First Screens:
Metroid Prime 2 (PG. 64)

4 Pages Of New Info:
Mortal Kombat Deception (PG. 54)

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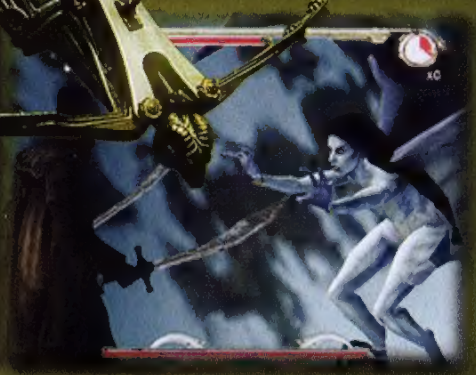

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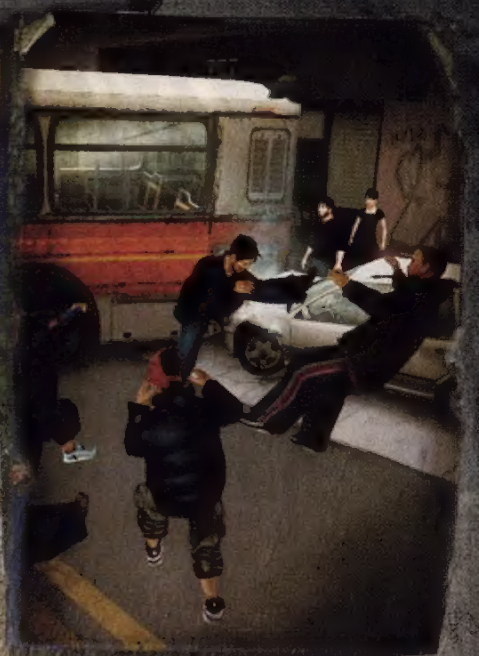

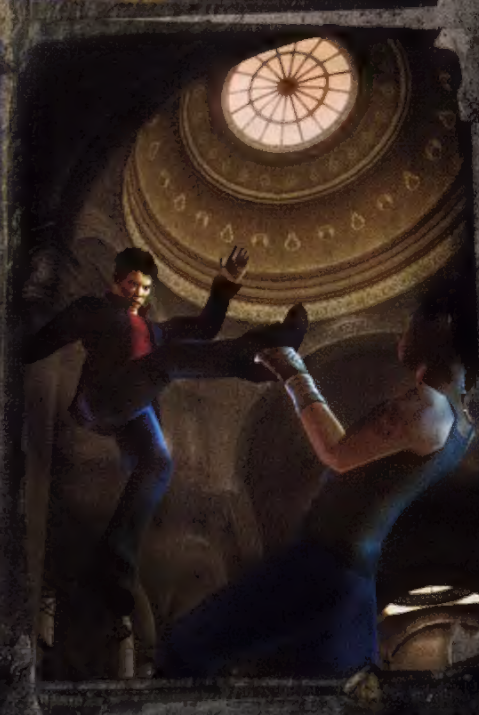

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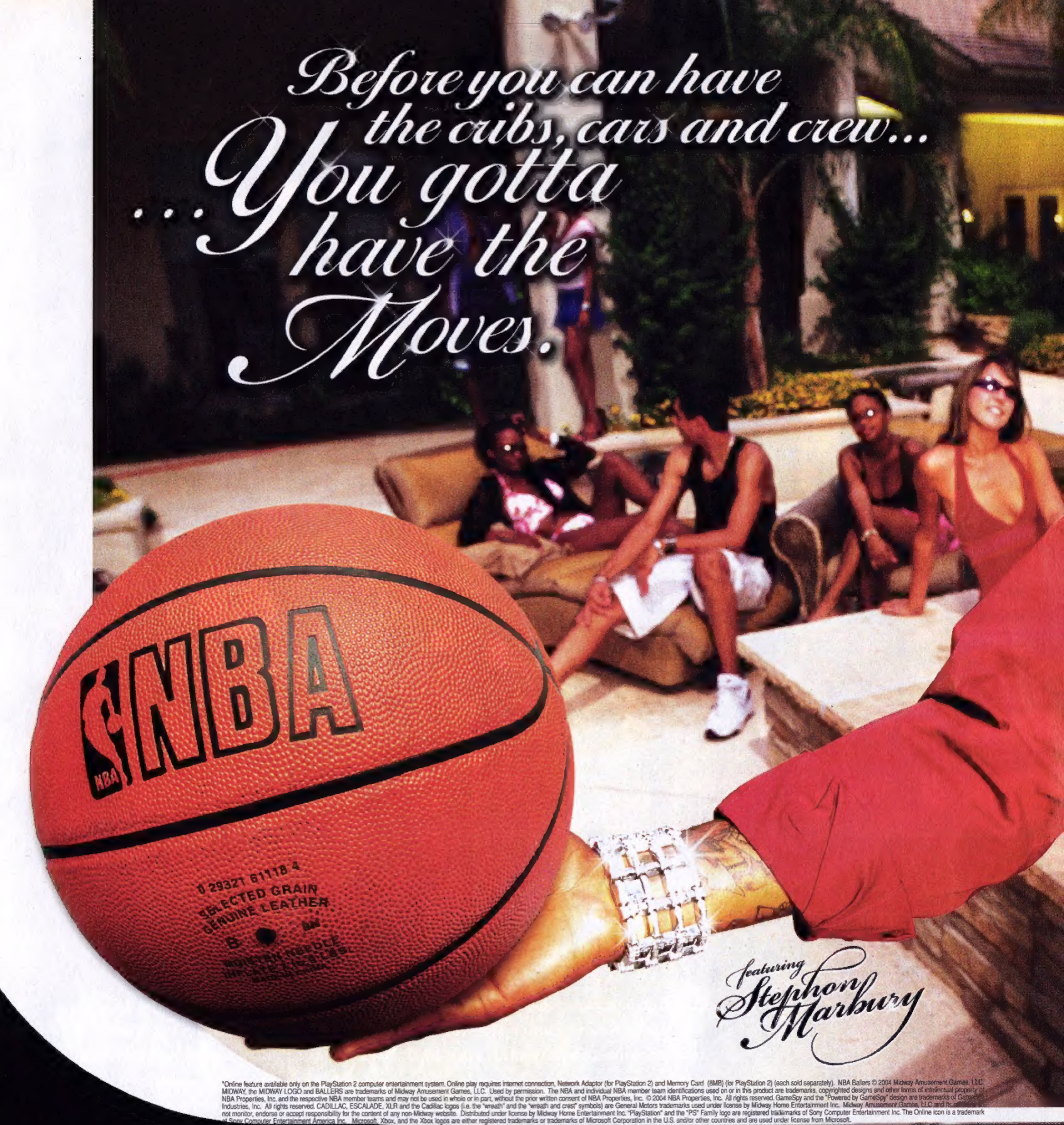

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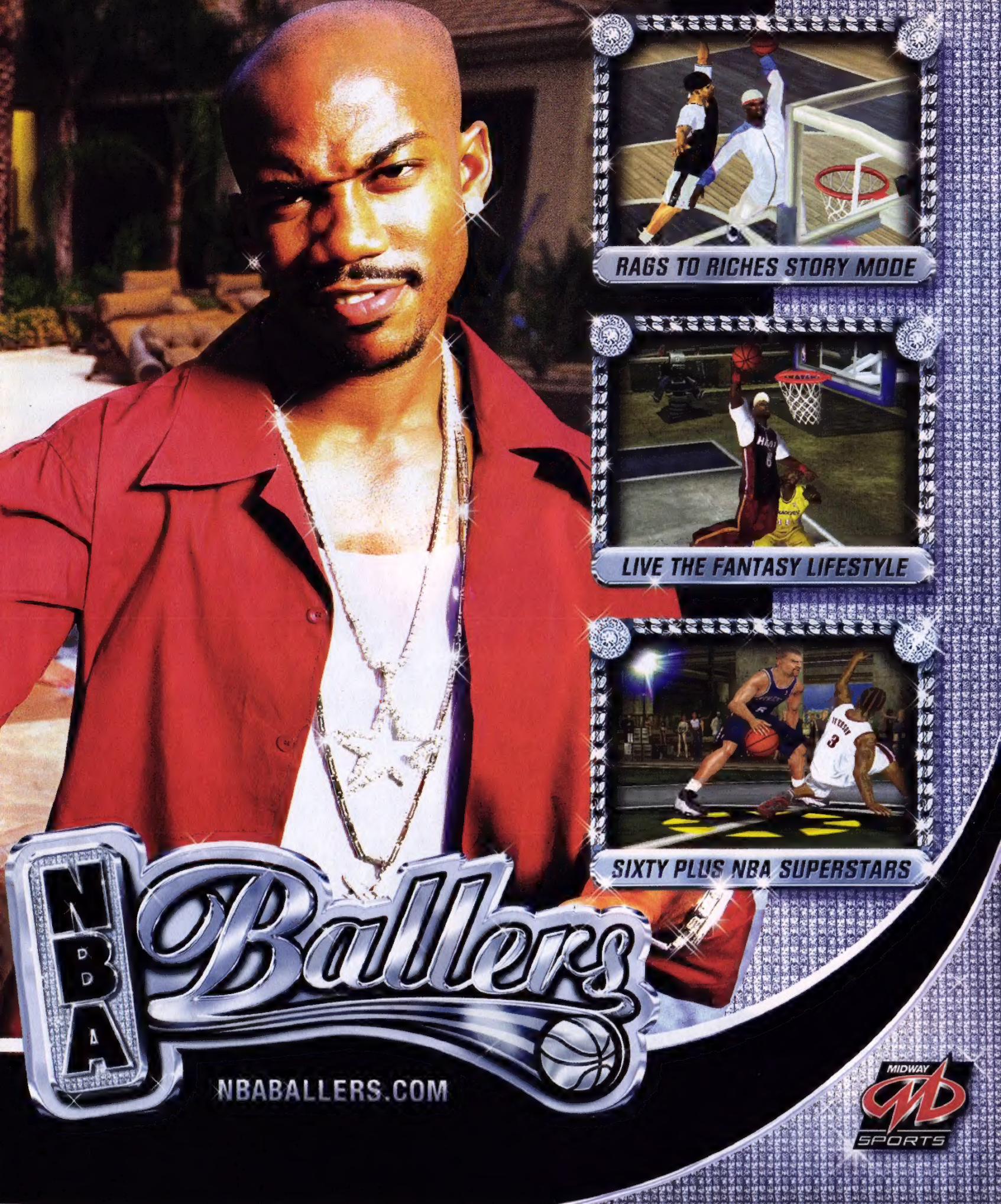
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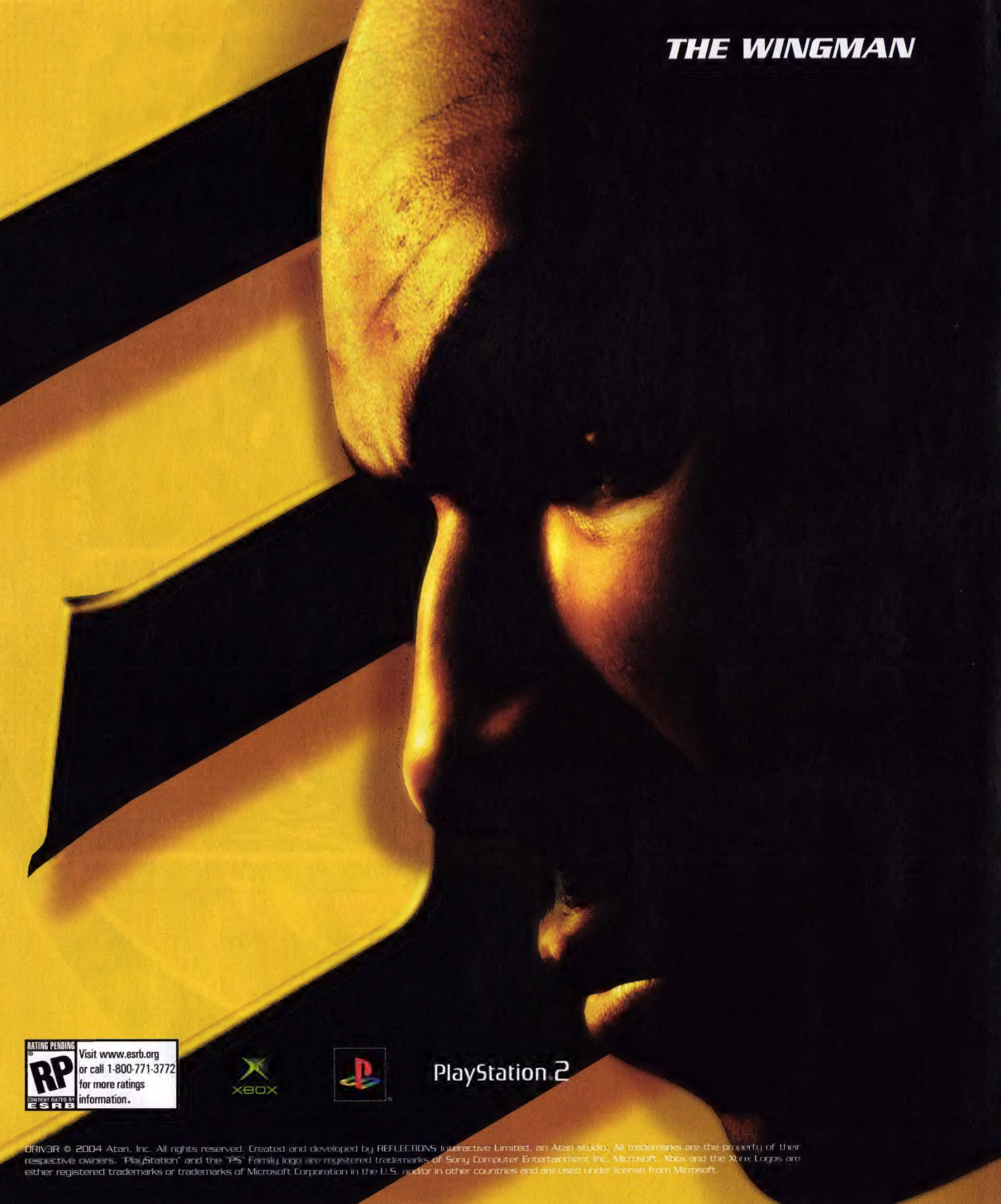

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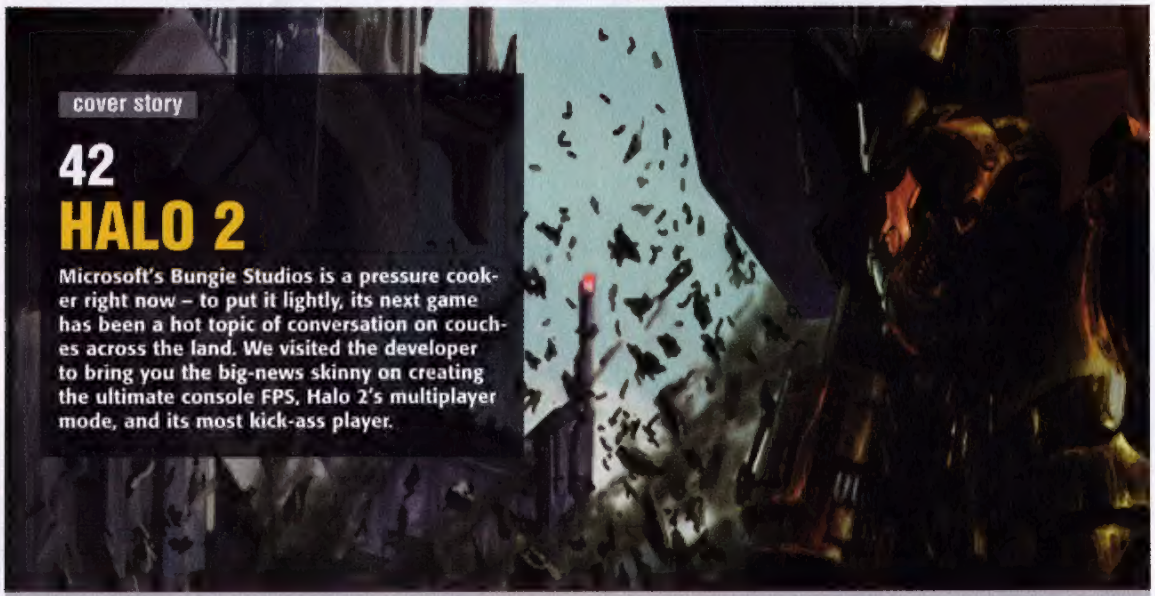


cover story

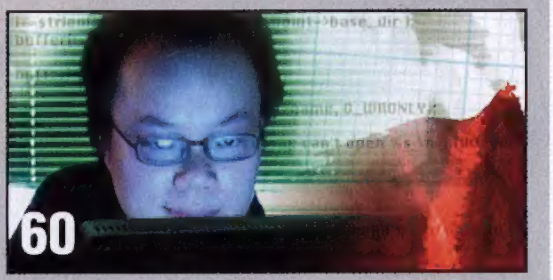
42 HALO 2

Microsoft's Bungie Studios is a pressure cooker right now – to put it lightly, its next game has been a hot topic of conversation on couches across the land. We visited the developer to bring you the big-news skinny on creating the ultimate console FPS, Halo 2's multiplayer mode, and its most kick-ass player.

features

MORTAL KOMBAT: DECEPTION

Ed Boon and his crew break their pact of silence and throw the doors wide open on their next MK release. Refreshingly open, they talk about character lists, alternate gameplay modes, Fatalities, and online play.



HOMEBREW GAMING 101: A PRIMER COURSE

Despite the Hollywood-like budgets of most triple-A titles in recent memory, it is still possible for someone at home to make a game with minimal financial investment. We're getting all of you independent developers off on the right foot.

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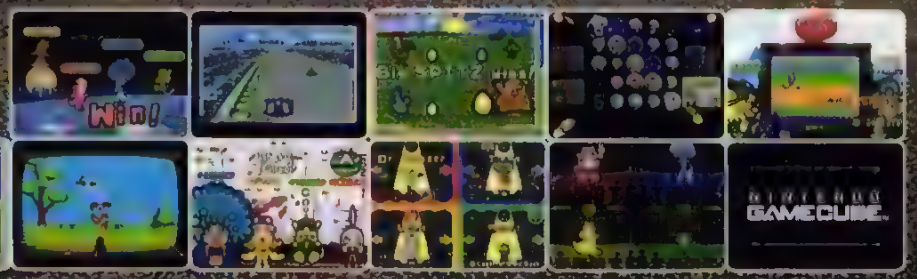

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STAFF

People Who Actually Get Paid To Play Video Games

SAME AS IT EVER WAS...

ANDY McNAMARA
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Over the last year, the staff and I have been working diligently on the magazine redesign you now hold in your hands – and we are quite proud of the results. As with any redesign, I'm sure there will be people who immediately decide to love it or hate it, but I would just ask that you give it a little time. I know that after I spent all my waking moments with the new magazine I found it difficult to go back to the old style.

The most notable updates are the sweeping changes made to GI News and Etc. As you may have noticed, GI News is now called Connect, and it includes some new departments such as the Interview, Calendar, and Opinion sections, as well as the new Etc. simply known as Gear. Like many of you out there, Etc. was always one of our favorite pages in the magazine, and we thought we could make it even better by moving it up and giving it more space.

You'll also notice other little additions throughout the book, but I'll let you discover those on your own. In the coming months we will continue to tweak Connect, and add and experiment with new bits and pieces. I'd love to hear your feedback on the new look, so feel free to drop me an email and let me know what you think.

Enjoy our Halo 2 cover story, and make sure to check back with us again next month when we bring you perhaps our biggest cover story yet. What game is it? I can't reveal this monster title just yet, but I can promise you that it's something you have been dying to see, and we'll have the exclusive first look.

Cheers,

Andy >> *andy@gameinformer.com*

Handle: The Game Hombre **Expertise:** RPGs, Action/Platform, Driving, First-Person Shooters **Interests:** *The Grey Album*, Timberwolves Basketball, *The Sopranos*, *American Chopper* **Dislikes:** Losing Power In The Middle Of A Superstar Saga Marathon, That Paulie Doesn't Get More Screen Time **Current Favorite Games:** Unreal Tournament 2004, Syphon Filter: The Omega Strain, Far Cry, Splinter Cell: Pandora Tomorrow

Reiner >> *reiner@gameinformer.com*

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Matt >> *matt@gameinformer.com*

Handle: The Original Gamer **Expertise:** First-Person Shooters, Action/Platform, Action/Adventure, Action/Sports **Interests:** The Line-up Of Lollapalooza 2004 (Morrissey! Sonic Youth!), Peter Jackson's *King Kong* Movie, Sunny Weather, Donuts, Baseball (I Love Baseball!), WiFi **Dislikes:** Actually Having To Go To Lollapalooza, Getting Lost In San Francisco, 56K, NetZero, Hyundai, Onions **Current Favorite Games:** Syphon Filter: The Omega Strain, Ninja Gaiden, Steel Battalion: Line Of Contact, Breakdown

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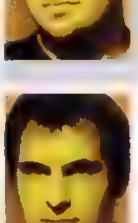

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Adam >> *adam@gameinformer.com*

Handle: The Alpha Gamer **Expertise:** RPGs, Strategy, First-Person Shooters, Fighting **Interests:** 170hp Inline 4-Cylinder Engines, 17-Inch Low-Profile Tires, 6-Speed German Transmissions, Leather Interiors, Backlit Gauges, Sunroofs, Heated Seats, Not Tasting The Rainbow While Reading GI **Dislikes:** Allergies, Spawn-Killing, Truckasaurus Parked Outside My Base And Obliterating Everyone Who Tries To Come Out **Current Favorite Games:** Unreal Tournament 2004, Far Cry, Diablo II (It Still Rocks), Rogue Squadron III: Rebel Strike (If You Use The Code To Skip The Non-Flying Stages), MVP Baseball 2004

Joe >> *joe@gameinformer.com*

Handle: The Real American Gamer **Expertise:** RPGs, Adventure, Strategy, Platform, Puzzle **Interests:** Hiro Protagonist, *Eternal Sunshine Of The Spotless Mind*, My Car's Comprehensive Warranty (Trust Me, I'll Need It), *Preacher*, Zombiance **Dislikes:** DVDs Without Chapter Selection (Curse You, David Lynch!), The Uncontrollable Mating Habits Of My *Wrath Unleashed* Dragons, Fancy-Pants Mustard, *Excel Saga*, Deep Blue **Current Favorite Games:** Metal Gear Solid: The Twin Snakes, Splinter Cell: Pandora Tomorrow, Ninja Gaiden, King's Quest II (AGDI's VGA Remake)

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GI SPY

Candid Photos From The Seedy Underbelly Of The Video Game Industry

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1 Matt and Lisa show Spider-Man pride with Activision's Lisa Fields and Chris Hewish 2 Andy looks on after presenting Lionhead Studio's Peter Molyneux with the Hall of Fame Award at this year's DICE conference in Las Vegas 3 GI Online's Billy Berghammer's inner Nintendo fanboy is stoked to meet the love of his life, Leslie Swan, the voice of Princess Peach! 4 Eidos' Denny Chiu and Steve Starvis grab a pint in Amsterdam with the GI Spy posse 5 Joe Juba practices his patented "I am staring into the dark pit of your soul" look with GameSpy's Raymond "Gisele" Padilla and Midway's Reilly Brennan 6 Oddworld's Lorne Lanning discusses the finer points of, um, game design with two Sudeki babes at Climax's DICE party. Vegas oddsmakers have put the over/under on the dollar value of silicone gel in this picture at $20,000 7 Rockstar Games' Devin Winterbottom (far left), Corey Wade (second from right), and Jordan Chew (right), share some laughs with the GI ad men Doug Faust and Rob Borm (center) while someone gets Rob a booster seat. "That's not funny," he says. 8 Rockstar's Rob "Bobz" Fleischer and Ryan Rayhill take a look at the remnants of the world's largest roast beef sandwich at Mayslack's in lovely Nordeast Minneapolis 9 Vivendi Universal's Adam Kahn and Stephen Wilkes stopped by the GI offices recently. They actually weren't here to show us a game, either! They just heard about our "Pizza Party Fridays!"

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DEAR GI

The Readers Strike Back

DAILY AFFIRMATION

I just wanted to write and tell you what a great job you guys are doing. The reviews are cool and fun to read. I'm heavy into video games and it's great to find a magazine with writers that seem to share my enthusiasm. I'm really enjoying my current subscription to Game Informer and will definitely renew it. You guys are the best. Keep up the good work.

Ryan Robinson
Via email

■ **Gosh, that's real sweet of you. It's so nice when readers respond to all of the hard work that goes into each issue – and without us paying them or anything! It just makes us feel all warm and fuzzy inside, especially when we don't have to buy the praise. We didn't do that in this situation, but you know, if we did, it wouldn't be...of course it would be unprincipled and dishonest, but we didn't pay Ryan a single cent. Honest!**

TAG TEAM BACK AGAIN

My friends and I have been watching and waiting for a decent multiplayer game to hit the shelves, and we haven't seen any. It's almost ritualistic for us to get together and destroy each other on TimeSplitters 2, cheer with delight as we play Super Monkey Ball, and slam out controllers as we lose to each other in Smackdown! Here Comes the Pain. While all three of these games have a high replay value (at least to us), we would like to get a new flavor in the mix. Since TimeSplitters 3 won't be out until 2005, we were hoping you guys could recommend any good multiplayer games that are already out or will be out in the near future.

Byron Klein
Via email

■ **Disregarding the obvious sports-themed titles that allow for multiple players, there has been a nice surge of good play-with-friends games in the last few months. James Bond 007: Everything or Nothing, Champions of Norrath: Realms of EverQuest, Wario Ware Inc: Mega Party Games and Splinter Cell: Pandora Tomorrow are all really different titles that have nice multiplayer or co-op options.**

BOON OR CURSE?

Final Fantasy has been one of the most intricate and thought-provoking series ever. But now Final Fantasy must confront the threat of decay that could ultimately mean the end of what made the series what it is. Final Fantasy began as a modest NES RPG with a simple formula that appealed to both American and Japanese gamers, but by the time the series reached its sixth installment, it had developed into a series with fantastic storylines and wonderful characters. FF games elicited both wonder and awe by giving you a vague detail of the events and history that took place in a unique world. At the same time, they allowed the player enough space to digest what he or she witnessed and build his or her own perception of the game.

Today, the true essence of the franchise is being severely threatened as the series and its marketing potential expands – it seems that Square Enix has become more concerned with milking the Final Fantasy franchise for all that it's worth rather than staying true to its formula. Square Enix has lost the concept of a "Final" Fantasy, of each Final Fantasy being unique without further elaboration. The recent X-2 is a prime example of this corruption.

Veteran Final Fantasy fans could still escape to their stronghold of the classic Final Fantasies (FF VI, VII, VIII, IX et al.), but Square now announces that they intend to tamper with Final Fantasy VII by making the cinematic sequel *Final Fantasy VII: Advent Children*. Few realize that this jeopardizes everything that made FF VII such a wonderful game. FF VII offered an entire world for players to explore, complete with a history, plot, and interesting characters. However, it was the 'filler space' that allowed the player to use his or her own imagination that earned FF VII an almost religious following. The movie will ruin our perceptions of FF VII.

In this new world of corporate competition, Square Enix seems to want to bring every penny possible into its pockets, and it appears that they are willing to go through some of their greatest and most memorable titles to do it.

Doctor Voyager
Via email

■ **Although the tone of your letter implies a greater conspiracy and reckless mishandling of the classic Final Fantasy franchise, it looks to us like Square Enix is doing something really spectacular for the fans. That being said, you do bring up some interesting points about taking away players' ability to use their own imaginations. We'll have to see how it shapes up once *Advent Children* gets closer, but judging by the response we received to our feature [The Future According to Square Enix, issue 127], lots of gamers are truly excited to get an updated guided tour through the world of FF VII.**

WISH LIST? DONE

I think that the next generation of consoles needs a whole lot more than the PS2 and Xbox are offering. First of all, it should have an input for your satellite or cable so you can watch TV using the console. It should also have a word processing program. In order to print out documents there should be a USB connection somewhere on the system. You can take simple storage devices that connect via USB and transfer the data to a printer or computer. The console should also allow a split screen mode so you can watch TV and work at the same time. It should also possess a 60 GB hard drive so you have plenty of storage for music. The console could also act as a digital recorder and playback device similar to TiVo. Of course, you need to throw in surround sound capabilities including THX. There should be Internet capability as well, but no additional online fee (that means you Microsoft) since your already paying an ISP to be hooked up to the net. The console should come with a foldable and compact keyboard/mouse combo and a controller that is wireless. Finally, it should have dual disc capability along with a built in DVD/CD burner. You also shouldn't have to buy a special remote to watch DVDs. Now imagine all of this in a package that costs no more than $200. True, the company might lose money on sales

SHARING THE PAIN

What's up with this dual screen Game Boy Advance? It's so stupid. I mean, do you play two people at once or what? Lately Nintendo's handheld consoles have been pretty impressive, but this seems like a feeble attempt to beat the Sony PSP to stores. I really want to see this.

Ryan
Via hotmail.com

■ **So do you want to play it then? Or do you think that it's stupid? We suspect that you've been gripped by the two opposing forces governing most gamers lately: the yin of wanting to like every bone Nintendo throws your way and the yang of doubting this two-screened gizmo. We're all going through it right there with you, buddy. It's okay, and as a community of like-minded gaming enthusiasts, we're going to come to terms with our emotions. You just have to hold on, hold on to the night. (At least until the unit is revealed).**

Send your comments to Game Informer. Snail Mail: Game Informer Magazine • Attn: Dear GI • 724 North First St., 4th Floor • Minneapolis, MN 55401 Email: deargi@gameinformer.com

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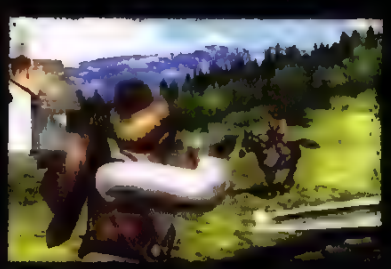

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PlayStation 2

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of the system, but it really wouldn't matter in the long run because they would make it all up in game licenses. Now all of this might seem a little far-fetched, but I guarantee a system with this capability would certainly be the biggest seller of all time.

I can only hope,
Dustin Hobaugh
Via email

■ **Dustin, we have some mighty good news for you – they already make this system. And, it's widely available in a range of configurations and price points (although it still hasn't really broken that $200 barrier). Because we're friends, we're going to clue you in on what this wonder-box is called. Ready? It's a PC. There you have it! A solution to all that ails your gaming ills! Happy pie!**

ROCK THE SOCKS

I read your article on the upcoming Resident Evil 4 and was a little bit heartbroken to hear that the Umbrella Corp. and the beloved flesh-eating zombies won't be in this one. Other that those two sad facts, this sequel looks to be pretty interesting.

Dar Man
Seattle, WA

I just read your exclusive on Resident Evil 4. Sweet! I cannot wait to get that game.

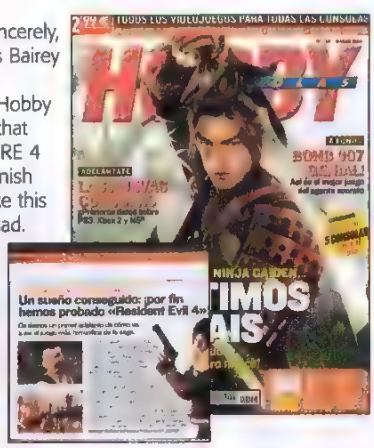
Eric Engel
Via email

Your coverage of Resident Evil 4 in the March 2004 issue was amazing. Although I'm too much of a wuss to actually play the game when it comes out, it might be something to buy – maybe even just to turn it on and get quick glimpses of the beautiful work they did before screaming like a child and turning it off. This certainly is something to look forward to in the future.

Silver Angel
Via email

Great job on your last article on Resident Evil 4 and Killer 7. Capcom is one of my favorite companies, with games like Mega Man, Resident Evil, Viewtiful Joe, and Killer 7 (which will hopefully be another great title). You guys cover the games that we, the gamers, want to hear about. Thanks much!

Sincerely,
Miles Bairey



Included is the Hobby Consolas issue that has your stolen RE 4 article. As a Spanish gamer, things like this make me very sad. Their magazine is pure crap.

Thank you,
Alberto José Lapuente
Spain

■ **Getting the opportunity to cover Resident Evil 4 and Killer 7 before anyone else in the world was a huge honor, and we were really excited to get the information out to everyone. But, as Alberto supplied us proof of, the story was so hot that certain publications and information outlets decided to just scan our article instead of going to the trouble of actually writing. Sending out curtly written requests to remove the loot was kind of fun, though.**

ENVELOPE ART

CHARLES ATKINS
That bunny sure isn't on that "Atkins" diet. Ha ha ha ha! [groan]

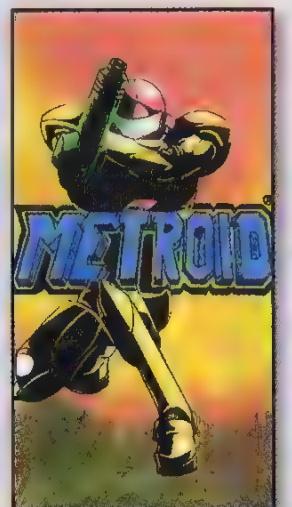
Enter the Game Informer Envelope Art Contest. All you need to do is draw, paint, scratch, spit, or carve the best darn envelope art you can think of and send it to us. Please include your name, phone number, and return address on the back of the envelope. If you're the monthly winner, we'll feature your work in GI and you'll receive a video game prize from the Game Informer vault.

Send to:
Game Informer
Envelope Art Contest
724 1st St. N., 4th Floor
Mpls, MN 55401

MAY WINNER!
MEGAN SIEGEL
These video game wasters look like they are [illegible] Ok...say hi to Whitney Houston for us!

CHARLES FERNANDEZ
Ricky Williams experiences the other end of Samus' technique

GEORGE YOUNG
Kain has a wicked case of b.o.!



JONATHAN SULLIVAN
Samus demonstrates her famous technique for anal probes

RAHEEM R. DADE
Mario and Luigi are going to star in the video adaptation of *Stuck on You*

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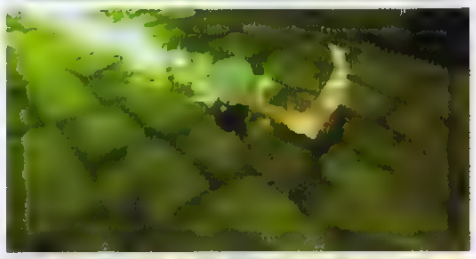
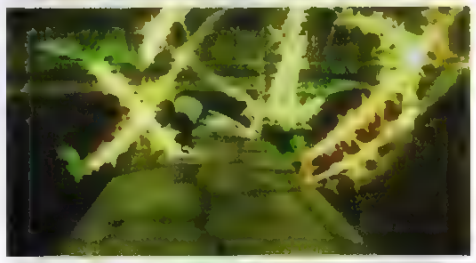
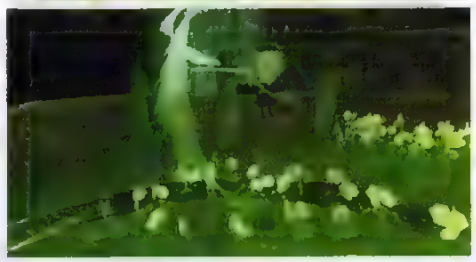
FIRST PSP GAME UNVEILED

SONY ROCKS GDC WITH DEATH JR. AND IDOL APPEARANCE







Not even an appearance by *American Idol*'s William Hung (of "She Bangs" fame) could overshadow the excitement caused at the annual Game Developer's Conference over a showing of the first actual footage of a PlayStation Portable game in action. Hung rocked the house singing along to "Y.M.C.A." while playing the upcoming EyeToy: Groove, but the real fireworks came later when Sony executive vice president of third-party relations and marketing Andrew House, unveiled new details regarding the company's highly anticipated handheld.

After the usual boasts about the system's cutting-edge technology, wireless networking, PS2 connectivity features, and a video montage of various development professionals singing the PSP's praises, House introduced Chris Charla and Mike Mika of Backbone Entertainment, who then showed footage of their upcoming PlayStation Portable-exclusive title Death Jr. A stylized action game in the vein of Tim Burton's *The Nightmare Before Christmas*, the title demonstrated a surprisingly sophisticated look, especially considering that it is far from complete. The footage showed Death Jr. (who is purported to be the son of the Grim Reaper) as he navigated fully 3D levels, decimating enemies with a bazooka-like weapon and his scythe. Graphically, the game already eclipses many PSone products in terms of texturing, and demonstrated jaw-dropping, explosive particle effects.

■ **Sony vice president Andrew House outlined the company's plans for PSP, while *American Idol*'s William Hung (inset) got down with EyeToy: Groove**

Charla also pointed out that the PSP was very easy to create software for, comparing its technology and development tools favorably to the developer-friendly GameCube, commenting that it was "really frickin' fun" to work with. Charla estimated that it would only take around 15 people to create a quality PSP title. He went on to add that "polygon per polygon, [the PSP] is more powerful than the PS2." Although Backbone is still searching for a publisher for Death Jr., the game looks extremely polished, with a highly developed visual style and macabre sense of humor. It's certainly a promising sign of things to come in the future of handheld gaming.

■ **Although a bit blurry, these screens (captured from a live video feed shown at GDC) do give some idea of what the PSP is capable of graphically**

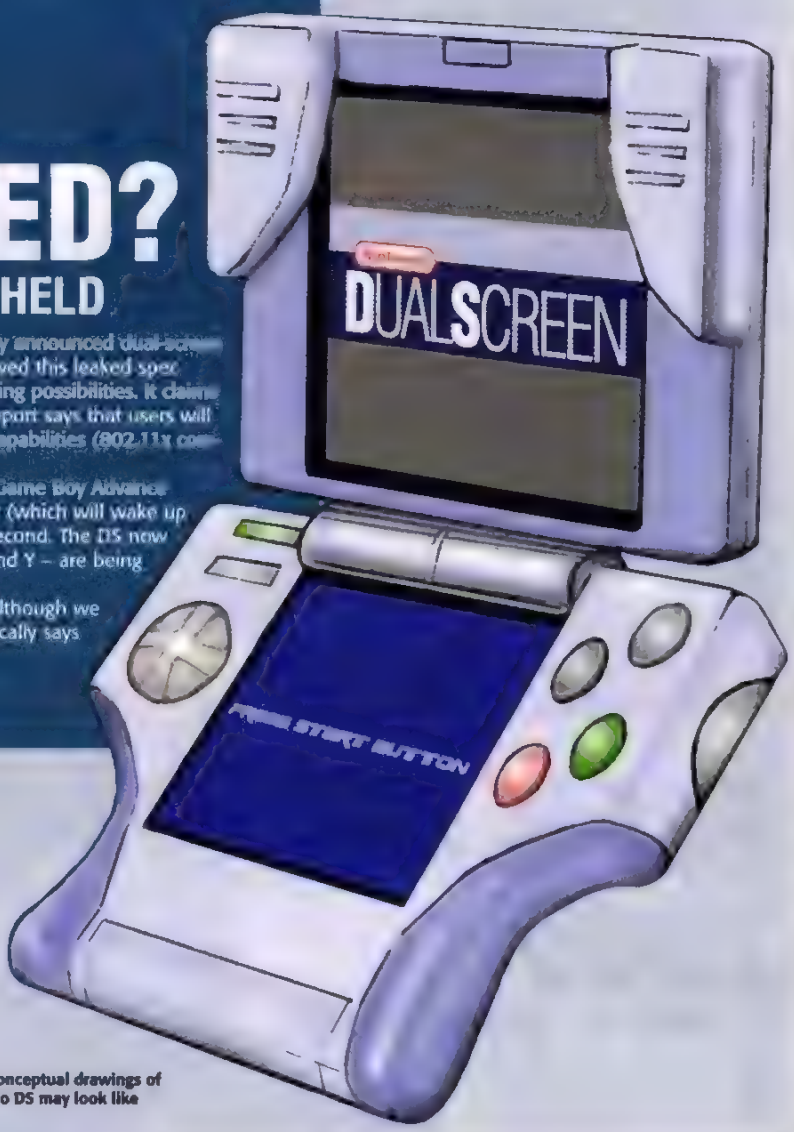
NINTENDO DS SPECS REVEALED?

INFO LEAKED FOR DUAL-SCREEN HANDHELD

Gamers around the world have been wondering what to make of Nintendo's recently announced dual-screen handheld. Some of your questions may have been answered. Game Informer received this leaked spec sheet for the system, codenamed Nitro in this document, which reveals some exciting possibilities. It claims that the DS will feature a touch screen – a first for a portable gaming machine. A CNN report says that users will be able to type out local instant messages with a stylus. The DS will also have wireless capabilities (802.11x compatibility) so gamers can compete with each other at a distance.

The handheld will also feature a higher screen resolution (256x192) than the current Game Boy Advance (240x160), be linkable with 15 other systems, contain a microphone input, a sleep timer (which will wake up for incoming messages), and have a polygon draw rate in 3D of 120,000 polygons per second. The DS now has a d-pad, left and right triggers and A and B buttons. Two additional buttons – an X and Y – are being considered.

Nintendo won't comment on the validity of the spec sheet or the features of the DS, although we expect to see it officially unveiled at E3. However, Nintendo president Satoru Iwata cryptically says the unit "should serve as a hint towards [our] next-generation console."



Here are two conceptual drawings of what the Nintendo DS may look like

CPU Core	
Main Processor	ARM946E-S (67MHz)
Sub Processor	ARM7TDMI (33MHz)
Memory	
Main Memory	4Mbyte (Debugger Use 8Mbyte)
ARM9, ARM7 Shared	32KByte(16KByte×2)
ARM7 Dedicated Internal Work RAM	64KByte
VRAM	656KByte
LCD	
Display Size	256×192 × RGB Dots × 2 Screens
Number of Colors Displayed	[illegible]
2D Graphics Engine (A,B)	
BG	Maximum 4 Layers
OBJ	Maximum 128 Objects
3D Graphics Engine	
Coordinate Transform Capability	Maximum 4M Vertices/second
Polygon Draw Rate	Maximum 120K Polygons/second
Pixel Fill Rate	Maximum 30M Pixels/second
Sound	
	16ch ADPCM/PCM Maximum 8ch allocatable to PSG Microphone Input
Wireless Communication	
	[illegible] proprietary protocol
Input Devices	
	Touch Panel + Key, A, B, R, L, START, SELECT (X,Y under consideration)
Power Management	
	Sleep mode capable (timer set, WakeUp on wireless receive, etc.), Power management capability for 2D engine, rendering engine, geometry engine, and LCD

A scan of the leaked document that may reveal the technology behind the Nintendo DS

games

ESPN NFL 2005

GLORY OF THE GRIDIRON

Sega and developer ESPN Videogames blew the doors off of the football genre last year with the addition of a first-person view to its already fantastic pigskin fun. We're here to give you a first look at ESPN NFL 2005, along with a few tidbits to whet your appetite.

ESPN has put a lot of work into the graphics for this already hot looking momma, including a new specular highlighting system. Furthermore, the company tells us that just one of the many improvements to first-person football is the new passing control. Couldn't get enough of The Crib last year? 2005 will bring you double the amount of unlockables to pimp out your pad with. There will be other new features on the gameplay front, but all the developer would tell us is that the picture on the right hints at some new bump-and-run coverage options for the defense. Of course, this, as they say, is just the tip of the iceberg. Keep your head on a swivel for more details soon.

DATA FILE

More News You Can Use

QUAKECON ON!

id Software has announced the dates and location of the 9th annual QuakeCon festival and tournament, which will be held August 12-15 at the Gaylord Texan Resort & Convention Center in Grapevine, Texas.

SATURDAY MORNING GBA

Majesco is touting its Game Boy Advance Video technology with the signing of *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, *Sonic X*, and other Fox Box shows to appear on the GBA or GBA SP. This technology allows up to 45 minutes of color video on a standard cartridge.

SOUL CALIBUR MOVIE

American Pie and *Final Destination* producer Warren Zide has snapped up the film rights to Soul Calibur. Wonder if Stifler's mom will square off against Ivy!

GUERILLA GOES SONY

Killzone and ShellShock developer Guerilla Games will make titles exclusively for Sony in the future.

SCIENTIFIC'S SET-TOP BOX

Cable expert Scientific Atlanta is looking at making a set-top box capable of playing games. Atlanta promises "the same performance" that gamers get out of other home consoles.

ENLIGHT GETS MCGEE

Alice creator and former id Software level designer American McGee has signed on to be a creative director for Enlight Software. McGee will spearhead rounding up creative developmental talent for Enlight, and will maintain his own work with his company Carbon6.

MAX BACK FOR MORE PAYNE

Despite less than expected sales of the sequel, Rockstar Games is pushing forward with Max Payne 3. Word has it that developer Remedy Entertainment will not be back at the helm.

NINTENDO BACK IN COURT

Using a patent filed over three years ago, Nintendo is attempting to block the Firestorm gbaZ Game Boy Advance emulator for Palm OS-based units, including Tapwave's Zodiac handheld.

FABLE'S KUNG-FU FIGHTING

With his spare time from being an artist on Fable, Mark Healey is developing Rag Doll Kung Fu. Onscreen combatants are controlled by your mouse, and have no pre-scripted animations. Healey wants to have the game on Lionhead's website this fall. Now go back to making Fable, you slave.

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Fantasy Violence
Suggestive Themes

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DOLBY DIGITAL

PlayStation®2

news

EA CALLS UPON THE GODFATHER

FIRST M-RATED CONSOLE GAME?

We were shocked this morning when we found a horse's head in our bed, but that was nothing compared to our surprise when we heard that Electronic Arts was going to dive into the mature-rated market with an adaptation of Francis Ford Coppola's seminal adaptation of the Mario Puzo gangster novel *The Godfather*.

Speaking at a conference in Florida, Warren Jensen, chief financial officer for EA said, "I think many of you know that we are developing The Godfather" Jensen went on to to say that the title will "likely be an M-rated game." Until now, Electronic Arts has stayed away from the 17-and-over ESRB designation on its console titles, choosing to erase the blood even from war games such as Medal of Honor, which bears a Teen rating. It will be interesting to see how EA fares against an established heavyweight like the Grand Theft Auto series now that the publisher is hitting the mature audience with this mainstream game.

Details such as release date, platform, and gameplay features have not been divulged yet, but Game Informer has heard that The Godfather will make a big splash next month at E3. We just hope Sofia Coppola doesn't ruin this game like *The Godfather Part III*.

R & D

Game Informer brings the world's worst game ideas to life

Uwe Boll: The Video Game Adventure

Talentless director Uwe Boll sure has a thing for video games. First, he inflicted the cinematic lesion that is *House of the Dead* upon the world, and then he started snapping up the film rights to any game he could get his hands on. He owns the rights to Hunter: The Reckoning, Dungeon Siege, Far Cry, and more. The director's adaptation of Alone in the Dark is currently shooting, and features the "talents" of Christian Slater and Tara Reid. Obviously, Boll loves games, so it seems only natural that he should star in one. We have the perfect idea for him: a stealth/action title. In this game, players would take on the role of Boll. Using his stealth abilities, Boll must spy on customers in game stores to see what they are buying so he can pick up the rights to the most popular titles and ruin them with horrid movies. Play too cautiously, and you won't learn what's really selling. But if you get caught, the enraged gamers will beat you to death for desecrating their favorite franchises. We think this is a really great idea for a game, and the best part is that if it's a hit, Uwe can buy the rights to his own game and turn it into yet another sub-par film!

THE GOOD, THE BAD, THE UGLY

When You Want Your News Categorized With An Editorial Sarcastic Spin

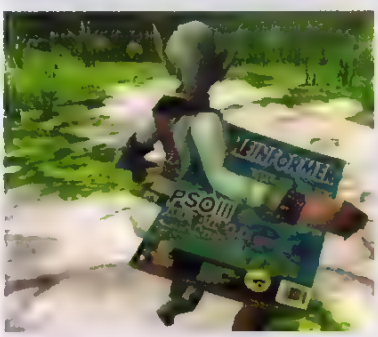
BAD

Castle Wolfenstein creator and Muse Software co-founder Silas Warner passed away after a battle with kidney disease. His widow said, "No one was more loved than my husband; the comments of his industry colleagues lead me to believe no one was more respected."

GOOD

Microsoft takes the plunge and lowers the price of the Xbox to $149. Also up for grabs are a clutch of new Platinum Hits games such as Crimson Skies, High Road to Revenge, Project Gotham Racing 2, and Counter-Strike.

Snoop Dogg played a snitch in *Starsky & Hutch*, and he's selling his own services when it comes to video games. Snoop Dogg Boxing will be available for download in late April for major Java and BREW handsets.



GOOD

On April 22, Sega's Phantasy Star Online Episode III: C.A.R.D. Revolution will send players on a special Game Informer quest. Reiner tells you to go out and find Andy Mac and Lisa, who have been missing for weeks. Those that complete the quest will get a special Game Informer card called "Hung Up," which restricts the MVP of surrounding characters. By the way, when you see Reiner, poke him in the eye for us.

GREAT

What was once old is totally freakin' new again! Nintendo is releasing a limited-edition Game Boy Advance SP modeled after the NES on June 7. The Classic NES series will also feature eight vintage titles, including Super Mario Bros., The Legend of Zelda, Excitebike, and others for $19.99 each.

Vicarious Visions CEO Karthik Bala has confirmed that its Xbox port of Doom 3 will give console players an exclusive mode. A buddy can join you through the single-player campaign for some co-op fun.

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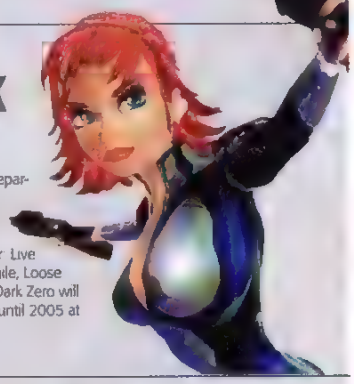
LOOSE TALK

Hot Gaming Gossip

ODDWORLD'S XBOX FALLOUT?

In some promotional materials for The Game Developer's Conference, developer Oddworld Inhabitants passed out materials with the saying, "Oddworld just got Stranger." True. Word is that the studio has split its ties with Microsoft Game Studios, who won't be publishing the probably 2005 title. This is a long way from the cozy relationship that the pair built up preceding the launch of the Xbox and the subsequent failure of once-marquee title Munch's Oddysee. The developer's new game may use "Stranger" in its title, which is the name of its central, Clint Eastwood-inspired character

PERFECT DARK 2005?



There has been talk that developer Rare is preparing three titles for release this year on both the Xbox and Game Boy Advance. What's notable is what won't be included in that trio. While Kameo: Elements of Power and Conker Live and Uncut have been kicking around for a while, Loose Talk has heard that the long-awaited Perfect Dark Zero will not be at this year's E3, and won't come out until 2005 at the earliest.

NEW TEST DRIVE IN 2004

Drummers, by nature, aren't very smart, but we're glad that ex-Fear Factory's skin man Raymond Herrera has a big mouth. Herrera says that the band's been working on a song for Atari's Test Drive: Cross-Town. The game will apparently be released this year for all the major consoles.

POSTAL 2 DELIVERS TO CONSOLES

Loose Talk has heard that the Running With Scissors development crew is working on bringing its mix of irreverent humor and gunplay from the PC to the consoles. Gary Coleman: Bigger than ever, same small size

Got some insider info? Email us at loosetalk@gamefan.com and we'll be all ears.

