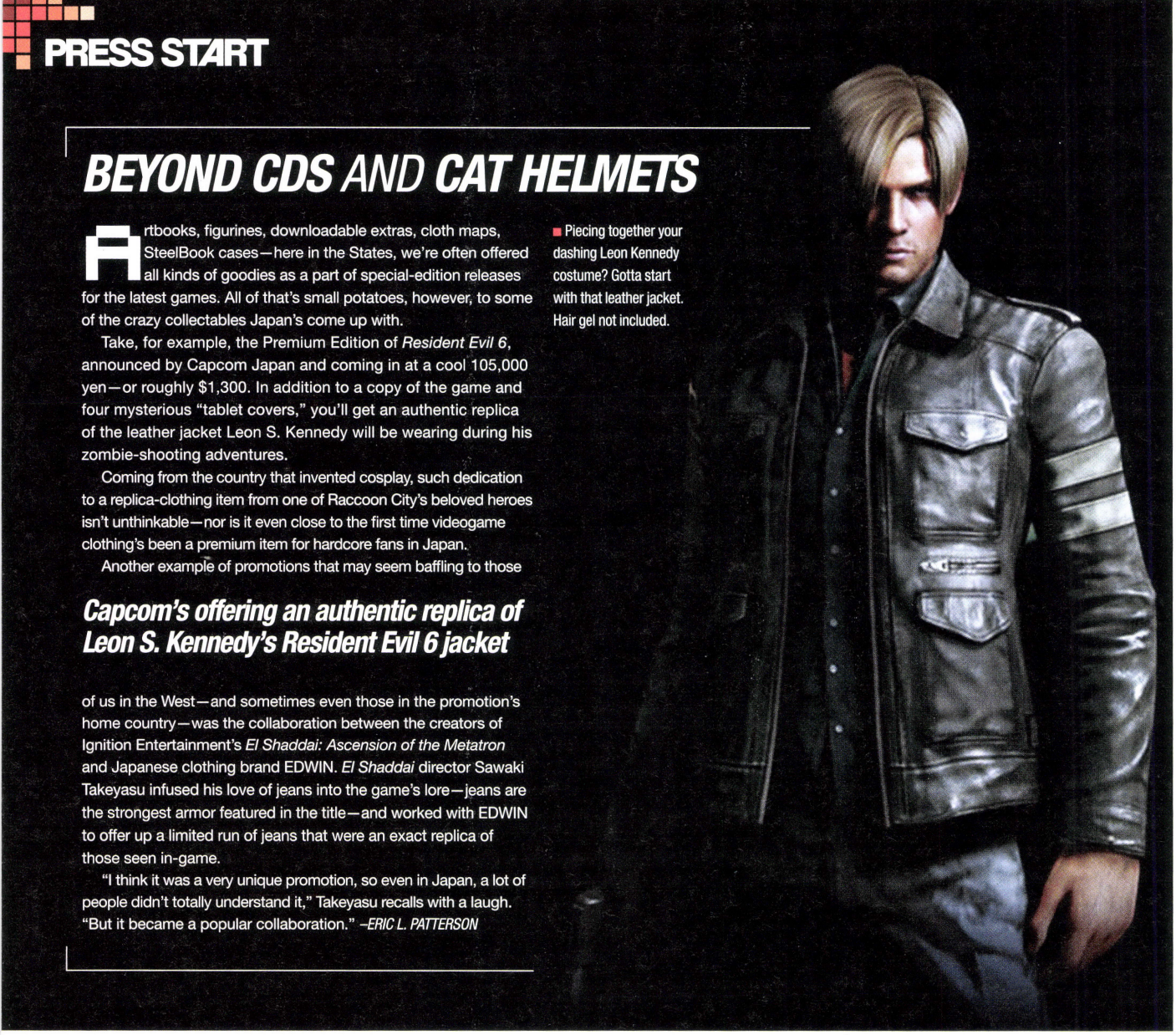
Coming from the country that invented cosplay, such dedication to a replica-clothing item from one of Raccoon City's beloved heroes isn't unthinkable—nor is it even close to the first time videogame clothing's been a premium item for hardcore fans in Japan.

Another example of promotions that may seem baffling to those

Capcom's offering an authentic replica of Leon S. Kennedy's Resident Evil 6 jacket

of us in the West—and sometimes even those in the promotion's home country—was the collaboration between the creators of Ignition Entertainment's *El Shaddai: Ascension of the Metatron* and Japanese clothing brand EDWIN. *El Shaddai* director Sawaki Takeyasu infused his love of jeans into the game's lore—jeans are the strongest armor featured in the title—and worked with EDWIN to offer up a limited run of jeans that were an exact replica of those seen in-game.

"I think it was a very unique promotion, so even in Japan, a lot of people didn't totally understand it," Takeyasu recalls with a laugh. "But it became a popular collaboration." *–ERIC L. PATTERSON*



■ Piecing together your dashing Leon Kennedy costume? Gotta start with that leather jacket. Hair gel not included.

GAME OVER FOR SEX OFFENDERS

For many who find themselves banned from Xbox Live or PlayStation Network, such results often serve as punishment for harassing other players, cheating, modifying consoles, or other such nogoodnik-like activities. For 3,580 New York state residents who recently found themselves kicked from the online services, however, it was due to a much different reason—being registered sex offenders.

The move came as part of Operation: Game Over, a joint initiative between major digital entertainment companies like Sony, Microsoft, Blizzard, EA, and Apple.

"We must ensure online videogame systems do not become a digital playground for dangerous predators," New York attorney general Eric Schneiderman said in regards to the effort. "That means doing everything possible to block sex offenders from using gaming networks as a vehicle to prey on underage victims."

Operation: Game Over is an effort that has its heart it the right place—but not everyone's certain it'll have positive results. Members of the New York Civil Liberties Union question if the bans will actually do anything to protect children; the group says that such bans step on the freedoms of those targeted.

Sex offenders found themselves banned from XBL and PSN

It's a discussion that's very delicate and complicated. Often, it's better to be safe than sorry, and if even one child is protected via Operation: Game Over, then it will have done its job. On the other hand, we'll leave you with something to consider: In a number of states, acts such as mooning, streaking, or public urination can still get you convicted for a sex crime. *–ERIC L. PATTERSON*

THERE WERE (MORE) DRAGOONS

Classic PlayStation titles coming to the PlayStation Store as digital downloads is nothing strange at this point. So, Sony's announcement that *The Legend of Dragoon*—a PS1 RPG originally released in 2000—has joined that library may have been a bit unexpected, but it wasn't all that surprising.

What did raise many an eye, however, was an offhand comment that came with that announcement. In bringing word that the game would soon be available for download, Sony Computer Entertainment Worldwide Studios president Shu Yoshida mentioned that an official sequel to the game had, indeed, once been in the works—but production was later halted.

"I still occasionally hear from fans of *The Legend of Dragoon*, and many want to know if there is a sequel," said Yoshida. "*The Legend of Dragoon 2* was put into preproduction after I left the Japan Studio, but it was eventually cancelled for some unknown reason, and the team members moved on to different projects. Some [former colleagues] still work in the Japan Studio, so we talk about the memories of developing *The Legend of Dragoon* when we see each other at company functions."

■ Players will soon get a chance to relive one of the PS1's great overlooked RPGs.

We here at *EGM* see it as one of those bittersweet moments: As hard as it can be to hear that such a game was in development but then cancelled, we'd still rather know and be heartbroken than never know at all. *–ERIC L. PATTERSON*

5 LIVES

with **HARVARD BONIN**
SENIOR PRODUCER, STARHAWK

BY PAUL SEMEL

You share your first name with a famous university. True or False: Harvard University is located in Harvard, Massachusetts.
That is an incredible lie. I didn't go there, but I have sat on their steps.
Correct. It's in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

You worked on the 2007 game *Warhawk* but not the 1995 *Warhawk*. What year did Firebird Software release the unrelated vertical side-scrolling shooter *Warhawk*?
Oh, wow. Do I have a lifeline? No? Then I'm going to say 19...86.
Correct.

***Warhawk*'s being made by LightBox Interactive. Who's most often credited with inventing light bulbs, which are used in light boxes, even though there were almost two dozen people who did it before him?**
I believe that would be Thomas Edison.
Correct.

Your latest game is *Starhawk*. What sci-fi TV show had a kind of warship known as Sun-Hawks?
This is going to be a total guess, but I'm going to say...*Stargate*?
Sorry, it's Babylon 5.

Besides your game, Starhawk is also the name of a writer of spiritual books. True or False: Starhawk's birth name was Sun Chicken.
That is false. We are very aware of our friend Starhawk.
Correct. Her original name was Miriam Simos.

SCORE 4/5

STANDING FIRM ON DIVERSITY

For our roundtable discussion in Issue 252, the *EGM* crew talked about the lack of maturity in videogames. As a part of that topic, we pondered the inclusion of elements such as homosexual relationships in games—and whether average gamers are yet accepting of said elements when they may not be able to directly relate to them.

That question was put to the test with the release of *Mass Effect 3*, which introduced—for the first time in the series—same-sex relationship options. (Well, outside of Liara, who technically didn't count because she was some weird blue alien chick.)

The result? Many hailed the move to bring diversity to the series—but postlaunch, EA revealed that they had received "several thousand letters and e-mails" that criticized the publisher for allowing LGBT content to be a part of both *Mass Effect 3* as well as *Star Wars: The Old Republic.* (In the case of *SWTOR*, same-sex relationships have been announced but aren't officially part of the game yet.)

For their part, EA says that the inclusion of same-sex relationship options such as those BioWare put into *Mass Effect 3* didn't come due to any sort of pressure or "agenda" by LGBT groups, and that the publisher had no plans to censor or edit any of its games to remove such content. While we commend EA for that stance, we've also been happy to see support for diversity and inclusivity in gaming also come from the gaming community itself—an opinion that has been far stronger and louder than those voices against such ideas. *–ERIC L. PATTERSON*

■ EA heard complaints for the same-sex relationships in *Mass Effect 3*, but received far more support for the move.

GAMING MAY BE HAZARDOUS TO YOUR HEALTH

"WARNING: EXPOSURE TO VIOLENT VIDEOGAMES HAS BEEN LINKED TO AGGRESSIVE BEHAVIOR."

If Virginia representative Frank Wolf and California representative Joe Baca have their way, you'll be seeing that label attached to any game you purchased—no matter its maturity level or ESRB rating. The two house members have proposed the "Violence in Video Games Labeling Act" (H.R. 4204), which would require such a label on games both sold physically in stores, as well as presented in some way for those distributed digitally.

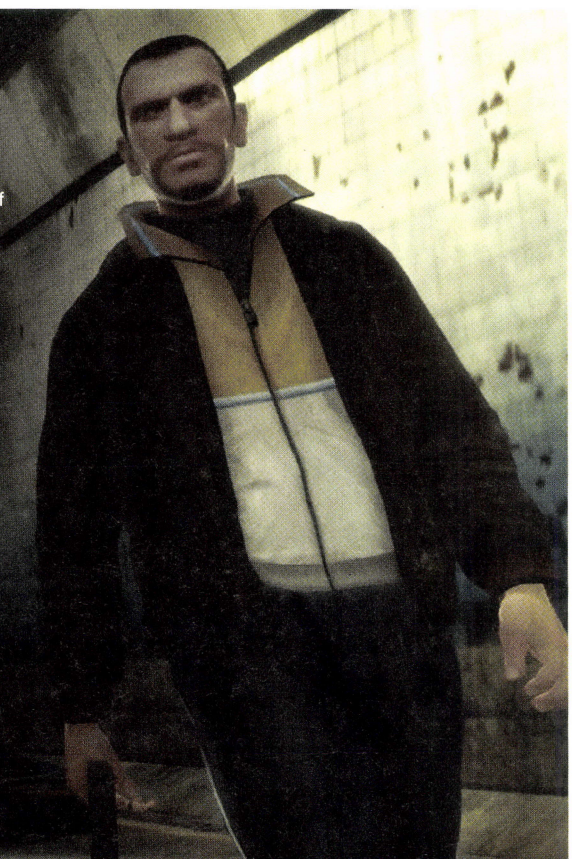
"Just as we warn smokers of the health consequences of tobacco, we should warn parents—and children—about the growing scientific evidence demonstrating a relationship between violent videogames and violent behavior," said Wolf. "As a parent and grandparent, I think it's important people know everything they can about the extremely violent nature of some of these games."

In the grand scheme of entertainment and technology, videogames are still a young medium. As such, many of those in a position to create laws meant to censor or control them are often likely people who know little about videogames themselves.

The reports used to back initiatives such as H.R. 4204 have also been called into question. For example, the research of Dr. Craig Anderson has been used by the state of California to show the dangerous effects of videogame violence, but the U.S. Supreme Court had this to say about the findings of Dr. Anderson—and the handful of other research California relied on in its previous attempt to ban the sale of violent videogames to minors:

"These studies have been rejected by every court to consider them, and with good reason: They do not prove that violent videogames cause minors to act aggressively."

The Violence in Video Games Labeling Act isn't the first piece of legislation aimed at demonizing videogames, and it certainly won't be the last. No matter if you're a casual player or a hardcore gamer, we must all be ready and willing to stand up and speak out in support of the hobby we love. *–ERIC L. PATTERSON*



ATTEMPTING TO BREAK THE EPISODIC GAMING CURSE

The idea seemed like a no-brainer: crafting a game based around the characters and world of *Penny Arcade*, a webcomic that's become a staple of gamers everywhere—and has seen its creators, Jerry Holkins and Mike Krahulik, become influential voices in the gaming community.

Their project? *Penny Arcade Adventures: On the Rain-Slick Precipice of Darkness*, a four-part episodic RPG developed by *DeathSpank* studio Hothead Games. Or, at least, that was the plan. Unfortunately, after *Episode Two* hit in October of 2008, Hothead announced they'd no longer be attached to the project—and it seemed that the two remaining chapters might never be made in videogame form.

Penny Arcade Adventures: On the Rain-Slick Precipice of Darkness is getting a second shot at life

Now, however, *Rain-Slick Precipice* is getting a second shot at life. Starting with a chance posting on the *Penny Arcade* message forums, indie RPG developer Zeboyd Games is now working with *Penny Arcade* to develop an official third chapter for the series—using a completely different visual and gameplay style that still continues with the characters, themes, and other storyline elements from the first two games. Fans of the series will finally get the continuation they've long been waiting for—but Zeboyd Games also sees a lot of interesting opportunities thanks to the shift in developer and design direction.

"We like to think—and we think the folks at *Penny Arcade* would agree—that this is sort of a fresh start for the series," Zeboyd Games co-founder Bill Stiernberg told *EGM* at PAX East 2012. "It's been a long time since the second game came out; starting with a new studio, and going with a new style, we think, 'Why not just take it in a new direction?' So, for us, we're ecstatic to be working with *Penny Arcade*, but we also think it's great that they're enthusiastic about doing it in this retro style."

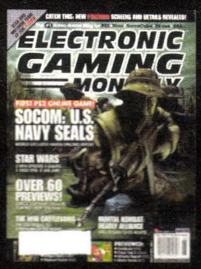
Amidst the enthusiasm for the revival of *Rain-Slick Precipice*, we can't help but think of the curse that's befallen more than a few episodic-game projects that have promised epic adventures spread across multiple releases—only to see the series cut short when sales or fan support didn't pan out as hoped. (Reports state that *On the Rain-Slick Precipice of Darkness: Episode Two* had only one-third the sales of the first episode.) In fact, the dangers of developers overpromising and underdelivering were evident even 30 years ago—when Atari announced their four-part 2600 magnum opus, *Swordquest*. (Two of *Swordquest*'s games ended up being released; the third chapter, *Waterworld*, saw very limited release, while the final game, *Airworld*, now sits forever lost to time.)

So, how does Zeboyd Games feel about stepping into a series that has already had such troubles—and is there any danger of reigniting the curse by talking about its fourth and final chapter?

"The series was originally planned as a four-part series, so I'm not actually saying anything officially new. So, I think I can sidestep the curse by saying that," Stiernberg says with a laugh. "As of now, we're planning to do the fourth game—after the third one's done, of course." *–ERIC L. PATTERSON*

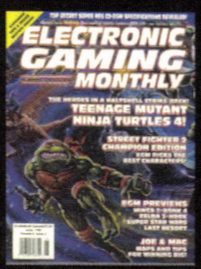
TIME CAPSULE

BY DAVID WOLINSKY



10 YEARS AGO
JUNE 2002

Issue No. 155 marked the beginning of a new era for Team PlayStation, introducing Sony's plans for online domination on the PS2, built on the strength of the console's first competitive military shooter, *SOCOM: U.S. Navy Seals*, which marked the beginning of an era for the heavy-hitting Zipper franchise. The sequel eventually stacked up more online hours played than the whole of Xbox Live's line-up combined. The issue also outlined the pending invasion of several titles stemming from the latest entry in George Lucas' *Star Wars* films; a world-exclusive look at *Mortal Kombat: Deadly Alliance*; and a whopping 3-page preview of Konami's *Castlevania: Harmony of Dissonance* for the Game Boy Advance. Rounded out by a Game of the Month award for Capcom's *Resident Evil* GameCube debut, there was plenty of franchise fan-service for all who entered.



20 YEARS AGO
JUNE 1992

June 1992's issue had one of the biggest rooster-teases in *EGM* history: a review for *Mr. Gimmick*, a Sunsoft-published game that was canceled before it hit our shores. (Though it was released in Scandinavia and Japan.) The platformer boasted astonishing levels, gorgeous, pastel-flecked art direction, intricate animations, and scorching difficulty (remember that?). And, because we could never play it here, *Mr. Gimmick* reached legendary status. You wouldn't be able to tell that from the reviews it got here, though—brushed aside as a kids' game by three out of four reviewers. One writer presciently noted that "more time could have made this one a winner." How's all eternity? Good enough?

30 YEARS AGO
JUNE 1982

A June 15, 1982 story in the Portsmouth, Ohio's *Daily Times* has the scoop on the 1980s equivalent of *Halo* wunderkind Lil Poison. "Video Game Teacher Is 9," reads the headline of a story the paper picked up from the Associated Press out of Pullman, Washington, and the tiny writeup says that "Megan Brians is teaching a summer-school class. She's a master at such electronic entertainments as *Pac-Man*, *Circus*, *Warlords*, and *Night Driver*." Her *Pac-Man* score was 12,686 (her dad's best was 600) so that means one thing and one thing only: The only way Billy Mitchell—of *King of Kong* fame—could be any more unlikable is if he'd challenged the small girl to a kill-screen-off at *Pac-Man*...and then kicked the milk crate out from under her.

BRANDON JUSTICE

ANDREW FITCH

RAY CARSILLO

ERIC L. PATTERSON

EGM ROUNDTABLE

THIS ISSUE: VENTING ON VIOLENCE

The debate over violence in videogames is about as old as the medium itself.

BRANDON JUSTICE, MANAGING EDITOR: So, as befitting the war-games issue of *EGM*, today we're going to talk a little bit about violence in videogames. So, I guess the first question is: Do you guys think violence in videogames is an integral part of what games are all about? Or is it time to branch out? What do you guys think?

RAY CARSILLO, ASSOCIATE EDITOR: No, I think we *need* violence in videogames, because it's the only thing that allows me to vent after we have to do a top 20 list! It keeps me from killing all of you guys for leaving my favorites off the list! [*Laughs*]

Seriously, though, there's always going to be war, and there's always going to be fighting. It's just the way it is, and I think videogame violence is a healthy expression of that for people to get out a lot of their anger and frustration after they've had a bad day at work or a bad day at school—and you can't have one bad egg ruin it for everyone.

ERIC L. PATTERSON, NEWS EDITOR: Ray and I went to Namco Global Gamers Day recently. They had this game there called *Ni no Kuni*, an RPG collaboration with Level-5 and Studio Ghibli—which is, of course, the big-time animation studio in Japan that did *My Neighbor Totoro* and *Spirited Away*, among others. It's interesting, because that studio is so against violence, and all their movies are anti-violence or anti-war, and they try very hard to not have violence as any kind of a positive in any of their movies.

Yet this game that they collaborated with Level-5 on was a typical JRPG, where it just has all of these random battles and combat going on, and it just felt so uninspired; I wish that we could get to a point where games wouldn't have to always rely on combat.

At Game Developers Conference in March, Yasuhiro Wada, the creator of *Harvest Moon*, spoke. He said that originally, he wasn't sure how to make a good game without battles, because he realized how important battles are for giving gamers other things to do in RPGs besides just talking to people or seeing the storyline. It was a real struggle for him to figure out what to do in a farming game without battles, and he added in the raising of crops, because that wasn't in the game originally. I wish more games said, "Look, we can do other interesting things without having you kill something." It goes back to asking how many people has Nathan Drake killed in his adventures?

BRANDON: That said, as much as I love *Harvest Moon*, I sort of technically blame him for *FarmVille*, so there's something to think about there.

ANDREW FITCH, ASSOCIATE EDITOR: Well, we're starting to see the mobile platform becoming more prominent, and so many of those games aren't violent. I can't think of a game that's really violent that's popular on the mobile platform...

BRANDON: *Infinity Blade?*

ANDREW: That's a developer with a history of making those types of games, though. And, again, that appeals more to the hardcore gamers.

BRANDON: *Angry Birds?*

ANDREW: *Angry Birds* is *not* violent.

BRANDON: You kill pigs!

ANDREW: *Angry Birds* is more akin to the classic violence of *Donkey Kong* or *Pac-Man*, though. It's simple images. I think that console games are always going to lean more violent because *Call of Duty* and all that stuff is what sells, but as the rest of the console game industry looks to see what they can do to combat the mobile market, I think they'll have to slim down. I think that console development might actually go that direction just because that's what the competition is doing, and it's less expensive.

ERIC: Well, it's nice now that we've got the $1 nonviolent games, but I want the $60 nonviolent games as well. I want the big games to take that chance. And we're not necessarily saying to get rid of all violence, but to go back to *Uncharted*, Naughty Dog keeps saying how good their storytelling is and how advanced they are in crafting a story versus other games, but they still fall back on having our main character shoot a bunch of guys in certain sections. It's like wave after wave after wave of enemies, and it gets ridiculous.

BRANDON: That was actually one of the low points of *Uncharted 3* for me, personally. They would get bogged down in these shooting sequences, and when you talk about that, one of Andrew's favorite games from last year comes to mind, *L.A. Noire*. That game had combat elements, but it wasn't about *those* combat elements. Those things were merely enhancements of the actual story itself, and that's something that we don't explore enough. So often, it's A to B, spawn enemies, shoot all those enemies, move on. There's got to be more to the actual story than what we're seeing right now.

ANDREW: I know Eric and I just played *Silent Hill: Downpour* and, to me, that's the sort of design I want to see more of. Yes, that game has issues, but that's the sort of design where you don't have to make everything about going up against a bunch of enemies. So much of it is about exploration, and I think that's a way around the violence—rather than rendering all these waves and waves of enemies, making it more about the exploration and being put in a specific location. It doesn't even have to be survival-horror. Back in the day with *Tomb Raider*, it wasn't really about combat; it was about exploration. I think that the industry's become bloated enough that the low-rent *Call of Duty* can't hack it, so they have to find another way in.

ERIC: Well, you know, it's funny, because *Downpour* gives you two options: It gives you the option for difficulty for monsters and difficulty for puzzles, and I turned the difficulty for monsters all the way down to Easy and the puzzles all the way up to Hard. And that was where I had the most fun with that game; I avoided 90 percent of combat, and the game was much more enjoyable when I did that. I think that I'd rather play an awesome game for five hours for 60 bucks than a so-so game for 10 hours for 60 bucks.

BRANDON: I always come back to the fact that one of my favorite segments in *Dead Space 2* was a sequence—slight spoilers here—for like 17 minutes, where you didn't see an enemy. The game was really focused on combat in a very heavy way, with lots of scripted action sequences, and then there's this one moment where you don't fight anyone. And the tension that lived in that moment, the fear that lived in that moment—every single time you heard a noise or saw a bump or something exploded, you were looking around like, "What the hell?"

ANDREW: One game that really stood out for me last year in the opposite way was the new *Ace Combat* game, where it was a Japanese developer clearly trying to take inspiration from *Call of Duty* and turn this very Japanese flight-combat sim into *Call of Duty* in the air. Every mission was wave after wave after wave of enemies for 15 minutes longer than necessary. After a certain point, any sense of urgency was gone.

That was one of the things with *Downpour*, where it felt like there weren't enemies just for the sake of enemies. Or, take *Metal Gear* back in the day. There were segments without combat—or combat seemed to have a purpose, at least—and I feel like in a lot of cases, developers have gone away from that.

RAY: Well, but with *Jumping Jawa Jamboree*—

It's nice that we've got the $1 nonviolent games, but I want the $60 nonviolent games as well.

■ Is low-cost, *Angry Birds*–style development a solution for publishers currently losing money?

excuse me, *Journey*—a lot of people may have loved it, but I know a lot of people, myself included, just didn't get into it because there was nothing there to really challenge us in *any* way, so we didn't get the same connection that a lot of people are claiming.

BRANDON: One final question for us here, then: What are some areas that you think gaming should branch into at this point that we haven't really seen?

ERIC: I think the relationship aspect of gaming is just where we need to get further into. Because, I mean, I think back to *Ico*, and I love *Ico*, but I wish it didn't have combat in it. I wish it were just all about making that connection with Yorda, the princess, and making sure she's safe and getting her through everything.

ANDREW: I'd like to see more in the vein of *Assassin's Creed*; what I like is that they highlight different sections of history that people might not be as familiar with. One thing that Asian developers have always done very well over the years is highlighting their history, and I don't think Western developers have done as well with that. I mean, there are just so many interesting places and conflicts throughout history—and the violence would be more meaningful because it actually happened. I think that we've underused historical conflicts—especially lesser-known ones—over the years, so that's something that I've personally wanted to see. I think we're starting to see some of that with *Assassin's Creed*, but I definitely want to see more of it.

RAY: I agree. It basically comes down to that for most gamers, we want to have our cake and eat it, too. We want a game that not only gives us that bloodlust fix, but also has that immersive story, like *BioShock* and *Assassin's Creed*. It's kind of selfish, but at the end of the day, I think that's what everybody wants. *Assassin's Creed, Gears of War, Batman*, and all these triple-A titles have done fantastically both in the marketplace as well as critically, and they hit upon all those critical check boxes.

ERIC: I just want more justification. If you're going to have me killing people or killing things, justify it better to me. I'm getting tired of just saying, "You're killing things because that's what the game is." I just don't want to kill as much anymore. So, if you're going to tell me I have to kill somebody, give me a good justification for why I'm doing it.

RAY: Batman never kills! [*Laughs*]

BRANDON: Well, you hit on exploration; that's a huge thing. I mean, I watch the *National Treasure* movies, and they're really cheesy, but by the same token, they're always entertaining. That's the side of *Indiana Jones* that I think *Tomb Raider* and *Uncharted* got right, and I'd love to see more games along those lines, because that can be fun without bashing in skulls every five seconds.

ANDREW: I think the fantasy of being an archaeologist—the fantasy of being Indiana Jones or whoever—is not going to ruins and shooting someone. It's going to ruins and exploring them. I think that's one of the reasons that *Uncharted* has never really clicked with me as well as it should, because I'm interested in exploring ruins, but I don't want to be accosted by dudes while I'm doing it. I think there's enough games where you're being accosted by people trying to kill you. Tone it down. If you have all these great settings, then let people explore them. Don't force enemies on the player all the time.

