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## VIII *Journey of the Cursed King*



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PlayStation 2

TEEN	Alcohol Reference Fantasy Violence Simulated Gambling Mild Language Suggestive Themes
<b>T</b>	
ESRB CONTENT RATING	www.esrb.org

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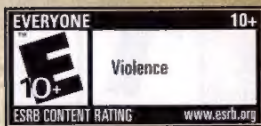


200 BC

216 AD

1206

1334



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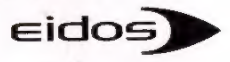
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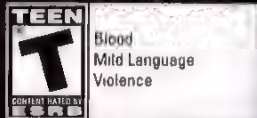


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The Moustache Issue



cover story

## 80 METAL GEAR SOLID 4

One of the bona fide superstars of game development has something delicious brewing for the PlayStation 3, and we've got the story on it. Hideo Kojima's Metal Gear Solid 4 is shrouded in secrecy, but we stopped by Kojima Production's offices for an exclusive look at how the game is shaping up and an extensive interview with Kojima-san himself. Find out just what the deal with that moustache is on page 80.

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#### THE XBOX 360 LAUNCH

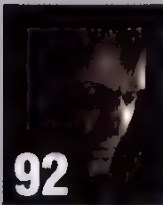
The next generation is about to begin, and we take a look at the hardware, the services, the developers, and most importantly the games that will make or break the Xbox 360.



52

#### HOLIDAY BUYING GUIDE

We cruised the 'Net and dug through the catalogues, and came up with 10 pages of video game-related swag for your purchasing pleasure. From the quirky to the functional, the Buying Guide has something for everyone.



92

#### BLACK

One thing uniformly comes out of people's mouths when they see Black. "That's on PS2? You're kidding!" Find out just what Criterion is capable of squeezing out of Sony's console.



100

#### SPY HUNTER: NOWHERE TO RUN

Midway's doing its best to bounce this venerable franchise back from its last disappointing game, and we've got the interview with The Rock to prove it.

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# STAFF

People Who Actually Get Paid To Play Video Games



## DOWN IN THE VALLEY

**ANDY McNAMARA**  
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

After all the hype, the next generation of gaming is here with the release of Xbox 360, and with its launch, it brings so many questions about the video game industry that it makes my head spin.

Is the new wave of consoles coming too soon, as we didn't even get to a full cycle with PlayStation 2, Xbox, and GameCube? Do people expect next-generation gameplay right out of the box, or are they willing to let graphical upgrades keep them happy until newer, less-rushed software hits the market? Can Microsoft win? Will Nintendo's strategy work or put them on the outside? The list, as they say, goes on and on.

About the only thing I can say for certain is that video games are progressing. We are attaining levels of detail that are truly outstanding. With the improved realism, however, new quirks stick out. This industry must push itself to create animations that match our high-tech look, which in and of itself is no easy task.

Japanese roboticist Masahiro Mori theorized back in 1970 that as robots become more realistic, there will be a point where their animations and how they react become grossly obvious. He termed this threshold The Uncanny Valley, or the point where things become so realistic that they become strange and out of place as they interact with their world in unrealistic ways. If you have seen *Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within*, you know the Valley all too well.

While the video game industry certainly isn't making robots or movies, the theory holds true for games as well. As the software reaches new peaks in realism, the flaws in animation and artificial intelligence become all the more obvious.

Some of these nit-picking critiques can be seen in the Xbox 360's launch line-up, but that was always expected. I'm sure we will see repeat performances for all the next-generation system launches and in much of the software in the future. But I can see the world across the Valley...and that place is where video games truly come alive.

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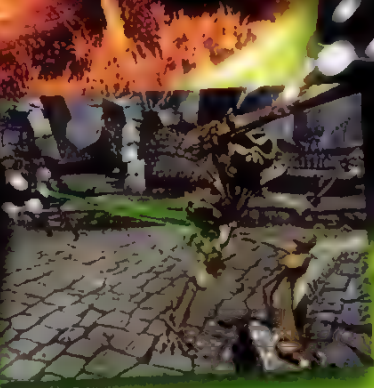
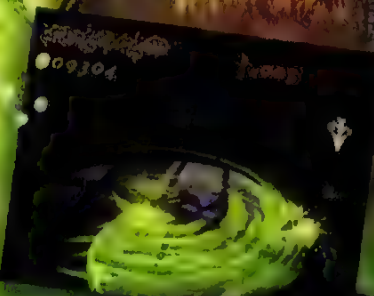
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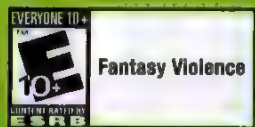


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# GISPY

Candid Photos From The Seedy Underbelly Of The Video Game Industry



8



1

1: Nick Davies, design manager for Bizarre Creations, plots the course for Project Gotham Racing 3 at Microsoft Game Studios Tokyo headquarters 2 Epic's CliffyB snapped this hot shot of *Sin City* seductress Jessica Alba at the recent Digital Life Expo 3 Indie Bull's Matthew Seymour and 2K Games' Anthony Chau pose with the GI crew and the newest addition to our staff – a large, creepy mechanical toucan! He haunts our sweaty, restless dreams – in a good way! 4 What better way to promote your next-gen console than to have some weird dude walking on the water in a giant bubble! See, the bubble – a large sphere – represents the 360 degrees of global entertainment experiences that the Xbox 360 will – oh nevermind. It looks cool, though! 5 Hey, whatever happened to the Digital Deviant? Well, this nice woman named Kate came along and made an honest man of him. Here's a picture from their recent wedding in Kentucky. Awww... gives us warm fuzzies 6 Microsoft exec Peter Moore extols the virtues of Xbox 360 at the company's recent X05 event in Amsterdam 7 The GI Spy camera captures the elusive likenesses of Square Enix Grandia III producer Wataru Higuchi and Game Arts director of Grandia III Hidenobu Takahashi 8 Here's Billy Berghammer, with legendary Final Fantasy composer Nobuo Uematsu



2



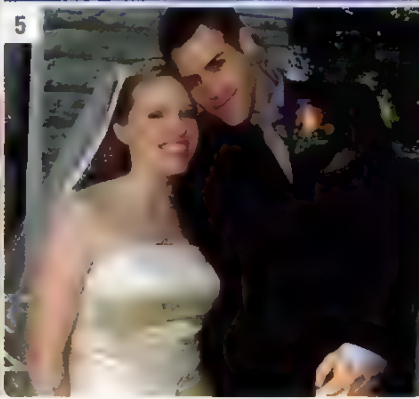
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## REVMOTE CONTROL

I can't believe that Nintendo is doing this. In its quest to engulf a more casual audience, it is throwing away one of its most dedicated customers: the normal, everyday gamer. Believe it or not, some of us like sitting on the couch with the controller in our laps, pressing the buttons with barely-perceptible finger twitches. Sure, the controller has high points (I can't wait to swing Link's sword), and I love the thought of attachments, but it just won't be the same.

David Beck  
via gmail.com

I've been a fan of Nintendo since the 8-bit days, but now they are officially crazy. I can't believe the same people who brought me the wonder of The Legend of Zelda and Super Mario Bros. could produce something as disappointing as the Revolution controller. It may be great for games about fishing and cooking, but I sure won't be playing them. I mean, I love my EyeToy and everything, but does every game need to have some cheesy gimmick?

Samantha Gables  
via gmail.com

After two console generations, Nintendo has finally seen the light. With the unveiling of the Revolution controller, Nintendo has demonstrated that it knows how to do things right. Developers now have the freedom to bring to life any crazy, nutty, wacky game they can dream up (I'm looking at you, Miyamoto). It took a worldwide MTV debut for me to want an Xbox 360, and it took a crapload of trailers and "gameplay footage" to make me want a PS3, but it took just one look at the controller in action to make me want a Revolution. No graphics, no specs, no flashy lights – just a controller. That might not be a revolution, but it sure means something.

Kevin Hummons II  
via gmail.com

■ As with most things pertaining to Nintendo these days, reactions to the unveiling of the Revolution controller ranged from incredulous outrage to unwavering devotion. Both sides have valid points, but it might be too early to jump to conclusions. First of all, remember that players will be able to use more than the remote-like device to control the action on-screen; game mechanics on the Revolution won't consist entirely of chopping and fishing. Nintendo has also mentioned a shell attachment (though we haven't seen it yet) that will presumably have more than two buttons, allowing for more traditional gameplay. As promising as these features sound, all that we've seen of the Revolution so far is pure potential, not indications of what it will actually achieve. We have no actual gameplay footage, or even a final list of technical specs. By all means, be excited for the Revolution; Nintendo has a solid track record for innovation. But blindly throwing your support behind a system because of what it could do often leads to disappointment when reality doesn't measure up to your expectations.

## SERIOUSLY

Would you pass up addressing a genuine opinion or question in Dear GI just because you couldn't think of a sarcastic response?

Damer Reeves  
via yahoo.com

■ Of course not. We have far more than "sarcastic response" in our repertoire of possible answers to reader letters. For instance, your question is currently being addressed by our "serious answer, then obscure '80s TV show reference" category response. In general, we try to deal with issues that are relevant to our readers, as well as certain topical concerns in the industry. We're actually more likely to pass on a letter that is outdated (the Hot Coffee mod is so three months ago, people) or doesn't make a cogent point than one that doesn't immediately set the gears of hilarity in motion. After all, if we ever need inspiration we can just turn to our secret collection of *Today's Special VHS tapes*. As Aristotle said, "mannequins coming to life is the root of all comedy."

## HARDCORE HARDSHIP

What happened to the term "gamer"? I remember when you couldn't pay someone to say that they were a gamer. Now anyone that plays Halo 2 applies the term to themselves. Look, I'll make this simple – anyone that plays games just to pass time isn't a gamer. To be a gamer you need to dedicate a major amount of time to playing games. Anyone that has beaten a Final Fantasy or played WoW knows what I'm talking about. Maybe it's just me, but if every Halo 2 and Madden player can call themselves a gamer, then the term has lost all value.

David Bryant  
Celeste, TX

■ Wow, David! What a lucky coincidence that you seem to meet your own requirements to qualify as a gamer! However, everyone has a different perception of what the term means, and one person's gamer is another's fanboy. If people play nothing but WoW and Final Fantasy, can they really call themselves gamers? Sure, those games require a serious time investment, but you're hardly broadening your horizons. Plus, it takes the same single-minded dedication to build a juggernaut football dynasty or to take on the Flood on Legendary difficulty. Where do you draw the line? Do you need to import wacky Japanese RPGs to be a true gamer or spend a certain amount of money on the hobby per month? It seems to us that if a person is enthusiastic enough about video games to want to call themselves a gamer, that should be enough. The phrase may not be the badge of honor it once was, but that seems like a small price to pay for the continued proliferation of gaming as entertainment and art.

## SOMETHING IN THE WATER

I have just got done reading issue #150 and I'm going to have to say that you guys are mega funny. That's right, MEGA funny, not just the normal funny. I laughed so many times, and continued to laugh even after everyone in the game store gave me strange looks. It got me wondering, though – you guys being so funny just isn't normal. Is there some kind of "Essence of GI" you guys take before writing this stuff?

Andrew Estavillo  
via aol.com

■ Pffff! Do we look like we were forged from unfettered moneysacks? Is Jeremy wearing a T-shirt that says "I am an opulent king of Europe"? We could never afford genuine Essence of GI; that stuff's made in France. France! Fortunately, the cheap knock-off imitation brand is almost as good, and though it has some unpleasant side effects (including excessive fart jokes and Aquaman references), it gets the job done. Now, if only it didn't look and taste exactly like a trout and cardamom smoothie.

## HEART AND SOUL

I must say I was shocked to see Dave Jaffe say that "a lot of games feel really soulless and heartless to me," but then in the same interview offer nothing but praise to Sony. I will not dispute his claim about many of today's games being bland (I personally agree 100 percent), but for him to say that while offering nothing but praise for Sony is quite ironic. After all, isn't Sony sort of infamous for releasing iterative versions of its key franchises every year like clockwork?

Chris Nickerson  
via aol.com

■ While it's true that Sony does release many of its key franchises on a near yearly basis, that doesn't mean that it's not producing quality software. On the other hand, they also allowed Dave Jaffe and his team several years to make the phenomenal God of War, and we know all too well how much time Polyphony Digital takes with each new Gran Turismo. Even though Jaffe is employed by the current hardware leader, that doesn't make his opinions as a gamer and developer any less valid. First and foremost, our interview section is intended to allow the biggest names in gaming to discuss their own views, not to be PR for their respective companies. After all, all people in the industry are employed by someone or another, and their personal thoughts are not usually required to align with the corporation's corporate philosophy. Unless they work for HiveMind Software. Those guys are a bunch of squares.



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COMING SOON TO THEATRES

## SOLID SNAKE'S DADDY

I was watching TV one day and a movie came on called *Escape From New York*, with Kurt Russell playing a guy named Snake Plissken. How does this relate to Metal Gear? Is the movie based on the Metal Gear franchise?

Timothy Brown  
via aol.com

■ No. In fact, *Escape from New York* is a sci-fi cult classic from 1981, which means that it predates Solid Snake and Metal Gear by a few years. Though the two series are unrelated from a story standpoint, the hardened Snake Plissken from the film has been cited as one of the characters Mr. Kojima used as inspiration when constructing the persona of Solid Snake. The appearance of the mysterious Iroquois Pliskin in Metal Gear Solid 2 is undoubtedly an homage to Kurt Russell's consummate action hero, adding a nice example of the quirky cultural humor that has become a hallmark of Mr. Kojima's signature franchise.

## THE HALLS OF FAME AND SHAME

I was reading your review of Resident Evil for PS2, and I was wondering: In the history of your magazine, what games have received a 10?