NAME THAT GAME

Test Your Sight

In 2001, Final Fantasy maker Square (as it used to be called) created a big budget PS2 fighter/RPG with the help of Tobal developers Dream Factory. The game wasn't very good, but it did expose Square's hatred of cacti (as shown on Volt's jacket). We know what they mean. We once tried to rub some cactus aloe on a rash we had, but nobody told us the lotion is from the inside of the cactus and not the outside. Ouch. Anyway, do you know this game or not?

(Answer on page 28)

news

XNA BRINGS XBOX, PC CLOSER TOGETHER

MICROSOFT PLATFORM TO GUIDE ALL FUTURE DEVELOPEMENT

In a presentation on the first day of The Game Developer's Conference, Microsoft unveiled the XNA software development platform. It will offer common technologies between different Microsoft platforms and be used to design software for the company's current and future systems, including Xbox Next, Windows, and Windows-based mobile devices. XNA will enable studios to keep production costs down, save time, and help keep up with the changing nature of developing games among the differing systems. Cross-platform play between the PC and Xbox (and/or Xbox Next) is also expected.

Microsoft says that studios will be able to utilize more of a stable development platform instead of having a steep learning curve where the best of what a system can offer will only appear at the end of its life. Says J. Allard, corporate vice president for Xbox, "Now, by creating this environment, we're really giving the development community an arsenal of tools to work together and XNA is really going to allow people to focus on the parts that matter."

Microsoft says that over 20 development and middleware companies, including the likes of Valve and Criterion, are already on board with the platform. BioWare CEO Dr. Ray Muzyka wants others to follow Microsoft's lead. "It's the kind of thing every hardware manufacturer should be doing if they want great games and want to command developer support."

XNA's theme of convergence will be reflected in the company's merging of technologies between the PC and Xbox. Microsoft plans to give Windows developers Xbox Live-style security, billing, and matchmaking; graphics and audio tools now used only on the Xbox; and both platforms will soon share a common controller like today's Controller S.

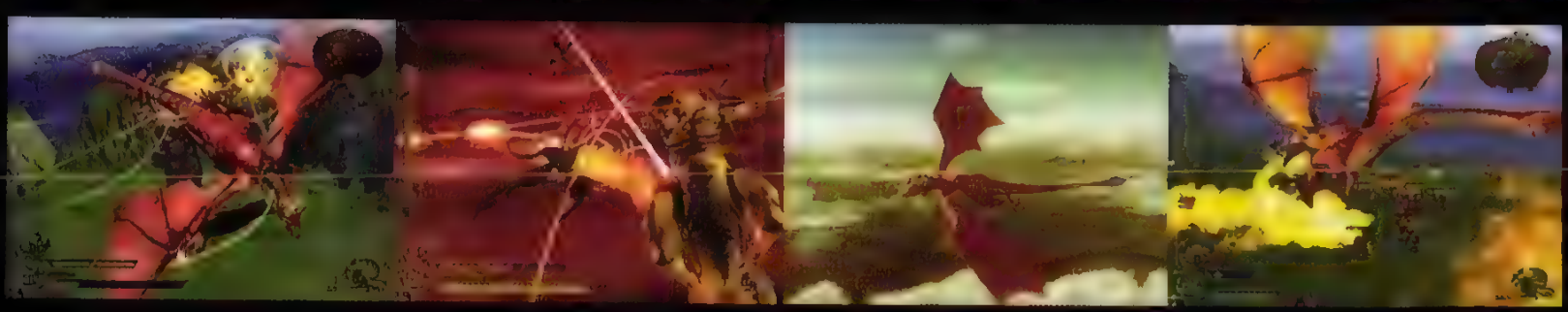
In a presentation to attendees, Allard and Robbie Bach, chief Xbox officer, not only explained the benefits of XNA, but also showed some demonstrations of the platform through a Windows XP PC with next generation ATI hardware. Using a Controller S through the PC, Laura Fryer (Xbox technology director) and Chris Donahue (lead technical evangelist for Windows gaming) showed some real-time demos, starting with one from High Voltage. It showed a gorilla morphing smoothly into various other animals. The focus of this was the audio. Using XNA, developer High Voltage was able to frontload it and let the creators integrate it with the demo's other elements at the same time, instead of dropping it in at the end as an afterthought.

Next was a demo of Eva, a film-noir femme fatale, who was created by a Microsoft team merging tools like HLSL (formerly PC-only) and XACT (once only for Xbox). Eva showed off spectacular reflections of light and self-shadowing.

Lastly, Microsoft showed the crowd a presentation put together by Pseudo Interactive showing a sleek sports car in a test laboratory. It then was sent racing off to crash headlong into a cement cube to show some great physics and particle effects. This was repeated several times, each impact having different crumpling effects on the car.

Microsoft says that XNA-enabled developer kits will be available this summer to studios.

Death from Above



Rain destruction on your foes from the back of a flying, fire-breathing dragon.
Dogfight airborne enemies in 360 degrees within massive environments.

news

THE TRUTH AND CONSEQUENCES OF DRUG USE IN VIDEO GAMES

MIDWAY'S NEW GAME KICKS OFF CONTROVERSY?

A screen from Midway's NARC

As video games take more and more of a prominent place in our culture and amongst the youth of this country, our industry and its games have come under more scrutiny from parents' groups and politicians. Whether the issue is violence in video games or the selling of inappropriate titles to minors, what we play is being monitored and discussed at kitchen tables and on legislature floors across the country. Now a new topic of contention may have just entered the arena: drug use in video games. Game Informer has seen a preview version of Midway's NARC for PlayStation 2 and Xbox, which features the main characters' use of the illegal drugs marijuana, LSD, crack cocaine, and speed. Is this going too far? Or is it just more evidence of the maturing and realistic nature of video games today?

NARC puts you in the role of a pair of cops out to stop a new drug called Liquid Soul. Along the way, the game presents you with choices. Some criminals you arrest will drop drugs for you to confiscate. NARC differs from other gritty crime games in that narcotics aren't just the subject matter; they can be ingested and become an important – but not mandatory – part of the gameplay (you can also purchase them from dealers or sell them). If you decide to smoke some pot, for example, the player will notice both positive and negative effects. You will go into "weed time," which puts the player into a slow-motion *Matrix*-like state. The downside, as with all drug use in the game, is that if you use it too much you will not only become addicted (which is a gameplay mechanic all its own), but you could overdose. Furthermore, your badge rating will fall, resulting in good cops coming after you in the streets. Midway's vice president of development, Steve Crane, points out that NARC is all about realism. "Real life is our guide in such matters. You have choices. Choices have consequences. As long as the consequences are realistic, we felt comfortable offering them."

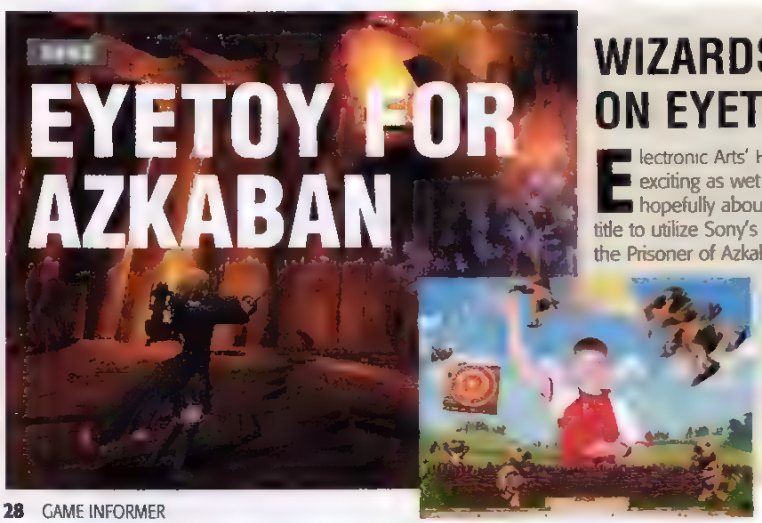
Choice is something gamers crave, but NARC is sure to invite controversy and bring up the age-old question as to whether content influences players' real-life behavior. Industry groups such as the Entertainment Software Association have historically denied a connection between violence in video games and society (the ESA couldn't comment for the purposes of this story), but are drugs a different matter? When you consider that violence in video games has been long-standing throughout the industry's history, and it is utilized far more than drug use up to this point, one wonders whether Midway is opening a new can of worms altogether. Particularly since NARC's use of narcotics is so pervasive and illegal and not merely using a medkit to heal a character. Furthermore, the bottom line is that violence is simply tolerated more in our society than illegal drugs.

However, Crane argues that an individual's own responsibility is still at the core of the matter, whether it stops people from taking crack or killing people in the streets. "[NARC doesn't promote drug use] any more than I think this game (or any shooter) advocates shooting people to solve your problems. If anything, it demonstrates rather vividly the consequences of your choices. I'd hope that people try to play the game in several different ways. We've put a lot of effort into making that possible, and that's why the choices are there in the first place."

Unfortunately, in an election year, we wonder if this view will be enough to keep the politicians at bay. The game releases in September, and Midway tells us that even though the drug portion of NARC did very well in the focus tests the publisher ran, some elements – such as whether to use the actual names of the drugs or generic substitutes – can still be changed. The ESRB has seen the game and appropriately rated it Mature, with the necessary content descriptors to warn consumers. An Xbox spokesperson told us that it trusts the ESRB's rating system and for players to make up their own minds. "Xbox appeals to a broad audience of game players and, like all forms of entertainment, not every game is appropriate for every player." In the end, the buying public will have to determine just how ready video games are for illegal drug usage in their living rooms.

news

EYETOY FOR AZKABAN



WIZARDS HOOKED ON EYETOY

Electronic Arts' Harry Potter games have been about as exciting as wet noodles until now, but the EyeToy is hopefully about to change all that. The first third-party title to utilize Sony's hit camera peripheral, Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban will feature four minigames using the EyeToy on the PlayStation 2. Squish chocolate frogs, catch the Golden Snitch, avoid dungbombs in Zonko's Joke Shop, and even play a game of Exploding Snap. Prisoner of Azkaban also lets players control Ron and Hermione for the first time as the trio unravels the mystery of escaped killer Sirius Black.

TOP FIVES

Favorites From Industry Pros And GI Readers

DEVELOPER

LYLE HALL
General Manager
Heavy Iron Studios

1 Super Mario Bros. 3 – NES
2 Phantasy Star – Sega Master System
3 Final Fantasy III – SNES
4 Guardian Heroes – Sega Saturn
5 Wing Commander – PC

READER

SEAN BORIS
Maple Grove, MN

1 Chrono Trigger – SNES
2 The Legend of Zelda: A Link to the Past – SNES
3 Final Fantasy VII – PSone
4 Shenmue – DC
5 Grandia – PSone

Send Top Fives and a photo of yourself to.

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Minneapolis, MN 55401-9022
email: topfive@gameinformer.com
(attach digital picture)

TOP TEN

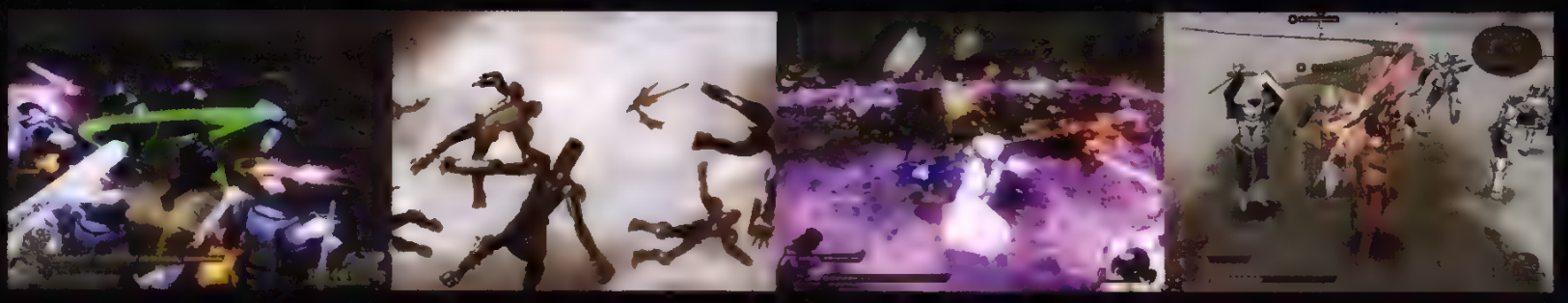
Lists...Everybody Loves Lists

Top Ten Things We Wish We Could Forget

10 The first time we played Devil May Cry 2
9 That time at the karaoke bar where Kato and Reiner did a duet of "Just Like Paradise" and looked lovingly into each other's eyes
8 Our GBA running out of batteries in the middle of our cousin's Catholic wedding
7 Joe Juba's album, "Pieces of Juba"
6 Losing at SOCOM 2 to a guy named "PinkFairy27"
5 Being held hostage by an enraged Nintendo fan who forced us to play Mario Party 5 for 72 hours straight
4 Watching Jeremy try to play Dance Dance Revolution
3 Nokia's all-night N-Gage slumber party
2 Michael Jackson's admission that he really, really, really likes Link
1 The Men of Game Informer Swimsuit Calendar

Name That Game Answer: The Bouncer

Crush vast armies with the might of your steel and magic.
As the legions fall, your strength, skills and spells will increase.



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CONTENT RATED BY ESRB
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Violence

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PlayStation.2

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JOHN SCHAPPERT

SENIOR VICE PRESIDENT/GENERAL MANAGER | EA CANADA

>> John Schappert may not be a household name, but as the head of EA Canada, he's the man directly responsible for the largest game production studio on the planet. Recently, GI talked with Schappert about EA's past, present, and future. <<

CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

1992 ▼ Desert Strike

John Schappert begins his long relationship with Electronic Arts as a programmer, crafting the SNES version of Desert Strike: Return to the Gulf

1993 ▼ Madden NFL '94

As part of a two-man team, Schappert exclusively handles the coding of the super-successful SNES titles Madden NFL '94 and Bill Walsh College Football

1994 ▼ Birth of Tiburon

In September, Schappert becomes one of the founding members of Tiburon Entertainment, along with partners Jason Anderson and Steve Chiang

1996 ▼ A Huge Hit

Tiburon releases Madden NFL '97 for PlayStation and Saturn. It's a huge hit, becoming the fastest selling PSone title released to date

1998 ▼ EA Nabs Tiburon

Tiburon Entertainment is acquired by Electronic Arts. Schappert steps down as President of Tiburon, and becomes as vice president at EA, as well as the general manager of the newly named EA Tiburon

2000 ▼ Madden NFL 2001

EA Tiburon releases Madden NFL 2001 for the launch of PS2. The game sells to over 50 percent of the installed base of the PS2 at the time

2002 ▼ Up To Canada

Schappert leaves Tiburon and becomes senior vice president, as well as the general manager of Electronic Arts Canada, the world's largest game production studio. There, he oversees the creation of many top sellers, including the company's new Def Jam Vendetta franchise

So, what's going on with John Schappert and EA Canada right now?
We just shipped MVP Baseball. It was the first baseball game shipped this year, and we were very happy with week one sales. We have a whole lot going on. We're going to deliver about half the games that come out of EA this year, so we're awful, awful busy. We signed the Marvel license, so we're working on a Marvel fighting game that will probably come out in the next calendar year. That's exciting for us. We've also announced Def Jam 2.

EA dominates the software market like no other company ever has...what does EA know that the other companies don't?
Well, you have to deliver high quality games. There are only so many $50 bills in people's wallets, and they have to be pretty discerning. When they walk into a store looking at the Tony Hawks of the world, the Maddens of the world, the Need for Speeds of the world -- why would they buy your game over some of those titles? We only want to make big hits. We make fewer games and make more out of each one of them. I think if you look at the other publishers you've seen over the past few years, many of them have trimmed back their plans and said, "We're going to do fewer, bigger titles." We were on this a long time ago; it's not rocket science. The challenge is simply executing that plan.

There is a perception, at least with a certain sector of hardcore gamers, that EA is a bit of a soulless, giant corporation. They'll say, "All they do is make a ton of money off sports and signing big franchises like Harry Potter and The Lord of the Rings – EA doesn't take the risks to make the truly groundbreaking, visionary games." Does that bother you?
I'd argue that, if you look at the number of new franchises that we have made, they often don't give us the credit that we're due. Looking at the studio I work for, EA Canada, since the inception of the PlayStation 2, we've created no less than three franchises: NBA Street, Def Jam Vendetta, and SSX. All three are great, critically acclaimed titles that have done well in the marketplace.

So, we come out with a game like Def Jam Vendetta and it does really well for us, the market's excited, and we think, "Gosh, there's so much we still want to do with that game that we couldn't do in the first one." The team that's working on a sequel that the market demands, that consumers want, that team could be working on a new franchise. But we can only make so many games. But the millions of people that play Madden and FIFA each year -- those are the people we need to make sure we're taking care of. Then, we can think about making new franchises. And when we can, like in our upcoming Marvel fighting game, we will.

One thing that people speculate now and again is the possibility of Electronic Arts entering the console market. Do you ever see this happening?
Anything can happen, I'll give you that. But, if you look at where we are in terms of all the different categories, I think there is still so much room for growth. I'll go back to the [sales] data. EA is a huge company, but what's the biggest category? Action games. Our share of the action market is 10 percent. That's the largest category on PlayStation 2. The second largest is sports, we have a majority share of that. The third largest is racing; we've got 27 percent coverage of that. Then you've got fighting; we don't have a large share of that, less than 10 percent. Then you've got RPGs. I just named five categories. Of those five categories, we've got less than 10 percent in two, no coverage in one – RPGs, and majority coverage in two – racing and sports. There's still room for improvement. There's still so much we can do in software, that I don't see us getting out of our core market.

You were one of the founders of Tiburon Entertainment. Why did you move on from Tiburon? Was that a difficult decision?
Yes, it was very difficult. I founded Tiburon with a couple of other guys. It's a great studio, they are wonderful people, and there are great franchises there. I was there for eight years, and it was very hard to leave. What was exciting was the opportunity to come to a new place with an amazing amount of resources and franchises. With me coming up here, I still have a strong partnership with Steve Chiang and the folks at Tiburon, so you saw all our sports titles go online last year. That was through a concerted effort between Tiburon and EA Canada.

We've heard that PSP and Nintendo DS tools are out there already in the development community. Does EA Canada have anything in the works for these systems? Also, what's your take on these systems?
We can't really talk about hardware or prototypes that we're under NDAs with the manufacturers regarding. I can tell you that we're very excited about the PlayStation Portable. I think it's going to be a great machine for the portable market. We are already looking at getting games over to that system. I'd like to say we'll be supportive of the PSP, but there is no business deal worked out yet. But, just as a video game fan, I'm excited about it and I'd like to make games for it.

EA has worked exclusively with Sony in the arena of console online play. Do you foresee working out your problems with Microsoft?
I think it would be wonderful if we could get the Xbox Live issue resolved, and I hope that we can. I know both our companies continue to talk about that issue.

> ***"I'm excited about [PSP] and I'd like to make games for it."***

What are some the issues you're discussing?
Well, some of the issues are who owns the relationship with customers, and ownership of servers. Sony's structure is a benign online model. We have a great EA.com business that has a huge infrastructure, big pipelines to the Internet, big server farms, so it's easy for us to tap into that. We have our own servers that run our games, we have our EA Sports Nations and EA Games Nation with unified logins and gamespace – it's a nice little community that we've created. Sony's said, "Hey you want to go online? Here's an adaptor -- go online." Microsoft has been a little more planned and has a few more rules. So, right now, our companies are disagreeing in the approach.

Can Nintendo continue in the home console business in the long term, competing with companies the size of Sony and Microsoft?
I think what Nintendo needs to do, and what they've always had as their trump card, is their first-party software. The GameCube hasn't been a runaway success, and they've been a little slow in getting out their first-party titles. Zelda and Mario last year certainly helped drive sales of that machine, along with the price drop. Remember when the Nintendo 64 came out and Mario 64 was the launch title? What a great game. Sadly, you look at the GameCube launch and I don't think we had titles of that caliber. It took a year to get our Mario, and it was a little late. We'd all spent our money buying the Xbox and PS2. ■ ■ ■

Who knew they had bamboo in Canada?

EA CANADA'S COMMANDER

Jerry Zovius

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tech

N-GAGE QD

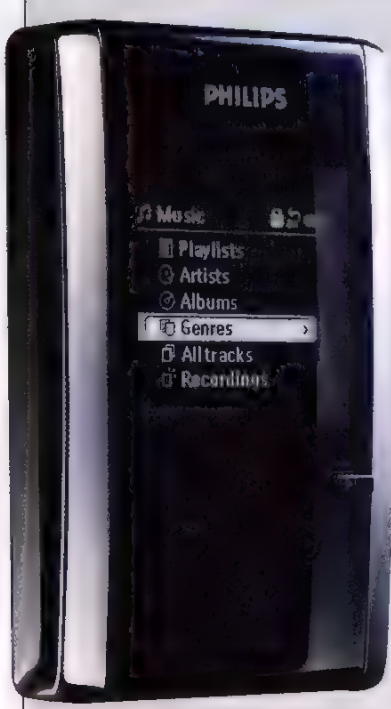
Manufacturer: Nokia **Website:** www.nokia.com **List Price:** $200

Nokia has announced and produced working prototypes for an addition to its N-Gage gaming platform/cell phone line. The QD (the initials purposely stand for and mean nothing) is expected to release this summer and be fully compatible with all existing N-Gage software. Think of the QD as an alternate shell for the same N-Gage.

WHAT'S NEW:
- Smaller form factor (shaving off a few grams in weight and a noticeable couple of millimeters on each side)
- A Check button to make selections (instead of pushing the middle of the directional pad, which was cumbersome)
- Hot-swappable MMC card slot for changing games on the fly
- Software that automatically starts a game when the card is put in
- Single-plug stereo headphone jack

WHAT'S MISSING:
- Side-talking capabilities – the speaker and microphone are now on the face of the phone
- Built-in MP3 player software (you can still download a third-party player off of the Internet from a number of websites that support the QD's OS)
- FM tuner
- Tri-band capabilities, which means that although it will work nearly everywhere in North America, Europe would be a dead zone (the QD is GSM 850/1900)
- Almost $100 dollars from the original's launch price

The QD's hot-swappable card slot – which means that you can change games without shutting down. Finally!



tech

HDD120 MUSIC PLAYER

Manufacturer: Philips
Website: www.philips.com
List Price: $349

Philips' newest hard-drive based music player packs high-end features into the world's smallest audio recording music player. The hdd120 model offers 20 GB of storage (around 5,000 MP3s or 10,000 WMA tunes), a rechargeable battery that plays for about ten hours per charge, and three different audio recording options. An internal microphone coupled with external analog-line, digital-optical, and secondary microphone inputs can be used for voice memos, live-session music recording, or track mixing. Finding tunes, editing recordings, and managing multiple equalizers is handled with the four face buttons that zip through the player's options.

peripheral

STELLADAPTOR 2600

Manufacturer: Pixels Past/AtariAge
Website: www.atariage.com
List Price: $29.99

It's certainly not sexy in appearance, but this adapter lets you use standard Atari 2600 controllers with modern computers through USB and an emulator.

toys

HORIZONS: EMPIRES OF ISTARIA ACTION FIGURES

Manufacturer: Radioactive Clown
Website: www.radioactiveclown.com
List Price: $9.99 – $12.99

This PC MMORPG finally lets you play as a dragon, and Radioactive Clown is now offering said creatures (along with other in-game characters) as high-quality figures. In addition, each comes with an encrypted key code that unlocks exclusive items that can be used, traded, or sold within the game.

pc

SATELLITE P25-S609 MEDIA CENTER NOTEBOOK PC

Manufacturer: Toshiba
Website: www.toshiba.com
List Price: $2,599.00

Truly a desktop replacement, this "notebook" weighs in just shy of 10 lbs. Unwieldy for commuters, but with more power than many desktops PCs out there, gamers will appreciate three big features of this model: an nVidia GeForce FX GO5200 graphics chip, the vivid 17-inch wide-screen display, and Microsoft Windows XP Media Center Edition OS. To use the Xbox Media Extender Kit that the company announced at CES, you'll need Media Center OS, and the P25 has it preinstalled for your personal file-sharing pleasure.

SPECS:
- 3.0 GHz Intel Pentium 4
- 1024 MB DDR SDRAM (expandable to 2048 MB)
- 80 GB IDE Hard Disk
- Microsoft XP Media Center Edition
- 17-inch active-matrix display
- Harmon/Kardon stereo speakers
- Integrated 802.11 a/g wireless networking, 10/100 Ethernet port, and 56k modem

etc

ROBOSAPIEN

Manufacturer: Wow Wee Toys Ltd.
Website: www.wowwee.com
List Price: $99

Granted, at 14 inches high, he's not the most intimidating fellow, but Robosapien can trip the light fantastic with some custom dance moves, navigate rooms without help, and pick up small items (like those dirty socks you threw on the floor three months ago). If only he had a giant laser on his head...

peripheral

ONIMUSHA 3 SOUL CONTROLLER

Manufacturer: Hori **Website:** www.hori.ne.jp
List Price: 14,800 yen (around $135 USD)

Spendy, and from the looks of it, a little goofy to use, but Onimusha fans (who have historically spent generously for franchise-inspired baubles) will certainly appreciate this katana-styled controller. Set to launch in Japan with the game, Hori has pronounced their intentions to bring the unit to American gamers along with Onimusha 3's launch stateside.

tech

WRIST NET SMART WATCH FOR MSN DIRECT

Manufacturer: Fossil
Website: www.fossil.com
List Price: $179.99 – $199.99

There's nothing that this watch line can do that other devices can't take care of (and sometimes in a more informative or graceful manner), but that doesn't mean that the geek joy factor isn't extremely high. We tested out the Abacus model in the rough-and-tumble world of downtown Minneapolis. There's a lot to cover about this device, so for more specifics go to direct.msn.com.

The Dick Tracy watch (shown here) is one of many models available, most of which are a little more subdued

Hour 1 – After charging the watch (which we did nightly thereafter because the charger is a handy display device that looks pretty cool), we followed the quickie directions. Finding the registration code for the watch, setting up a Passport account, and coughing up dough for the monthly service fee (around $5 a month) took less than 15 minutes. Quick indeed.

Hour 2 – The watch has synchronized with an atomic clock, offered us a new clock face, and supplied us with weather reports for Minneapolis, San Francisco, LA, and Tokyo. We also got some rudimentary stock reports along with quick and dirty versions of the news headlines.

Day 2 – Watch beeps. We're getting a news flash about the verdict in the Martha Stewart case, which closed minutes ago. This is cool. The amusement factor of constantly switching between channels and annoyingly telling everyone the current NASDAQ index is starting to wear on friends and family.

End of Week 1 – The novelty has faded a bit, but the weather reports, constant news feed, and sports scores are still handy and interesting. We've wrestled with a few annoyances (IMs being delayed and having to tell MSN when we'll be out of our home area to get Calendar and Messenger notices), but the service is generally quick and surprisingly useful.

A SHIFT IN THE GAME

BY STEVE KENT
AUTHOR, *THE FIRST QUARTER*

The video game industry is undergoing a fundamental shift. Classic companies such as Nintendo, Sega, Square, and Capcom are stumbling all over themselves while relative newbies such as Take 2 (a.k.a. Rockstar Games) and Sony Computer Entertainment reshape the definition of gaming.

Does playing Grand Theft Auto make you a gamer? I don't know. Does eating at Taco Bell make you a Mexican?

Don't get me wrong. I raved about how cool GTA 3 and Vice City were along with everybody else. But in the past, gamers had their own definition of cool. We thought it was cool when Mario turned metal and sank to the bottom of the lake. We thought it was cool when E. Honda did a belly flop on Chun-Li.

The rest of the world shook its head at us in disgust. The difference with Grand Theft Auto is that it is chic in that universally accepted, Quentin Tarantino-type of way that only Puritans and politicians ignore. (Gamers may be nerds, but they are neither Puritanical nor political.) You do not need to be a gamer to appreciate most of what comes out of Electronic Arts, either.

Make no mistake, EA makes a good product. I would go so far as to say that EA is the most dependable company in gaming today. (Nintendo used to be the most dependable publisher; but after Super Mario Sunshine, Kirby Air Ride, Star Fox Adventures, and the whole "connectivity fiasco," questions about Nintendo's sanity can no longer be ignored). But Electronic Arts prospers by making games for the majority. These days, when it comes to video game playing, gamers are in the minority.

PROFITS AND LOSSES:

Over the last decade, I have shown an amazing propensity to pick last-place consoles. What do Saturn, Dreamcast, and GameCube all have in common? A) They all did poorly. B) They all suffered from technological inferiority. C) I picked each as my favorite console at the time of its launch.

PlayStation and Xbox are engineering marvels, but do the above-named consoles have gaming in their souls? I doubt PlayStation 2 even has a soul. What it has is DVD playback and a well-rounded library. The mainstream likes watching DVDs and respects a good library. As for soul, don't count on the public that made Clay Aiken's *Measure of a Man* double-platinum to care much about soul.

In the meantime, the companies that cut their teeth pandering to gamers are taking it in the shorts. EA sold over 4 million copies of Madden NFL across all platforms this year. In the meantime, Capcom has sold approximately 202,000 units of its critically-acclaimed Viewtiful Joe since it debuted late last year. Ubisoft moved more than 718,000 copies of Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time across all three platforms – but for one of the most awarded games of the year, this is a disappointment (and it's hard to say how much of the title's sales boost was because of the company's free Splinter Cell tie-in over the holidays). THQ's Sphinx and the Cursed Mummy has sold a pitiful 140,000 since early November across the major consoles.

But do not cry for THQ or Ubisoft. THQ, with its WWE franchise, and Ubisoft, with its ultra-chic Clancy games, are almost sure to survive in any market.

Sega, however, may not be able to save itself, not even with genius designers like Yu Suzuki (Virtua Fighter, Shenmue), Yuji Naka (Sonic, Samba de Amigo), and Toshihiro Nagoshi (F-Zero GX, Super Monkey Ball). Other high-profile companies such as Namco, Capcom, and very possibly Nintendo are in the same boat. They seem unable to adjust to a market in which nerds are in the minority.

> "...don't count on the public that made Clay Aiken's *Measure of a Man* double-platinum to care much about soul."

IS THERE HOPE FOR OLD SCHOOL GAMERS? YES AND NO.

If the market remains as it is today, some companies can preserve their identities and save themselves by accepting the reality that they will never have the best-selling game of the year. They will become boutique publishers such as SNK. SNK always makes a profit on King of Fighters, no matter how badly Soul Calibur II outsells it. There's still a strong market for a good Mario Kart game, even if it is not as big as the market waiting for Gran Turismo 4.

And then there is that hateful hope – the hope that mainstream gamers are simply tourists who will lose interest in gaming just as they lost interest in Razor scooters and boy bands. Mainstream interest in video games has certainly come and gone before.

In the meantime, hardcore gamers, get used to the company and enjoy these chic new games. After all, Madden NFL and The Lord of the Rings really are great titles – as long as they don't crowd out the likes of Prince of Persia and Viewtiful Joe. ■■■

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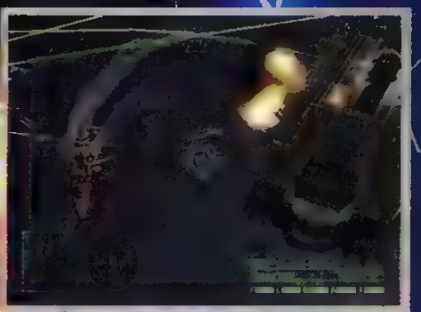

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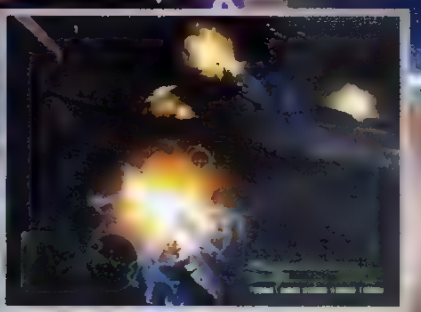

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PlayStation®2

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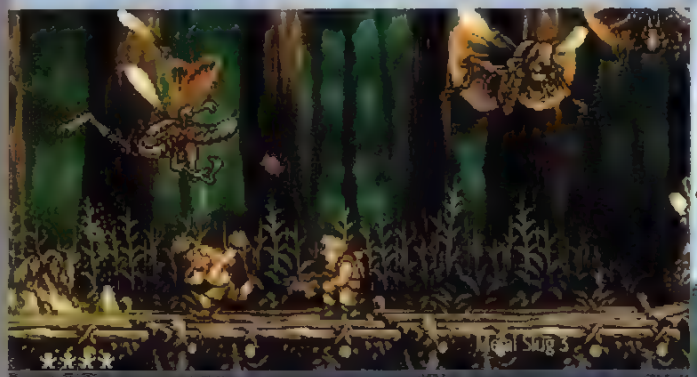

01

02

03

NEW RELEASES
- Rent-a-Hero No. 1 – Xbox
- Samurai Warriors – PS2

04

NEW RELEASES
- La Pucelle: Tactics – PS2
- Metal Slug 3 – Xbox
- RalliSport Challenge 2 – Xbox
- Shrek 2 – PS2, Xbox, GC, GBA
- Syphon Filter: The Omega Strain – PS2

07

HUGH JACKMAN SAVES THE WORLD!
On this day that we'll remember forever, *Van Helsing* opens in theaters. The video game adaptation is also available today on PS2, Xbox, and GC.

08

THE NORTHWEST CLASSIC GAMES ENTHUSIASTS 2004
(May 8 – 9)
Once again, this exciting event is home to the Annual Northwest Atari Championships. Put your classic gaming skills to the test at the Sea-Tac International Airport Holiday Inn in Seattle.

09

MOTHER'S DAY
This is one of the few days in the year where you shouldn't be playing video games...unless it's a really good one.

10

CAPCOM'S PRE-E3 GAMERS DAY!
Set your browser to www.gameinformer.com for exciting details from Capcom's games.

11

NEW RELEASES
- Custom Robo – GC
- Invader Zim Volume 1: Doom Doom Doom – DVD
- Mega Man Anniversary Collection – PS2, GC
- Transformers: Armada – PS2

12

E3 2004 BEGINS!
(May 12 – 14)
The world's largest video game event kicks off at the Los Angeles Convention Center. From surprise announcements to hands-on time with the year's biggest titles, E3 is the most important three days in the video game year.

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15

It's Saturday. Go outside and move out of your parent's basement.

16

James Bond, Secret Agent...Senior Citizen Pierce Brosnan turns 51 today.

17

NEW RELEASES
- Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon: Island Thunder – PC

18

Today action hero Chow Yun-Fat celebrates 49 years of shooting people.

19

22

MIDWEST GAMING CLASSIC CONVENTION
(May 22 – 23)
Celebrate the history of video games with industry veterans and enthusiasts from across the world at the Brookfield Sheraton in Milwaukee, WI.

www.midwestgamingclassic.com

25

What do Elvis, Vampires, Hobbits, and Really Boring People from Alaska All Have in Common?

Bubba Ho-Tep, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer Season 6*, *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King*, and *Northern Exposure Season 1* come to DVD.

26

27

The Sith will live forever. Christopher Lee turns 82 today.

28

ANIME MID-ATLANTIC 4
(May 28 – 30)
Artwork on display, anime music contests, Cosplay dance parties, and video game tournaments are just a few of the sights and sounds to be found at the Holiday Inn Select Koger Center in Richmond, VA.

www.animemidatlantic.com/events.html

30

31

The Good, the Bad, the Ugly, and the old...Clint Eastwood turns 74 today.

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MATURE 17+
M
Strong Language
Blood and Gore
Intense Violence
CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

PlayStation 2

XBOX

PC CD-ROM SOFTWARE

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XBOX

> **STYLE** 1 TO 4-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 16-PLAYER VIA XBOX LIVE OR SYSTEM LINK) > **PUBLISHER** MICROSOFT > **DEVELOPER** BUNGIE > **RELEASE** FALL

HALO 2

AN ARMY OF MANY: HOW BUNGIE IS MAKING SURE HALO 2 WILL BE ALL THAT IT CAN BE

In an office park in Redmond, Washington sits a nondescript building, not too different from the countless utilitarian structures that dot the landscape of suburban areas around the country. It does not stand apart from any of the buildings that surround it, and its white exterior is so familiar and unassuming that few would give it a second glance. On the inside, however, things are a bit different. Posters for various video games, comic books, and sci-fi movies cover the walls, and desktops are covered with the plastic likenesses of characters such as Spider-Man, Hellboy, and a certain mysterious space marine. This is Bungie Studios, home to the Xbox's most anticipated title, Halo 2.

The crew at Bungie is very excited and devoted to their game, and are completely aware of the feverish buzz around it. They know that any scrap of information, however small, will be eagerly devoured by Halo fans around the world. Because of the intense scrutiny Halo 2 factoids receive from the gaming public, Bungie is reticent to dole out too much. But eager to get some new information out to the public, they had some news to share with us, which should make Halo fans quiver with delight. The most exciting aspect of Halo 2 is the online multiplayer via Xbox Live, and they revealed the process they used to ensure that Halo 2 will be the absolute best online experience it can be. Oh yeah, and they let us play it, too. But more on that later.

BOOT CAMP

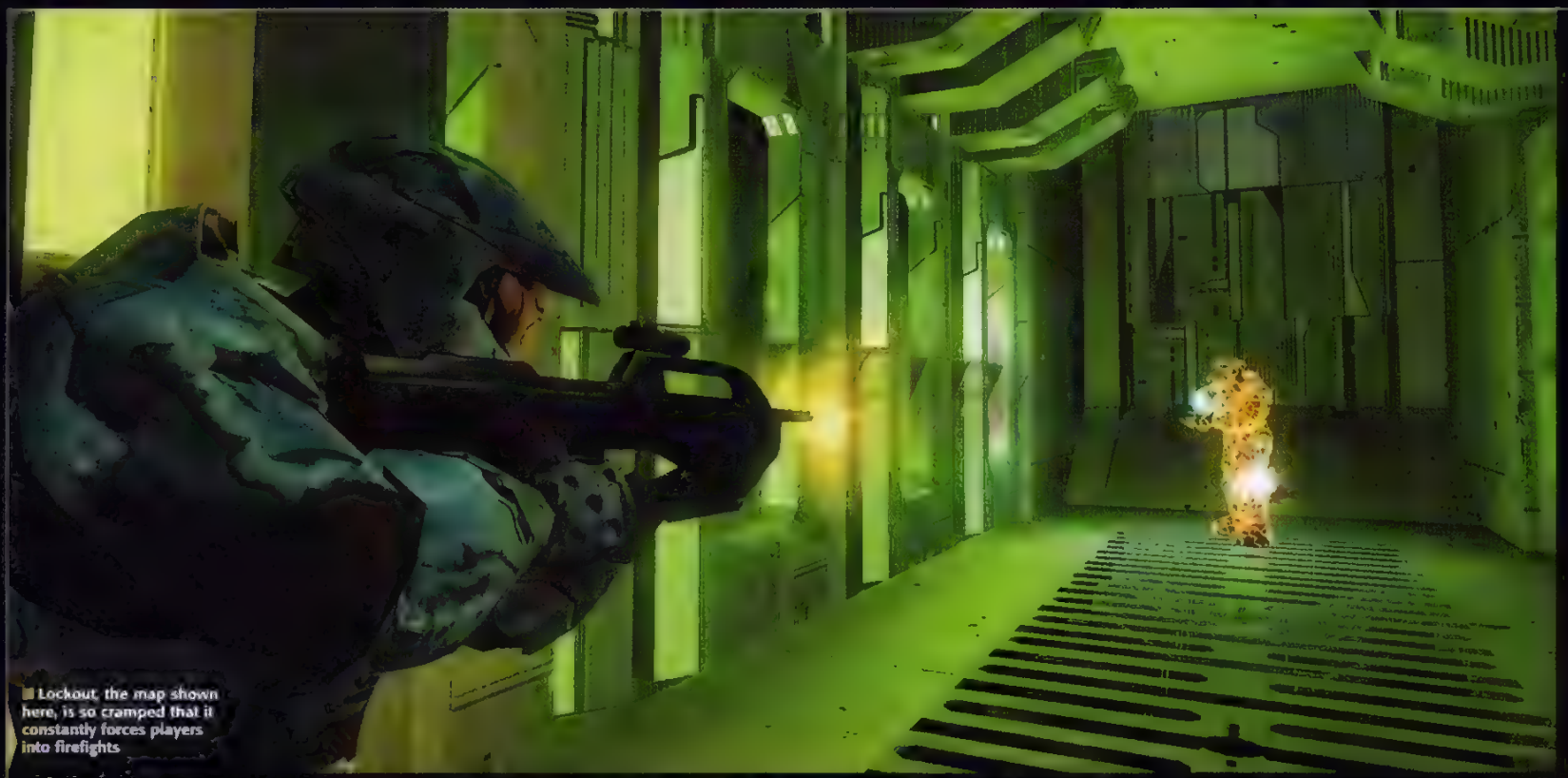
"Multiplayer games are really important to us," says Bungie's Chris Butcher, the lead networking engineer. "But we haven't done an Internet-scale twitch-based action game before." According to Butcher, an online multiplayer mode at one point existed for the original Halo. However, it was scrapped because Bungie didn't have enough time to fully develop it before the game was scheduled to ship. With Halo 2, it is even more critical that things are done right. When dealing with a title so hotly anticipated, the public will show little mercy if it falls short in any area. To make sure this doesn't happen, Bungie initiated the Halo 2 online alpha test. "Obviously, you can't go live with an Xbox Live game unless you've tested it," said Butcher.

The alpha test was a five-week trial to make sure that Halo 2's online features functioned in the real world. Because of confidentiality reasons, only Microsoft employees were able to participate, and only 1,000 were chosen. In order to qualify, candidates for the alpha had to be full-time Microsoft employees with broadband and an Xbox at home. They also had to be spread out all over the country to ensure that location wasn't an issue when playing online. These testers were all given a version of Halo 2's online mode to play at home in order to collect data on how it performed on the real Xbox Live network.

Since there are several different types of broadband connections (cable, DSL, T1, etc), Bungie needed to ensure that its game worked smoothly in all types of network situations. Gigabytes of data were collected on Halo 2's online performance in as many different configurations as possible. The company wants Halo 2 to be as fun and fluid online as playing the original game in split-screen or system link, even in a situation where players are divided between the coasts and have wildly different Internet connections. Several Bungie employees confessed to us that they are driven to create a great online title because they love crushing their friends. Killing your buddies, they say, should feel no different online than it feels when they are sitting right next to you. It should feel great.

The results of the test, according to Bungie, were quite positive and helpful. Max Hoberman, multiplayer design lead, summarized the collected data for us. "We gathered

(continued on page 46)



Lockout, the map shown here, is so cramped that it constantly forces players into firefights

every piece of data you can imagine, from usage patterns to individual network performance to individual player performance to automatic bug reporting," said Hoberman. "Our testers collected so much data it took several weeks just to sort through it all! That kind of data is only being collected for the alpha testing process – so don't worry, we won't be collecting info on how you stayed up 'til 5 a.m. for three weeks solid when the game ships."

When the test was completed, the participants were required to return their copies of the game, so don't go searching eBay to find some illicit bootleg. "Once we had gathered all the data that we needed we pulled the plug, causing a lot of tears," jokes Hoberman. "Lots of these were tears of joy from spouses glad to finally get their significant others back!" Although the testers were sad to give up their beloved games, all at Bungie feel that the exercise was a success.

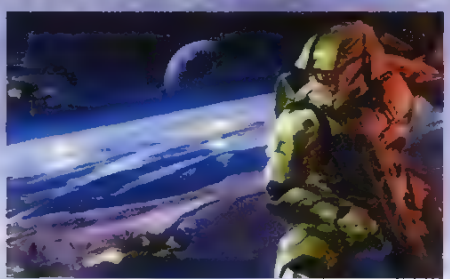
Hoberman described how feedback was collected and what people had to say:

"We hosted a set of newsgroups for the alpha and encouraged testers to post anything and everything. I actually read every single post, over a thousand of them. Topics included bugs and network issues, gameplay questions and comments, and of course, feature requests. We kept track of all of this without giving much away. You'd be amazed by how careful we are, even within the company, even with other game studios within the company, to not let any secrets out!

Judging from the feedback on the newsgroups, everyone that participated in the alpha had an amazing time. One comment I saw often was that they liked that the game felt like a natural extension of the original—like an old friend, only with a new look, a clean new haircut, and a fat wad of cash."

TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION

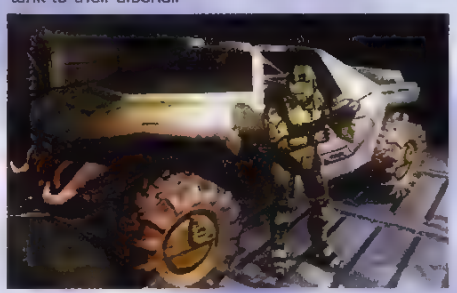
With a game like Halo 2, a lot of info gets tossed around. The following is a list of things that have been mentioned by Bungie and are believed to be true or very, very likely.



>> The setting is Earth: What is known about the story so far is that it deals with a Covenant invasion of our planet. However, a second Halo is also involved so we have a feeling that Master Chief will be heading back into space. Bungie has stated that there will be low-gravity environments, so space travel seems even more likely.

>> The Covenant will be playable: Elites will be a playable class in multiplayer. We don't know if any other Covenant forces are playable, nor do we know if there will be more than one class of human to choose from.

>> There will be more vehicles: The Warthog, the Scorpion Tank, and the Ghost are returning, along with some new rides. There will be several variants of the Warthog for different uses, along with more Covenant vehicles. The Banshee is definitely back, and rumor has it the aliens have added a new tank to their arsenal.

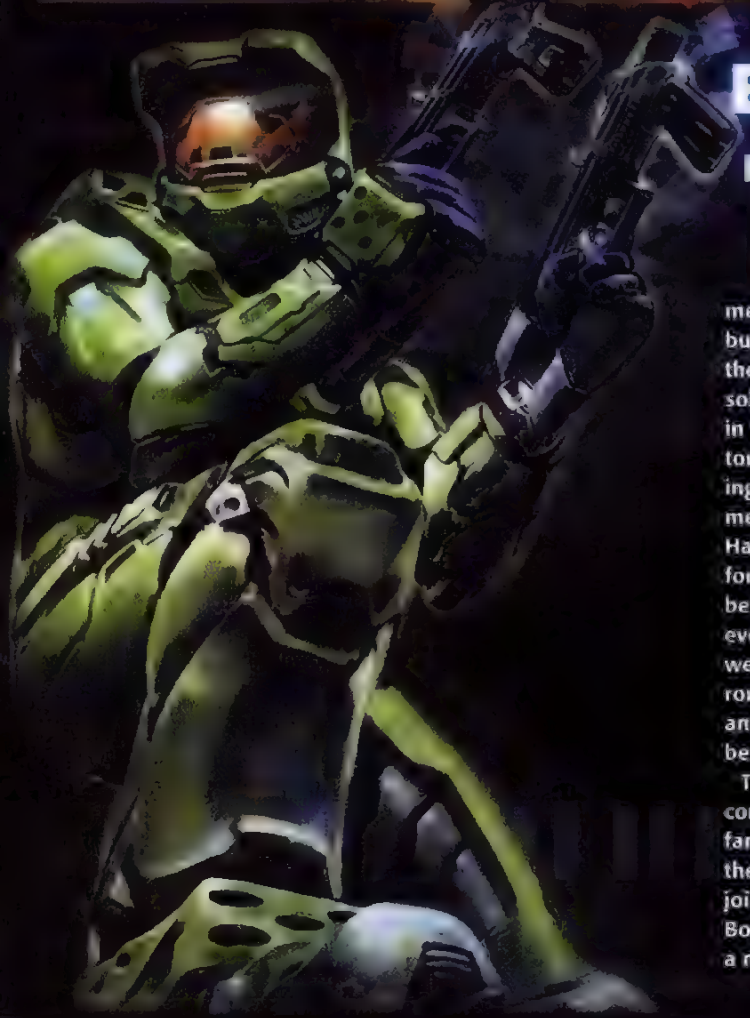


>> Master Chief has new tricks: Dual-wielding is in for certain, and peeking around corners should make it in as well. Destructible environments are also expected to be included.

>> More enemies are headed your way: The Covenant has added at least two new types of warriors: the Brutes and the Prophets. The Brutes are huge, gorilla-esque warriors, while the Prophets are floating psychics who are expected to be more like generals than actual warriors, as they look pretty frail. Word is there may be even more enemies, including a huge beast capable of flipping over a Warthog! Whether this makes it into the final version or not remains to be seen, but it would certainly be pretty sweet.

>> There will be more multiplayer modes: Aside from the typical deathmatch modes of Slayer and Team Slayer, Capture the Flag, Assault, Oddball, and King of the Hill will be back for Xbox Live, split-screen, and System Link. Online co-op is also likely.

Note the characters in the background holding two guns. Woohoo! It's like Halo, John Woo Style



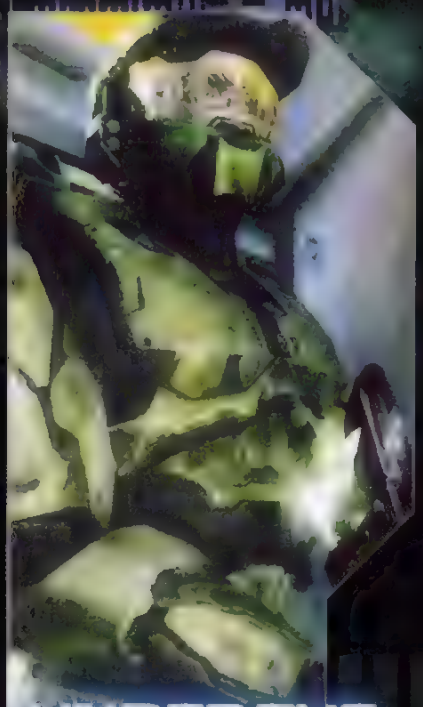
BASIC TRAINING

The alpha test version of Halo 2 consisted of three different multiplayer maps, three game types, and just enough of the actual gameplay mechanics to keep testers coming back, but not so much that they lost sight of the point of the test and commented solely on gameplay issues. Not featured in the alpha were some of Halo 2's highly touted new features, such as dual-wielding. Interactive environments, another mechanic Bungie has announced for Halo 2, were only included in a very basic form. Certain objects in the alpha could be pushed around by shooting them, and even forced off ledges. The final version, we have been assured, will feature environments that are much more interactive and destructible, and dual-wielding will be included as well.

The alpha did, on the other hand, contain a few of the features that Halo fans have been drooling for. Obviously, the Warthog made a return, and it was joined by drivable Ghosts and Banshees. Both of these airborne vehicles feature a new boost function: By holding down the left trigger, the engines flare and send you screaming across the level at unheard-of speeds. Certain multiplayer maps in Halo took a long time to cross on foot, and still felt oversized when driven across. These boards can now be traversed in no time, thanks to this new, rocket-assisted flight.

While the exact number of maps that will be included in Halo 2's multiplayer is still unknown, we were shown three, each with its own distinct look and feel. Obviously, many more original maps will be included, and multiplayer environment lead Chris Carney admitted that fans are hoping for the return of some popular favorites, especially Blood Gulch. The inclusion of these classic maps is being considered.