ERIC: Nathan Drake is a mass murderer. That's all there is to it.

■ *Assassin's Creed* has its share of violence, but the historical setting makes the killing more meaningful to players.

*Nathan Drake is a **mass murderer**. That's all there is to it.*

Going back to *Downpour* for a minute, that game was so on the precipice of being great. It was 70 percent of the way there, and if they'd just taken 30 percent more steps, it could've been really great. And, I mean, it's funny because, the previous game, *Shattered Memories*, specifically avoided violence. It avoided giving the player the option to fight back, but the game sucked because of how they introduced that. But *Downpour* was so interesting because it was you exploring that world and the relationship between you and that world and the characters.

THE MONTH IN GEEK

Fun stuff for gamers

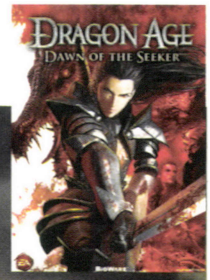
BY PAUL SEMEL, PETER SUCIU, AND REBECCA SWANNER

WAR MACHINE

War is hell. But with the right equipment, you can unleash hell on your opponents. While any computer will let you send e-mail or update your Facebook status, Digital Storm's new Marauder gaming PCs ($1,299; digitalstormonline.com/marauder.asp) are designed for those looking to head into digital battle. They feature Corsair Vengeance C70 casing, which looks as tough as Kevlar body armor, and inside the top-of-the-line version, there's an Intel Core i5-2500K processor, an AMD 7870 GPU with 2GB of VRAM, and a 1TB hard drive. The Terminator would be envious.

THE LIZARD KINGS

The folks at BioWare are masters at crafting cinematic experiences, so it was inevitable that some of their games would become movies. *Dragon Age: Dawn of the Seeker* is a CGI anime film from director Fumihiko Sori (*Vexille*). Centered around Cassandra Pentaghast and set between *Dragon Age II* and its unannounced but inevitable sequel, the film's available on DVD ($24.98; funimation.com) and Blu-ray ($34.98), with both versions including interviews, behind-the-scenes footage, and a visit to BioWare's offices.



52 CHARACTER PICKUP

DC's "New 52" semi-reboot may be nearly a year old, but for people who like to read comics in book form, it's just about to begin. Collecting the first issues in hardcover form, *Batman: Volume 1: The Court Of Owls* ($24.99) has the Caped Crusader trying to figure out if Dick Grayson is a murderer; *Justice League: Volume 1: Origin* ($24.99) has Bats bringing his superfriends together to fight a dark evil; while *Green Lantern: Volume 1: Sinestro* ($22.99) has Hal Jordan reluctantly helping his old enemy.

LEATHERCASE

While the PlayStation Vita has a cool look, the same can't be said for its carrying cases. Well, most of them. The PS Vita Case from WaterField ($49; sfbags.com) is a handsome nylon-and-leather case with a scratch-free interior liner, slots for multiple games, and a zippered back pocket. They also make the PS Vita Suede Jacket ($12-$15), a soft Ultrasuede sleeve that doubles as a screen cleaner, and the PS Vita Gear Pouch Pro ($45), a zippered nylon case that can hold your Vita and its charger.

For more fun stuff, check out THE WEEK IN GEEK on EGMNOW.com, and more geekdom available in EGMi, free on the iPad

the EGM HOTLIST

10 THINGS YOU DIDN'T KNOW ABOUT DIABLO III

BY PAUL SEMEL

Usually, when we're doing these "10 Things" stories, developers tell us interesting inside information about all aspects of a game: movie references in the level design, mechanics stolen from other titles, and characters named after their third cousins twice removed.

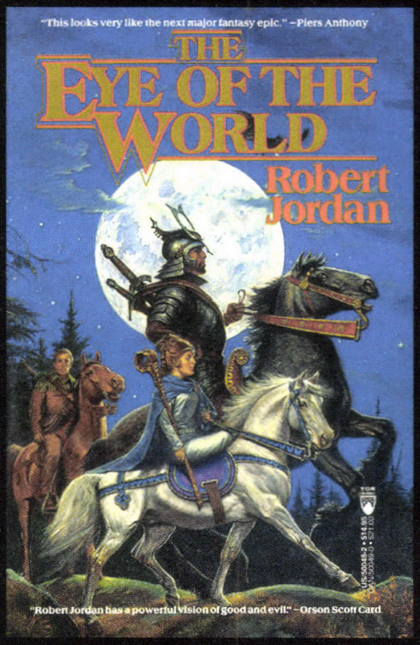
But in talking to Blizzard's Julian Love, lead technical artist on *Diablo III*, we noticed that almost all of his bon mots were about the game's attacks. "Well, the game is primary about combat," he notes. "Since each character has access to over 100 unique spells, there's a need for variety. And that need, combined with our mental craziness, makes it OK for us to come up with some crazy ideas." Though as you'll see, sometimes how they come up with these crazy ideas is as interesting as the ideas themselves.

01 MONSTER ZERO

In *Diablo III*, the Wizard has a version of the Hydra skill that shoots lightning. Which got Love thinking about one of his favorite movie monsters. "I've watched every *Godzilla* movie ever," he says, "and one of my favorite characters is King Ghidorah, this three-headed dragon-like thing that shoots lightning. So, when we were thinking about this Hydra skill, I immediately wanted it to do what King Ghidorah did in the *Godzilla* movies."

02 WHEEL IN THE SKY

When Blizzard first showed off the Wizard's Disintegrate skill, some fans thought it looked too futuristic for a fantasy game. Which was funny to Love, since it was actually inspired by Bale Fire, a spell in Robert Jordan's *Wheel of Time* fantasy novels. "We took most of our direction from how it's described in the books," Love notes. "And they're fantastic books. They really share a lot with the *Diablo* universe."



03 CLUCKSHOT

The people at Blizzard either hate chickens or love the movie *Hot Shots*, because one of the weapons in *Diablo III* is a crossbow that cruelly shoots chickens instead of arrows. "One of the designers wanted bows to shoot something other than just arrows," Love recalls. "When we tried frogs, we realized that you couldn't see them. But if you shoot a chicken, it leaves a trail of feathers. So, now we have a crossbow that shoots chickens."

04 CLUCKSHOT II: ELECTRIC BOOGALOO

Continuing the punishing use of poultry, *Diablo III* also has a spell that turns your enemies into chickens, as well as a rune variant for the Witch Doctor's Hex skill that turns you into a chicken. An exploding chicken. "I thought, 'What if you accidentally hexed yourself and turned into a chicken?'" Love says. "Would that be fun? No. But what if the chicken explodes? That would be fun."

05 FROG BASEBALL

Chickens aren't the only animals being used as ammo in *Diablo III*. The Witch Doctor has a skill called Plague of Toads that spawns numerous toads that hop toward your enemies...and then explode. "This was inspired," Love explains, "by Chris Haga, an effects artist who grew up in Texas and told us that in the spring, there were always be lots of toads around, and if you walked through the grass, you'd end up stepping on them. Which, Chris said, was just horrifying, especially if you walked around barefoot."

06 DIABLO II: ELECTRIC BOOGALOO

In *Diablo II*, one of the most feared enemies were these pygmy characters who are called forth by Ormus with a sacred knife called Gidbinn. Well, maybe "feared" isn't as apt a description as "hated" or "annoying." So, of course, Blizzard's bringing 'em back for *Diablo III*. But don't fret—Love assures us that, this time, they're on your side (well, if you play as a Witch Doctor and use the Fetish Army skill). "And when we brought the pygmies back," Love adds, "it prompted us to bring back the Gidbinn as well."

07 HAKU'S SECRET JUTSU: CRYSTAL ICE MIRRORS

While you'd expect *Diablo III* to be influenced by other fantasy games—*Skyrim*, *Dragon Age*, and so on—Love admits that a very different kind of game inspired one of *Diablo III*'s spells. "There's a Wizard skill that shoots out rays of frost," he explains, "and when we were looking for a way to change that up, we saw this *Naruto* game where one of the characters surrounds herself with a dome of ice. We thought it looked cool, so we re-created it in our game."

08 STAR CRAFT, TOO

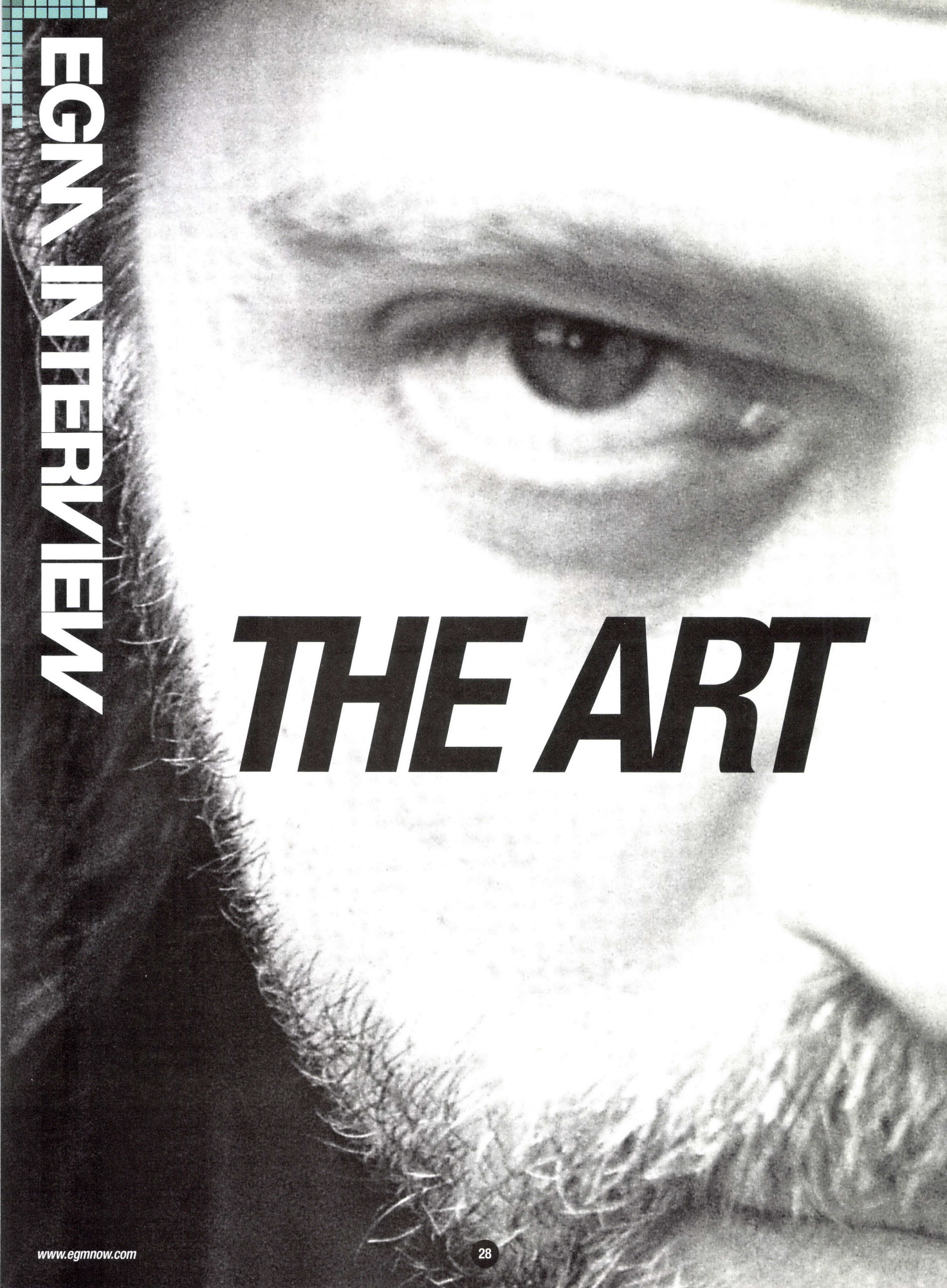
While game developers sometimes make obscure references in their games, *Diablo III* has a rather obvious one...if you play one of Blizzard's other games. "We didn't intend to make a nod to *StarCraft II*," Love admits, "but when we came up with this Witch Doctor skill where he summons bats that he then sets on fire, someone said it should be called 'Fire Bats.'" Which is funny, since Firebats are armored troops in *StarCraft*. Though it's also funny because, Love notes, "this all happened before *StarCraft II* came out, and, at the time, they weren't sure Firebats were going to be in the game."

09 NATURE BOY

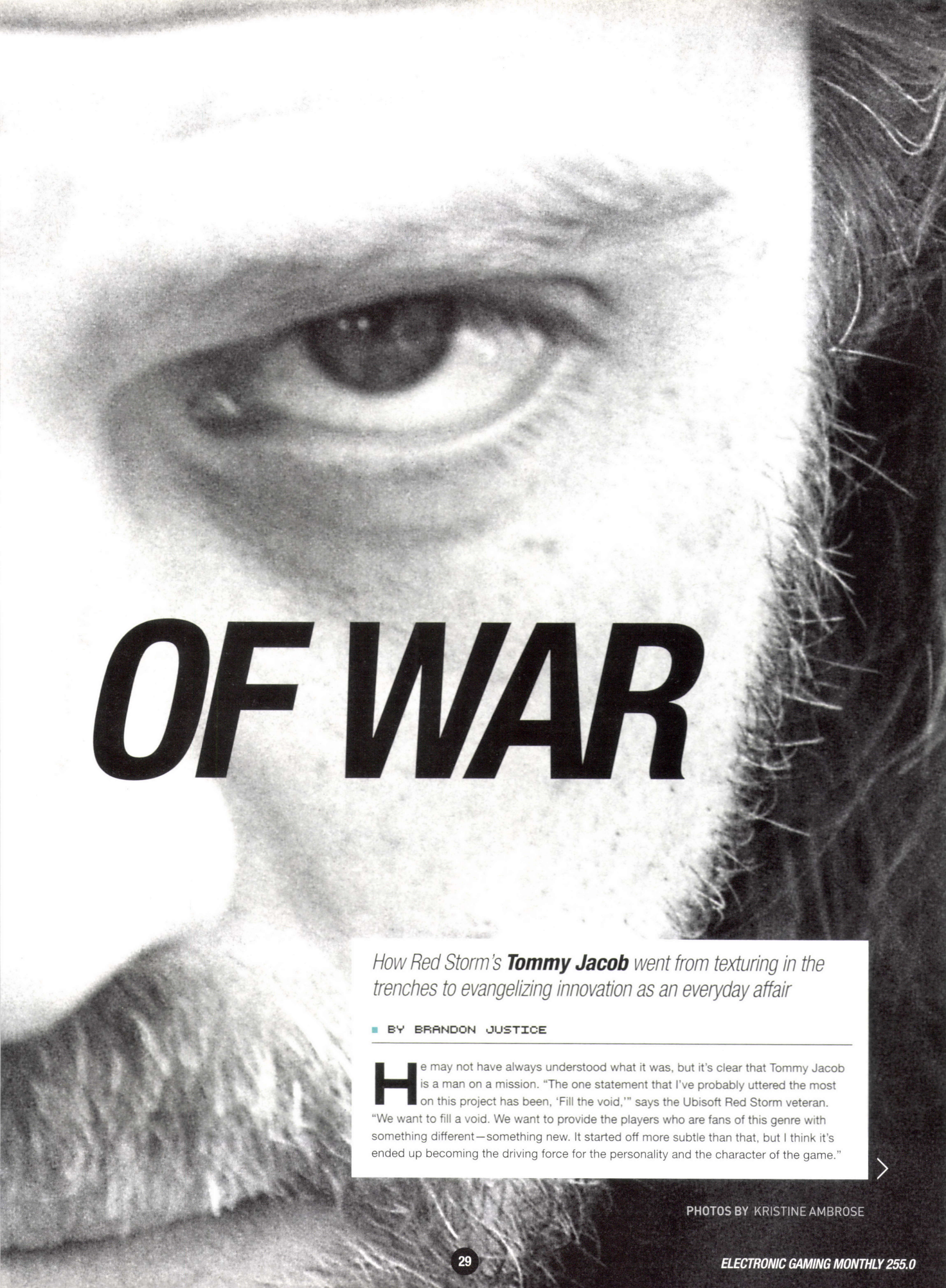
While some of this stuff is just silly, the way Wood Wraiths die, Love explains, is just natural. "I'd seen on this nature show how, in a forest fire, the sap of a pine tree will overheat and, because it's trapped in the wood, explode. It has a very specific look to it, with wood flying everywhere. So, I wanted to capture that feeling for the Wood Wraith's death."

10 BIG OL' JET AIRLINER

Reading this story, you might think no idea is too silly for Blizzard. Well, you're half right. Some are too silly...until they get reworked a little. "One time, when we were talking about what skills the Demon Hunter should have, someone jokingly said, 'She turns into a jet,'" Love recalls. "But later, when we started thinking about how jets drop bombs, it led us to create the Rain of Vengeance skill, which makes these flying demons do kamikaze raids."



THE ART



OF WAR

*How Red Storm's **Tommy Jacob** went from texturing in the trenches to evangelizing innovation as an everyday affair*

BY BRANDON JUSTICE

He may not have always understood what it was, but it's clear that Tommy Jacob is a man on a mission. "The one statement that I've probably uttered the most on this project has been, 'Fill the void,'" says the Ubisoft Red Storm veteran. "We want to fill a void. We want to provide the players who are fans of this genre with something different—something new. It started off more subtle than that, but I think it's ended up becoming the driving force for the personality and the character of the game."

PHOTOS BY KRISTINE AMBROSE

The genre in question just so happens to be one of the most saturated, firmly entrenched areas of gaming today: the highly competitive space of the military first-person shooter. And the game, *Ghost Recon: Future Soldier*, is a project on which Jacob will have to do more than fill a void—he's also got to convince gamers that it even exists in the first place.

With Activision's *Call of Duty* firmly in command of the space, there are no easy answers on how to get this done, but as it turns out, the quest for clarity's exactly what drove Jacob to make games in the first place.

"To me, that's the most exciting thing—trying to do something new," enthuses the wide-eyed creative director of the game's critical multiplayer component. "And not for the sake of doing something new, but because there's truly a void somewhere. That's been the inspiration for every one of those moments where there's been a kind of click like, 'Ah, I could do this thing differently, and it's not only going to make me better at my job in terms of my interaction with my team and all of that, but they're also going to be better as a result of it."

But, just like his aforementioned mantra, this idea's more than just a way to get things done behind the scenes. For Jacob, this philosophy seems to inform the very soul of the design decisions that drive *Recon*. And if he has his way, they'll do much more than that, helping him share that same "a-ha" moment with a brand-new generation of gamers.

START

EGM: You took a roundabout path into the industry. You weren't necessarily interested in making games at all early on. What pushed you to take the plunge?

Tommy Jacob: Back when I first started in the industry, it was kind of unintentional. I was a musician for a while, and there was a strong desire in my family to get me out of what I was doing to supplement the non-income of the musician. So, painting houses on the side put me in a situation where my family felt like I was in desperate potential for bodily harm. My mom and my stepdad encouraged me to get a job at a desk somewhere, and luckily, I found something where it was asking me to use a little bit of the graphic-design background that I had.

I was just doing that just to earn money—it wasn't really something that I was actively pursuing. I had this musician thing in the background, and even though I wasn't intended to make a career out of it, I hadn't set out to do graphic arts.

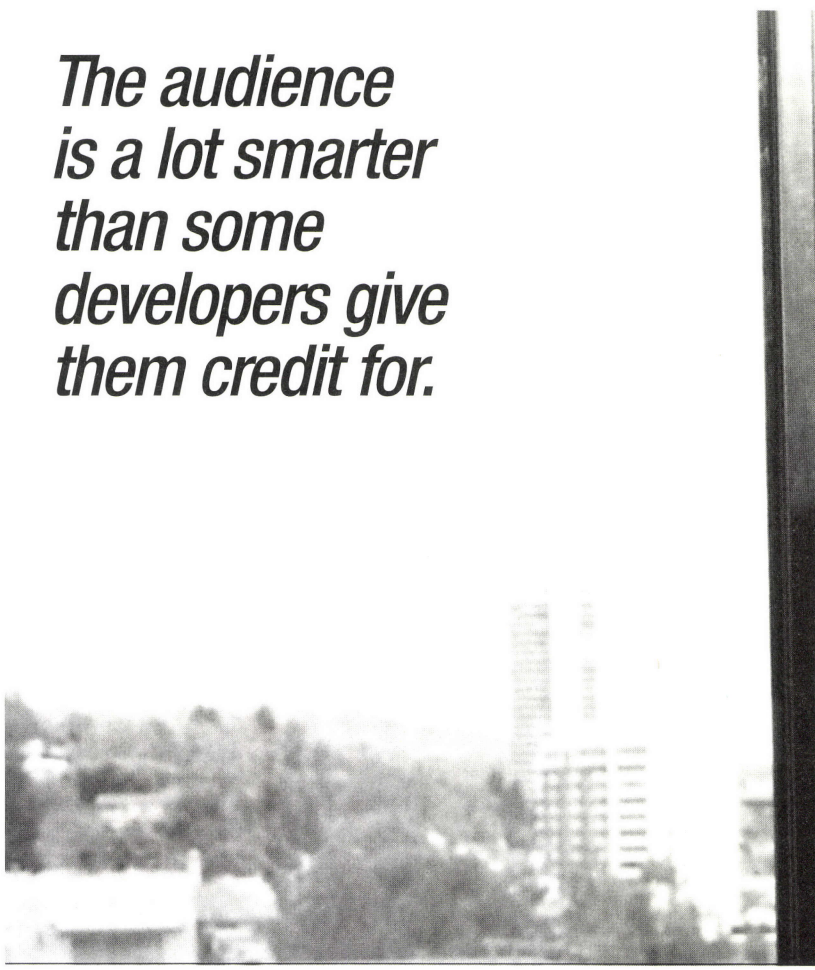
Being what you probably consider a casual gamer at the time, I was certainly inspired by how games gave you access to become this hero character that was in the game, or was something that you related to from something else—like if it was a Marvel game. You knew this hero, you knew this character, and now, because of the game, it was different than a film. You weren't just watching it; you were controlling the actions—and, to some degree, controlling the path of the character and what decisions they made. That was fascinating to me.

EGM: From painting houses to painting textures?

Jacob: Yeah, absolutely. That's what I ended up doing for my first gig in the industry—texture artist. It was a very interesting correlation, because I ended up going back and giving my mom and my stepdad the credit for getting me there, but yeah, I went from painting houses to painting textures. And not on a ladder anymore—now at a desk. It wasn't as dangerous, but essentially the same thing.

EGM: You kind of had an interesting ride there in the beginning as well with

The audience is a lot smarter than some developers give them credit for.



***Loose Cannon*, considering how that project got juggled around.**

Jacob: I was at Sinister Games at the time, and we were in the middle of one prototype idea. We were putting together a pitch for another existing property, and then *Loose Cannon* came along, and we instantly started to break it down, figure out what work needed to be done.

I worked on lots of the architecture, did a little bit of character work—but it certainly wasn't my strength—so I ended up mainly working on vehicles. We couldn't use any of the Ford products or anything like that, so we had to make up 52 cars that all were distinct in one visual way or another.

It was fun. It was exciting and fascinating, and it allowed me to—for the first time in my career, and in my life—I got to sit down with a bunch of creative people and just problem-solve. That was where I think I got that first taste of what got me to where I am now—the first time I actually got to do that and got paid to do it. But, it obviously didn't pay off on *Loose Cannon*. We all know how that one ended, with the game being canceled. It was sad.

EGM: Definitely a tough time, but you must have been stoked to finally break into the industry, right?

Jacob: It was so exciting, because there was so much power at the youth level. All of these young guys working together with millions of dollars in the backing, making decisions that you didn't even realize how critical they were.

We were designing this entire experience, and we were just a bunch of guys who liked games. It seems like there should be a stricter criteria for that, but there wasn't, you know? It was really cool to just all of a sudden be involved, and people wanting to know your opinion, because it's valuable. And that was very inspiring for me to see that.

EGM: It's definitely an eye-opening experience when you finally get in and start doing it. What was it that drove you to want to do games, versus the other things you could do with artistic skills?

Jacob: I had a conversation with my mom once. I remember being a kid and walking into a room, and I wasn't that young, but I still had this mindset that anything was possible. I remember, after watching a *Voltron* cartoon, going into my mom's room and saying, "So, I finally decided what I want to do. I want to be a pilot of one of the *Voltron* lions. That's what I want to do." And she said, "Well, that's great. Um, maybe what you could do is be an engineer, and engineers get to work with robotics," and I said, "No, no, no—*Voltron* pilot specifically. I don't care which lion necessarily—I'm open—but I want to pilot a *Voltron* lion."

There was this look on her face—and I think that was a moment of maturation for me—because it was a look on her face like, *that's never gonna happen*. But, still, really wanting to connect to those characters from the first time I ever saw *Star Blazers* or *Ultraman* or *Speed Racer* when I was a kid, and watching the development of the '80s hero cartoons, I always had that connection. And then, playing videogames, to me, was the closest thing to being that guy.

I remember, at one point, I got a Sega Genesis and was playing an *X-Men* game; the first time I was Wolverine and I was controlling him, and I was jumping around, I remember thinking, 'Man, the potential for this is *huge*. It's just a matter of time before this—which is very pixelated now and low-res—is going to be like looking at live characters.'

And I think that's when I made the decision that I'm not f***ing around with

GAMEOGRAPHY

LOOSE CANNON
CANCELLED

RAINBOW SIX: LOCKDOWN
2005

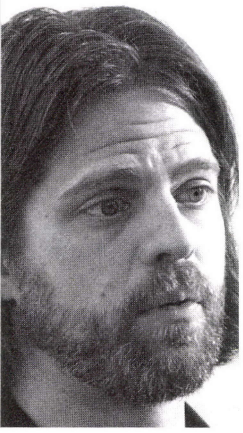
GHOST RECON: ADVANCED WARFIGHTER
2006

NFL HEAD COACH 09
2008

MADDEN NFL 09
2008

MADDEN NFL ARCADE
2009

HENRY HATSWORTH IN THE PUZZLING ADVENTURE
2009



any of this other stuff anymore—my focus is games. I'm going to be a part of the industry, one way or another, even if that means I've got to abandon everything else that I do. And I did. I'm embarrassed to say this now, but I put my bass in a case, I slid it under the bed, and I don't think I even opened that case for two years. It was just total commitment. Of course, anybody that's paid any attention to the development of the technology since then, it inspires itself now.

EGM: But it does take imagination to actually go and utilize that, though.

Jacob: I think to do something unique, it does. I think to do something different. Actually, more than imagination, it takes courage. Because I think that, as broad as games are in terms of the experiences that can be found, there are these really strong trends that, oftentimes, people are afraid to buck.

But there's just so much potential with the strength of what the hardware and the software is going to do. It's really only limited by what we're willing to go after, what we're brave enough to go after.

That's why I love the indie-game movement. It's becoming so much more mainstream now. It's having that same impact on games as an art, as all art forms have. There's always these innovators that change things. It happens in music, it happens in film, and in games, the rise of the whole indie movement is so good for the industry. It's so needed, because things like *Journey* cause us to question how much "game" needs to be in a game.

EGM: We're actually seeing a lot more of that from games that are in production right now—getting away from that typical hero fantasy and really trying to humanize these stories. To me, that's one of the most courageous things I'm seeing right now. What's your take on that?