Jake  
via comcast.net

■ Every month there are three types of letters that Dear GI receives without fail: readers asking us which of the next-gen consoles will be the best, readers telling us which of the next-gen consoles will be the best (often with excessive cursing and "clever" terms like Xbot, PS2, and Nintendork), and readers asking what Game Informer's highest and lowest scoring games of all time are. We can't use our arcane methods of divination to determine the winner of the upcoming console war (Miller ate all of our tea leaves), so we just decided to list all of the games to receive a score of 10. As an added bonus, we've also included the only four titles ever to sink as low as 0.5 - games that, by owning them, you waive any right to defend yourself if given a wedgie (provoked or otherwise). Consider yourself warned.

### PERFECT TENS

- Tony Hawk's Pro Skater 2 (November, 2000 [PSone])
- Metal Gear Solid 2: Sons of Liberty (December, 2001 [PS2])
- Grand Theft Auto: Vice City (December, 2002 [PS2])
- Metroid Fusion (January, 2003 [GBA])
- Grand Theft Auto III & Vice City Double Pack (January, 2003 [Xbox])
- The Legend of Zelda: The Wind Waker (April, 2003 [GC])
- Ratchet and Clank: Up Your Arsenal (November, 2004 [PS2])
- Halo 2 (December, 2004 [Xbox])
- Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas (December, 2004 [PS2])
- Resident Evil 4 (March, 2005 [GC] and November, 2005 [PS2])
- God of War (April, 2005 [PS2])

### HUMILIATING HALF-POINTS

- Batman Beyond: Return of the Joker (December, 2000 [PSone])
- Ailyn Chronicles: The First Mage (May, 2001 [N64])
- Shrek: Fairy Tale Freakdown (June, 2001 [GBC])
- Kabuki Warriors (December, 2001 [Xbox])

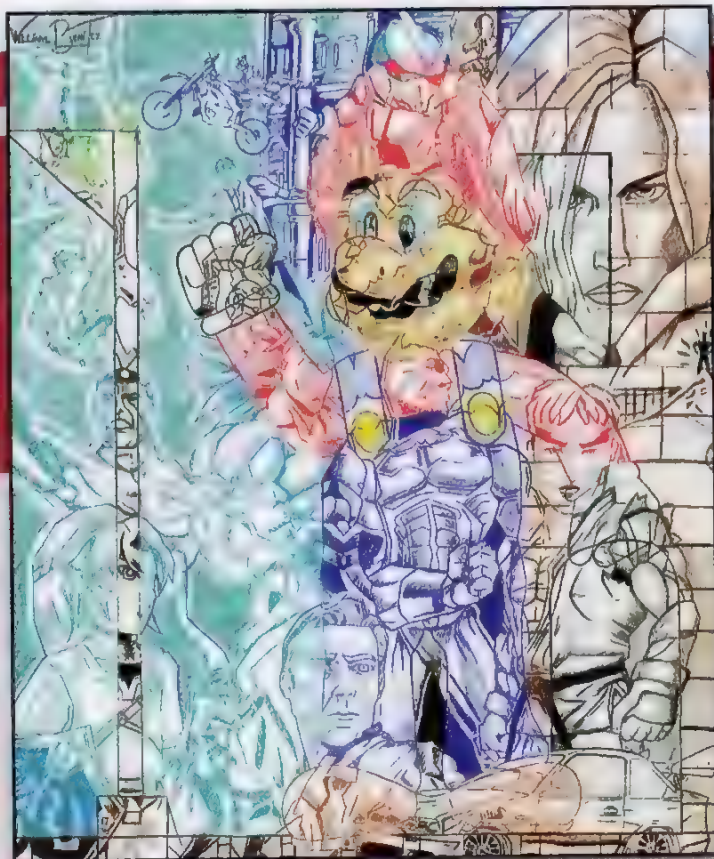
## ENVELOPE ART

### DECEMBER WINNER!

**WILLIAM BENITEZ**  
All hail the People's  
Republic of the Mushroom  
Kingdom!

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.

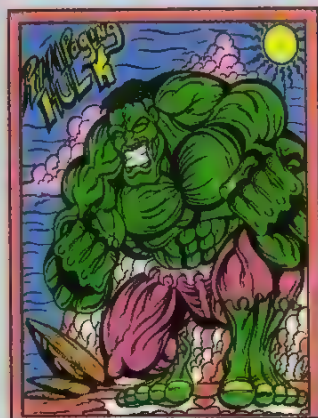
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Mpls, MN 55401



**ARNOLD A. BUFORD**  
Jumpin' Jehuty, a Zone of the Enders envelope! Get to next-gen, you lazy robot! Go on, move it.



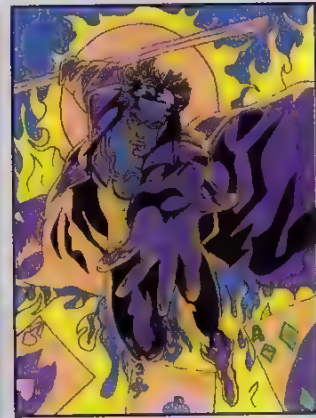
**LARRY RANDALL**  
We'd hate to be at the table when this family starts fighting at Thanksgiving.



**RICHARD RAMIREZ**  
The Incredible Hulk, the king of 'roid rage. No, not steroids. Hemorrhoids.



**CHAD BORGSCHATZ**  
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**PABLO H. RIVAS**  
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# CONNECT

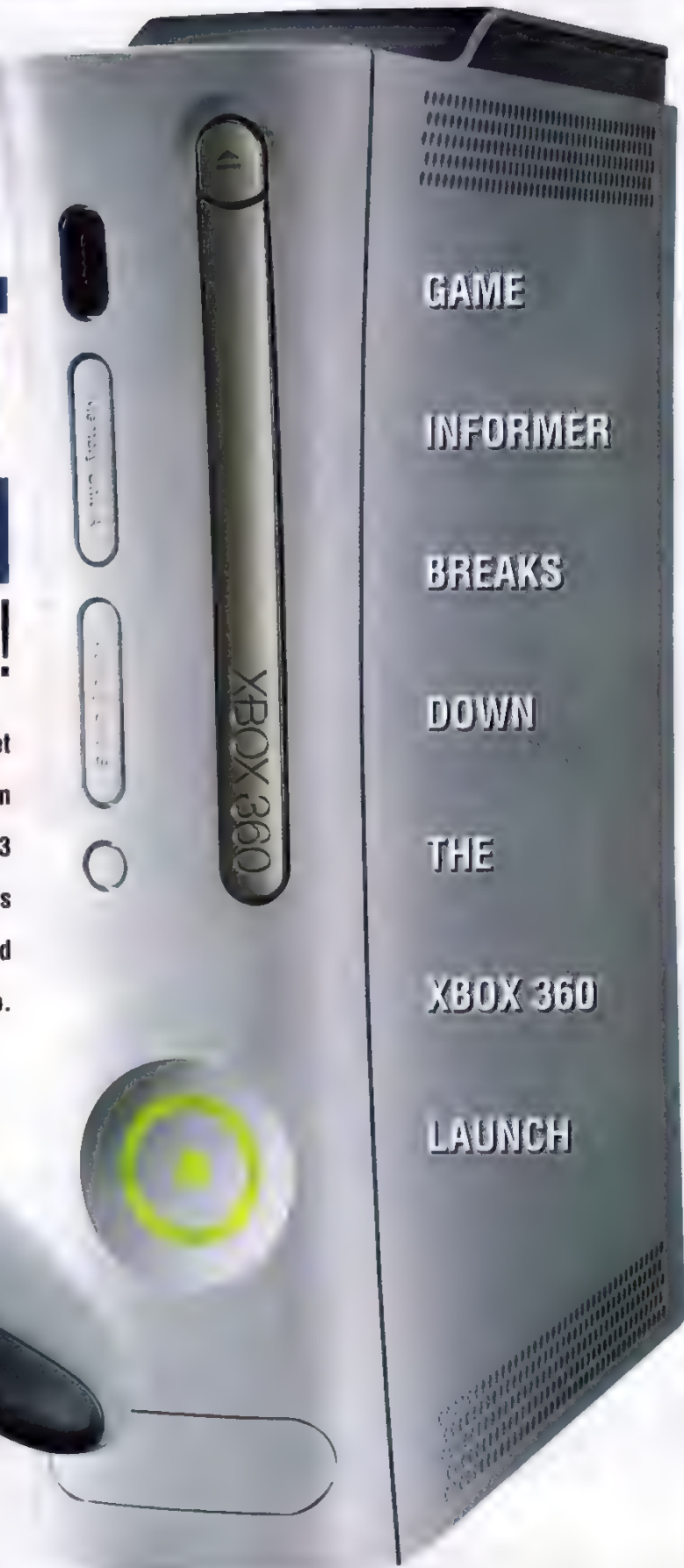
Breaking News, Views, And Technology From  
The Cutting Edge Of Gaming



# THE NEXT GENERATION STARTS NOW!

The wait is over. Microsoft has laid its multi-billion dollar bet on the table, and is set to deliver the first of the next-generation consoles, the Xbox 360, to retail. Beating the PlayStation 3 to store shelves by at least six months to a year, Microsoft is starting this generation early in hopes of gaining an early lead on Sony and Nintendo.

■ Microsoft has announced that Xbox 360 controllers, which utilize USB inputs, can be used for PC gaming





**W**hile some have questioned whether the company's timing is too early, the buzz surrounding the 360 launch has been steadily building, and most retailers have already sold through their allotted presales. Just how many units will be available for consumers on day one will still be unconfirmed at press time, and Wall

Street analysts seem to think that production has been slipping. A CNN/Money story quoted several prominent analysts, one who had revised his estimates from the 1.8 to 2 million units shipped worldwide in 2005 down to the 1.4 to 1.6 million range. More pessimistically, Banc of America's Gary Cooper thinks there will only be around 360,000 Xbox 360 units on sale on November 22nd in North America, with another shipment to follow before Christmas. Either way, expect the 360 to be the hot item on eBay this holiday season.

Needless to say, anticipation for 360 was running high at the Game Informer offices the day we received our pre-release retail units.

Pulling it out of the box, we were surprised at how compact it appears. Although its actual dimensions are only a bit smaller than the Xbox, it's sleek-looking and attractive, despite initial complaints that it resembled a PC tower. The relatively small size of the console does come at the expense of a very large power supply "brick" on the A/C cord. It's fairly easy to take off the faceplate, although the faces themselves feel a bit flimsy. We suspect that there will be more than a few broken faceplates before the "HD era" is over.

Navigating the various menus and Xbox Live is every bit as easy and intuitive as Microsoft had promised. Music functions like hooking up your iPod for custom mixes is a breeze. Also, in good news for those of us who don't have \$4,000 televisions, the HD cables that come packed in with the more expensive 360 bundle serve as component as well as conventional cables. This means that you don't have to buy a set of standard cables while you save up for that HD set.

By far the best news of the Xbox 360 launch isn't the system's oft-touted rendering power, but rather the fact that Microsoft has designed a great game controller for the system. After the debacle that was the original, enormous Xbox controller (which was remedied by the more compact Controller S), this new gamepad is a masterpiece. Taking the best elements of the Controller S and adding two more shoulder buttons to match the twin analog triggers, it's clearly the best-designed new controller since Sony's Dual Shock. Its contours are very comfortable, and the high-quality analog sticks are very accurate and appear quite durable. The combination of two triggers and two shoulder buttons allows developers more flexibility, and will put an end to our clumsy fumbling for the Controller S's awkwardly placed black and white buttons. It's clear that Microsoft listened closely to its consumers, and this research has paid off in a controller that could possibly be the new standard in conventional gamepads (especially if Sony ends up sticking with its strange, boomerang-shaped PS3 pad).

In terms of power, the Xbox 360 seems to have that in spades, evident even in the launch titles. While, sadly, a good majority of the launch titles are simply graphically enhanced ports of current-gen products, the rendering power and texturing already blow away the current generation systems. Talking with developers (some of whom have provided us with their own reactions, see sidebar) both on and off the record, it's clear that 360 has strong support among the development community. In the weeks since the 360 beta kits were delivered, estimates of the system's power have steadily increased. At press time, the general feeling seemed to be that the PlayStation 3 and 360 are capable of producing basically the same level of graphical detail. And, a programmer no less respected than id's John Carmack even tagged the 360 as better than PS3 in most respects in an interview with Game

Informer in our October issue: "The Microsoft dev kits are much nicer, I'll say that... I think Microsoft made a better choice with processor technology than Sony did. But...they are both plenty capable systems."

Of course, the general consensus regarding the 360's power, as mentioned, has improved drastically since the release of the more powerful beta development kits, so it's not unlikely that the same phenomenon will happen once Sony releases its next round of kits.

Putting a damper on the good feelings surrounding Xbox 360 development is the nagging issue of disc space. The current Xbox 360s have spurned both of the new high-density DVD formats currently fighting for dominance, HD-DVD and Sony's Blu-ray, opting instead for a conventional DVD drive. As many current-gen games like Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas are already filling up 9-gig DVDs, there has been much concern that next-gen games, with their high-polygon character models and high-res textures, will force many studios to release games on multiple discs.

After talking to many developers, it appears that these space issues are very real. Almost every developer we spoke to at Microsoft's recent X05 event said that their DVD-9s were extremely full, and that it had been difficult to fit their launch titles on one disc. In fact, we hear that one highly anticipated 360 title is currently filling up four discs.

Given that games will only get larger and more complex as the Xbox 360's lifecycle wears on, this would seem to be a serious issue. It's

conceivable that some titles, like Rockstar's next-gen Grand Theft Auto, might not be able to be released on 360 at all, assuming the company wants to stick to its tradition of single-disc games.