Carney, who joined Bungie after studying architecture, was happy to show us around the levels he helped create. The first level is called Lockout, and is a very small map that is tall and narrow. When describing this stage, he explained not only how it was laid out, but hinted at how it fit into the story of the Halo universe. A multi-tiered



UNDER THE HELMET

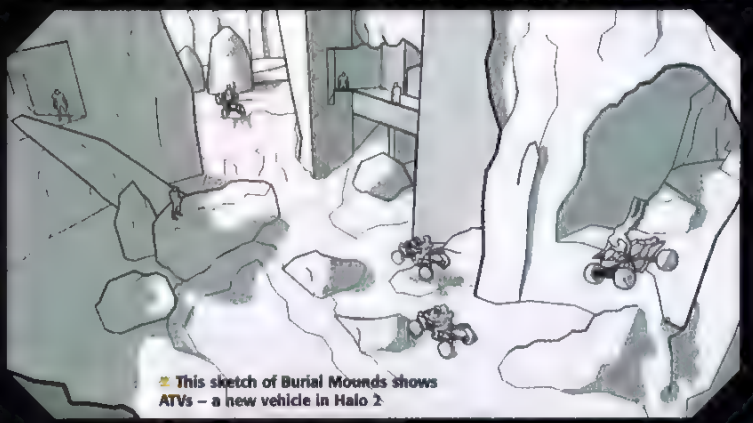
Even for a video game character, Master Chief is a mysterious and enigmatic hero. Halo revealed shockingly little about the man behind the mask, and it's doubtful Halo 2 will reveal much more. But information about the human killing machine is out there, in the form of the official Halo novels, and they reveal quite a bit about the space marine.

According to the books, Master Chief is the result of a super-soldier program spearheaded by Halo's Jacob Keyes and a woman named Dr. Halsey. The pair "recruited" children from orphanages and enhanced them through drugs, surgery, and training. These children were known as the SPARTANs, and the boy who would be become Master Chief was designated SPARTAN-117. When outside of his MJOLNIR armor (named after Thor's hammer), he's known simply as John.

concrete structure built into a rock outcropping. Carney said this type of structure was typical of the Forerunners – the mysterious, unseen race credited with the creation of the Halo. Since Bungie has stated that Halo 2 takes place primarily on Earth, the news of areas created by the Forerunners is certainly intriguing.

The Forerunner structure in Lockout is a central tower with a couple of satellites attached by narrow bridges. Each area of the structure features multiple levels, which can be traversed by ramps and ladders, as well as a new energy elevator contraption. Stepping into the swirling energy beam lifts the player up like a strong air current. Not only is this a welcome change from the original Halo's ladders because it is easier to navigate, but it can also be used in combat. Unlike the ladders, which leave players vulnerable to attack, firing one's weapon is possible while riding the beam between floors. When used properly, the beam becomes an interesting and deadly combat tactic.

Lockout was designed as a small map for small games, such as one-on-one or two-on-two. But an unexpected side effect of the level design is that it makes for incredibly fierce matches when more players are involved. Our first round of Halo 2 was a classic game of Team Slayer on this map. However, rather than the two teams and four players we were accustomed to from our experience with the original Halo's split-screen, we found ourselves playing a game with four teams and 14 players! Red, Blue, Green, and Gold teams squared off against each other in a fast-paced fragfest unlike anything we expected. Naturally, we stood no chance against Bungie's group of fanatical gamers; they knew the map, they knew the weapons, and they knew we didn't. We were unprepared for how intense Halo 2's multiplayer is, and found ourselves getting wiped out every 15 seconds or so.

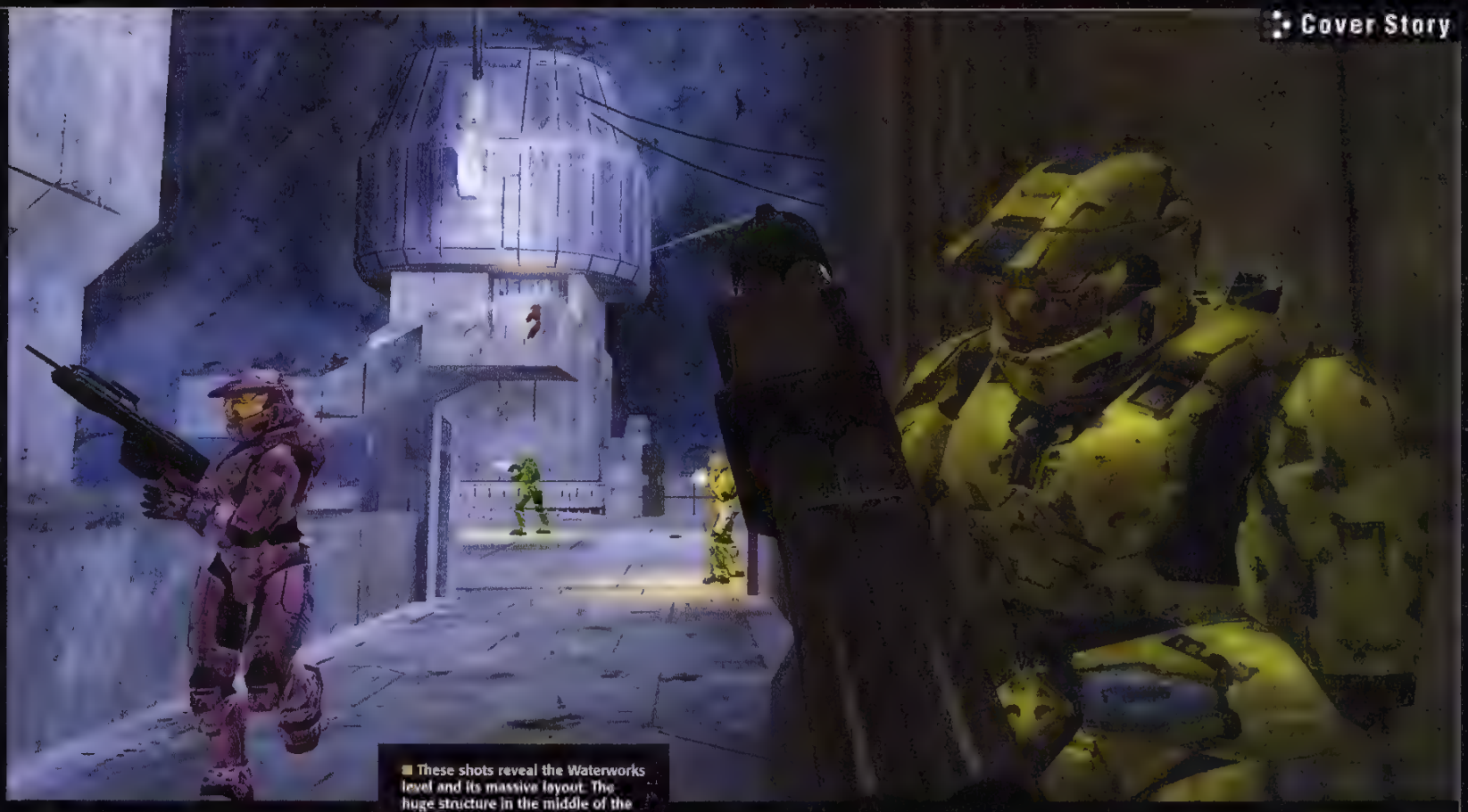


This sketch of Burial Mounds shows ATVs – a new vehicle in Halo 2

The second level featured in the alpha test is named Burial Mounds. A medium-sized map, Burial Mounds is a barren, desert-themed map which prominently features a military base and huge, twisted pieces of metal affectionately referred to as "the ribs"

(continued on page 50)

Ahh, the sniper rifle. The great equalizer



These shots reveal the Waterworks level and its massive layout. The huge structure in the middle of the map is an alien machine with tons of great hiding places inside

because of their resemblance to the skeleton of a long-dead giant. This board stands out in the Halo universe because it could fit so well in the Star Wars universe. The sandy, junk-strewn wasteland is reminiscent of Tatooine.

Burial Mounds feels like it was custom-designed for the game type we played on it: Assault. In Assault, one team plays offense, the other plays defense. The offense team must carry a bomb into the defense's base to score a point. The two sides switch at regular intervals and the first team to three points wins. The defenders' base has a nice little perk to dissuade attackers: two mounted turrets. Much like the guns on the back of the Warthog, those on the base can be activated with a click of the X button and spew out unlimited ammo. When playing defense on this map, we were pretty happy when we mounted the turret on the side of the base and started laying down a heavy suppressing fire. We may have even cackled a bit when we mowed down a couple red soldiers. But then we saw a light moving rapidly towards us. By the time we figured out it was a rocket, it was too late.

Since the pace of this match was not as frantic as Lockout, we had a little time to actually appreciate some of the smaller details. It was on this map that we realized that we had picked up one of the new weapons: the battle rifle. This improved version of Halo's assault rifle packed a bit more punch and featured a nifty scope. We also noticed that even though this version was a test, character models seemed to sport more details. This basic version of the game points to the final build being visually staggering.

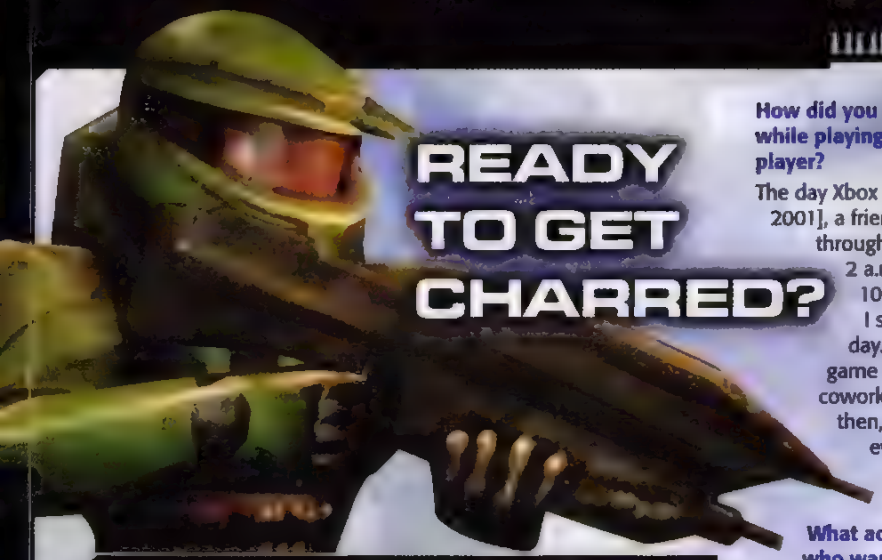
This sketch shows just how huge Waterworks truly is

After our team lost the Assault game in the Burial Mounds, we were treated to a final level called Waterworks. An absolutely huge map, Waterworks feels like the successor to the infamous Blood Gulch. Indeed, the basic setup is the same: it is a large enclosed area with a base on each end. However, a couple of things set it apart from Blood Gulch. First, the entire area is inside a massive cave. Endless stone walls surround the entire area, and the main light source is a huge hole in the ceiling. The second difference is the giant alien machine in the center of the level. It stretches from floor to ceiling, and is filled with plenty of nooks and crannies to explore. Whereas Blood Gulch tended to limit combat to the ends of the canyon, the giant structure in the middle of Waterworks adds another combat hotspot in the middle of the map.

The alien machine in the underground cavern leads us to a bit of speculation: The structure seems to be Forerunner technology, but the sheer size of the cave leads us to believe that it takes place on Earth. Does this mean that the Forerunners, creators of the Halo rings, visited our planet years ago? We didn't have time to search for more clues while we were being shot, but what we've seen of this level so far certainly makes us wonder.

With its two bases and centrally located choke point, Waterworks is the ideal map for Capture the Flag. It also is the map that features the most vehicles out of the three: Warthogs, Banshees, and Ghosts are all accessible. While using a Ghost or Banshee in multiplayer is a great thrill (especially for those who haven't played Halo PC), the danger of doing so is quickly learned. Fly to the enemies side and get shot down, and suddenly your foe has possession of your vehicle along with their own.

Our peek at these three multiplayer maps is only a brief glimpse of what is to come in Halo 2. The single-player campaign is still shrouded in mystery, be we have a feeling the online play will be this title's biggest draw. Based on our time with the multiplayer mode, it seems obvious that Halo 2 will be the top Xbox Live title the very day that it hits. You can be certain that we will be online on the first possible day. And that night, and the following morning, and many, many days to follow. ■■■



READY TO GET CHARRED?

During the alpha test, one player quickly rose to the top of the pack. Going by the screen name "Char," this tester kicked so much booty it inspired Bungie to sponsor a "Death to Char" contest. He took some time out to talk about the game and his amazing killing skills.

This statue of Master Chief can be found in Bungie's cafeteria

How did you manage to kick so much butt while playing Halo 2? Were you a huge Halo player?

The day Xbox launched [November 15th, 2001], a friend and I sat down and played through co-op. We started around 2 a.m., and I think it took us about 10 hours to finish. Needless to say, I showed up late to work the next day. I quickly organized a weekly game on campus for friends and coworkers. It's grown and evolved since then, but we're still getting together every week and fragging each other into the late hours of the night over two years later.

What advice would you give someone who wants to improve their game?

Start with the single-player campaign. You'll get basic skills from that and a good understanding of the physics, weapons, power-ups, and so forth. In multiplayer, pay attention to the environment (which weapons and power-ups are missing), evaluate your targets (soft targets like a wounded player running away are easy, hard targets like the guy with the battle rifle and overshield standing on the health pack might be better to avoid), pick the right weapon (plasma is good against shields, for instance), and engage or keep looking. There are so many considerations, like your weapon loadout, health, shields, position on the map and how those compare to your opponent. It's really just about quickly evaluating your situation, deciding how and when to hit, and moving on to the next target.

Tell us about your alpha test stats.

Bungie didn't share the information about player stats that I really wanted to see. I'd love to know my overall kill/death ratios (as well as per-map and per-gametype), kills per minute, accuracy with different weapons, and other stats.

I do know that I regularly had high kill/death and kills/minute ratios. After playing the alpha for two weeks, I had a weekend with over 3,000 kills in under 20 hours played.

Without incriminating yourself, what can you tell us about who you are and what you do at Microsoft?

I get paid to design API's for TabletPC and other aspects of Tablet as a platform, but I think you could make a strong case for me being an ancillary Halo and Xbox hardware tester.

Ah, turrets: the Sam's Club of Halo 2. They deal out carnage in bulk.

Based on what you have played so far, how is Halo 2 an improvement on the original?

A lot of the features we're all waiting for, like dual-wielding SMGs or vehicle takeovers, weren't in the alpha. I can't wait to see all that stuff implemented in the final game. It looks like there is a lot of effort going into balancing weapons and designing maps. In the alpha, the pistol has been replaced with the battle rifle. It doesn't have quite the range and accuracy combination that the pistol does, but it leads to more balance. Some of the new maps, like Burial Mounds, are manifestations of pure genius.

There are also obvious engine improvements. Sounds, textures, and lighting are all stunning. I'm going to need to upgrade my home theater setup to take full advantage of everything this game has.

Tell us about the various competitions during the alpha.

There were weekly competitions organized by Bungie during the alpha. Prizes were awarded for various things like "Most kills" or "Most deaths by falling off a map." One of these competitions was named "Death to Char," and (aptly) had a prize for whoever killed me the most. It was pretty silly what some people were willing to do to get kills. I had people on my own team betray me in CTF games (I really hope those people lost a kill for that). People piled into every game I played that weekend in an attempt to get kills – it was a zoo. I would see two players shooting at each other, and as soon as I engaged them, they would both turn on me instead of trying to finish each other off.

I think the best example of how my online experience changed was a CTF game I was in during the competition. The teams were pretty balanced and my team got off to a 2-0 lead. Suddenly, everyone switches off my team and I now have one teammate and nine opponents. My valiant teammate and I got stomped shortly afterwards.

I do have to tip my hat to pun1sher (the winner of the competition) for killing me 33 times that weekend.

Did you win a good prize for being the top player during the test?

Besides being the prime target in every game I played after that? Actually, I did receive a very nice Halo hoodie. It's made appearances at our weekly Halo games to many "oohs" and "aahs."

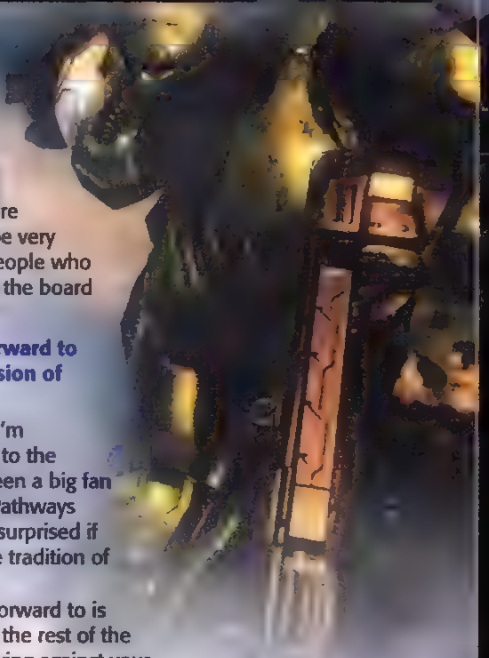
After Halo 2 ships to retail, do you think you'll still be a top player?

There are many people who are better than me at various aspects of the game. Certain people are better snipers, some are wizards with grenades, some are great with vehicles, and some are flag running masters. I'd be very surprised if there aren't people who are better than me across the board when Halo 2 goes live.

What are you looking forward to most about the final version of Halo 2?

This may sound odd, but I'm definitely looking forward to the campaign – I've always been a big fan of Bungie's games since Pathways Into Darkness, and I'd be surprised if Halo 2 didn't continue the tradition of incredible storytelling.

What I'm most looking forward to is being able to play against the rest of the world, though. It's fun playing against your friends, but the biggest rush will be taking your group of friends and playing against another team and seeing how you stack up!



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MORTAL KOMBAT DECEPTION

AN INSIDE LOOK AT THE EVOLUTION OF KOMBAT AND THE TEAM BEHIND IT

Within the last year, we've crossed paths with Mortal Kombat creator Ed Boon on several occasions. When asked about the next installment in the series, Boon would light up, project an enormous amount of excitement, and then say, "Sorry, I can't tell you anything yet." But, at long last, Midway is letting Boon and his team speak freely about this highly anticipated sequel.

Kira's Concept drawing

STORY AND CHARACTERS

Story and character development have always played large roles in the Mortal Kombat series. How does the story begin in Deception?

JOHN VOGEL (Animations & Story): There will be an FMV sequence depicting what happened at the conclusion of Mortal Kombat: Deadly Alliance. The opening storyline for Mortal Kombat: Deception is also part of this FMV and will seamlessly pick up where Mortal Kombat: Deadly Alliance leaves off. About the only thing we can reveal at this point about the content of the Mortal Kombat: Deception storyline is that the Dragon King is the main antagonist, and that he's been very 'deceptive.'

The cast of characters is one of the most memorable in all of gaming. Who can we expect to see returning?

STEVE BERAN (Character Designer): In Mortal Kombat: Deception we wanted to introduce new characters, bring back the Mortal Kombat: Deadly Alliance favorites, and revive many of the classic characters from earlier Mortal Kombat games. Baraka, Mileena, Noob, Smoke, Tanya, Ermac, Nightwolf, Sindel, and Kabal are all making their way into Mortal Kombat: Deception. There are more that I can't reveal quite yet. The returning characters will still have their signature moves. We were loyal in keeping the basic character concepts the same, but introduced new design elements and details that make them revitalized and fresh. Devoted fans of these characters will not be disappointed.

Will we see the introduction of any new faces?

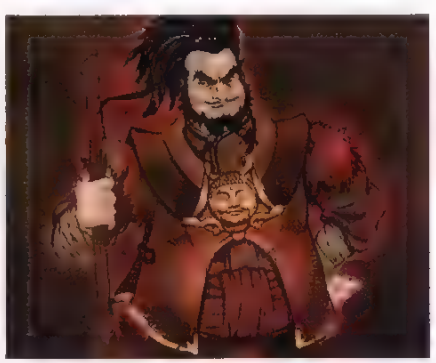
HERMAN SANCHEZ (Character Designer): Yes, we've got some new additions that I think fans will be pleased with. Joining the classic MK character roster will be Kira, a new member of the Black Dragon; Ben, a professional martial-arts world champion; Dairou, a Ronin samurai with a score to settle; Ashrah, a mystical demon huntress, and… well, we have to save SOME surprises for you, don't we? Suffice to say that we are adding fighters who have a purpose in the MK universe, and will possess some very cool fighting styles and special moves that are unique to those characters. And, if you perform well during a certain mode of the game to its conclusion, you may be rewarded…

Have any of the core characters undergone significant change since the last chapter?

LUIS MANGUBAT (Character Designer): Sub-Zero has probably undergone the most radical change. His new costume was designed to look more Chinese in keeping with the Lin Kuei concept. Plus, it helped to visually separate him from Scorpion, which I think a lot of fans have been wanting. Also, Liu Kang, having been killed in the previous game, returns in two new forms – a ghost and a zombie.

What have you done to bring out the realism in your characters?

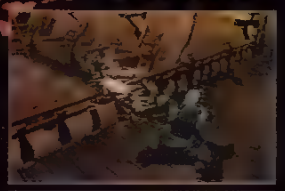
JON GREENBERG (Engine Programmer): We've given the rendering engine a complete overhaul to take further advantage of both the PS2 and Xbox. The polygon count in the characters has been increased quite significantly, and we've added a host of new effects to really show off the kombatants. Characters have gloss maps, multi-layered transparency, a new more flexible dismemberment system, and some fairly complex dynamic lighting to top it all off. We've also been playing with bump-mapping and some full-screen effects to take better advantage of the Xbox's horsepower.

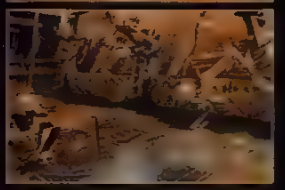


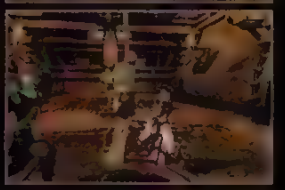
The number of playable characters is one of the largest that we've seen in a fighting game

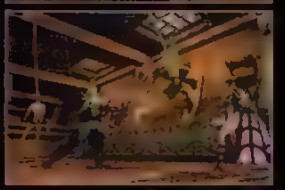
The combo system has been enhanced significantly and now includes break out counters

Additional weapons are hidden in each of the stages









Knock your opponent to the lower deck where hanging bodies can be interacted with

GAMEPLAY

Regarding gameplay, can we once again expect to see three fighting styles per character? Has this mechanic evolved since Deadly Alliance?

ED BOON (Team Leader): Yes, we were pleased with how the three fighting styles worked in Deadly Alliance. Our plan with Mortal Kombat: Deception is to expand on the idea by making the styles even more different from each other. Also, since you will be able to blast your opponent into background "death traps," there will be more moves that propel them in front and behind you. We want the player to be very aware of where he is in a background and to use that position to his advantage.

What new gameplay features are you implementing?

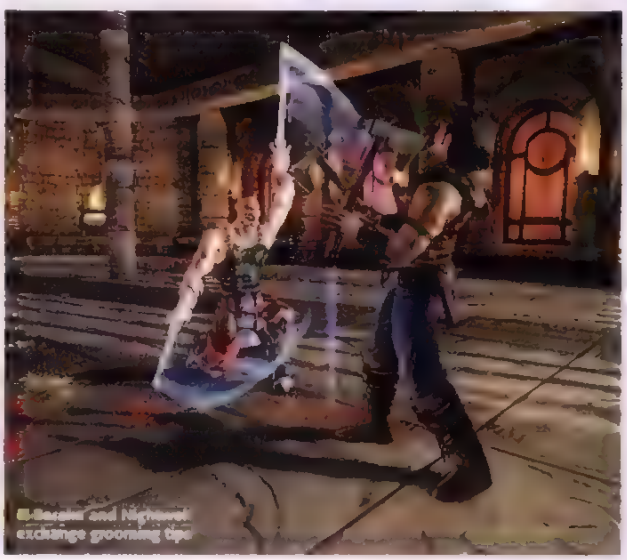
TONY GOSKIE (Background Designer): Probably one of the most dramatic gameplay features we are adding to the fighting element is the role that the backgrounds play. Mortal Kombat: Deception's backgrounds are much more diverse in size, shape, and variety. Some backgrounds literally change in size and shape as you are playing in them. Our goal is to have the backgrounds be as influential to the outcome of a battle as the characters that were selected.

Are weapons still as prevalent? Are there any new armaments that we can look forward to wielding?

JAY BIONDO (Game Programmer): Weapons will continue to be an important gameplay element in Mortal Kombat: Deception. We have expanded the number of unique weapons and continue to make weapons an integral part of the fighting engine. One of the major additions to the backgrounds are obtainable weapons that are both unique and powerful. There is a strong incentive to get these weapons as they have dramatically increased range and deliver far more damage than normal weapons. However, getting these weapons will be a challenge, as they are placed near death traps, hidden in secret locations, and sometimes even encased inside other interactive background elements.

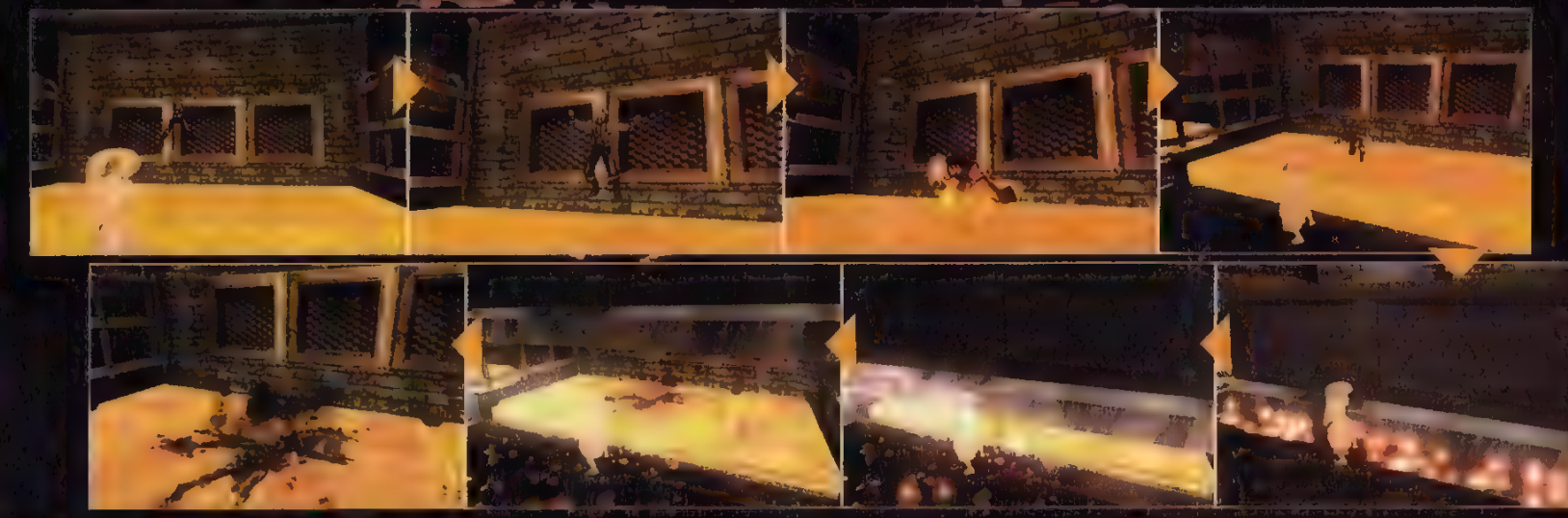
Are you enhancing the combo system?

ED BOON: Yes, we are expanding the combo system and restricting it at the same time. There will be more combos per fighting style as well as per character. But this time around we are also going to allow players to "break out" of combos. Deadly Alliance had some pretty elaborate multi-fighting style combos that delivered some pretty serious damage. We want to give the victim a chance to escape or break out of these longer combos by adding a "break out" move. This should really even the playfield when fighting against someone who has mastered a character's combos.



Sidearm and Nightwolf exchange grooming tips

Could this be any more gruesome?



The sexy but deadly Mileena

Knock your opponent through the series of floors down into the ice worm's mouth

FATALITIES

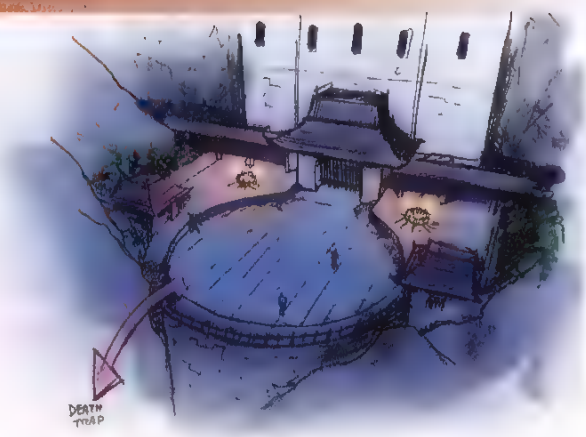
Fans love Fatalities. How many can we expect to see for each character?

CARLOS PESINA (Animations, Martial Arts & Fatalities): Fatalities are an integral part of Mortal Kombat and the fans will appreciate the ones in Mortal Kombat: Deception. Players can expect two new tasty Fatalities per character. Unlike Mortal Kombat: Deadly Alliance, limbs can be severed and there will be several Fatalities that take advantage of this new feature. One example would be the Fatality in which the attacker rips the opponent's arms off and then beats him with them.

We've also heard that level Fatalities are returning.

MIKE BOON (Game and System Programmer): Yes, level Fatalities are returning, and there are many in the game. Most of the level Fatalities take advantage of our interactive background features. If a player can force his opponent into a danger zone, they can quickly turn a losing match into a winner. As always, level Fatalities in Mortal Kombat: Deception are graphic, and it might just be worth losing a match to see them.

Here's an illustration of the rock crusher deathtrap



How exactly will the multi-tiered environments fit into the fray?

MIKE TARAN (Background Designer): The environments are stocked full of surprises, like earthquakes that literally shrink the arena size and increase the chance of you falling off, breakable glass floors, breakable walls revealing secret rooms, and hanging dead bodies that you can slam into your opponent. As for the stage Fatalities, you will see opponents get buried in rock avalanches, smashed with giant steel presses, ripped to shreds with grinders, eaten by giant slugs, gored with spikes, shaved into chunks with spinning blades, boiled in lava, impaled on stalagmites, or cut to pieces by lasers... Awww yea!

MODES

Deception also marks the first time that Mortal Kombat will feature online play. What exactly is going into this experience?

ED BOON: We are very excited about online play in Mortal Kombat: Deception because it kind of recreates the whole magic of playing against friends and strangers at an arcade. Players always talk about the days when arcades were big and they would see a crowd of people gathered around an MK machine. Letting players go online and find opponents will give them that same thrill and challenge of playing people from all over the country.

We've heard a lot of talk about Deception's Konquest mode. What is its allure?

JIM BULVAN (Game Programmer): We have added several new exciting features to the Konquest mode from Deadly Alliance. Aside from learning all the characters' move sets, Konquest is a full adventure game where the player is allowed to explore the different realms of the MK universe as the story of Deception unfolds. MK fans will be excited to learn that you will run into and can interact with every character in the history of MK! Also, throughout your journey, you will be building up your character with the different techniques you learn and items you find. Once completed, you will be able to use your character in the fighting game, and even unleash him online!

A little bird told us that Deception would feature a handful of minigames and bonus modes. Can you elaborate on what we might see?

NICK SHIN (Game Programmer): Deception will feature new game modes to expand on the minigames beloved by many players. Minigames in the past have pretty much been small and diversionary tactics to break up the constant cycle of playing a couple of rounds, beating your opponent and repeating. But these minigames helped define what Mortal Kombat is today. This time, in Mortal Kombat: Deception, minigames will be bigger and better. One game mode will be a strategy board game. You will need to place your characters on the board (each handicapped by the position they cover – do you place your favs up front and in more numbers or save them out back where they are more powerful but in lesser numbers?). And, like in the fight modes where backgrounds have interactive elements, this board game will as well. We will place power-up abilities when you occupy a square and hold it. Another game mode in Mortal Kombat: Deception will be Puzzle Kombat. You select a character that's unique by their super move abilities. Some of them have offensive power moves that fill up your opponent's screen, while others have defensive moves to help clear our your own screen. Each background in this game mode is also unique in that you get to see different Fatalities performed on the victim of a poorly played game. Oh yeah, both of these games modes will be playable online. This game will cause people to yell, "Here comes the Fury!" "I suck..." "Oh, what happened? You lose?" People who are not playing but watching their friends play can't help but also burst out, "What are you doing?!?" "You suck..." "Gimme the controller, you're going down." ■■■

Sub-Zero shows off his fall fashion

All of the minigames can be played online

"If you move that pawn, I'll rip your head off."

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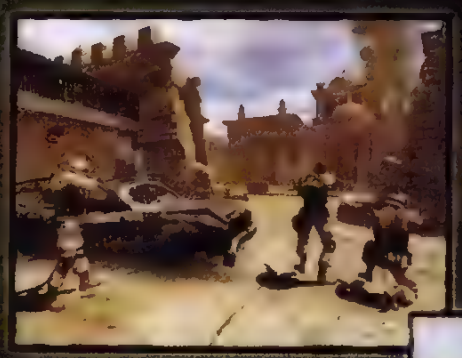

CPL. DEVEREUX AND PFC SILVERMAN MOVE INTO FLANKING POSITION TO ENGAGE ENEMY

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HOMEBREW GAMING 101:

A PRIMER COURSE

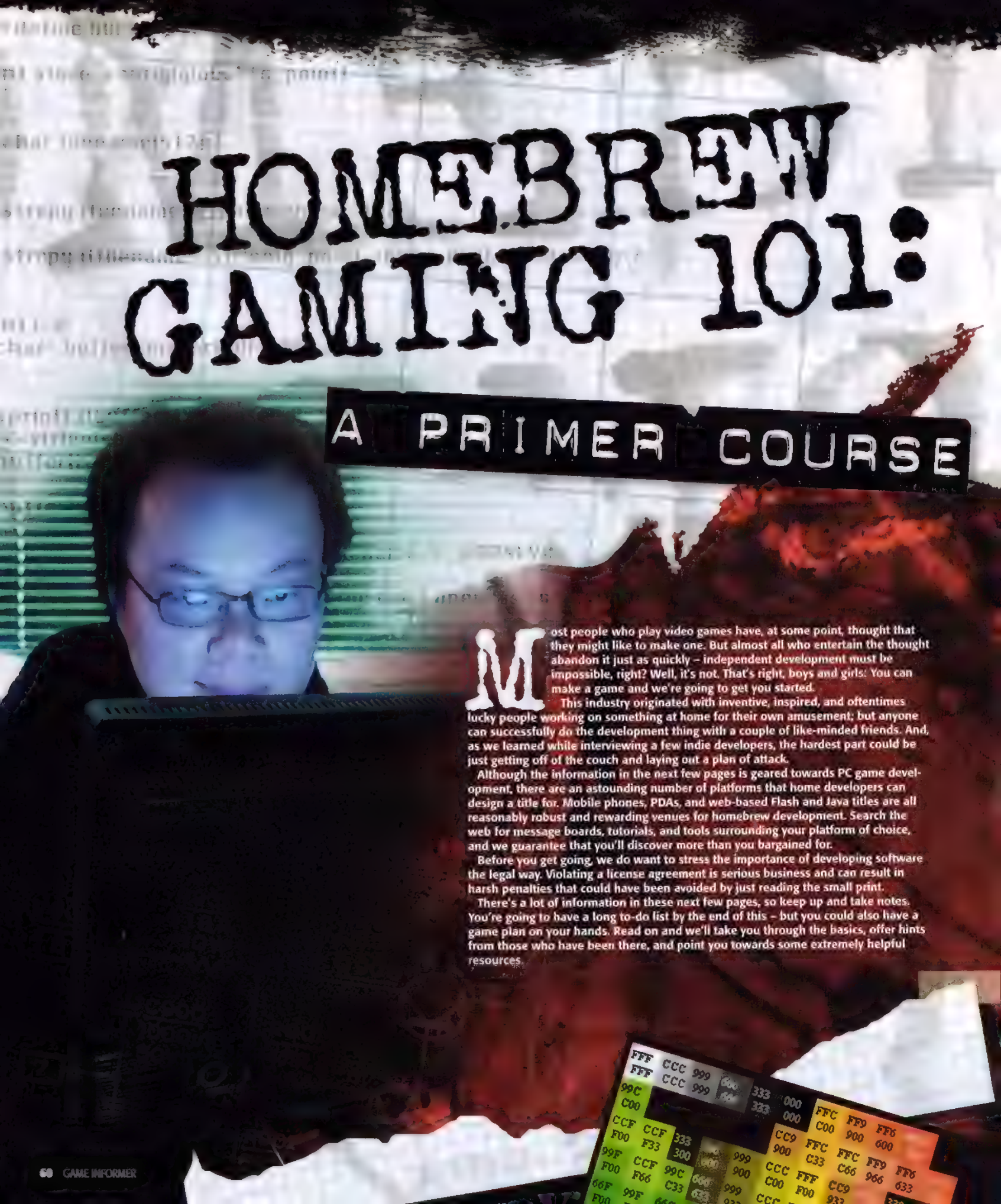
Most people who play video games have, at some point, thought that they might like to make one. But almost all who entertain the thought abandon it just as quickly – independent development must be impossible, right? Well, it's not. That's right, boys and girls: You can make a game and we're going to get you started.

This industry originated with inventive, inspired, and oftentimes lucky people working on something at home for their own amusement; but anyone can successfully do the development thing with a couple of like-minded friends. And, as we learned while interviewing a few indie developers, the hardest part could be just getting off of the couch and laying out a plan of attack.

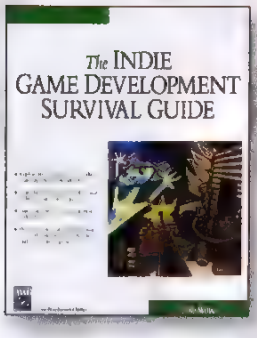
Although the information in the next few pages is geared towards PC game development, there are an astounding number of platforms that home developers can design a title for. Mobile phones, PDAs, and web-based Flash and Java titles are all reasonably robust and rewarding venues for homebrew development. Search the web for message boards, tutorials, and tools surrounding your platform of choice, and we guarantee that you'll discover more than you bargained for.

Before you get going, we do want to stress the importance of developing software the legal way. Violating a license agreement is serious business and can result in harsh penalties that could have been avoided by just reading the small print.

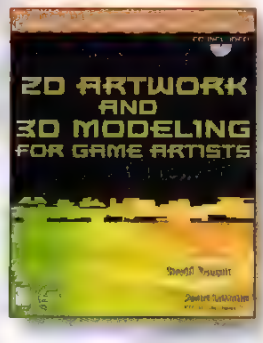
There's a lot of information in these next few pages, so keep up and take notes. You're going to have a long to-do list by the end of this – but you could also have a game plan on your hands. Read on and we'll take you through the basics, offer hints from those who have been there, and point you towards some extremely helpful resources.



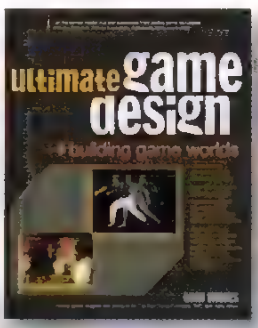
Recommended Reading



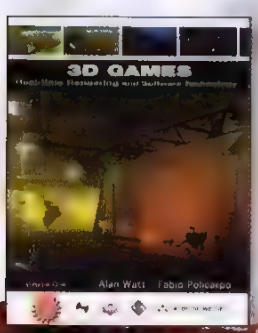
THE INDIE GAME DEVELOPMENT SURVIVAL GUIDE
by David Michael [Charles River Media, 2003] $39.95
Suggested by the Independent Games Festival as it covers designing, developing, and publishing equally. Coupled with *Ultimate Game Design: Building Game Worlds*, this is a full-fledged course on theory and business execution.



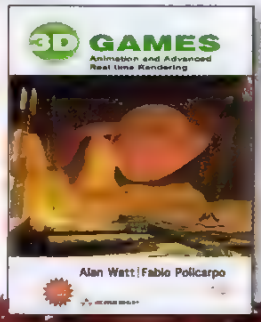
2D ARTWORK AND 3D MODELING FOR GAME ARTISTS
by David Franson [Premier Press, 2002] $59.99
A really great beginner's course on how to make texture maps, 3D models, and other in-game art from the ground up. The CD has tutorials on trueSpace and PhotoShop, along with trial versions of professional software.



ULTIMATE GAME DESIGN: BUILDING GAME WORLDS
by Tom Meigs [McGraw-Hill Osborne Media, 2003] $34.99
Ultimate Game Design focuses on the process and theory of game development itself. Pre-visualization, level planning, lighting, camera control, audio, and effects each have their own easy-to-read chapter.



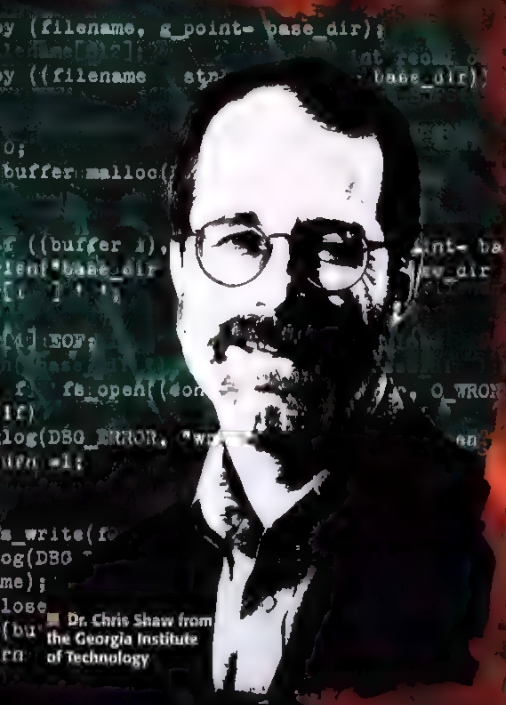
3D GAMES: REAL-TIME RENDERING AND SOFTWARE TECHNOLOGY VOLUMES 1 AND 2
by Alan Watt and Fabio Policarpo [Pearson Addison Wesley, 2000 and 2003] $68.00 (Vol. 1), $62.00 (Vol. 2)
Volume 1 is on Dr. Shaw's suggested additions to his course material and Volume 2 continues the series' discussion of artificial intelligence, physics, collision detection, engine architecture, and multiplayer technology. Included in each edition is a CD-ROM with demos, images, source code, and a full game engine.



Also check out:
Game Programming Gems series published by Charles River Media and *A Programmer's Guide to Sound* by Tim Kientzle

ONLINE RESOURCES
- Game Development Search Engine [www.gdse.com]
- International Game Developers Association [www.igda.org]
- GNU General Public License [www.fsf.org/copyleft/gpl.html]
- Game Tutorials [www.gametutorials.com]
- Breaking In [www.igda.org/breakingin]
- DIY Games [www.diygames.com]
- Gamasutra – The Art & Science of Making Games [www.gamasutra.com]
- Garage Games [www.garagegames.com]

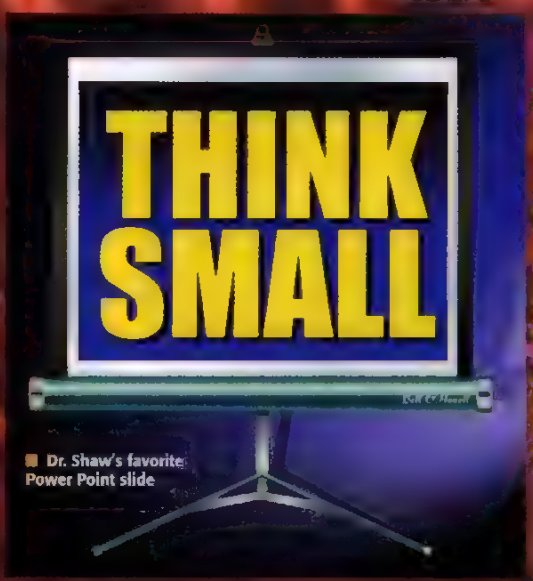
PHASE 1: Get it Together


Dr. Chris Shaw from the Georgia Institute of Technology

Like so many things in life (painting the living room, wooing that special someone, convincing parental types that they really need an HDTV), prep work is key. We talked to Dr. Chris Shaw, research scientist and teacher at Georgia Institute of Technology about where prospective developers should get started. He teaches a class in video game programming and design, and has ushered more than a few teams of GaTech seniors toward making a game in one semester since the class began in 2000. His advice starts by pointing out that, "What you are in control of as a programmer or as a designer is only half of the experience. The player is in charge of the other half." It seems basic, but to really plan out how you want someone to experience the game you've designed involves more than just writing an instruction manual, and even for this initial step, you may need some help.

"If there was something that I wanted to be a prime message in this class, which operates both in games and other aspects of life, is that there are no really big one-person projects. Honestly, there aren't even many medium sized one-person projects. Most games aren't one-person projects anymore. What that means is that you have to be on a team, and the hard part of teamwork is that you have to go along with that team vision."

Therefore, prospective designers really have two things to consider right away, and it's one of those chicken-or-the-egg parts of game design. Do you lay out a complete plan and then find the teammates to help you make it happen; or do you take a basic idea, find some willing cohorts, and work it out as a team?



Dr. Shaw's favorite Power Point slide

Whichever path you take, the written result of the planning stage is called a white paper or a design doc, and it is laid out for almost any piece of software from Windows to Tetris. So what's in this mystical white paper? It is most easily described as everything. Anything about the game that you and your team of designers can come up with – user interface, hardware requirements, control schemes, plot, environment interaction, color schemes, move sets, player objectives, and character lists for starters. Things that may or may not be included in your game are economy models, items, vehicles, experience-point allocation, time limits, etc. That's a lot of information – and it should be planned out or you're in big trouble.

Planning, like most prep work, isn't usually the most fun part of a project, but writing everything down does offer a certain clarity, especially for overzealous beginners. "The idea is conceptual unity. You need to manage to deliver a game that plays well and has no irrelevant things that distract from the gameplay. Typically, another thing, because you've got a limited amount of time, is to select one thing that you're going to specialize in, one thing that is readily identifiable that is really cool – something that each individual did. It has a strength that people can identify. You need to think it through," says Dr. Shaw.

If you've managed to come up with some serious conceptual unity all alone, you still need to find a team, get some tools, and actually start making that great American game – and the wide open web can help you out.

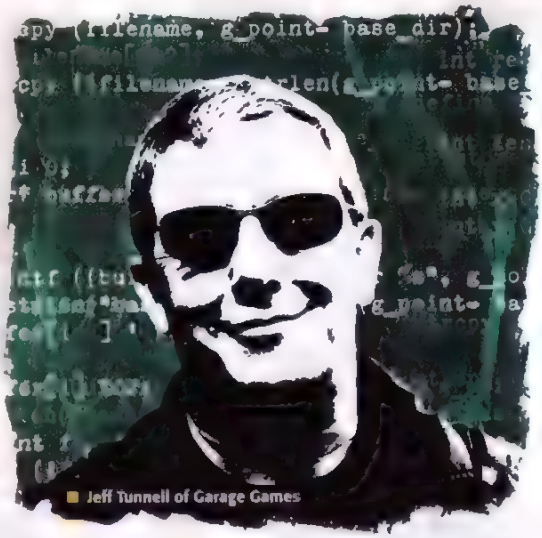
Phase 2: Get it Done

A founder of Dynamix who played a large role in the company's greatest successes – including Tribes and Tribes 2 – Jeff Tunnell aided in the production of around 70 published titles. Disenchanted with the state of the industry, he and a handful of developers opened Garage Games [www.garagegames.com] a few short years ago. The company is a one-stop shop to help fledgling game creators find teammates with specific skills (they have an extensive independent artist headhunting tool), technology support, and publishing aid geared towards independent developers.

"Garage Games is entirely made up to help the small guy – to help him get technology a team, and [get the game] published. The point that we're making is that the really interesting stuff is coming from the indies. We'll be the steady stream of innovation," explains Tunnell. If your friends are disinclined to participate in this programming madness, there is no shortage of people wanting to work on a game and you can search Garage Games by what skills are needed for your project. There you have it, an instant team – just add water.

Now that you're all off to the races with a thorough design document, a team of ambitious designers, and…well, what comes next? That's right – actually making the game you've been thinking so much about. Obviously, we're can't offer a step-by-step guide for this part of the process, but we can tell you what you're going to need. It's like a recipe of sorts, and the good news is that the ingredients are cheap and readily available. A PC and electricity are the only things that you absolutely have to shell out for – but remember that sometimes you get what you pay for. Ponying up a couple of bucks can really pay off in expanded tutorials, more lenient licensing requirements, or better feature sets for your tools.

Garage Games' Think Tanks is available for Windows, Mac, and Linux – the company's Torque game engine is designed to be cross-platform to increase availability.



Jeff Tunnell of Garage Games

Tunnell adds, "I think that without having good technology now, you don't even stand a chance. Without having good technology, how are you going to make something that people even want to play? We feel like it's incredibly important to get this technology out to the masses so that they can make games. Without it, in the past – say 10 years ago – the technology was so hard to make yourself that it was almost impossible. We provide the tools that allow people to make a game that's really fun, but there's still a certain amount of technology that you have to reach before people would even want to play your game."

Tools of the Trade

All prices are listed as a per user cost. Read through license agreements carefully, because making a kick-ass game, but breaking your license agreement, is one quick recipe for disaster.

3D MODELING AND ANIMATION:

Have your own little platforming hero or military head that you want integrated into a game? How about buildings, landscapes, guns, vehicles, or a lovely vintage armoire thrown in for some ambience? You'll need to find the models or make them yourself. These programs let you design 3D objects, apply texture maps, and export them to your game.

gmax – Free [discreet.com/products/gmax]
MilkShape 3D – $25 [swissquake.ch/chumbalum-soft]
3ds max 6 – $3,495 [discreet.com/3dsmax]

GAME ENGINE:

Many of you already know that engines are what make games work – they make sure that all parts of the experience (physics, graphics, collision, control, etc.) run when they're supposed to. Different engines have different strengths and weaknesses; so to figure out what you need as a developer, it's a good idea to decide what your game is going to be like and make your selection accordingly.

Quake II GNU General Public License innovation without tools – Free [idsoftware.com]
Torque – $100 [garagegames.com]
3D GameStudio/A6 – $150 [conitec.net/a4info.htm]

COMPILER:

Engines have source code and any changes that you make to it (customizing levels, incorporating characters, setting up collision, and the like) need to be compiled before that bucket of text will work as a game. These programs do the math and some will let you know about inconsistencies in the code you've written.