Jacob: I think that the game audience is a lot smarter than I think some developers give them credit for. And I think that in acknowledging that, there's an elevated expectation of content. You can't make a shooter the way you made a shooter five, six, seven, eight years ago. There's a higher level of expectation from the gamer that's been involved and seen that growth.

There's a level of sophistication in the gamers that have been around for a while, just in terms of what they've seen—it's also there for just because of their own maturity, their own age, their own growth, that they expect more out of it. They want more story; they want to feel more for the character. I think that's why we're seeing a lot of these things.

EGM: Not everyone has, though. What we're seeing now is essentially all the younger generation knows.

Jacob: I mentioned *Journey* earlier, and it's been interesting to see the people that I know that have played that—and who it's appealed to, and where the falloff's occurred.

My son and his friends, they're 10 and 11 years old, and I handed them the controller and they're like, "What does it do?" I said, "Just move the character, just go, just do this, just experience this thing." And their attention span was so short. "When do you shoot?" "You don't shoot. Just move the character through the world." "What's over that hill?" "I don't know; go look." "Am I going to shoot it?" "*No, just go over the hill!*"

It's interesting to see where that divide happens, where there's an appreciation for the depth that you can get in story and character, and there's still the expectation or desire to just press A or X and get through the menus and just start running and doing stuff.

To me, it creates a bit of a divide, because when you invest in that content, when you decide that you're going to put resources into story development and this more emotional tie, it's something that you want the player to experience. So, it's going to be interesting to see if—with that same age change that I've noticed, where younger and younger kids are playing more mature games—if maybe they start to invest earlier in that as well.

You know, maybe it won't take them into their 20s until they're interested in the development of a character and in humanizing this collection of polygons. Maybe they'll invest sooner.

EGM: It's a special problem, though, when you think about it, because the publishers have been obsessed with these games and the gamers who play them for so long. We're just now getting to the point where people can even take these kinds of chances, so it's kind of a generational problem. Why is it so hard for us to buck the trend?

Jacob: That's a good question. It could have something to do with the fact that it's a big part of their social interaction. Kids see their friends in the classroom, and then they see their friends online. I think as that trend continues, and younger and younger kids are using the medium as a way to socialize, the expectations will change as well.

Netflix does that now. You can sit at home, log in with a friend, and watch a movie. They're at their house, and you're at your house, and you're watching a movie, and I guess it's like watching the same TV show, so you can come in the next day and talk about it. It's a connection and disconnection at the same time. I'm going to do this thing with you via technology, rather than proximity.

EGM: It's kind of ridiculous.

Jacob: Yeah, but I guess in a way, it's fascinating. My son has to be home when it's dark outside. But maybe he wants to still play with his friends, so he can do that through this.

EGM: Whatever happened to just having your friend come over and hanging out on the couch?

Jacob: Yeah, I don't know. I've got a 9-year-old niece who texts me now. I don't talk to her anymore. She texted me at Easter—I was in the house with her, and she *texts* me! So, to me, that connection of how you socialize and interact with people, and how games provide that connection, I think is where there's a lot of opportunity.

EGM: And everything's so readily available now, like you said. You start to wonder what it's going to take for us to get back to genuine interaction. It's almost like we forgot how to be decent people to one another online these days. You worry about 10-year-old kids getting in and mixing it up with people, because you never know who they're going to run into.

Jacob: Even though they tend to be some of the most aggressive people in the environments, too. They learn to curse online. [*Laughs*]

If [the Ghosts are] firing bullets, part of their goal has already failed.

EGM: It's a bit of a social experiment, too. It's almost a *Lord of the Flies* type of thing.

Jacob: And it's interesting, too, because just the nature of the pacing of a lot of the games that people use as kind of the hub or the catalyst to get them together, the decision-making needs to happen so quickly.

So, to your point about how we interact with people, we're at this age where information is so readily available, communications are short, and a lot of the pacing of games doesn't help that.

You get in there, and you've got to learn this kind of shorthand dialogue that becomes kind of even socially accepted. When I'm speaking to you, we're not online anymore; we're in a conversation, and I can use the same abbreviations because it's just understood. It becomes part of the common culture.

EGM: When you talk about designing games for that space, does it ever become difficult choosing the things you want to do versus the things you know gamers will readily understand?

Jacob: It does, but I think those are the exciting challenges—when somebody says, "All right, we know people like to run around and shoot each other. That's fun. Now, how will we take that and make it secondary? How do we take the concept of the mission, teamwork, your life, and make that the priority over the shooting mechanic?"

You mentioned earlier the idea of bringing more of the authentic experience into the game, and that was where those relationships that Red Storm and Ubisoft have with a lot of the special-forces guys really help us, because if you look at the fiction of the Ghosts as the most elite special-forces guys, their mission is not to engage in combat. If they're firing bullets, part of their goal has already failed. They want to go in, do their mission, and get out without having to fire a round. But that goes directly against the mechanics of, like you said, what gamers expect in a shooter.

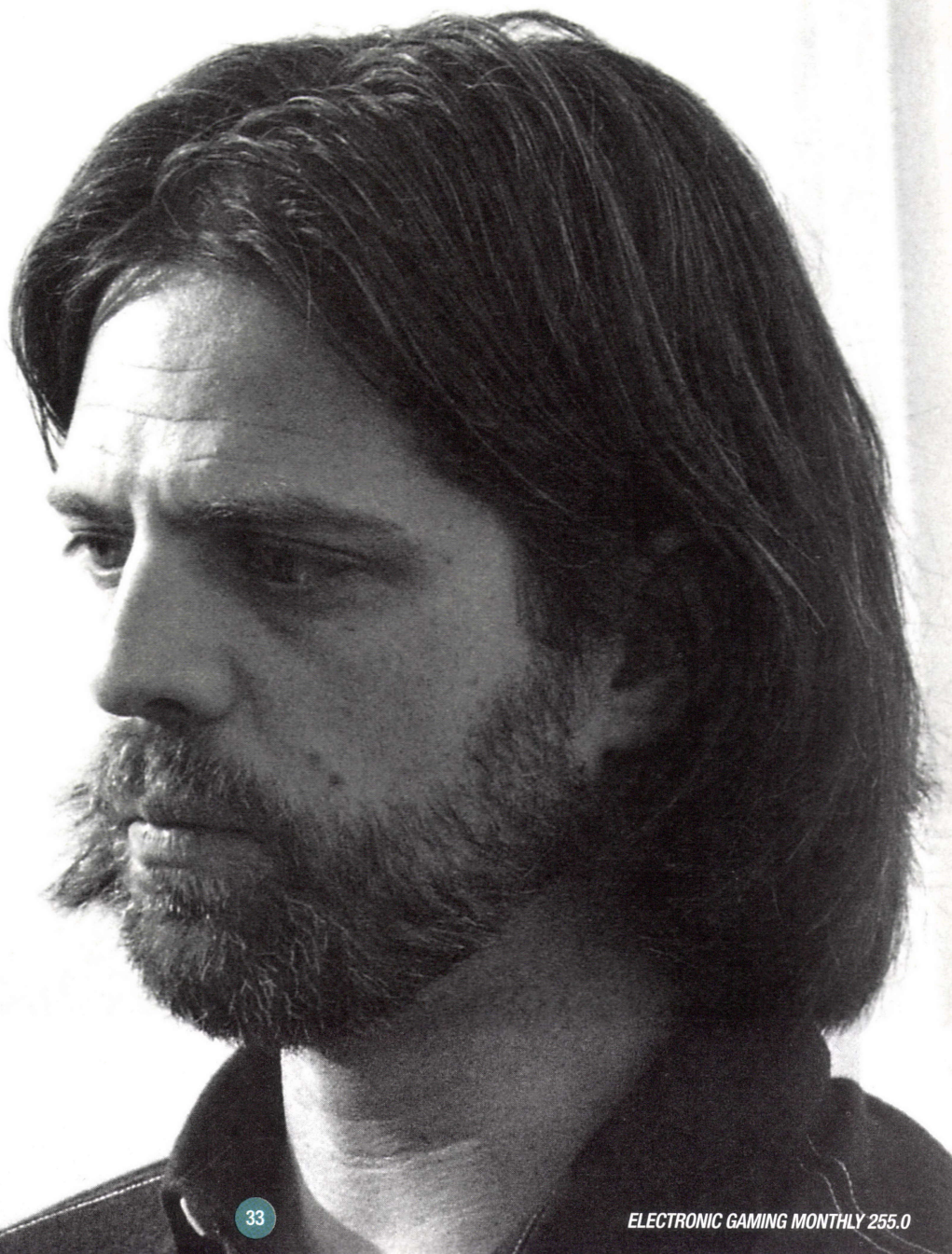
So, how do you involve shooting as a reoccurring mechanic but still make the motivation of shooting something greater? That was one of the most exciting challenges we had on this game. We wanted people to care about their team. We wanted "team" to mean something. How do we incentivize that teamwork? Coming up with those systems, that's what making games is all about.

EGM: But, then again, making a shooting gallery is easy. Why not just go with the flow?

Jacob: We're Red Storm. We can make shooting games all day long; we've done that for 13 years now. But to try to turn the tide and fill a void, that was the goal. Maybe in the beginning, when we said we're going to make shooting secondary, was thinking too far. I don't know that we got there. But we found that, through playing with how we reward just XP, people love XP. They'll do some crazy s*** to get more XP. That was a big motivator for people.

We do these weekly "fresh eyes" tests, where we bring the public in to play the game, and we looked to see what would motivate you. Our target was always the lone wolf. Not to punish the lone-wolf guy, but to incentivize him in a way that made him want to be around his team. I don't know if you've played the beta or seen any of the footage, but we have this concept that's called "data mugging." Every player in game is a potential secondary objective, because we have a mechanic where I can pull out a nonlethal piece of equipment—a stun gun, for example—and, while you're down, incapacitated, I can hack into your system and download your intel, and then I can share it with my team.

So, we have this system in there that essentially drives players together much like the Hunter did in *Left 4 Dead*. If you're off on your own, you're at risk of getting killed. But we added to it by saying, not only are you at risk of getting killed, but



you're going to potentially be the reason that your team failed. And that sense of responsibility in that failure—people respond to that. To me, that's the whole reason to be in this industry in the first place, because it allows us to do it.

EGM: But it's tough to be the first one to try something and put it out there.

Jacob: It is, and it's funny, too, because I think that maybe that's the difference between developer and publisher? Because I think developers are often inspired to do something different. Publishers, as their job, need to make sure that you create this system that, yeah, it might be awesome and cool for you and your artsy friends, but no one else gets it, and now we're in the hole because no one bought it.

EGM: Yeah, you'll find lots of publishers saying, "Here's *Medal of Honor* and here's *Call of Duty*, and this stuff sells." Or, "This is our SKU plan, and we want to put something in that box." But the truth of it is, if you're doing exactly what they're doing, they're *always* going to do it better than you—I mean, that's their wheelhouse. That's their bread and butter.

Jacob: Yeah, there's certainly a fear of that. There's a guy that makes decisions about what you're going to do that's the one on the receiving end of the money, and at the giving end of the money, and he's going to give you money based on what you're doing, and how well he thinks it's going to bring money back in on this channel.

I can't tell you how many times on this project, on *Ghost Recon*, we heard, "But in *Battlefield*," or, "But in *Call of Duty*, they do this." All right. Awesome. And they do that really well! No one does *Battlefield* better than *Battlefield*, and no one does *Call of Duty* better than *Call of Duty*, but that's not what we're making.

We're not really even comparable to those titles, other than genre and theme. Technically, we're a shooter, and we have a military theme. The similarities end there. And it's not because we don't love what those guys do. We all bought *Battlefield* the day it came out. Everybody was at home playing and loving the game. But it doesn't mean that that's what we want to do. That's not what we want to make.

Led Zeppelin didn't say, "We're going to be the Beatles. We're going to do everything that they did, and we're going to write our songs the way they wrote their songs, and we're going to dress like they dressed, and we're going to write about the same subjects." They didn't do that. They found an inspiration in what other greats did, and then they did their own thing. To me, that's what's been so great about this experience with *Future Soldier*, is that even though we did have that pressure of "Well, *Battlefield* did this, and *Call of Duty* did that," there was a genuine team goal to allow inspiration to come in from those avenues, but to maintain the fact that we set out to do something different from the very beginning.

EGM: So, what's the payoff for you guys?

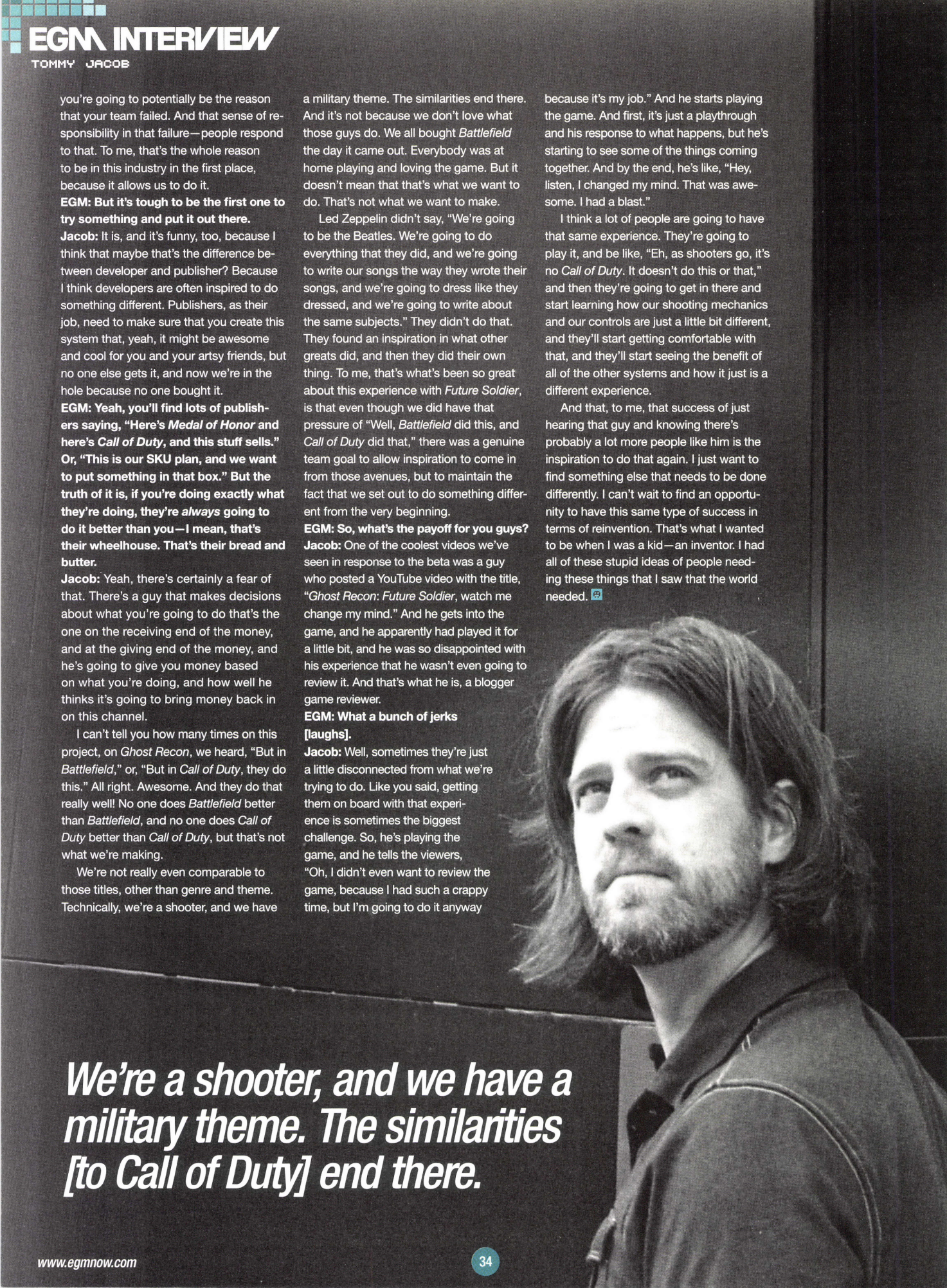
Jacob: One of the coolest videos we've seen in response to the beta was a guy who posted a YouTube video with the title, "*Ghost Recon*: *Future Soldier*, watch me change my mind." And he gets into the game, and he apparently had played it for a little bit, and he was so disappointed with his experience that he wasn't even going to review it. And that's what he is, a blogger game reviewer.

EGM: What a bunch of jerks [laughs].

Jacob: Well, sometimes they're just a little disconnected from what we're trying to do. Like you said, getting them on board with that experience is sometimes the biggest challenge. So, he's playing the game, and he tells the viewers, "Oh, I didn't even want to review the game, because I had such a crappy time, but I'm going to do it anyway because it's my job." And he starts playing the game. And first, it's just a playthrough and his response to what happens, but he's starting to see some of the things coming together. And by the end, he's like, "Hey, listen, I changed my mind. That was awesome. I had a blast."

I think a lot of people are going to have that same experience. They're going to play it, and be like, "Eh, as shooters go, it's no *Call of Duty*. It doesn't do this or that," and then they're going to get in there and start learning how our shooting mechanics and our controls are just a little bit different, and they'll start getting comfortable with that, and they'll start seeing the benefit of all of the other systems and how it just is a different experience.

And that, to me, that success of just hearing that guy and knowing there's probably a lot more people like him is the inspiration to do that again. I just want to find something else that needs to be done differently. I can't wait to find an opportunity to have this same type of success in terms of reinvention. That's what I wanted to be when I was a kid—an inventor. I had all of these stupid ideas of people needing these things that I saw that the world needed.



We're a shooter, and we have a military theme. The similarities [to Call of Duty] end there.

EGM: What's your favorite war movie of all time?
Jacob: The one that had the biggest impact on me was probably *Saving Private Ryan*, just because of the intensity of the scenes—particularly the scene of the guys in the stairwell where he slowly puts the knife into the other guy's chest, and he's like, "Shhh."

That was just so well shot, so well choreographed, so powerful—and so hard to watch for me. Afterward, I couldn't see it in the theater; I heard about it, so I paused it, had to take a break, and then came back and watched the rest of the movie. That's probably the one that I've researched the most in terms of its presentation, storytelling, and all that.

Another guilty pleasure one would be *Red Dawn*. Love that movie, but it doesn't really hold up in terms of authenticity. But it's just so awesome.

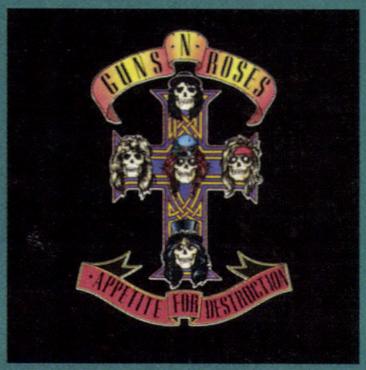
EGM: You mentioned you're a huge fan of '80s cartoons. What's your guiltiest pleasure?
Jacob: Wow, that's tough. I'd probably have to say *Voltron*, but it's a close tie with *M.A.S.K.* and *G.I. Joe*. But *Voltron* would probably win out. That was the one where I was so invested in the story because it was ongoing. Characters got injured and even killed. Prior to that, I'd probably say *Star Blazers*, but that was technically from the '70s.

EGM: What have you been reading lately?
Jacob: The book I'm reading now is actually research for projects, so I probably can't talk too much about it. It's a factbook; it's not a story. I was reading *The Dresden Files* for a while—that's not a favorite, but it's more current. That's the thing I've read most recently. It's guilty-pleasure stuff—that's what I like to do in my downtime.

EGM: What's the most innovative gave you've played in the last year?
Jacob: Definitely *Journey*. I'm still on the fence—I haven't decided if it's a game or not. There are mechanics, and there are rewards for doing things, but when someone tells you it's a game, you have nearly an understanding what the experience is that you're getting ready to go through.

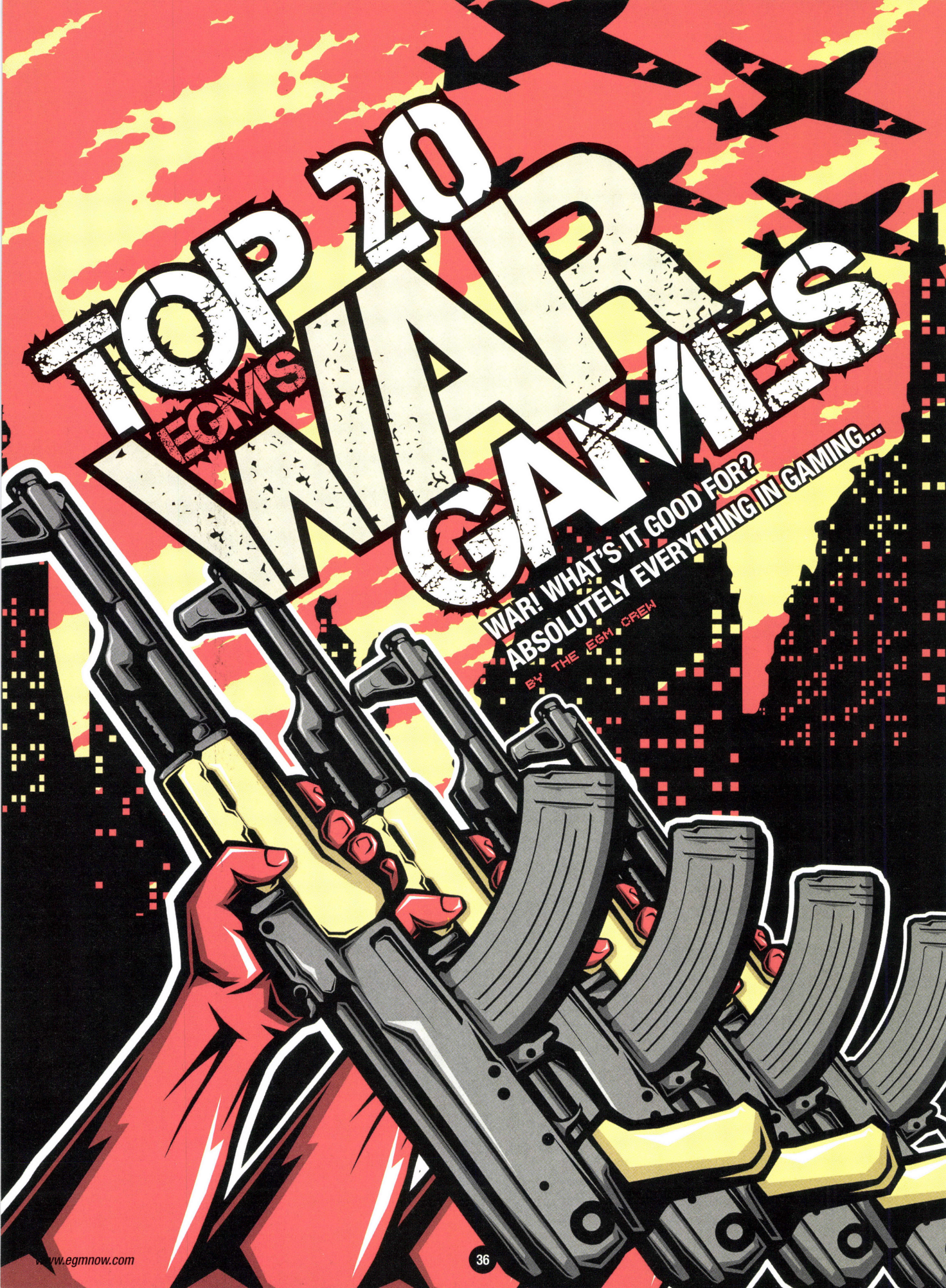
EGM: You get convicted of a heinous crime. What's your last meal?
Jacob: I'm going to go to Vinnie's, which is this pizza joint in South Jersey where I grew up, and I'm going to get a stromboli. Afterward, I'm gonna go home and have some of Mom's key lime pie. Or, they'll bring it to my cell, I guess.

EGM: You're trapped on a deserted island. What are three things you bring with you?



Jacob: I'm going to bring *Appetite for Destruction* from Guns 'N Roses to listen to—and I'm gonna bring my bass and sunscreen. [*Laughs*]

EGM: What kind of car do you drive?
Jacob: I have a Mazda 6.


TOP 20
EGM'S
WAR GAMES
WAR! WHAT'S IT GOOD FOR?
ABSOLUTELY EVERYTHING IN GAMING...
BY THE EGM CREW

If there's one thing the industry has down pat at this point, it's using endless amounts of ammo to effortlessly obliterate anyone who has the audacity to threaten national security. The hobby that *Pong* built is now several decades and hundreds of games into its shameless love affair with warfare, and as such, it takes a certain amount of military mojo to separate oneself from the pack. It's only natural, then, that we had to ask who'd win in a fight—and whether they pioneered a genre, redefined the online experience, or spawned a cultural phenomenon that consumed the social lives of millions, the titles that follow have all earned medals of commendation for bringing something distinct to the battlefield. And for that, we salute them.

20 WORLD OF TANKS

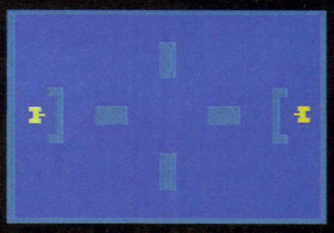
- **PUBLISHER** WARGAMING.NET
- **DEVELOPER** WARGAMING.NET
- **RELEASE DATE** 4.12.2011

It's rare for a free-to-play game to garner as much interest as *World of Tanks* has since it launched just over a year ago. But with 20 million registered players worldwide and half a million players on at once during peak times, it's just more proof that WWII tank gameplay is addictive no matter the format—or price.

19 COMBAT

- **PUBLISHER** ATARI
- **DEVELOPER** ATARI
- **RELEASE DATE** 1977

Its blocky tanks and biplanes might not look impressive today, but *Combat* was an important milestone in gaming history—it proved the then-nascent industry was more than derivative *Pong* clones. Plus, since Atari included it with every 2600 from 1977 to 1982, just about every gamer of the time got their hands on it.



18 JEANNE D'ARC

- **PUBLISHER** SONY COMPUTER ENTERTAINMENT
- **DEVELOPER** LEVEL-5
- **RELEASE DATE** 8.21.2007

While its take on the Hundred Years' War between England and France might have caused historians to look away in horror—chances are Joan of Arc didn't transform into a *Sailor Moon*–style anime heroine and fight alongside anthropomorphic lions and lizards—Level-5's *Jeanne d'Arc* is still one of the most imaginative strategy titles on the PSP.

17 ARMA II

- **PUBLISHER** GOT GAME ENTERTAINMENT
- **DEVELOPER** BOHEMIA INTERACTIVE STUDIO
- **RELEASE DATE** 7.7.2009

While arcade blasters have managed to edge out the occasional simulation-centered shooter, *ARMA II*—Bohemia Interactive's spiritual successor to their work on the *Operation Flashpoint* series—remains as one of the genre's last bastions of hardcore military strategy, offering an intense, uncompromising alternative experience.

16 VALKYRIA CHRONICLES

- **PUBLISHER** SEGA
- **DEVELOPER** SEGA
- **RELEASE DATE** 11.4.2008

We love our grandparents, but we're grown a bit fatigued from playing their war in every other FPS. And that's why *Valkyria Chronicles* was so refreshing. This shooter-strategy-RPG took familiar WWII themes—with clear allegories to France, Nazi Germany, and Jews—but crafted them together with glossy, cel-shaded anime packaging.