However, Microsoft's J. Allard holds that improved compression techniques will make later 360 games capable of holding much more data on one disc, and attributes the current space crunch to the rushed timetables of launch game development.

"We're not totally where we want to be with compression," admitted Allard. "Here we're trying to do a worldwide launch of this very ambitious program and developers will tell you they're not really satisfied what we did with the DVD emulator or compression. And therefore their layouts are in DVD. They're struggling with that. They're cutting corners. They're being a little sloppy with the CPU. They're being a little sloppy with the discs. They're being a little sloppy with the formats and compression to make launch. Next year, you'll see that they tighten that up and can get more out of the system by using the same disc capacity, the same memory, the same art tools."

However, there's a good chance that the solution to this problem could be addressed with changes in future versions of the 360 hardware. Notably, Microsoft recently announced that it had signed on to support the HD-DVD format (which is currently battling Sony's Blu-ray for dominance). In a previous interview with Game Informer, Allard left the possibility of adding an HD-DVD drive to the 360 in the future. "[People ask] 'What about this hi-def movie thing, and if that takes off, aren't you gonna screw yourself?' No, because we have a flexible system, and we can just build a system with that kind of drive if that takes off."

Despite any lingering questions about the hardware or Microsoft's marketing strategy, the Xbox 360 is by all accounts an extremely powerful system with deep support in the publishing community. The launch lineup, while perhaps lacking one original, blockbuster title like Halo, is flush with quality titles and well-known brand names. Also, Peter Moore recently cited over 200 Xbox 360 games currently in development. And, while gamers continue to wait for Sony and Nintendo's next moves, Microsoft is ready to kickstart the new era today. For those ready to make the leap into the next generation of gaming, the time is now.

## DEVELOPER IMPRESSIONS

*"It's much more of a raw gaming powerhouse than Xbox ever was in terms of how it's put together, and that means lots of work tapping into that power. It's certainly not stuck in the PC world like before. We're discovering new tricks daily, and the 360 tools are excellent for showing you where the box has more power - it's just a matter of tapping into it well. The early games will look great, but the kick-assness-curve is going through the roof in year two and three, trust me."*

**Todd Howard**  
Executive Producer,  
The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion  
Bethesda Softworks

*"I was skeptical about the controller until we acquired our near-final ones and I was able to play Gears of War on it extensively. It just feels solid, like a true piece of consumer electronics. You could probably beat someone to death with the thing. The problem is that you can't strangle anyone because it's wireless."*

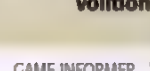
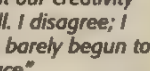
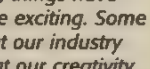
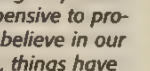
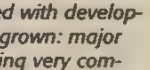
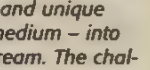
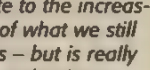
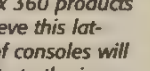
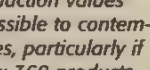
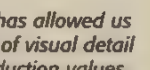
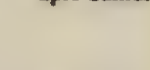
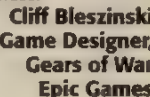
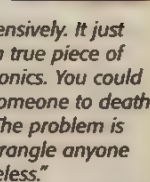
**Cliff Bleszinski**  
Lead Game Designer,  
Gears of War  
Epic Games

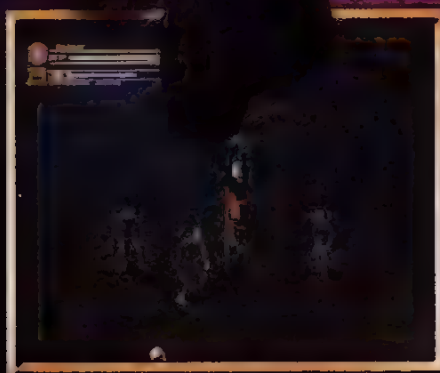
*"The Xbox 360 has allowed us to reach a level of visual detail and overall production values previously impossible to contemplate on consoles, particularly if you display Xbox 360 products on HDTVs. I believe this latest generation of consoles will greatly contribute to the increasing penetration of what we still call video games - but is really an entirely new and unique entertainment medium - into society's mainstream. The challenges associated with development have also grown: major titles are becoming very complicated and expensive to produce; but if you believe in our medium, as I do, things have never been more exciting. Some people think that our industry is aging fast, that our creativity is going downhill. I disagree; I believe we have barely begun to scratch the surface."*

**Jacques Hennequet**  
Producer, Saint's Row  
Volition



...Microsoft has designed  
a great game controller  
for the system.






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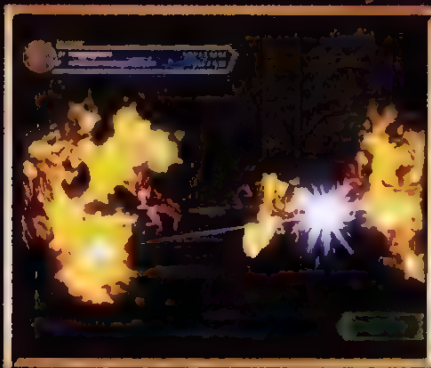
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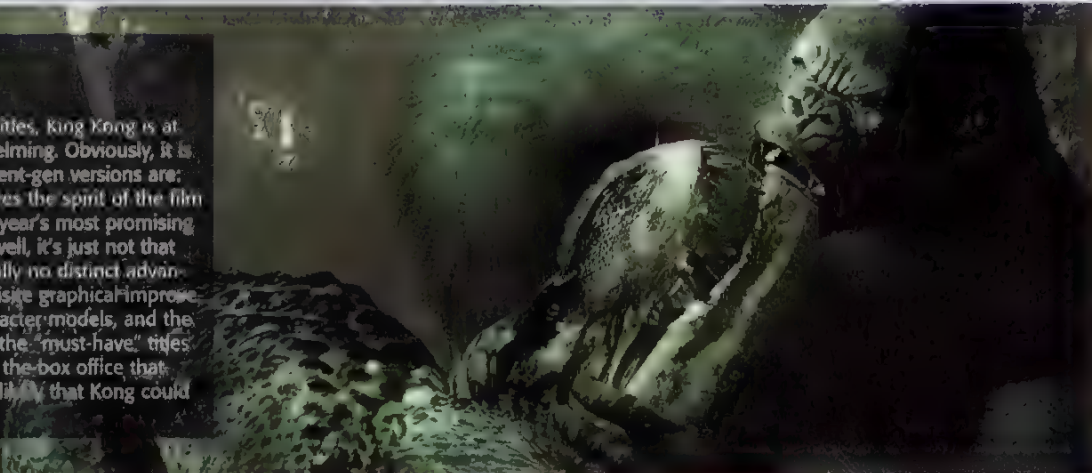
## SIZING UP THE LAUNCH LINEUP

For reasons beyond our control, we were not able to get reviews for every Xbox 360 launch title. So, if it's not in our reviews section (starting on page 142), here's a rundown of the rest of the launch, with our initial impressions.

### KING KONG

**Developer:** Ubisoft Montpellier • **Publisher:** Ubisoft

Like a good number of the Xbox 360 launch titles, King Kong is at once impressive and yet somewhat underwhelming. Obviously, it is impressive for the same reasons that the current-gen versions are: It's a cinematic and well-done title that captures the spirit of the film while also standing on its own as one of this year's most promising titles. It's somewhat disappointing, because, well, it's just not that different from its console cousins. There is really no distinct advantage to playing it on 360, other than the requisite graphical improvements like better textures, more detailed character models, and the like. That said, it definitely looks to be one of the "must-have" titles for launch. If the film does anywhere close to the box office that Peter Jackson's last project did, it's also quite likely that Kong could be the top-selling 360 title.



### PROJECT GOTHAM RACING 3

**Developer:** Bizarre Creations • **Publisher:** Microsoft Game Studios

This launch racer has pushed out some of the most impressive screenshots for Xbox 360's first day offerings and, at the publisher's recent X05 event, we got to see a bit of the game in action. Does it hold up to the hype? Well, the short demo available didn't really flesh out the entire game experience, but it did shed some light on how the series' Kudos system is changing. While you will still be rewarded for flash and showmanship, more points will be doled out for skillful driving. A few cars were available to try out in the London and New York areas and the good news is that they handle well (if less forgiving than their predecessors) and the areas looked great. As this is a confirmed launch title for the 360, all will reveal itself shortly, but from what we've seen, fans will not be disappointed.



### MADDEN NFL 06

**Developer:** EA Tiburon • **Publisher:** EA Sports

EA Sports' Madden will be a big seller come November 22, and it looks like gamers who pick it up won't be disappointed. Apart from featuring a franchise mode with more stat tracking than ever before, this next-gen title brings over important elements from the current-gen titles, like the Hit Stick and Precision Passing. For good or bad, the title's new engine solves some gameplay bugs from the past while presenting a few new flaws of its own, but it more or less feels like the Madden you love. And, apart from the sweet graphics, the presentation has finally taken a step up. Not every feature is here, but it's certainly the most full-bodied Madden that's ever been at a console launch.



### NBA 2K6

**Developer:** Visual Concepts • **Publisher:** 2K Sports

While the next-gen version of Madden is dropping features from its current-gen edition, NBA 2K6 developer Visual Concepts says it doesn't have to make such sacrifices with its 360 b-ball title. Instead, it's bringing its full game. It's not only giving you the stuff you love like 24/7 mode, but it's wrapping it in an amazing graphics package that includes eerily realistic player models, more animations than the NBA 2K6 game out now, and some small gameplay tweaks for the Isomotion controls and analog shooting. The developer tells us that the online features are a little bare bones, but it doesn't look like the series' move to a new court means it's gonna surrender its hardcourt crown.



### DEAD OR ALIVE 4

**Developer:** Team Ninja • **Publisher:** Tecmo

We may not have received review code, but we were still able to get our hands on the lovely ladies of DOA 4. Oooh yeah, it was hot! We're talking about the gameplay, of course. Get your mind out of the gutter. The fourth entry in this series is even faster and more brutal than previous titles, and naturally it looks gorgeous. Of course, this series has been a graphical powerhouse, but DOA 4 honestly isn't a huge leap over Dead or Alive Ultimate. Still, this is definitely one smooth, gorgeous fighter, and if you like fighting games, there's no reason not to snap it up at launch. We haven't had a chance to check out its online play yet, but DOA Ultimate was quite respectable on Live, and we've got no reason to think that DOA 4 won't be as well.

# AMPED 3



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## RIDGE RACER 6

**Developer:** Namco • **Publisher:** Namco

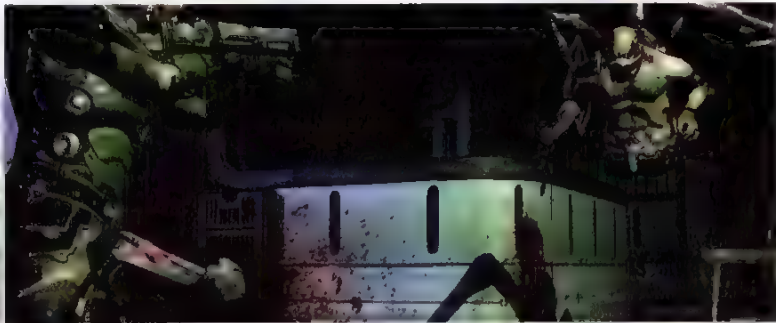
What's a console launch without a Ridge Racer title to go along with it? Not much, if you ask us, so it's good to see that Microsoft has convinced Namco to bring their long-running drifter to the new 360. Showing the same demo level at both the Tokyo Game Show and X05, Namco has been keeping pretty quiet about this entry in the series. We do know that the nitros system from the PSP release is coming back, as well as the franchises' classic courses and touches (think helicopters and airplanes in the sky overhead). One notable improvement is the draw distance, which allows you to see upcoming parts of the circuit well before your arrival.



## QUAKE IV

**Developer:** Raven Software/id Software • **Publisher:** Activision

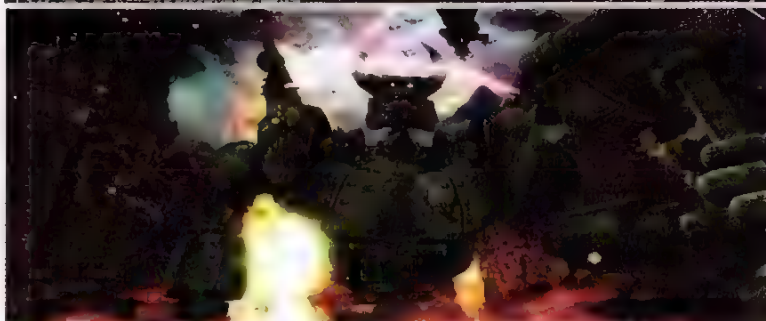
We've already reviewed the PC version of Quake IV (see last issue), and found the title worthy of carrying the torch of one of PC gaming's most well-respected franchises. Even if Quake IV doesn't really try anything new in terms of design, the highly-polished FPS gameplay and still-beautiful Doom 3 engine that it runs on are a solid choice for anyone looking to gun down some aliens. If the Xbox 360 edition delivers on the same level as the PC version, the 360 will have some seriously awesome online FPS when this launches, despite the absence of any four-letter games that start with an "H." Activision has assured us that Quake IV on 360 will be a nearly identical port, so we're not too worried.



## NHL 2K6

**Developer:** Kush Games • **Publisher:** 2K Sports

Unlike another company that usually goes by two letters, 2K is actually bringing all of the features from its current-generation games to the Xbox 360. Along with the not-so-surprising upgrade in graphics, players can also expect to see a number of exclusive features, such as something called Crease Control. Don't worry, you won't be giving players physicals in the locker room. Crease Control is actually first-person goaltending. That's right. There's finally a game that is focusing on the goalie. Kush is also upping the realism in player momentum, allowing players to really get a sense of what it is like to push off of the ice.