GCC – Free [gcc.gnu.org]
Visual C++ .NET – $109 [msdn.microsoft.com/visualc]
CodeWarrior – Prices Vary Per Platform [metrowerks.com]

ALL-IN-ONE-WONDERLAND:

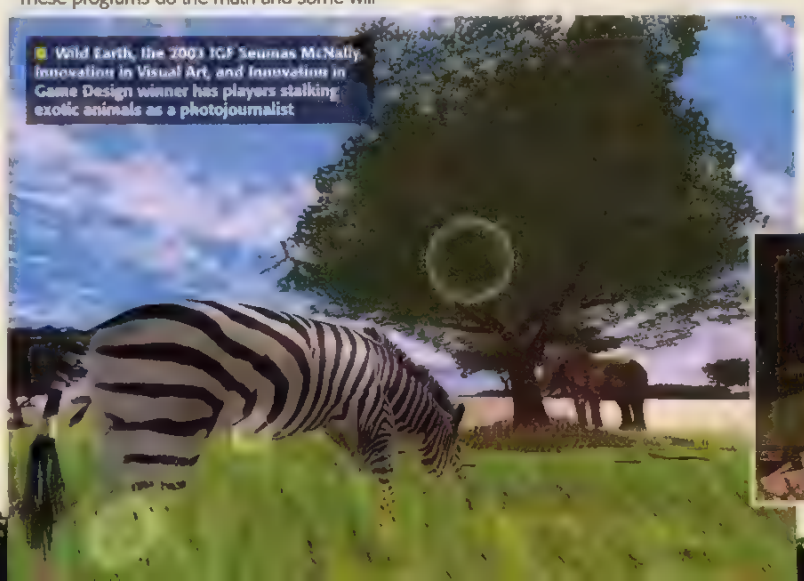
Blender is an open-source project that combines a 3D modeler, animation suite, compiler, and game engine with physics and lighting configurations. It's a free, all-in-one solution designed for ambitious newbies that also lets users take advantage of individual parts of the program (use the 3D modeler, but import the files into a different engine, for example). The only thing that you absolutely need in addition to this is an image editor.

Blender – Free [blender3d.org]

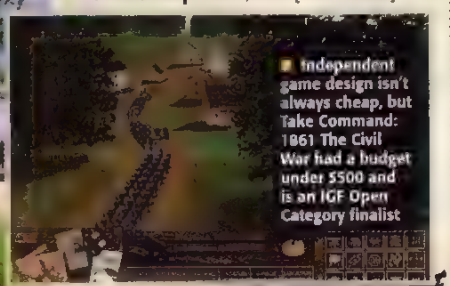
IMAGE EDITING:

These programs let designers make images, logos, texture maps, and user interfaces either from scratch or starting with a digital picture from a texture database or camera. The images can be applied to the 3D models you've made, imported as backgrounds for levels, or displayed as user interfaces.

The GIMP – Free [gimp.org]
PhotoShop Elements – $99 [adobe.com]
PhotoShop CS – $649 [adobe.com]



Wild Earth, the 2003 IGF Seumas McNally Innovation in Visual Art, and Innovation in Game Design winner has players stalking exotic animals as a photojournalist



Independent game design isn't always cheap, but Take Command: 1861 The Civil War had a budget under $500 and is an IGF Open Category finalist

Phase 3: Getting it Out

So the game is done? Good work. Lots of development teams (indie and pro) don't take a game to completion, and making it that far should give you a huge sense of personal satisfaction. But, if that warm fuzzy feeling inside would be even better knowing that others are actually playing your opus, there are a few things you can do to get a game to the masses.

In 1998, The Gama Network [www.cmpgame.com] (which offers a collection of resources for publishers and game developers large, small, and student) started the Independent Games Festival. The goal, as stated in the IGF rules, is "to pick the games that show the greatest overall promise and contribute most towards the evolution of the art of game development." This goal doesn't differentiate between home developers, college students, or collections of self-funded professionals. Although the Student Showcase entries aren't eligible, awards and cash prizes are offered each year for innovation in visual arts, audio, game design, and technical excellence. In addition, there is an audience-selected prize and the $15,000 purse for the Seumas McNally Award for Independent Game of the Year.

And, in what appears to be a first for the awards' highly competitive Open category, a student team has made the finals this year. Eric Anderson from the Bontãgo (see below) team tells us that enrolling in the IGF was part of their plan all along. "A big goal was to get into the IGF. At first, we figured we'd just go for the student submissions, but when the game was completed, we figured that it was innovative enough to try for the professional IGF. We entered in both just for fun, and to our surprise, got into the professional IGF. It's the first time a student team has ever done that from what I hear." The awards are going on at this year's Game Developer's Conference and no matter the outcome, Bontãgo is already earning the team a lot of recognition – which is worth its weight in gold for upcoming college grads looking to enter the workforce.

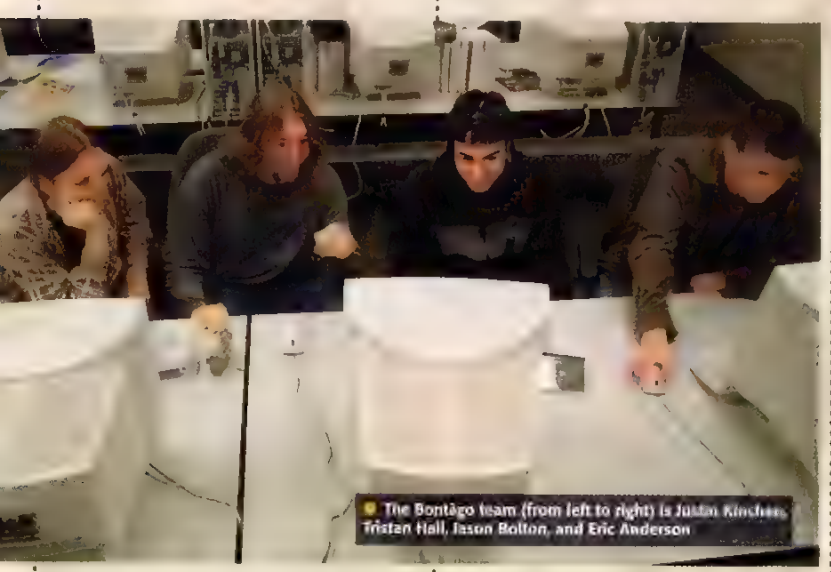
Besides submitting your game to this once-yearly event, there are number of options for getting a game to the masses. Building a webpage is a viable, cheap, and effective option. Another is a service offered by the good folks at Garage Games. "Once you get your game done, you need to publish it. That was another thing about the industry that had been bothering me for a long, long time was that the publishers take all of the rights to your game," explains Tunnell. "That was something that we didn't want to do. We have a publishing arm of our company and we pay really high royalties and we don't try to take any of the intellectual property rights or anything like that. We tried to make an entire system that will help developers and treat them the way that we want to be treated." Check out the website for the specifics, but the company's game sales are a great option for those who have a qualifying title.

A student team called Annex Labs, from Iowa State University, is getting a lot of attention for Treefort Wars – where players make and defend a fort during a neighborhood waterfight

Although there are many rewards that come with making your own game, the fast track to riches and acclaim is not a path many indies will walk. Everyone chimed in with the same sentiment as Tunnell about independent game design who said, "I think that people should just do it. It's like starting a band, you don't know until you try. You just get together with some friends and start making a game. It's accessible now. The technology isn't a barrier anymore, the tools aren't a barrier, and publishing is not one. Go out and do it. It takes time. You'll need time, but you're having fun."

An Indie Development Team Making Waves

For a little frame of reference, Neverwinter Nights took 75 full-time employees (at the project's employment peak) and nearly five years to complete. But one team of four students put together Bontãgo in seven and a half months for a mere $79 (to buy a license for the terrain background tool they selected).



The Bontãgo team (from left to right) is Justin Kinchen, Tristan Hall, Jason Bolton, and Eric Anderson

The Bontãgo team – Tristan Hall, Jason Bolton, Justin Kinchen, and Eric Anderson – are at varying stages of their post-secondary education at DigiPen Institute of Technology in Redmond, Washington; but they worked together to make a strategy game that's getting a lot of attention at this year's Independent Games Festival.

Tristan Hall, acting producer and programmer for the project, tells us that, "Bontãgo was the game that our team did for our junior level project class. The idea came almost exclusively from Justin Kinchen, our lead designer."

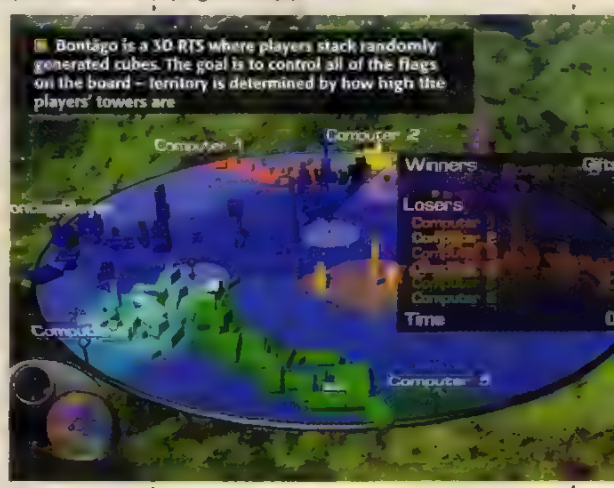
Eric Anderson chimes in, "The main goal for the semester was to have a fully completed game with nothing missing or scrapped, and everything working in order. For the most part this goal was reached – even surpassed in some areas, which is good. We wanted people to play a completely different type of game that no one had ever seen."

Hall and Anderson agree on what their work schedules were like during the development phase. "Since we were taking about 20 hours of other classes at the time, we had to work in our free time – about 10 hours a week. We had pretty reasonable goals for getting things done, so there were only a few weeks [of really long hours]," says Hall. Anderson adds, "Our work schedule had to coincide with school, so it was mostly nights. Some weeks it was many more than normal due to milestones that needed to be reached."

Being focused when making the initial plans for the game was something that the team excelled at because of experience. It was their second project as a group, so they already knew each member's skills and styles and how to better plan the actual execution of their plans. Only one major feature was cut after implementation, "it just wasn't fun." This is a testament to planning, but that doesn't mean that development was all smooth sailing.

"The main technical problem encountered was getting the physics to work right. It was our initial intention to make our own physics engine for the game, but it just wasn't performing to our liking. Luckily for us the Tokamak engine came out literally right when we needed it. It solved a vast majority of our problems; but added new ones that were eventually fixed," Anderson explains.

With the team composed of students, we had to ask the scholarly question: What did this exercise teach you? "Teamwork and the ability to learn and know when to use new technology are the most important skills," Jason Bolton, who dealt with programming and multiplayer support for Bontãgo, says. Designer Justin Kinchen offers, "Finding the time to work on it [is hard]. But, always have fun doing it." Anderson thinks that the biggest hurdle is to stick with the project until it's done. "Don't start on some other project thinking it will be so much better than your existing project – finish what you've started, get everything done, and then make another one. Otherwise you'll end up with 50 million demos, but none actually equating to a full game." Hall offers that, outside of student licenses and college-supplied equipment, big games can be financially infeasible for some people (for some sticker-shock, check out the full license costs of the Quake III Arena engine or Alias Wavefront's 3D modeling program, Maya).



Bontãgo is a 3D RTS where players stack randomly generated cubes. The goal is to control all of the flags on the board – territory is determined by how high the players' towers are

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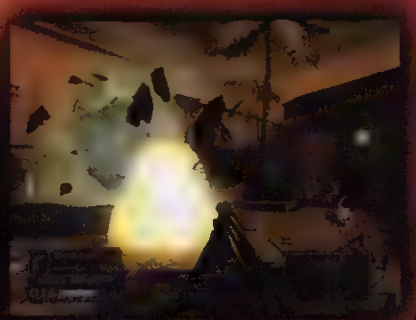

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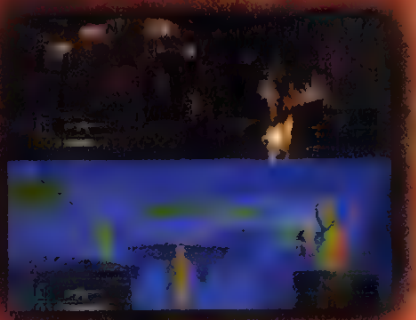

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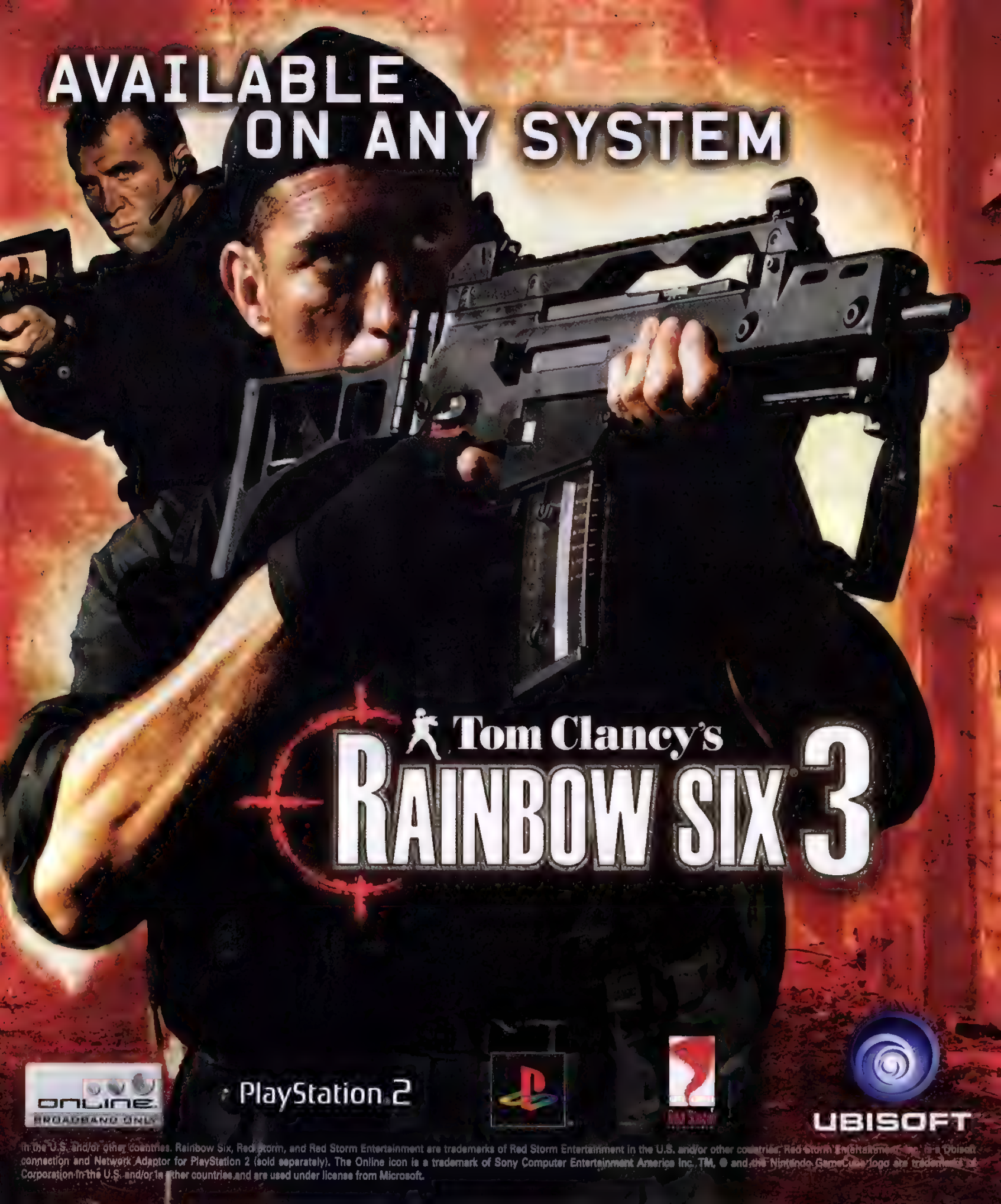

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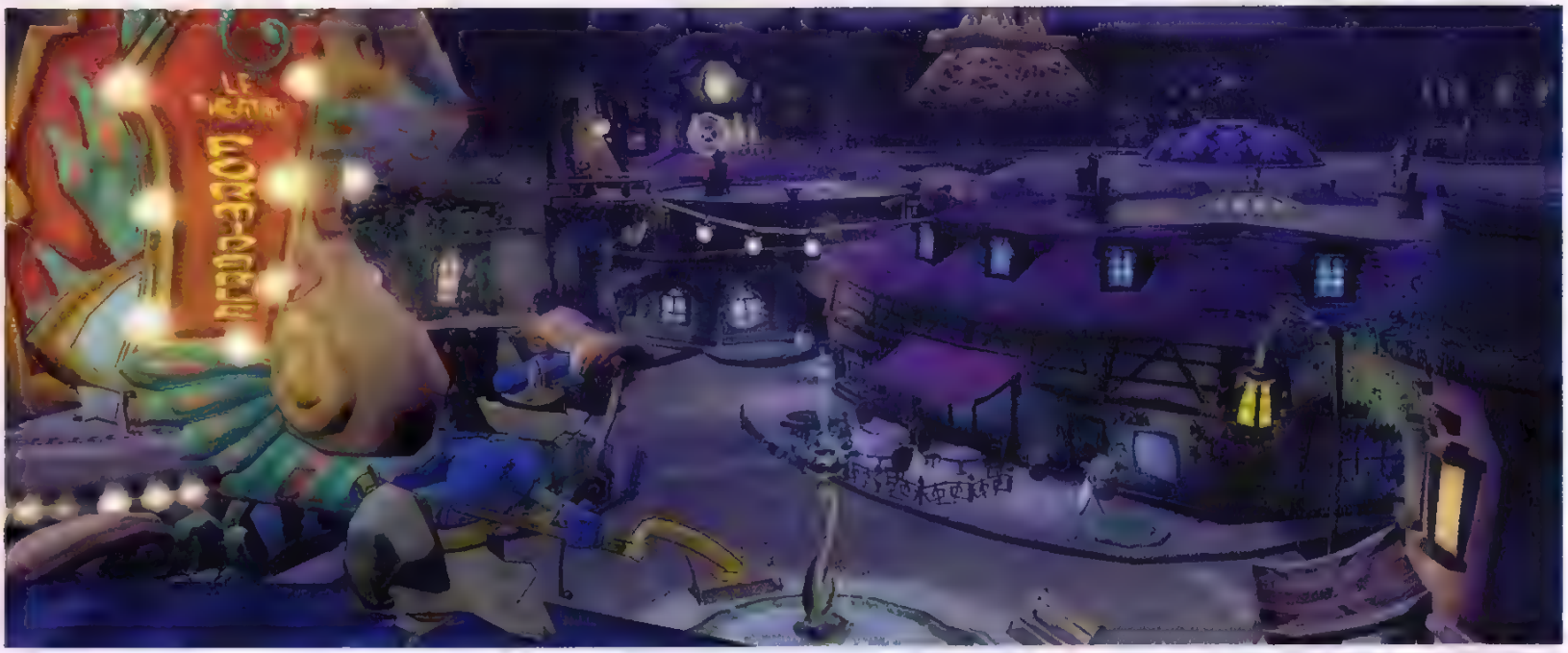


PLAYSTATION 2

Sly 2: Band of Thieves

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION > **PUBLISHER** SONY COMPUTER ENTERTAINMENT AMERICA > **DEVELOPER** SUCKER PUNCH
> **RELEASE** SEPTEMBER

Our little thief is growing up; but that big, goofy grin looks like he's still having fun stealing for the greater good

TALE OF THE COON

Sucker Punch's 2002 effort, Sly Cooper and the Thievius Raccoonus, was well received by press and players alike – the game was quickly inducted into Sony's Greatest Hits collection for PS2. But this team, not one to rest on its laurels, has been quietly toiling away at the sequel for almost 18 months now, and we got a chance to check it out at the developer's Seattle digs.

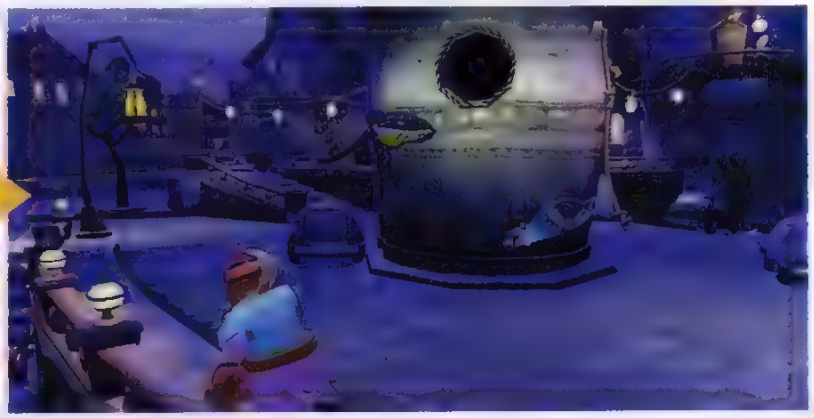
Sly's nemesis in Thievius Raccoonus was the menacing Clockwerk, who the wily thief dismantled at the end of that game. In Sly 2, which starts two years after the first entry ended, the hero finds out that Clockwerk's parts have been stolen. It's now up to Sly and the Family Thieves [our name, not the developer's] to stop this nefarious plot in its tracks.

Sly 2 really is a family affair [sorry, we just can't stop, but we're almost done] that lets players take control of all three super-thieves in a way that wasn't offered during the team's first outing. Although there will be the series' trademark minigames, Sucker Punch isn't spilling the beans on the specifics. We do know, however, that Bentley and Murray will be playable characters in a more traditional sense. Gamers will be switching between teammates and their skills on a regular basis to successfully complete the title's elaborate capers.

The edict that Sly's development team has been following for the entire process is that, "Sly and the gang work together to pull off a number of big heists." What this really means to players is that the combined effect of the team's efforts is bigger, more dramatic, and remarkably clever. The scale of these events is seriously large and highlights another of the sequel's updates – non-linear quests in massive environments that players can take on however they like.

Although some of the improvements we saw were more on the storytelling and pacing side of things, there are a notable handful of more tangible improvements as well. The one-hit kills that put Sly on the map have largely been taken away. Instead, both the heroes and the villains will have health bars, and the game design puts a higher priority on managing groups of enemies effectively. Also, the stealth functionality is much deeper and features an exclamation point indicator showing how aware an enemy is of your presence. Everything will affect his meter – walking on tightropes will cause the lights to sway and make the guards pay attention, and using your weapon and running across different materials will also change your level of cover.

Sucker Punch, despite the tongue-in-cheek humor displayed in its games, is taking this entry quite seriously. Sly 2 is scheduled to ship in September to let players creep to their hearts' content. ■■■



THE GOOD GUYS

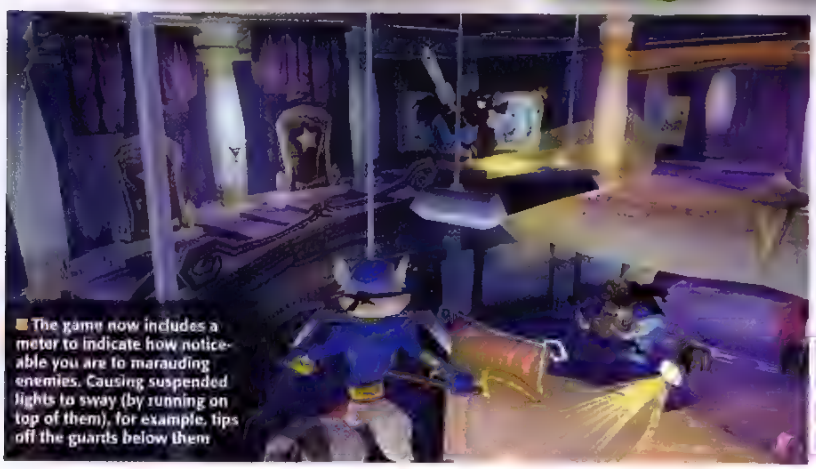
Murray

Bentley

Dimitri

Rajan

FORCES OF EVIL



The game now includes a meter to indicate how noticeable you are to marauding enemies. Causing suspended lights to sway (by running on top of them), for example, tips off the guards below them

Bentley is meek in appearance, but strong in explosive weaponry. This demolition expert uses the big bang and a tranquilizer gun to get the job done

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Suggestive Themes
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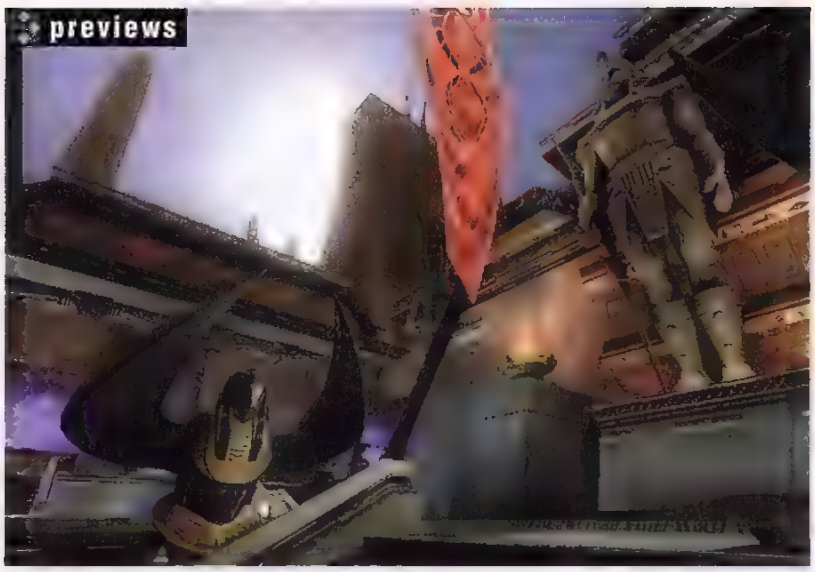
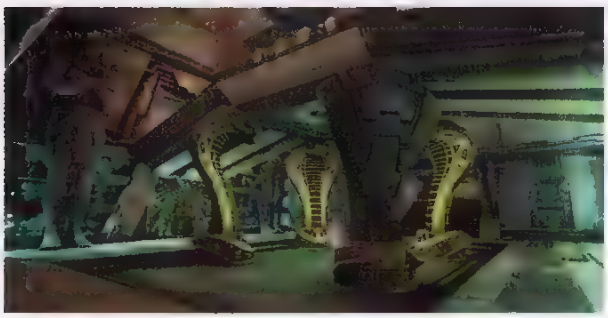
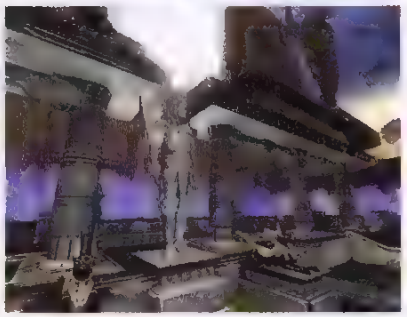
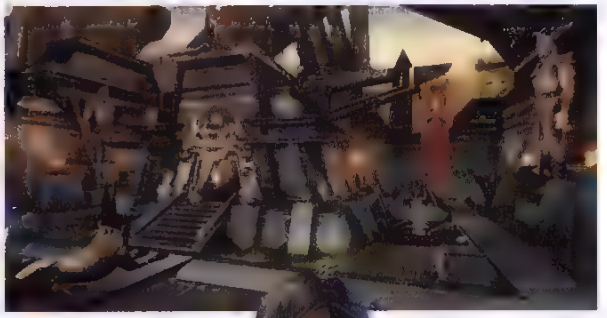


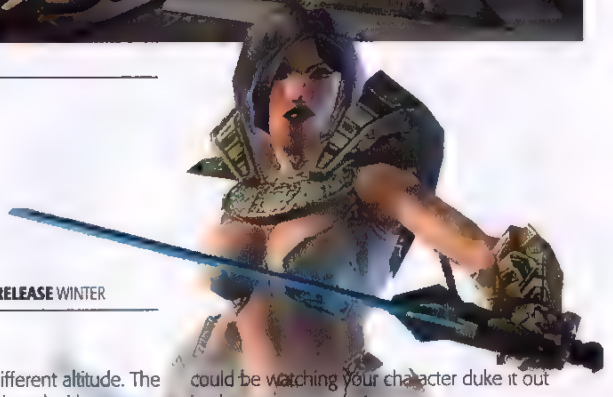






XBOX

Unreal Championship 2: The Liandri Conflict



> STYLE 1 TO 4-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 16-PLAYER VIA SYSTEM LINK OR XBOX LIVE) **> PUBLISHER** MICROSOFT GAME STUDIOS **> DEVELOPER** EPIC GAMES **> RELEASE** WINTER

UNREALITY CHECK

With the March release of Unreal Tournament 2004 for the PC, and February's Unreal II: The Awakening for the Xbox, fans of the Unreal franchise are living the high life these days. The good news is that things are just going to keep getting better this winter when Microsoft releases the sequel to 2002's Unreal Championship. However, unlike some sequels that just cruise along on previous success, Epic Games has done some considerable retooling to make this entry something special.

The first major improvement is the addition of melee combat. This may seem jarring to purists looking for unadulterated guns-blazing action, but Microsoft claims that melding the two styles will be seamless. It will certainly make it necessary to devise different strategies for close and ranged combat, and it promises to add a whole new category of hand-to-hand weaponry to complement the already impressive array of long-range instruments of destruction.

To highlight this new fighting potential, players will also be capable of taking their melee combat to the air, pulling off amazing acrobatic combos against opponents. Instead of just dashing to the side, players will now be able to flip in the air, weapons drawn, and take the battle to a different altitude. The maps are even being designed with a more vertical approach in order to facilitate the high-flying fighting.

Because of these new additions, some of the mechanics of previous iterations simply won't do anymore. For instance, it would be nearly impossible to pull off a mid-air twirling melee attack from a first person perspective. In order to make these feats easier to accomplish, a new third-person camera angle has been integrated in addition to the traditional first-person view. This means that one minute you could be blasting away from long distances in classic form, and the next you could be watching your character duke it out in close range combat.

In a genre that is swollen with derivative titles and no-improvement sequels, it is good to know that Unreal is taking a step in a different direction. However, the new features aren't the only ones getting love; already existing aspects of the series are receiving attention as well. An involved single player campaign, along with Xbox Live-enabled multiplayer (including more vehicles, characters, and adrenaline powers than before) has UC 2 shaping up to be a solid mix of old favorites and new hotness. ■ ■ ■

■ Cirque du Soleil... of the future!

■ Expect multi-tiered, highly-detailed environments

■ Multiplayer continues to be the main focus

Must...

The new melee fighting won't always be the best option

In heels, great

What's hot? Guns. What's not? Clothes

You'll need to get comfortable with airborne combat

Anubis is one of the heroes of the solo campaign

Anubis

UNLIMITED ENABLED

PLAYSTATION 2

Driven to Destruction

> STYLE 1 TO 4-PLAYER RACING **> PUBLISHER** ATARI **> DEVELOPER** MONSTER GAMES
> RELEASE SEPTEMBER

RACING THE FENDERS OFF

This time last year, we were shocked to hear that Atari would be bowing out of NASCAR games. The publisher had been edged out of the license due to the power of EA Sports' almighty buck. This left developer Monster Games without a direction, but it produced a beneficial side effect. Now free to think outside of the NASCAR box, the team began to dream up some pretty crazy ideas of what to do with their racing engine, and how it would rip a car to shreds in the process. Strangely enough, the game they came up with is played out in real life every Friday night.

The concept behind Driven to Destruction is an homage to the wackos throughout this great land of ours who find fun in destruction derbies or beating and banging their station wagons around a track – with trailers in tow. Contests like this are usually side attractions to amateur racing nights. Driven to Destruction gives you 25 of these events, and wraps them in an engaging career mode that would make any owner of an AMC Gremlin proud. You start out with a junker car, and must enter it into various nights. These are where you will compete in three to 12 events, including figure eight courses, Suicide races (where half the field is driving in the opposite direction as you), and something unfathomably known as Gizmo Wrangling. Monster's president Richard Garcia calls it "short attention-span racing." Work your way up the ladder, and you'll unlock new cars (of which there are over 30), gain money for upgrades, and become the craziest driver in the county. Apart from multiplayer goodness (although online is regretfully absent), the game also features a Dare mode, which has you meet certain challenges in the events.

Our main concern was whether players would be confused. Which is more important? Racing for first or destroying your competition? Thankfully, this gameplay conundrum solves itself. In our exclusive hands-on session with the title, we quickly noticed that in trying to come in first, there were plenty of mid-air collisions, horrible wrecks, and mayhem. Sometimes it's the tracks (such as in a figure eight course with the intersecting jumps in the middle) which inevitably lead to chaos. Other times it's the race format (like in Whiplash, where you must turn and go the opposite direction after each lap) or the AI. Monster Games has even included collision for many of the objects that may litter the track. Halfway through a race a stray hay bale sitting in the middle of the course can suddenly make things a little tricky. Each race features ambient life such as traffic outside the track, great commentary from the stadium announcer, mid-race replays of the best crashes, and a sweet damage model for the cars. Instead of just losing a back fender, each auto has a crumple zone where a back quarter panel, for example, will indent and expose one of your rear wheels.

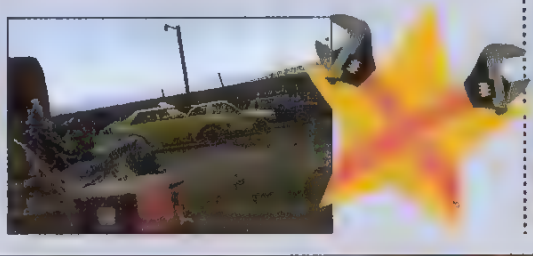
What was once a defeat at the hands of a competitor has turned into a blessing in disguise for Monster Games. The developer has left the NASCAR license and its year-to-year grind behind to pursue an even more ambitious project. If Driven to Destruction's infectious fun catches on with the gaming public, perhaps Monster will find itself at the front of an all-new racing juggernaut. ■ ■ ■

★ LOCAL COLOR ★

The game features a dozen unlockable videos showing footage of these events in real life. One mulleted contestant reads off a list of injuries he's sustained, and then declares, "And that was just before the race!" Get a little down home flavor of the tracks, where when you order a beer they ask you, "Six or 12-pack?"

★ SWEET HOME ALABAMA ★

The game's hub location is a world onto itself. You'll not only visit the junkyard to buy new cars or upgrade and paint them; you'll physically drive around the hub to do it. In fact, while going to the events, you can be challenged by rivals to a race for some extra cash!



★ DEATH BY POULTRY ★

Bringing back the spirit of NASCAR Heat's tire-shooting secret code, Monster Games has included the multiplayer-exclusive Battle mode. Here you'll be pitted in a poultry fight to the death. You must destroy the opponent by shooting chickens out of your grill at your foe. Chickens were hurt during the making of this game!

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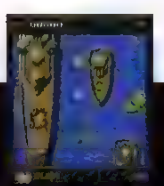
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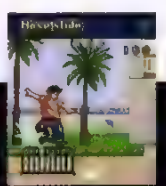
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Go ahead, make fun of his hat and shiny eye. See what happens

"Silly me! I've been using my cholesterol cannon!"

PLAYSTATION 2 | XBOX

Darkwatch

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 12-PLAYER VIA ONLINE)
> **PUBLISHER** SAMMY STUDIOS > **DEVELOPER** SAMMY STUDIOS > **RELEASE** WINTER

A FISTFUL OF VAMPIRES

As long as there has been civilization, there has been a secret organization that protects the world from the ultimate evil. Their methods are a bit unorthodox – they grind enemies for fuel and use their skin to create protective cloaks. Grim, but effective. No, they aren't the Freemasons – they are the Darkwatch, and they have a deadly new agent named Jericho Cross, a gun-slinging half-vampire with a bone to pick.

With a concept reminiscent of Stephen King's *The Dark Tower* series, this upcoming FPS title from Sammy Studios features a re-imagined version of the Wild West teeming with sinister ambience, following Jericho across the frontier as he hunts the vampire lord who attacked him. As a half-vampire himself and a member of the technologically advanced Darkwatch, Jericho can use some powerful (and anachronous) weapons crafted to eradicate evil en masse. In addition to the typical shotguns and sniper rifles, he can wield heavier artillery such as a rocket launcher and the gattling-gun equipped Coyote Steamwagon assault vehicle.

But weapons alone do not make the man. Even without his impressive arsenal, Jericho is still a force to be reckoned with. He has three vampiric powers that enhance his combat effectiveness – a jump that allows him leap onto rooftops, a shield that absorbs damage from bullets, and enhanced vision that makes it possible for him to zoom in with any weapon, even if it doesn't have a scope. Also, in addition to these innate superhuman abilities, Jericho will be able to periodically resurrect his undead steed, which he can then mount, blasting and trampling enemies as he rides.

Though there will be ample hordes of enemies to mow down, you can expect them to be more intelligent than your average shuffling, brain-eating zombie. In order to add more vitality to this reworked version of the West, the enemies will feature a dynamic AI that constantly reacts to the player's actions. They'll use cover, retreat when threatened, and gain courage when they think they have the upper hand. Don't expect to just learn the patterns and blow through a level; enemy behavior depends on what you do as a player, so each time through the game could be a different experience.

The fun doesn't stop with the end of the single player campaign, either. Various co-op and versus modes (including a "Classic Western Duel") supporting up to 12 players online will be available, in addition to the possibility of downloadable content like new characters and missions. Combine this replayability with a uniquely macabre theme, and you have an FPS with a highly original feel – something that's harder to find these days than a good sarsaparilla. ■■■

Wanted: Dead or Undead

Location-specific damage leaves the door open for some grisly scenes

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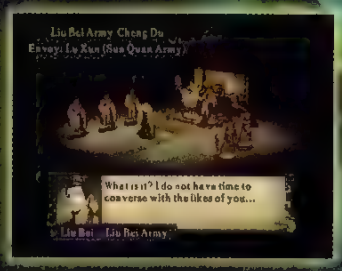

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EVERYONE E CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

Mild Language
Violence

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PlayStation®2

PLAYSTATION 2 | XBOX | GAMECUBE | PC

MADDEN NFL 2005

> **STYLE** 1 TO 8-PLAYER SPORTS (UP TO 8-PLAYER VIA ONLINE) > **PUBLISHER** EA SPORTS > **DEVELOPER** EA TIBURON > **RELEASE** AUGUST

HITTIN' AND STICKIN' LIKE FRIED CHICKEN

The EA Sports empire builds to even higher heights every year. It seems that with each title in its arsenal, the famed publisher keeps raising the bar for itself and others. In Madden NFL 2004, Franchise junkies got more than they could handle, as the minutia of your team could be tweaked. No less of a feat came for offenses in 2004. The Playmaker controls let quarterbacks turn something into nothing with a flick of the stick. We've seen what MVP Baseball 2004's use of right analog control did for the sport, now you're going to see what it does to a wide receiver stretching out over the middle for a pass..

The extent of defenses' use of the right analog stick in last year's Madden was like a melon baller to a kitten – negligible enough that you might never have used them. Unlike the real NFL, defenses are now playing on an equal playing field with offenses. Developer EA Tiburon is introducing Hit Stick control, which lets you jam on the right analog and put the big hurt on quarterbacks, wide receivers, and anybody else who comes in your way. Given the way EA Sports has been growing, we wouldn't be surprised to see Madden let you manually control players similar to how the boxers handle in Fight Night 2004. Imagine if this Hit Stick control encompassed swiveling the right analog to perform a swim move on a guard or personally pick off a pass (we're sick of the AI dropping the ball!).

Getting a gander at these screens, it's evident that EA Tiburon is finding more and more detail to pick out of the players. Notice how the jerseys stretch and strain to the players' shoulder pads. Years into this console generation, and the developer is still finding new ways to make what already looked awesome even better. In an attempt to match the great broadcast-like touches of ESPN's football game, EA Sports is promising "ground-breaking fan presentation." Does that mean halftime streakers? ■ ■ ■

■ No QB controversy here, EA likes Bulger all the way!

PLAYSTATION 2 | XBOX | GAMECUBE

NCAA Football 2005

> **STYLE** 1 TO 8-PLAYER SPORTS (UP TO 8-PLAYER VIA ONLINE) > **PUBLISHER** EA SPORTS
> **DEVELOPER** EA TIBURON > **RELEASE** JULY 1

CLEAN OLD-FASHIONED HATE

College football is more than football without the massive salaries and big egos. It's a whole sub-culture of fierce rivalries played out before over 100,000 screaming fans jammed into a stadium on a Saturday afternoon. It's the Red River Shootout between the Sooners and the Longhorns. It's the passing of rival trophies with names like The Megaphone and The Apple Cup. And it's a little Georgia tiff called "Clean Old-Fashioned Hate."

Before now, EA Sports' NCAA series did a good job of representing the passion of college football. In 2005, however, the game is going to take sports – collegiate or pro – somewhere it's never been before. In an ode to the fierce rivalries throughout the land, the crowd can have a direct impact on the players on the field. Whether it's the difficulty of a QB calling an audible over the deafening crowd noise, or the pressure of executing a winning forth quarter drive in an enemy's stadium, NCAA kicks the intensity of football up a notch and many thousands of decibels. Taking the custom entrances of last year, fans can now get in on the act with their own celebrations, such as the University of Florida's Gator Chomp or the Texas Longhorns' Hook 'Em Horns.

Part of the thrill of college football is seeing the men among boys, like a Larry Fitzgerald. NCAA now allows you to take advantage of any mismatches on the line of scrimmage. With the Match-Up stick, you can position your best receiver against that slow, 5'9" cornerback, and watch as the domination unfolds. ■ ■ ■

■ The Ohio State crowd makes it difficult for Michigan to get its audible down

■ Coach gets ready for his game-winning Gatorade suppository

GAMECUBE

Fire Emblem

> **STYLE** TBA > **PUBLISHER** NINTENDO
> **DEVELOPER** TBA > **RELEASE** TBA

OUT OF YOUR HANDS AND ONTO YOUR TV

Fire…Bad!!! Frankenstein's monster may not like fire, but Nintendo certainly does. At long last, the revered strategy/RPG saga is coming to GameCube. If you've played Super Smash Brothers and wondered who the characters Marth and Roy were, they originated in the Fire Emblem series, which made its stateside debut with the recent GBA title. The GameCube edition is the first U.S. console release for the series, and as you can see, it looks pretty freakin' cool. Details are still scarce, but you can be sure we'll be following this one closely, because we like playing with fire. ■■■

PLAYSTATION 2

Bujingai: The Forsaken City

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION > **PUBLISHER** BAM ENTERTAINMENT > **DEVELOPER** TAITO/RED ENTERTAINMENT
> **RELEASE** MAY 19

HACK N' SLASH ... WITH STYLE!

No matter your opinion on some recent releases like Ninja Gaiden, Nightshade, or Tenchu: Return from Darkness, you cannot deny that these are great times for the swordplay enthusiast. But while many entries in this genre tend to feel and play alike, Taito and Red Entertainment are attempting to inject a little variety into the formula with their new title, Bujingai: The Forsaken City.

There isn't much innovation in the story department – a lone warrior must save the world from destruction. However, Bujingai manages to set itself apart with some outstanding stylistic elements. Though the hero Lau, doesn't rank up there with Dante or Ryu in terms of the number of attacks in his repertoire, each of his moves has a unique flair. When he swings his two blades, a dazzling prismatic trail follows them throughout the entire combo, enveloping the hero in a swirl of color, and the enemies in a world of hurt. While in the air, Lau can glide for a short distance, very much resembling the wirework flight seen in movies like *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. In fact several aspects of the game feel deeply rooted in the Hong Kong cinema, such as over-the-top attack animations, wall-climbing, and extensive aerial combat.

The release of Bujingai commemorates Taito's 50th anniversary, and to mark the occasion it brought in some top-shelf talent to work on the landmark title. The characters were designed by Toshihiro Kawamoto (of *Cowboy Bebop* fame), and the story was written by Yousuke Kuroda (best known for *Inigun*). But the most high-profile contributor is eccentric Japanese pop icon Gackt who served as the model for Lau, and even provided the motion capture for his movements. So, while much of the gameplay seems familiar, the level of style and talent being poured into Bujingai promises to give it a flavor all its own when it comes stateside. ■■■

Though you won't drive them, vehicles are very much a part of the war

Enemies will use cover, so you'd better too

Authentic architecture adds to the setting

It's all about the size of your boomstick

XBOX | PC

Men Of Valor

> STYLE XBOX: 1 OR 2-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 8-PLAYER VIA XBOX LIVE OR SYSTEM LINK) PC: 1-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 16-PLAYER VIA LAN OR INTERNET) **> PUBLISHER** VIVENDI UNIVERSAL **> DEVELOPER** 2015 **> RELEASE** OCTOBER

YOUR DEEDS OF VALOR WILL BE REMEMBERED

Remember how it felt the first time you popped in Medal of Honor: Allied Assault? The shells bursting all around you, your fellow soldiers falling like so much wheat before the scythe? 2015, the developer who brought that experience to your home, is working to bring that same level of intensity to the Vietnam conflict with Men of Valor. Though southeast Asia is a significantly different venue than the European theatre of World War II, this looks to be on track to end up just as visceral and polished as Allied Assault.

While Medal of Honor did many things right (just ask its legions of fans), 2015 is moving in a more realistic direction for MoV. To that end, it's shooting for a Mature rating – a decision which allows for a much more accurate and gritty depiction of the war. The requisite cursing and blood aren't the only things that immerse you into the conflict, though. Cliches like breaking boxes for ammo are getting chucked out the window, in favor of searching the bodies of fallen foes to find the supplies you need.

Another way Men of Valor brings you into the game is through the ever-present squad dynamic. No longer will you play a lone wolf; with the vastly improved enemy AI, how well you work with your team will determine much of your success. Try to go play Rambo on your own, and your mother will more than likely be getting the worst sort of telegram.

On the technical side of things, 2015 is making great progress in bringing the steaming environments of southeast Asia to life. Even at this early stage of development, the amount of foliage present is astounding. Of course, the impressive presentation hardly ends with that. Excellent music (including eight licensed 1960's songs), realistic sounds, and contextual banter between your squadmates really go the extra mile to put you in Sgt. Dean Shephard's shoes.

Even in its current very incomplete form, Men of Valor looks like it's going to not only live up to the high standard of Medal of Honor, but surpass it in many ways. Keep your eyes on this one, and cross your fingers with us to hope that everything comes together like we think it will. ■■■

THE PERSON IN THE SHOOTER

In yet another bold step forward for the video game industry, 2015 is doing their utmost to ensure that Sgt. Shephard, the main character in MoV, is a fully-developed character that gamers can empathize with – something that's almost unheard-of in the FPS genre. In-game cutscenes and conversations will tell his story without taking you out of the world, and even mission briefings are given through Dean's letters home to his family. In addition to being a fleshed-out character, he's African-American; and we all know that video games could benefit from having more non-white characters who aren't there just to jazz a title up a bit. The developer isn't trying to dodge any bullets or tackle only half of the question, either. Dean's squad is ethnically mixed, and the interactions manage to both feel natural and address the race issue, something that is currently very lacking in our favorite entertainment medium. After all, the Xbox can display millions of colors. Why not mix it up a bit?

PLAYSTATION 2

Athens 2004

> **STYLE** 1 TO 8-PLAYER SPORTS > **PUBLISHER** SONY COMPUTER ENTERTAINMENT AMERICA
> **DEVELOPER** EUROCOM/SCEE > **RELEASE** SUMMER

MEDALS OF HONOR

Why Sony would choose to do an Olympic game is beyond us. Maybe the Olympic Committee should check for illegal substances. But, Athens' product manager, Ed Loonan, tells us why Sony is going to succeed where others have failed with Olympic games. "The gameplay itself [in previous titles] didn't seem to be very deep – I think that there are twice as many events [in Athens]."

Sounds like just talk, but we're glad to hear exactly how Sony is pushing the genre forward. First off, the gameplay is going to be more than button mashing. Those of you with dance pads will be able to use those peripherals to control athletes in at least eight events. Running races will definitely utilize it, as will the women's dance gymnastics events. Unfortunately, the pad can only be used in Athens' standalone Party Mode. Also, the game will utilize the analog sticks for more varied gameplay (see below).

Athens contains more than 25 events, including Equestrian, weightlifting, and shooting to go along with the customary track and field, swimming, and gymnastics. In Competition mode, players can go up against the real Olympic world records. Sadly, the International Olympic Committee put the kibosh on online play for the game.

Sony is taking a risk with Athens, but hopefully good gameplay will be the final determiner. If all goes well, the company tells us that it has the right of first refusal for a winter Olympics game, so we may be curling in no time! ■ ■ ■

GYMNASTICS

In a thankful attempt to spice up the gameplay, Eurocom will have the player utilize the analog sticks to perform certain events like the gymnastics rings. The controller will have built in resistance to mirror the muscle strain as the gymnast's arms shake. Sony says that it is currently looking at how and where else it can use the sticks in gameplay, but the only other confirmed event is discus.

UNLIMITED ENABLED

PLAYSTATION 2 | XBOX

Hitman: Contracts

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION > **PUBLISHER** EIDOS > **DEVELOPER** IO INTERACTIVE > **RELEASE** APRIL

THE BIGGEST JOB YET

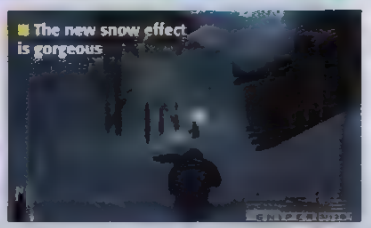
Agent 47, the protagonist of the Hitman series, is one of our favorite antiheroes to ever grace consoles, and he's coming back for more in Hitman: Contracts. Developer IO Interactive is moving in a slightly different direction for this sequel, but it looks like the core gameplay is intact and even more refined than before, making for the best kind of follow-up to a hit title.

At the very top of the list of improvements is a new graphics engine. Everything on screen, from Agent 47 himself to the poor bastards on his list (and the dank holes they hide in), looks better than ever before. Blood spurts, arms flail, neon glows, and snow flies – all in vivid detail. Of course, not all of that detail is particularly pretty. The world of Hitman is a much more grisly place to be now. Within one level, we saw insane mental patients, genetic experiments, and quite a bit of gore from the dozens of corpses spread around the facility.

This twisted vibe is present through the whole plot of Contracts. Agent 47's story is told through a series of hallucinatory flashbacks, each one of them a mission. These psychotic episodes probably have something to do with the gunshot wounds and heavy dosages of painkillers running through his system, lending a significantly different tone to the franchise. This is a good thing, though – it also opens up the action for some innovative ways to go about your profession.

To that end an expanded arsenal, something that no self-respecting sequel should be without, is also available in Contracts. From syringes full of pain to 30 firearms, there are numerous ways to take care of business. Not to mention new sneak attacks. Don't worry, though – the cunning and strategy that the franchise is known for are just as necessary as ever, since Agent 47 isn't the only one with new tricks up his sleeve. Enemies feature improved AI that lets them communicate with each other and band together into squads to track you down, which should more than compensate for the new toys you have access to.

With all of these improvements, Contracts looks like it will do what every sequel aspires to – keeping old fans happy while generating new ones. Even if the previous Hitman titles didn't do much for you, it's probably a good idea to keep this one on your radar until it hits stores sometime in April. ■ ■ ■



AD LIB VIOLENCE

One of the big changes in Contracts is a huge bump to the interactivity of the environments. Not only can you use them to your advantage by doing things like hanging bodies on meat hooks as a lesson to your foes, but also an unprecedented number of commonplace objects can be used as weapons. Shovels, pool cues, and even pillows can serve to give you an alternate means to accomplish your objectives, thereby allowing even more freedom to complete tasks as you see fit.

"I'll be right there, honey! I just need to break this guy's neck."

"Yep, that looks infected."

GAMECUBE

WWE: Day of Reckoning

> STYLE 1 TO 4-PLAYER ACTION **> PUBLISHER** THQ **> DEVELOPER** YUKE'S **> RELEASE** FALL

THE NEW HEAVYWEIGHT

Do you think you have what it takes to become a WWE superstar? Many wrestling fans have dreamed of making it to the upper echelons of the world's most famous wrestling organization, but few actually have the ability or determination. But thanks to THQ's new WWE title, wannabe heavyweights everywhere can live the dream. The GameCube-exclusive Day of Reckoning will let players experience the life of a WWE wrestler as they climb the ranks to the main event of Wrestlemania.