15 ROMANCE OF THE THREE KINGDOMS III

- **PUBLISHER** KOEI
- **DEVELOPER** KOEI
- **RELEASE DATE** 11.8.1992

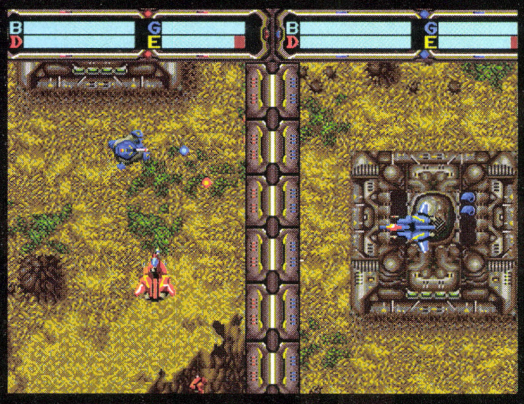
Given the unfortunate realities of the American educational system, most of the *EGM* staff learned way more about ancient China and its wars for unification from *Romance of the Three Kingdoms III* than we ever did from school. While the series started on the NES, it was the 16-bit-powered third chapter where the franchise really grew into something special.

TOP 20 WAR GAMES

14 HERZOG ZWEI

- **PUBLISHER** TECHNOSOFT
- **DEVELOPER** TECHNOSOFT
- **RELEASE DATE** 1.11.1990

EGM news editor Eric L. Patterson will use any excuse he can find to mention Technosoft's *Herzog Zwei*—one of the founding fathers of the real-time strategy genre, and still one of the most enjoyable competitive multiplayer games based around managing resources, creating military units, and fighting mercilessly to conquer the armies of your opposition.



13 METAL SLUG 3

- **PUBLISHER** SNK
- **DEVELOPER** SNK
- **RELEASE DATE** 6.1.2000

SNK cut their teeth on military-themed titles like *Ikari Warriors* and *P.O.W.*, but it's arguably their *Metal Slug* series that's now the most beloved. Of those, we just had to give the nod to *Metal Slug 3*—the chapter with the perfect balance of intense gunplay, menacing bosses, imaginative stages, and trademark *Metal Slug* charm.

12 BATTLEFIELD: BAD COMPANY 2

- **PUBLISHER** ELECTRONIC ARTS
- **DEVELOPER** DICE
- **RELEASE DATE** 3.2.2010

War is serious business, but *Bad Company 2* reminded us that a little dark comedy never hurt anyone. By giving some interesting personality to the game's main players, *Bad Company 2* provided the rare worthwhile story—as well as *Battlefield*'s signature destructible environments and awesome gunplay, mashed into one sweet product.

11 SUIKODEN II

- **PUBLISHER** KONAMI
- **DEVELOPER** KONAMI
- **RELEASE DATE** 9.29.1999

To this day, *Suikoden II* is an RPG still talked about with love and affection—thanks, in part, to its gripping storyline about countries caught in the burning fires of war. The player's tasked with bringing together an army of 108 legendary heroes, and battles are waged between entire armadas, six-character parties, or via 1-on-1 duels.

10 GHOST RECON: ADVANCED WARFIGHTER

- **PUBLISHER** UBISOFT
- **DEVELOPER** UBISOFT PARIS
- **RELEASE DATE** 3.9.2006

Ghost Recon: Advanced Warfighter proved it was possible to make a realistic military shooter without falling back into history or diverging into sci-fi silliness. Set in the near future, *GRAW* gave us access to nifty equipment we could imagine using—and in gritty missions that seem wholly plausible today. Play the Xbox 360 version for the definitive *GRAW* experience.

09 IKARI WARRIORS

- **PUBLISHER** TRADEWEST
- **DEVELOPER** SNK
- **RELEASE DATE** 1986

Capitalizing on the immense popularity of high-octane action flicks like *Rambo* and *Missing in Action*, *Ikari Warriors* was one of wargaming's first and best co-op experiences, spawning some awesome gun battles and more than a few fistfights between gamers who coveted all-important access to the almighty tank.

08 SOCOM II: U.S. NAVY SEALS

- **PUBLISHER** SONY COMPUTER ENTERTAINMENT
- **DEVELOPER** ZIPPER INTERACTIVE
- **RELEASE DATE** 11.4.2003

Fans of modern-day marvels like *Call of Duty* and *Battlefield* might not realize it, but Sony's former flagship for online military action wasn't always an afterthought in the mind of the frag-happy masses. Emphasizing skill and tactics over brute force and constant respawns, the second entry in the *SOCOM* franchise boasted a 12-mission single-player campaign, a whopping 22 mutliplayer maps, and five online modes that fueled more daily hours played than the whole of Microsoft's Xbox Live catalogue combined. Now, if only Sony would listen to the numerous fan petitions and deliver an HD remake...

07 MEDAL OF HONOR: ALLIED ASSAULT

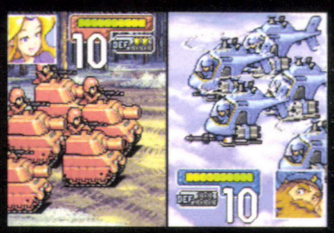
- **PUBLISHER** ELECTRONIC ARTS
- **DEVELOPER** 2015
- **RELEASE DATE** 1.22.2002

The high point of the *Medal of Honor* series, *Allied Assault* dropped players in an interactive version of *Saving Private Ryan*, storming Omaha Beach on D-Day and trying to survive one of the bloodiest battles in any war. The emotional impact, coupled with the brilliant gameplay, makes this one of the most harrowing war games ever conceived.

06 ADVANCE WARS

- **PUBLISHER** NINTENDO
- **DEVELOPER** INTELLIGENT SYSTEMS
- **RELEASE DATE** 9.10.2001

For years, Intelligent Systems crafted addictive, cerebral strategy games on Nintendo consoles—unfortunately, none of them reached North America. But *Advance Wars* bucked that trend by bringing cartoony strategy to the GBA; the game was so successful, in fact, that the series is now more popular in the States than in its native Japan.



05 METAL GEAR SOLID 3: SNAKE EATER

- **PUBLISHER** KONAMI
- **DEVELOPER** KONAMI
- **RELEASE DATE** 11.17.2004

Arguing over the best overall *Metal Gear* may cause a skirmish of its own, but we can all agree that *Snake Eater* definitely has the coolest, most stylish war vibe in the series. Its Cold War setting with a hint of James Bond panache—not to mention some of the greatest bosses in series history—may well be unmatched by *any* war-themed game.

04 STARCRAFT II

- **PUBLISHER** BLIZZARD
- **DEVELOPER** BLIZZARD
- **RELEASE DATE** 7.27.2010

How good is *StarCraft II*? Blizzard's only released a third of the game, and it's already in the top 10. If the Zerg and Protoss campaigns can live up to the wartime brilliance of the Terran tale in *Wings of Liberty*, then we'll have to name our future children after characters in the game. We're sure little Kerrigan won't mind.

03 COMMAND & CONQUER: RED ALERT 2

- **PUBLISHER** ELECTRONIC ARTS
- **DEVELOPER** WESTWOOD STUDIOS
- **RELEASE DATE** 10.23.2000

No company did real-time strategy games as well as Westwood Studios, and its *Command & Conquer* series set the standard for all of the resource-collection and troop-building games to follow. Aside from its perfectly balanced, polished mechanics, *Red Alert 2* reveled in its complex, politically charged story. Actually, make that *stories*. Players got to choose between the Allied and Soviet campaigns and deploy their troops in such diverse locations as Asia, the Atlantic Ocean, and even Antarctica.

02 CALL OF DUTY 4: MODERN WARFARE

- **PUBLISHER** ACTIVISION
- **DEVELOPER** INFINITY WARD
- **RELEASE DATE** 11.5.2007

The original *Modern Warfare* helped give war games the shot in the arm they desperately needed a few years ago, and Activision hasn't looked back since. It was the first game of the series to set the story in the near future instead of World War II, and it also introduced killstreaks, an element that's become a staple in nearly every FPS since then. *Modern Warfare* helped set a standard that not only would set the stage to launch the franchise into the billion-dollar range, but also set a bar for graphics, gameplay, and an extremely addictive multiplayer experience.

01 COUNTER-STRIKE

- **PUBLISHER** VALVE
- **DEVELOPER** VALVE
- **RELEASE DATE** 09.12.2003

Counter-Strike optimizes war games. Every minute of every hour of every day, a new battle's beginning somewhere in the world. Whether it's the never-ending struggle between the Terrorists and Counterterrorists—the game's two teams—or the little conflicts that break out in every one of the thousands of matches played out each day, it's a constant battle for survival that can never truly be won. It's these personal battles—seemingly insignificant or petty in many eyes—that make *Counter-Strike* what it is.

This isn't your usual shooter, where players are driven by levels, experience, or high score. *CS* players are motivated purely by skill level alone. It's this "play hard or go home" attitude that escalates every miniscule rivalry into a full-blown war.

Though it's been around since 2003 (versions before 1.6 were beta clients) and undergone numerous aesthetic changes, the core gameplay remains unchanged.

This highly tuned, well-balanced gameplay didn't just happen overnight...

But this highly tuned, well-balanced gameplay didn't just happen overnight; the game went through several painful cycles back when it was a simple *Half-Life* mod, before 1.6 officially released—the ultimate test of skill in many fans' eyes. The maps are expertly laid out for explosive, deadly conflicts, and the weapons are perfectly weighted and balanced for quick movement and precision aiming. The player base was quick to learn and improve, ultimately making the game a proving ground for skilled gamers the world over.

Valve made several changes to the game after 1.6, adding new maps and even overhauling the whole engine. But they never dared to mess with the beloved 1.6 setup. *Counter-Strike*'s player base doesn't require fancy new game modes, prestige levels, or double-XP weekends—they're in it purely for the fight and a chance to prove themselves in a worldwide virtual war.

GET YOUR DAILY DOSE OF EGM AND STAY CONNECTED LIKE NEVER BEFORE!

EGM [NOW]

EGM NOW AVAILABLE ON THE WEB!

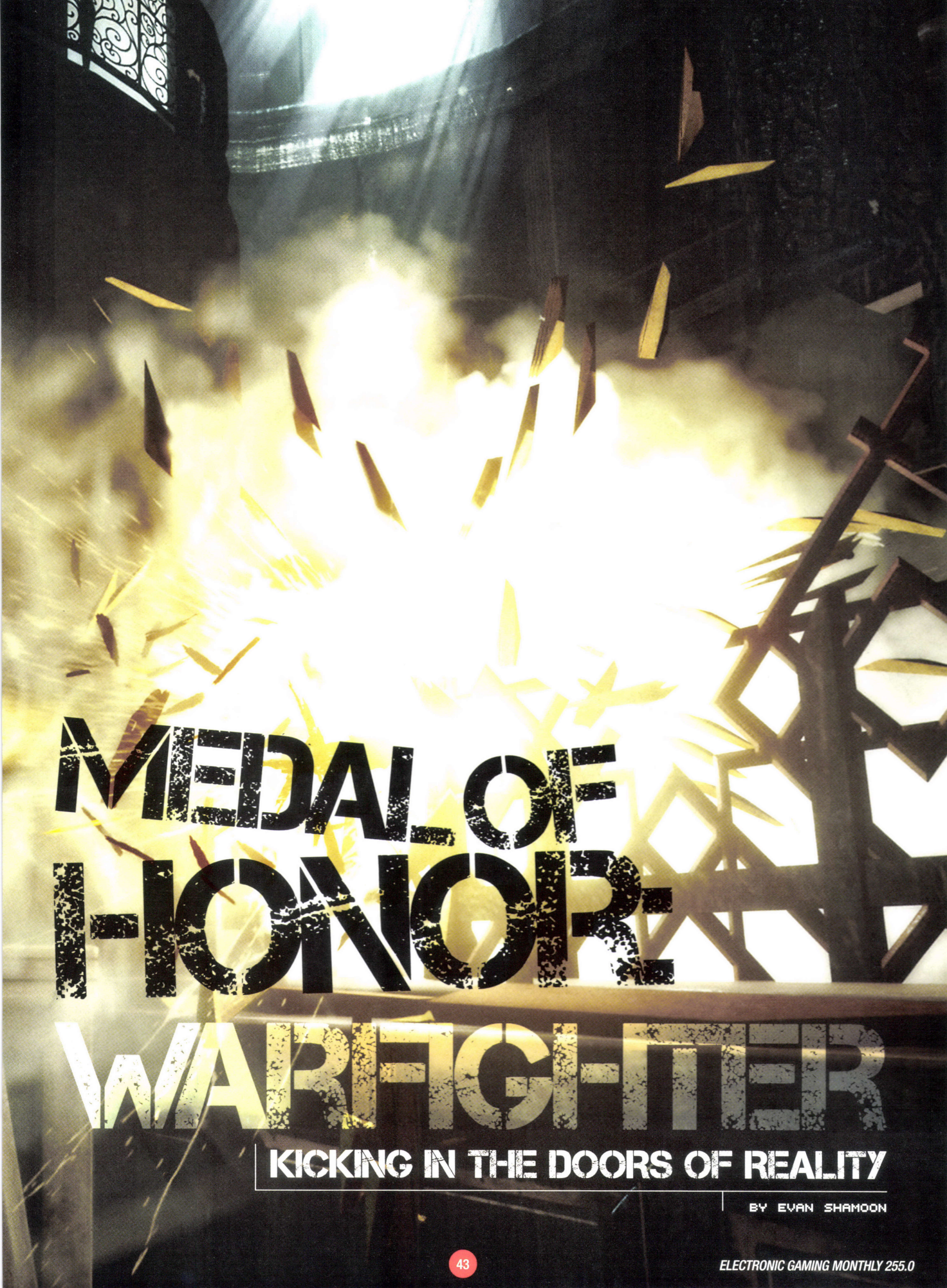
Now you can stay connected to EGM like never before, with the official website of Electronic Gaming Monthly! Every day EGMNOW.com is packed with news, reviews, features, and video you can't get anywhere else — with insightful writing and opinions from the name you've known and trusted for nearly 25 years!

NEWS. REVIEWS. VIDEO. 24/7.

only at WWW.EGMNOW.COM

360 | PS3 | Wii U | PC

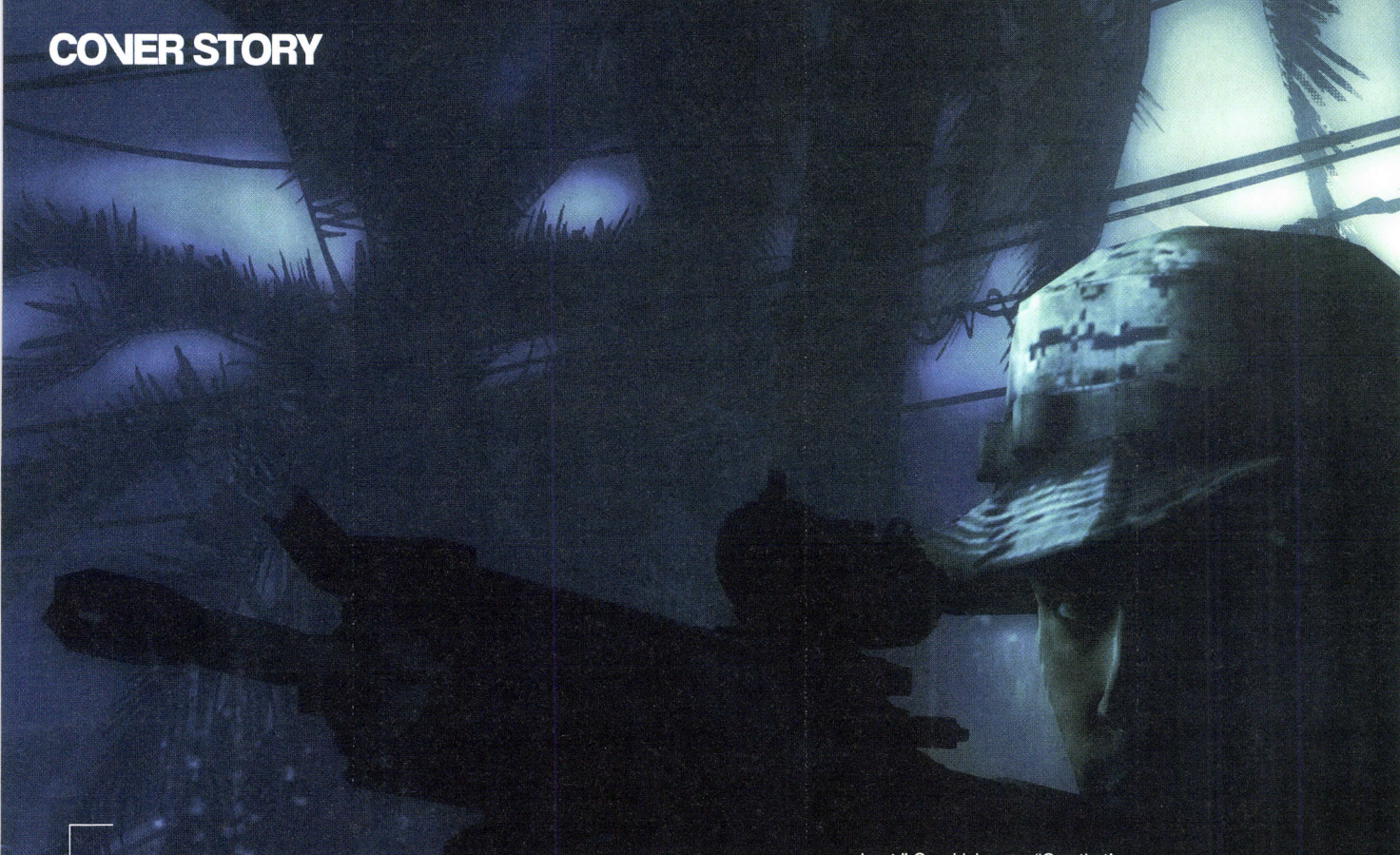
- **PUBLISHER** ELECTRONIC ARTS
- **DEVELOPER** DANGER CLOSE
- **RELEASE DATE** 10.23.2012



MEDAL OF HONOR: WARFIGHTER

KICKING IN THE DOORS OF REALITY

BY EVAN SHAMOON



Despite their exceedingly personal vantage point, first-person shooters—particularly those of the military variety—have been largely unsuccessful at telling personal, meaningful stories. Heavy hitters like *Battlefield 3* and *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3* do plenty right, but making you feel anything resembling compassion or empathy for its soldiers isn't one of them.

It's in precisely this regard that EA and developer Danger Close hope to interject with the upcoming *Medal of Honor: Warfighter*. Active U.S. Tier 1 Operators wrote the script while deployed overseas, which is based on—and inspired by—real-world events. Like the 2010 *Medal of Honor* reboot, *Warfighter* takes the series into a contemporary setting; this time around, however, the battle's moved out of the arid mountains of Afghanistan and into a host of other military hotspots, such as hostage-rescue operations in Abu Sayyaf's Basilan, Philippines stronghold, and assaulting al-Shabaab's "Pirate Town" on the coast of Somalia.

"It's been at the heart of *Medal of Honor* for quite some time, since the franchise first started," says executive producer Greg Goodrich. "That sense of historical fiction, the personal story, the soldier's story—getting into the boots of a soldier. We've moved eras, times, wars, but those core tenets still remain: putting the gamer in those boots and giving them a sense of what that's like, as much as we can, and in a very authentic and reverent way."

With both the 2010 and 2012 games, the focus has been on these elite operators from the special-operations community; when Goodrich saw the script in 2006, he immediately knew it was a story that needed to be told. He brought it to EA and used pieces of it in the 2010 title to introduce these characters and their mindset.

The bulk of the script's become part and parcel of the *Warfighter* experience. "We look at this reboot as the next step," says Goodrich. "It's a crawl-walk-run mindset that we have here; in game development, it's an iterative process, and what we're doing with this game is really trying to focus in on the one team, one clear creative vision. And, having been given one of the world's best game engines in Frostbite 2, we feel like we have a pretty good recipe to deliver on all the goals we're set for ourselves."

Those goals are to both create a slick, narrative-led FPS, as well as a novel multiplayer offering that finds its own niche in the crowded MP landscape. "We want to] stay true to our core tenets and tell an interesting story with characters that you care about," Goodrich says. "One that's meaningful and touches on the lives of these guys—and the real sacrifices that are being made on a daily basis."

Arguably as crucial in bringing authenticity and realism to *Warfighter* is the upgraded tech driving the experience. While the 2010 *Medal of Honor* ran on the popular Unreal Engine, *Warfighter*'s nuts and bolts consist of EA's proprietary Frostbite 2 technology, developed over the better part of the last decade by the company's Swedish studio, DICE. Anyone who's played *Battlefield 3* can attest to the engine's prowess at rendering the fog (and explosions, and shrapnel) of war, and our demo—not to mention the short trailer circulating online—confirms that this continues apace.

"Like a superpowered car, the engine's capable of a lot," says art director Chris Salazar. "It's very powerful, and it can do things that shock even me. At the same time, like a performance car, it requires a lot of maintenance, and it's very finicky." He says that while the engine's great to work with, and it affords the team a

■ DICE's Frostbite 2 engine gives *Warfighter* a significant visual upgrade over its 2010 predecessor.

"We wanted to find that balance between the purely tactical simulation like that found in the old *Rainbow Six* or *SWAT* games and something like kicking in a door and taking down bad guys," says executive producer Greg Goodrich. This attempt at balance manifests itself in the game's mechanic for breaching doorways. "We've come up with a pretty good system that allows for a player to asses a door, figure out how they want to enter that door and the *consequences* of how you enter that door, and where you're gonna be in the stack. Are you gonna be the breacher? Are you gonna be the No. 1 guy? Second, third, fourth in the door? Again, we're a very cinematic experience, and we do set it up in a way that we want the player to experience a certain engagement, so it's not a 100-percent-free choice of how you're going to simulate breaching a door. We're somewhere in the middle of that."

A similar approach is being taken with use of the sniper rifle. "We're sort of in the same point with sniping," says Goodrich. "At some point, it just becomes a training simulator, and especially when you're talking about wind, elevation, muzzle velocity, and bullet drop, you don't want your gamer to have to stop and get out a notepad and do math before they pull the trigger. It's finding the balance between pure simulation/tactical training and slick, explosive FPS gameplay."

This is not a globetrotting game. This is not Team America.

staggering amount fidelity in everything from lighting to environment design, it can seem almost overwhelming at times. "The minute you're not limited by the technology," he says, "the more you get shackled by the amount of options you have—there are just so many."

In order to make sure they had their ducks in a row, the team first sat down and looked at its own franchise history, as well as that of the *Battlefield* series. "We want to do things that defy expectations," says Salazar. "How do we come up with a space that's a little bit different? How do we layer context on top of that, and how do we push the engine? It's already a crazy engine that does a lot of things, and we have the same desire that our brothers at DICE do to make it do more and more. Luckily, they've done a lot of the heavy lifting, but nobody likes to rest on that. No one's content with, 'That's just good enough.'"

If there's a clear narrative theme to *Warfighter*, at least at this stage of the public-relations game, it's one familiar to the genre: the ongoing global terror threat. While the original 2006 script took place in one location, the feedback EA received from the 2010 *Honor*—"and people's desires to get out of the dirt circuit," according to Goodrich—convinced them to open things up and give it some breadth.

"We took some of the inspirations and scenarios that were going down in the original manuscript, and we applied that to different locations," he says. "This is not a globetrotting game. This is not *Team America*—hopping-and-popping, landing in a place, shooting the bad guys, and then coming home." He says the game's narrative glue is, in many ways, the underlying threat network—specifically the supply and distribution of PETN that our troops are constantly trying to keep off our shores.

"Most people first heard of this stuff in the shoes of 'Shoe Bomber' Richard Reid, and then it showed up in a train station, and then it showed up in some underwear, and Times Square," says Goodrich, who points out that most recently, PETN has been found in UPS packages of printer/toner cartridges coming over from the Arabian Peninsula. "So, it's a real threat, and the guys are out there trying to keep this s*** off our shores and out of our shopping malls. It's the threat that's the connective tissue of our game."

In many ways, the game's more personal approach to story and tone has

informed the dynamics of the action itself. "The broader picture is trying to make it feel like you're viewing this experience through a pair of eyes," says Salazar. When he started on the project, one of the resources he consulted was Steven Spielberg's (albeit heavily mined) *Saving Private Ryan*. "[Spielberg] tried to translate a historical event that most people were starting to not think about much, and said, 'How can I make this relevant to a modern audience?'"

Upon inspection, it became clear that the director keyed on some very simple things: The visual experience of what it's like to *be there*. "A lot of modern games have the conceit that there's a screen in front of us; things get on the screen, and it's treated like a screen," continues Salazar. "And what I really want to do is treat it like there's no layer between you and the environment. It's not a piece of Plexiglas; [it's not] what it's like to look through a movie camera, but through your own eyes. Again, trying to relate things back to a real person, an individual. I see that as a differentiator that we can hang our hat on; it might be subconscious, and it might be subtle, but it's a key thing."

Indeed, this notion of a "personal touch" has affected design perspectives in other ways as well. "What [Goodrich] has laid out for the story and the tone, and the manner in which he'd like to see it represented, is a foundation that makes it so much about being human—one man—and making it more relatable to you on a much smaller scale," says Salazar.

Essentially, if you're headed into a physical space where a firefight's going to take place, the emphasis is very much on your immediate surroundings. As contrast, Salazar offers the example of *Braveheart*. "I'm gonna craft destruction and lighting so that it speaks to me on [a level] that's closer to me, as opposed to something that has a huge amount of scope to it. You're a very small team—one or two people—and you're fighting very close to your enemy. Everything needs to relate back to the individual soldier—his own body—and, therefore, the player." He says the action becomes more meaningful because of this, and easier to relate to: "That's probably the best thing we have, and [we're] always coming back to that tenet."

Access to the actual soldiers has also been invaluable. "It's amazing to have one of the guys come in and do something as simple as show you as how he reloads a pistol," says Salazar. "I was pretty blown away by how much character, how much fluidity there was in his motion." Salazar likens it to watching a professional basketball player come in and show you how to shoot hoops. "It's on another level altogether, and it goes above, 'Hey that's a great animation of a guy doing a reload.' No, this is a professional at the top of his game—it's a beauty that most people don't see. You certainly don't see it in a movie." He says the experience has been eye-opening, motivating, and inspiring: "You just feed off of it, because they're that good at it."

Still, "authenticity" and "videogames" have been nothing if not strange bedfellows. EA experienced a firestorm of criticism for the 2010 *Honor* release, after families of war victims objected (on national television, no less) to the company's decision to allow players to pose as Taliban fighters in multiplayer combat. Facing ongoing criticism and a ban across U.S. military bases, EA eventually changed the name of the multiplayer enemies from "Taliban" to "Opposing Force." The company also argued at this time that *Medal of Honor* was "just a game," and that games have "good guys" and "bad guys."

Perhaps it's simply a matter of verbiage, or perhaps it's a question of commitment to the idea. "I know that all the stuff we've put out so far has been very forward-facing, aggressive—what you'd expect from a first-person shooter trailer," says Goodrich. "But there's a lot more depth to this game that I'm personally very anxious to get out there and start talking about."

He says that when developing an authentic game about real people—"and real lives, and real sacrifice, and real loss"—it adds orders of magnitude of difficulty to the job. "There's a sense of 'getting it right' and making sure you're not betraying anybody or stepping on toes, or revealing things that you shouldn't reveal," he says. "We try very hard not to take; we always ask. We never exploit; we honor. We use these terms a lot, but it's a very real mantra here at Danger Close. Spending time with these guys, they become your friends, and people that you respect, and you just want to get it right—and they're right next to you, and they're certainly a presence in the room."