## KAMEO: ELEMENTS OF POWER

**Developer:** Rare • **Publisher:** Microsoft Game Studios

Kameo has been a long time in development, having been planned at one point or another for the GameCube and Xbox before finally being switched over to the Xbox 360. But it is finally upon us, and Kameo is looking like it might be one of the most promising titles of the launch. While Rare's other game, Perfect Dark Zero, has given us many reasons for concern, Kameo has been consistently improving every time we've seen it. The visuals are top-notch, creating a unique and beautiful fantasy setting, and the gameplay looks solid. With the ability to transform into several different monsters, each with unique abilities, Kameo seems to offer a bevy of ways to keep the combat fresh, yet still simple and inviting. Rare is clearly hoping to offer gamers a grand adventure with Kameo, and the title is the only game of such ilk at launch. Only time will tell if it will live up to Rare's lofty goals, but the impressive demonstrations we've experienced so far, along with its all-ages appeal, lead us to believe that Kameo will be one of the biggest hits of the 360 launch.



## PERFECT DARK ZERO

**Developer:** Rare • **Publisher:** Microsoft Game Studios

It has been a long wait for the Microsoft purchase of Rare to bear fruit. Inside Microsoft, that fruit is Perfect Dark Zero, which it feels will be the flagship piece of software for the Xbox 360. While Microsoft was unable to get us review code (which is bewildering considering our late deadline for this issue), we have played the game on numerous occasions. The draw of Perfect Dark Zero is obvious. The original was one of the premier first-person shooter titles on the Nintendo 64, and with its new home and improved graphics the hopes for this game are high.

Sporting missions and gadgets much like the original GoldenEye, the base of this game is solid. Throw in co-op play and multiplayer components and, at the very least, this game is competent. Now it just becomes an issue of execution. From what we have seen, PDZ lacks the polish and AI of the top first-person shooters. During our time with the game, we saw many enemies standing about waiting to be shot and even a guard who stood staring at a wall. This software was incomplete, but you can't help but think some of these issues will find their way into the final product. Game intelligence is far too complex to simply flip a switch and correct. Many of these issues could be fixed, but at the moment PDZ seems to be on a collision course with being good, and nothing more.

# Kameo

## Elements of Power

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ice-spear-burster

fire-spewing warrior

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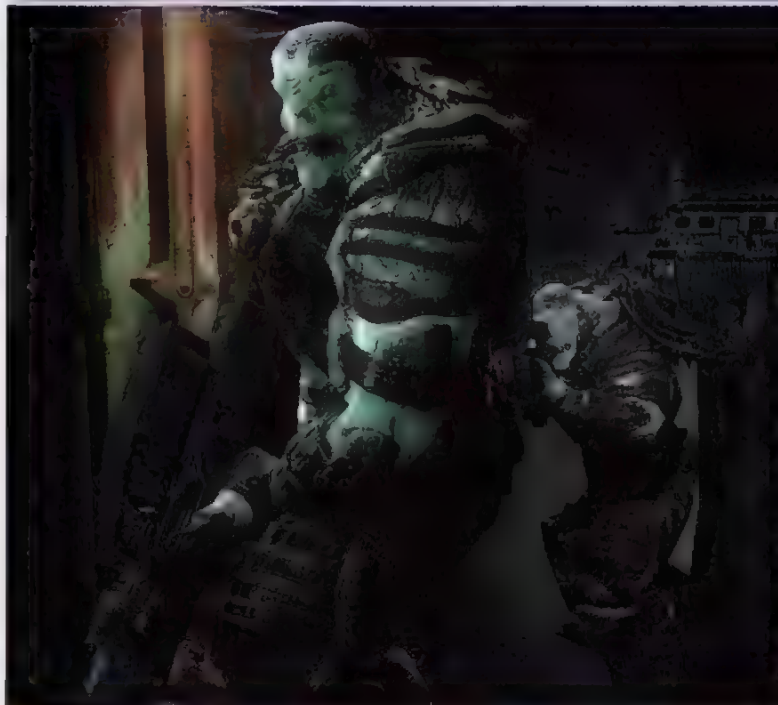
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Jump in.

XBOX 360

## ON THE HORIZON

Xbox 360 definitely sports one of the best launch lineups in recent memory. But, of course, one of the biggest challenges of any console manufacturer is to make sure that a steady stream of quality games follows in the months after launch. Here are some of the Xbox 360 titles to keep your eye out for in the near future.



### GEARS OF WAR

**Developer:** Epic Games • **Publisher:** Microsoft Game Studios

Arguably the most anticipated upcoming 360 game, Epic's *Gears of War* is looking better and better every time we see it. A new stage shown at X05 featured new rain effects that added a lot to the chilly, foreboding atmosphere of the game. The Marcus Fenix character model looked wet and slick while outside in the rain, but gradually dried off once inside. The demo also revealed an area known as The Hollow for the first time—the underground home of the villainous Locust Horde. It also revealed a new move for Marcus—a stooping run that allows him to move quickly from cover to cover while keeping his head down. With a camera that pulls in tight to highlight the frantic feel of the action, using this maneuver recalls the feeling of soldiers running across the battlefield in *World War II* movies.

*Gears of War*'s lead designer Cliff Bleszinski told *Game Informer* that the title is roughly 60 percent complete at this point, meaning that most of the core mechanics are in place and the development team is now focused on polishing the game. If it looks this good at 60 percent, then we truly can't wait to see the final product.



### NINETY-NINE NIGHTS

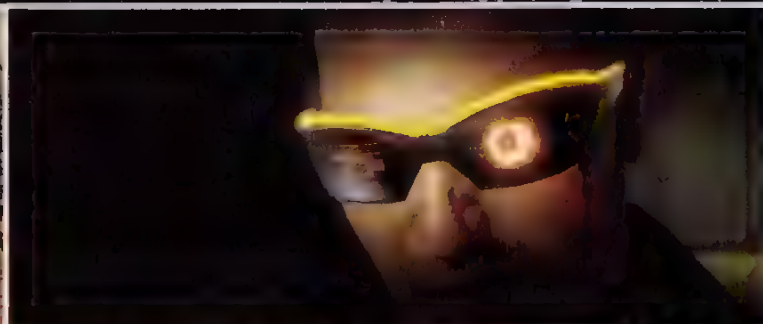
**Developer:** Q Entertainment/Phantagram • **Publisher:** Microsoft Game Studios

Fans of full-scale battle games should be pleased at the progress of *Ninety-Nine Nights*. Far more than a *Dynasty Warriors* clone, the massive conflicts dwarf what we've seen in other war games. Beyond the amazing graphics, the game distinguishes itself from typical hack 'n' slash fare with several interesting ideas. An RPG-like element lets you level up your hero as you fight, and you'll also be in charge of ordering friendly troops forward into battle or back into retreat. We've also seen a devastating super-attack that slows down time and lets you literally wade through enemy troops as you cut them down. It is impressive displays like these that make us take notice, and help assure that the game will fill a much-needed spot in the 360's early lineup.

### BLUE DRAGON

**Developer:** Mistwalker • **Publisher:** Microsoft

The list of names lending their talents to this upcoming title reads like an RPG fan's dream birthday party guest list. Designed by *Final Fantasy* creator Hironobu Sakaguchi and his new company Mistwalker, *Blue Dragon* also features the artwork of acclaimed artist Akira Tonyama and a musical score from none other than Nobuo Uematsu (the last time the trio worked together was on the classic *Chrono Trigger*). The story stars a character named Shu and his friends, whose shadows can transform into hulking beasts to assist them in battle as they explore a colorful world that utilizes ancient technology of a long-lost civilization. Even though no official release date has been set, Sakaguchi has said that one of Mistwalker's two games would hit within a year of the Xbox 360's launch. Given the lack of concrete information on the other one (*Lost Odyssey*), there is a good chance that we could be playing *Blue Dragon* by next holiday season.



### FRAME CITY KILLER

**Developer:** Namco • **Publisher:** Namco

If you thought that the next generation of gaming would do away with generic-looking characters who wear gaudy neon-colored Oakleys, then slap your knee and call yourself a ninjaboop! *Frame City Killer*'s protagonist (who simply goes by the studly name of Crow) will likely not help Namco sell one copy of this game. The fact that it's powered by Unreal Engine 3 will probably reverse these fortunes. Wearing sunglasses like Crow's would likely bring on a beating in the real world, but in a happy coincidence, these shades (known as Virtual Frames) are the latest and greatest in digital imaging. In the hands of a mysterious terrorist, they can produce deadly digital acid! With Crow on the case, however, the death tally should be kept fairly small. After all, this dork is well trained in all types of weapons, vehicles, martial arts, stealth, and investigative techniques.

Your goal is to find *Frame City* of its virtual drug lords. To do this, you'll first figure out who is pulling the strings, then you'll have to start from the bottom and work your way up the food chain. How you take down a target is up to you. Tail them home and run them down with a car as they go for a job. Snipe them from a distance after they walk out of a bar. Little has actually been shown of the game in action, but we have seen some fairly explosive sequences that highlight the third person action. The most impressive was Crow running down a garbage-ridden alley with bullets ripping up the filth as he sped passed.

*Frame City Killer* doesn't have a solid release date as of yet, but our sources close to the project have pointed toward early next year.





WHEREVER FREEDOM  
IS THREATENED,

THE

SEALS



## THE ELDER SCROLLS IV: OBLIVION

Developer: Bethesda Softworks • Publisher: 2K Games

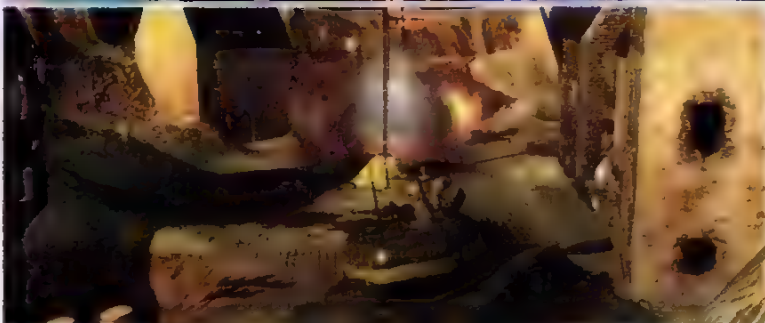
Although it will no longer be available on launch day, *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* is still looking like one of the most exciting games of the 360's early days. Visually, *Oblivion* is amongst the most impressive titles for the system, but what makes it the most exciting is its gameplay. A full-featured role-playing game, *Oblivion* is designed with a more western aesthetic than traditional Japanese RPGs – it is playable from either a first- or third-person perspective, features interactive minigames for functions that other games assign to static menus, and sports visceral, real-time combat. Every character in the world has their own 24-hour schedule and goals, meaning that you will encounter other heroes out on epic quests. With so much to offer, we don't mind waiting a little longer to get our hands on *Oblivion*.



## CRACKDOWN

Developer: Real Time Worlds • Publisher: Microsoft Game Studios

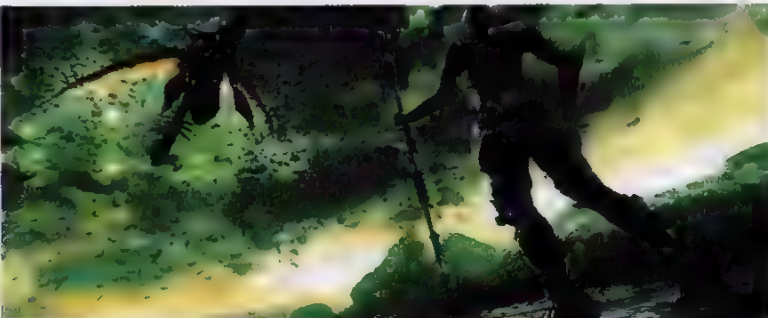
*Crackdown* won't be the first open-world game for the Xbox 360, but it looks like it will be the one to define the next step in evolution of the genre. With an array of features that make use of the Xbox 360's unique Live capabilities, *Crackdown* will broadcast challenges to players in-game based on the accomplishments of others, and it will be the first sandbox title to feature online co-op. Add to that the fact that you can build up your Agents of Justice to the point that they can pick up cars, jump off of skyscrapers, and generally perform superhuman tasks in their efforts to clear the city of its crime infestation, and this game quickly becomes one of the most promising in the Xbox 360's future. Designed by David Jones, the original creator of *Grand Theft Auto*, *Crackdown* isn't just another "me-too" free-roaming destruction spree – it's the game that hopes to bring next-gen gameplay, not just graphics, to one of the most popular and fastest growing genres in the industry.



## LOST ODYSSEY

Developer: Mistwalker • Publisher: Microsoft Game Studios

While much more mysterious than the other Mistwalker title in development, *Lost Odyssey* also seems to have a more serious, mature tone when compared to the light-hearted *Blue Dragon*. Very little has been shown of this title since its E3 debut, but we do know the adventure follows Kaim Argonar, a man sentenced to live for 1,000 years. Taking a more experimental approach to storytelling, players will live with Kaim through the ages and experience his extended life, including the heartache involved with having to watch friends and loved ones age and die off while he remains untouched. The premise is certainly interesting, and considering the talented artists collaborating on this title (Nobuo Uematsu will be composing the soundtrack as well), *Lost Odyssey* will undoubtedly be a major part of Microsoft's effort to court the RPG crowd that felt somewhat neglected by the current Xbox.



## THE OUTFIT

Developer: Relic Entertainment • Publisher: THQ

We've had a glut of serious, dark wargames in recent years, but Relic Entertainment's *The Outfit* is anything but. Focusing on action movie-style ridiculous violence, this title hopes to put the fun back in military shooters. With any luck, *The Outfit*'s mix of light RPG elements, crazy-awesome explosions, and impressive back-end technology will result in a rollicking good time when it launches in next year. If the highly talented designers out at Relic can overcome the game's potential shallowness, we're confident that this will live up to expectations.