Developed by wrestling experts Yuke's, the goal of Day of Reckoning is to provide fans with everything they've ever wanted in a wrestling title. By listening to fan feedback, message boards, and the like, THQ determined that a compelling story mode is the key to a great game. In Day of Reckoning's School of Hard Knocks mode, gamers will create a unique character and set out on a quest to become the next world champion. Players will participate in training camps to builds stats and earn a chance at a WWE contract. Those who are good enough will get signed and enter the WWE at the bottom rung. Backstabbing, betrayal, and plenty of plot twists will all obscure your rise to the top.

Over the course of your quest, you'll square off against over 40 of the WWE's most famous stars, including Chris Benoit, Triple H, John Cena, and many more. The models for the wrestlers are the most accurate and lifelike to appear on the 'Cube thus far, with new faces, improved physiques, and more detailed textures and lighting. Many fans will appreciate these improved models even more when they see the Day of Reckoning's bra and panties matches!

While a little skin is always a welcome addition to a wrestling game, THQ has so much more than improved visuals in store for WWE enthusiasts. Gameplay has also been overhauled, and now features location-specific damage, more realistic weapon usage, an improved grapple system, and a new submission meter. No longer will tapouts be decided automatically – how quickly you hit the A button determines how quickly you break out of a hold. The same mechanic is used to fight off "de-clothing" in the titillating bra and panties match.

These new features are all showcased by a new TV-style presentation with dynamic camera angles to emphasize the best parts of the action. Like the WWE itself, Day of Reckoning is hard-hitting, fast paced, and should drive wrestling fans absolutely nuts, if you smell what the GI is cookin'! ■■■

WRESTLERS ARE GAMERS, TOO

We recently had the chance to ask some WWE superstars about their thoughts on video games, and they were happy to share with us. They're so giving! Here are a few of our favorite quotes.

HURRICANE:

"I just bought the last Mortal Kombat. If I were fighting them in real life, I wouldn't do a Fatality, because I'm a superhero and I have super-morals.

DEVON DUDLEY:

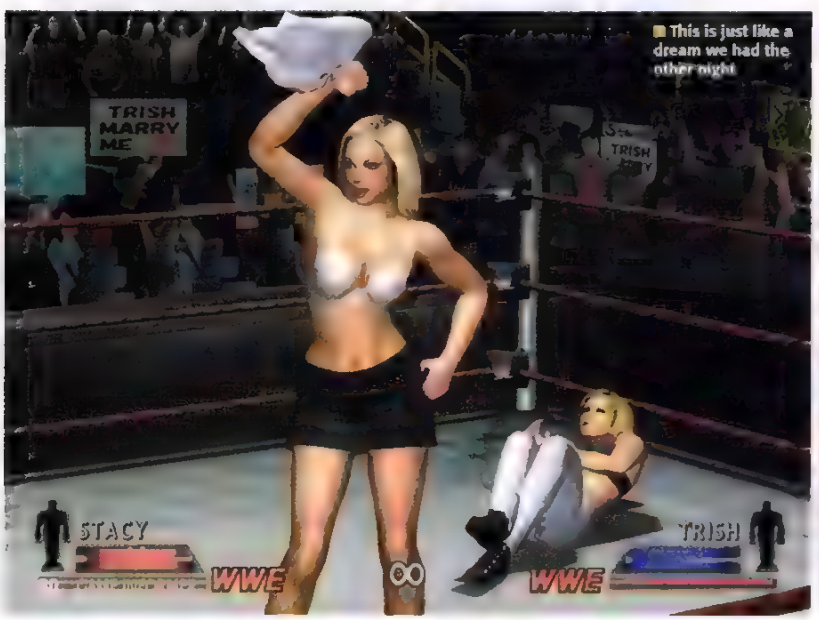
"I love video games. It's a big stress release. After a hard night in the ring, I like to play PlayStation all night long."

VICTORIA:

"I used to be an avid player when I was playing Atari – Centipede, Asteroids. I'm aging myself."

A-TRAIN:

"When I'm not playing with my dogs or my lady, I like to play video games, ever since the Atari. You gotta love Pong. You know – the little paddles."



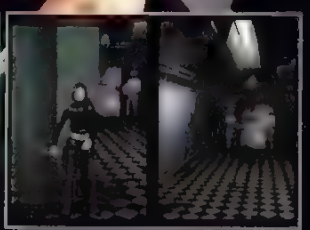
This is just like a dream we had the other night

"Aww, dude! Lay off the burritos!"

STEALTH BOMBSHELL

High-impact, motion-captured combat

Spy gadgets, high-tech & makeshift weaponry



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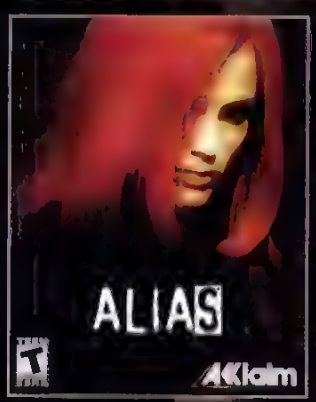

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XBOX

Iron Phoenix

> **STYLE** 1 TO 2-PLAYER FIGHTING (UP TO 16 PLAYERS VIA SYSTEM LINK OR XBOX LIVE) > **PUBLISHER** SAMMY STUDIOS
> **DEVELOPER** INTERSERV INTERNATIONAL > **RELEASE** WINTER

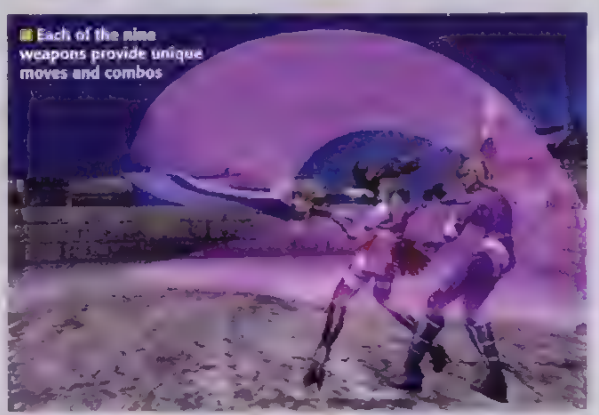
WILL THIS METAL BIRD FLY?

Sammy Studios is planning to break new ground in a couple of ways with its upcoming online fighting title, Iron Phoenix. Not only is it the publisher's first release on the Xbox, but it is also the first game to try to mix the action of 3D fighters with the strategy of team-based combat. We've seen plenty of entries in each of those separate genres, but the styles have yet to be combined in a massive 16-player online arena.

Though you'll find many standard weapons and attacks, Iron Phoenix is not your typical fighting title. For one thing, the weapons (not the characters) entirely determine which moves you can perform. In fact, the only differences between the 10 characters are purely cosmetic; they all wield each weapon with equal proficiency. Instead of character-specific special moves, players will need to get familiar with several weapons (such as warhammers, daggers, and spears), and be able to switch them to suit the situation. Of course, once you change weapons, the various moves and combos at your disposal will also be altered.

But Iron Phoenix will contain much more than the average button-mashing melee mayhem; there will be a heavy emphasis on teamwork and strategy. While on Xbox Live, it will be imperative that you use the headset to communicate with your teammates in order to coordinate your attacks and get the jump on your opponents. Even in the single-player campaign, you will have an AI-controlled combat buddy, so you're rarely expected to go solo.

In addition to its unique gameplay mechanics, Iron Phoenix will also have other goodies to enhance the experience. Not only will it include unlockables to spice things up, it will also support HDTV at a resolution of 480p, as well as integrate Dolby Digital 5.1 surround sound. Many games in the past have had trouble melding genres in the way that Iron Phoenix is attempting – here's hoping all these factors come together well enough to get this hybrid off the ground. ■■■



■ Each of the nine weapons provide unique moves and combos

■ Ah, the memories of picking square dance partners back in grade school

■ Statue in Training

XBOX

Tron 2.0: Killer App

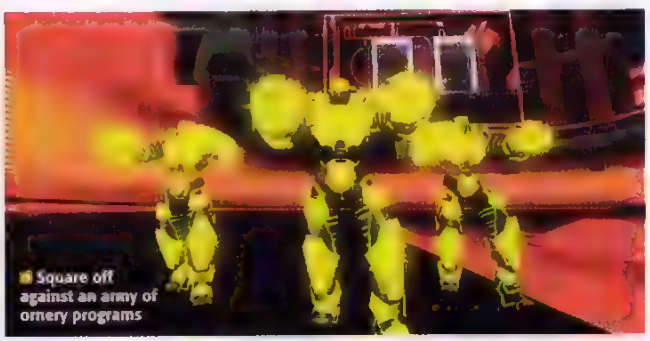
> **STYLE** 1 TO 4-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 16-PLAYER VIA SYSTEM LINK OR XBOX LIVE) > **PUBLISHER** BUENA VISTA INTERACTIVE > **DEVELOPER** CLIMAX > **RELEASE** FALL

BETTER WITH AGE

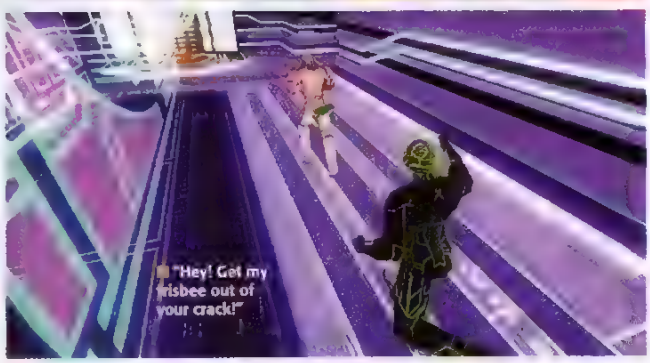
It's a good thing that Buena Vista waited about 20 years after *Tron*'s heyday before attempting to revisit the 1980's box-office failure. It gave us time to remember the film fondly and gradually forget its faults. So when Tron 2.0 came out last August, we were thrilled to play something that lived up to our expectations. Even those who weren't fans of the movie could appreciate the vibrant surroundings and engaging gameplay. In fact, one of the only downsides to the game was that it was available exclusively on PC – but that's going to change this fall when Tron 2.0: Killer App hacks its way into the Xbox.

On one level, this game is identical to Tron 2.0. The single player missions are the same as the original title, but Killer App is more than a simple port. In addition to tweaks that make the title's unique first-person gameplay more console-friendly, there is also a good chunk of new content on the multiplayer side of things. Ten brand new maps and extra weapons available for use in the arena are just two examples of the game's expanded features. Plus, you'll be able to enjoy them on four-player split screen or with up to 16 players through system link or Xbox Live.

For a game whose premise is rooted in computers, it is only fitting that it will make extensive use of available technology to enhance the gaming experience. Killer App will support HDTV at a resolution of 480p, widescreen, and Dolby 5.1 surround sound. If Tron 2.0 on PC brought a digitized world to life, Killer App promises to immerse the player in that world like never before. ■■■



■ Square off against an army of ornery programs



■ "Hey! Get my frisbee out of your crack!"

And who might you be?

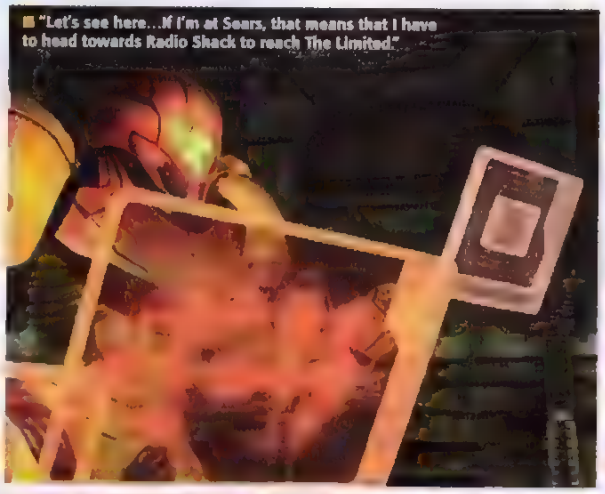
GAMECUBE

Metroid Prime 2

> STYLE 1 TO 4-PLAYER ACTION **> PUBLISHER** NINTENDO **> DEVELOPER** RETRO STUDIOS **> RELEASE** TBA

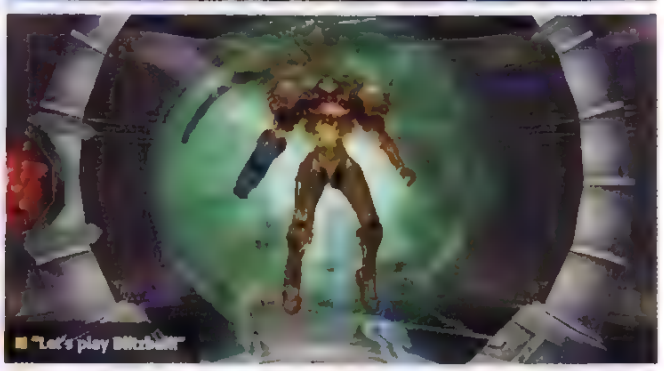
AT LONG LAST....MULTIPLAYER!

They say that a picture is worth a thousand words. The shot of Metroid multiplayer most certainly has the Game Informer offices buzzing with speculation. Some people are optimistic and think that Nintendo may include Internet or LAN support, others fear that they will have to use their Game Boy Advance as the controller. Unfortunately, when confronted with these questions and a billion others, Nintendo wouldn't confirm or deny a single thing. It sounds like the company will stay tightlipped about this one until this year's Electronic Entertainment Expo. For now, sit back and enjoy these exclusive screenshots, and stay tuned to upcoming issues of Game Informer for all of the juicy details! ■■■



"Let's see here...if I'm at Sears, that means that I have to head towards Radio Shack to reach The Limited."

It looks like a big...uh...thing



"Let's play Metroid"

Nothing could be sweeter

Like the original, this game will be absolutely gorgeous

Much like in real life, L.A. is constantly overcast and gloomy

Believe it or not, this building is a nightclub

PC

Vampire: The Masquerade – Bloodlines

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION (MULTIPLAYER TBD) **> PUBLISHER** ACTIVISION **> DEVELOPER** TROIKA STUDIOS **> RELEASE** FALL

HALF-UNDEATH

With a license like White Wolf's World of Darkness, there are approximately a bajillion elements of the universe that just don't work in a video game. Fortunately for us, developer Troika Studios (which also did Temple of Elemental Evil) knows this. Thus, rather than try to port a pencil and paper RPG to PC, the primary focus of Bloodlines is to craft a full RPG and present it with the latest FPS technology. To that end, all kinds of character customization and a branching storyline are being infused into the super-sexy graphics of the Half-Life 2 engine.

Some actions can trigger scripted events like this

Veterans of any White Wolf "Storyteller" RPG will instantly recognize the character sheet in Bloodlines. Everything that makes sense in a video game has been incorporated by Troika, from attributes to talents and Disciplines. This may be somewhat unusual for FPS gameplay, but it seems to integrate pretty smoothly. For instance, your firearms skill determines how large your cone of fire is, and having a high enough perception trait will make things like a loose board in a fence glow.

It was clear from what we saw that the gameplay department of Bloodlines is being designed with our very favorite formula in mind: Give the player an objective, and let them decide how to go about completing it. Every situation that we saw allowed for several solutions, each of which played to different character types. Become invisible and sneak past the guards, convince them that you don't have the droids they're looking for, or boil their blood. Did we mention that this has a projected Mature rating?

Based on what we've seen firsthand of Bloodlines, along with the impressive technology of the Half-Life 2 engine and the RPG expertise of Troika Studios, Bloodlines has become one of the top PC titles on our radar for 2004. ■ ■ ■

The Beast Within

One of the major role-playing elements of Bloodlines is the concept of Humanity. All vampires, in the course of their undeath, have to cope with trying to retain what makes them reasoning beings, rather than feral, marauding animals. Kill a non-combatant or do something equally morally reprehensible, and you come closer to succumbing to your darker nature. Help a starving orphan, and you push that ravening monster farther from yourself. If you get low enough on blood, your Humanity level determines your likelihood of going into Frenzy – a berserk, uncontrollable state where you tear everything up in a blind fury.

Vampires need sugar, too

Assaulting a vampire with a fire iron may not be the most intelligent choice this fellow ever made

GAMECUBE

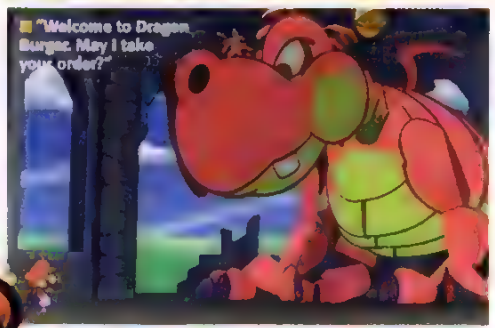
Paper Mario 2

> STYLE TBA **> PUBLISHER** NINTENDO **> DEVELOPER** NINTENDO
> RELEASE TBA

PREEMPTIVE STRIKE

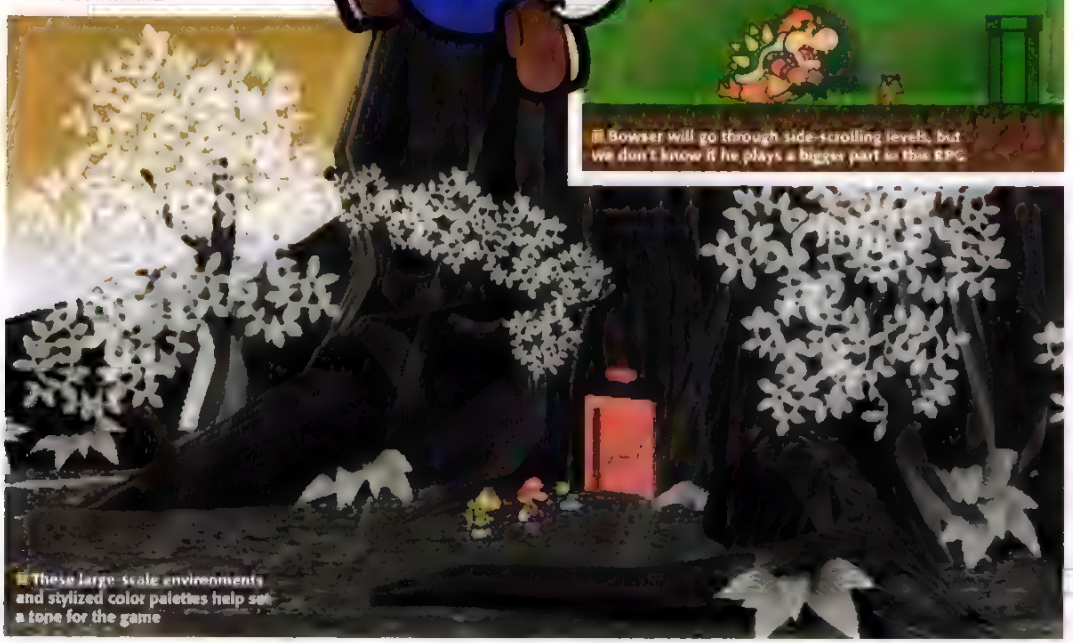
The first Paper Mario, released at the end of the N64's life-cycle, met with wide critical acclaim, but sales that were below expectations. Despite this, Paper Mario 2 (possibly buoyed by Mario and Luigi: Superstar Saga's warm welcome) is starting to make its presence known. There aren't a lot of specifics to spill, as the Big N is being quite secretive until this year's E3, but we do have these mighty tasty screens to get excited about.

N64's Paper Mario RPG offered two different play mechanics: a world view where enemies would charge at the adventurers (like Superstar Saga, jumping on the opponents would give the good guys a first-strike advantage); and the turn-based, menu-driven combat screen (something that this batch of shots doesn't show). We're excited about the large scale of enemies and environments, which implies a much grander experience this time out. ■■■



■ "Welcome to Dragon Burger. May I take your order?"

■ Bowser will go through side-scrolling levels, but we don't know if he plays a bigger part in this RPG.



■ These large-scale environments and stylized color palettes help set a tone for the game

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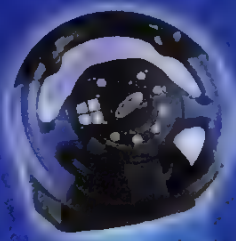

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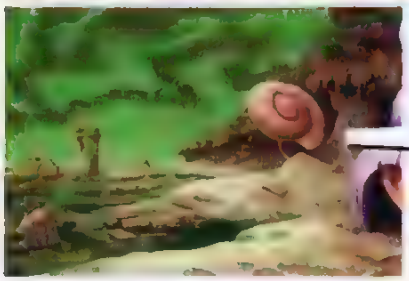
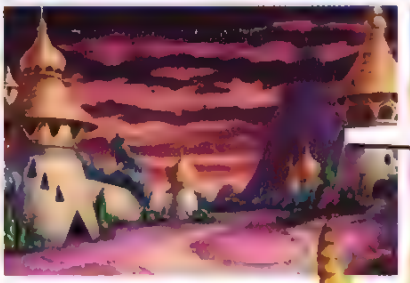
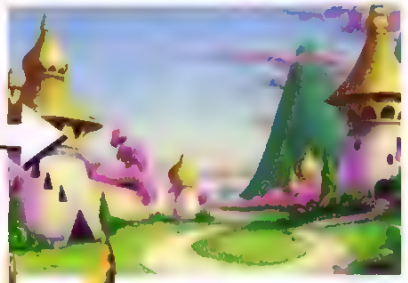






PLAYSTATION 2 | XBOX | GAMECUBE

Spyro: A Hero's Tail

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION **> PUBLISHER** VIVENDI UNIVERSAL **> DEVELOPER** EUROCOM **> RELEASE** FALL

MOVING ON UP

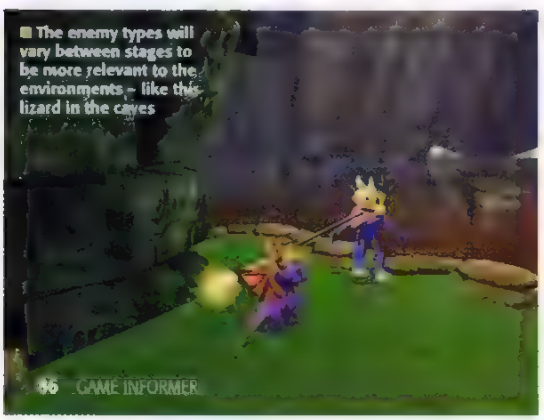
Spyro the character has defined himself as one of few platform stars born on the original PlayStation that still successfully holds court on the next-gen systems, but both his publisher and developer realize that it's time for some change. They're pumping the purple dragon's next outing full of new technology, character variety, and even alluding to some grown-up darkness.

Technologically, A Hero's Tail is offering an interesting feature that developer Eurocom is calling "real time morphing technology." What this means is that while Spyro is destroying dark gems that (at the beginning of the game) have transformed the Dragon Realms into a sinister wasteland, the worlds will turn into the happier, more familiar versions players are accustomed to. Eurocom producer Jon Williams tells us, "The size and layers of the morphing areas are the most impressive parts of this technology. In game, we have whole, huge sections transforming and changing every time Spyro destroys a dark gem. Morphing has never been done in a game at this level of detail."

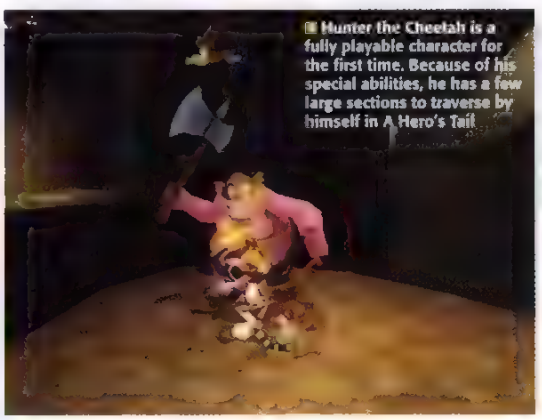
Taking a cue from Spyro: Year of the Dragon, a few fully playable characters will join in Spyro's quest. Hunter the Cheetah, who gamers will remember as an NPC and trainer in earlier entries, offers distance attacks with his trusty bow and arrow. Playing off of his feline abilities, Hunter will also be able to climb into areas unreachable by the other characters. Spyro's favorite penguin, Sgt. Byrd, brings jetpack-enabled flight to the team along with missiles and bombs for more serious firepower. A new character introduced in A Hero's Tail is Blinky, a mole-like creature with a formidable hand-held gadget – his Mecha Glove lets him fire flaming bombs and dig to find treasures. Lastly, Sparx (another minigame favorite in Spyro games of yore) will make an appearance in linear 3D shooter levels.

Even with this long list of friends, Spyro himself needed to improve. Williams says, "The player should notice, as soon as he picks up the controller, how smooth and realistic [Spyro's] core moves are. We've re-animated and tuned all of his preexisting moves for more precise interaction." They've also added the ability to climb up ledges and a horn-slamming move to break large objects. "The main character, Spyro, has evolved into a much more mechanically robust creature with a fairly realistic move set."

Couple these major updates with playable areas three times larger than any earlier entry, and players are in for a Spyro geared towards a new generation. Although it's still early in A Hero's Tail's development cycle, we're thinking that Eurocom will reach its goal of matching the high level of quality that the Spyro audience has come to expect – and hopefully bring some new players into the fold. ■■■

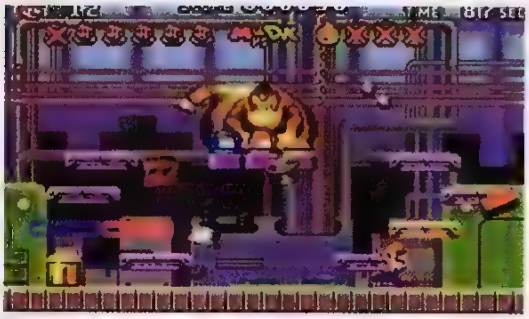


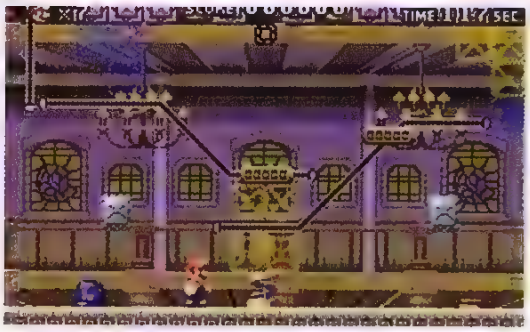
■ The enemy types will vary between stages to be more relevant to the environments – like this lizard in the caves

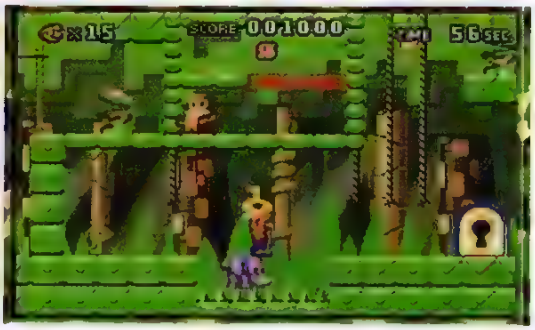


■ Hunter the Cheetah is a fully playable character for the first time. Because of his special abilities, he has a few large sections to traverse by himself in A Hero's Tail

■ Everyone's favorite dragon will be collecting gems to free his world from the clutches of evil







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GAME BOY ADVANCE

Mario vs. Donkey Kong

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION **> PUBLISHER** NINTENDO **> DEVELOPER** NINTENDO **> RELEASE** MAY 24

RIVAL REUNION

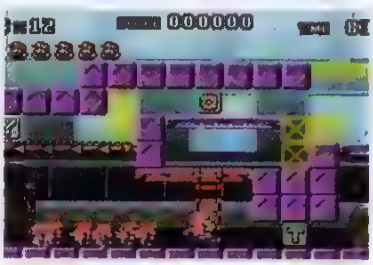
Drawing inspiration from Nintendo's full stable of favorites, Mario vs. Donkey Kong is most closely tied to the 1994 Game Boy version of Donkey Kong and is looking like it will become quite a time sucker for portable devotees. In this GBA title, our ape has gone crazy about the new Mini-Mario toys stocked in Toad's shop. In a rage, he decides to cut out the middleman and steal all of the baubles directly from the factory. Mario has no choice but to get them back by traversing a series of puzzle-orientated stages.

The game's look resembles Nintendo's Super Mario Advance series of platformer updates, but the characters, music, enemies, environment interactions, and moves pull from every corner of Mario and Donkey Kong's combined adventures. This, it seems, is turning out to be a very, very good thing.

We had the opportunity to play through some of the game's six worlds (each of which has eight areas) and were impressed by Mario's moveset and the speed of play. Besides the expected jump and run, our plumber has a set of special jumps to master these stages. For a medium height jump, players can maneuver into a handstand position and then spring up (which appeared, in part, during the Donkey Kong GB game). The high jump is a very Prince of Persia-like maneuver requiring Mario to grab a pole, spin to gain momentum, and then fling off like a wee Olympic gymnast. In addition, the long-distance backflip introduced in Mario 64 comes in quite handy and looks great, even in this portable setup.

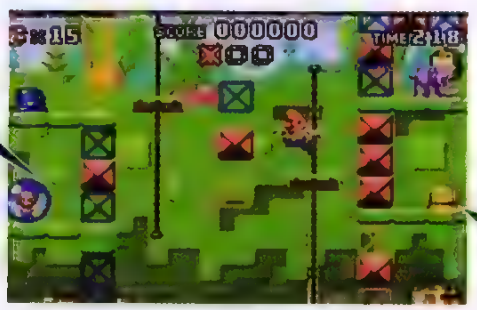
While the Donkey Kong Game Boy title led gamers through some get-the-key-to-unlock-the-door levels, followed by a boss encounter with Kong, Mario vs. Donkey Kong throws in a little more goal variety. Grabbing a Mini-Mario toy will end some levels, and others are randomly chosen minigames which offer your choice of prizes. In addition, the Lemmings-like levels where Mario leads a troop of toys to their toy box are an interesting change of pace.

Nintendo was tightlipped about unlockables, but made it clear that this game would be packed full of them when in releases at the end of May. ■■■



■ These Mini-Marios follow the plumber around like Lemmings, but can't go up ladders. You have to get as many of them as possible to the toy box to beat the level and earn extra lives for the upcoming boss encounter

■ In this WarioWare-looking segment, Mario switches the boxes (which contain prizes) to try and save the one he wants from Donkey Kong's big, fat fist. These segments have different play mechanics, but happen regularly during the game



■ Some levels make you get a key to a door, while others end when you grab the Mini-Mario toy. Don't go for it right away, though, as the three presents hidden in the level will earn bonus points and unlockables if they're grabbed first

■ The colored switches, like in Super Mario World, determine which outlined blocks turn solid – a strategy element used extensively in the game that requires surgical precision from players

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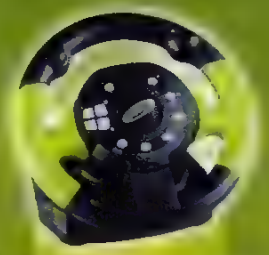

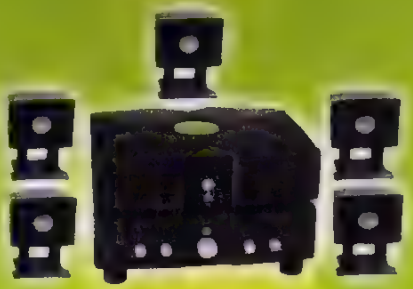

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PC

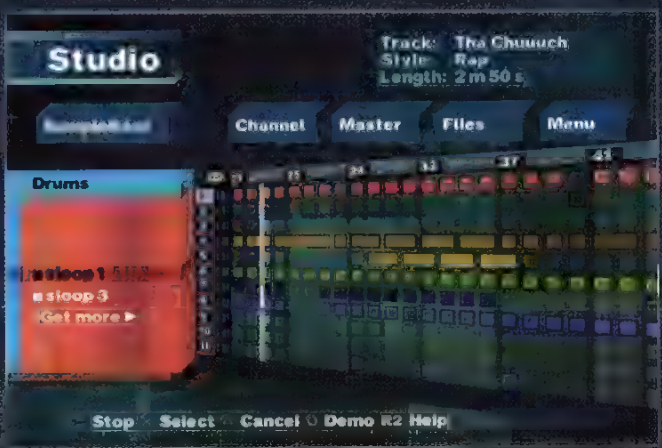
RollerCoaster Tycoon 3

Many a franchise has suffered badly in the transition between two and three dimensions, but have no fear about Atari's RollerCoaster Tycoon making the foray into the brave new world of real-time 3D graphics this holiday season. The gameplay is such that it would be almost impossible to break anything by changing the perspective. The best part about it, though? You can finally ride the 'coasters that have been inducing nausea in your guests. And, obviously, you own the park – so no standing in lines! The standard sequel improvements (greater guest diversity and AI, among others) are en route of course, but we all know what the main attraction is: Motion-sickness competitions.

PLAYSTATION 2 | XBOX | GAMECUBE | PC

NHL 2005

The NHL and the players' association may be threatening to rob us of professional hockey next season, but over at EA Sports, it's business as usual – making a great hockey title. Here's an early look at NHL 2005, and what the company has got cooking will floor you like a...uh...pat on the head from Todd Bertuzzi. New to this year will be Open Ice Control, which lets you position players without the puck to set up the perfect attack. You can even select your face-off strategies. Add in the World Cup of Hockey and skills drills, and we imagine that whether you're a dedicated gamer or an NHL player on strike, you'll be plenty busy come September.



PLAYSTATION 2 | XBOX

MTV Music Generator 3: This is the Remix

After a brief hiatus, and a split with original developer Jester Interactive, the MTV Music Generator franchise will be back on the wheels of steel this June. The team at Mixmax is crafting this to incorporate an even greater array of features into the music creation title, including the ability to sample from your CD collection. Also, a host of high profile hits will be available for you to remix including Outkast's "The Way You Move" and dancehall champion Sean Paul's ubiquitous "Get Busy." As always, upgrades to the interface abound, making this what looks to be the best entry in the series to date.

GAME BOY ADVANCE

Mario Golf Advance Tour

Nintendo's favorite golf-game developer, Camelot Software (responsible for Mario Golf and Toadstool Tour, among others), will be back in action this June. The team is building a jam-packed cartridge that lets up to four golfers play the links or connect with the GameCube for extra unlockable options and character building. RPG-like features include allocating experience points between a handful of attributes and making sure that your doubles partner is equally upgraded if you want to win tournaments. Look for it at the end of June.

PLAYSTATION 2 | XBOX | GAMECUBE

Nascar Thunder 2005

If you can't beat 'em, join 'em. EA Sports is using former rival Dirt to Daytona's career structure this year in NASCAR Thunder 2005 (coming this fall), letting you start out as a driver with nothing but a can cozy to your name. Build your way up through the modified circuit, Craftsman Truck series, and Busch cars to the promised land of the Nextel Cup. Expanding the rivalries of last year, you can even race drivers through city streets in production cars or tangle it up with a hothead like Tony Stewart after a heated race! In the meantime, watch as owners and sponsors reward your skills, and the fans worship you like a god or cast you as the track villain. The game even features new driving controls to make it everything a NASCAR fan could want.

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REVIEWS

We Play The Crap So You Don't Have To

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GAME INFORMER GAME OF THE MONTH

Splinter Cell: Pandora Tomorrow

The second title in a franchise is critical, as it can make or break a series, and the new Splinter Cell game knocks it out of the park. Featuring tighter gameplay and improved graphics, Pandora Tomorrow is everything you loved about the original with none of the stuff you didn't. In addition to a killer single-player game, Pandora Tomorrow features a multiplayer mode that will change the way you think about online gaming. To check it out, sneak on over to page 102.

Our crack (or crackhead, we can never decide which) review team rates games in a number of categories to help you sort out the great from the stuff you'll hate. Most games are reviewed by two staff members, and you will find both their opinions on each review. To make things a little easier we have put together some definitions of what the numbers mean, what we look for in a game, and also a cheat sheet so the newbies can understand our advanced video game jargon. It is important to note that the Game of the Month is determined only by the main review score, not an average of the two opinions.

THE SCORING SYSTEM

10	Outstanding. A truly elite title that is nearly perfect in every way. This score is given out rarely and indicates a game that cannot be missed.
9	Superb. Just shy of gaming nirvana, this score is a high recommendation because the game reviewed is head and shoulders above its competition.
8	Very Good. Innovative, but perhaps not the right choice for everyone. This score indicates that there are many good things to be had, but arguably so.
7	Average. The game's features may work, but are nothing that even casual players haven't seen before. A decent game from beginning to end.
6	Limited Appeal. Although there may be fans of games receiving this score, many will be left yearning for a more rewarding game experience.
5	Passable. It may be obvious that the game has lots of potential, but its most engaging features could be undeniably flawed or not integrated into the experience.
4	Bad. While some things may work as planned, the majority of this title either malfunctions to varying degrees or it is so dull that the game falls short as a whole.
3	Painful. If there is anything that's redeeming in a game of this caliber, it's buried beneath agonizing gameplay and uneven execution in its features or theme.
2	Broken. Basically unplayable. This game is so insufficient in execution that any value would be derived in extremely small quantities, if at all.
1	Apocalyptic. End-of-the-world-as-we-know-it bad. Unquestionably awful, this game will mark itself as an example of terrible for years to come.

> Concept: What new ideas the game brings to the table and how well old ideas are presented.

> Graphics: How good a game looks, taking into account any flaws such as bad collision or pop-up.

> Sound: Does the game's music and sound effects get you involved or do they make you resolve to always play with the volume down?

> Playability: Basically, the controller to human interface. The less you think about the hunk of plastic in your hands, the better the playability.

> Entertainment: Flat out, just how fun the game is to play. The most important factor in rating a game.

> Replay Value

High – You'll still be popping this game in five years from now.

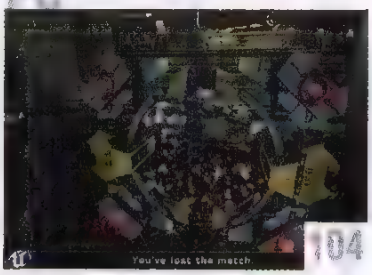
Moderately High – Good for a long while, but the thrills won't last forever.

Moderate – Good for a few months or a few times through.

Moderately Low – After finishing it, there's not much reason to give it a second go.

Low – You'll quit playing before you complete the game.

PC



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Unreal Tournament 2004

HANDHELD

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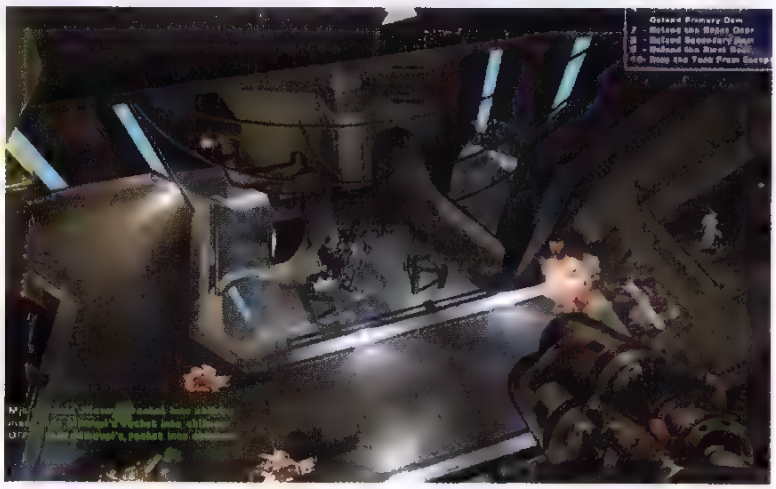

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pg. 96

PC GAMES MUST

Unreal Tournament 2004

Just when you think that a new installment in a beloved franchise will never get it all right, something like UT 2004 comes along and blows your mind. It's like the developers launched an alien mind probe to find out what gamers wanted, came up with some completely awesome new features on top of that, and put it all into UT 2004. If you for some reason passed on checking the demo out, read on and learn why it was the most downloaded PC demo in history. pg 104

the edge

When All Games Aren't Created Equal

This is where GI breaks down multi-platform games. So whenever you see the logo, there is important multi-system information regarding that product.

EARLY CHILDHOOD C ESRB	Content suitable for persons ages 3 and older	MATURE M ESRB	Content suitable for persons 17 ages and older.
EVERYONE E ESRB	Content suitable for persons ages 6 and older	ADULTS ONLY AO ESRB	Content suitable only for adults.
TEEN T ESRB	Content suitable for persons ages 13 and older	RATING PENDING RP ESRB	Product is awaiting final rating

For our newer readers, here is a glossary of terms and acronyms that commonly appear in the magazine. Video game veterans should move along (these aren't the droids you are looking for).

1080i – A resolution specification used for HDTV. 1080i stands for resolution of 1920x1080 pixels. The "i" means that the video is being interlaced

480p – Progressive scanning, this option ("p"=progressive) creates a picture signal with double the scan lines of a conventional interlaced picture. 480i (i = interlaced), to create a noticeably sharper image. The 480p image offers higher picture resolution and eliminates virtually all motion artifacts in a 640x480 pixel resolution setting

720p – A resolution specification used for HDTV. 720p stands for resolution of 1280x720 pixels. The "p" means that the video is in progressive format

action – A term we use for games like Zone of the Enders and Gauntlet

adventure – A term we use for games like Myst and Escape From Monkey Island

AI – Artificial Intelligence. Usually used to refer to how well the computer reacts to a human opponent

board – A term we use for games like Jeopardy! and Mario Party

bump mapping – A technique where varying light effects simulate depth on textures

cel shading – A technique used to create 3D rendered objects that resemble hand-drawn animation cels

CG – Computer-Generated graphics

E3 – Electronic Entertainment Expo. The world's largest convention for video games

Fanboyism – A disease that afflicts devotees of any one particular system. Extremely common on gaming forums

fighting – A term we use for games like Street Fighter and Dead or Alive

FMV – Full Motion Video. Usually refers to an animated CG cutscene

FPS – Frames Per Second. How many animation frames happen in one second. Also used to denote First-Person Shooters like Doom, GoldenEye, and Unreal Tournament

framerate – The frames of animation used to create the illusion of movement

frontend – A game's menus and options

GBA – Game Boy Advance

GBC – Game Boy Color

GC – GameCube

HDTV – High Definition Television

isometric – Three-quarters top down view, like StarCraft or Red Alert 2

ISP – Internet Service Provider. The company that provides you with access to the Internet

jaggies – Graphical lines that are jagged when they should be straight

LAN – Local Area Network. Connecting computers or consoles together within a small space to allow communication between them. Provides fast, simultaneous gameplay

minigame – A small, simple game within a larger one

motion-capture – Using human models and infrared cameras to record movement for game animation. Also mo-cap

motion blur – Phantom frames follow an object to give the impression of realistic speed

N64 – Nintendo 64

NES – Nintendo Entertainment System

NPC – Non-Player Character. Those people and creatures you see wandering around in games that are not being controlled by actual humans

particle effects – Things like smoke or sparks created in real-time

PKer – Player Killer. This is a person who thrives on killing newbie or vulnerable characters in MMORPGs or shooting their teammates in games like Counter-Strike

platform – A term we use for games like Super Mario and Crash Bandicoot

pop-up – When onscreen objects, usually distant, suddenly appear

PS2 – Sony PlayStation 2

PSone – Sony PlayStation

puzzle – A term we use for games like Tetris and Chu Chu Rocket

racing – A term we use for games like Gran Turismo and Mario Kart

RPG – Role-Playing Game. A game that involves character improvement through collecting and spending points. A term we use for games like Final Fantasy and Dragon Warrior

shooter – A term we use for games like Mars Matrix and Gradius

SNES – Super Nintendo Entertainment System

sports – A term we use for games like Madden NFL

strategy – A term we use for games like Command & Conquer and Fallout Tactics

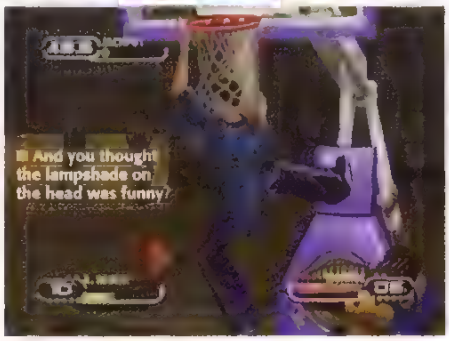
third-party – Something made for a console by a company other than the console manufacturer

In Rags to Riches you start out playing nobodies, but will eventually face NBA superstars like King James and legends like Larry Bird

The animations and variety of dunks truly are spectacular

The Back-Turned-Down maneuver is a button-mashing good time

As you progress through Rags to Riches mode, you'll win cash, clothing, cars, friends, and even your own crib. Pictured here, we chose CJ to be our courtside gal


And you thought the lampshade on the head was funny?

UNLIMITED ENABLED

PLATFORM: PLAYSTATION 2 | XBOX

NBA Ballers

> **STYLE** 1 OR 2-PLAYER SPORTS (2-PLAYER VIA PS2 BROADBAND) > **PUBLISHER** MIDWAY > **DEVELOPER** MIDWAY
> **RELEASE** APRIL 5 > **ESRB** T

ABSOLUTELY OFF THE HIZZLE

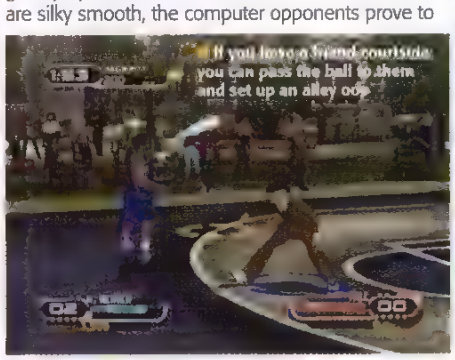
This isn't just a game about basketball. It's about the NBA lifestyle and the pursuit of becoming rich and obnoxious. Through a mode dubbed Rags to Riches, gamers will make the journey from no-name street baller to the king of the NBA court. Whether you're dropping dimes at Kevin Garnett's residence, breaking ankles on Scottie Pippen's yacht, or making legends look like punks at the Naismith Basketball Hall of Fame, you'll gain respect and the ever important bling bling that comes with it. By winning tournaments, you'll procure cash that can be used to purchase clothing, tattoos, and vehicles.

Going into this review, I really didn't know what to expect from this lifestyle angle. Truth be told, I was convinced that it was going to be one of the cheesiest things I've ever laid eyes on. Thankfully, Midway went out of its way to make this experience thoroughly engrossing, highly interesting, and above all, rewarding to the player. Not only does it give you a glimpse of the players' lives, it delivers a story (yes, this is a sports game with plot), and brings out the collector in you. The number of unlockable items isn't nearly as extensive as I would have hoped (especially in character and crib customization), but you usually find yourself unearthing things of value – like hidden players and videos that give you a behind-the-scenes look at the NBA.

The action on the court is equally as impressive. Basically take the setting of Julius Erving and Larry Bird Go One-on-One and insert the high-flying gameplay of NBA Street into the mix. The controls are silky smooth, the computer opponents prove to be extremely skilled, and the moves that you can perform would make a Globetrotter stare in amazement. Not only can you bounce the ball off of your opponent's face (which gives you a split second to break for the hoop), you can use their back as a springboard, and toss the ball to a friend stationed courtside to set up an alley oop.

From a technical standpoint, I absolutely love how the ball cursor is used for rebounding. The realism that accompanies stealing is equally as handy. In other hoops titles, I always find myself jamming on the steal button to try to knock a ball out of a player's hands. In this game, loose balls are not randomly decided. If you get your hand on the rock at the opportune time, you'll strip it free. On a negative note, I don't like how the Act a Fool dekes are randomly produced. I often found that the moves my player would perform would go against my drive.

All told, my complaints are few and my praise is high. NBA Ballers is a fresh spin on the NBA that brings great depth, dynamic gameplay, and fevered multiplayer to the video game court.—**REINER**


If you have a friend courtside, you can pass the ball to them and set up an alley oop

the edge

When All Games Aren't Created Equal

Both versions of Ballers excel in different ways. The multiplayer is exclusive to the PlayStation 2. Given the intensity of the one-on-one play, talking trash through the headset is sweet thing. While the Xbox lacks online, it lights up the screen with amazing HDTV support. It's a beautiful game to boot with, but viewing it in 480p or 720p is truly a sight to behold.

BOTTOM LINE 8

> **Concept:** Combine the grit of street ball with the flash of MTV Cribs to create a unique and rewarding one-on-one basketball experience

> **Graphics:** A visual slam dunk that features realistic character models and unbelievable animations

> **Sound:** An excellent collection of underground rap tracks and a catchy theme song by DJ Supernatural

> **Playability:** Finely tuned, perfectly balanced, and incredibly responsive. Ballers' gameplay is right where it needs to be

> **Entertainment:** It's a great multiplayer experience, and the bevy of unlockable content gives single player legs

> **Replay Value:** High

Second Opinion 7.75

I must admit that I was a little wary of a b-ball game that only featured one-on-one play, but Midway's NBA Ballers is surprisingly engaging. The play mechanic is solid, with silky smooth controls that offer great battles against both human and computer opponents. I would have liked to see some more variety in the move set, and more depth in the lifestyle content (tours of the homes or yachts you play at would have been nice, and I wish I could have designed my own MTV-worthy crib), but what's here is more than enough to please most NBA fans. The lack of online play for the Xbox version is a complete bummer, but in the end it doesn't really matter, as the online play isn't as engrossing as I had hoped. If you have to choose, go Xbox just for the high-definition support, but either version will entertain.—**ANDY**

XBOX

Judge Dredd: Dredd vs. Death

> **STYLE** 1 TO 4-PLAYER ACTION > **PUBLISHER** EVOLVED GAMES > **DEVELOPER** REBELLION
> **RELEASE** MARCH 25 > **ESRB** M

BLOWING UP BALBOA

You might expect Sylvester Stallone to get his ham-assed meat hooks all over this one, but developer Rebellion largely gets this game right, unlike Sly's movie. It hits the fundamentals of the comic – letting you cut loose as Judge Dredd to decide who gets jammed in an isocube and who gets stuffed in a pine box. Along the way you'll get some doses of the comic's black humor and be covered in lots of red goo.

Judge Dredd is charged to go after the four Dark Judges who have returned to Mega-City One, a story inspired by the comic. However, it is the game's arrest mechanic that draws a more direct parallel with the series. Capture enough perps and you'll gain rank and unlock models to shoot up in the multiplayer modes. Of course, you can outright kill them or even go after civilians if you choose (which will cause other Judges to come after you). As Dredd himself famously says, "I am the law."

Fans of the comic will be relieved to get their hands on a game that doesn't reek of Italian Stallion, but those looking for innovative gameplay will have to be satisfied with "average." I found everything pretty much in order for an FPS, and I was glad that you could co-op through the game. More environmental interaction and a less linear structure (although missions are lengthy) would have instantly jumped this game up in my estimation. The only things that stand out visually are some of the flickering lights and shadows. It's not Doom 3, but it's something.

Judge Dredd scores a minor victory in its ability to let its roots show through amid the usual indistinguishable mess of guns and guts.—**KATO**

BOTTOM LINE 6.75

> **Concept:** Judge Dredd injects your basic FPS with a little color – mainly blood red

> **Graphics:** Can be as bland as a dirt sandwich and the rag doll animations are overzealous

> **Sound:** The ambient voices, although repeated, are humorous and irreverent

> **Playability:** I missed having a reference map, but that's about it. Otherwise, Judge toes the FPS line. The simple arrest mechanic is about all that will catch your eye here

> **Entertainment:** Judge Dredd cuts through its own limitations to make "your average FPS" worth playing. Non-fans wouldn't be too ill-served to pick this up

> **Replay Value:** Moderately High

Second Opinion 6.25

While I can honestly say that I have more vested interest in a game based on Campbell's Chicken Noodle Soup than Judge Dredd, I have to tip my hat to Rebellion for creating a game that is incredibly faithful to the long-running comic book series. The level of detail and wealth of player-initiated options that went into judging criminals are both particularly impressive. Outside of this interesting play mechanic, the remainder of content can best be summed up as a repetitious snoozefest that gives new meaning to generic FPS.—**REINER**

GOOD COP...BAD COP

Perps can be arrested by getting them to surrender or shooting the guns out of their hands. Then slap the cuffs on and advise them of their new change of address. Or, use an enemy's prone position to your sick advantage.