Goodrich says they think about the process as one of boundaries, like staying within the lanes of this swimming pool. "Steven Spielberg created *Saving Private Ryan* as a 'thank you' to his dad, and we go back to those founding principles and leave everything else out of it," he says. "We never use the word 'realism,' because there's absolutely nothing real about a videogame. Combat is combat; games are games. But we try to make everything plausible, everything authentic. And if you take the narrative history of a squadron of guys in one of these units—18 to 20 years, everything that's ever happened to each of them—and you put it into one guy, then you've got yourself a game."

Goodrich says that every mission in *Warfighter* has a dotted line to either something that has happened, is inspired by something that happened, or, in one case, something that was going to happen but never did. "One of my favorite missions in the game was [based on something that was] called off in the eleventh hour, but we decided to play it out as it might have happened with this unit in real life. Historical events, fictional story."

■ *Warfighter* aims to tell a more realistic FPS tale, imparting what spec-ops troops *really* face in combat.

// ENGINE SWAP //

Danger Close art director Chris Salazar says the leap from Unreal Engine (used in 2010's *Medal of Honor*) to *Medal of Honor: Warfighter*'s Frostbite 2 has meant incorporating new approaches and best practices. "Unreal was familiar to a lot of people who'd worked with it for a number of years," he says. "It's easier to get to a given point when you're working with something like that. However, you're limited by what it can do visually. There's a certain level of fidelity you'll never be able to reach—you're held back." He says that for the *Warfighter* team, it's been a flip of the coin: "We're learning the tool, and it's capable of so much. It's just a matter of, 'Can you ramp up well enough, can you ramp up fast enough, and is your team strong enough to wear the crown of responsibility?'"

Salazar continues: "I'll go to an effects artist and say, 'I have this idea, and I want to alter the way lens flares look. Can you do it?' They don't bat an eye; they run off, and the next day, there it is. The technology supports all of that. I don't have to go to an engineer to write some code for me; the structure to support that kind of thought exists, so there's not a lot standing in our way."

There's a sense of "getting it right" *and making sure you're not stepping on toes...*

// EMBRACE THE ALT-FIRE //

"We're going deep on weapons systems," says executive producer Greg Goodrich. "First and foremost, this is a first-person shooter, and the weapon's the one thing that's on your screen 100 percent of the time." As such, developer Danger Close has formed ties with over two dozen product partners: gear manufacturers, weapons-systems manufacturers, optics, lights, tactical nylon gear, and the like. "In the Tier 1 units, these are the guys who are developing this stuff, inventing this stuff, working with these manufacturers to come up with better, faster, stronger systems," says Goodrich, who equates it to pro athletes. "Kobe Bryant doesn't go into Foot Locker to buy his shoes; his shoes are made for him. It's the same thing in the Tier 1 communities. Their gear's custom-tailored for them."

He says that the goal is to give the player a sense that their weapons system is truly their own. This will be apparent when using one weapons system for multiple types of engagements: An M4 with a magnified optic can be used at range, but it can also be used at extremely close engagement distances. Weapons will have various alt-fires, attachments, and components, giving them more flexibility and more efficiency in the field.

// HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMP //

While *Medal of Honor: Warfighter*'s multiplayer modes haven't yet been fully revealed, the team's bringing something of a "global perspective" to the multiplayer proceedings. Taking a page from the *FIFA* franchise playbook, the game will give players a selection of 12 Tier 1 international units from 10 different nations to pick from and do battle against. Some of the revealed forces include British SAS, Australian SASR, German KSK, and Polish GROM. This will also bring with it a "Blue-on-Blue" playlist, which pits allies against allies in competitive multiplayer matches.

In addition to *FIFA*, executive producer Greg Goodrich cites classic boxing games as a primary inspiration as well, as they let players pit fighters from different generations and weight classes against one another to determine the age-old question: Who's the best fighter of all time? "Similarly, we're giving FPS gamers the chance to fly that flag and feel some national pride and get online and battle against the best to determine the best unit in the world," says Goodrich. "Who's the best operator in the world? Is it Army, Navy, SAS, SASR, or GROM?" While he won't go into detail, Goodrich says there will be fairly substantial differences between the various forces. "Playing [different forces] will look and feel a little different," he says. "Otherwise, it's just a skin, right?"

Can Medal of Honor succeed where Battlefield failed?

By typing the headline above, I'm pretty sure I've caused the brain of some poor marketing exec at Electronic Arts to explode like a potato on the wrong end of a sledgehammer. But despite the demonstrable success of moving over 10 million units worldwide, the presence of a pachyderm in the room is as unmistakable as the company's brash marketing slogan for the 2011 shooter:

"Above and Beyond the Call," I believe it was.

Funny, because Activision's *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3*—the title EA not-so-subtly mocked with its megamarketing campaign last fall—managed to sell over 25 million units in the same timeframe, so despite a valiant effort from the folks at DICE and their admittedly awesome Frostbite 2 engine, *Battlefield* still got smacked last holiday season. And with *Call of Duty: Black Ops 2* on its way in the latter half of 2012, it looks like we're gonna get a rematch much sooner than expected when *Medal of Honor: Warfighter* hits retailers.

As such, you've gotta wonder if Danger Close and co. can turn things up a notch and give Treyarch a run for their money—or if we're in for yet another ass-kicking at the hands of the world's most popular first-person shooter.

Normally, I'd have laughed at the idea that *MOH* had a random goon's chance in a Jean-Claude Van Damme flick, but after getting a glimpse of the game at this year's Game Developers Conference in March, I think it's got three things going for it that'll go a long way toward closing the gap.

For starters, Danger Close has the advantage of crafting a second-gen title on the Frostbite 2 engine—and, *man*, does it show. Visuals lead the way in the console wars, and seeing *Warfighter* in motion made me wonder less if it was one of the best-looking military shooters out there, and more if I could think of a game in any genre that matched its visual prowess. I'm still thinking—it looks *that* good. Considering the game's just hitting its pre-ship "polish" phase, I think it's got a fighting chance.

MOH isn't just taking a cue from *BF3* in the one area it arguably whipped *COD*'s ass—multiplayer, for those keeping score at home. It's also borrowing from EA Sports' best, *FIFA 12*, by playing off national pride in the MP department; that should increase variety and strengthen the player base, which has a long way to go before it can convince *BLOPS* and *MW3* fans to elevate a non–*Call of Duty* game to anything outside of "that other game I play when I'm not playing *Call of Duty*." If they combine the obvious map-grab mechanics seen in other military titles with novel weapons, gear, and skins, it could be massive.

Last but not least, I'm really intrigued by the narrative. Thanks to a heavy burden from the team and the square-one involvement of several former elite military operatives—including one who's serving as an associate producer on the project—*Warfighter* looks like it might actually deliver a plot that isn't straight out of Sly Stallone's rejected *Rambo* reboot screenplay pile.

But will all of these factors be enough to push *Warfighter* to the front of the line this fall? Ultimately, I doubt it. Getting loyal *COD* fans to make the switch is like getting a redneck (and I'm one of 'em!) to switch his stance on the Ford-vs.-Chevy debate. Loyalty runs deep in gaming circles, and in that sense, EA's in for the fight of its life. From what I've seen, I'd wager they'll make a big dent in Activision's lead, but like most good generals, EA's better served to avoid betting on this short-term battle and keeping their eye on the larger war that's sure to play out on the next round of consoles—that's when things will get *really* interesting.

—Brandon Justice

■ *Warfighter*'s missions are based on real-world operations—or plausible "what if" scenarios that nearly happened.

SPEC OPS: THE LINE

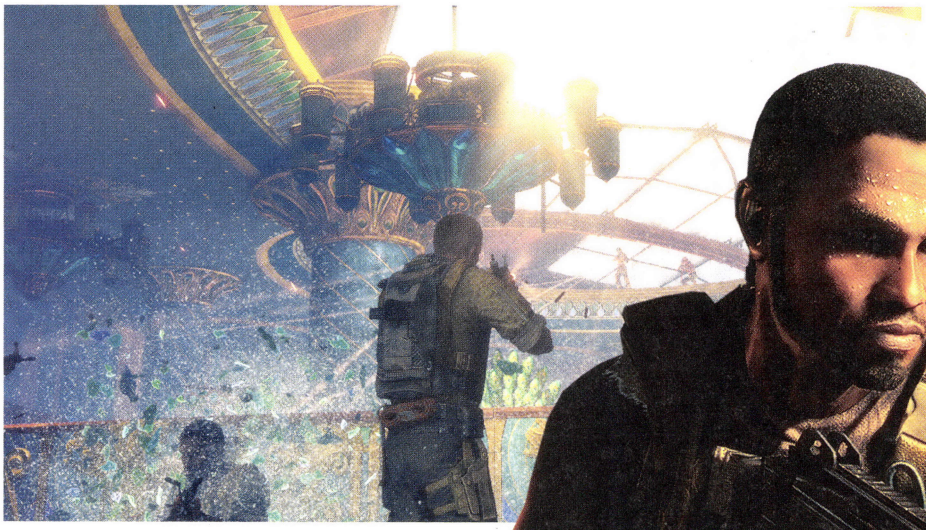
Highlighting the high cost of war

BY BRANDON JUSTICE

British philosopher Bertrand Russell once stated that "War does not determine who is right—only who is left." And while his thoughts hardly echo the competitive, cutthroat business of battle typically showcased on your favorite gaming console, 2K Games gives the distinct impression that with their latest military thriller, *Spec Ops: The Line*, they're making an earnest attempt at unseating blockbuster action as the focal point of the modern military shooter.

360 | PS3 | PC

- **PUBLISHER** 2K GAMES
- **DEVELOPER** YAGER DEVELOPMENT
- **RELEASE DATE** 6.26.2012



■ *Spec Ops* isn't all about mindless blasting; you've got to pick and choose your battles like a real soldier.

According to project consultant Reggie Bennett, a former United States Air Force survival instructor, battlefield tactics aren't always as simple as obliterating everything that moves. "There are a lot of shades of gray out there," he says. "[Soldiers] have to decide every second of the day whether they're facing the enemy or just somebody who's walking down the street. So, every instance out there is a moral dilemma for these guys."

It's this sense of internal conflict that drives a surprising amount of the gameplay, as players often have to make some tough calls amidst the action. Taking up the role of Capt.

THE BIG QUESTION:

Can a third-person shooter succeed in the era of the FPS?

While many gamers could argue that their favorite niche genres face a near-constant struggle to get their fair shake, our guess is there's at least one topic you won't hear the fanboys fuming over anytime soon: a pressing need for more first-person shooters.

In that sense, a lot's changed in the last 10 to 15 years. The once-mighty platformer, the tried-and-true JRPG, and the nearly extinct adventure are all but an afterthought for most publishers, but the idea of putting gamers into the first-person perspective and arming them to the teeth is almost a genre in and of itself these days, thanks largely to the unstoppable empires built by folks like Activision, Electronic Arts, and others via their unabashed love for all things annihilated, leaving little room for the idea that we'd ever go back to a more character-driven approach to presentation.

And it's difficult to blame them. Whether you're talking presentation or the adrenaline-pumping pistol play provided by the up-close-and-personal action of the first-person perspective, there's a lot to be said for diving into the fray from the view of the protagonist, allowing gamers to really get into the role of the hero. Applying the technique to classic genres has allowed gamemakers to present the action in an entirely new way in most respects.

With all that said, it's curious to see 2K Games return to a decade-old franchise via a third-person perspective, and you have to wonder if the *Call of Duty* crowd will see it as a refreshing change of pace or more of an aging relic from gaming days gone by. The military-themed shooter is almost as tough a nut to crack as the MMO market these days, and while there have been some notable exceptions in the last few years (*Gears of War*, *Uncharted*, and *Vanquish* come to mind), the rule of the day definitely leans toward presenting things from the main character's viewpoint to provide a greater sense of immersion.

For their money, the *Spec Ops* team feels that the change in cameras gives them an opportunity to help their story hit home, giving gamers the ability to see the effects of the game's events on their squad in real time, adding a much-needed human element to the plotlines; this type of thinking's certainly paid off for Naughty Dog and Platinum Games in recent years, but it remains to be seen if Yager has the chops to deliver on a similar sense of character.

Granted, a first-person camera doesn't necessarily make any of the above any easier, but it definitely makes certain shortcomings a bit easier to hide, meaning that 2K has to work even harder to make a dent in the military market. The story and environments give them a distinct position among the flood of similar titles that'll hit this year, so it'll ultimately come down to execution. If they dial it, they'll be sitting pretty as one of the few third-person games worth playing. If not, well, let's just say a sandstorm is the least of their meteorological worries.

Martin Walker while leading his team on a questionable rescue mission into the sand-ravaged streets of Dubai, you'll often have to choose to between saving hostages, using brute force, or taking a more tactical approach to conflict resolution.

The thing is, a series of natural disasters and military indiscretions have made the distinction between friend and foe tough to determine, a dilemma lead designer Cory Davis sees as the key to *The Line*'s assault on the status quo of the genre.

"We really wanted to portray that darker, more emotional side of the soldier's journey," he says. "We started doing a lot of research at the start of the project, and we found all these really heart-wrenching stories from soldiers that were on similar battlefields—the way they felt when they came home from different conflicts, as well as the different things that they had to do and the decisions they had to make on the battlefield that they'll have to live with for the rest of their lives. And a lot of times, those decisions have unknown consequences. Obviously, these themes are very important to us, and we really wanted this to be more about exploring the soul of man in the harshest conditions imaginable."

To that end, Davis and the team relied heavily on Bennett's experience, noting that he lent a crucial sense of credibility to the games' most pivotal choice points.

"[He was] the game's barometer to see if these stories were meaningful to him and seemed authentic enough," Davis says. "The last thing we ever wanted to do was just shock people for the sake of it."

Bennett appreciates the props, but he's also quick to point out that it isn't all tears and turmoil. "It's still all about having fun," he says. "You don't want to make it so realistic that you're no longer having fun. It's a game. But playing it, you can just get so engrossed."

One aspect that makes this sense of fiction particularly clear is the setting, as the events play out in a digital portrayal of the real-world megalopolis of Dubai ravaged by a series of brutal sandstorms that have buried half the city and laid waste to the rest. Walker and his team have to make their way through the landscape with the ever-present threat of "sandslides" that could bury them alive or send them plummeting to their doom.

"It really changes the dynamics of the gameplay and the combat," Davis says. "Sand comes into play in a lot of different ways, and it's really sort of a character [in the game] reflecting back on our main squad characters and haunts them throughout this journey. We wanted to be able to throw a twist on a lot of these old cover-shooter combat games that you've played in the past, and the sand can really add this dynamic element that can [create combat] you wouldn't expect. For example, you're walking on top of skyscrapers a lot of times, but it looks like you're walking on a sand dune, so there's this element of unsure ground everywhere you're walking; you may fall into a hotel lobby that's been entombed by the sand, and it's just like the day the sandstorms hit."

It's this feeling of walking on shaky ground—both physically and morally—that 2K hopes will define the final product, and while it's not as loud or as slick as some of the genre's top titles, it's definitely out to draw a distinct, ahem, line in the sand this summer.

WALK THE LINE

BANNED IN THE UAE

Dubai's ruling body apparently wasn't too fond of 2K's decision to present the Middle Eastern metropolis in the wake of a natural disaster, leading to a territory-wide ban of the game prior to release.

DO IT FOR YOUR SQUAD

The multiplayer side of *Spec Ops* is built on a class-based, objective-driven system that'll offer upgrades for good performance and require teamwork to succeed.

FUN WITH FACTIONS

Head-to-head play also allows you to uncover aspects of the game's backstory thanks to direct tie-backs to the single-player campaign.

DEADLY DUNES

The environment's sizable amount of sand doubles as a weapon against unsuspecting enemies who've backed themselves into a damaged area.

A NOVEL IDEA

You may not notice it amidst the firefights and environmental upheaval, but *The Line*'s plot is actually intended to be a modern-day retelling of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*.

FAR CRY 3

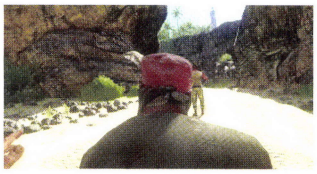
Welcome to the jungle

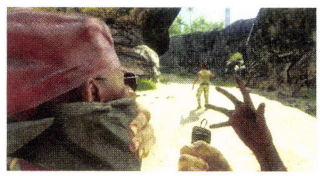
PC	PS3	360

- **PUBLISHER** UBISOFT
- **DEVELOPER** UBISOFT MONTREAL/UBISOFT MASSIVE
- **RELEASE DATE** 09.04.2012

BY DOUGLASS C. PERRY

"Did I ever tell you the definition of insanity? Doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results." These are the words your killer Vaas says before you die.





Or *presumably* die. In the opening moments in *Far Cry 3*—with your hands tied and your foot roped to a giant cinder block—the tattooed, mohawked gang leader Vaas kicks you off a cliff and into a deep freshwater pool. Traveling quickly downward, you have mere seconds to live. At the bottom, fear is everywhere: Dozens of drowned victims, their feet tied to similar cinder blocks, hang upward, like ghostly balloons. A button prompt helps you tear loose the ropes, and you swim up for air. As you gasp for breath, it's time to form an escape plan.

That's where it all begins, returning to the tropical jungles that helped make the first *Far Cry* so intriguing. But in this third iteration, Ubisoft's taking players on a different kind of trip, opening up the world, adding more RPG elements, and introducing a cast of wild-yet-realistic characters in the personages of lead Jason Brody, chaotic ringleader Vaas, and the strange Dr. Earnhardt, among others. It's Brody meeting with Dr. Earnhardt, an off-kilter biologist with a penchant for collecting hard-to-find mushrooms, that reveals the developer's impressive *Uncharted*-quality storytelling elements.

■ The jungle itself isn't the only hostile in *Far Cry 3*—don't underestimate the human element!

"Telling a story with a first-person camera is a massive challenge, especially from a cinematic point," explains animation director Robert Purdy. "Traditional storytelling tools are not there for us. That being said, we get the chance to actually be in the mind of our character. For instance, in the mushroom mission when Jason's hallucinating, hopefully, the player is saying, 'What the f*** is going on?' We want Jason to confirm those same feelings. We don't want him to be a flatline guy, like an '80s action hero, where he deals with everything the same way."

Far Cry 3 mixes traditional mission-by-mission structure with open-world discovery and a plethora of weapons, actions, and mushroom-induced realms to explore.

The Earnhardt mission introduces Brody to several mechanics: swimming, diving, and collecting. (And drugs.)

Underwater, Brody can retrieve the mushrooms the doctor seeks, gaining a valuable ally in the process. Topside, he can start the game's more linear missions and RPG qualities, or wander throughout the packed, verdant island with the freedom to discover it independent of the main story.

"We'll feed things to you that will increase the experience," says lead game designer Jamie Keen. "You'll start off with just a pistol or just a knife, and then gradually, you'll add to your repertoire. You'll understand how you can interact with the world. There will be plants around you, with which you'll learn to heal yourself and give yourself special abilities and powers."

The open-world aspect of *Far Cry 3* is rife with possibilities, explains Keen. "The natural environments are interesting," he says "You'll have the sea, which has harbors and these vast open beaches with rock formations. We have deep, dark, dense jungles, giving a sense of claustrophobia and oppression. And we have mountains, providing a sense of openness and beauty of the place; they're where I like to go. Sometimes, the game surprises you with how amazing it all looks from the top of a mountain range. You look out toward a sunset, and you find yourself just marveling at its natural beauty. From a gameplay sense, all those environments create different combat experiences."

Climbing through the jungle reveals a slew of items to collect and sell or trade, and swimming unveils another world to explore. On land, Komodo dragons and wild boars roam wild (other deadly creatures, too). Underwater, the lovely, colorful fish are followed by sharks.

"And they'll start hunting you," Keen says. "It won't be a safe place."

Brody eventually gains more powerful weapons; some are standard fare, like AK-47s, pistols, shotguns, and sniper rifles. The in-game currency system encourages players to upgrade them and provides stylized approaches. If you like to run-and-gun, upgrading a rifle or shotgun with less recoil is recommended. With sniper rifles, an upgrade for reducing sway is available. And for stealth hounds, a suppressor's the smart choice. For less-traditional killing tactics, players can wield machetes, utilized in stealth or drop attacks. Both can be thrown to reduce body counts.

Whatever path you choose—be it stealth kills, straight-up combat, or deep exploration—Ubisoft's newest entry on this lawless tropical island is sure to prompt a little walk on the wild side of life...and death.

A BOOMING BATTLE CRY

TAG AND BAG

Enemies don't appear on the minimap, so one way to be a good teammate is to tag them. Just like BattleCry and Revive, this action earns points. By tagging enemies right away, you're indicating to teammates the enemy's locations; this subtle action's helpful to noobs and experts alike.

DAZED AND CONFUSED

While using the minimap to drop Psyche Gas, it's impossible to pinpoint enemies; oftentimes, a canister will explode near your own teammates. The gas confuses everyone nearby by clouding their appearance in a silhouette. Shoot the wrong guy, and you'll lose points (or earn them if you guess right). Either way, it's all a purple haze.

RETURN OF THE MAP EDITOR

Nearly everyone who played previous *Far Cry* games adored the innovative Map Editor, which returns here. Massive's keeping quiet about the minute details, but count on more and better tools, social features to share and experiment with, and bigger, better ones.

THE SOCIAL NETWORK

Along with a stream of new maps and specialized DLC, Massive's working on a postrelease metagame encouraging players to share specially modified weapons that can only be earned through social (texting, e-mailing, and so on) means; this could be a rifle with an extra-strength scope or a shotgun with larger-than-average shells.

REAL-TIME SWEDES

Celebrating its 15th anniversary this year, Massive earned their fame by creating the real-time strategy PC series **Ground Control** for Vivendi Universal (2000-2004). They went on to make the *World in Conflict* RTS series afterward (2007-2009). Months after the Vivendi-Activision merger in 2008, Activision sold the now-75-person-strong Swedish developer to Ubisoft.

THE BIG QUESTION:

Will Massive convince players that friends matter?

Standing in a brightly lit conference room in the former state-run telephone building in Malmö, Sweden, lead designer Magnus "Soundboy" Jansen turn his focus to the issues behind multiplayer games. "There's something missing in multiplayer today," he says. "You just spam out bullets, figuring who *not* to shoot. With *Far Cry*'s multiplayer game, *friends* really matter. *Teamplay* matters, and even when idiots join in, the game is fun."

Jansen's spot-on. All too often, well-meaning gamers are lumped in with misguided strangers. But can Massive, known for its team-oriented play in real-time strategy games *Ground Control* and *World in Conflict*, translate its "Friends Matter" mantra into reality and pry players away from *Call of Duty* and *Battlefield*?

What Massive already has going for it is multifold. The game's due in September, and *Far Cry 3*'s multiplayer modes are up, running, and competitive. The team-battle mode pits players in a fight to maintain control of key stations until time runs out. The second, a mode called Fire Storm, focuses even more intensely on teamplay, as players struggle to control the lush landscape, succeeding or dying in a fiery field of flame and explosions.

Jansen's mantra kicks in right away. While players individualize their loadout to customize their attacks, selecting shotguns, sniper rifles, or submachine guns, every soldier on the field has the ability to revive their teammates. This is counterintuitive to the standard class system, but it frees up gamers to make choices and earn points in the process—reinforcing sticking together. Blasting dudes' faces off does, in fact, earn points, but so does keeping your friend's ass intact.

The idea of transforming teammates into friends spreads organically into other areas of combat. After a certain amount of points are accrued—through shooting enemies, controlling nodes, and calling in "psych" gas bombs to confuse enemies using a top-down perspective—players can ignite another "Friends Matter" feature, BattleCry.

By pressing down on both analog sticks simultaneously, it's on. This buffer adds a strategic advantage to the fight: With two or three friends nearby, a BattleCry-boosted attack slightly increases all nearby player speed, quickens health regeneration, and boosts uninjured player health, making your squad tougher to kill off in a tête-à-tête over a control point.

BattleCry's even more crucial in Fire Storm, where players rush to light two distant barrels on fire, then battle to control a central radio station to call in a fire bomb. This immediately generates teamplay ("You go to Barrel A, and I'll get Barrel B!").

In the overly crowded FPS market, Massive's goal is ambitious—even daunting. But the road less traveled is ripe with rewards, and it's much harder for monster franchises to make significant changes without ignited rebellion in its fanbase. If Massive can convince hungry online players how fun it is to play with friends, then gamers might just find a new duty to fulfill.

ENEMY FRONT

These asskicking WWII heroes ain't frontin'

BY RAY CARSILLO

360	PS3	PC

- **PUBLISHER** CITY INTERACTIVE
- **DEVELOPER** CITY INTERACTIVE
- **RELEASE DATE** Q4.2012

Enemy Front's WWII heroes will be less touchy-feely Tom Hanks and more asskicking Eastwood.

THE BIG QUESTION:

Can a WWII FPS break away from the Saving Private Ryan mold?

The World War II setting's been a staple of the first-person shooter for the past decade. Franchises like *Call of Duty* and *Battlefield* blasted their way onto the gaming scene by re-creating critical aspects of our grandfathers' war. But many of those games tried to tell the personal story of a single foot soldier—or him and a handful of his friends—as they worked their way through one of the darker periods of the 20th century. This was good for drama, but there are only so many ways to skin a cat; in recent years, many games have moved away from that scene, placing us in the present or near future, and many have become too obsessed with telling that dramatic, character-driven story and lost sight of the action that defines the genre. But now, *Enemy Front* looks to take us back in time and give us a World War II story that won't require any tissues to wipe away the tears.

"This game was designed in the spirit of those classic 'men on a mission' war movies from the '50s, '60s, and '70s," says creative director Stuart Black. "We wanted to get back to a bit more of the rock 'n' roll spirit. To do that, we wanted to get you off the front lines and stop being a grunt, doing the same old Normandy-to-Berlin run. I mean, it's obvious why people were doing that. Because, before Normandy, the Allies were pretty much getting their asses kicked, and no one wants to play a part in the losing side."

In *Enemy Front*, you'll play as an American OSS operative dropped behind enemy lines during the evacuation of Dunkirk. While the Allied forces flee, you're the only one running right into the heart of Nazi-occupied Europe. While on a simple heavy-rail-artillery sabotage mission, you come across plans that could cripple the Allied forces permanently. With a ragtag band comprised of yourself, a snarky British commando, and a sexy female French Resistance fighter, you'll work your way not to Berlin, but deep into Poland, help the Warsaw resistance, assault Hitler's infamous Eagle's Nest facility, and then head to Norway for an epic fortress assault worthy of any action movie—not some sappy drama.

"While researching and watching all these old war movies, *Where Eagles Dare* from the late '60s is the one that really stood out as an inspiration," Black says. "It really stood the test of time. You've got Richard Burton and Clint Eastwood—and this is Eastwood before he was a star, before *Dirty Harry*. So, he was playing a bit of a second fiddle to Richard Burton. It's really a Richard Burton movie where Burton's driving the story. And Clint is just there as an asskicker, pure and simple. And that's what we're doing with *Enemy Front*. You're like Clint. You're the asskicker."

IN THE TRENCHES

HOPE, HONOR, GLORY

Enemy Front's Hope, Honor, and Glory options will allow players to truly customize their experience. Hope gives you regenerative health like *Call of Duty*, Honor requires you to use health packs à la *Resistance*, and Glory turns off the HUD altogether, giving players three different experiences in one game.