## SAINT'S ROW

Developer: Volition • Publisher: THQ

While there's no *Grand Theft Auto* on the horizon for the Xbox 360, *Saint's Row* looks like it could fit the same niche in a way that should please fans. Multiple song-filled radio stations, crime-based gameplay, and dozens of cars and weapons to accessorize with should feel familiar right away. But while there are lots of similarities to draw between the two games, *Saint's Row* is looking to set itself apart. There's a Create-A-Character mode, a wealth of unique activities around the city like insurance fraud and stronghold sieges, and a focus on delivering next-gen textures, physics, and effects within the open world experience. Originally planned for launch, it's not entirely clear how long we'll have to wait before *Saint's Row* releases. However, early signs indicate a lot of fun to be had, so we're definitely eager for its arrival.

## EDITOR IMPRESSIONS



### REINER

I've found myself in the center of many heated debates surrounding the launch of the Xbox 360. Some people believe that this current console generation still has a lot of life left in it, and by releasing

first, Microsoft is making the same mistakes that Sega made with Dreamcast. After talking with developers who are currently working on games for both Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3, it sounds like both machines are similar in performance much like the Xbox and PlayStation 2 are. Microsoft and Sony have basically switched roles. I don't see the 360 as the next Dreamcast, but as the next PlayStation 2. Releasing first should allow Microsoft to achieve a comfortable lead and a firm foothold over the next generation.

The system is accompanied by the most impressive launch lineup to date, and 2006 is already shaping up to be a phenomenal year with blockbuster titles like Splinter Cell 4, Gears of War, Mass Effect, and Crackdown leading the charge. I truly believe that this war will be won by the unique software that each system brings to the market. Microsoft's first party support is definitely impressive, but Sony is already thumping its chest over the exclusive signing of Metal Gear Solid 4, and I wouldn't be surprised if we hear an announcement that Grand Theft Auto is in PS3's camp as well. It should be quite exciting to watch these two companies jockey for exclusives and position. Regardless, Xbox 360 is here for the long haul, making it one of the safest purchases you'll ever come across. I've only spent a month with it, but I'm already head over heels in love with it.



### KATO

The next generation of gaming doesn't start with the release of this console. It starts when the games for this system start being "next-gen." Although the launch games for the 360 aren't bad by any

means, it won't be until Gears of War when we really start to see what this thing can do. Then again, graphics aren't the be-all, end-all of things, and I find it funny that most of the developers I've talked to can't cite anything other than graphics when I ask them how the Xbox 360 or PlayStation 3 is really going to change the way we play games. Well, I certainly didn't think that graphics would get worse.

But who doesn't get excited about a new console?! Especially when it's got the best controller in gaming. Launch lineup aside, I don't think you can go wrong getting this system since Microsoft has bolstered its software partners. Of course, getting just the 360 or just the PS3 isn't going to cover all gaming bases, as each platform is going to have its exclusives. That's just the nature of the beast these days.



### JEREMY

Out of all the consoles I own, my Xbox gets the most use, so naturally I've had somewhat mixed feelings on the 360. On one hand, I feel like the Xbox had at least another good year of life left in it, but on the other,

I've been looking forward to the next evolution of the console. Now that I've had some time to play around with it, I'm pretty excited about the machine, but not really for the reasons I expected. Many of the early 360 games don't look that much nicer than some of the top-tier Xbox games, but that's to be expected. I know that the games will continue to get better and better just as they do with any console, but one thing I didn't see coming was how the 360 has gotten me excited about Xbox Live. I currently subscribe to Live, but barely ever use it, because I'm simply not a very competitive gamer. I prefer the feeling of satisfaction I get from completing a difficult single-player game to the short-lived pride I take in a nice headshot in a deathmatch. But a lot of the new Live features built into 360 games seem strangely appealing to me. With Achievements tracked in every game I play, my single-player accomplishments will be just as much of reflection on my gaming identity as my questionable Halo 2 skills. I like that I'll be able to look at the profiles of others, see what they are playing, and get an understanding of who they are that isn't based solely on how many times they captured the flag. And, of course, the prevalence of online co-op in 360 games is even more compelling. I can't wait to play Gears of War with a buddy, and the free-form approach to completing missions that Crackdown will offer with a friend simply blows my mind. Considering that I would rather play through a Splinter Cell campaign alone than shoot it out online in Rainbow Six, I never thought I'd be so excited to get back online. But, as it stands, the potential for Live is one of the aspects of the 360 that I am looking forward to the most.



### JOE

As a dedicated gamer, I should probably be a lot more excited about the historic launch of this new console than I am. Now, that doesn't mean I'm not psyched for what the future holds; there are some Xbox 360

games on the horizon that inflict a little bit of irreparable mental damage every day I have to wait to play them. But I'm not going to be able to buy any of them on day one. It's difficult to gauge a system based on some shifting notion of its potential, and as far as I'm concerned, there's nothing immediately available at launch that is a herald of the next generation. I see a lot of prettier versions of current-gen games and gameplay. When 360 starts kicking out its incubating exclusives, then I'll have something to be excited about. Maybe I just got my hopes too high in the recent months leading up to release, but the Xbox 360's holiday season warm-up lap seems like a pretty unceremonious way to cut the ribbon on the next generation.

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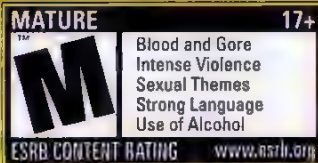


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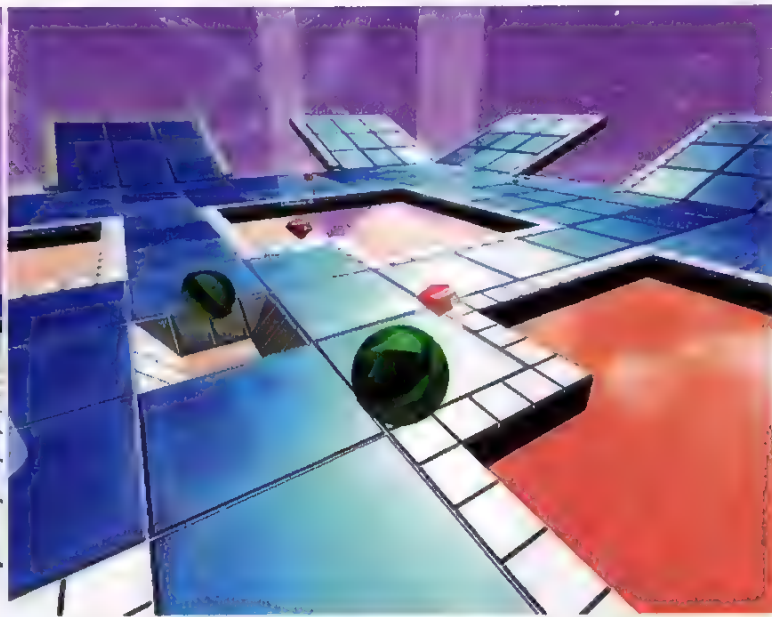
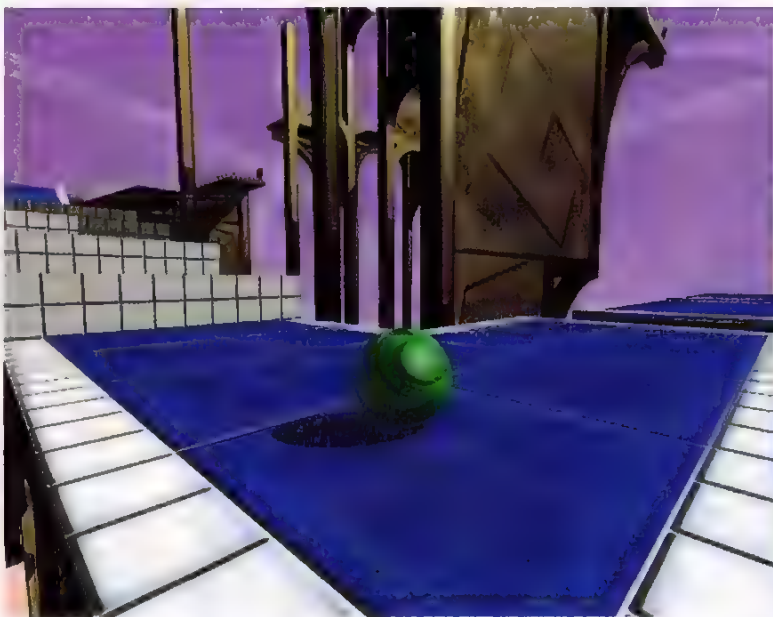


PC  
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NIVALA  
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■ Marble Blast Ultra looks to be one of the best of the original titles being readied for the new version of Xbox Live Arcade

## XBOX LIVE ARCADE

Next-generation gaming is changing in more ways than one. Aside from all the heavily hyped, graphical masterpieces already heading to Xbox 360, Microsoft is also seeking to reinvent old-school gaming through the new version of its already popular Xbox Live Arcade service. Here are our initial impressions, including some of the games that seem destined for greatness.

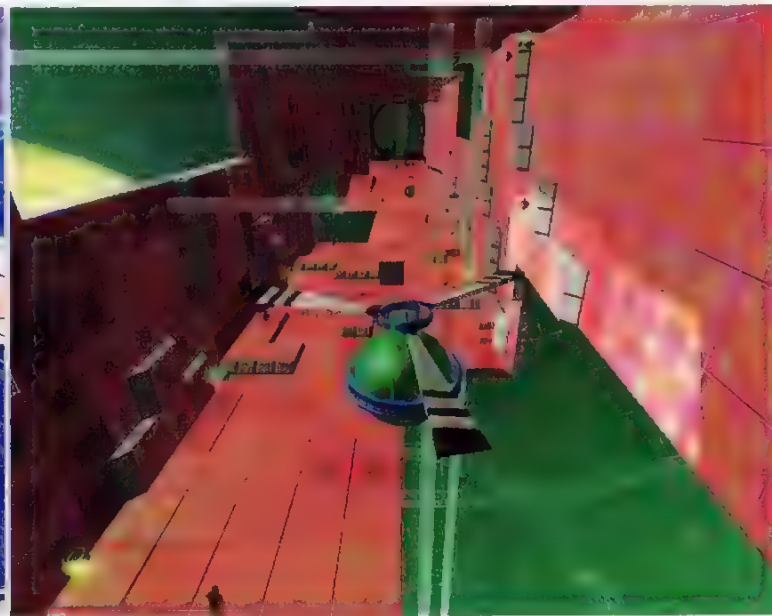
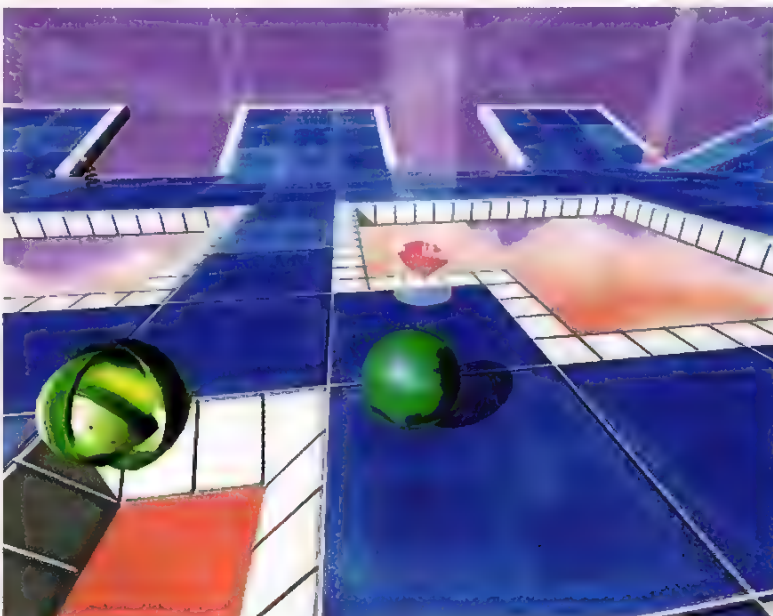
Amid all the excitement about top-tier franchises and launch games, there are several games that almost no one knows anything about. The 360 will play host to a brand new and rethought approach to Xbox Live Arcade. We got a chance to download and check out several of the new titles for the service, and were amazed by the high quality and unique feel of the new games. It was enough to make us examine the announced list of titles, and we're now confident that Xbox Live Arcade will be a feature to watch going forward.

All of the games for the service will have a free downloadable trial so you can find out whether you like it or not. If it strikes your fancy, you can spend credits to get the full version. There is no word yet on pricing, but we expect that acquiring one of these smaller games won't be exorbitant. Several of the games included online ranking, and we were also pleased to see how many of the games had multiplayer functionality.

We played several levels of Marble Blast Ultra, which has you maneuvering your ball through puzzle-laden courses for the best time — a next-gen Marble Madness if ever there was one. Mutant Storm Reloaded and Crystal Quest each offered their own variety of

single-screen, addictive arcade action. Meanwhile, our clear favorite of the early titles was a little gem called Wik: Fable of Souls. This strange little adventure had a tone halfway between Oddworld and Lemmings, and tasked our hero Wik with using his insanely long tongue to swing around the forest, swipe bugs from the air, and feed an unusual creature on a diet of slugs. It's quirky, strange, and undeniably fun.