PLAYSTATION 2 | GAMECUBE

Samurai Jack: The Shadow of Aku

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION > **PUBLISHER** SEGA OF AMERICA > **DEVELOPER** ADRENIUM GAMES/AMAZE ENTERTAINMENT > **RELEASE** MARCH 16 > **ESRB** T

AIN'T GOT JACK

Genndy Tartakovsky's Samurai Jack cartoon has a lot of cool things going for it: a unique look, smart stories, good sound design, and tons of action. The Samurai Jack game, however, has none of the above. The conversion of Tarakovsky's two-dimensional characters to three dimensions makes for graphics that look familiar, yet still crappy. Where the show looks lush, the game looks bland. But the graphics aren't the only dull aspect of this title.

As with the show, The Shadow of Aku follows Samurai Jack's quest to defeat the evil demon Aku by travelling back in time to thwart him before he can rise to power. Before he can head into the past, Jack has to free those Aku has enslaved. In each stage, Jack must seek out caged villagers and ancient relics to earn power-ups. Freeing villagers can earn Jack new swords, while relics can be exchanged for more life, power, or Zen (which allows Jack to enter "sakai mode" – basically a simplified bullet time). The trouble is that none of these power-ups have any real effect on gameplay. The various swords all appear to dish out basically the same amount of damage.

Like most licensed games, The Shadow of Aku is a collect-a-thon with simple combat, basic platforming, and little innovation. This isn't a truly bad game, just a very uninspired one. The various combat systems all work perfectly, they're just shallow and a bit counter-intuitive. The difficulty level is hilariously low; on the hardest setting, it's still a cakewalk, on the lowest, it can be easily completed by someone in a coma. Strangely, young kids don't seem to be this title's target audience, based on the Teen rating. Overall, The Shadow of Aku comes across as an amazingly generic action title. It's a shame, as Samurai Jack is easily one of the most unique cartoons on the air today, so this could have been so much more.—**JEREMY**

BOTTOM LINE 6

> **Concept:** Take a Cartoon Network hero, dumb him down, and shove him in a generic third-person action title

> **Graphics:** The look is pretty faithful to the show, which sadly doesn't make for a good-looking game

> **Sound:** The music, sound effects, and voiceovers are all pretty minimal and forgettable

> **Playability:** The slightly bizarre control scheme works just fine, but it isn't exactly deep

> **Entertainment:** Even Samurai Jack fans will find themselves yawning through this one

> **Replay Value:** Low

Second Opinion 4

Every single one of the four points I'm giving this game is for the animations seen in sakai mode. Sakai, apparently, makes time slow down and allows Jack to execute some really nice kung fu-inspired moves. But to be kind, the rest of Samurai Jack's latest outing is less than inspiring. There are hub worlds. I really thought that we were past all of that sometime back in 2001. I don't want my missions doled out by ungrateful villagers in such a predictable and linear fashion. In addition, although the look of the game kind of resembles the show, it ends up just looking gross.—**LISA**

PLAYSTATION 2 | GAMECUBE

Serious Sam: The Next Encounter

> **STYLE** PS2: 1 OR 2-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 8-PLAYER VIA BROADBAND) GC: 1 TO 4-PLAYER ACTION > **PUBLISHER** GLOBAL STAR > **DEVELOPER** CLIMAX > **RELEASE** APRIL 13 > **ESRB** M

IT'S TIME TO GET SERIOUS

I have to respect the Serious Sam franchise for knowing exactly what it is, and never mucking up its run-and-gun style with other considerations. With no stealth, few puzzles, and a very light story, Sam is about shooting stuff. Lots of stuff. Pretty much everything you see is there to be mowed down by the might of Sam's various guns.

The core gameplay works really well. The weapons are fun to use, Sam's movement speed is nice and fast, and the sense of humor (the title for this game was originally Word to the Mothership) fits perfectly. To make the hordes of enemies more exciting to plow through, the new Killing Spree speeds you up if you kill 20 aliens in a short time frame. Plus you score double points, which makes the unlockables far easier to obtain.

Hidden levels, new features, and cheats all await the dedicated gamer. However, it will take a seriously patient player to not only finish the game, but to go back and earn the gold medals. Almost all of the enemies can be defeated handily by strafing around them until they drop. The only tough parts are when you get swarmed by a flood of aliens (which happens all the time, of course), since it's difficult to maintain a situational awareness with baddies continually spawning behind you. This formula makes most fights feel very similar, despite the variety of weapons and enemies. Even with the new vehicles, it felt like I was whaling on the same enemies over and over.

Multiplayer on either system does help to keep this vital, though there's nothing really innovative about it. It's still brainless shooting, except that it's your friends (or random strangers, on the PS2) that you're gunning down.

Taking all of its flaws into account, the final tally still comes up in favor of Sam. Sure, it gets old, but $20 for a decently long single-player and well-done multiplayer is more than reasonable.—ADAM

BOTTOM LINE 7.75

> **Concept:** Circle-strafe to your heart's content, blowing up aliens all the while

> **Graphics:** Surprisingly smooth and crisp for a budget title

> **Sound:** Repetitive, but not too annoying. Some of the effects make me giggle even after hearing them over and over

> **Playability:** Being able to re-map the controls would've been really nice, given the wonky defaults

> **Entertainment:** Mindless shooting at its finest. Don't expect anything more, though

> **Replay Value:** Moderate

Second Opinion 7.75

Life is cheap in Serious Sam's world, and luckily so is this game. An absolute steal at $20, Sam dishes out a good time in bloody chunks of flesh and a humorous tone. The only problem I had was that it is hard to distinguish enemies that spawn behind you. I was surprised by this because sound detection of your foes is a huge part of the game's charm (it doesn't support surround sound). The vehicles I could take or leave, but the Super Combo Killing Sprees are a hoot. This is fitting, as Next Encounter is limited (not being a proper sequel), but you'll find that Sam's penchant for carnage fits like a glove.—KATO

the edge

When All Games Aren't Created Equal

There are two differences [illegible] graphics and multiplayer. The GameCube has the visual department firmly under control, with smoother play and various effects that don't show up on the PS2. Multiplayer's a toss-up; if online is your thing, PS2 is the way to go. The 'Cube does have the four-player (as opposed to two-player) split-screen going on, so it's really up to personal preference here.

PLAYSTATION 2 | XBOX | GAMECUBE

Scooby Doo!: Mystery Mayhem

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION > **PUBLISHER** THQ > **DEVELOPER** ARTIFICIAL MIND AND MOVEMENT > **RELEASE** MARCH 1 > **ESRB** E

TASTES LIKE DOG FOOD

Scooby-doobie-doo, where are you? In a crappy video game, that's where. Honestly, I just don't know where to start with this title, as its lack of any compelling features make it a bit difficult to write about.

In the face of such banality, I'll dispense with any attempt at analysis and just give you the basics. As Scooby and Shaggy, you'll traverse around variously themed levels to complete the most rudimentary of puzzles. These challenges are all things you've done a million different times in a million different ways, and trust me when I tell you nothing has been done to make them any more fun or interesting. There is really no platforming at all, but you can switch between having Shaggy and Scooby in the lead of the tandem, but again this element doesn't really do much to enhance the gameplay. You can also use an occult book to trap various ghosts and monsters.

In terms of gameplay, design, and execution, Mystery Mayhem is as uninspired a game as you're likely to play this year. As you complete the seemingly endless series of dreary switch puzzles and fetch quests, not once will you be entertained. During my playtime, my emotions always registered somewhere between mildly annoyed and just plain bored.
—MATT

BOTTOM LINE 4

> **Concept:** Fulfill a federal law that any kid-targeted major motion picture must be accompanied by a video game

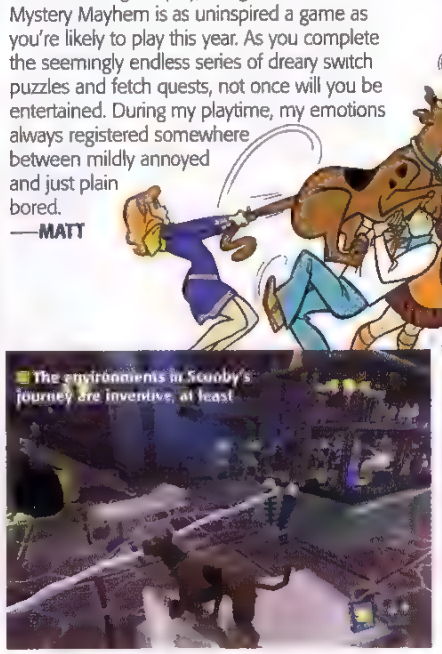
> **Graphics:** Renderware: How are you mediocre? Let me count the ways!

> **Sound:** Great if you like Casey Kasem impersonators! (And, no Sara Michelle didn't get within a mile of this clunker!)

> **Playability:** Are you familiar with the concept of controlling the direction in which a character is walking with a controller?

> **Entertainment:** Unless you're very, very young (or just simple), skip this

> **Replay Value:** Low



Second Opinion 5.25

The problem with this game isn't the same one that most cartoon-licensed product struggle with. Instead of stripping away all that is witty and/or interesting about the source material, this Scooby Doo game is everything that an episode is: by the numbers mystery solving, wacky locations, and even a laugh track. The big problem is that the license just isn't great source material for a game – too bland for most players' tastes.—LISA

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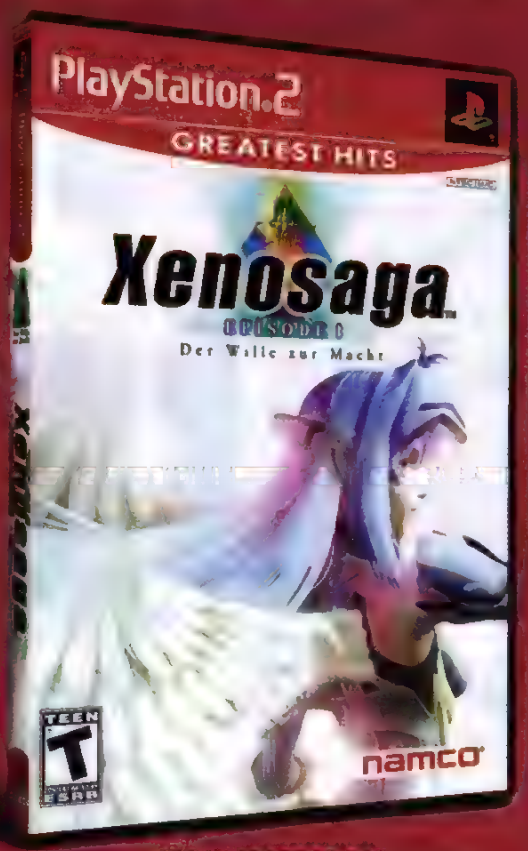

"...Xenosaga is to video games as the original Star Wars is to movies."
–GMR, 9 out of 10

"Xenosaga is truly a triple-A title..."
–Game Informer, 9.75 out of 10

"Calling this game epic would be an understatement."
–IGN

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PlayStation.2

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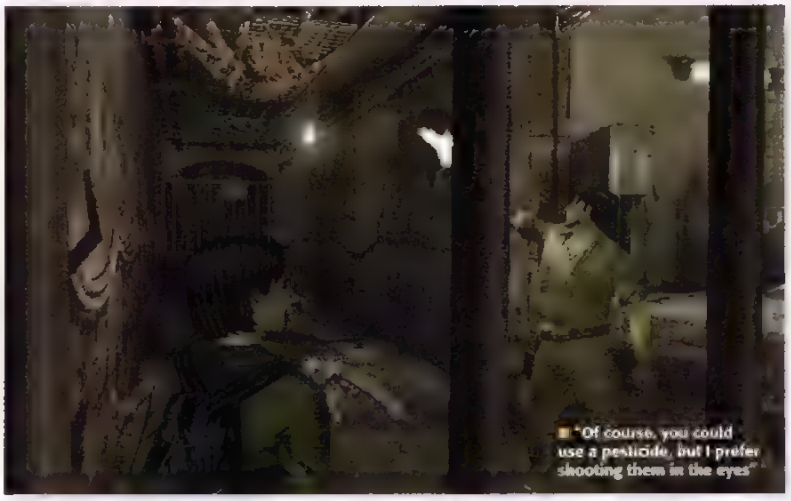
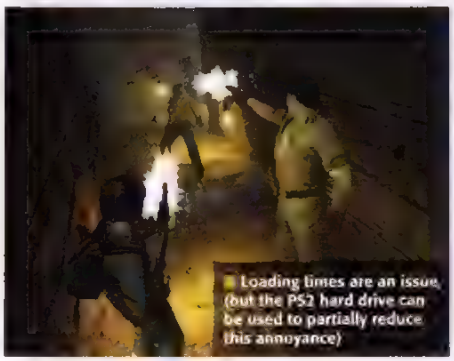

"Of course, you could use a pesticide, but I prefer shooting them in the eyes"

Another gasoline fight leads to tragedy


Loading times are an issue (but the PS2 hard drive can be used to partially reduce this annoyance)

A single player mode is available, but it's not nearly as rewarding as multiplayer

PLAYSTATION 2

Resident Evil: Outbreak

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION (1 TO 4-PLAYER VIA BROADBAND) **> PUBLISHER** CAPCOM **> DEVELOPER** CAPCOM
> RELEASE APRIL 1 **> ESRB** M

LOG ON TO HORROR

The virus has spread online, and Resident Evil's gameplay has never been so infectious. Fighting for life with three human-controlled characters at your side definitely adds an element of unfamiliarity to the survival horror mix, but make no mistake, this is still Resident Evil. Whether you find yourself jumping out of your seat as a zombie crashes through a window, marveling at the action in the cutscenes, or complaining about the stiffness of control and awkwardly placed camera angles, this is just another trip to Raccoon City. Only this time, you're with friends.

I really have to hand it to Capcom for making teamwork the cornerstone of gameplay. In every room that you reach, this game hammers home the message that you have to stick together and work as a group. When jumping from one rooftop to another, you may misjudge the distance and fall short. Thankfully, a teammate can pull you up.

Even before the game commences, you'll find yourself coordinating tactics with your soon-to-be companions at the character selection screen. In a similar vein to an RPG, each of the eight playable characters that you can select brings completely different abilities to the table that you must factor in. Do you bring a lock-picker? Someone with extra inventory spots? Or rely on firepower with a weapons expert?

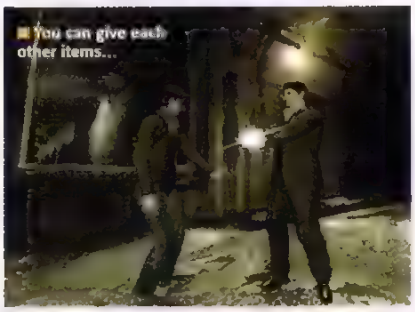
Unlike the other games in the series, zombies can pass from room to room and are often found in packs. Taking this newfound hunting prowess into account, Capcom has implemented a handful of new techniques that players can use to survive. You can slide under beds, hide in lockers, and even repel a zombie attack by forcing their head away from your neck with enough breathing room to raise your pistol and shoot them directly between the eyes. You'll even find strategy in the reloading of weapons. For instance, a box of shells takes more time to load than a clip. As annoying as it is to watch your character get munched because he couldn't load the rounds quick enough, I really like this aspect. It makes you keep an eye on every little detail.

Where Outbreak excels in engrossing multiplayer and creative gameplay, the overall design of the game is very odd. Rather than creating one lengthy quest that players can really sink their teeth into, Capcom opted to break up the game into five separate scenarios that are roughly 45 minutes each. If you die, you'll turn into a zombie for a brief extent (and yes, you can attack your teammates if you like), then will be dropped out of the game. Sadly, you can't re-spawn. You either have to wait for your friends to finish up, or find another game to enter. While scripted controller commands are offered, it doesn't support voice chat at all or keyboard functionality in-game. Someone's head should roll for this!

All told, this is a surprisingly enjoyable online venture that showcases some amazing gameplay concepts, yet a lack of foresight in the delivery of multiplayer.—**REINER**

THERE'S NO 'I' IN TEAMWORK

THE MAIN DRAW OF RE: OUTBREAK IS THE MULTIPLAYER INTERACTION. HERE ARE A FEW EXAMPLES OF HOW TWO PLAYERS CAN WORK TOGETHER...


You can give each other items...

...team up to move this car quicker...

...assist in pulling someone up from a ledge...

...and lead the injured to safety

BOTTOM LINE **7.5**

> Concept: A highly creative, yet slightly flawed approach to multiplayer survival horror

> Graphics: Not as lavish as the recent GameCube releases, yet impressive nonetheless

> Sound: Great ambiance, but it sure would be nice to communicate with other players. Where's the voice chat?!

> Playability: Familiar RE controls with innovative teammate techniques and newfound environment interaction

> Entertainment: Entertaining, yet lacking all the elements that would keep you hooked

> Replay Value: Moderately Low

Second Opinion 8

Why isn't there voice chat in Resident Evil: Outbreak? For the love of all that is holy, I want to give this game a good score for its thoughtful level design, nice graphics, intense gameplay, and smart mission structure – but that missing headset support throws the whole experience out of whack. These levels are fast-paced and frantic, almost like an FPS, and what you want is to make some sort of strategy. This just isn't possible with the canned commands available, as "You two check out the locker room and we're going to search the owner's office. Meet back here and we'll go up to the 3rd floor," weirdly isn't mapped to the right analog stick. So, this game gets the backhanded compliment of being "high concept" like Crystal Chronicles and Steel Battalion, for example. My ideal setup is playing this game with four friends, four TVs, and four PS2s all in the same room. Get this setup, and the game is a real gem.—**LISA**

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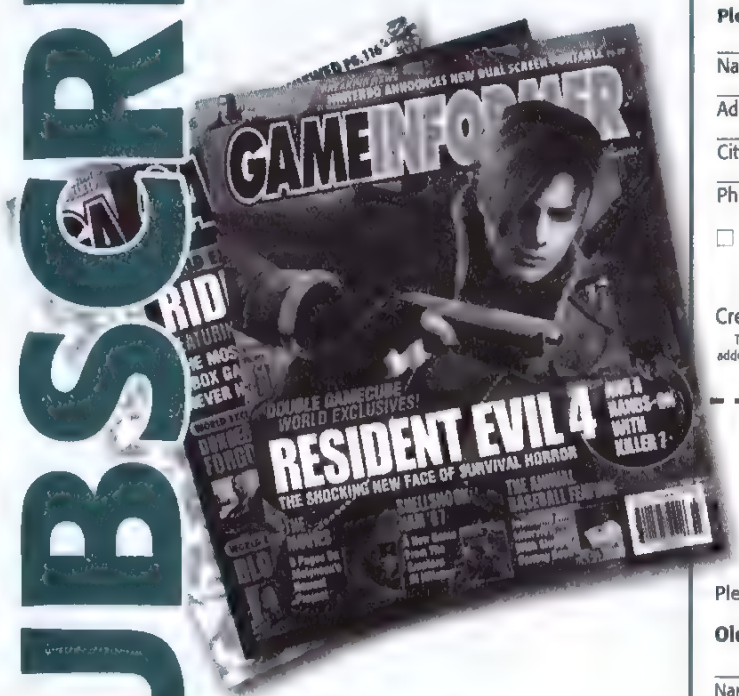

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PLAYSTATION 2

Siren

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION > **PUBLISHER** SONY COMPUTER ENTERTAINMENT AMERICA > **DEVELOPER** SONY COMPUTER ENTERTAINMENT > **RELEASE** MARCH 20 > **ESRB** M

GREAT EXPECTATIONS

The creepy tale of a possessed Japanese village (Hanuda) told through the eyes of ten playable characters in combination with some impressively innovative gameplay features should totally make my day – but playing Siren turns out to be sadly different than I was expecting.

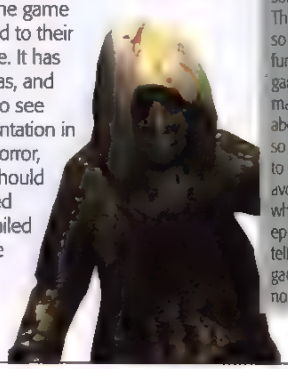
The game's two big features: sightjacking (where you see through the eyes of other characters) and the Link Navigator (which manages the plot's order of events) sadly don't add to the player's experience enough to justify their problematic existence.

Sightjacking is more fun to mess around with than it is helpful to the player. Watching the paths of roaming enemies can offer useful information, but the stealth mechanic is so simplistic that the data is rarely necessary. In many situations, being seen by enemies is something that you can't avoid or recover from – they will find you, and they will kill you. This is fine by me, but when the only stealth-orientated skill that is offered is a painfully slow crawl (and a distracting yell, which had little to no effect that I could perceive), it doesn't make me want to be all that sneaky. There isn't a sound meter, no real way to know if enemies can see you or not (like a vision cone or shadow meter), and very little chance of distracting them with diversions. It is more fun and more efficient to just run through levels and see what happens than to use the sightjacking feature to suss out a plan of attack.

Which leads to discussion of the game's other big feature, the Link Navigator. Siren's storytelling plan sounds like a survival horror *Real World* season: Pick 10 characters to escape the apocalypse and find out what happens over 3 days through 78 missions – you could call it *Siren: Hanuda*. The complication is that the order of events is jumbled and the Link Navigator is supposed to help you keep track. What this means, from a player's point of view, is that the game's story doesn't really get its hook into you – not even in the first few hours. The tales are too disjointed, the characters too many, and the plot too slow in getting going.

The more conventional aspects of this game like sound design and graphics are also something that people will have mixed feelings about. The creatures' insane, maniacal laughs are honestly unnerving, and therefore good for this game. The graphics look to be actual pictures of the characters' faces and lend a realistic, but still skewed version of each person – they're detailed, but strangely flat. I think that this is a nice subtle touch, but others may disagree.

I really, really wanted to like Siren, but in the end, I just didn't have much fun or feel like the innovative parts of the game were used to their advantage. It has good ideas, and I'm glad to see experimentation in survival horror, but this should be chalked up as a failed test in the genre.
—**LISA**



BOTTOM LINE **6.25**

> **Concept:** Navigate a horrific village as ten different characters

> **Graphics:** Muddy and jerky – but it fits with the disjointed feel of the gameplay

> **Sound:** The best part of this game, the sound effects are creepy and (for lack of a better word) icky

> **Playability:** The context-sensitive menu system is counter-intuitive and the stealth mechanics are pretty archaic and basic

> **Entertainment:** I really need a reason to care in a game this cerebral and slow-paced, and Siren doesn't give it to me

> **Replay Value:** Moderate

Second Opinion 5.75

From a conceptual standpoint, Siren is chock-full of ingenuity, and is a soaring success when it comes to the delivery of unusual ideas. Forming a mental bond with your attackers so that you see the surroundings from their perspective is a great idea that leads to some unnerving situations. This gimmick only goes so far, however. I found its functionality, and the entire gameplay package for that matter, to be clunky, and above all, frustrating. I grew so disenchanted with trying to pick up enemy sight that I avoided using this technique whenever I could. I love the episodic approach to storytelling – but the execution of gameplay bothered me to no end.—**REINER**

PLAYSTATION 2

Samurai Warriors

> **STYLE** 1 OR 2-PLAYER ACTION > **PUBLISHER** ELECTRONIC ARTS > **DEVELOPER** KOEI > **RELEASE** MAY 4 > **ESRB** T

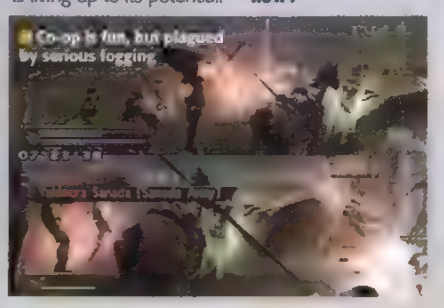
AN AGING WARRIOR FIGHTS ON

Koei continues to find new ways to milk the Dynasty Warriors engine for all it's worth. After Dynasty Warriors 4: Extreme Legends tried the "1.5" sequel tactic, this time around the company has changed the title altogether and switched the setting from ancient China to 16th century Japan.

There have been some improvements in the gameplay package. The combo system accommodates a larger variety of tactics, and the different characters have wildly varying styles of combat. In addition, the Musou special moves are devastating and shown in even greater graphical splendor. Still, I doubt even the most ardent Dynasty Warriors fans will be able to claim this is any sort of dramatic reinvention of the well-used combat scheme.

While the missions and levels are no great feat of game design, there are some interesting twists that will keep the experience fresh enough for many. There is now some degree of castle randomizing, which should help add to the replay factor for hardcore players. Yes, many of the missions are still pretty simplistic, but every once in a while you'll perform a unique task or be surprised by the traps in interior environments.

In the end, Samurai Warriors is not a bad game. In fact, for some people, it might be just what they need – solid hack n' slash action that does a great job of making you feel that you're part of a much larger conflict. However, for me, it's obvious that Koei has become complacent. Samurai Warriors is merely mediocre in terms of graphics (including the pitiful draw-distance in multiplayer), and simple problems like the inept camera have yet to be fixed. Its strong gameplay manages to squeak out a passing grade, but I really don't feel this franchise is living up to its potential.—**MATT**



BOTTOM LINE **7.5**

> **Concept:** The same old hack n' slashin' in a new setting

> **Graphics:** I think it's time for Koei to radically upgrade or scrap this engine

> **Sound:** A nice score with Dolby Pro Logic II support

> **Playability:** Does a good job of providing some depth to the basic combat, but the camera still blows

> **Entertainment:** Don't be fooled by the new title, this is Dynasty Warriors all over again

> **Replay Value:** Moderately High

Second Opinion 7.5

The bottom line is that the biggest difference between Samurai Warriors and Dynasty Warriors is the name. It's the same old hack n' slash action that Dynasty Warriors has offered for years with a slightly different setting. Every battle in the game is basically the same as those that came before it, the combat isn't too deep, and the environments are bland. But, on the other hand, upgrading my abilities and getting new skills was engaging enough to keep me playing for a while. If you're one of those Warriors fans that picks up every iteration of the series, you won't be disappointed. If you're just a fan of action games, you may also get a kick out of it – for a while. This title truly epitomizes the phrase "dumb but fun."—**JEREMY**

PLAYSTATION 2

Syphon Filter: The Omega Strain

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 4-PLAYER VIA BROADBAND) > **PUBLISHER** SONY COMPUTER ENTERTAINMENT AMERICA > **DEVELOPER** SONY BEND > **RELEASE** MAY 4 > **ESRB** M

A BOLD NEW DIRECTION FOR TACTICAL ESPIONAGE

This wildly ambitious release offers two different ways that players can work through the game. You can simply play through it as a single player, which offers up an experience that is very similar to the PSone trilogy, or you can hop online and partner with up to three additional human players for an action-packed extravganza that is quite unlike anything you've come across before. Interestingly, the content for both methods of play is virtually identical. In such, you can bounce back and forth between online and offline play with the same save data. I found this to be extremely beneficial. Of course, I'd prefer to work my way through the game with teammates, but I did find that if my friends are not logged in and the only people I can partner with give new meaning to the word "annoying," I'll play offline.

Sticking to its guns, the gameplay hasn't changed too much over the years. Headshots are once again highlighted with text, the lower shoulders are used for strafing, and you still have the luxury of tapping into a handy auto targeting system for frenzied fightss. The one area where you will see significant change is in the missions. In past Syphon Filter games, you had to complete most of the objectives and be mindful of parameters to progress to the next stage. In The Omega Strain, the theory has changed to "anything goes." Usually, there is only one critical objective on each stage that must be completed to move on. The remainder of the goals (which can number close to 15 for a level) are more or less optional for the player(s). The game won't come to a screeching halt if you ignore them. You can even finish a level by disregarding all parameters (like don't shoot the good guys) and still move on. So why would you even bother messing with additional feats? Simply because the rewards that they bring couldn't be more delicious.

All of your accomplishments and performances are tracked. Everything from shot accuracy to time you spend in a level are taken into consideration. Much like a role-playing game, your character will gain levels as experience is accumulated. You'll begin the game as a Field Agent and can eventually work your way through 21 additional ranks to Commander in Chief. Through extensive play, you can also earn medals, commendations from the NPCs, and Special Agency Ratings. Each one of these attainments (which number close to 100) rewards the player with a new weapon or power-up.

The density of unlockable armaments that you can wrap your hands around is truly unheard of, and is reason enough for players to work their way through the game over and over again. Although Omega Strain is the same, playing solo and with a group of friends produces two completely different results. Given the gargantuan size of the levels, never before has vocal communication (via the headset) been so necessary and constant. Also, you can reach areas that are not accessible in single player with teamwork.

Some of the missions are a bit ambiguous, the respawn points don't work as well as they should, and the visuals really haven't evolved too much since the previous installment, but as a whole, The Omega Strain emerges as one of the PlayStation 2's most irresistible online titles.—**REINER**

BOTTOM LINE 8.5

> **Concept:** Amusing single-player and four-player co-op mixed with traditional run-and-gun Syphon Filter gameplay and role-playing elements

> **Graphics:** This game won't win any beauty pageants. Some of the effects are decent, but the lighting, animations, and texturing lack significant detail

> **Sound:** Does a great job of forcing gamers to use voice chat

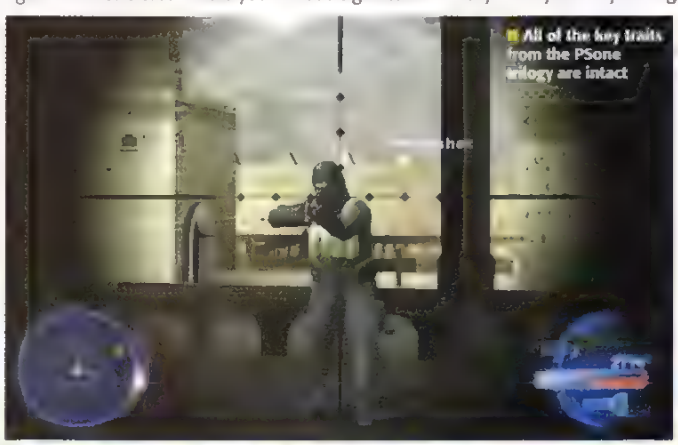
> **Playability:** Smooth controls and tons of weapons, but missions can be confusing

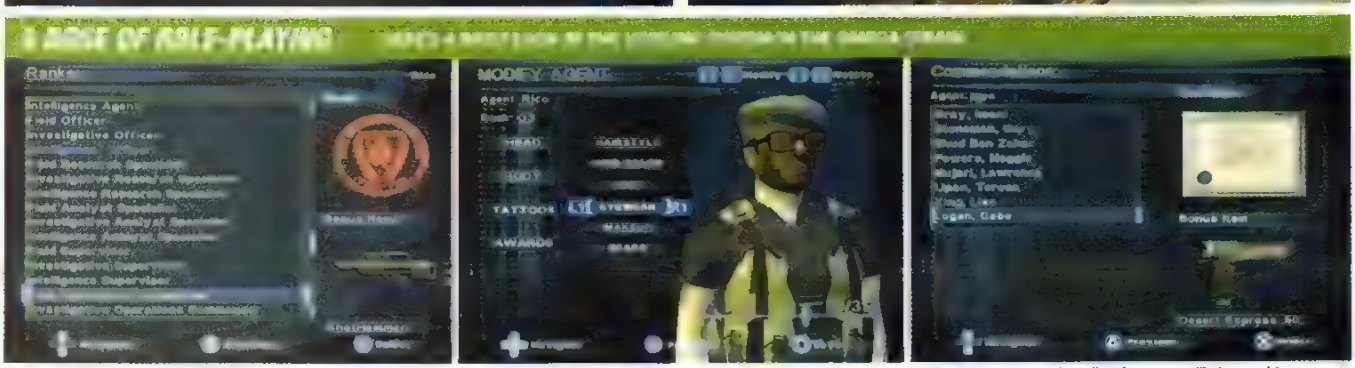
> **Entertainment:** Both methods of play are enjoyable and loaded with unlockable material

> **Replay Value:** High

Second Opinion 8.5

I've been eagerly anticipating Omega Strain as a bold new beginning for the Syphon Filter franchise. I'm happy to report that, while this is clearly a groundbreaking game, it does keep most of the strengths (and some of the weaknesses) of its forebears. The way this title manages to meld the multi-player and single-player portions into a cohesive whole is quite amazing, and I think this may well point to the direction that many games will head in the future. I love the fact that, while you can tackle the missions alone, playing in co-op actually creates a different experience, allowing you to access previously inaccessible areas and use teamwork for both strategy and to more quickly complete level goals. It's great fun, if a bit uneven. If not for the unimpressive graphics, sometimes suspect auto-targeting, and its irritating habit of re-spawning your character in seemingly random locations, this could have been an all-time classic. As it is, it's another great addition to the PS2 online library. —**MATT**

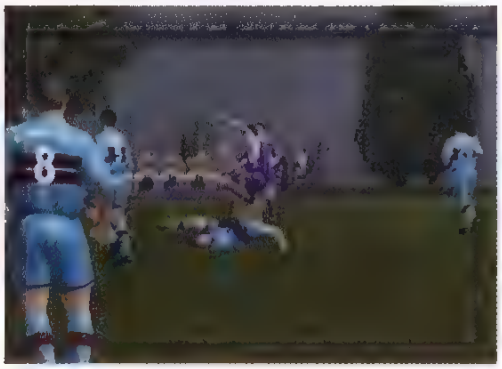




If you make it to the rank of Field Operations Commander, you'll receive the ShotHammer as a reward

Not all of the rewards are weapons. You'll also obtain gear such as sunglasses, facepaint, and different tattoos

If you perform extremely well, Gabe Logan will give you his commendation and will even hand over his truly spiffy Desert Express .50



PLAYSTATION 2

World Tour Soccer 2005

> **STYLE** 1 TO 8-PLAYER SPORTS > **PUBLISHER** SONY COMPUTER ENTERTAINMENT AMERICA > **DEVELOPER** 989 SPORTS
> **RELEASE** APRIL 13 > **ESRB** E

STOP THE WORLD, I WANT TO GET OFF

Playing this year's World Tour is like stepping into the shoes of an old, once-great soccer star. He's lost a step and it's painful to watch. The series has tried to adjust to the dominance of Konami's Winning Eleven franchise, which is the best in the business, but it just doesn't have the moves.

Whereas the last installment of World Tour was quick on the headers and in firing the ball into the net, 2005 has none of that zip. In fact, in a copy of Winning Eleven, this game has a power gauge for your shots and long passes. Unfortunately, it's a tad slow at actually pulling the trigger. Not only that, but the game lacks any of the smoothness in its dribbles or player movement. Perhaps this is a result of the new gauges and larger player models, which is at least an attempt at progress. However, not only does the game not keep up with the Joneses, it lacks needed internal improvements. The AI for your defenders is horrible. Attacking forwards don't have the plague fellas, just the ball. Go get it; that's what I pay you for. The one thing that I love which hasn't changed is the career structure where you work your team up through the ranks.

Two years ago, World Tour was my favorite. With the onset of Winning Eleven, however, this game's stock has plummeted. I'm getting out faster than Martha Stewart – and that ain't no crime, just good sense. I suggest you do the same until this thing turns around.—**KATO**

BOTTOM LINE **6.5**

> **Concept:** The series inexplicably goes backwards in its pursuit of progress

> **Graphics:** This year has got larger player models and some improved presentation aspects

> **Sound:** I like that the announcers worked at pronouncing all the non-English player names

> **Playability:** To alleviate frustration, change the default controller setting to manual player selection

> **Entertainment:** If last year's game was a solid piece of meat, this is a steak covered in stink sauce

> **Replay Value:** Moderate

Second Opinion 6

Taking a cleat to the groin, 989's promising soccer franchise has come up limping this year. The finesse and intensity that fueled last year's release is nowhere to be found. Non-aggressive CPU AI allows players to drive the field uncontested and unload on the hapless goalies. Furthermore, the new power meter feels as though it was slapped on at the last second. Even the little things like dribble animations seem jittery and a hair off. This disappointing release makes me pull out the red card in disgust.
—REINER

Success slips though Sony's fingers

PLAYSTATION 2

Destruction Derby Arenas

> **STYLE** 1 OR 2-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 20-PLAYER VIA PS2 BROADBAND)
> **PUBLISHER** GATHERING > **DEVELOPER** STUDIO 33
> **RELEASE** MARCH 29 > **ESRB** T

SLIGHTLY BENT METAL

At first glance, Destruction Derby Arenas seems like it's got all the makings of a great game. Tons of unlockable cars and drivers, plenty of over-the-top arenas, and a weird mix of smashing and racing sounds pretty awesome. Unfortunately, once you start digging into this title, you bottom out pretty quickly. Scoring is done in such a fashion that your skill as a driver means less than the opportunities you're presented with on the asphalt, which results in the feeling that the outcome is out of your hands.

The idea behind the single-player mode is sound, but it's structured really poorly – if you don't qualify for the next tier, you have to make the entire run through the circuit again. Ideally a robust online experience makes up for this – it's too bad that playing with other humans simply exacerbates the inherent flaws in the scoring system.

All of its weaknesses aside, DDA is still a good time for a little while. The graphics are crisp and the physics are solid once you get used to how loose they are, but there's nothing to keep you coming back after the initial fun of t-boning someone and watching them explode wears off.—**ADAM**

BOTTOM LINE **6.75**

> **Concept:** Win the Derby by a combination of racing and wrecking your opponents' rides

> **Graphics:** Nice detail on the cars and stadiums, and a cool blur effect for nitro use make it the high point of the title

> **Sound:** You'd be hard-pressed to find a more irritating [illegible]

> **Playability:** Except for the idiotic camera pans that break up your flow, it's fine

> **Entertainment:** There are some good thrills to be had, but success tends to depend a bit too much on luck

> **Replay Value:** Moderately High

Second Opinion 6.5

This game feels like tipping cows on a Saturday night. A small part of me thinks it's fun, but the overwhelming majority knows I've got better things to do. If this was a Hot Wheels game, I could see young kids liking it, but nobody will find joy in the sluggish online portion. You might get a few laughs from it with your friends, but then so would pestering farm animals.
—KATO

Abrupt camera pans are horribly disorienting

PLAYSTATION 2

Final Fantasy XI

> **STYLE** MASSIVELY MULTIPLAYER ONLINE ROLE-PLAYING GAME
> **PUBLISHER** SONY COMPUTER ENTERTAINMENT AMERICA
> **DEVELOPER** SQUARE ENIX > **RELEASE** MARCH 23 > **ESRB** T

ENOUGH THRILL FOR THE GIL?

Seeing as how this title marks the debut of the PS2's hard drive and Final Fantasy's first venture into the realm of the console MMORPG market, there has been a lot of commotion and anticipation surrounding it. Now that it has hit the shelves, the world of Vana'diel will need to brace itself for the fresh surge of PS2-playing inhabitants, providing enough people shell out the dough.

This is essentially the same game that came out for the PC in October, though it runs at a significantly lower resolution. It offers the same impressive persistent world, storyline, and content. It still has beautiful visuals and a gripping score, along with an unfortunately awkward menu interface. Overall, this is a solid game that does a wonderful job of unifying Square Enix's vision of the Final Fantasy world under a multi-platform roof.

This is unquestionably the best MMORPG available for the console, with a high potential to eat away at your free time, and possibly be responsible for some "sick" days at work. Sure, you'll have to pay a hefty sum for the game and peripherals, but if you're the type of person who even considers a purchase like this, you won't be disappointed.—**JOE**

BOTTOM LINE **7.75**

> **Concept:** Use Vana'diel in a pernicious ploy to push the PS2's hard drive

> **Graphics:** The characters and environments have surprising detail, but the animation is choppy

> **Sound:** A soundtrack on par with some of the best in the series

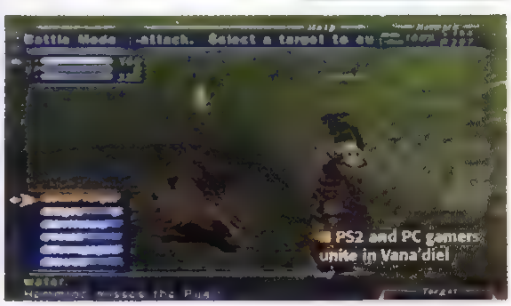
> **Playability:** The interface, designed for both PS2 and PC, doesn't really feel at home on either

> **Entertainment:** Easy to get sucked in, though things do roll along pretty slowly, even for an MMORPG

> **Replay Value:** High

Second Opinion 7

Putting an MMORPG on a console is an ambitious undertaking, one that's almost doomed out of the gates. To be fair, the content in FF XI is great – the character system is engaging, the concepts based on allegiance are cool, and graphically it's certainly acceptable. However, until you take the time to program the macros to your liking, the interface ranges from utterly unusable to merely horribly frustrating – even with a USB keyboard.—**ADAM**



PS2 and PC gamers unite in Vana'diel

PLAYSTATION 2

X-Files: Resist or Serve

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION > **PUBLISHER** VIVENDI UNIVERSAL > **DEVELOPER** BLACK OPS ENTERTAINMENT
> **RELEASE** MARCH 16 > **ESRB** M

RESIST, PLEASE

Resist or Serve is a merely passable survival horror game that relies on its franchise rather than gameplay to deliver the bulk of the entertainment value. Granted, some of the elements from the TV series are well used, such as the voices and likenesses of David Duchovny and Gillian Anderson, as well as a plot revolving around Black Oil (a familiar menace to fans of the show). Unfortunately, these aspects aren't enough to overcome the uninspired, repetitive puzzle solving required to get the ball rolling.

Whether I was walking the streets of an eerie town or the halls of psychiatric ward, I was following the same pattern. The path forward was blocked (usually by a locked door) so I had to tromp around until I found the particular key that would let me progress. Along the way, if I saw a zombie, I shot it and it fell down. If it tried to get up, I kicked it until it died (because I usually didn't have enough ammo to shoot it again). I couldn't just run by it, either, because often times regular-looking enemies will be carrying a mission-critical clue or item.

To the game's credit, it does a good job of capturing the mood of the show, and some of the dialogue is pretty funny (especially when referencing the size of Mulder's adult video collection). It also manages to add some variety by providing alternate paths through missions, depending on whether you choose to play as Scully or Mulder. They need to accomplish tasks in a different order, and take slightly different approaches to certain situations. As Scully, you have occasional autopsy sequences where you cut up infected individuals to obtain precious zombie-fluids, and as Mulder you rely more on heavy firepower to solve problems.

Unfortunately, regardless of the agent you choose, the basic formula never changes. You spend so much time wandering aimlessly and kicking prone undead that you never really have a chance to get wrapped up in the exceptionally intriguing and involved story that was clearly intended to make Resist or Serve stand out.—**JOE**

Zombie-kicking excitement

BOTTOM LINE **6.5**

> **Concept:** Make a game based on a series long past its prime

> **Graphics:** The scenery looks creepy and foreboding, but character animations are a bit awkward

> **Sound:** A bright star in the game's dark sky. The voices and music capture the ominous feel of the X-Files perfectly

> **Playability:** A conspiracy involving poor aiming, confusing camera work, and locked doors make it difficult to get comfortable

> **Entertainment:** I want to believe that this game isn't boring as all get-out

> **Replay Value:** Moderate

Second Opinion 7

With a vast city to explore, two playable characters with intertwining stories, an abundance of locked doors, and more zombies than you can shake a bloody New York strip at, this is a surprisingly decent amalgamation of survival horror's heavy hitters – primarily Resident Evil and Silent Hill. Truth be told, I like this game. Sure, it has a fair share of problems – be it the vagueness of puzzles, or the frustrations that the camera brings – but I just couldn't seem to put it down. The sarcastic banter between Scully and Mulder is done very well, the story moves along at quick pace, and the gameplay is solid. Not bad. Not bad at all.—**REINER**

PLAYSTATION 2

Seven Samurai 20XX

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION > **PUBLISHER** SAMMY STUDIOS
> **DEVELOPER** DIMPS/SAMMY STUDIOS > **RELEASE** MARCH 23 > **ESRB** T

SEVEN, NO LONGER THE "LUCKY" NUMBER

In all honesty, the idea taking Akira Kurosawa's classic *The Seven Samurai* and turning it into a science-fiction themed video game sounded pretty damn bad on paper. Now, despite the cooperation of Kurosawa's estate and the involvement of both legendary comic artist Moebius and anime writer/translator Marc Handler, the end product turns out to be worse than we could have imagined. Sammy, here's a hint: If you're going to make a "respectful" update of one of cinema's most cherished films, it's probably a bad idea to have a cutscene that features two rapping boy band rejects on rollerblades. But maybe that's just me. Also, I suspect that dialogue like "Bite me!" (which, I swear to God, actually does make its way into the script) might possibly diminish the gamemakers' dramatic intentions.

Of course, great gameplay makes up for any number of flaws, but unfortunately Seven Samurai offers nothing but mindless button-mashing, boring level design, and horrible pacing. Yes, there is some theoretical "depth" to the combat in the form of a dash move, blocking, combos, and the ability to equip new weapons, but in reality none of these techniques prove any more or less effective than just mindlessly punching the square button. Really, the only thing you'll have to master is the Nitoh-Ryu power-up, which lets you decimate your opponents with two swords for a brief period of time. Other than that it's a dull trek through levels that are alternately painfully linear or just plain confusing. Even worse, I suspect that the only audience that might have truly embraced 20XX's middling action – hardcore devotees of Kurosawa's films – will not only be put off by the juvenile voice-acting and poor dialogue, but will likely be offended at this affront to his legacy.—**MATT**

The dialogue is so inane you'll soon find yourself avoiding conversation with NPCs altogether

BOTTOM LINE **5**

> **Concept:** Make a sci-fi hack n' slasher based on Kurosawa's *The Seven Samurai*

> **Graphics:** Really this game's only strong point; the characters and particle effects are nice

> **Sound:** Ridiculous voice acting, and the battle music is horribly repetitive

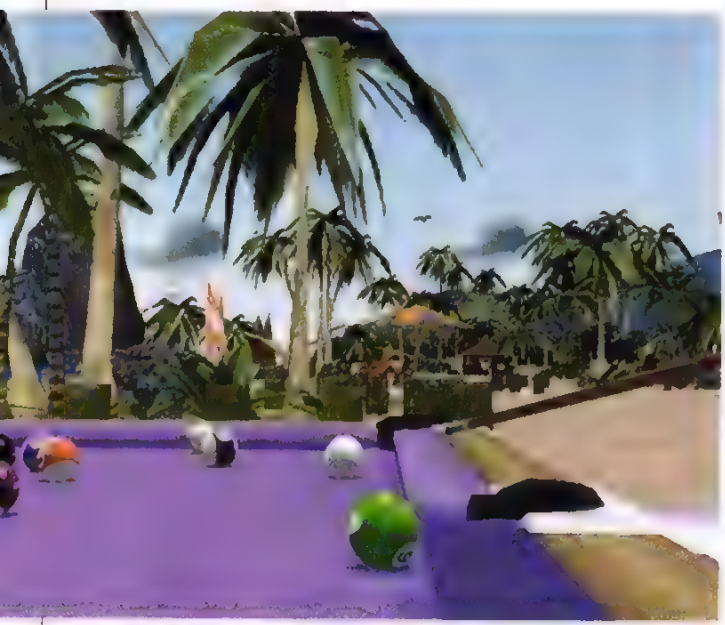
> **Playability:** Seriously, press square and you'll be fine

> **Entertainment:** Falls far short of living up to both its license, and the standards of modern-day hack n' slash

> **Replay Value:** Moderately Low

Second Opinion 4

Despite its high production values, Seven Samurai is an absolutely putrid game. The combat is so one-dimensional and yawn-inducing that I have enemies I wouldn't recommend this game to. It's so bad, in fact, that I would warn fans of Kurosawa's classic tale to not ruin their love of the movie by playing this pathetic button masher.—**ANDY**



This baize says "I'm Irish." Not recommended for non-Irish players

Manos: Hands of Fate

GAMECUBE

Pool Paradise

> **STYLE** 1 OR 2-PLAYER SPORTS > **PUBLISHER** IGNITION ENTERTAINMENT
> **DEVELOPER** AWESOME STUDIOS > **RELEASE** APRIL > **ESRB** E

WHIZ IN THE POOL

I can only assume that the name of Pool Paradise's developer, Awesome Studios, is meant to be ironic. Though the game does have its successes, I would estimate that it is only 10 percent awesome by volume. 15 percent tops.

At its core, I think this game succeeds in its primary goal: It captures the experience of playing pool through slick analog cue control, accurate ball physics, and some cool arcade elements thrown in for fun (like a laser scope and HUD). But if the pool itself is the sweet caramel center, everything surrounding it is a moist, fetid sponge.

Regardless of how accurately it plays, the other elements of this game don't come together, and the result is just unpleasant. The graphics are noticeably substandard, the music is ridiculously inappropriate, and a host of other things just feel "not right."

For instance, the game boasts "unique and highly detailed animated hands." Note that it doesn't say anything about the rest of the body, because *it isn't there*. Each match you play is against a pair of floating, disembodied hands. It is supposed to add personality to your opponents, but ultimately just makes them disturbing.

Pool Paradise simply missed too many opportunities to improve. The competition mode revolves entirely around climbing up a ranking ladder with no real payoff, and all of the things you buy with your winnings either only have aesthetic effects (cues, baizes), or just aren't worth your hard-earned cash (skee-ball, crazy tables).

So, even though the pool itself plays fine, the rest of the game, like the hands with conspicuously absent bodies, simply feels incomplete or unrealized.—**JOE**

BOTTOM LINE 6

> **Concept:** GameCube and billiards, together at long last

> **Graphics:** My expectations were low, and I was still disappointed. Jaggies and bad texturing litter every screen

> **Sound:** The unbefitting synth soundtrack would be more at home in a *Lethal Weapon* movie

> **Playability:** The ball physics are great, and the analog cue control works remarkably well

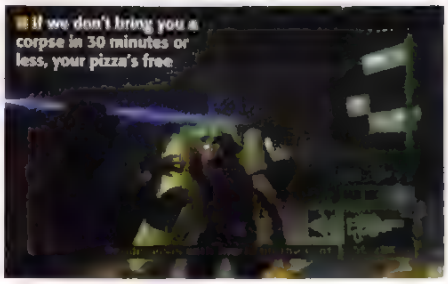
> **Entertainment:** Has all of the excitement of real pool, for better or worse

> **Replay Value:** Moderate

Second Opinion 6.75

Despite its pool in a paradise theme, Hervé Villechaize wouldn't call this a fantasy island. The physics work well, and there's stuff to blow your money on, but I wanted that EA-like career progression. Hell, the skee-ball minigame didn't even really work! This game is average not because "it's just pool," but because Awesome Studios failed at the chance to make something definitive.—**KATO**

Even daylight shows off the fantastic lighting engine


If we don't bring you a corpse in 30 minutes or less, your pizza's free

Are you ready for some completely awesome graphics? This is your game

BOTTOM LINE 9.5

> **Concept:** The legendary agent returns with an all-new adventure and a groundbreaking online mode

> **Graphics:** The dark, realistic look and lifelike animations can only be described as "freakin' awesome"

> **Sound:** The voice work is great, but the score is a tad forgettable

> **Playability:** Whether you're playing as Sam, a Shadow Net agent, or a merc, control is spot-on and will make you feel like a total badass

> **Entertainment:** If you like stealth/action, you must, must play this game

> **Replay Value:** Moderate

UNLIMITED ENABLED

XBOX

Splinter Cell: Pandora Tomorrow

GAME INFORMER GAME OF THE MONTH

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 4-PLAYER VIA XBOX LIVE OR SYSTEM LINK) > **PUBLISHER** UBISOFT
> **DEVELOPER** UBISOFT SHANGHAI > **RELEASE** MARCH 25 > **ESRB** M

PLAY IT AGAIN, SAM

After only his first title, Sam Fisher became an instant video game superstar. The original Splinter Cell brought the stealth/action genre to the forefront of gaming and became the template for dozens of knockoffs. Well, those imitators are now going to have to work even harder, because Sam's second mission, Pandora Tomorrow, raises the stealth/action bar even higher.