NEW OLD GUNS

In order to help differentiate itself from your standard WWII FPS, *Enemy Front* looks to highlight and feature a variety of weapons that you may not have seen before in games of this nature—but that are still true to the time period—like your main character's preferred British Lanchester SMG.

THE WALLS ARE CLOSING IN

As is a staple in Stuart Black games, the environment's completely malleable to bullet fire. This means that those pesky Nazis who prefer to stay in cover for way too long may not have cover any longer if you feel like shooting it up or blowing up a conveniently placed ammo crate or explosive barrel.

QUICK TRIGGER, SLOW RELOAD

Enemy Front's introducing the interesting dynamic of quicker reload times if you change magazines when the clip isn't empty. This can mean the difference between life and death in the middle of a firefight if the clip runs out—and it then takes twice as long to reload.

Sneaky Connor Kenway is the epitome of stealth, unlike these easily detectable Redcoats.

ASSASSIN'S CREED III

BY RAY CARSILLO

PS3 | 360 | PC

- **PUBLISHER** UBISOFT
- **DEVELOPER** UBISOFT MONTREAL
- **RELEASE DATE** 10.30.2012

Give me liberty...and death!

The first four *Assassin's Creeds* embraced the past with a fervor that would make any history major proud. Sprawling piazzas, horizon-piercing towers, and bustling city centers were ours to explore as we took a step back through the ages. But what happens when you switch the setting to an area of the world where there wasn't as much history to begin with?

That's what *Assassin's Creed III* looks to do when it sends us back in time to the American Colonies in the years leading up

to—and just past—the American Revolution. Unlike the Middle East or Western Europe—with traceable histories stretching thousands of years—the United States has only been around for a couple of hundred years, a blink of an eye in world history. With a more "modern" 18th-century setting, the game loses the ancient city streets and tower fortifications that dotted castle walls and city borders—and played huge roles in previous games in the series. Fortunately, the minds behind *Assassin's Creed* have this all planned out.

"The big addition, in terms of the setting for the game, is what we call the frontier," says creative director Alex Hutchinson. "The frontier is a huge map on its own and is about 1.5 times the size of *Brotherhood*'s Rome. It's monstrously large, especially when you're going around on foot. Our goal with [protagonist] Connor [Kenway] was to make you feel as capable with him in the wilderness as you felt with Ezio and Altaïr in cities."

The frontier makes up about 30 percent of the game experience in total, and because there aren't any buildings out in the wilderness, Connor will definitely be getting his hands dirty as he finds himself climbing and swinging from trees and cliff faces with smoother mechanics than we've seen in the past. This offers him a whole slew of Eagle's Nests, hiding spots, and still plenty of places to climb and explore to perform stealthy takedowns as he works—sometimes even behind enemy lines. Not to mention that key storyline moments like the Battles of Lexington and Concord and locales like George Washington's Valley Forge camp are all out in the wilderness, of course.

But that means that the majority of the game still takes place in cities, primarily Colonial New York and Boston. And though many of the buildings are nothing like the Western European towers Ezio had to climb, Connor will have new tricks all his own. The most important one may be that chase-breakers from *Brotherhood* and *Revelations*' multiplayer modes are now in the single-player campaign, and Connor can dive through second-story windows and actually run through houses in order to break off Templar pursuit.

"Instead of stone structures, we have wood structures," says Hutchinson. "Instead of flat roofs, we have sloped ones. Instead of tight, narrow, winding streets, we have big avenues. And all these things will change the feeling of the game; it was very important to make sure there's no sense of fatigue and that this doesn't feel like a game you've played before."

THE BIG QUESTION:

Can Assassin's Creed work in the new Colonial America setting?

A HISTORY LESSON

BUNKER DOWN

ACIII **will render—and move in real time—as many as 2,000 on-screen NPCs at once. In the Battle of Bunker Hill level, entire platoons of Redcoats fire on Connor at any given time as he moves through the trenches.**

COMING FULL CYCLE

Ubisoft Montreal's been working on this game since *Assassin's Creed II* launched, giving the project a full development cycle—members of other teams came onboard as *Brotherhood* and *Revelations* wrapped to help give *ACIII* its final push to the October release date.

BACK IN THE NEW YORK GROOVE

You'll get to play as modern-day protagonist Desmond more than in any previous *Assassin's Creed* game, and since much of Connor's story takes place in 18th-century New York—and Desmond spent much of his adult life there—it's safe to assume the key to saving the world lies in New York City.

MIXING IT UP

A key story element in the game will be how Connor—who's half-European and half-Mohawk—will have to strike a balance between pleasing both the Native American tribes and the Colonial folk that he'll encounter on his journey in order to advance his skills and the game plot.

LAUNCH POINT

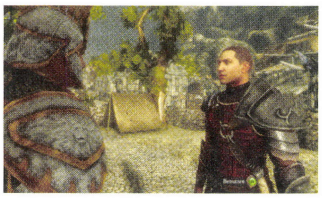
BRANDON JUSTICE

After two solid entries, I'm expecting nothing short of a new high-water mark from the folks at Irrational.

THE DARK EYE: DEMONICON

360 PS3 PC

- **PUBLISHER** KALYPSO MEDIA
- **DEVELOPER** NOUMENA STUDIOS
- **RELEASE DATE** TBD.2012



2012's quietly shaping up as one of the best years RPG fans have seen on the current round of consoles, and Kaylpso's action-fueled epic looks to pick up where *Kingdoms of Amalur: Reckoning* and *Dragon's Dogma* left off, while giving fans of the *Dark Eye* universe something to shout about.

SOUND SHAPES

PSV

- **PUBLISHER** SONY COMPUTER ENT.
- **DEVELOPER** QUEASY GAMES
- **RELEASE DATE** TBD.2012

The PS Vita's stumbled a bit out of the gate, but Queasy Games' upcoming music-driven platformer just might be the type of app that pushes Sony's latest entry into the portable market through to the masses, thanks to an addictive, pulse-pounding playstyle and a focus on user-generated content.

BIOSHOCK INFINITE

360 PS3 PC

- **PUBLISHER** 2K GAMES
- **DEVELOPER** IRRATIONAL GAMES
- **RELEASE DATE** 10.16.12

The original *BioShock* took the gaming world by storm, but after two solid entries, I'm expecting nothing short of a new high-water mark from the folks at Irrational, as this tale of a daring rescue amidst a political uprising on the floating city of Columbia has all the makings of another industry-defining experience.

RAY CARSILLO

Master Chief will come face-to-face with his destiny as he confronts a new evil.

HALO 4

360

- **PUBLISHER** MICROSOFT STUDIOS
- **DEVELOPER** 343 INDUSTRIES
- **RELEASE DATE** 11.6.2012

The first chapter in what's being described as the "Reclaimer Trilogy," *Halo 4* marks the return of John-117. Revolving more around exploration and discovery on a long-abandoned Forerunner planet, this adventure will see Master Chief come face-to-face with his destiny as he confronts a new evil that threatens the galaxy.

CHARLIE MURDER

XBLA

- **PUBLISHER** SKA STUDIOS
- **DEVELOPER** SKA STUDIOS
- **RELEASE DATE** TBA.2012

Similar in gameplay and visual style to *Castle Crashers*, this side-scrolling 4-player co-op beat-em-up stars the four members of a fictional punk band who must save the frontman's girlfriend. And along with the titular leading man Charlie Murder, the band also includes such names as the Rexecutioner, Lester Death, and Tommy Homicide.

SLEEPING DOGS

360 PS3 PC

- **PUBLISHER** SQUARE ENIX
- **DEVELOPER** UNITED FRONT GAMES
- **RELEASE DATE** 8.14.2012

Originally *True Crime: Hong Kong*, this open-world action title focuses on an undercover agent trying to infiltrate the Triads. Blending elements of *Assassin's Creed*'s free-running with *Batman: Arkham Asylum*'s fighting mechanics, *Dogs* promises a bit of a different take on the open-world genre.

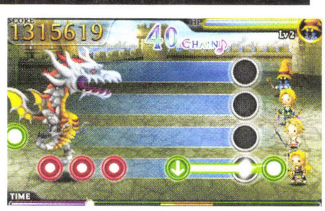
ERIC L. PATTERSON

I can't wait to beat Final Fantasy end bosses with the power of song!

THEATRHYTHM: FINAL FANTASY

3DS

- **PUBLISHER** SQUARE ENIX
- **DEVELOPER** INDIESZERO
- **RELEASE DATE** 07.03.2012



I know what you're saying—a rhythm game based on *Final Fantasy*? What type of craziness is this? The *awesome* type of craziness, that's what. *Theatrhythm* is an expertly produced musical adventure that honors the history of *Final Fantasy*—and will give any fan of the franchise a serious dose of nostalgia. I can't wait to beat *Final Fantasy* end bosses with the power of song!

ANARCHY REIGNS

360 PS3

- **PUBLISHER** SEGA
- **DEVELOPER** PLATINUM GAMES
- **RELEASE DATE** 07.03.2012

If there's one thing you can always count on from Platinum Games, it's a project that'll have a lot of thought and care put into it. For *Anarchy Reigns*, I know two things for certain: It'll serve up a heaping helping of online multiplayer brawls, and my interest shot up even more now that Bayonetta's joined the cast.

GROWLANSER: WAYFARER OF TIME

PSP

- **PUBLISHER** ATLUS
- **DEVELOPER** CAREER SOFT
- **RELEASE DATE** 07.24.2012

Think the PSP is dead? Don't tell that to Atlus, which is still showing support for everybody's favorite underappreciated handheld—which will now include an English-language release of another chapter in Japan's legendary strategy-role-playing series *Growlanser*. Love deep, extensive Japanese RPGs? Keep your eye on this one.

ANDREW FITCH

I'll be honest—Pokémon usually doesn't do anything at all for me.

POKÉMON CONQUEST

DS

- **PUBLISHER** NINTENDO
- **DEVELOPER** TECMO KOEI
- **RELEASE DATE** 06.18.2012

I'll be honest—*Pokémon* usually doesn't do anything at all for me. *Pokémon* combined with the brutal 16th-century Japanese warlord Nobunaga Oda, on the other hand, does all *sorts* of things for me. This entry takes the classic monster-raising backdrop and adds the bloodthirsty, fiefdom-conquering action that everyone always knew was missing from the experience.

MATTHEW BENNETT

Gone are the crazy gun antics and unrealistic body proportions—this Tomb Raider's all about survival.

TOMB RAIDER

360 PS3 PC

- **PUBLISHER** SQUARE ENIX
- **DEVELOPER** CRYSTAL DYNAMICS
- **RELEASE DATE** Q3.2012

Crystal Dynamics is taking Lara back to the drawing board with their latest entry, as a 21-year-old, fresh-faced neophyte adventuress finds herself stranded on an island after her boat sinks while she's searching for relics. Gone are the crazy gun antics and unrealistic body proportions—this *Tomb Raider*'s all about survival.

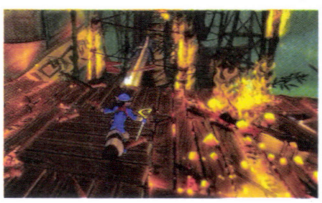
MARC CAMRON

It'll take everything Sly can muster to take down El Jefe, a tiger with a 'tude.

SLY COOPER: THIEVES IN TIME

PS3

- **PUBLISHER** SONY COMPUTER ENT.
- **DEVELOPER** SANZARU GAMES
- **RELEASE DATE** TBD.2012



What's better than sneaking around as a master thief and his gang? Skipping through time and teaming up as members of the Cooper clan throughout the ages, of course! It'll take everything Sly can muster to take down El Jefe, a tiger with a 'tude. Are you up to the challenge?

XCOM: ENEMY UNKNOWN

360 PS3 PC

- **PUBLISHER** 2K GAMES
- **DEVELOPER** FIRAXIS GAMES
- **RELEASE DATE** TBD.2012

Many fans weren't thrilled when, in 2010, 2K Games announced it was reviving the *XCOM* series—this time as a first-person shooter. Well, strategy fans, don't lose heart. The Powers That Be heard your protestations and pushed back the shooter so they could release a new strategy installment this fall.

SOUTH PARK: THE GAME

360 PS3 PC

- **PUBLISHER** THQ
- **DEVELOPER** OBSIDIAN ENTERTAINMENT
- **RELEASE DATE** TBD.2012

When I heard the words "South Park" and "RPG" in the same sentence, I thought it had to be a joke at first. Imagine stepping into the shoes of Cartman, Kyle, Stan, and Kenny and embarking on an epic quest of some sort. Are they returning a videotape? Buying a new Okama Gamesphere system? Heading to Casa Bonita? I don't know—but I can't wait to find out.

THE LAST STORY

Wii

- **PUBLISHER** XSEED
- **DEVELOPER** MISTWALKER
- **RELEASE DATE** 07.10.2012

While certain *EGM* reviewers were a little disappointed with the ultrahyped *Xenoblade Chronicles*, perhaps we'll have better luck with *Final Fantasy* creator Hironobu Sakaguchi's latest take on the genre he helped forge—the JRPG—with *The Last Story*, one of the last highly anticipated Wii exclusives.

RISEN 2: DARK WATERS

360 PS3

- **PUBLISHER** DEEP SILVER
- **DEVELOPER** PIRANHA BYTES
- **RELEASE DATE** 07.31.2012

This one might be better titled *Become a Badass Pirate!*, as you'll engage in drinking contests, train monkeys to swipe valuables, and compete in swashbuckling duels that'd make Capt. Jack Sparrow envious. PC gamers already have their hands on the title, but console players get a taste of the pirate's life come July.

THE LAST OF US

PS3

- **PUBLISHER** SONY COMPUTER ENT.
- **DEVELOPER** NAUGHTY DOG
- **RELEASE DATE** TBD.2012

Joel, a ruthless survivor with a shady past, and Ellie, a 14-year-old girl who's wise beyond her years, must both find a way to escape a quarantined postapocalyptic Pittsburgh. A mixture of *Fallout* and *Uncharted*, this one may well set a whole new standard for the survival genre.

GRAND THEFT AUTO V

360 PS3 PC

- **PUBLISHER** ROCKSTAR GAMES
- **DEVELOPER** ROCKSTAR NORTH
- **RELEASE DATE** TBD

After seven years, *Grand Theft Auto* returns to Los Santos, the series' tongue-in-cheek take on Southern California. Even with little to go on so far—bar a brand-new main character and the promise of several new features—I'm already pegging this to be the ultimate open-world experience.

PROTOTYPE 2

A mutant tale of revenge

REVIEW PHILOSOPHY

EGM rates games based on quality and entertainment value. We only score games played to completion, but we also offer secondary impressions without scores in some instances. The highest score is 10, and in the middle lies the average score, 5.0. Simple, ain't it?

Platinum Award (average 10.0)
This award only goes to the best of the best. The highest accolades a game can receive.

Gold Award (average 9.0+)
Gold awards are given to games that achieve an average of 9.0 or higher.

Silver Award (average 8.0+)
Games that average at least an 8.0 receive *EGM*'s Silver status award.

PS3 | 360

- **PUBLISHER** ACTIVISION
- **DEVELOPER** RADICAL ENTERTAINMENT
- **PLAYERS** SINGLE-PLAYER
- **ESRB** M - MATURE
- **RELEASE DATE** 04.24.2012

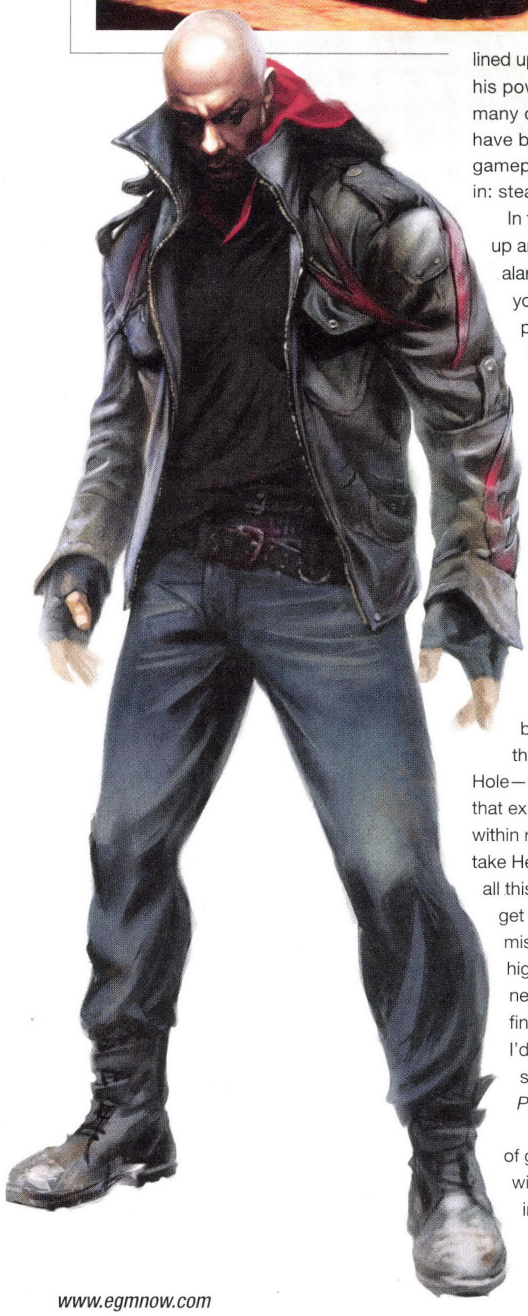
Like many sequels, *Prototype 2* unfolds a year after the events of the original—but that's where this game takes a decidedly different turn. Alex Mercer, the first game's hero, is now lambasted as the villain behind a new mutagenic viral outbreak that's crippled New York City—since renamed New York Zero.

Sgt. James Heller, a man who's returned home from overseas military conflicts to find his wife and daughter murdered—supposedly by someone infected with what's now been dubbed the "Mercer Virus"—plans revenge. But Mercer's got other plans for our dear sergeant, whom he promptly infects. Now, with powers comparable to our erstwhile protagonist, Heller looks to take down all who get in his way on his quest for vengeance.

That's perhaps the biggest difference between the two games—the drastic change in narrative tone. Whereas the first *Prototype* played heavily on conspiracy, Heller's not here to play detective. He's got one purpose—and, if he blows up some stuff along the way, so be it. Players who love plot and story may not enjoy the changes, but simplifying the plot makes the experience much more relatable; this tale's a lot tighter than the convoluted conspiracy theories of the first game, which helps keep the main focus on the action.

And there's a lot of smashing and bashing to be had here, especially as you start to evolve Heller's powers with a stream-

■ James Heller isn't snooping around, playing mutant detective—he's simply out for revenge.



lined upgrades tree. Not only are many of his powers different from Mercer's, but many control issues from the first game have been improved upon, and a new gameplay element's surprisingly crept in: stealth.

In the first *Prototype*, if you picked up an item, you automatically set off an alarm. In this game, this merely raises your suspicion level, and you can place the object back down and wait for things to cool down without entering conflict. You've also got a new sonar sense that allows you to determine who's most vulnerable in a group of enemies—which means you can sneak up from behind, stealth-consume them, and work your way into Blackwatch bases or GenTek facilities without ever tripping an alarm. Plus, seeing the reactions of soldiers and scientists as they realize their coworkers are slowly disappearing is hysterical.

Of course, if you want to be a bull in a china shop, you can still do that, too. And with powers like Black Hole—where you fire a cluster of tendrils that explode outward and pull in whatever's within reach—it's not going to be easy to take Heller down. The one downside to all this, though, is that the gameplay can get repetitive; *Prototype 2* offers little mission variety beyond murdering high-value targets for information or new powers as you build up to the final confrontation. I never thought I'd see the day where I'd get bored suplexing a tank, but it can happen in *Prototype 2*.

The game's also got its fair share of glitches, which is understandable with such a complex physics system in an open world. Plus, some are in the vein of *Skyrim* or *Red Dead Redemption*—more humorous than a hindrance. I'm talking NPC hobos randomly flying across the screen for no reason, bouncing around in the middle of the street like they're having a seizure, or standing in place and floating up the side of a building like they're in some invisible elevator.

If you like superhero games, you'll enjoy *Prototype 2*—this is the closest thing in gaming to having a Spider-Man symbiote to play around with.

RAY CARSILLO

8.5

THE GOOD
Rough edges from the first game are smoothed out here

THE BAD
Lack of gameplay variety

THE UGLY
All the non-human baddies look like something Ray puked up

7.5

MARC CAMRON

A FUN ACTION GAME THAT'S MORE FLASH THAN SUBSTANCE

On the plus side, *Prototype 2* improves upon nearly every aspect of the original. The graphics are better, the action's smoother, and the gameplay's more interesting. Unfortunately, it's wrapped around a package that's hard to care about. It would've been interesting to continue to follow the story of Alex Mercer as his perspective on the world darkens. Instead, we get unknown protagonist James Heller—whose quest for revenge is more sad than compelling. Yeah, it's fun to rip apart hundreds of baddies, growing Heller's powers along the way—but there comes a point when it all feels pointless.

3.0

BRANDON JUSTICE

PROTOTYPE 2 IS A SUPERHERO SIM FOR THE AGES

As a card-carrying geek who spent many nights dreaming of waking up in Xavier's School for Gifted Youngsters, I always get stoked when someone takes a swing at a bigger, better superhero sim—and *Prototype 2* is exactly that. It's not quite perfect—due to occasional comedic glitchiness and some awkward shifts between the story and the action itself—but I couldn't get enough of the whole "mutant Sherlock Holmes" schtick. All told, the game's gritty visuals, addictive upgrade system, and effortless movement model all came together to help this game overtake *Crackdown* and *Infamous* on my list of empowering epics in the super-genre.

GET ADDITIONAL MAGAZINE CONTENT EACH MONTH!

EGM[i]

YOUR PASSPORT TO A WHOLE NEW WAY TO READ EGM

Your Unique iPASS code:

Already a Member

Electronic Gaming Monthly is the first gaming magazine to introduce a digital companion to keep you up-to-date with the reviews, previews, and breaking events that matter most to you!

PLUS, with the EGM iPASS, you can upgrade your interactive experience with more content, more video, and more downloads—plus access on a numer of different digital formats!

Enhancing your EGM experience is easy:

1. REGISTER FOR FREE AT www.EGMMAG.com

2. CLICK ON iPASS AND INPUT THE UNIQUE CODE PRINTED ABOVE

3. ACCESS THE LATEST ISSUE OF EGMi FOR ADDITIONAL PAGES OF MAGAZINE-STYLE CONTENT PLUS MORE!

WELCOME TO THE EVOLUTION OF GAMING MAGAZINES.

www.egmnow.com

Wii

- **PUBLISHER** NINTENDO
- **DEVELOPER** MONOLITH SOFT
- **PLAYERS** SINGLE-PLAYER
- **ESRB** T
- **RELEASE DATE** 04.06.2012

XENOBLADE CHRONICLES

A sprawling, epic, and very flawed adventure

Xenoblade Chronicles director Tetsuya Takahashi always has big ideas, but he's a bit like a Japanese Peter Molyneux in many ways—he's developed a habit of biting off a bit more than he can chew, despite his best intentions as a developer. Namco slashed his *Xenogears* follow-up, *Xenosaga*, from a planned six-game opus to a mere trilogy due to cost concerns, and there's always been this nagging sense among players that his games haven't quite lived up to their considerable promise.

■ This blade is named the Monado. You will hear this factoid repeated 5 trillion times throughout *Xenoblade*.

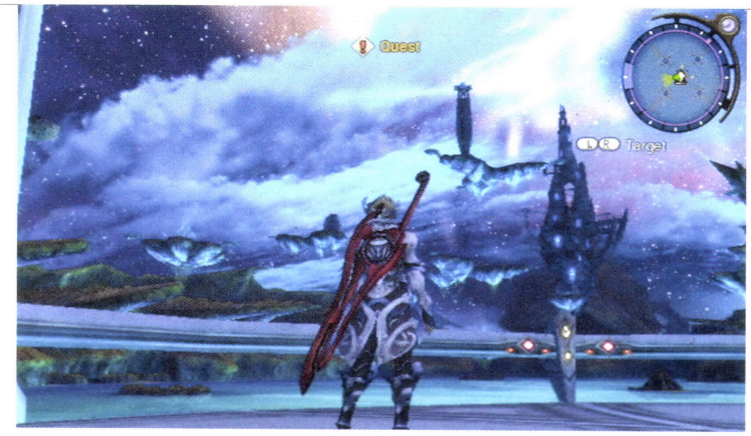
And with *Xenoblade*, it appeared that North American players wouldn't even get the opportunity to play his latest epic at all, due to Nintendo of America's refusal to commit to a release in this market until a few months ago; in fact, a grass-roots campaign from a group called Operation Rainfall likely helped the game's cause immensely.

Thankfully, Takahashi hasn't let the *Xenogears* and *Xenosaga* experiences affect his grand visions—he's still thinking as big as ever when it comes to his game worlds. Instead of merely piloting a giant robot like in *Xenogears*, *Xenoblade* sees you *walking* across an absolutely gargantuan titan for the entire game. Two colossi, in fact—ancient rivals locked in combat and frozen in time after delivering their respective deathblows. Meanwhile, a teeming society of flora and fauna populate their now-lifeless husks.

Despite its ambitious themes and settings, *Xenoblade*'s only loosely connected to Takahashi's previous works. While you'll find subtle callbacks to *Xenogears* throughout, this is most certainly a 21st-century role-playing game; for all intents and purposes, *Xenoblade* is a single-player MMO in the vein of *Final Fantasy XII*—and how you enjoyed that game will likely determine how positively you'll respond here (I'm not an *FFXII* fan, for what it's worth).

Xenoblade's Warcraftian influences are most obvious in the language the game uses: "buffs," "debuffs," "skill trees," "aggro," "cooldown," "loot"—this isn't the vernacular of 1998 and *Xenogears*; in fact, it would've been incomprehensible to Japanese RPG players of the time. Indeed, *Xenoblade* is a thoroughly modern incarnation of RPG strategy and terminology.

In my mind, though, "modern" doesn't necessarily mean "better" when it comes to RPGs. I've never truly enjoyed an MMO; I find them frustratingly hands-off, and I don't like the fact that they're now more or less the RPG standard-bearers for the majority of gamers. Still, while they're not my preference, I'll certainly tolerate MMO mechanics if they're accompanied by minimum headaches and effective commands. Unfortunately, from my perspective, *Xenoblade* fails in this regard.



Your AI teammates constantly make weirdly suicidal decisions...

I can tolerate half-baked sidequests and clunky inventory management (and *Xenoblade*'s got plenty of both in spades), but when combat itself becomes an issue—specifically due to frustratingly dense party AI—that's when I lose patience with an RPG. *Xenoblade*'s characters all fill certain MMO class archetypes, and they'll engage in this behavior even to their own detriment—and there's very little you can do to wrangle them under your control on the field of battle. Furthermore, your teammates will constantly make weirdly suicidal tactical decisions even after you've warned them against such behavior—specifically, my crew just *loved* rushing off to attack a level-75 troll in the distance while we were engaged in combat with enemies approximately 50 levels lower and about 5 million times less menacing.

Though I'm personally lukewarm on the overall experience, I'm glad that North American players finally have the opportunity to play *Xenoblade*. Takahashi's one of the more intriguing RPG minds in the industry, and his worlds are always worth exploring, even if they might not always succeed on crucial design aspects. Many are calling this the Japanese RPG of this console generation—if not of all time—but it's simply got too many glaring warts for me to embrace the experience on that level. Instead, I see it as a deeply flawed, tantalizing glimpse of what the Japanese RPG can potentially become in the coming generation.