A host of publishers and developers have signed on to contribute to XLA. These include Midway, whose background in arcade classics means it is bringing games like Gauntlet, Smash TV, Joust, and Robotron 2084 into the picture. Other publishers include heavyweights like Electronic Arts, Capcom, Codemasters, Atari, Konami, Harmonix, Vivendi, Sega, Ubisoft, and Namco. All told, there should be around 35 games available for download within the first several months of the system's life. For a head start, the full version of Hexic HD will come preloaded on every Xbox 360 hard drive. Our hope is that Xbox Live Arcade will eventually serve both casual and hardcore gamers by delivering the independent, risky, and surprising titles that might not have ever seen the light of day otherwise. Regardless, it's definitely one aspect of the 360 to keep an eye on.



"Genius."

- Xbox.com

"Halo with chips"

- Maxim magazine

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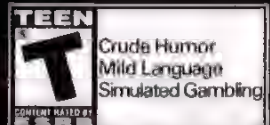


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## DATA FILE

More News You Can Use

## TUROK GROWS TO EPIC PROPORTIONS

Turok is coming back with an unreal vengeance. The former Acclaim franchise has been picked up by Buena Vista Games, and the publisher has already signed a deal with Epic Games to use its Unreal Engine 3 for the next-generation rebirth of Turok. Buena Vista has assigned Canadian developer Propaganda Games to the project, and has said that multiple handheld editions of the series are also in the works.



## 25 TO LIFE STAYS ITS SENTENCE

Eidos has delayed its action/crime game 25 to Life from October into an undisclosed date in 2006. As far as we're concerned the game will only be helped with the extra time. Perhaps Eidos will use the time to drum up some more controversy in the hopes of some coverage. Any coverage



## FIFA BACK ON THE STREETS

EA's got balls bringing back the FIFA Street series after the first one went over like a Chelsea chant at a Millwall match. Nevertheless, FIFA Street 2 is due out this spring, and aims to take freestyle soccer play to a new level with humiliation moves initiated with the right analog and face buttons. If it doesn't work this time around, EA will be suffering some humiliation.



## WOLFENSTEIN RETURNS TO NEXT-GEN

id Software has confirmed that it is sending out the troops at Raven Software for a next-gen Wolfenstein title on both PC and Xbox 360. In fact, the game marks the first time that one of id's projects has been designed for a console first. Legendary engine developer John Carmack says that he's even developed a graphics technique just for the system.

## THE RETURN OF THE COMMODORE

Everyone's got fond memories of the Commodore 64, and Yeahronimo Media is stepping up to bring the system back from the void. The company is forming Commodore Gaming, and plans to bring old C64 titles to the public via plug-and-play, mobile, and handheld devices. Eventually, Yeahronimo wants to put out new game licenses under the Commodore name.



The old Commodore 64

## FISHER FOR FOURTH SPLINTER CELL

## XBOX 360 GHOST RECON DELAYED

The short trailer at Microsoft's X05 event may have ended with the words, "You have no idea what's coming", but we know that, when it comes to Sam Fisher and Splinter Cell, we're always excited. Publisher/developer Ubisoft has announced Splinter Cell 4 (working title), which is expected to appear for the current consoles, Xbox 360, and PC this spring. There is no word on if a PlayStation 3 edition will appear later in the year, however Ubisoft has traditionally put the series on all systems.

Offering both online and offline stealth play, the newest trailer shows an NSA agent and his night-vision goggles getting thrown around by a mysterious character wearing a visored-helmet that completely shields his face – that is until a familiar set of night-vision goggles shows up. Ubisoft says that Splinter Cell 4 will take the series "into entirely new territory, expanding the story and depth of [Sam's] character."

In other Ubisoft news, the company has delayed Ghost Recon: Advanced Warfighter. The Xbox 360 game was originally expected for the launch of the system, if not the launch window before the end of the year. Now, however, the game will not appear until February 2006. Ubisoft says that it is delaying the title in order to optimize the capabilities of the system.



Ghost Recon: Advanced Warfighter for Xbox 360

## NEWS

## JACKSON TAKES OVER HALO MOVIE STEPS IN AS EXECUTIVE PRODUCER

Video game movies have a less than impressive history at the box office, and it doesn't help that most of them feature bad acting, bad writing, and bad direction. Gamers were holding their breath when it was announced that Bungie's Halo was getting the film treatment – especially when the rumor went around that cinema slumlord Uwe Boll was handling the movie. Luckily, the Halo flick is in much, much better hands. Oscar-winning *The Lord of the Rings* director Peter Jackson has agreed to serve as executive producer for the movie and is also bringing in the help of his partner/wife Fran Walsh, Weta Digital, and Weta Workshop.

Although Jackson will not direct the film, his influence as executive producer will be invaluable as he oversees the project. "Jackson and

Walsh will provide creative counsel on all aspects of the film via their WingNut Films banner," read a statement from Microsoft. "Jackson's award-winning companies, Weta Digital Ltd. and Weta Workshop Ltd., will provide creatures, miniatures, and visual effects for the production."

"I'm a huge fan of the game and I look forward to helping it come alive on the cinema screen," said Jackson. "As a gaming fan, I'm excited to bring Halo's premise, action, and settings to the screen with all the specificity and reality today's technology can provide."

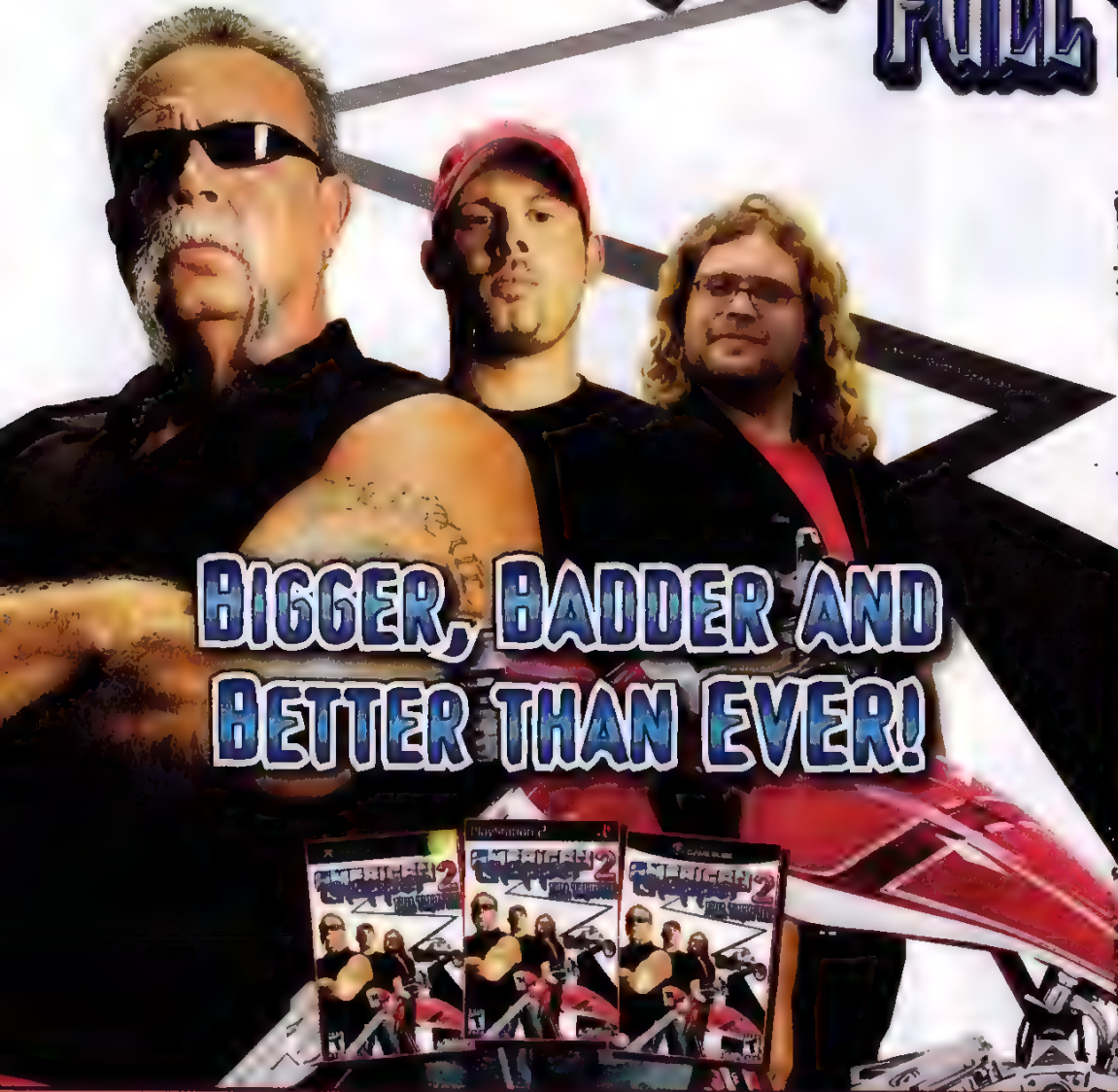
Jackson is currently offering his vision for Ubisoft's King Kong game, which will come out at the end of November before his movie premieres on December 14.





# AMERICAN CHOPPER™ 2

## FULL THROTTLE



**BIGGER, Badder AND  
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PlayStation 2



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## THE GOOD, THE BAD, THE UGLY

When You Want Your News Categorized With A Sarcastic Editorial Spin



### BAD

Square Enix has delayed the release of long-awaited PSP movie *Advent Children*, the animated film that followed events after *Final Fantasy VII*, which was supposed to be out this summer. The movie won't release until early January. Of course, Joe's already seen it, and would love to tell you all about it. Call him with all your questions at 505-922-1100.



■ **Castlevania: Dawn of Sorrow** for Nintendo DS

### GOOD

Castlevania producer Koji Igarashi has confirmed that a next-generation version of the series is already in development. Igarashi says that he plans to continue the franchise's habit of splitting Castlevania's storyline between the console and handheld versions. The producer also hinted that he's got some special plans to celebrate Castlevania's 20th anniversary.



### BAD

As an update to last month's news, California governor Arnold Schwarzenegger has signed a bill making it a crime to sell violent video games to a minor. The law will go into effect in January, but the Entertainment Software Association has already filed a lawsuit saying the law violates the First Amendment.

### GOOD

Last month we told you about the layoffs at Myst developer Cyan Worlds. Well, what a difference a month makes. Founder Rand Miller has confirmed that his 11th hour hopes have come true, and the company has been able to secure enough funding to hire his staff back. Miller would not comment on the details of the turnaround, nor what projects Cyan Worlds may be working on.



### UGLY

Activision has struck back hard against the lawsuit filed against it by Call of Duty: Finest Hour developer Spark Unlimited (see last issue for more). The publisher claims that Spark was so incompetent that Spark CEO Craig Allen would not have been able to keep the company going if it had not been for Activision—something that Allen allegedly has admitted to Activision. As for the matter of Spark not being able to develop a sequel to Finest Hour, the publisher claims that the proposal Spark put forward was so deficient that it was unusable and submitted in "bad faith." Activision further says that after Spark dropped the development duties for the GameCube and Xbox ports of Finest Hour (although it collected royalties on the Xbox version), that Spark was unstable to work with. Activision seeks a jury trial and undetermined damages in the lawsuit, which also contains numerous other charges.



### GREAT

The more Jessica Alba the better. The actress has announced her plans to put out a video game based on an X-Games-esque extreme sport. Alba says that racial diversity in the characters and non-violent competition is important to her, and that she'll do voice-work for a character based on herself. Who knows when this game is going to come out, but we're not worried because we already play our own game with Jessica Alba. It's called "Please remove the restraining order, because once you get to know us you'll really grow to love us."

■ "Big ups to my EA homies."



## SPIELBERG SIGNS WITH EA WILL WORK ON ORIGINAL EA PROPERTIES

**R**aiders of the Lost Ark and War of the Worlds director Steven Spielberg has signed with Electronic Arts' EAALA development studio to create three games based on original franchises. The collaboration starts this year, when Spielberg will start to work with the studio on the story, concept, art, and design of the games. However, details regarding which of the titles will come out first, and when, were not given. Spielberg says that he has a great deal of respect for EA. "I have been playing EA games for years and have watched them master the interactive format."

## R & D

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

### Webster



One genre that we feel is lacking in the Xbox 360's launch lineup is the classic platformer. Of course, every Mario 64-style romp needs an identifiable main character, and we've got one who has been inexplicably overlooked for far too long: Emmanuel Lewis, star of the smash hit '80s sitcom *Webster*. We can't believe that no one has made a game out of this property yet. Come on, doesn't the story of a tiny young orphan adopted by a football player and his wife just scream video game? We think it does. As Webster, your diminutive size would make every day an adventure! Players would explore the Papadapolis household by double-jumping off the furniture to collect hard-to-reach "Webster Power Pellets," avoiding such hazards as housecats, giant spiders, and vacuum cleaners gone haywire. Of course, if your antics cause too much damage to the house, you'll anger your adoptive parents George and Ma'am, forcing you to run for the secret passage in the grandfather clock to escape. With the power to summon your tap-dancing uncle for assistance, and a shocking boss battle against Gary Coleman, Webster the video game is the perfect title to fill the hole in the 360 launch. It's an adorable system-seller for sure!

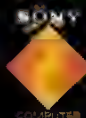
# HOOYAH!

## SOCOM U.S. NAVY SEALS

### MOBILE RECON



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## LOOSE TALK

Hot Gaming Gossip

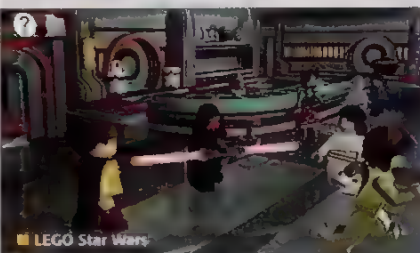
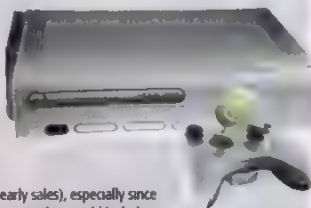
## ZELDA TO REVOLUTION?