In terms of gameplay mechanics, little has outright changed, but much has been improved. Sam now sports more precise aiming, a handful of additional moves, and a few new gadgets. The enemy AI has also been tweaked, as has the relentless difficulty level. The result is not a quantum leap in gameplay or graphics, just a smoother and more refined play experience. Pandora Tomorrow is a sequel in a more traditional movie sense: The basic setup and characters remain the same, but the story has changed.

As with the original, Pandora Tomorrow places a heavy emphasis on the plot. Without giving too much away, Sam is charged with tracking down a charismatic Indonesian terrorist with a sinister anti-American agenda. Like a Robert Ludlum thriller, the story is dark, intelligent, and mature. The dialogue is sharp and witty, and Sam is easily the most complex character in gaming. This is undoubtedly video game storytelling at its finest.

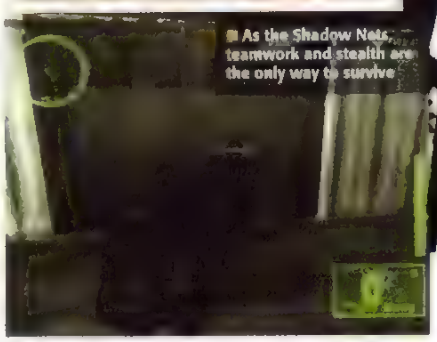
Sam's mission takes him to a variety of stunning locations. Over the course of the story, Sam must brave the jungles of Indonesia, pull himself along the bottom of a speeding train, climb an elevator shaft, and creep through the freezers of a cryogenics lab. Of course, he faces well-armed thugs everywhere he turns. It's these innovative action sequences that make the single-player quest so compelling.

While the story mode is brilliant in its own right, Pandora Tomorrow's real innovation comes in the form of its multiplayer mode. Cleverly tying into the main story, multiplayer pits teams of spies and mercenaries against each other. The spies play in third-person like Sam, while the mercs use the traditional first-person view. Using stealth as their main weapon, the spies (a.k.a. Shadow Nets) must sneak past the mercs to their objectives. This truly unique multiplayer mode features a fantastic control scheme for both teams, absolutely addictive gameplay, and graphics that are every bit as gorgeous as the single-player mode.

"This is undoubtedly video game storytelling at its finest."

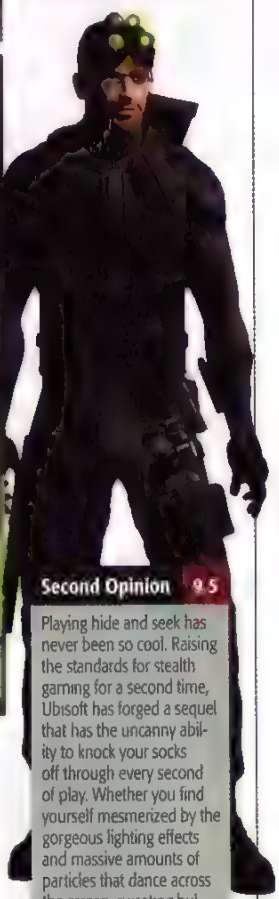
The original Splinter Cell is still one of the most visually impressive console games ever, and Pandora Tomorrow is even prettier. Character models have improved, and the famous shadows feel even deeper and richer, but it's the little details that really stand out. In one level, a passing subway train blows newspapers and trash around, while in another rain pours down around you in a full-fledged thunderstorm. It is these extra touches that make Sam Fisher's world seem like a living, breathing place. Several times during this game, I had to stop playing and drag a witness over to my desk to share the amazing sights unfolding on my screen. Other times I had to stop and praise the intelligent, surprising plot points. And others, I simply had to gloat about how many times I snapped Joe's neck in multiplayer. This, my friends, is a game that keeps on giving.—**JEREMY**

Finding shadows is still the best way to complete a mission


As the Shadow Nets, teamwork and stealth are the only way to survive

"Here comes the tickle monster!"

"Man, it stinks like dead Ninja Turtles down here!"



Second Opinion 9.5

Playing hide and seek has never been so cool. Raising the standards for stealth gaming for a second time, Ubisoft has forged a sequel that has the uncanny ability to knock your socks off through every second of play. Whether you find yourself mesmerized by the gorgeous lighting effects and massive amounts of particles that dance across the screen, sweating bullets within the taut action sequences, or compelled by the expertly penned story, Pandora Tomorrow is a gripping and unforgettable experience. The gameplay is much tighter, targeting is no longer questionable, and you're continually asked to use Sam's entire arsenal of moves. The online component is just as remarkable. Not only is it a departure from multiplayer as you know it, it has a clever tie to Pandora Tomorrow's story and adds serious replay to a game that you'd probably only play through once or twice.—**REINER**

UNLIMITED ENABLED

XBOX

TOCA Race Driver 2: Ultimate Racing Simulator

> STYLE 1 OR 2-PLAYER RACING (UP TO 12-PLAYER VIA XBOX LIVE OR LAN) **> PUBLISHER** CODEMASTERS **> DEVELOPER** CODEMASTERS **> RELEASE** APRIL 20 **> ESRB** E

CALLING FOR MCKANE

Codemasters struck gold when it merged story elements with racing in the first Pro Race Driver. Between now and then, however, the series has gone through much more than a name change, and I'm very disappointed by the transformation. The racing, in fact, has gotten better on several fronts, but TOCA has changed up its story structure and lost all the magic and appeal that once made the franchise stand out.

The story cutscenes are now seen through your eyes instead of Ryan McKane's (the protagonist of the original). That's fine, but the developer has also done away with the hub world with its separate email and garage areas. Sounds like a small thing, but it's better than the simple and boring menu interface now in its place. Worst of all, there is little choice because the original's tier structure (and its pool of races) is gone. At times in TOCA you'll be asked to pick from different circuits. You can go race pick-up trucks at an oval or semis on a road course, for example. I'm glad that the franchise has retained its variety and racing versatility, but without a good story context, the magic of the first Race Driver is lost. Also, because the tier structure and email challenges are gone, the game is more linear. In the end, I felt like the cutscenes were driving the story, and not my choices.

Codemasters has dialed down the difficulty, which is welcome, but has not sacrificed the intricacy of cars' handling. The more high performance cars and rally races are good cases in point. You have to know both when and how to slam on the throttle in order to get the most out of a car. Visually, the details abound and the sensation of speed is good. If you've got a high-def TV, you have to take advantage of the game's support of 480p, as it adds an extra dimension that must be experienced. You can make your car a sight to see by beating the living hell out of it, but I was hoping that TOCA would make vehicle damage a more meaningful aspect than in the first Race Driver.

The game's peripheral importance on being able to damage your car is a good example of why this sequel isn't as fun as the original. It doesn't spur you to do better. If I had to earn money to pay for my wrecked cars or had to purchase and develop new rides, then my ambition would have made this a more engaging title. Add in my disappointment with the new story structure, and this series has lost its driving edge for me.

I think people liked Pro Race Driver because its story produced an allure that was more charming than the stiffness of Gran Turismo. Codemasters has got the racing aspect of the game down – that's not in question. But you aren't going to beat Gran Turismo in the car department, and I don't want TOCA to. Instead, I want to feel that I'm in control of tale worth telling, and I just didn't get that impression here.—**KATO**

BOTTOM LINE 7.5

> Concept: Codemasters takes a second stab at the "caRPG" and fails where the first succeeded

> Graphics: Everything runs at a good clip and the draw distance is excellent no matter the number of cars. Split-screen is another story

> Sound: The dialogue is fairly well written and all the right car sounds are captured

> Playability: The difficulty balance has been made easier without cheapening the cars' handling

> Entertainment: I never thought I'd miss corny Ryan McKane, but he makes all the difference

> Replay Value: Moderately High

Second Opinion 7.5

Race Driver 2 is a good example of the key role that choice can play in a game's quality. None of its essential elements are broken—the racing works well, the cars look great, and there are a wide variety of available vehicles and tracks. Even with all of those things working together, I couldn't get over the frustration of being given little or no choice as to the game's difficulty, what race I would undertake next, or even which car I would drive. Though it is impressive on many levels, RD2 just fences you in too much for it to be truly enjoyable.—**JOE**

XBOX

Steel Battalion: Line of Contact

> STYLE 2 TO 10-PLAYER ACTION (ONLINE ONLY) **> PUBLISHER** CAPCOM **> DEVELOPER** CAPCOM **> RELEASE** FEBRUARY 26 **> ESRB** T

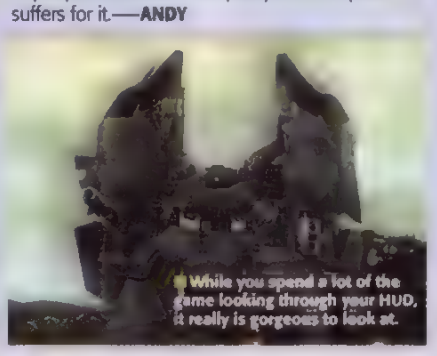
THE CADILLAC OF MECH VIDEO GAMES

Line of Contact is an interesting game offering on so many levels. First and foremost, you can't play this unless you have purchased the original Steel Battalion (which retails for a beefy 200 dollars), as that is the only way to get your hands on the required 40-button controller that features three foot pedals and two joysticks. Secondly, the game can only be played online or on a local area network, so unless you have nine other friends with the title and the time to lug their gaming rig to your house, an Xbox Live account is also required to play.

Like the original game, there is nothing pick-up-and-play about Line of Contact. The user interface is still clumsy and mastering the controller takes a couple of hours. And, like the original, you really have to love starting up your mech, because you are going to do it a lot and it's a process that takes about a minute each and every time you hop into a new machine.

Line of Contact offers four different modes of online play: Battle Royale (deathmatch), Capture the Container (LoC's answer to Capture the Flag), Campaign, and Conquest. The latter two being the most interesting, as they allow teams of players to earn battle power points by blowing crap up, capturing bases, or completing various objectives.

If you loved the original Steel Battalion, I can't recommend this purchase enough (even though it is more an expansion pack than a full game). But be forewarned that there aren't exactly a ton of people online and the quality of the experience suffers for it.—**ANDY**


While you spend a lot of the game looking through your HUD, it really is gorgeous to look at.

BOTTOM LINE 7.5

> Concept: Give players an online option for using that expensive controller they bought a year ago

> Graphics: The addition of 720p makes an already graphically impressive game stand out even more for HDTV users

> Sound: The sounds of battle drip with realism, but the rest of the soundtrack is only acceptable

> Playability: Understanding and mastering the monstrous controller takes time, but it is a treat once you get it down

> Entertainment: If you love realistic mech simulators, this is the game for you

> Replay Value: Moderate

Second Opinion 8.5

Since it requires approximately $300 to play (when including this title, the original, and Xbox Live), I'm a bit let down that Line of Contact doesn't have a little more to offer. Yes, the Campaign mode is great, but that doesn't change the fact that this is nothing more than an expansion pack being treated as a true sequel. But if you can afford it, Line of Contact offers an unparalleled video game experience. The original Steel Battalion was immersive like no other mech title, and playing against other humans takes things to the next level. Sure it's awesome, but I can't help feeling a little bit of sticker shock.—**JEREMY**

PC

Unreal Tournament 2004

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 32-PLAYER VIA INTERNET OR LAN) > **PUBLISHER** ATARI
> **DEVELOPER** EPIC GAMES / DIGITAL EXTREMES > **RELEASE** MARCH 16 > **ESRB** M

THE CHAMPION RETURNS

Last year's Unreal Tournament 2003 was criticized by fans for many reasons. Rest assured, fragmeisters – UT 2004 is all you could ask for and more. Beyond the stunning presentation, the fast-paced core of UT's gameplay is better than ever before. And besides, what other FPS can offer you the instant gratification of the announcer shouting "Head shot!" when you snipe some unsuspecting fool?

Graphically, the Unreal engine has made miles of progress since last we saw it. Incredible detail is present on every model and texture, and the explosive and dismemberment effects are gorgeous. The most impressive feat the developers have wrought, though, is the fact that even with 32 players slugging it out with every weapon imagined by man, there's no slowdown – meaning you have nobody but yourself to blame when you get gibbed.

In terms of content, UT 2004 delivers in spades. All of the maps from 2003 are available, as well as a whole dropship full of new ones. You can literally play the same mode for ten hours and not repeat a map. And that's just out of the box – you can be sure that UT's robust mod community will be increasing the pool of levels in short order. Considering that there are ten modes to try, there's no reason for UT 2004 to ever get stale; especially since the brand new Battlefield-esque Onslaught mode is such a work of art. It takes all of the frantic combat of classic UT and introduces a whole new level of teamwork while seamlessly integrating the vehicles. It's easily my new favorite thing to do online, period.

There are really only two things I can think of that are wrong with this title. First, the single-player is boring. Expected, yes, but I have to say it. Second, finding people of your skill level to play with can be a chore at times. While racking up the kills by mowing down newbies is fun for a little while, it quickly becomes only slightly more entertaining than getting obliterated by the hardcore masters yourself. However, neither of these ever make it past the realm of minor annoyance – you'll forget about them entirely when you find a good group to get down with. The speed and polish of UT 2004 cannot be denied.—**ADAM**

ROAD RAGE

Ah, the vehicles. From the lightly armed but agile Manta hovercraft to the enormous, transforming Leviathan tank, every ride in the game is fun to pilot, yet not impossible to overcome while on foot – mostly thanks to the new AVRiL rocket launcher, which locks onto vehicles and can lay them out in a very short time. Onslaught mode wouldn't be possible without the quick transport these mechanical monsters provide, and they serve to radically diversify both combat itself and the strategic element of the game. Plus, what use would a 'chopped-in-half' death animation be without scything blades of death protruding from a little buggy?

BOTTOM LINE **9.5**

> **Concept:** Take Unreal to the next level with new modes, vastly improved visuals, and more maps than National Geographic

> **Graphics:** Better than chocolate. Very scaleable, too – you can play this on just about any machine

> **Sound:** "Killing Spree! Rampage!" Also, the 3D audio helps to find the action

> **Playability:** Adding voicechat support makes talking smack (and coordinating assaults) so much better

> **Entertainment:** This is the smoothest, fastest, most addicting multiplayer shooter around

> **Replay Value:** High

Second Opinion 9.5

Unreal Tournament has always delivered fantastic online gameplay, but 2004 ups the ante in so many ways that you just can't help but love all the depth it has to offer. Not only does it provide an amazing 10 modes of play, 2004 offers up so many levels that it will take you at least a week just to memorize them all (and that's only going to happen if you play nonstop). But for all the depth and graphical upgrades that 2004 has, the things that make this game an absolute must-play are the return of the Assault mode and the addition of Onslaught. This is basically Unreal's answer to Battlefield, but with a fevered pace and manic gameplay. While I love this mode to no end, I like Assault even more. The level designs are simply awe inspiring and a blast to play. If you like getting your online FPS groove on, 2004 is a must.—**ANDY**

BOTTOM LINE **9.25**

> **Concept:** Escape a gorgeous island paradise while stopping a mad scientist's evil schemes

> **Graphics:** An insane amount of foliage provides ample cover, though textures are kind of basic

> **Sound:** Not the best voices ever, but every other aspect is brilliant

> **Playability:** Grenade button! Lean functions! Good vehicle control! For once, I don't get to complain about any of it

> **Entertainment:** The best, most polished single-player FPS in a heckuva long time (maybe ever) – and the multiplayer ain't half bad, either

> **Replay Value:** High

PC

Far Cry

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 16-PLAYER VIA LAN OR INTERNET) > **PUBLISHER** UBISOFT > **DEVELOPER** CRYTEK
> **RELEASE** MARCH 23 > **ESRB** M

A DIAMOND IN THE ROUGH

It's not often that an upstart developer comes out with a new engine along with an incredibly polished game. Far Cry, though, is not only notable for being the first entry by Crytek into the crowded PC first-person shooter market – it is quite possibly the best one-player, action-intensive shooter ever. Yes, the multiplayer is good, but the true strength of this title is in the solo experience.

Of all the incredible things I could bring up about the offline experience, the enemy AI is my absolute favorite – the best I've ever seen by a long shot. They react realistically to seeing or hearing things, use cover better than most human players, and call in backup when they're in trouble. To top it all off, different bad guys have distinct AI – there's nothing so awesome (and frustrating) as coming up against better-trained troops who know just how to counter the tactics you've been using to great effect against the grunts.

The variety to be found as you progress through the approximately 20-hour campaign is another unparalleled achievement on Crytek's part. Not once, even for a moment, did I feel that it was a chore to tackle whatever challenge was in front of me. Whether it's the environment, the weapons and gadgets available, new enemies to defeat, or non-standard objectives to accomplish, Far Cry continually innovates – even after ten hours into the quest, something new was constantly causing my jaw to drop in awe. The vehicles integrate seamlessly into the action, whether you're flying across a crystal-clear bay in a speedboat (with a mounted minigun, of course) or evading enemy choppers trying to hunt you down. Additionally, all of the weapons (and the several different grenades) react nicely, including their reload times, rate of fire, and accuracy.

Graphically, Far Cry is right up there with the triple-A titles coming out. The most impressive thing, though, is the draw distance. You can literally see the trees on an island a kilometer away, and fully animated water out to the horizon. Also, lighting is very nice (mottled sunlight filtering through foliage is my new favorite graphical effect), and shadows are quite detailed. The icing on the cake is the incidental effects, which will continually surprise you as you go on. For instance, take a big hit and your vision and hearing will momentarily get all funky.

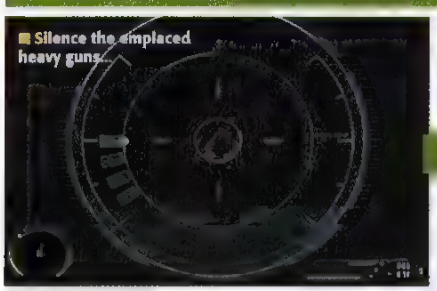
"...Even after ten hours into the quest, something new was constantly causing my jaw to drop in awe."

Between three multiplayer modes and 11 maps, as well as a choice of three kits with weapon choices within those, there's quite a bit of fragalicious fun to be had playing with friends, but the real draw is in the solo play. If you have any desire at all for nigh-perfect solo action, Far Cry is for you.—**ADAM**

Second Opinion 9

I had no idea what to expect from Far Cry, but only minutes in I was hit upside the head with just how good this game is. And that feeling returned time and time again. Do not take the freedom Far Cry gives you for granted. The game's vast vistas open up all sorts of strategic possibilities for you. Given the devious AI, utilizing the map to its fullest is sometimes a must. Not only does the title give you breathtaking landscapes and draw distance, but its interior levels are populated with plenty of shadow play and steam effects to make you gasp. Far Cry betters the sum of its parts by integrating them all superbly. For instance, the pacing perfectly balances the adaptable and fluid enemy AI to not only cater to your playing style, but to constantly replicate both that "calm before the storm" tension and the feeling of unloading a clip while emptying your bowels. A well-crafted game that is effortless to enjoy.—**KATO**

GUERILLA TACTICS



Piggybacking on the stellar AI is the concept of truly integrated stealth. Rather than the standard two types of completing a mission (sneak around or kill everyone), Far Cry allows players far more freedom. Slip unnoticed into the camp and take out a couple of the guards before they can react, then fade back into the concealing jungle and invite them to follow you for a deadly game of hide-and-seek. Everything is so well-executed on a technical level, especially the detection algorithms for the enemies, that strategies impossible in other games work flawlessly, such as the one you see illustrated here. Of course, when you're fighting mutants that can leap 40 feet in about two seconds, this doesn't necessarily always work...

Being part of a big assault

Using the M60 is a lot like mowing the lawn

Air support is a huge advantage

It takes a sharp eye to spot enemies hiding in the jungle

BOTTOM LINE 8

> **Concept:** Pretend that this isn't just a BF 1942 port to the Vietnam era

> **Graphics:** Much better than its predecessor, but not competitive with its contemporaries

> **Sound:** The whistle of shells and whine of bullets makes the battlefield a scary, intense place

> **Playability:** Coordinating an assault with 12 people and no voicechat is a lot like having an aneurysm

> **Entertainment:** Finding a good server (and good people) to play with is worth it, but without those this is an exercise in pain and misery

> **Replay Value:** High

Second Opinion 7.5

Battlefield Vietnam has all of the elements you liked about BF 1942, but none of them have been fine-tuned or polished. The most glaring problem is the lack of attention paid to balancing. Some job kits are alarmingly overpowered, and many of the maps blatantly favor one side. Sure, it's cool to be the underdog who fights overwhelming odds to emerge triumphant, but these scenarios just end up being enraging, not challenging. If I could have coordinated attacks with voice-chat (instead of pre-packaged commands mapped to the function keys) it would have made the effort less painful. If you want to enjoy BFV, take it online with some friends and be sure to pay attention to the sound design – both the effects and the soundtrack are outstanding. Though it ultimately feels like the same game in a different era, this glorified expansion still delivers in the same ways that made BF 1942 a success.—**JOE**

PC

Battlefield Vietnam

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 64-PLAYER VIA ONLINE OR LAN) **> PUBLISHER** ELECTRONIC ARTS **> DEVELOPER** DIGITAL ILLUSIONS **> RELEASE** MARCH 16 **> ESRB** T

WARNING: NOT THE SEQUEL YOU WANTED

Let's get one thing straight right now: This is not Battlefield 2. Battlefield Vietnam is more of a standalone expansion with better graphics and a different setting; there's nowhere near the amount of enhancement present to consider this a true sequel. Yes, BF 1942 was and is a great game, but BF Vietnam feels like it was pushed out the door without the tweaking and tuning necessary to give it the polish we expect out of a brand-new triple-A title.

Almost every aspect of BF Vietnam plays identically to BF 1942. It's like the core game was ripped out and implanted into the jungles of southeast Asia. The one mode that anybody plays (Conquest) works precisely the same, save for the new flag-capturing timer. Great addition that it is, this isn't exactly a genre-defining revolution. The server-browsing interface is as primitive as ever, and trying to drive a vehicle (especially aircraft) is still on par with attempting to steer a cow through a minefield. Of course, if you're a Battlefield person already, these won't bother you, but they leave a lot to be desired in a new game.

Though the number of maps is a bit low (there are only 14), the kits – especially Engineers – are a lot of fun to play. Booby-trap vehicles, lug your portable mortar out to a better position, or cut down everyone in your path with a big ol' M60. Which, incidentally, is one of the most unbalanced things I've ever seen. It's a heavy machine gun – you know, the kind that you need to go prone and kick the legs out to use properly – yet it works just like an assault rifle in run-and-gun combat, but with a 100-shot clip and twice the rate of fare. Also, the kit that gets it as the primary weapon gets a rocket launcher as the secondary. This is the most glaring balance issue, but it's hardly the only one. Most maps seem to favor one side or the other, and half of the games I was in had lopsided teams.

Despite distance fogging that limits your visibility rather sharply on most maps, the graphics are certainly passable. The heavy foliation provides nice cover for infantry, and the levels capture the feeling of a war zone quite well. The sound design, on the other hand, is probably the best I've ever heard, and makes being under fire downright intimidating. Brilliant is the only word for it.

"An incredibly good time if you can find an amicable crew of fellow soldiers."

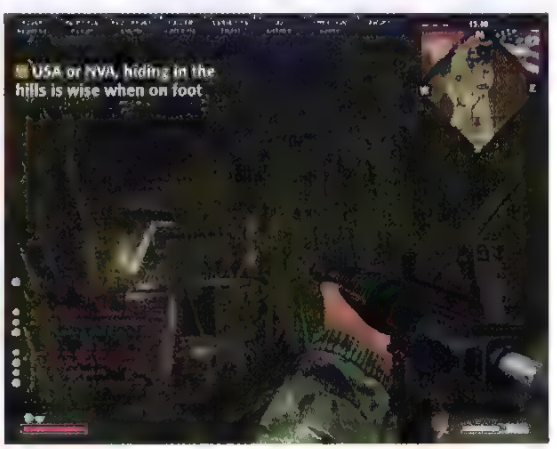
All of the imbalances and similarities to BF 1942 aside, BF Vietnam is still an incredibly good time if you can find an amicable crew of fellow soldiers. The strategies that are possible with the map design and different abilities of vehicles and kits are numerous, and successfully assaulting or defending a fortified position with good teamwork is very rewarding. I just can't recommend this rough of a product too highly to people who aren't already Battlefield junkies.—**ADAM**

DEAR DIARY

February 16, 1967

0900:08 Well, here we are in Kwang Tri. Hope the VC doesn't –
0900:15 Whoops, should've picked a better spawn point. That one was a bit –
0901:32 Aack. They must be a bit closer to our base than I expec –
0901:53 Wow! This guy knows exactly where we spawn! What a talent! If only –
0904:21 Haha, surprised the sucker. One down, 20 to go. On to the –
0904:49 Okay, seriously. This is getting dumb. If I can't even –
– YOUR SPAWN POINT HAS BEEN LOST. PLEASE CHOOSE A NEW SPAWN POINT –
0905:12 Great. Just what I need. Maybe if I could get off a shot –
– US 41, NVA 0. MINOR VICTORY! –
0905:58 Ah, the glories of teamwork. Better than a body bag, I guess.

They fought the L.A.W., and the L.A.W. won


USA or NVA, hiding in the hills is wise when on foot

PC

Gangland

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER STRATEGY/SIMULATION (UP TO 8-PLAYER VIA LAN OR INTERNET) > **PUBLISHER** WHIPTAIL INTERACTIVE
> **DEVELOPER** MEDIAMOBSTERS > **RELEASE** MARCH 4 > **ESRB** M

AN OFFER EASILY REFUSED

BOTTOM LINE **6.5**

It irks me when a developer innovates within a genre and fails to tighten up the final product to the point where its creativity can be enjoyed to the fullest. Gangland is chock-full of great new ideas, but I couldn't get into its world of violence, wealth, and power.

The idea behind this title is brilliant: Captain an organized crime family to dominance through clever strategy, shrewd business dealings, and plenty of violence against those who oppose you. These elements fit snugly together, and impact one another in logical fashion. Ignore any one facet of your criminal empire, and it'll all come crashing down around you – the mark of a well-conceived strategy game.

Although its core concepts are well executed, the little things bring Gangland down. In particular, the AI leaves a bit to be desired. Regular civilians to whom I'd done no wrong would frequently open fire on me, completely breaking the game fiction. Also, combat feels more like a slugfest than an intense tactical experience; not once was I able to recover from bad odds through strategic expertise.

If your desire to be a criminal mastermind isn't enough to get you over a steep learning curve and overlook some flaws, you'd be well-advised to look to other, more polished titles for your strategy fix.—**ADAM**

> **Concept:** Become the godfather of Paradise City through an odd RTS-style interface

> **Graphics:** Smooth and flavorful. Seeing the same 20 or so character models gets awfully old, though

> **Sound:** I had no idea that mobsters listened to both nu-metal and techno

> **Playability:** For a complex game, nothing is explained particularly well – the learning curve is a bit much

> **Entertainment:** It's definitely unique and interesting, but somehow fails to really come together in the end

> **Replay Value:** Moderately High

■ The vehicle controls are worse than you can possibly imagine

Second Opinion 7

Whiptail Interactive envisioned Gangland as a blend of the real-time strategy, role-playing, and sim genres. On paper, this sounds quite amazing. However, there are just too many flaws that detract from Gangland's admittedly cool concepts. Too much of your time is spent in transit between jobs (the vehicles, which do help save time, are abysmally difficult to control), and the combat itself doesn't really have much in the way of depth or strategy, a problem that's exacerbated by the lack of unit variety. Like so many Mafia epics, Gangland reaches a predictable conclusion: great concept, spotty execution.—**MATT**

PC

Tom Clancy's Rainbow Six 3: Athena Sword

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 16-PLAYER VIA LAN OR INTERNET) > **PUBLISHER** UBISOFT
> **DEVELOPER** RED STORM ENTERTAINMENT > **RELEASE** MARCH 9 > **ESRB** M

A FRIEND IN NEED

BOTTOM LINE **7.25**

This add-on for last year's Raven Shield is so stereotypical of an expansion that it boggles the mind. New content (maps, weapons, etc.) is all you get here; there's no technological improvement to be found anywhere. Of course, many would argue that none are needed.

The good news is that nothing is broken from the original – R6 aficionados will find everything they love intact, from planning to execution. However, nothing has really been fixed either. The new campaign falls prey to the same issues that have plagued every R6 game I've ever played – namely, much of the time the outcome of a mission is decided by the AI rather than player actions. On some missions, it's not all that uncommon for one of your squads to get wiped out in the first minute. And with no voicechat or voice command support, you can't even curse your dying moron allies. To top it off, it's pretty short – five hours should get you through it. Multiplayer gets a significant boost with Athena Sword, though. With five extra maps, seven additional weapons, and three new modes, the replay value of R6 is higher than ever.

Nothing here is really going to change anyone's mind about the franchise – if Rainbow Six isn't your thing, then don't bother with this. If you still find yourself playing Raven Shield instead of the newer FPSs though, Athena Sword will only make you fall in love with it all over again.—**ADAM**

> **Concept:** Give the Tom Clancy fandub some new missions and maps to do their thing with

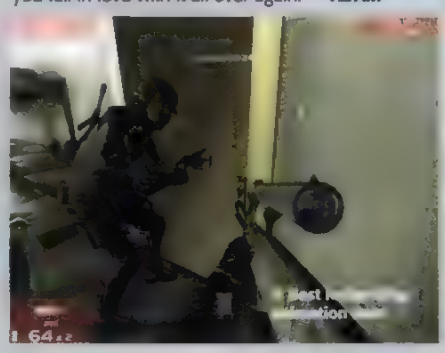
> **Graphics:** No better than those of Raven Shield. Textures are pretty basic

> **Sound:** The only thing it's good for is locating terrorists around corners

> **Playability:** Strangely enough, the squad control is worse than the recent Xbox edition of Rainbow Six 3

> **Entertainment:** If you don't like R6 in the first place, nothing here will change your mind

> **Replay Value:** Moderately High



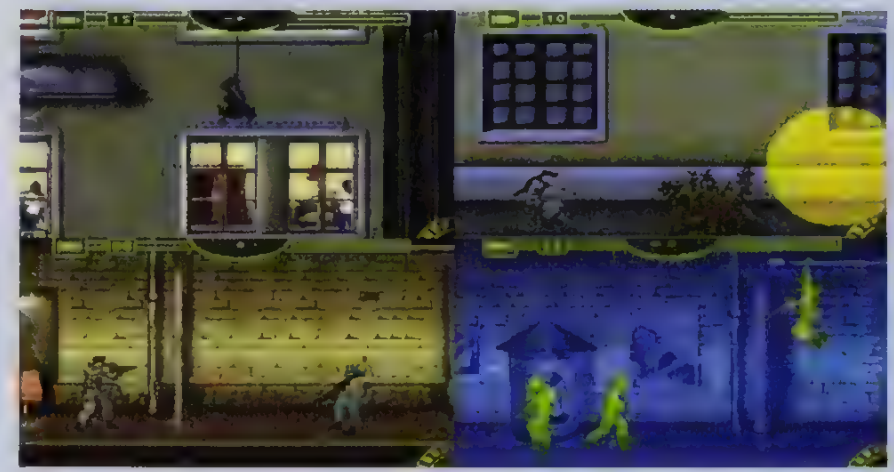
Second Opinion 7

Athena Sword makes no contribution to improving the elements that make Rainbow Six titles unique. The mission planning and team setup are still great ideas, but they remain ultimately useless since your AI allies often get gunned down after their first two steps. Sure, you could just tell everyone to stay put while you do the mission yourself, but that sort of defeats the whole "team-based operation" concept. Your meat-shield comrades make the solo campaign frustrating, but there are enough additions to the set of multiplayer options to hold the attention of current R6 fans.—**JOE**

GAME BOY ADVANCE

Splinter Cell: Pandora Tomorrow

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION > **PUBLISHER** UBISOFT > **DEVELOPER** UBISOFT > **RELEASE** MARCH 23 > **ESRB** T



SIDE SCROLLIN' CELL

BOTTOM LINE 8

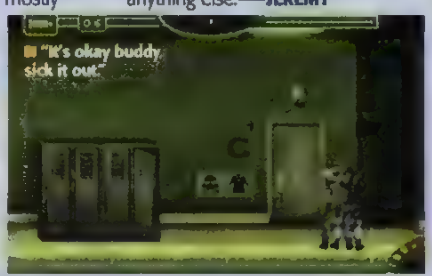
Who hasn't wished to be a spy? I know I sure have. Of course, when I was a kid, my spy missions mostly involved trying to successfully sneak past the neighbor's dog. Fortunately, Rex was old and couldn't run very fast. Even more fortunately, spy games now have some more challenging tasks, thanks to Pandora Tomorrow. This handheld version of Sam Fisher's latest adventure stays true to the solid formula of the first GBA Splinter Cell, and features the plot of the new console version.

In this new iteration, players must guide Sam through side-scrolling levels filled with guards, civilians, security cameras, and spotlights. Stealth is his greatest weapon, and he can press up against walls, crouch behind bushes, and climb drainpipes to avoid being seen. It goes without saying that this release isn't as deep as the console version, but it's still one of the most complex side-scrollers out there. Several minigames are incorporated into the quest, including rappelling, computer hacking, and lock picking. These segments add a lot of atmosphere to the game and keep things diverse.

While the simple controls work well and the missions are mostly enjoyable, the frustration level is pretty high. The enemy AI is unpredictable; at some times they appear blind and deaf, while at others they seem to have eyes on the back of their heads. Since many missions end after a single alarm sounds, be prepared to play the same sections over and over. Certain enemies must not be killed in order to get information from them, but these foes sadly look the same as everyone else. Several times my mission ended simply because I punched the wrong guy. Obviously, I found this hugely annoying.

While this title did make me swear like a sailor on several occasions, there is still much to praise. The environments are a little on the plain side, but character animation is simply stunning. The first time Sam grabs a hapless guard and shoves his face into a retinal scanner, you can't help but marvel at the fluid motions. Each move in Sam's deep repertoire looks great, and lends a realism to the game that helps it feel like a mature spy thriller. And although neither the sound effects or music is all that impressive, the voiceovers from the guards make up for that. They may only shout "hey," but it's still refreshing to hear actual voices on the GBA.

Splinter Cell: Pandora Tomorrow is much like how I imagine real espionage (that doesn't involve sneaking past elderly canines) must be: often it's frustrating, but overall it's a worthwhile experience that's unlike anything else.—**JEREMY**



> **Concept:** Sam Fisher's latest adventure is recast as a 2D side-scrolling handheld title

> **Graphics:** Character animations are easily some of the best to ever appear on the GBA

> **Sound:** Like the recent Max Payne, it features actual voices on the GBA!

> **Playability:** Sam's move set gets a lot of mileage out of the GBA's small button selection

> **Entertainment:** Alternately engaging and supremely frustrating, Pandora Tomorrow is a fun, yet mixed experience

> **Replay Value:** Low

Second Opinion 7

I wouldn't want to be in Sam Fisher's shoes. "Don't kill this guy. No alarms." Too much structure in his world. Similarly, the title's exacting stealth operations weren't that exciting - even if the gameplay capabilities of this pint-sized agent (like being able to pick locks, move bodies, and flatten along walls) were cool. Without the amazing light and shadow effects of the console, this side-scroller leaves you with an unsophisticated stealth experience – which is just inherent in 2D, handheld gameplay. The combat was also basic. I'll leave the NSA dirty business to Sam Fisher, while I search for more patently exciting fare. —**KATO**

GAME BOY ADVANCE QUICKIES

Yu-Gi-Oh! World Championship 2004

BOTTOM LINE 6.5

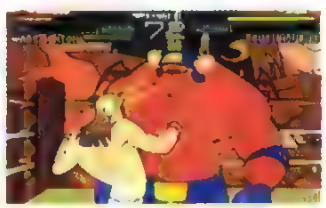
> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER STRATEGY (2-PLAYER VIA LINK CABLE) > **PUBLISHER** KONAMI
> **DEVELOPER** KONAMI > **RELEASE** FEBRUARY 10 > **ESRB** E

Duel Monsters, the card game at the core of the Yu-Gi-Oh! franchise, involves a surprising level of strategy and skill, and World Championship 2004 does an excellent job of bringing those elements to life. Unfortunately, it's about on par with a video poker machine in terms of graphics and sound. You will truly have a more sensory-enriching experience playing Duel Monsters with real cards than on your GBA. Plus, unlike previous iterations, you can't manually input your physical cards to unlock them in-game, which means the only edge this edition has over its predecessors is that it will be the standard for this summer's Yu-Gi-Oh! World Championship – and if that's a deciding factor for you, then you're beyond any help I can offer.—**JOE**

Wade Hixton's Counter Punch

BOTTOM LINE 7.5

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER FIGHTING > **PUBLISHER** DSI GAMES > **DEVELOPER** INFERNO GAMES
> **RELEASE** MARCH 15 > **ESRB** T

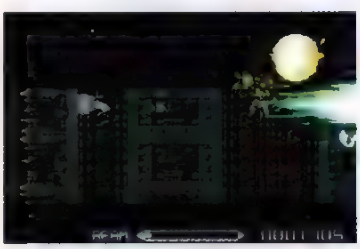


Who's Wade Hixton? Think of him as Mike Tyson without the psychotic chemical imbalance, but with the gameplay that'll happily remind you of Punch-Out!! Although Wade has less than 10 opponents (and you'll have to fight many more than once if you want to make some dough), the game's open structure is inviting. Roam around town and fight for cash, answer the call of your beeper (where you get money for winning under certain conditions), or pay off allies to intercede on your behalf during the middle of a bout. Along the way, Wade Hixton will entertain you with its colorful art style and amusing dialog. It's not often these days that a developer treats the GBA not as an afterthought, but gives us a title that's solidly entertaining.—**KATO**

R-Type III: The Third Lightning

BOTTOM LINE 6.25

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION > **PUBLISHER** DSI GAMES > **DEVELOPER** RAYLIGHT STUDIOS
> **RELEASE** FEBRUARY 17 > **ESRB** E



This port of the 1994 SNES title of the same name is just about as old school as it gets. The graphics have translated nicely to the GBA, and the control works just dandy, but the level design drives me absolutely insane. Cheapness abounds to the point where the gameplay is far more about memorizing where each enemy spawns and what sort of bizarre patterns the walls move around in than plowing through with skill and reflexes. Couple that cheapness with the facts that foreground layers often obscure deadly hazards and your ship has a truly molasses-like speed – both of which boost the difficulty of the tougher encounters into the stratosphere. If you've got a burning desire to throw your GBA through a wall in frustration, R-Type III should satisfy it; otherwise you're well advised to stick to games that won't make your head explode.—**ADAM**

CHARTS

An In-depth Listing Of The Best Selling Games

TOP 20

Listings Based Upon NPD Data For February 2004 Based On Units Sold

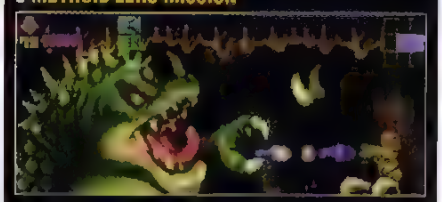
1 FINAL FANTASY: CRYSTAL CHRONICLES

Let's get this straight. A bucket is a vessel used for holding or carrying. A chalice is a cup or a goblet used for drinking. You do not drink from buckets. You do not carry things in goblets. Therefore, regardless of what name the game assigns to it, it's still a bucket. Game Informer victorious.

2 NFL STREET

Football season may be a while off yet, but that doesn't mean that you can't start getting your snacking in shape! We recommend a strict regimen of 12 sets of Funyuns per day, with a cool-down including Rollitos and Gummi Bears. And to drink: meatballs. Mmm...fitness.

3 METROID ZERO MISSION



People dig Samus' past in a big way. Coming soon: Metroid Negative Five Mission. You control Samus as an awkward teenager as she explores the hallways of her high school, outwits the crusty old principal (Ridley in disguise, of course), and builds up the courage to ask one of the Contra guys to the Sadie Hawkins dance. Oh, to be young again!

4 NEED FOR SPEED: UNDERGROUND

Sure, it may be a high-octane, turbo-charged barrel of fun with meticulous attention to detail, but ask yourself this: Does it have that new car smell? That's what we thought. Now, retire to your meditation chamber to ponder the limits of your so-called "technology."

5 JAMES BOND 007: EVERYTHING OR NOTHING

In game form, all Bond characters, past and present, are forever preserved in youthful glory. It's almost like a museum, except with more bikini girls, classified weaponry, and the exhibits attack each other. Culture at its finest.

Rank	Title	L. Mo.	System	Score	Release	Price
1	Final Fantasy: Crystal Chronicles	N/A	GC	7	2/04	$49
2	NFL Street	1	PS2	7.75	01/04	$50
3	Metroid Zero Mission	N/A	GBA	9.5	02/04	$29
4	Need for Speed: Underground	3	PS2	9.5	02/03	$48
5	James Bond 007: Everything or Nothing	N/A	PS2	8.5	02/04	$50
6	Rise to Honor	N/A	PS2	7	02/04	$40
7	Champions of Norrath: Realms of EverQuest	N/A	PS2	8.75	02/04	$50
8	Halo	7	XBOX	9.5	11/01	$30
9	Mafia	N/A	PS2	7.75	01/04	$50
10	James Bond 007: Everything or Nothing	N/A	XBOX	8.5	02/04	$50
11	Sonic Heroes	N/A	PS2	7.75	01/04	$50
12	Mario Kart: Double Dash!!	6	GC	9.25	11/03	$49
13	Sonic Heroes	2	GC	7.75	01/04	$49
14	Super Mario Advance 4: Super Mario Bros. 3	14	GBA	9.5	10/03	$30
15	Madden NFL 2004	9	PS2	9.25	08/03	$48
16	MX Unleashed	N/A	PS2	8	02/04	$39
17	True Crime: Streets of LA	8	PS2	8.5	11/03	$48
18	Baldur's Gate: Dark Alliance II	10	PS2	8.5	02/04	$48
19	NFL Street	4	XBOX	7.75	01/04	$50
20	Yu-Gi-Oh! World Championship 2004	N/A	GBA	7	02/04	$35

Source: The NPD Group/NPD Funworld®/TRSTS® • David Riley 516-625-2277

TOP 10 JAPAN

Rank	Title	L. Mo.	System
1	Custom Robo	N/A	GC
2	Onimusha 3	N/A	PS2
3	Pokémon Fire Red/Leaf Green	2	GBA
4	Famicom Mini: Super Mario Bros.	N/A	GBA
5	Sengoku Musou	N/A	PS2
6	Winning Eleven 7	N/A	PS2
7	Ghost in the Shell: Stand Alone Complex	N/A	PS2
8	SD Gundam G Generation Seed	N/A	PS2
9	Famicom Mini: Ice Climber	N/A	GBA
10	Famicom Mini: The Legend of Zelda	N/A	GBA

Source: Game Japan Based On Monthly Units Sold

TOP 10 GI

Rank	Title	L. Mo.	System
1	Splinter Cell: Pandora Tomorrow	N/A	Xbox
2	Unreal Tournament 2004	N/A	PC
3	Far Cry	N/A	PC
4	Ninja Gaiden	1	Xbox
5	Metal Gear Solid: The Twin Snakes	2	GC
6	Syphon Filter: The Omega Strain	N/A	PS2
7	Steel Battalion: Line of Contact	N/A	Xbox
8	Metroid Zero Mission	3	GBA
9	MVP Baseball 2004	4	Multi
10	Fight Night 2004	5	Multi

TOP 10 PC

Rank	Title	L. Mo.	Price
1	Call Of Duty	1	$48
2	EverQuest: Gates of Discord	N/A	$29
3	Age of Mythology	4	$34
4	The Sims Deluxe Edition	2	$20
5	Zoo Tycoon: Complete Collection	6	$30
6	The Sims: Makin' Magic	3	$32
7	Hoyle Casino 2004	N/A	$23
8	The Sims: Unleashed	9	$28
9	Delta Force: Black Hawk Down - Team Sabre	N/A	$20
10	The Sims Double Deluxe	5	$40

Based On Monthly Units Sold

Buying a Video Game?

Play the game that's right for you!

You can give Tiger Woods a tennis racket, but he knows that golf is the game that's right for him. So how does Tiger know which computer and video games are OK to play? He checks the rating on every game box...And so should you!

Computer and video game ratings have two parts: **rating symbols**, which tell you what age group the game is appropriate for and **content descriptors**, which tell you about specific content elements that may be of interest or concern.

So the next time you're choosing a game, check the rating and the content descriptors. And like Tiger Woods, play the game that's right for you.

ESRB

ENTERTAINMENT SOFTWARE RATING BOARD

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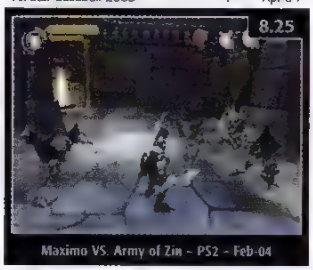

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SSX 3	9.5	Nov-03
Starsky And Hutch	5.75	Oct-03
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SWAT: Global Strike Team	7	Dec-03
Tak and the Power of Juju	6.75	Nov-03
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Terminator 3: Rise of the Machines	5.75	Jan-04
Tiger Woods PGA Tour 2004	9.5	Oct-03
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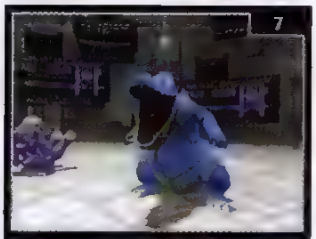

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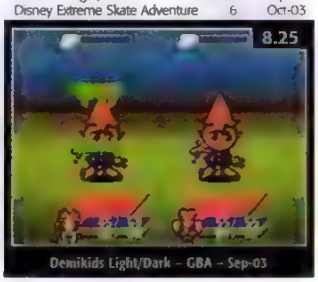

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Harvest Moon: Friends of Mineral Town	7	Dec-03
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Mission Impossible: Operation Surma	6.25	Mar-04
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Pokémon Pinball Ruby and Sapphire	8.5	Oct-03
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Fight Night 2004

Strategies From The Main Man, Executive Producer Kudo Tsunoda

The skills and tactics that win boxers professional fights are the same tools necessary to be successful in this game. Listed below are some of my favorite keys to dominating in the ring.

1. Keep Your Guard Up

If you are not punching or moving, you'd better be thinking defense. When your opponent moves into range, get your guard up. Start preemptively blocking punches. Recognize your opponent's punch patterns and move your hands to defend areas where he likes to strike. Keep your head

moving by bobbing and weaving with your upper body. A moving target is always harder to hit. Fight Night's analog control system allows you to move your upper torso in any direction you can move the analog stick. You can quickly lean out of the way of punches. You also have 360 degree rotational control of your boxer's upper body. No matter what, do not sit still and let your opponent unload on you. Punches that miss cost a lot more energy to throw, so if you are defending well, you protect yourself and tire out your opponent. Using good defense also opens up great opportunities to land punches of your own.

2. Use Counter Punches

The most powerful punch in boxing is a clean counter punch. Boxers are most vulnerable as they are punching. When they throw a punch, boxers open a hole in their own defense. A counter punch is when you can use your defense to avoid your opponent's punch and land a punch of your own. Counter punches often land clean in an open area on an unsuspecting opponent. Counter punches are easy to do after leaning out of the way of a punch. As you see your opponent starting to punch, lean left or right to avoid the punch. Then throw a power punch with the same hand as the direction you just leaned. So if you lean to the left to avoid the punch, counter with a left hook. If you lean to the right, counter with a right hook. By constantly bobbing back and forth while throwing punches from the side you can get

a nice counter punching rhythm going and really hurt the opposing boxers.

Blocking also gives you a great opportunity to land a counter punch. A perfect block is called a parry. A parry will throw your opponent temporarily off balance and make them completely vulnerable. This gives you the perfect opportunity to tee off and really drive some punches home.

3. Set Up Your Punches

You will have to start setting up your punches effectively if you want them to connect. An opponent who's good on defense, and is an effective counter puncher, will start picking up on what types of blows you like to throw. If you always come in and throw a left jab as your first punch, they will start to defend against that. Unlike other games' button punch pressing, which forced you to throw an entire punch from beginning to end, with Total Punch Control you can set up your punches using feints. If you notice your opponent is regularly blocking your left jab, fake a left jab by starting to throw the punch with the analog stick. Then immediately pull the punch back and throw a right hook to the body. Your opponent will move to block your left jab and be wide open for the right. Another great tactic is using three or four feints in a row before throwing a power combination. Your opponent will be spastically trying to block multiple punches at the same time leaving them wide open for a devastating attack.

4. Go To the Body Mercilessly

Many a boxing trainer will tell you…you gotta chop the tree down before it will fall. That basically means that a great way to score a knockout is to work the

body early on in a fight to tire boxers out and make them weak. While body punches don't do as much immediate damage as head shots, they have a much larger impact on a boxer later on in the fight. As you work a boxer's body over time, the boxer will get tired. He will move slower. His hand speed will go down. His punches will be weaker and he becomes more susceptible to damage. Going to the body is a great tactic to use if you find the guy you are fighting has an advantage early on.

For instance, if you are in a fight where your opponent has fast hand and foot speed, and you have a power advantage, you might find him hard to hit with your big punches. Stick-and-move guys float around the ring and will quickly pop in and out with flurries of punches. By going to the body early on in the fight, the stick-and-move boxer will slow down over time. He won't be able to land as many punches on you or get out of the way of as many of your punches. He might beat you in points in the early rounds, but your power punches will take their toll in the middle and later rounds. If you had kept going to the head, the stick-and-move boxer would have had the advantage throughout the entire fight. Remember, it is a 12 round fight. You don't have to win it in the first three.

5. Win The Fight Late

Going to the body is something you can do to tire your opponent out. But there are also other ways to get your opponent to tire themselves out. When a boxer's energy is low, all of their abilities will go down. The best way to tire somebody out is to make him miss. The most obvious tactic for doing this is to use your blocking and leaning ability (see tip #1). But there are other things you can do. One of my favorites is to quickly dart in on an opponent and then dart out throwing no punches. Your opponent will see you coming in and almost always try and hit you with a punch. By time the punch is thrown, you will be out of range and he will have lost some energy. You can start mixing it up…punching when you come in or when you just dart out. This will start messing with your opponent's head and confuse them. I also try and bait my opponent into getting mad and throwing wild series of punches. If I am fighting a tougher boxer, I will try and keep away from them mostly and quickly jab if they come in range and then move away. Not being able to successfully land punches gets people to start throwing a lot of punches without landing many. Once your opponent is tired, you can take him out.