ANDREW FITCH

6.5

THE GOOD
A huge world with scores of subtlety to explore; excellent British voice work

THE BAD
Brain-dead party AI; dull MMO game mechanics

THE UGLY
Why do RPG developers place the least-interesting 15 hours at the beginning of the game?

6.0 RAY CARSILLO

BROKEN MENUS, A CLUTTERED HUD, AND MORONIC PARTY AI

Xenoblade's menu system is inconvenient, the camera's awkward and difficult to properly position, and the real-time combat system is one of the worst iterations of that style in an RPG I've seen. During combat, the screen's cluttered with useless information, the party AI is subpar, and when charging up your arts, the battles switch from high gear to a snail's pace. *Xenoblade* had so much potential, but when a game can't provide the basic essentials needed for an RPG, it's hard to look past the glaring surface flaws to get to the rewarding story underneath it all.

9.0 ERIC L. PATTERSON

XENOBLADE ISN'T WITHOUT FLAWS, BUT IT'S STILL FANTASTIC

I have terrible news for you, dear readers: The other two people reviewing *Xenoblade* here on this *EGM* page are clinically insane. Does the game have its flaws? Absolutely—but they're the small, fluffy clouds in what's otherwise a big, beautiful blue sky of joy and happiness. In a world where Japanese RPGs continue to struggle, *Xenoblade* shines; its characters aren't anime-reject brats, its MMO-esque combat system is right up my alley, its completely British voice acting is just so damned charming, and its visual style is both impressive and endearing. Also, c'mon—you have to love a game with a medic who heals you by shooting you. You're so cool, Sharla!

DRAGON'S DOGMA

The dragon that stole my heart—literally

PS3 | 360

- **PUBLISHER** CAPCOM
- **DEVELOPER** CAPCOM
- **PLAYERS** SINGLE-PLAYER
- **ESRB** M - MATURE
- **RELEASE DATE** 05.22.2012

Ever since the game was first unveiled, it was hard to get a read for exactly what *Dragon's Dogma* was supposed to be. Was it an action game, or was it an RPG? Was it more Western or Japanese? And why was it a single-player game that seemed to want to be multiplayer?

Having now played *Dragon's Dogma*, I'm still not sure I can boil down exactly what the game is—and that's actually why I ended up liking it. *Dragon's Dogma* is different, both in good ways and bad. It's not *Dark Souls*, nor is it *Skyrim*—nor is it any of the other random fantasy-themed games you've played lately.

Actually, there *is* one game that it reminds me of: *Dungeons & Dragons*. Not any of its videogame interpretations, but the world that I imagined inside my head back whenever I played with friends. *Dragon's Dogma* is like a sandbox of RPG elements, ready and waiting to kick into gear the moment your character makes their first entrance.

And what a sandbox it can be at times. Step foot into the game's open expanses, and you'll be legitimately impressed by the visual splendor that's on display before you. (At least, on a technical level; the pseudo-Western art direction does the game no favors.) Exploration then gives way to combat, which feels completely satisfying and decidedly Capcom: Action is fast, move sets are badass, and the varying classes provide a wide range of playstyles.

Dragon's Dogma is at its best when you encounter its more dynamic moments, such as coming across an unscripted event or participating in the game's more dramatic battles. One moment, your party may simply be traveling down a countryside road—and the next, you're locked in fierce combat with a wandering Hippogriff. Suddenly, your hero jumps on its back, weighing it down as your faithful party members unleash fury on the beast before it can break free of your grasp and regain the advantage. In moments like these—with an epic battle theme blaring and your adrenaline pumping—*Dragon's Dogma* feels downright incredible.

Sadly, the game can't always keep up that level of excitement. At times, it'll instead push your attention to accomplishing side tasks—and when the focus shifts from those more dynamic, unexpected experiences to killing X amount of Y creature or delivering a recovered item to its awaiting owner, *Dragon's Dogma* can feel like a real drag. Here and now, I want an end to the current trend of RPG quest systems—they're the new gameplay clock-padder for the post–random encounters era.

All my excitement for *Dragon's Dogma* then gets punched in the face by the game's main gimmick—the pawn system. I actually like AI-controlled party members; while I wish *Dogma* offered far better control over how your CPU teammates act in battle, they tend to be useful far more often than not. Where my disconnect comes in is that you only have direct creative control over one of your three teammates—the other two must be pulled from a strange alternate universe that provides living beings who can't wait to serve you. Yeah, it's a little weird.

The problem is, these two additional party members never level, nor can their skill sets be altered. So—just like a sword, or a pair of boots—once your level sufficiently outranks theirs, you simply throw them away and get new friends. It *completely* kills any ability to make a connection or care about your team. I don't want to experience *Dragon's Dogma* with a revolving door of random faces; I want a team that will fight together, struggle together, and grow together.

I know Japan loves their wacky gameplay gimmicks, but *Dragon's Dogma* is legitimately hurt by its pawn system. I don't just dislike it—I hate it. It's not enough to ruin the potential enjoyment from everything that the game has to offer, but it's a stupid inclusion that mars what's otherwise a fascinating new franchise for Capcom.

ERIC L. PATTERSON

7.5

THE GOOD
Has an incredible ability for creating awe-inspiring experiences

THE BAD
Going through more random partners than your average NBA star

THE UGLY
The Western RPG–style visual design. You're a Japanese company, Capcom. Don't be ashamed of it!

8.5 BRANDON JUSTICE

A PLEASANT SURPRISE THAT DELIVERS ON ITS PROMISE

After seeing a few ho-hum preview glimpses of *Dragon's Dogma*, I'll admit I wasn't exactly expecting much from this one. But credit Capcom for serving me a steaming cup of "wake the f*** up," as *Dogma* ended up as a strikingly solid action-RPG. A beautiful, vast adventure with solid character and creature design that holds its own with *Skyrim* and *Dragon Age* in many respects, *Dogma*'s a little rough around the edges, but what game of this size and scope isn't? If you're looking for the next big bout of high fantasy, *Dogma* should definitely make a healthy dent in your free time.

3.5 ANDREW FITCH

AN IMPERSONAL ADVENTURE THAT DISRESPECTS THE GENRE

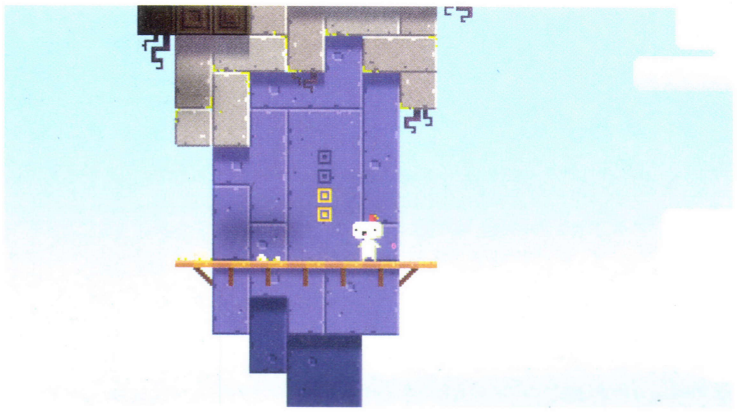
Eric, I can't believe you compared this stunningly impersonal, insulting role-playing experience to *Dungeons & Dragons*—some of the most meaningful, personal experiences I've ever had in RPGs have come from creating immersive adventures with my friends around a coffee table. And while the pawn system may not have sullied your experience, it ruined mine. Sure, we all know that our RPG characters are really nothing more than a collection of statistics. But *Dragon's Dogma* openly treats them like interchangeable numbers with vacant stares—a grand parade of lifeless packaging—and I can't condone an RPG product that brazenly disrespects the genre like that.

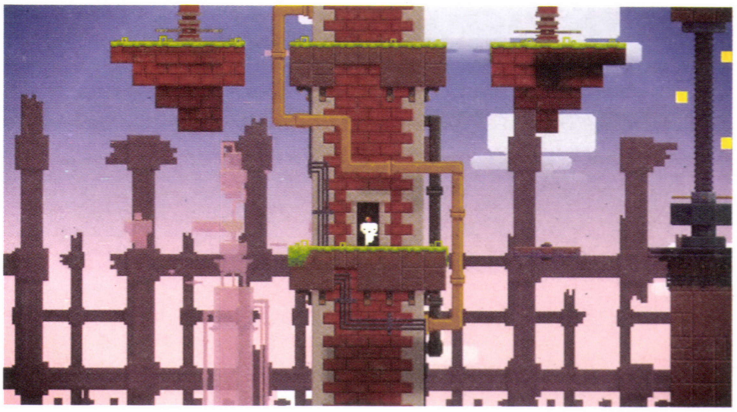
FEZ

XBLA

- **PUBLISHER** POLYTRON
- **DEVELOPER** POLYTRON
- **PLAYERS** SINGLE-PLAYER
- **ESRB** E - EVERYONE
- **RELEASE DATE** 04.13.12

Separating the brilliant art from the controversial artist





Humorist Jack Handey once said, "It takes a big man to cry, but it takes a bigger man to laugh at that man." And I get the distinct sense that after pushing many fanboy faithful to tears with his comments at this year's Game Developers Conference, *Fez* creator Phil Fish is laughing his ass his off somewhere.

I say this because, regardless of the colossal douchebaggery required to call the whole of Japanese gaming out on the carpet—outright saying that their games "just suck"—before you've unleashed your opus, *Fez* backs up this bravado with one of the most original, engaging platformers I've played in over a decade.

A heavily stylized 8-bit love letter with a perspective-based twist similar to Zoë Mode's *Crush*—with a little *Super Paper Mario* thrown in for good measure—*Fez* is built around the idea that the world of a digitized citizen named Gomez is turned upside down when he awakens one day to find himself in the adventure of a lifetime. Our hero's now able to turn his once-flat world around to different planes in the third dimension, which, of course, breaks the world in an ever-so-threatening manner that requires his intervention in the form of collecting golden shiny cubes before the universe implodes upon on itself.

Or something like that.

Anyway, *Fez* isn't your typical butt-bouncer; you never actually fight enemies, making it as much of a puzzle game as anything—but, in that sense, it's probably one of my favorite puzzle games since *Tetrinet*. Madness, you say? It's tempting to label this level of shameless oozing the direct result of a bump to the head or some bad mushrooms, but the fact remains that there's an unmistakable amount of genius in the way this game is wound.

It all starts with the level design, which works off the principle that perspective is everything, as each new 90-degree turn provides a new potential path. Sometimes, you'll see cubes that need grabbing, or maybe you'll find a door you didn't know was there, or perhaps you'll gain access to a platform you thought was out of reach. No matter what you find, you'll rapidly uncover the fact that *Fez* is the type of game that will change the way you see the world, as it requires constant creativity and vision from its players in ways that few big-budget games have the balls to—and by that, I mean there's actual challenge here on occasion.

What's more, each new area has its own little sense of personality, whether we're talking about new *Tiny Tower*–esque citizens or clever additions to the game's core mechanics, such as hidden platforms that can only be seen when lighting strikes a gloomy haunted-castle zone or moving platforms that can only reach their desired destination by rapidly rotating the world around you to shift them to another track. In that sense, *Fez* delivers much more punch than *Super Paper Mario*'s simple perspective shifts, taking great care to use the camera mechanic as an integral part of the game's overall design.

And then there's the deliciously fitting music that comes off like the chiptunes equivalent of the *Drive* soundtrack, adding a healthy dose of personality and suspense to the project. It goes quite well with the game's whole "NES on steroids" vibe, and it'll have you snooping around on iTunes for the OST before you know it.

All told, *Fez* is one of those once-in-a-console-generation titles that demands your attention. Its quirky, cute, creative approach to game design is something you just don't see enough of these days; spinning the world on a digitized Lazy Susan in an effort to grab little yellow blocks may not sound like much, but my guess is that running around and munching mushrooms while chasing after a princess didn't, either. *Fez* is that kind of special, and regardless of my general annoyance at being forced to like it despite my misgivings about the man behind the madness and his lack of respect for the games that so obviously informed his vision, Fish certainly put his money where his mouth is. I guess that means it's your turn. You want a revolution? Well, then—go buy it, already.

BRANDON JUSTICE

9.5

THE GOOD
An unparalleled blend of playability, creativity, and old-school charm

THE BAD
The muddled mini-map's lack of usefulness

THE UGLY
Being forced to swallow our pride and enjoy the ride

8.0 RAY CARSILLO

A TERRIFIC PUZZLER TOO COMPLEX FOR ITS OWN GOOD?

Fez has been hyped from all corners of the gaming world for five years now—complete with a starring role in *Indie Game: The Movie*—and, for the most part, it certainly lives up to its promise. Creative and inventive, this throwback should certainly satisfy puzzler fans. But fun can quickly turn to frustration, as you can easily get lost in this nearly endless puzzle. Much like a Rubik's Cube or the mighty Minotaur's Labyrinth, once you go too far in, it seems like—even with the use of an overly complex, convoluted in-game map—there's no way to get out and actually progress the story.

8.5 ERIC L. PATTERSON

A GREAT GAME, BUT NOT THE REVOLUTION SOME PREDICTED

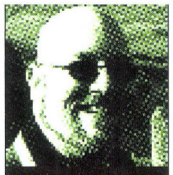
On a professional level—and in consideration of its score—I have to commend *Fez*. Going into the game, it's easy to see it as just another hipster indie platforming project, but there's a real level of sophistication and ingenuity lying under *Fez*'s pixelated surface that I wasn't expecting. *Fez*, however, isn't perfect—at times, it feels unpolished or overly obtuse. Unfortunately, on a personal level, I simply cannot separate the art from the artist. I wish my experience with *Fez* hadn't been tainted due to prelaunch nonsense perpetrated by its creator—actions that, for me, perfectly showcase a growing trend of unchecked egotism among segments of the indie gaming community.

THE WITCHER 2: ASSASSINS OF KINGS ENHANCED EDITION

PC 360

- **PUBLISHER** WARNER BROS.
- **DEVELOPER** CD PROJEKT RED
- **PLAYERS** SINGLE-PLAYER
- **ESRB** M - MATURE
- **RELEASE DATE** 04.17.12

Amorous witch trysts—now enhanced on the 360!



MARC CAMRON

9.0

THE GOOD
Comes from the PC with little compromise...

THE BAD
...except for the controls

THE UGLY
The way I looked after playing this for an 18-hour stretch

I was skeptical when CD Projekt Red announced they were bringing their PC-centric RPG, *The Witcher 2: Assassins of Kings*, to the Xbox 360. After all, the ambitious, graphically intense opus made my one-year-old gaming PC work hard—how could it possibly fare on the aging 360? Happily, the answer is "quite well, thank you."

The graphics have translated with surprising fidelity; you can tell the game pushes the system to its limits, and while you'll encounter occasional clipping and pop-in issues, that's because the system becomes overwhelmed at times, not because the developers didn't take the time to optimize the game.

My biggest concern, though? Translating the controls from PC to console. Figuring out how to hold and maneuver the controller without causing hand spasms took about half an hour, but once I got in rhythm, it became second nature.

That's good, because the game's battles are intense, complicated affairs. It's possible to succeed strictly wielding a sword or concentrating on heavy magic use, but you must *own* your decision and follow though. Getting flustered in the midst of an attack will cost you your life—as will letting groups of enemies overwhelm your position.

Shiny graphics and good controls only take a game like this so far, though. The real meat and potatoes lies in its story, and *The Witcher* 2 has a great one. Players take on the role of Geralt of Rivia, one of the last Witchers—monster hunters adept at using both weapons and magic. Geralt navigates a dank, shadowy world filled with political intrigue and racial tension, dispensing judgment as he sees fit.

Both the main narrative and sidequests intertwine, forming a more seamless narrative than most RPGs. The sidequests don't feel like tacked-on diversions, but instead compel players to split their attention to learn more about the story and the world around them. Likewise, the decisions never feel like cut-and-dry "this is good and that is evil" morality choices. The familiar—yet not—fantasy world keeps you ill at ease, never knowing what's going to happen next.

9.0 BRANDON JUSTICE

AN EPIC ADDITION TO THE XBOX 360'S RPG LINEUP

Wow. It's not like *The Witcher 2* came out of left field considering its stunning debut on the PC last year, but the team at CD Projekt Red didn't miss a beat translating this bad boy to consoles, offering up one of the most mature, expansive RPGs to hit consoles in this generation. The combat system's incredibly deep, and unlike most "choice-driven" experiences, your decisions have a real impact on your individual experience, making this one of the best high-fantasy RPGs available on the 360. Even if you missed out on the first game, you owe it to yourself to give this one a whirl.

7.0 ANDREW FITCH

THE CLOSEST THE RPG UNIVERSE GETS TO GAME OF THRONES

Playing Western RPGs always makes me laugh at those elitists who hold up their collective noses at those of us who prefer the Japanese take on role-playing. No, your game isn't "deeper" because it's got convoluted, clunky inventory systems and spellcasting—it just means the menu design sucks. But I will say that everyone—even those who worship at the anime-styled altars of *Tales* and *Dragon Quest*—should give *Assassins of Kings* a shot; its dark, depressing, witch-tryst-filled world is the closest thing in the RPG universe to *Game of Thrones*. Or *Suikoden*, but we aren't getting another one of *those* anytime soon, alas...

ATELIER MERURU: THE APPRENTICE OF ARLAND

PS3

- **PUBLISHER** NIS AMERICA
- **DEVELOPER** GUST
- **ESRB** T - TEEN
- **RELEASE DATE** 05.22.2012

ERIC L. PATTERSON

Though the *Atelier* series might not be the epitome of Japan's RPG industry, I've always had a soft spot for its various chapters. *Meruru* isn't "epic," "intense," or "exhilarating"—it's simply charming, friendly, and fun. Digging deep into alchemy-fueled crafting is a joy—and a welcome change of pace from focusing on killing or destroying. In fact, I'd love to see the console *Atelier* games move beyond their serviceable-but-not-stellar combat and go all-out with the concepts of creation and world development like younger cousin *Atelier Annie* did on the DS. Oh, and while we're at it: Stop pandering to the love-pillow-snuggling otaku. You can—and should—be better than that, Gust.

BRANDON JUSTICE

After enduring the snooze-inducing visual novel *Hakuoki*—last month's Review Crew torture at the hands of Mr. Patterson—I was totally prepared to hate this game. But, lo and behold, *Meruru* ain't half bad. A cutesy, throwback RPG that reminded me a lot of old-school *Phantasy Star* titles with a novel "alchemy" system (read: fancy-schmancy crafting), this quirky little title has a lot to like. Sure, it's held back a bit by dialogue rife with stereotypical typical Japanese chattiness and a menu system apparently designed by people who didn't actually have to *use* it, but all things considered, *Meruru*'s my favorite retelling of *Legally Blonde* currently in videogame form.

ANDREW FITCH

Wow, who would've thought that notorious weaboo-hunter Brandon Justice would give *Meruru* a higher score than me, a Japanophile since age 6? While I do give protagonist Meruru props for being the most J-poppy princess in videogame history—Her Highness even wears her crown askew like a schoolgirl on the streets of Harajuku—I can't quite embrace the experience on the same level as Brandon or Eric. My problem with the *Atelier* games—and *Meruru*'s no exception—is that they don't play to their strengths nearly enough. Why continually bog down the experiences with severely subpar combat when it's the alchemy and city-building that keep me playing?

BLOODFORGE

XBLA

- **PUBLISHER** MICROSOFT STUDIOS
- **DEVELOPER** CLIMAX
- **ESRB** M - MATURE
- **RELEASE DATE** 04.25.2012

RAY CARSILLO

Admittedly, it's difficult to offer originality in the hack-n-slash genre, but *Bloodforge* looks like it barely even made an effort. The combat camera's completely busted, as it doesn't convey the scope of the battlefield—and it'll often glitch at the worst possible moments. The voice acting's solid, but the dialogue itself is as old and stale as the game's ancient Celtic mythology. The story's just another tale of failed redemption that's been told a hundred times before in games, and though the magic and attack combos satisfy, little else does in this disappointingly unoriginal title.

BRANDON JUSTICE

I was simultaneously surprised and disappointed by *Bloodforge*. As content-gated hack-n-slashers go, it's a stylish, fast-paced action game that gives equal parts homage to *Golden Axe* and *300*—with the gritty visuals and vengeance-laden story to match. But the lack of a blocking mechanic or a target-lock system are unnecessary black eyes on a compelling bit of fantasy, and like most modern melee titles, it suffers from a healthy dose of button-slamming boredom. It's certainly not the worst buy at $15, but you'd have to really love the genre to make the most of this one.

PAUL SEMEL

Were it not for some obvious—and easily corrected—issues, this might've been a passable *God of War* clone. If only. Like Ray said, the camera's distractingly frenetic and jittery, while moving the right thumbstick to look around makes it jump by degrees instead of turning smoothly. Though it also doesn't help that—thanks to needlessly simplistic combat, uneven difficulty, poorly explained mechanics, and environments that, while pleasantly bleak, are also unpleasantly monotonous—this intentionally short game still manages to become tiresome by the end. This, ladies and gentlemen, is why quality control is so important.

SILENT HILL: DOWNPOUR

360 PS3

- **PUBLISHER** KONAMI
- **DEVELOPER** VATRA
- **ESRB** M - MATURE
- **RELEASE DATE** 03.13.2012

ERIC L. PATTERSON

Silent Hill: Downpour has problems—legitimate, inexcusable problems. The engine chugs at times, breakable weapons are annoying, the autosave system's terribly unfriendly, the game's Western-inspired horror can feel cheesy...and that's not the full list of issues. Yet if you can move past all that and find the good in *Downpour*, then it's also an utterly enjoyable, amazingly crafted, deeply personal adventure—one filled with exploration, puzzles, and other captivating moments the series hasn't seen in ages. Yes, *Downpour* could've used extra development time and a better sense of direction; it's also the first time I've had genuine hope about the franchise since *Silent Hill 2*.

RAY CARSILLO

A strong effort to return the franchise to its classic survival-horror roots, *Silent Hill: Downpour* succeeds on more fronts than not. It's got an amazing score, powerful voice acting, and strong visuals to help pull you into the extraordinary scenario—the only drawbacks are some needlessly frustrating puzzles and loose controls that can pull you back to reality. Series newcomers will most likely want to look at earlier titles if they're looking for that premiere *Silent Hill* experience, but longtime fans will appreciate everything from the opening credits to the conclusion of one of the multiple endings you can receive.

ANDREW FITCH

With Konami's Team Silent likely to never reunite, it's been up to Western fans-turned-developers to recapture the vision of Akira Yamaoka and co. the past five years—and they've never quite succeeded. But *Downpour* truly feels like a Team Silent game, with its varied areas and real sense of a living, breathing town of doom. It also definitely passes the "1 a.m. test" for me; I got extremely spooked and disturbed playing this one after the witching hour. But the horrors in *Silent Hill* should come only from the setting—not a broken save system or clunky combat. Ray, Eric, and I all agree this is the direction *Silent Hill* needs to go from here, but the technical execution must improve.

RESIDENT EVIL: OPERATION RACCOON CITY

360 | PS3 | PC

- **PUBLISHER** CAPCOM
- **DEVELOPER** SLANT SIX GAMES
- **ESRB** M - MATURE
- **RELEASE DATE** 03.20.2012

RAY CARSILLO

7.0

Four multiplayer modes with a *Resident Evil* twist and a decently long campaign overshadow a few of *Operation Raccoon City*'s faults, like the clunky cover mechanics, poor ally AI, and a lack of character development for the protagonists. But *ORC*'s biggest flaw is that it's yet another game that promotes versus and co-op multiplayer above all else, yet it fails to include local options for either mode. *ORC* can still be a lot of fun, though the hardcore fanbase may not enjoy how far this game distances itself from the series' survival-horror roots—this one's all about the action.

ERIC L. PATTERSON

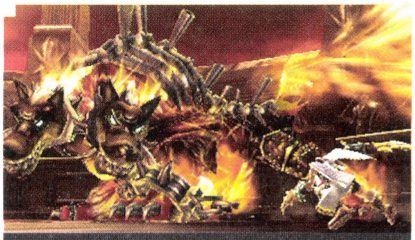
6.0

Oh, *Resident Evil: Operation Raccoon City*—why are you so frustratingly generic? You have Slant Six Games, a developer known for making hardcore tactical shooters. How awesome would it have been for a deep, mission-based journey through a zombie-infested Raccoon City? Instead, we're given a game that has neither the charms of *Resident Evil* nor the substance of *SOCOM*—made even more disappointing when you find those moments that *are* legitimately interesting or enjoyable. Also, we're neither given the chance to play as our favorite *RE* heroes and villains (outside of one multiplayer mode) nor the chance to make our own custom mercenaries.

BRANDON JUSTICE

8.0

I've had a longstanding love affair with the *Resident Evil* universe—the characters, the visual design, and the way it turned fear and anticipation into a genre. The thing is, I've had an equally enthusiastic hatred for the game's inexplicably unwieldy control schemes over the years, and while I wish *Raccoon City* upheld the series' dedication to quality, there's an intensely playable co-op experience with tons of depth here that begs to be played. It's definitely not the *Resident Evil* you'd expect, but after years and years of the same old thing, it's an avenue the series desperately needed to explore.



KID ICARUS: UPRISING

3DS

- **PUBLISHER** NINTENDO
- **DEVELOPER** PROJECT SORA
- **ESRB** E10+
- **RELEASE DATE** 03.23.2012

RAY CARSILLO

8.5

Though going toe-to-toe with the Eggplant Wizard may no longer be as infuriating as it once was on the NES, *Kid Icarus: Uprising* still offers plenty of challenge. Unfortunately, much of this stems from the unusual control scheme. I would've killed for some sort of Z-Targeting system when the game switches at the mid-point of each level from an on-rails romp to a traditional third-person shooter. Even though the controls can get a little iffy at times, they don't sour the whole experience; the great visuals, tremendous gameplay depth, and a brilliantly executed plot make this a must-have for every 3DS owner.

ERIC L. PATTERSON

6.5

Typically, Ray gets the hate at *EGM* from the legions of hardcore Nintendo fans, but it seems like I may be the one pelted with pitchforks this time. When I'm flying through the skies of *Uprising* as Pit, blasting away at hordes of Medusa's minions, listening to Palutena chatting my ear off, and basking in the endless amounts of delicious nostalgia, I thoroughly enjoy this game. And then—the on-land, walking-around segments of each stage hit, and I'm forced to endure the torture that is *Uprising*'s secondary control scheme. Call me a noob or accuse me of having no skill all you want—those controls seriously tarnish an otherwise wonderfully produced game.

MARC CAMRON

5.0

I don't get it. What was so difficult about taking the classic 8-bit *Kid Icarus* and updating it for a modern system? If *Kid Icarus: Uprising* is any indication, it's a lot harder than it seems. Still, Nintendo should've known the game was fundamentally broken when they decided to include a plastic 3DS stand in the package. Believe me—it's there for a reason. Trying to play the land-based sequences without it will result in severe hand cramps and frustration. *Uprising* has moments of brilliance, but when I'm given a handheld game that must be placed on a table to play, I score it accordingly. Save some of the Nintendo-fanboy hate for me, Eric!