As if the GameCube wasn't already foundering, Nintendo fans were disappointed when it was announced that *The Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess* was being delayed until 2006. Loose Talk has heard that it might not all be in vain, however. A source tells us that not only will the tide not be out until the third or fourth quarter of 2006 (it was originally scheduled to appear before March 31), but that Nintendo is contemplating moving the game from GameCube to the Revolution.

## ANALYSTS PREDICT A 360 WIN/PSP HARD DRIVE

Industry analysts from Piper Jaffray are busy predicting the future of video games. Their latest report says that through 2008 the Xbox 360 will lead the console war with 19.6 million units, with Sony's PS3 trailing at 15.5 million. Piper Jaffray's outlook for Revolution isn't good, with the system only selling 5 million units. The analysts expect both the PS3 and Revolution to come out in late 2006. Sony will, however, gain some ground on the handheld front (eventually pulling even with Nintendo in yearly sales), especially since it plans to release a second-edition PSP in the middle of next year that would include a hard drive for storing data such as music.



LEGO Star Wars

## MORE LEGO STAR WARS BLOCKS

We were pretty surprised by just how much we enjoyed *LEGO Star Wars* this year, and have been even more surprised at how well the game's sold. Taking note of its success, Loose Talk has heard that publisher Giant is commissioning developer Traveller's Tales to make another *LEGO Star Wars* title. This time the game will center around the events of the three original trilogy films.

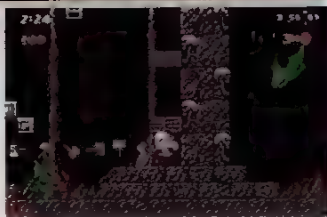
Got some insider info? Email us at [loosetalk@gamerformer.com](mailto:loosetalk@gamerformer.com) and we'll be all ears

## NAME THAT GAME

Test Your Sight

Even though the box art to this Sega Genesis game made it look like you were going to step into the shoes of Corey Feldman, this title actually let you turn into some pretty cool alter egos. Charged with saving a bunch of kids trapped inside the holographic world of a video game, you must side-scroll your way through over 100 levels and numerous bosses. Helmets that you found along the way transformed you into different characters like a knight, fly, or samurai.

(Answer on page 44)



Jack Thompson  
bullies kids out  
of \$10,000

## JACK THOMPSON GETS ROASTED

FINKS OUT ON \$10,000 CHARITY FOR KIDS

Anti-video game lawyer Jack Thompson has not only threatened the industry with lawsuits related to what he perceives as inappropriate content (he has a particular bug with Grand Theft Auto-maker Rockstar Games), but he's also harassed journalists, industry leaders, and gamers alike with his particular brand of condescending arrogance. This is the man who has compared Entertainment Software Association president Doug Lowenstein to Hitler and Saddam Hussein. Well, now his charm is starting to wear off. Recently the National Institute on Media and the Family – a group that Thompson claimed to be sympathetic with – denounced the Florida lawyer.

Thompson cited the Institute and its founder Dr. David Walsh in many of his open letters on the subject of video game violence. Walsh and the Institute resented Thompson's use of their name without their permission, and felt that Thompson's abrasive attitude in the pursuit of his goals was actually damaging to the cause of protecting children from violent media. In an open letter of his own to Thompson, Dr. Walsh says, "Your commentary has included extreme hyperbole and your tactics have included personally attacking individuals for whom I have a great deal of respect. Some of the people that you have publicly criticized are not only people of integrity, but are people who have worked to improve the lives of children." Dr. Walsh wants no further references to him or the Institute from Thompson.

Thompson hit back at Dr. Walsh and his colleagues in typically outrageous fashion. Thompson claimed that the Institute is funded by retail chain Target and has ties to Best Buy, insinuating that Dr. Walsh is being bought off by those that would benefit from selling controversial games such as Rockstar's *Bully*. In another of his open letters, Thompson wrote of Dr. Walsh's dismissal: "The mistake I made, apparently naively, is in thinking that a person of his expertise would use it actually to help some bereaved families rather than choose to protect his relationship with portions of the video game industry and its reckless retail network."

Of course, the Jack Thompson saga only gets weirder. Thompson recently contacted the game community with a proposition: He would donate \$10,000 of his own money to a charity if someone were to make a game depicting the murder of characters thinly disguised as Paul Eibeler (president of Rockstar parent company Take-Two Interactive), his family, and other leaders in the industry. Well, bloggers Old Grandma Hardcore took Thompson up on his offer with a text-based game named *Zork Thompson*. But, as always, Thompson wouldn't cave when faced up with the facts. He reneged on his deal, saying that it was "satire," and told the bloggers that they weren't a major video game company – which he said he was really targeting.

As if Thompson wasn't already making himself look bad, zeitgeist purveyors Penny Arcade really nailed him. Mad that Thompson wasn't following through with his end of the bargain, co-founders Jerry Holkins and Mike Krahulik donated \$10,000 of their own money in Thompson's name to the Entertainment Software Association Foundation, a charity that raises money for sick and disadvantaged children. Despite this generous donation, at the time of this writing Thompson has refused to make good on his promise of a donation. While Thompson has been welching on his promises to help charities, the ESA Foundation has raised over \$6.7 million over the last eight years. Said Holkins and Krahulik on their site, "We've just made the donation you never would, and never meant to." Of course, Thompson is threatening legal action against Penny Arcade.

In spite of the counter-productive efforts of Jack Thompson, the research into video game violence continues. A recent study by Michigan State University has shown that the 13 German male participants (between 18 to 26) who played an FPS in the study showed brain activity patterns "that are considered as characteristic for aggressive cognitions and affects."

Researchers had the participants play *Tactical Ops: Assault on Terror* for an hour while their brain patterns were being monitored as they were synchronized with the events in the game. The participants, on average, played games for 15 hours a week on their own.

The researchers say that the study establishes a "short-term" causal link between violent video games and activity in the brain associated with aggression. However, the study does add that despite these links, the player's interpretation of that violence is also very important.

# LOCK AND LOAD, DOOM RPG HAS ARRIVED.

"Superbly Playable"

"A Fresh Experience For Mobile"

"Highly Recommended"

IGN RATING 9.0/10



"You Must Experience This Game"

WG WORLD RATING 5/5



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Violence



PlayStation 2





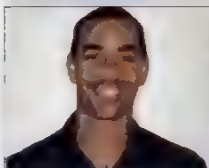
**AEONFLUX**  
[AEONFLUX.COM](http://AEONFLUX.COM)

## TOP FIVES

Favorites From Industry Pros And GI Readers

**DEVELOPER**  
CJ CONNOY  
Senior Producer, NBA 06

**READER**  
LUKE BROG  
Bellingham, WA



- 1 Medal of Honor – PSone
- 2 Call of Duty – PC
- 3 Panzer Front – PC
- 4 NCAA GameBreaker '98 – PSone
- 5 NBA 2K – DC

- 1 Halo – Xbox
- 2 Aquaman: Battle for Atlantis – Xbox
- 3 Metroid Fusion – GBA
- 4 Road Rash – PC
- 5 Madden NFL 06 – Xbox

Send Top Fives and a photo of yourself to:

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(attach digital picture)

## TOP TEN

Lists... Everybody Loves Lists...

### Top Ten Quotes Heard Around The Game Informer Office This Month

- 10 "There's nothing quite like a nice, big Snake."
- 9 "Final Fantasy is no *Under Siege*."
- 8 "I have this unavoidable appreciation for nougat."
- 7 "No, Tony Danza wasn't necessarily 'The Boss.' It was left ambiguous. You're thinking of *Charles in Charge*."
- 6 "I predict buttsores."
- 5 "Why run down there and screw one cow when you can walk down there and screw two cows?"
- 4 "Hard is the new Normal."
- 3 "Chicken Soup – perfect for strokes!"
- 2 "Ha, ha! My horse is on fire!"
- 1 "You can't eat that. It's gourmet. Here, eat this crappy hot chocolate powder instead."

Name That Game Answer: Kid Chameleon

## news

# EA PAYS \$15.6 MILLION IN OVERTIME

## OTHER CASES STILL PENDING

Electronic Arts has settled one of the lawsuits brought against it by employees demanding compensation for unpaid overtime. As part of the class-action lawsuit settled out of court in California, EA will pay \$15.6 million and re-classify salaried, entry-level artists as hourly employees. A similar lawsuit brought against EA by programmers still remains pending.

Late last year, when the case was made public, the topic of work conditions dominated the industry after a blog from a disgruntled EA spouse exploded on the Internet and was covered by papers such as *The New York Times*. It exposed the company's practice of exploiting its salaried workers by

making them work long hours in a never-ending development crunch time without compensation in the form of overtime pay or days off. Under California law, employees in some creative

fields are exempt from garnering overtime pay. In fact, because of this settlement to now pay overtime to its eligible California workers, some EA employees believe that they have been transferred out of the state to other EA studios in Canada and Florida so the company can avoid paying overtime under the new guidelines.

It remains to be seen what effect EA's settlement will have on the big picture of game development, where long hours are a given and are often used as a determination of dedication.



## news

# NINTENDO STARTS ONLINE PLAY WITH MCDONALDS

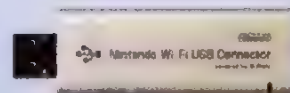
## HOME USB ADAPTER ALSO AVAILABLE

Nintendo is fulfilling the promise of Nintendo DS online wireless gaming through a new wireless adapter and a deal with McDonald's fast-food restaurants. The release of Mario Kart DS (see page 187 for our review) on November 14 marks the launch of Nintendo's global online wireless community. Other Nintendo titles like *Animal Crossing: Wild World* (see page 186) and *Metroid Prime Hunters* (available early next year) will be playable via Wi-Fi for no extra charge. Nintendo says that it is up to third-parties if they want to charge for online play in titles such as Activision's *Tony Hawk's American SK8Land*.

Nintendo DS players can connect to the Wi-Fi network if they are near a wireless hot-spot – such as the ones at McDonald's. Nintendo's deal with the food chain will let gamers play titles like *Mario Kart DS* wirelessly in over 7,000 locations around the country.

For those of you who want to bring your DS online at home, but do not have a wireless network, you can plug in the Wi-Fi USB Connector into a computer that has high-speed Internet service. The Nintendo DS will then use this access point to bring you online play.

In other DS news, in Japan Nintendo has announced a bunch of DS titles that have yet to be confirmed for America, including *Ash*, from Hironobu Sakaguchi's *Mistwalker*, and *Mario Basketball 3-on-3*.



Nintendo's Wi-Fi USB Connector hooks up with your home computer and allows for wireless DS play. Nintendo says it wants to utilize a similar setup for its upcoming Revolution console.





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<b>MATURE</b>	<b>17+</b>
<b>M</b>	Blood Language Violence
ESRB CONTENT RATING	www.esrb.org

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## CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

## 1981 ▼ Donkey Kong

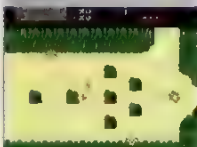
Hired as an artist, Miyamoto becomes a game designer and creates his first masterpiece, Donkey Kong

## 1985 ▼ Super Mario Bros.



Super Mario Bros., the game that would reshape the industry, is released in the U.S. The game's pioneering use of side-scrolling environments is a new benchmark in design

## 1987 ▼ The Legend of Zelda

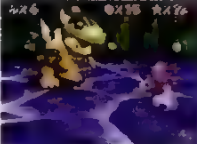


Another landmark in Miyamoto's career, The Legend of Zelda brings an innovative mix of storytelling, puzzle-solving, and exploration to gaming

## 1990 ▼ Super Mario Bros. 3

After a somewhat disappointing sequel, Miyamoto restores Mario's luster with the excellent SMB 3

## 1996 ▼ Super Mario 64



Bringing 3D gaming to life and pioneering the use of the now-ubiquitous analog control stick, Super Mario 64 launches with the Nintendo 64

## 1998 ▼ The Legend of Zelda: The Ocarina of Time



Zelda takes the 3D stage, resulting in a dense, deep adventure that launched to near-universal critical acclaim

## 2001 ▼ Pikmin

Inspired by his garden, Miyamoto translates the lives of insects into an oddly enjoyable take on the real-time strategy genre for GameCube

## 2005 ▼ Nintendogs

Once again taking cues from nature, Nintendogs is Miyamoto's latest franchise and is already looking like Nintendo's next craze

## SHIGERU MIYAMOTO

SENIOR MANAGING DIRECTOR AND GENERAL MANAGER, NINTENDO JAPAN

>> There are legendary game developers, and then there is Shigeru Miyamoto. Starting with the arcade classic Donkey Kong, Miyamoto's career has nearly defined the art of game design over the course of the last 20 years. With such venerable franchises as Super Mario Bros. and The Legend of Zelda on his resume, Nintendo's resident genius shows little sign of slowing down, as evidenced by the blockbuster success of the recent Nintendogs. Recently, we spoke with Miyamoto about the future of Nintendo and its upcoming Revolution console. <<

**Nintendogs has been very successful. Where do you see the franchise going in the future?** Well, I don't think we'll see any sort of development of the series as far as going towards a "Nintencats" direction. I think we'll end up using some of the technology we developed in Nintendogs – like the animation style, the voice recognition, the touch-screen controls, and the wireless communication – and taking that and applying it to other games in this genre that I think Nintendogs falls into. I call [them] "communication games." We'll use that technology to create new types of games within that genre.

**We've noticed that Brain Exercises has been consistently in the top end of sales in Japan. Is there any thought to bring any of those over to America?**

We are considering it. We're looking at localizing the games. We don't have a specific launch date, but we are looking at launching them in the U.S. market.

tion of wireless functionality in games, we're going to see that really evolve and take off.