6. Make Your Opponent Come To You

Boxing is warfare. Just like in any clash of armies the boxer holding a defending position always has an advantage over the person attacking. It is better to have your opponent be the person who moves towards you from out of punch range into punch range. While he is thinking about moving into punch range, you are standing and waiting for him already throwing your punch. You will be able to hit him before he hits you. If you notice the opposing boxer following you around the ring backpedal some then stop short and already be throwing a punch. He will walk right into it.

7. Cuts Slow Defense

Our damage system is not just a visual effect, it also affects gameplay. As boxers' eyes start to swell and bleed, their ability to see incoming punches is hampered by their injuries. The more they get hurt, the harder it is for them to defend

themselves. If your ability to block and lean is impaired you are in big trouble. During a fight, when damage shows up on your opponent, take advantage of it! If his left is starting to swell, keep driving punches into that eye. Open up a cut there and his defense will get even worse. By directing your punching power and concentrating on damaged areas, you can make it harder for your opponent to protect himself.

8. Hit The Guy On The Way Down

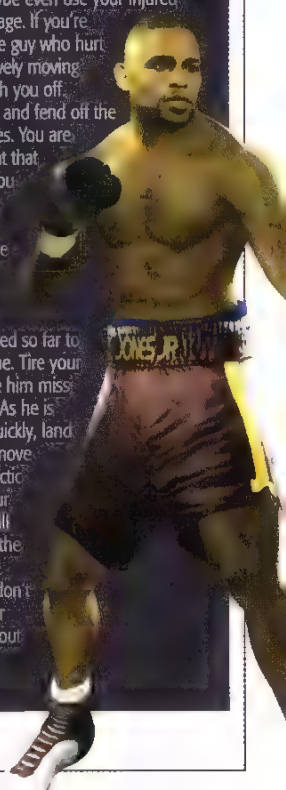
How a boxer falls to the canvas is controlled by the type of punch he is hit with, the power of the punch, the angle of the punch, and the way the two boxers' bodies were moving at the time of the punch. Once the physics kick in, a boxer falling to the canvas is unable to defend himself. A skilled boxer can move in and get some free shots as the opposing boxer is on his way down. These extra punches cause facial damage and also make it harder for your opponent to get up from the knockdown. Try and land your knockout blow while the other boxer is trapped in a corner. Your punches will bounce him off the ropes right into another awaiting punch from you. You can hit him repeatedly all the way down.

9. Building Your Boxer

Most people, in customizing their boxer's ratings and attributes, focus on power or hand speed. But two of the most important ratings your boxer has are his heart and his chin. Your heart rating determines how easy it is for you to get up from a knockdown. Your chin rating determines how well you take a punch to your head. Having an advantage in these areas over your opponent means you will get knocked down less and get up from knockdowns more. This can overcome a big disadvantage in other ratings like power, speed, and agility.

10. Staying Alive

In case your opponent hits you with a lucky punch and you find yourself in trouble, don't panic – you can survive and maybe even use your injured state to your advantage. If you're hurt, chances are the guy who hurt you will be aggressively moving in and trying to finish you off. Many boxers will try and fend off the attacker with punches. You are hurt – mixing it up at that point will only get you more hurt. Frustrate your opponent by keeping on the move and not letting him hit you. You can use the other skills you have learned so far to benefit from this time. Tire your opponent out. Make him miss with your footwork. As he is chasing you, stop quickly, land a punch, and then move out of range. This tactic will really irritate your opponent and he will swing all the wilder the next time. If you are winning on points, don't let somebody corner you and knock you out to take your title.



Attention All Cheaters!
Cheat codes, by their very nature, are in many cases buggier than Virginia in August. So, unless you don't mind re-doing those 70 hours you put into the latest game, do yourself a favor and back up your save before using any codes.

On a lighter note, you can send your codes to secretaccess@gameinformer.com for a chance to be featured here and win a very special prize!

MULTI-PLATFORM

Battlestar Galactica
> PLAYSTATION 2, XBOX
From the main menu, go to the Options menu, and from there to the Extras menu. Enter these codes there, and a voiceover will confirm correct entry. Each of the bonus codes unlocks different stuff.

Starbuck and Apollo as Wingmen – Down (x2), Left, Down (x2), Up, Right (x2)

Bonus Art, Mini-Series Stills, And Renders
Left, Up, Left (x2), Down, Left, Up, Down
Up (x2), Down (x2), Right, Up, Right, Down
Right (x2), Down (x2), Left (x2), Up (x2)
Down (x4), Left (x4)
Up (x3), Down (x3), Left, Right
Up, Left, Up, Right, Up, Left, Up, Right
Right (x4), Down (x2), Left (x2)
Right (x2), Up (x2), Left (x2), Up (x2)

MTX Mototrax
> PLAYSTATION 2, XBOX
Faster Bikes – In the options menu, enter JIH345 as a cheat.

MX Unleashed
> PLAYSTATION 2, XBOX
In the Cheats menu, enter these as the appropriate cheat codes.

Unlock 50cc Bikes – SQUIRRELDOG
Unlock Career Completion – CLAPPEDOUT
Unlock Pro Physics – SWAPPIN

PLAYSTATION 2

Pitfall: The Lost Expedition
At the title screen (where it says "Press Start"), enter these codes while holding L Button + R Button. A confirmation message will appear after you release the triggers.

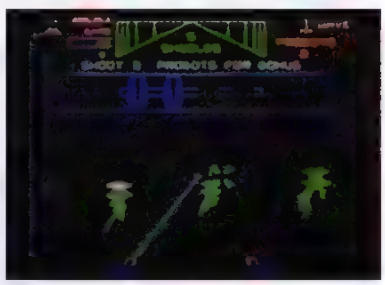
Canteen Always Full – Left, □, ○, Down, □, ×, □, ○
Play As Nicole – Left, Up, Down, Up, ○, Up (x2)
Super Punches – Left, Right, ○, Up, ○, Right, Left
Unlock Original Pitfall – ○ (x2), Left, Right, ○, □, ×, Up, ○

Mission Impossible: Operation Surma
Unlock All Levels – Go to the Profiles menu, highlight Jasmine Curry, then press L1 + R1 + △ + ○ (at the same time)

GAMECUBE

Pitfall: The Lost Expedition
At the title screen (where it says "Press Start"), enter these codes while holding L Button + R Button. A confirmation message will appear after you release the triggers.

Canteen Always Full – Left, B, X, Down, B, A, B, X
Play As Nicole – Left, Up, Down, Up, X, Up, (x2)
Super Punches – Left, Right, X, Up, X, Right, Left
Unlock Original Pitfall – X (x2), Left, Right, X, B, A, Up, X



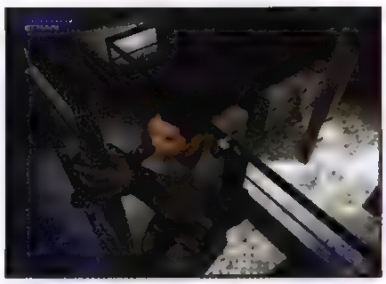
Star Wars Rogue Squadron III: Rebel Strike
In the Passcodes screen, enter these codes. For the cheats with two codes, enter the first and choose "Enter Passcode" and then immediately enter the second and choose "Enter Passcode" again. If you did it correctly, the code will stay up on the screen and you'll have to exit and return to enter another one.

Black & White Mode – NOCOLOR? (Note: You'll have to reset the game to go back to color)
Infinite Lives – IIOUAOYE, WIMPIAM!
Level Select (Co-op) – SWGRCQPL, UCHEATED
Level Select (Single-player) – HYWSC!WS, NONGAMER
Level Select With Bonus Missions (Single-player) – EEQQ?YPL, CHE!ATER
Unlock Asteroid Field Level (Co-op) – RWALPIGC, NOWAYOUT
Unlock Beggar's Canyon Level (Co-op) – FRLL!CSF, FARMBOY?
Unlock Death Star Escape Level (Co-op) – YFCEDFRH, DSAGAIN?
Unlock Endurance Level (Co-op) – WPX?FGC!, EXCERSIZ
Unlock Jedi Starfighter – BBGMYWSX, JEDIWHO?
Unlock Millennium Falcon – QZCRPTG!, HANSRIDE
Unlock Naboo Starfighter – RTWCVBSH, BFNAGAIN
Unlock Slave I – TGBCWLPN, ZZBOUNTY
Unlock TIE Advance – VDX?WK!H, ANOKSHIP
Unlock TIE Bomber – JASDJWFA, !DABOMB!
Unlock TIE Fighter – MCKEMAKD, ONESHOT!
Unlock TIE Hunter – FRRVBMJK, LOOKOUT!

Extras Menu Cheats
To access these cheats, after entering the passcodes, go to the "Extras" menu and from there to the "Special Features" screen.

Ace Mode – YNMSFY?P, YOUDAMAN
Art Gallery – !KOOLART
Credits – LOOKMOM!
Documentary – THEDUDES
Music Hall – HARKHARK
Original Star Wars Arcade Game – RTJPFCIG, TIMEWARP
Original The Empire Strikes Back Arcade Game – !HIF?HXS, KOOLSTUF

XBOX



Mission Impossible: Operation Surma
Unlock All Levels – Go to the Profiles menu, highlight Jasmine Curry, then press L Button + R Button + B + Y (at the same time)

Ninja Gaiden
Play With Original Blue Costume – At the main menu, highlight "New Game," hold down the L Button + R Button, then press the A button. A sound will confirm correct entry.

PC

Gangland
Press the ~ key during gameplay to open the console, then type in these codes. Note that you have to patch Gangland to version 1.1 (available at www.mediamobsters.com) for these to work.

$100,000	cheat youbetterpay
1,000 Of Each Bullet Type	cheat needmorelead
Invincibility	cheat wowitsgreattobetheboss

Free Characters

Assassin	cheat youwillbestunned
Bazooka Soldier	cheat yourliverlandedoverthere
Big Momma	cheat iwilltakecareofyou
Black Widow	cheat youhadbetterwearkevlar
Bodyguard	cheat trustmewithyourlife
Bomber	cheat likeatonofbricks
Businessman	cheat pocketsfullofdough
Crazy Gunslinger	cheat loonies
Enforcer	cheat iwillripyourarmsoff
Fake Cops	cheat alienprophets
Lawyer	cheat iwillmakethefamilyrich
Ninja	cheat iknowodintoo
Seductress	cheat youlittlehottieyou
Sniper	cheat thegreatvassilizaitsev
Super Bouncer	cheat ihavetenpoundfists
Thief	cheat whatwasbrieflyyoursisnowmine

SpellForce – The Order Of Dawn
Press Left Control +] (right bracket) to open the console, then input the code.

Any Amount Of All Resources – Application: GiveMeGoods(Amount)

Mod World

Neverwinter Nights [illegible] Expansion Pack

[illegible] and is now presented for your enjoyment at **www.bioware.com**. Head over there to find over 450 new creatures, two new playable races, 121 new NPC portraits, and [illegible] custom campaigns. Get it now, and you'll [illegible] force is even working on an epic adventure that takes advantage of all the cool content available in the **CEP**.

Content Downloads via Xbox Live
Yeah, we all know about the whole downloadable content on **Live** thing, but some things bear repeating. Especially now, when there's finally an add-on for **Knights of the Old Republic**! A whole new area – Yavin – awaits those with the means to connect to Live. New, high-powered weapons and armor will be available there. An entirely new race to KOTOR, the Trandoshans, is also included. How can you not dig on this?

Even if KOTOR isn't your thing, there's lots of [illegible] new maps and a different plane for **Crimson Skies**. **Counter-Strike** action, two more maps and a campaign mission for **Brute Force**, extra **Return to Castle Wolfenstein** levels, and of course a whole boatload of additions to **MechAssault**.

GAME BOY ADVANCE

Metroid: Zero Mission

Enter these on the Password screen of the original Metroid (which you unlock by beating Zero Mission).

111 Missiles, 4 Energy Tanks, Ice Beam, And No Suit – BOMBS_ MISSLE SCREW_ ATACK_
All Upgrades, Unlimited Missiles, And Health – NARPAS SWORD0 000000 000000
Morph Ball And Bombs – 000000 000000 4G0000 00000H
No Suit – 000000 000020 000000 000020
No Suit And Wave Beam – 999999 999999 KKKKKK KKKKKK
No Suit, In Norfair, Infinite Missiles, And No Upgrades – SAMUS8 RIDLEY 444444 444444
No Suit, 255 Missiles, And Fully Upgraded – JUSTIN BAILEY ——— ———
On Track To Finish With Best Ending – X——— —N7WO dV-Gm9 W01GMI
Ridley's Lair, Not Very Well-Equipped – GameIN FORMEKMagazı ne000W
Ridley's Lair, Well-Equipped – AndyMc Namara GiEdit or 03Y

Zero Mission Endings
Fulfill these requirements to unlock the corresponding art of Samus.
Blue Jumpsuit – Beat Normal or Hard in under two hours with more than 15% completion
Close-Up On Her Face – Beat Hard with less than 15% completion
In Shorts At A Bar – Beat Normal in under two hours with 100% completion
In Shorts At A Window – Beat Normal with less than 15% completion
In Shorts In A City – Beat Normal or Hard in over two hours with 100% completion
In Shorts Overlooking A City – Beat Hard in under two hours with 100% completion
No Helmet Enjoying A Sunset – Beat Normal or Hard in three hours with more than 15% completion
On A Rock – Beat Easy, or beat Normal or Hard in over four hours with 100% completion

Code of the Month

Tenchu: Return From Darkness

If being a master ninja with magical powers just isn't enough to excite your cynical gamer palate anymore, check these out. Enter these cheats in the indicated place.

Pause Screen
Display Score – Right (x3), Left
Enable Special Abilities – While holding R Button + Black, enter Up (x2), Down (x2), release R Button + Black, then enter X (x2), L Button, R Button
Extra Damage – While holding R Button + White, enter Up, Down, Up, Down
Increase Score – While holding White + Black, enter Right (x3), Left
Free Kanji – Left (x3), Right, X
Full Health – Up, Down, Up, Down, X (x3)
Full Kuji Meter – While holding R Button + L Button, enter Left (x3), Right, X

Item Select Screen (before mission)
10 Of Each Item Available – While holding R Button + L Button, enter Up, Left, Down, Right, X (x3)
Max Capacity – While holding R Button + L Button, enter Up (x2), Down (x2), Left, Right, Left, Right, release White, then enter X (x3)
Unlock All Ninja Items – While holding R Button + L Button, enter Up, Down, Up, Down, X (x3), Left, Right, Left, Right, X (x3)

Mission Select Screen
Unlock All Layouts – R3, L3, L Button, R Button, White, Black
Unlock All Missions – White (x2), L Button, R Button, Right, X, L3, R3

Title Screen (where it says "Press Start")
Unlock Alternate Audio – While holding L Button + R Button, enter Down, X (x2), Up, X (x2), Left, X (x2), Right, X (x2) (Note: Must be turned on in the Language menu)
Unlock Tesshu – While holding White + Black, enter Up, Right, Left, Down, release White + Black, then enter L Button, R Button

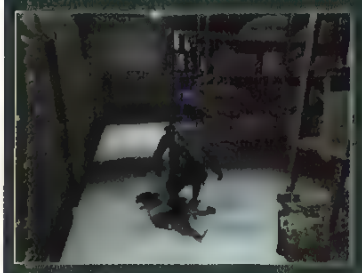
Jackson Reynolds
Norfolk, VA

Mini-Walkthrough

Splinter Cell: Pandora Tomorrow

Sam Fisher's latest adventure isn't quite as frustrating as the original Xbox release, but it still has quite a few tricky moments. We won't walk you through the entire game, but this should get you through the harder bits. Beware: if you don't want story elements revealed, turn back now. Otherwise get ready for your mission.

The Embassy
This early mission is pretty simple, but things get dicey when you get to the courtyard. Shetland will instruct you to stay in the light until you get to the far wall. Wait until the spotlight comes close and creep into the cone of light. Move with it until you reach the far side. Once there, climb the pipe after you see Ingrid's light flash. Keep an eye on the guard on the balcony; if you move fast enough he shouldn't see you. Climb up over Ingrid's balcony and drop down when the guard's head is turned.



The Cryo Lab
The lab is also pretty simple until you reach the auditorium room. Soon after you enter, three guards will come in through the far door, and the middle of the room is pretty bright. Wait in the dark corner by the door until one of the three leaves. Then climb the pipe near you, shimmy across, and drop down on the guard when he walks underneath you. The final guard will be alerted, but can be taken out easily now that he's alone.

Shortly after you get through the auditorium, the terrorists will plant a bomb, and you only have a minute to disarm it. Wait around the corner until you see the two guards leave, then head down to the second door. There may be a guard near the end of the hall, but he'll leave if he doesn't see you. Pick the lock, then head inside and disarm the bomb. It will be close, but you should have enough time. Then head upstairs. There are motion sensors in the stairs that can alert the guards, but they won't pick you up if you move slowly.

When you head upstairs, you will see three guards. Either take them all out with your frag grenade, or just wait until two leave, then whistle to lure the third and knock him out. Head around the corner, sneaking past the motion sensors. Deal with the guards in the security room, then pick the lock to the data room. There are a ton of cameras in this room. Take out all the ones in the middle of the room and along the left side, and you should be able to proceed to the computer terminal unseen. The remainder of the level is pretty straightforward.

Jerusalem
This entire level is pretty tricky, and there are several ways to do it. Here is one way to get through the rougher patches. First talk to your contact, then sneak up the stairs. Wait until the guard turns his back, then knock him out. Remember, one alarm on this stage will end your mission. Head down the alley on the left, use the SWAT turn to pass the door, then follow the road. You'll see a cop head into a lit tunnel. Take out the light and knock him out, luring him into the shadows if necessary.

After taking out the cop, you'll see a bright courtyard with two civilians sitting on benches. Grab a nearby bottle and toss it into the courtyard. They'll investigate, and you can creep behind them in the shadows. In the next corner is a pipe. Climb it up to a zipline, which will deposit you on a window ledge on the other side of the street. Drop down to the awning below, shoot the nearby light, then take out the cop below you. Proceed through the courtyard to Saul's shop. He's being robbed, so you'll need to knock out one thug, then shoot the guy holding Saul hostage. He'll then give you a gun and lead you to a "shooting range." Follow him quietly and you'll have no problems.

After you reach the range, head back the way you came and turn right, following the street. There will be both cops and civilians to deal with, but they all appear alone, so they should be no problem. Remember that lethal attacks result in mission failure, though. When you reach the checkpoint, you'll see two well-lit cops at the end of a sloping street. Shoot out the light on the wall, climb the pipe to the roof, and run to the far side. Drop down and you'll grab a window ledge. Climb in the window, creep through the room, and crawl out the window on the other side, bypassing the two cops completely. Soon after you'll meet your contact, and she'll lead you to the warehouse. If you follow her instructions, you should finish the level easily.

Inside the warehouse, aggression is the best policy. Run and gun through this small area, and take the elevator. It will open up to a long hall. Shoot out the lights, because there are snipers in the courtyard ahead. With nightvision, you'll see two on the balcony ahead, and with thermal, you'll see a third on the scaffolding to your left. Snipe them and head through the yard.

Terrorist Camp

When you first reach the camp, you'll need to take out a couple of guards quietly. Then creep along the fence until you hear two guards talking. Get your rifle

out and watch them through the scope. One will trip a landmine and kill himself. Snipe the second and hide the bodies in the grass. The field ahead is full of booby traps, so proceed slowly, disabling them as you go. You'll have to KO a guard at the far end of the field. Keep checking for traps until you reach the hangar. Take out the guards with sticky shockers, then plant the explosive on Sadono's plane by putting it in the engine compartment on the left side. Head out of the hangar. There are two guards that you need to deal with in the guard booth in order to open the gate. Again, sticky shockers are a good choice if you have any left.

Once through the gate, hide behind the sheet metal and wait until the guard passes. Sticky shocker him, shoot the dog, and drag the body back to your hiding place. Creep up into the camp. In this area there are two guards and a sniper in the tower. If you wait, one guard will go take a nap, then you can KO the second guard when he walks into the shadows.

This part can be really tricky, because the sniper will spot you unless you're well hidden. But once you've dealt with the guard, he can be sniped easily from the shadows. Head up the guard tower to the zip line to clear the area.

The Submarine Installation

The submarine installation starts off easy, but gets pretty tough after you raise the sub. To raise it, sneak through the installation, taking out the guards using your standard methods. When you reach the control room, grab the technician and interrogate him. When he raises the sub, make him respond to his friend's radio communication. Then knock him out and head out into the sub bay. Walk along the catwalk until you reach the small transporter car. Before you activate it, snipe any guards you can along the side catwalks. Then shoot out the light in the car and hit the button. It will take you to the far side of the sub bay, and you'll need to snipe a few guards as it

moves to make it to the other side. When you reach it, follow the catwalks into the submarine.

Inside the sub, you'll need to knock out a few guards silently. One alarm will end the mission. If you move slowly and carefully they should be no problem. But once you reach the square room that a crew member walks into, don't knock him out. Instead, grab him, bring him to the next room, and force him to use the retinal scanner. Knock him out once the door opens. Another crew member will head out, and he can be easily dealt with by waiting in the shadows. Then enter the control room, take out the final guard, then get the data you need off the computer. Leave the sub the same way you came in.

Leaving the sub facility is much harder than entering it. A guard will head towards you as you leave, but he can easily be knocked out. When you head down the stairs, though, you'll be in for a nasty surprise. Several guards are waiting for you. Throw smoke grenades at them and move for cover (there are some grenades and a first aid station at the top of the stairs if you need them). From a dark place, try to snipe the gasoline drums. If you hit them, they will explode and take out a few guards. Be prepared to run up the stairs to heal yourself, as you'll probably take a few hits. But once you kill these guards, simply proceed straight ahead to finish the level.

The TV Station

Getting to the TV station is easy; getting inside is hard. The trouble starts in the parking lot, where two guards are patrolling. Take out all the lights you see, but stick to cover, because they may see you

when lightning flashes. If you're wearing night vision when it does, you'll be temporarily blinded, so switch it off frequently. Knocking out the guards is easy if you're extremely cautious. After taking them out, you'll need to head down the center pathway to the station. There are lights along the side and a machine gun turret. Take out the lights and throw a flare. The gun will aim for the heat, so you can sneak around and disable it. When you reach the far side, two more guards will approach from the left. Use sticky shockers on them if possible, or you'll be drawn

into a fire fight. Once you've dealt with them, go through the gate and follow the path. There is one more guard ahead, but he can be avoided easily by shooting out all the lights, including the van's headlights. There is a sewer entrance in front of the van that you must climb into. The sewers are cake if you take it slow and watch for cameras.

When you emerge from the sewer in front of the TV station, simply duck under the automatic turrets and climb onto the roof. There is a pane of glass on the skylight that is cracked. Shoot it and you're in.

Making your way through the station is another pretty standard affair. Take it slow, use stealth to take out the guards, and watch out for cameras. The first real challenge comes from when you locate Ingrid, who is again being held hostage. She'll lead you through the security doors and to a

divided hallway. Take the left path, and she'll take the right. As she heads down the hall, the terrorists will get orders to kill her, so snipe them as they run toward her. After you kill all the guards, you'll head up into the vents and emerge in the auditorium where Sadono is taping a video. Sneak around the perimeter of the room and behind him. Rush in and grab him from behind. The guards will see you, but won't shoot while you're holding him. Drag him up the ramp to the security door and force him to use the retinal scanner. Once you're out on the roof, you can KO him as soon as Ingrid sees you, then carry his body over to her. That's the end of the level, as well as the charismatic terrorist.

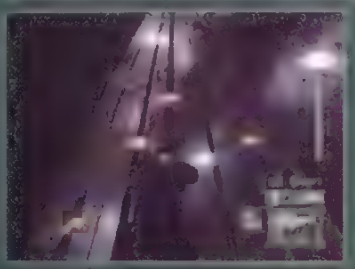
The Airport

The final stage takes place in the Los Angeles international airport. Sneaking in on the back of a truck is easy, as is infiltrating the luggage facility by hiding behind piles of bags as they head down the conveyer. Once inside, you must take out the terrorists posing as employees by reading their higher body temperatures with your thermal lenses. They are mingling with real employees in the two baggage sorting rooms

and aren't too tough to dispatch if you are careful. It helps to knock out civilians so they don't get in the way. But you must, on the other hand, kill the terrorists. Sticky shockers are a good way to take them down quickly, but since they are non-lethal, make sure you put a bullet in them while they are down. If you don't kill every terrorist, you cannot complete the mission.

After you take out the terrorists in the sorting rooms, you will head out into an office to see another terrorist and a civilian. Use the sticky shockers on both and kill the terrorist. Then head out into the hall, create some darkness for yourself by shooting the lights, and knock out the two airport workers. Then head down the hall (avoiding the camera) to the balcony overlooking the lobby. Locate rogue CIA agent Norman Soth with your binoculars and thermal vision. Then turn around and take out all the lights in the elevator lobby so you can slip past the cameras. Head to the elevator on the far right, go in, and prepare for the final challenge.

The elevator will stop halfway up, so you'll have to shoot out the hatch and climb up the cables to the platform leading out to the catwalks. In this room there are three levels of catwalks. On the first, there are a handful of airport maintenance workers; on the third, Soth and his two henchmen are planting a



smallpox bomb. You must make your way up to the third level and take out all three bad guys before the bomb goes off. As soon as you enter the room, turn right and head for the ladder near you. Climb it, then jump up to the pipe above. Use the pipe to get to the other side of the room. Pull your legs up or you'll be seen. On the other side, drop down behind the pillar, and then climb down the ladder. You should be able to do this without being seen by the nearby worker, but take him out if you have to and hide his body. If the terrorists see or hear you, they will trigger the bomb, and you will have just one minute to finish the level.

Head down the catwalk until you see the ladder attached to a concrete post. Take it, and you'll find a little nook in the post you can pass through. When the coast is clear, drop down on the other side and head to the right, then turn left on the perpendicular path. Move slowly and you won't be seen or heard. Take this path to the ladder leading to the second level. Once you reach the second level, you'll see a ladder leading to the third a few feet away. As soon as you grab the ladder or fire a shot, the one minute countdown begins. The best way is to wait for the patrolling guard to come near, and give him a headshot with the sniper scope. You'll then need to climb the ladder and unload on the final two, then head to the bomb. This part is extremely tough and will probably require many attempts. All three are wearing kevlar, so don't be afraid to hold down the trigger. Once you've killed them and touched the bomb, you've finished the game.

GI Droid

(location unknown – last seen learning how to make origami swans out of sheets in the prison laundry room with Martha Stewart)

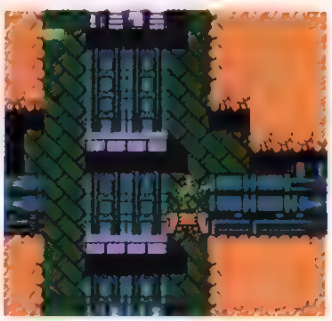
BURIED TREASURES

FRANCHISES THAT DIDN'T DESERVE TO DIE

Many of the success stories in the modern video game industry are built from the humble beginnings of the 8- and 16-bit eras. From the highly anticipated Altered Beast (scheduled to arrive sometime in 2004) to Zelda, there are dozens of franchises that have survived and prospered all the way up to the current generation. On the other hand, there are plenty of well-loved classics moldering in dusty boxes in the back of closets around the world, weeping silent tears at being forgotten by the companies that created them. Here's a look at some of the titles that we at Game Informer feel could have found a home in the new millennium, but have been denied the chance to shine on the sparkly new consoles of today.

BIONIC COMMANDO (NES)
Release: 1988

BIONIC COMMANDO: ELITE FORCES (GBC)
Release: 2000



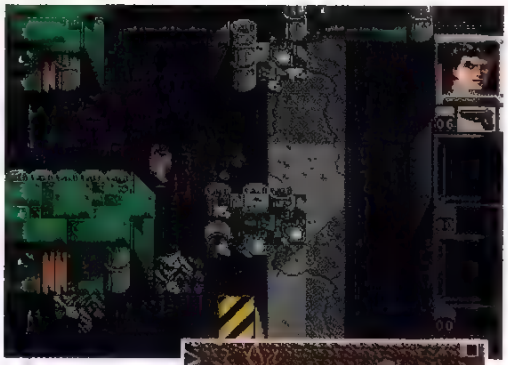
Cyborgs don't get enough love. Remember RoboCop? He was awesome, but has fallen completely off the radar. Darth Vader has been replaced with whiny little Hayden Christensen. Bionic Commando is just gone, though plenty of gamers, when asked to name something totally sweet for the NES, will come up with Bionic Commando. The elements that made this title stand out back in 1988 could very well fit into the modern espionage genre. Think about it – it'd be a lot like Metal Gear Solid, but with a bionic grappling hook on your arm. The verticality of level design possible in a new Bionic Commando alone would make it stand out. How much freedom would that arm give players and designers alike? You could zip up to the ceiling to avoid detection, bring down environmental objects to block doorways, and pull all sorts of insane acrobatic stunts. Talk about adding a third dimension to stealth! Dual-wield the arm with melee weapons, firearms, or gadgets in your flesh hand, and let players combine them for some crazy attacks. Pick up a guard with the arm, swing him around, and toss him up in the air before unloading your SMG into him. Sweet. An upgrade system could be added, too – find new attachments to put on the arm, like tasers or spinning saw blades. Incorporate a strong storyline and character development (how can you not love a character named Super Joe?), and the whole genre would have to stand aside to make way for the awesomeness of Bionic Commando.

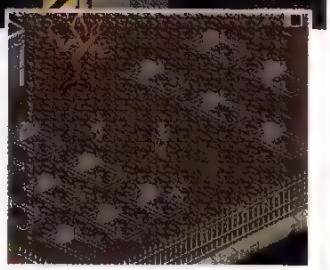
MIKE TYSON'S PUNCH-OUT!! (NES)
Release: 1987

SUPER PUNCH-OUT!! (SNES)
Release: 1994

Probably the only boxing game for the NES that anybody remembers, Punch-Out was more akin in gameplay to rhythm titles like Gitaroo Man than any next-gen fisticuffs like Fight Night. And who's to say that's a bad thing? Punch-Out went over well enough back then, why has the big N withheld it from this generation of gamers? Its huge popularity and name recognition make this possibly the most mind-boggling entry on our list. If so many people loved these titles so much, how could updating the formula with all of the flavor and goodness possible on the new machines fail? Punch-Out's style of simple gameplay is something that it seems the industry has largely lost, and it's a niche that must be filled. The games are so well executed and entertaining, we've been known to dust off the old cartridges and lay down the smack on that whimsical Don Flamenco even now, in 2004. It'd be so easy to update the franchise. Bring in some cel-shaded graphical flavor to give it that cartoony look that fits so well with the premise. Throw in some completely over-the-top opponents of Super Macho Man caliber. Promise unlockables to give it some replay value. Earn new super-punches and abilities as you progress through the game. And, for the love of all that's holy, do something about the pink jumpsuit training interludes. You hear us, Nintendo? That wasn't cool even in 1987.

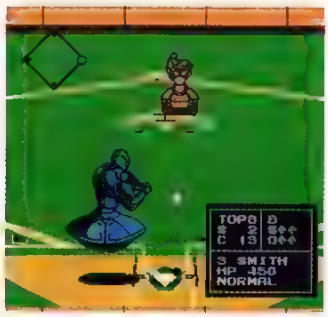
SHADOWRUN (SNES)
Release: 1993
SHADOWRUN (GENESIS)
Release: 1994





Waking up from cryogenic sleep only to face zombies would suck

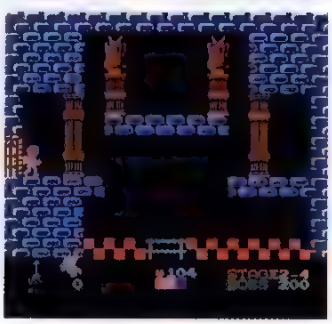
As any fan of either sci-fi or fantasy will tell you, the two genres tend not to mix very well. Shadowrun, set in a futuristic Earth where elves and dragons have been integrated into a cyberpunk, noir-style world (think *Blade Runner* meets William Gibson's *Neuromancer*), is the exception to the rule. We know it sounds weird, but trust us and everyone else who's ever played the games: Shadowrun is awesome. Imagine what a developer these days could do with it – if BioWare can make Star Wars exciting and fresh again, the gaming potential in this setting is immense. Action, RPG, or both – Shadowrun lends itself equally well to pretty much any sort of gameplay. There's more than enough established material in the Shadowrun universe to craft a stellar story-driven title, but there are also any number of elements that could be used to create an enthralling action game. Playing as a half-dragon street samurai with cybernetic eyes and a suit that makes him invisible sounds pretty sweet. Choosing whether to work for the giant corporations that rule the world or an underground movement of neo-Druids with the power to command nature would be awesome. Fighting against nightmarish guard dogs with retractable steel claws, armor plating, and electronically enhanced reflexes would be incredible. But leveling up that half-dragon and developing magic powers? Coolest thing ever.



Not even Pudge could stand up to this

BASEWARS (NES)
Release: 1991

We're well aware that the words 'baseball' and 'extreme' don't really belong anywhere near each other, but when the sport is being played by robots, it works out better than you'd think. If baseball is too boring for you, try crossing it with Mortal Kombat. The fact that in order to tag out a runner you have to defeat him in one-on-one combat adds a whole new dimension to America's favorite pastime, and should satiate those with a need for a little more pep to their games than the sport traditionally offers. Integrate several different types of mechanical sluggers, each with their own strengths, and an upgrade system, and you've got a heck of a game. Wait, the original NES title had all those. Okay, so fix the combat so it's not just button mashing and give the different 'bots some special moves, weapon upgrades, and Street Fighter-esque attacks. Work in a front-end, too; command your crew of elite robots through multiple seasons, earning new parts as you go. The ability to make your squad into either unstoppable butt-kicking machines or quick, skillful finesse players could really push this to the next level. As with all sports games, it'd have to be online. And, the title could separate itself from the pack by having a hardcore option so that if one of your players got trashed, he was gone forever – especially for persistent online leagues. We know the XFL was lame, but the nature of video games would let BaseWars do it right.



KID ICARUS (NES)
Release: 1987

Probably known for its obscene difficulty more than anything else, Kid Icarus is certainly one of the more recognizable NES titles. And why wouldn't it be? For 1987, it was as good a mix of action and RPG flavors as you could find outside of Zelda and offered a unique vertical style of play. With Greek mythology powering the story, Kid Icarus seems like one of those franchises that need never die. Look no farther than the recently released trailer for God of War to see how cool mythical monsters can be in action games. On a next-gen console, so much would be possible within this framework – a meld of not only action and RPG elements, but also a blend of flying and on-foot vertical platforming. The distinctive feature of the hero, his wings, could open up a whole new dimension of mobility and level design, as well as combat maneuvers. Instead of dodging left to avoid a swing, launch straight up and pincushion the sucker with arrows or dive-bomb him into oblivion with a spear. Throw in a plot that plays to the strengths of the old legends of the ancient Greeks, perhaps involving Icarus' father Daedalus and his famous Labyrinth on the island of Crete. It could even be made into a superhero-esque tale set in the modern day with the old stories coming alive, and only a hero called out of legend would be able to vanquish the horrors of the past. Now that would be a suitably epic adventure for a guy with wings.

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A NIGHTMARE ON ELM STREET (NES)
Release: 1989

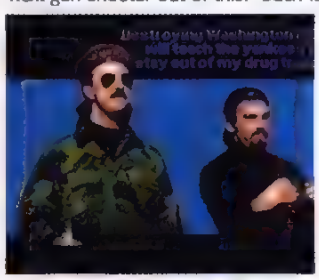
Talk about name recognition. A Nightmare On Elm Street came back into cineplexes with *Freddy vs. Jason*, but the Springwood Slasher can't get a next-gen video game. How many SpongeBob titles must we endure before an actually interesting license gets picked up? With the huge popularity of survival-horror franchises like Resident Evil and Silent Hill, you'd think that someone would get the clue that the interactive nature of our favorite hobby lends itself particularly well to fright-fests, and do something with this license. As opposed to those blockbuster series, however, Freddy Krueger – seeing as he's the leading man of the whole story – could get a starring role in his video game as well. Take some of the simulation technology of a title like The Sims, and make it the player's mission to use Freddy to avenge his horrible death at the townsfolk's hands, or frighten them into becoming as feral and evil as himself. Or, for that matter, give the player a choice to either make the world into Freddy's own twisted image, or try to expiate his sins so he can finally go away for good. How much fun would it be to unleash terror on the unsuspecting citizenry using all the horror-movie tricks yourself, and balance that with actual deeds of dark purpose to let the people know you mean business? Gruesome, certainly. M-rated without a doubt. But with the fantastical nature of the whole Nightmare mythos, we'll bet that it wouldn't be as disturbing as certain other, more brutally realistic titles.

MANIAC MANSION (PC)
Release: 1988
MANIAC MANSION: DAY OF THE TENTACLE (PC)
Release: 1993

From deep within the adventure genre beckons a dim, pulsing, vaguely disconcerting glow. Overlooked by many, it richly rewards those who heed its hypnotic call with an experience that only phrases like "zany madcap antics" and "freakin' hysterical" can accurately describe. This is Day of the Tentacle, a puzzle-based adventure game that managed to combine clever design with a distinctive brand of humor into what is possibly the funniest game of all time. Somewhat like the Monkey Island series, but wackier and with more sci-fi elements, DotT has a flavor all its own. With the technology available in the newer machines, the kinds of sight gags and puzzles that defined this title could be expanded to truly ludicrous proportions. Especially given the relatively low hardware demands of a typical adventure game, all that extra processing power could be channeled into mayhem of a whole new scale. Look at Viewtiful Joe – side-scrolling action, but all the more gorgeous because of it. Not only that, but the amount of available memory on DVD media would allow for some actual branching plotlines. Who could possibly deny the allure of a title where you could either save the world form the evil command of an insane science-experiment-gone-wrong, turn the whole of humanity into purple invertebrate monsters, or claim the title of Dictator-For-Life for yourself and shape the Earth into your own image?

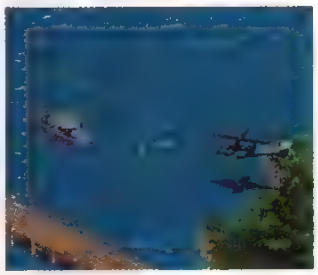
DESERT STRIKE: RETURN TO THE GULF (SNES/GENESIS)
Release: 1992
JUNGLE STRIKE (SNES/GENESIS)
Release: 1993
URBAN STRIKE (SNES/GENESIS)
Release: 1994

Assault helicopters are simply designed for video games, and we can't get a decent update of these classic isometric shooters. Come on – these choppers are hovering gun platforms, loaded so heavily with armaments that they can more or less take over a small country by themselves, and nobody in the last nine years has said, "Hey, we should make a next-gen shooter out of this!" Such laxity on the part of the industry doesn't really compute. If ever there was a more fitting subject for a fly-around-and-shoot-things action game, we've certainly never seen it. Put the player in a huge, free-roaming map (the trademark of the Strike series, for those who don't remember), give them the ability to customize their weapons load, supply a bunch of objectives, and let them go. How many people love GTA just for the wandering around and random violence? A new title in this vein would be a lot like that, except in the most heavily armed aircraft ever. Tanks are your kid brother's Tonka trucks compared to these bad boys – the amount of destruction they can hand out is almost ludicrous. The best part, though, would be the multiplayer. So many modes could be done: co-op, deathmatch, blow up more stuff than the other guy. It could be better than Crimson Skies. A little freedom goes a long way in making a game awesome, and between that and the level of pain you could bring in an attack chopper, this would rock the house like few others. ■ ■ ■

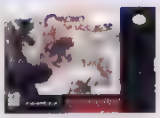


Stereotypical villains are hardly new

Stealth sub? Aren't subs stealthy by nature?



GREATEST GAME OF ALL TIME
By William Wagoner



CHRONO TRIGGER
> **FORMAT** SNES
> **PUBLISHER** SQUARE

This game originally appeared on the SNES in 1995, but it was not until three years ago that my cousin, a fan from the beginning, introduced it to me. It was the first RPG I had ever really played and I fell in love with it.

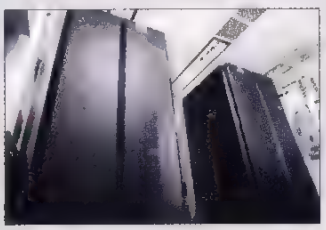
The story starts out as the classic, "guy with a crazy hairdo meets a girl who's actually the princess and he must save her from monsters." The brilliant twist on the story is that he must go back in time to save her – and that's just the beginning. After that, they must escape into the future where they find out that an alien life form known as Lavos destroys the world and turns it into a barren wasteland. The noble (but extremely quiet) hero and his friends journey through five different time periods – from the dinosaur populated past to a forgotten magical civilization.

One of the defining points of the game is the odd ensemble of characters. These very different friends include a futuristic robot, a medieval frog, a wild cave woman, and even one of the main bad guys. Their double and triple battle techniques are devastating and beautiful. Speaking of battle, it is based on ATB meters (similar to many Final Fantasy games) which, once filled, allow the characters to attack, use special tech skills, or combine their techs with other active characters as mentioned before One of my favorite moments in Chrono Trigger is the trial. Once you save the princess, you come back to your own time to be accused of kidnapping. Every insignificant detail at the beginning of the game is used either for or against you in this hilarious scene.

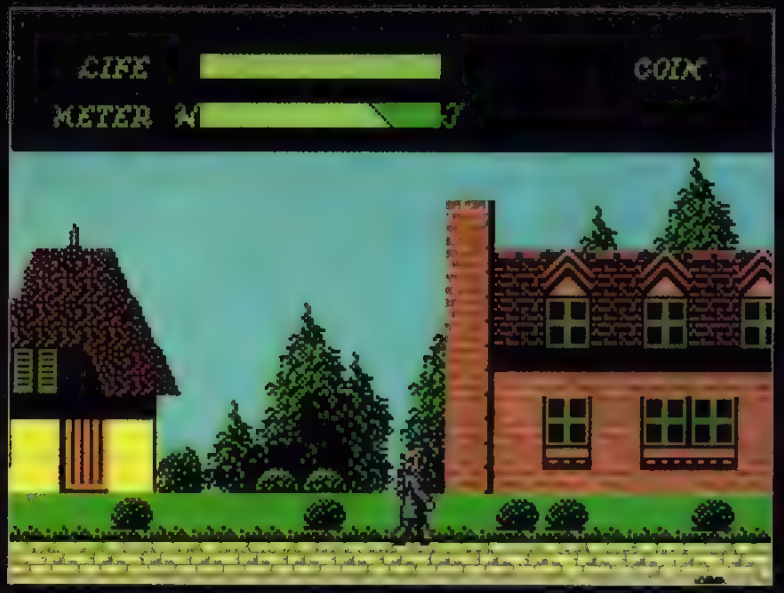
Chrono Trigger had top graphics in its time and I think the music is some the best RPG music around. With such a memorable story, the great characters, and the awesome battle techniques, everyone will find something to love in Chrono Trigger.

THIS MONTH IN GAMING HISTORY

In May of 1997, the machines moved one step closer to wresting control of the world out of our inefficient, fleshy grasp. IBM's silicon-based think tank, Deep Blue, defeated the merely organic world champion of chess, Garry Kasparov, 3.5 to 2.5 in a six-game match. Fortunately, no assassins from the future were reported at IBM's research and development facilities.



Of course, that might just mean that us meatbags have no future.

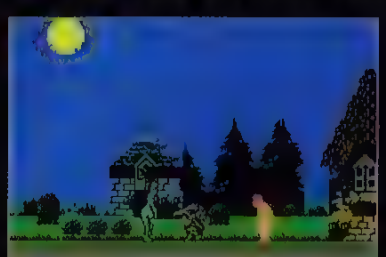


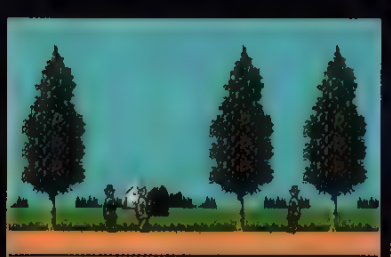
NES

DR. JEKYLL AND MR. HYDE

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION > **PUBLISHER** BANDAI > **DEVELOPER** ADVANCED COMMUNICATION > **RELEASE** 1989

This game gets one thing right from Robert Louis Stevenson's original story: Dr. Jekyll is a total wuss. Under any normal circumstances, the concept of walking through the park to get to a wedding would not be the premise for an action game. However, Jekyll is such an inviting target that this casual stroll across town becomes a deathtrap. Jekyll needs to avoid such authentic Victorian hazards as women out for an afternoon stroll, playful dogs, and bird crap. Should you come into contact with these threats, your Agitation Meter increases. Your only defense against such terrors is to slowly jump over them or poke them with your walking stick (which isn't much of a defense, since successful jabs only result in an agitation boost for you, and does no harm to your foe). When the meter fills up entirely, Dr. Jekyll transforms into Mr. Hyde and you need to battle through some auto-scrolling levels with random, game-ending lightning strikes. Repeat until you reach the church. Flawed on every fundamental level, Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde is possibly the most unplayable garbage available on the NES.





SNES

BRAM STOKER'S DRACULA

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION > **PUBLISHER** SONY IMAGESOFT > **DEVELOPER** SONY IMAGESOFT > **RELEASE** 1992

Like its nosferatu namesake, this game is an unholy abomination. Think of it like store-brand cola: upon first glance it seems like it might stack up against its competitors, but as soon as you gain first-hand experience, you recognize its myriad failings. You play as Jonathan Harker heading to, and subsequently escaping from, Castle Dracula. Your main weapon is a Strider-esque sword which Harker swings with about as much enthusiasm and bravado as one would use to water the garden. The enemy design is equally exciting; along the way you encounter such innovative creatures as spiders, zombies, and wolves. And there's the fact that the levels simply don't make a whole lot of sense – remember that part in the book (or even the movie, for that matter) where Harker battles the fire-breathing Dragon down in the Mines? Neither do we. Though it is fun to take shots at a digital likeness of Gary Oldman, this title is so generic and sloppy that you will find yourself frantically scrambling to select "no" when given the option to continue. There are generations of Belmonts weeping at what this game does to the noble profession of vampire hunting.

SEGA CD

SHERLOCK HOLMES CONSULTING DETECTIVE VOLUME II

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ADVENTURE > **PUBLISHER** SEGA > **DEVELOPER** ICOM SIMULATIONS > **RELEASE** 1993

Though officially authorized by the estate of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, this game lacks the adventure and charm that people have come to associate with the great detective Sherlock Holmes. It actually helps to think of this title as more of an assignment and less of a game. It "plays" like a research paper: you are given a topic to work with, such as "The Murdered Munitions Magnate," and then you use a central menu screen to peruse the London directory, gather clues, and visit numerous people associated with your investigation. When you pay someone a visit, the game cuts to a digitized video cutscene where they drop hints as to who you should talk to next. To the game's credit, it doesn't hold your hand the whole way through; it gives you a nudge in the right direction, but it is entirely up to you to write down the clues and determine the killer, motive, and method. It certainly isn't fast paced or engaging, but the interface is well done, and in a world before Myst, it was a good chance to explore and gather clues, even though by current standards it is a bit…elementary.

GAMEOVER

Was It Over When The Germans Bombed Pearl Harbor?

VIDEO GAME TRIVIA

The relationship between television and video games is undeniable. Heck, without a TV, you'd have nothing to play your games on! Take our TV-themed triva challenge, and see how your knowledge compares to these game-based shows.

1. What was the name of the critically acclaimed live-action Mortal Kombat television series?

- **A.** *Mortal Kombat: Defenders of the Realm*
- **B.** *Mortal Kombat: The Series*
- **C.** *Mortal Kombat: Conquest*
- **D.** *Mortal Kombat: Crap*

2. *Star Trek* actor (and all around ladies man) Leonard Nimoy was the narrator for what Sega Dreamcast title?

- **A.** Samba de Amigo
- **B.** Seaman
- **C.** Leonard Nimoy's Spring Break Party
- **D.** Mr. Driller

3. The TV-themed game Smash TV featured ultra-violence and some pretty bizarre bosses. Which of the following is NOT a real Smash TV boss?

- **A.** Game Show Host
- **B.** Mutoid Man
- **C.** Death Bot
- **D.** Scarface

4. In the movie *WarGames* – which can be seen on broadcast TV every Sunday afternoon – what is the name of the "video-game" that nearly starts World War III?

- **A.** Global Thermonuclear War
- **B.** Scorched Earth
- **C.** Nuclear War Simulator
- **D.** Nuke 'Em

5. In his recent animated series, the voice of Sonic the Hedgehog was provided by which washed-up sitcom actor (who apparently needed cash)?

- **A.** Danny Pintaro (Jonathan on *Who's the Boss?*)
- **B.** Kim Fields (Tootie on *The Facts of Life*)
- **C.** Tina Yothers (Jennifer on *Family Ties*)
- **D.** Jaleel White (Urkel on *Family Matters*)

6. Tia Carrera starred in a TV show called *Relic Hunter*, which is in no way a ripoff of Tomb Raider (*snicker*). She also starred in a 3DO game. What was it called?

- **A.** ESPN Step Aerobics
- **B.** The Daedalus Encounter
- **C.** Escape From Monster Manor
- **D.** The Horde

7. The cable network G4 is the only TV station solely devoted to video games. Which of these shows is a real G4 program?

- **A.** Save!
- **B.** Blaster
- **C.** Platform
- **D.** Sweat

8. On the cult classic sitcom *NewsRadio*, what was the name of the arcade game that Dave was obsessed with?

- **A.** Star Command
- **B.** Defense Commander
- **C.** Stargate Defender
- **D.** Head Crusher

9. Mark "Please Don't Call Me Luke" Hamill has made a living as a TV and video game voice actor in the years following George Lucas' last good Star Wars movie. Which of the following games did NOT feature voice work by Hamill?

- **A.** Batman: Dark Tomorrow
- **B.** Scorpion King: The Rise of the Akkadian
- **C.** Dark Cloud 2
- **D.** Soldier of Fortune II: Double Helix

10. In 1989, a weekly half-hour commercial went on the air. Entitled *Captain N: The Game Master*, the show was the story of a regular kid who was sucked into a world of video games, featuring familiar faces like Simon Belmont, Mother Brain, Mega Man, and more. What was the name of the world in which the show took place?

- **A.** The United States of Nintendo
- **B.** Videoland
- **C.** Nintendonia
- **D.** The Mushroom Kingdom

BREAKDOWN

50% of stores in the US are currently sold out of GameCubes, according to Nintendo. The shortage is attributed to the increase of sales after the price drop and the 'Cube's small production runs.

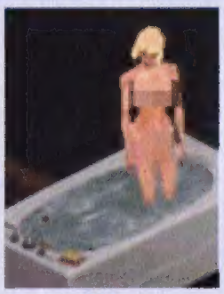
12.5% The percentage of games reviewed this month with the word "samurai" in the title

5% The amount Take-Two Interactive's stock increased the day Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas was announced

87% is how efficiently Matt rocks while on stage.

12% The amount TV viewing has decreased among males 18-34 since last season. Increased video game playing is considered one of the central causes.

★ Trivia Score & Rank ★



0-2
The Sims' Gone Wild

3-4
Everybody Loves Blinx the Time Sweeper

5-6
CSI: Chocobo Scam Investigators

7-8
Survivor: Mushroom Kingdom

9-10
American Idol Solid

Video Game Trivia Answers: 1.C 2.B 3.C 4.A 5.D 6.B 7.D 8.C 9.A 10.B

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