I AM ALIVE

XBLA | PSN

- **PUBLISHER** UBISOFT
- **DEVELOPER** UBISOFT SHANGHAI
- **ESRB** M - MATURE
- **RELEASE DATE** 03.07.2012

RAY CARSILLO

6.0

I Am Alive's tone that the end is nigh hits you like a ton of bricks from the second you start playing. It's dark, bleak, and desolate—even the tutorial may make you want to give up hope! But once you peel back the layers of atmosphere, *I Am Alive* reveals itself to be a bare-bones experience. The graphics don't enhance the horror at all, and combat's more like a puzzle that's too easy to solve once you pick up on the pattern, rather than something you'd expect from a survival title. In the end, *I Am Alive*'s strong atmosphere and interesting premise weren't enough for me to look past its technical shortcomings.

ERIC L. PATTERSON

6.5

I'll be honest—I have a love for disaster-based games of questionable quality. I utterly adored *Disaster Report* and *Raw Danger* on the PS2, and I also quite enjoyed *I Am Alive*. That isn't to say that it's a great game—when looking at it with a critical eye, it's sadly an underachiever. The survival portion's sorely lacking in actual survival, and the promise of depth in human interaction is, in reality, frustratingly shallow. I'm still glad that *I Am Alive* lived through its hardships and that I got to play it—but, *man*, do I wish it could've been the more epic tale of survival that it was once meant to be.

BRANDON JUSTICE

8.0

It's rare to see a robust, new-school console experience in the download space that's actually worth a damn, but I suppose if you're going to take a chance on something different, this is the place to do it these days. Considering all the trouble this game had getting out of the gate, I'm glad to see it actually delivered an experience that brings a genuine sense of exploration and tension missing in many modern titles—and sets it to such an intriguing backdrop of ruin and despair. If you've ever wanted to play Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, this is about as close as you're ever going to get.

AKAI KATANA

360

- **PUBLISHER** RISING STAR GAMES
- **DEVELOPER** CAVE
- **ESRB** T - TEEN
- **RELEASE DATE** 05.16.2012

ERIC L. PATTERSON

8.0

It's not hard to view *Akai Katana* as sort of the pinnacle of Cave's horizontal-scrolling shoot-em-up efforts; the game's a lot of fun, it's got some genuinely interesting gameplay systems going on, and the military-infused-with-fantasy theme will be a welcome change of pace for those who've grown tired of Japanese shooters getting as cute as they have in recent years. Cave fans already have *Akai Katana* on preorder, but is this a good starting point for those new to bullet-hell shooters to give the genre a go? Honestly, every one of Cave's games is sink-or-swim—but *Akai Katana*'s more Western-friendly theme may give it an edge.

SOUTH PARK: TENORMAN'S REVENGE

XBLA

- **PUBLISHER** MICROSOFT STUDIOS
- **DEVELOPER** OTHER OCEAN INTERACTIVE
- **ESRB** M - MATURE
- **RELEASE DATE** 03.30.2012

MARC CAMRON

8.5

South Park: Tenorman's Revenge is an old-school 2D platformer that perfectly complements the *South Park* aesthetic. Overflowing with references to the series and filled with huge, well-designed levels, *Revenge* follows the show's four main characters on a most urgent quest to retrieve their stolen Xbox hard drive. The game works better with friends, though, so be sure to take advantage of the four-player co-op. With more than 20 levels—each with multiple branching paths—*Tenorman's Revenge* might be one of the most value-packed XBLA games ever released. You'll even have enough left over to buy a big bag of Cheesy Poofs!

KINECT STAR WARS

360

- **PUBLISHER** LUCASARTS
- **DEVELOPER** TERMINAL REALITY
- **ESRB** T - TEEN
- **RELEASE DATE** 04.03.2012

RAY CARSILLO

5.0

This is not the Kinect game you've been looking for. As with most efforts on Microsoft's motion box, the controls hold it back; the peripheral simply can't sense your motions accurately enough to keep you in the moment. A cute array of minigames and a decent-length main campaign could make this a fun *Star Wars*–themed party game, but many hardcore fans would rather step in bantha poodoo than play this for any significant length of time. No one wants a dance-off between Han and Lando. If you were looking to finally feel like a Jedi, you might wanna stick to the bathrobe and flashlight a little while longer.

TRIALS: EVOLUTION

XBLA

- **PUBLISHER** MICROSOFT STUDIOS
- **DEVELOPER** REDLYNX
- **ESRB** E10+
- **RELEASE DATE** 04.18.2012

RAY CARSILLO

9.5

Fans of the original *Trials* will love the steps the motorcycle-racing series has taken to move forward, but this entry's also more open for newcomers to jump right in and have fun, too. *Evolution* can be a bit frustrating at times, as the game almost has an old-school-platformer feel—it's easy to learn, but very difficult to master. Still, with a new 4-player versus mode and the same track designer that the developers used for the single-player mode at your fingertips, *Trials: Evolution* offers plenty of reasons to keep going back to the races.

SINE MORA

XBLA

- **PUBLISHER** MICROSOFT STUDIOS
- **DEVELOPER** DIGITAL REALITY/GRASSHOPPER MANUFACTURE
- **ESRB** M - MATURE
- **RELEASE DATE** 03.21.2012

BRANDON JUSTICE

9.5

With a development roster that features talent like Digital Reality, Grasshopper Manufacture, and *Evangelion's* Mahiro Maeda, it's little wonder that this story-driven shoot-em-up delivers in a way that reminds me why the genre was such a big part of gaming in decades past. The time-centered mechanics are a refreshing change of pace that offer a boost to folks not accustomed to bullet-hell shooters, and I loved the *Star Fox*-inspired character design and incredibly articulated boss battles. Plus, the story seems almost *too* good to be in a shooter of this ilk. Very, very impressive all around.

RIDGE RACER: UNBOUNDED

360 | PS3 | PC

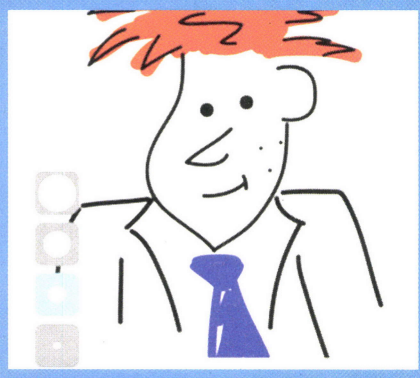
- **PUBLISHER** NAMCO BANDAI
- **DEVELOPER** BUGBEAR ENTERTAINMENT
- **ESRB** T - TEEN
- **RELEASE DATE** 03.27.2012

BRANDON JUSTICE

9.0

It's been a while since I've played a game till my thumbs hurt, but despite its departure from the standard script of the *Ridge Racer* universe, *Unbounded*'s one such experience. The folks at Bugbear—veterans of the *FlatOut* franchise who know their racers—have delivered on a reputable reboot that stands up to the best the arcade-racing genre has to offer, packing in an impressive amount of reply value via a staggering amount of tracks, modes, and unlockable goodies. No, it's definitely not the *Ridge Racer* you're used to, but trust me when I say that this is a good thing.

THE BEST OF iOS



GAME OF THE MONTH

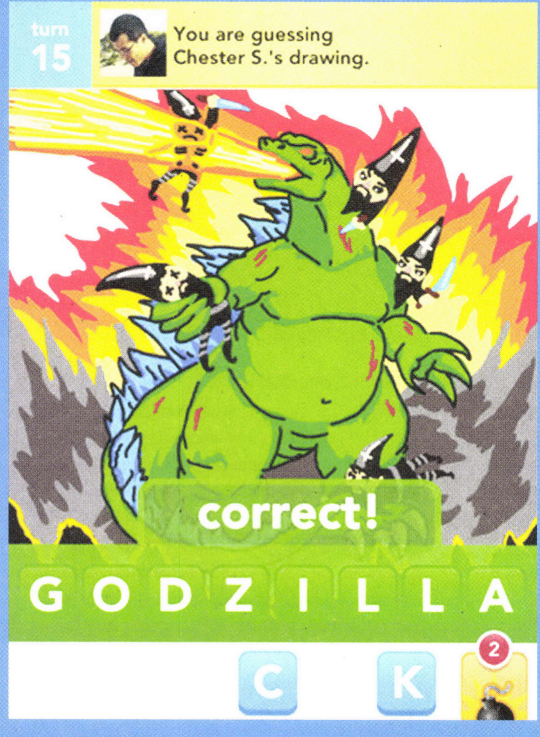
DRAW SOMETHING

DEVELOPER OMGPOP

9.0

Following the success of *Words with Friends*, *Draw Something* takes a simple game and makes it freely available for mobile users. Paired with a friend or stranger, players choose a word to draw and must draw a picture to describe it for their partner. The more difficult the word, the more coins earned, which can then purchase additional colors for drawing and bombs for letter elimination when guessing.

The rest is up to players. Draw highly detailed pictures—or cheat and write the word. The game is free with ads, or can be purchased for $2 with several thousand extra words and no ads. Either way, millions of people play it, and you're bound to find someone who'll make *Draw Something* fun every time. **JAMES PIKOVER**



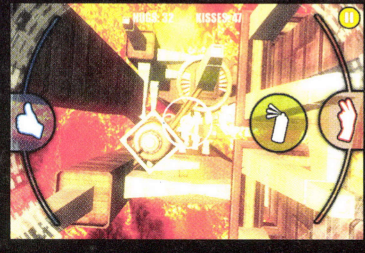
ANGRY BIRDS SPACE

DEVELOPER ROVIO

7.0

The *Angry Birds* phenomenon is far from over, and the latest is Rovio's best yet. Using the same physics-based, bird-tossing gameplay, players shoot different types of birds at their most vile enemy, pigs. Since the war's escalated into space, gravity plays a more active role in gameplay mechanics. It's more like *Super Mario Galaxy*, in a way—tiny worlds, each with their own pull, make *Space* a completely different beast from its predecessors.

While this is by far the most interesting *Birds* title to date, it's also the shortest: 60 levels spanning two worlds, plus collectable bonus levels, make it very easy to beat the game in just a few hours. It's free—or $1 without ads—and promises free additional levels in future updates. **JAMES PIKOVER**



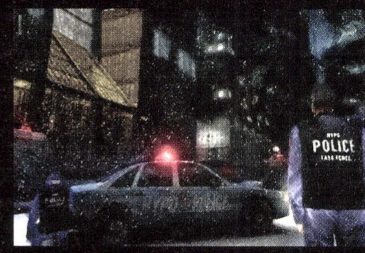
AaaaaAAaaaAAAaaAAAAaAAA-AA!!! (FORCE = MASS X ACCELERATION)

DEVELOPER OWLCHEMY LABS

8.0

With the longest title of any iOS game, *F=MA* is a mobile version of the hit indie PC BASE-jumping game where players fall off a ledge to near-certain doom, in the hopes of hugs, kisses, and general anarchy. Oh, and not dying on the way down. Who'da thunk?

On iOS, the game utilizes the gyroscope and accelerometers, which offers realistic steering that's way more intense and exciting than a mouse—especially on the iPad. Staying close to buildings earns hugs and kisses, which earn points to unlock new levels and gear. With 60 levels, *F=MA* is a huge and extensive iOS title, but it also gets tiring after short periods, so enjoy the three-minute meditation level. **JAMES PIKOVER**



MAX PAYNE MOBILE

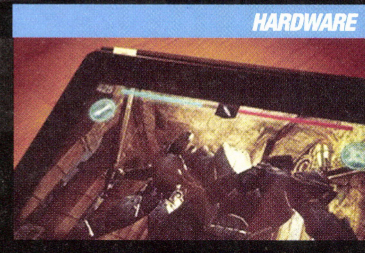
DEVELOPER REMEDY ENTERTAINMENT

6.0

The quintessential noir shooter that brought gaming into the 21st century is now available on iOS, putting the father of bullet time in your pocket. Mobile gamers can now experience the brilliant tale of a cop gone rogue after his family is brutally murdered in a drug conspiracy in all its original 2001 glory, including the muddy-but-detailed New York city and Max's blocky grimace.

As excellent a port as it is, though, *Max Payne* suffers from poorly translated controls. Touch controls are insensitive and difficult to use, which makes gunplay a constant frustration—especially against numerous NPCs. Even without controller support, it's still the same game we loved back in the day, and for $3, it may be worth suffering through the touch controls. **JAMES PIKOVER**

HARDWARE



iPAD (2012)

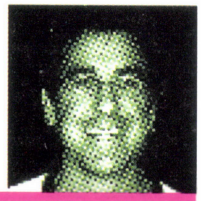
APPLE, INC

8.0

The iPad's long been associated with gaming, and the newest model accentuates those curves. It's got a 264ppi Retina display with a 2048x1536 resolution—better than most desktop monitors—which is powered by the same GPU as the PlayStation Vita. No tablet's better at gaming than the iPad.

But it's not all bells and whistles. This new iPad's thicker and heavier than the iPad 2, and it can get uncomfortably hot under stress. The battery lasts for 8 to 10 hours of gaming, but it takes six hours to fully recharge. The amazing 4:3 display isn't optimized for HD video, and it isn't better than competing Android tablets for video or Web browsing. Even then, it's still the best tablet you can buy. **JAMES PIKOVER**

GAMES ANALYST
MICHAEL PACHTER



REPEAT BUSINESS

Tired of sequels? There's a reason we see so many.

The industry appears to be obsessed with sequels—and for good reason. We're in the unprecedented eighth year of the current console generation—the seventh for Sony and Nintendo—when no cycle's gone past six years in the past. As cycles wear on, game-development costs tend to decline, but gearing up for the next generation's quite costly; publishers and developers are reluctant to invest a significant amount in new intellectual properties at the tail end of a cycle. In the current cycle, game-development costs have skyrocketed, from an average of $5 million per game for PS2 and Xbox to well over $20 million, on average, for PS3 and Xbox 360. The only way to keep these costs in check is to reuse game engines and art assets, which favors sequel creation.

Similarly, the break-even threshold (the sales level required to recoup R&D investment) has risen with increasing development costs. An average legacy-generation title required around 300,000 units sold at full price to break even; this was around $12 million in net sales, less $3 million manufacturer's royalty, $2 million in marketing, $5 million in R&D, and less some amount for licenses, developer bonuses, and allocation of overhead. In the current generation, the break-even threshold's closer to 1.5 million units: around $72 million in net sales, less $18 million in manufacturer's royalty, $11 million in marketing, $20 million in R&D, and less some amount for licenses, developer bonuses, and allocation of overhead.

As the break-even threshold's risen in the current console generation, publishers and developers are less likely to greenlight a project. This means that in pitch meetings, a sequel to a proven brand will always enjoy an advantage over a new property; the sequel will also enjoy the benefit of reusing an engine and art assets. The publisher has the benefit of understanding the purchaser of the prior version in a series and is better able to efficiently market the subsequent release. In other words, the deck's stacked against new intellectual properties.

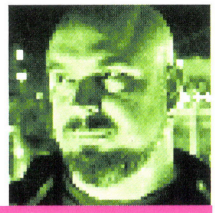
Developers also like working on sequels, as they're able to benchmark their accomplishments and command ever-increasing bonuses based on the sequel's success. Court documents filed in Activision's dispute with the former Infinity Ward studio heads revealed an $84 million bonus in controversy. While it's unusual to see a game sell as many units as *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2*, the amount of the bonus shows that developers can be paid quite handsomely if they manage to deliver an overwhelming success. It's clear that a sequel to a multimillion seller has great potential to sell many millions of units, making developers likely to pitch such games out of enlightened self-interest.

I don't expect to see many original new titles until the next console generation begins. Thankfully, it starts at the end of this year, and we should have three new consoles to contend with by the beginning of 2014, at the latest.

Michael Pachter serves as managing director of equity research for Wedbush Securities. For more of his unabashed insights, follow him on Twitter: @michaelpachter.

Game-development costs have skyrocketed; the only way to keep those costs in check is to reuse assets, which favors sequel creation...

■ In this economy, publishers know sequels are always sound investments.



GAME DEVELOPER

JAKE KAZDAL

INDEPENDENT FREEDOM

Success and failure on your own terms

With every passing year, it seems the changes get faster. In fact, the only constant is change. Mobile gaming, social gaming, free-to-play, Facebook games, DLC—everyone's telling me I should move the studio in a thousand different directions based on whatever's the latest hot trend in gaming.

I don't agree. In my opinion, to be independent is to make the games *you* want to make. I think a lot of forgotten genres have been buried by the newest stuff, but they still deserve our attention. If we allow ourselves to go back to that place, just for a minute, we'll realize how much we miss the classic genres of days gone by.

I've been thinking about this a lot, and I believe my friend Nathan Vella at Capy Games said it best at the Game Developers Conference in March: "Super-mainstream games such as *Fruit Ninja*, *Angry Birds*, and *Cut the Rope* have each sold tens of millions of copies. Attempting to replicate that success is natural. But, in reality, if you're making a game for everyone, you're actually making a game for no one. The hit-based mentality takes you away from making a game that has soul or is fresh."

I can make exactly the game that I want to play—and know there's an audience for it...

For me, this sums it up perfectly. I could be chasing the dollars trying to replicate the latest fads, or I could be true to myself as a longtime gamer. That's why I'm taking the opportunity to dive into the classic genres most of us grew up playing—and revisit them with fresh eyes and modern tools. I believe we can create modern experiences that remind us of the best experiences from the classic generations of gaming—and potentially create new classic games.

Take a look at *Bastion*, Supergiant Games' original take on the classic top-down action-adventure. After years of triple-A game-development experience, they struck out on their own and created one of the biggest indie hits of last year. How? They remembered what made the classic games so great while updating the concepts intelligently, organically, and by using modern production techniques. Even with a small team, they were able to perfectly execute on their vision and craft an experience that people flocked to, even though it has nothing in common with the *Modern Warfare*s and *FarmVille*s of today's mass market.

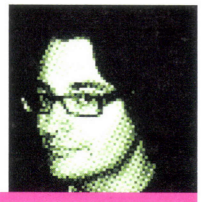
Our goal with *Skulls of the Shogun* has always been to provide a fresh, inspiring, relevant version of the classic 8- and 16-bit turn-based strategy games, approached with a modern sensibility. For independent game creators, I believe it's our responsibility to push the envelope forward in the direction we ourselves want: new gaming experiences. As I watch the gaming market continue to expand in many new directions, I can't help but think how much more fun I had playing games while growing up, and I fight hard to capture the best of that spirit of fun in a modern light.

These are some of the most exciting times ever to be a developer, and we've got a massive audience that hungers for all kinds of games. To be in a spot where I, as a designer, can make exactly the game that I want to play—and know there's an audience for it—is truly a glorious thing.

BASTION

A 19-year videogame industry veteran, Kazdal's served stints at Sega of Japan working on Space Channel 5 *and* Rez, *and EA Los Angeles on Steven Spielberg's* LMNO *project, as well as the* Command & Conquer *franchise. As CEO of 17-BIT, he's finishing up his debut independent project,* Skulls of the Shogun, *which ships this fall on XBLA, Windows 8, and Windows Mobile. You can follow his continuing adventures on Twitter: @Jkooza.*

ASSOCIATE EDITOR
ANDREW FITCH



WE REPEAT: 5.0 IS AN AVERAGE SCORE!

I'm not handin' out hate—I'm using the whole scale

During the Dan Hsu era of *EGM*, that message ran loud and clear at the front of every Review section. It means exactly what it says: Everything above 5.0 is a varying degree of "good," while everything below a 5.0 is a varying degree of "bad." Simple, right?

Over the years, some readers haven't always found it quite so easy. Former executive editor Shane Bettenhausen publicly proclaimed his intention to "reclaim the 6.5 for good" after readers misinterpreted many of his scores. I joined then-*EGM* publisher Ziff Davis during that era, and I got a firsthand look at the review philosophy—which I considered the best the industry, and still do. We aren't some monolithic publication that doesn't print the names of our reviewers. And a 7.0 in *EGM* isn't "mediocre" or "middling"—it's absolutely worth playing. We use the whole scale, and we stand behind our scores with our personal bylines.

After my *Xenoblade Chronicles* review went online at EGMNOW.com in April, I prepared for a gigantic backlash from RPG fans. I hoped people would understand that while I enjoyed the game, it definitely had its share of flaws that soured the experience to a degree. Unfortunately, to many readers, this meant that I "hated" the game, even though I said nothing close to the sort. I described *Xenoblade* as "a deeply flawed epic that still deserves a look from all role-playing fans." How that's construed by readers as "hate," I'll never know. I invested an obscenely large amount of time in the game—10 times what the average review requires—highlighted what I enjoyed, explained what I didn't like, and scored it with a number that most closely reflected my personal experience with the game.

Believe me, I *wanted* to enjoy *Xenoblade* a lot more than I did. I respect director Tetsuya Takahashi a great deal, and I always find his worlds some of the most fascinating and imaginative in the RPG landscape. But I wouldn't have been honest with myself or our readers if I'd gone with the general consensus and given it an 8 or a 9. Our job isn't to fall in line with the Metacritic average or score games based on what some imaginary "average reader" might think of a game. Our job is to give our *individual opinion* on our experience with a game.

This month, I gave 6.5s to *Xenoblade*, *Silent Hill: Downpour*, and *Atelier Meruru*. All are enjoyable experiences and recommendable to some degree—but they're on the low end of "good" from my perspective, and all feature significant flaws. *Dragon's Dogma*, on the other hand, was a significantly below-average experience, and I scored it accordingly. I liked *Xenoblade* but didn't love it; I outright hated *Dragon's Dogma*. That's the difference between a 6.5 and a 3.5.

I liked Xenoblade but didn't love it; I outright hated Dragon's Dogma. That's the difference between a 6.5 and a 3.5.

That's why I love the return of multi-person reviews—they really give a broad sense of what readers can expect from the experience. I may not agree with Eric's take on *Xenoblade*, but I respect it, and I understand why he likes the game. By the same token, I'm glad that Ray and I were able to have our say as well, as I've read reviews from players online who were similarly underwhelmed by the experience.

By including three reviews—and using the whole scale to impart our takes—we're able to offer an in-depth rundown of the latest releases that no other gaming magazine can match. That's always been our goal at *EGM*, and in these days of Internet instant gratification, when seemingly every outlet's so quick to rush out and be first, we're taking a more comprehensive look at the gaming experience.

But always remember this when you read our reviews: 5.0 is an average score.

■ Readers shouldn't dismiss a game that receives 6s and 7s in the pages of *EGM*.

THE WORST GAMES ABOUT TERRIBLE SPORTS

MAKING LEMONS OUT OF LEMONS

SEANBABY
www.seanbaby.com

Not every sports game is obvious about how much joy it's going to steal from you. I've played plenty of bad games about sporting events that should've been fun—like doing kung-fu with Shaq, throwing flaming basketballs with Michael Jordan, or punching Bill Laimbeer. I'm not talking about those this month; I'm talking about uninteresting sports that should've translated poorly into videogames...and then did exactly that. Now that I think about it, maybe these terrible titles should be commended for their honest lowering of expectations. On the other hand, not surprising people isn't really that commendable. If it were, then where's *my* Nobel Peace Prize for warning you that I'm about to type penis fungus? I'm sure not seeing it. And penis fungus.

BEDROCK BOWLING

PLAYSTATION

What do you call it when someone slides down a mountain in a birdbath trying to hit things? If you said *Bedrock Bowling* or "stupid," you're right either way. The graphics look like they were designed by a man who couldn't think of a more efficient way to explain to his boss that he didn't know how to make videogame graphics. And the gameplay is worse

As you slide down the narrow courses in your birdbath, you can hit whatever you want. Invisible walls keep you from falling off the sides, and most obstacles don't do anything—and the ones that do only slow you down for a moment. Of course, when there's no time limit, clock, or speedometer, slowing a player down for a moment is just a rude way for a game designer to announce that he's an idiot.

If you manage to avoid the obstacles—and, remember, there's no reason to—you can collect points by hitting everything else. These points are important, since they have no effect on whether or not you pass a level. Pressing any button at any time in *Bedrock Bowling* is like putting on a clown costume before you sharpen your knives. It's pointless—but deranged is probably a better word for it.

CURLING DS

NINTENDO DS

Curling is a sport where you shove a stone along ice and hope that it stops at a certain spot. If I'm not mistaken, it was invented as a way for stranded people to fall asleep peacefully while freezing to death. Curling world champions tell their dates they're coin dealers to seem more exciting. Curling is what baseball thinks about when *it's* having sex.

As shocking as it is that a videogame version of this strange sport was released, I imagine no one was more surprised than the people who produced it. The first thing they said at the release party was probably, "Hold on a second! That curling game we were making was real? I thought we were in some kind special hell for Nintendo nerds!"

BALLS OF FURY

NINTENDO WII

Table tennis was the inspiration for one of the very first videogames ever made, so making a table tennis game worse than it 40 years later is quite an achievement. This game's based on the film *Balls of Fury* in the same way an overflowing toilet is based on a hot-dog-eating contest—except that an overflowing toilet is more responsive to a Wiimote than this videogame.

The stars of the movie were rendered for the Wii with all the professionalism of Bigfoot's photographer. The most notable thing about *Balls of Fury*, though, is the taunt button. Pressing it causes your character to blurt out a line recorded from the film—and not a single one has anything to do with table tennis. If I ever meet the man who decided this terrible game needed a button that announced, "Have your grandma pull the car around," I'm going to tell him he's awesome—whether he meant to be or not.

GAMINGMODZ.COM

MODS FOR THE MASSES™

introducing

ChromElite

for those that demand perfection in their gaming

Scan with your cell phone

PlayStation 3 version

Xbox 360 version

GamingModz.com provides customization services for Xbox 360 and PS3 controllers ranging from Exterior to Internal Modifications.

You can visit our website and choose from hundreds of designs and much more.

When you purchase online, include the following code for a free promotional gift with your order: GM052012

www.GamingModz.com

18267 NE 4th Ct. North Miami, Fl 33162 • Call Toll Free at 1.877.382.6639

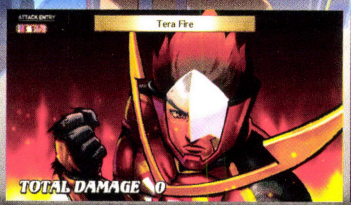
Available Now!

1 Million Hours of Fun

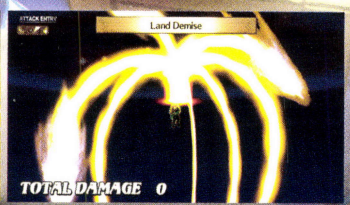
Baddest Ever Strategy RPG!

DISGAEA 3 Absence of Detention

Hardcore Gameplay
Reach Level 9999 and deal millions of points in damage!



Now With More Power
The new Tera-level spells feature character cameos drawn by guest artists, as well as more damage!



Insane Customizability
Create unique characters with new, job-specific Special Skills!

Fight New Bosses
What are Fuka & Desco doing here!?

Available Now at GameStop
power to the players

ESRB	
TEEN T	Alcohol Reference
CONTENT RATED BY ESRB	Mild Fantasy Violence
	Mild Language
	Mild Suggestive Themes

PSVITA™ PlayStation Vita

PlayStation Network

日本一 SOFTWARE

NIS America NISAmerica.com

©2008-2011 Nippon Ichi Software, Inc. ©2012 NIS America, Inc. All rights reserved. Distributed exclusively by Index Digital Media, Inc. Disgaea is a registered trademark of Nippon Ichi Software, Inc. Licensed and published by NIS America, Inc. "PlayStation" and the "PS" Family logo are registered trademarks and the PlayStation Network logo is a trademark of Sony Computer Entertainment Inc. The "PSVITA" logo is a trademark of the same company. The rating icon is a trademark of the Entertainment Software Association.