**You've talked about making games that appeal to more casual fans, but here in America sports games and more mature games like Grand Theft Auto reach a very mass market. Has the definition of "casual gamer" changed to be one that includes more complex, mature gaming?**

We're going to continue to create new and unique experiences for people that are currently playing games and hardcore gamers. But, at the same time, we need to continue to invite new people into gaming, because those are the people who are going to become the next generation of hardcore gamers. Obviously, this focus on hardcore gamers is still very prominent in our development. That's why we're making Zelda, and sports games are obviously very important as well. With our new interface that we've introduced, we feel that sports games are actually going to get simpler and more fun to

I think in general people are interested in hearing about systems that use cutting-edge technology. But, at the same time, there's a whole group of people out there that might be interested in playing games but look at a controller and just want to know what button to press to get started. To be honest, I think the average person doesn't understand all the spec numbers and may be more surprised by the cost of the new systems. They see a video game system and say, "Wow, why do I have to spend \$300 or \$400 just to play some games?" We focus on the end cost to the user, and we want to create a system that's going to give them the type of entertainment that they're expecting at a cost that's not going to shock them.

**There are some statistics out there that say that only about 10 percent of gamers buy peripherals for game systems. Is there any fear that some of the add-ons for the Revolution controller won't be widely utilized by Revolution owners?**

...we've shown the controller to EA and they've expressed a great deal of interest in it.

**With the Micro, do you think there will be a new audience for it? Or, do you think it will be people that already own a GBA?**

With the Game Boy Micro, that system represents our thinking in terms of where portable gaming should be moving. Nowadays, you see a lot of people playing games on their cell phones, listening to music on their cell phones, and essentially wanting this tiny device that they can use in order to entertain themselves. But the fact of the matter is, for playing games you really want to play it on a dedicated gaming machine, because it resolves a lot of the problems you have with cell phone gaming – the battery life and the control of games on cell phones is much harder. So, what we've done is created a dedicated gaming system in the size that that people can carry with them at all times.

**Do you think that the next iteration of the Game Boy Advance will be more of a dedicated game machine, rather than a cross-functional device like what Sony has put out?**

As you can see with the Play-On [sold as the Play-Yan by most import shops - ed.] Micro portable [media] player, we do feel that portable gaming devices can cover that type of functionality, but obviously Nintendo's objective is to create and sell entertaining software. We're going to create a system that allows us to do that. Clearly, with the add-

control. Of course, to demonstrate that, maybe Nintendo would have to create a sports game. But, we've shown the [Revolution] controller to EA and they've expressed a great deal of interest in it. They seem to be very excited and we look forward to seeing what they can do with the controller [and] their sports games in the future.

**You mentioned EA's reaction to the controller. What have other third-party developers' reactions been?**

I don't know who I'm allowed to mention at this point. But I can say that we've shown the controller to a very large number of third-party developers and the response has been very positive from every one of them. So, what I can say is that in Japan we have been showing it with a number of people – some very influential people like Hideo Kojima, the creator of the Metal Gear series, and Yuji Naka. [They have] been very interested in the controller and very positive. Square Enix is also very positive about it, as is Capcom and a number of others. We have shown it to a number of third parties here, in America, and overseas.

**With the next generation of consoles, a lot of people are focusing on the tech specs. Does the average consumer pay attention to the numbers that get thrown around?**

You make a very good point. We've experimented with many peripherals and different types of expansions in the past, ranging from connectivity between GameCube and Game Boy Advance to Donkey Kong Jungle Beat, with the Konga controllers. With these type of efforts, the biggest challenge is the reluctance of people to buy these sorts of peripherals. But, I think what you've seen with our efforts on the Nintendo DS, we've tried to limit the peripherals and instead include functionality from the start with the system. We're going to use this same philosophy with the Revolution. As far as the controller goes, the main controller unit is the most expensive component of the controller...the expansion controllers will be very cheap to manufacture. So, we could just pack them in with games.

**There's always a lot of talk about who's number one in the console wars. Is being number one important?**

Well, our focus is on doing something different – coming up with unique ideas and styles of gameplay. So, we don't really look at it as a competition between ourselves and the other manufacturers. The more that we can get the media to point out that we're not competing with them and they're not competing with us, then that leaves us with no competitors and then we're number one! [Laughs]

# NINTENDO'S GENIUS SPEAKS!

■ Shigeru Miyamoto is widely regarded as the greatest game developer of all time

57

MATURE 17+



Blood and Gore  
Intense Violence  
Strong Language



SEGA

ONLY ON  
XBOX 360



XBOX 360

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# CONDEMNED CRIMINAL ORIGINS

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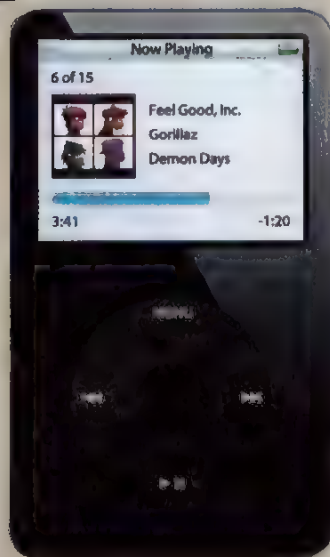
# 2005 HOLIDAY BUYING



1

PC manufacturers both large and small are keeping up with the quickly updating hardware market

2 3



9



4 8



**1 SPEED-LINK COMPETITION PRO USB JOYSTICK SL-6602**  
List Price: \$25.00

A simple retro-flavored color scheme and solid feel are really all that a good joystick needs. In a weirdly under-represented segment of the peripheral market, it's nice to see Speed-Link's a good quality, affordable mechanism for enjoying tastes of the old school on our PCs. For a couple bucks more at most retailers, gamers can spring for the transparent blue case. You know, if you're into that kind of thing.

**2 MAINGEAR F131**  
List Price: \$2,513.22 (AMD base price), \$2,346.98 (Intel base price)

Spunky upstart Maingear has consistently impressed us with their small-scale attention to detail. Its F131 systems pack a big punch, but don't lose ground with the little things. Hopefully starting early in November, customers can trick out their systems with ATI's new X1800 XT in Crossfire (enabling dual-card support), if ATI gets the cards out on time. Barring that, all of the systems feature sound-dampened aluminum cases and scads of options to extend the RAM, HDD space, and power supplies.

**3 IPOD**  
List Price: \$299 (30 GB), \$399 (60 GB)

Updating and replacing Apple's juggernaut is this sort-of-video-iPod that looks to be a nice transition between the current form and a more specialized unit. Many were hoping for a bigger display, but this widescreen has nice picture quality and its size (and therefore smaller power draw) allows for the unit to sport up to 20 hours of battery life. Downloading TV episodes and music videos runs around \$1.99 a clip through the newly-updated iTunes store.

**4 DISC-GO-POD PLUS**  
List Price: \$495

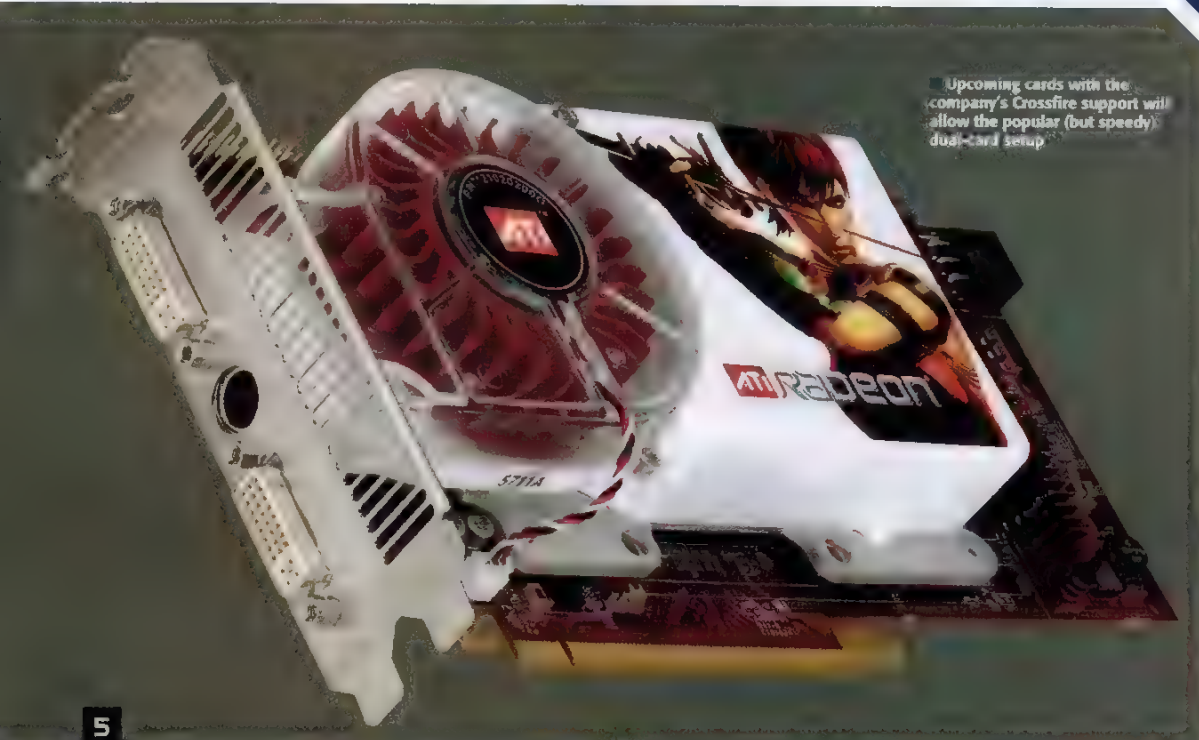
If a product only does one thing, but does it really, really well, is it worth any price? That's a decision you'll have to make for yourself, but the admittedly spendy Disc-Go-Pod is hands down the best disc cleaner/repair tool out there. In theory the device could pay for itself by saving you repurchases when the dog keeps chomping on Halo. The unit's hardy design means it should hold up to years of use.

**5 ATI RADEON X1800 XL**  
List Price: \$599

Having two top-dog graphic card manufac-

# GUIDE

Deck the halls and all that jazz, but what we really want to talk about is what the biggest gift season of the year will bring to you and yours. This is the annual Game Informer Gear Holiday Buying Guide, and it's rife with tech, peripherals, toys, and personal accoutrements.



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*All prices are suggested retail and are subject to change. Contact your local retailer for exact price and availability.*



turers (ATI and NVIDIA) is nothing short of awesome for consumers. Their technological shove-fest keeps us gamers knee deep in great hardware like the recently-announced Radeon X1800 line. With Shader Model 3.0 support and a bucket of hardware-optimizing design ideas, ATI's card makes today's games shine and promises truly blinding results for tomorrow.

**6 X-ARCADE TRACKBALL MOUSE**  
*List Price: \$129.99*

For a long time, Xgaming has made some of the sturdiest arcade-quality controllers on the market. After a long wait, the X-Arcade Trackball is coming out and we're hooked

on the unit's solid feel and great response (not to mention the packed-in Atari trackball classics like Centipede and Super Breakout). Insider's tip: If you move fast, the special launch price is a cut-rate \$99.99.

**7 ERGODEX DX1 INPUT SYSTEM**  
*List Price: \$149.95 (base system), \$49.95 (25 additional keys)*

Four years of toil has produced one of the first true changes in text input since the spring-key. Ergodex's "keyboard" lets users assign functions and locations to any key on the pad—group your movement keys in the middle, collect ranged attacks together, and put the cool-down actions in another.

Reusable sticky bits on the back of the keys put up with angry gamer abuse, but detach with a simple twist and the included software has a utility for printing out backgrounds (with your personal key layouts), making different arrangements easy to replicate. You can even record macros on the fly, without leaving the game first.

**8 POWERSQUID POWER MULTIPLIER**  
*List Price: \$14.99*

Cool fashion colors and five grounded outlets arranged in such a way that you can always use every last one of them? Oh, our gods have not forsaken us! Not on this day. The cool fashion colors, by the way, are black,

silver, metallic blue, lavender, dark blue, and contractor black and yellow (shown).

**9 SUPERSCREEN OUTDOOR THEATER SYSTEM**  
*List Price: \$9,999*

With everything you need to turn your barren wasteland of a backyard into a cinema revolution, the SuperScreen Outdoor theater-in-a-box promises easy setup and jaw-dropping size. The 13 by 16-foot screen inflates with a built-in fan and the tech (a DLP projector, DVD player, and 10" speakers) is stored in a secret agent-looking case.

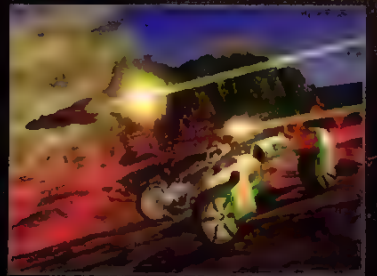




# JAK X

-COMBAT RACING-

This time, Jak's racing for his life. You get to choose your road to victory in the 2nd and 3rd place races. You'll have to power up, get to base and blast your way through enemies. It's all in brutal, head-on, and no-holds-barred death matches. Only one person is a crazy driver. But only once.



PlayStation 2

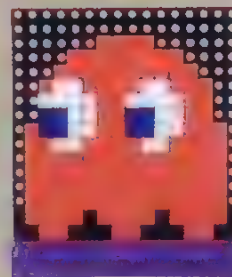
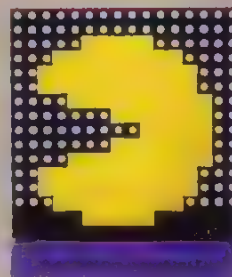
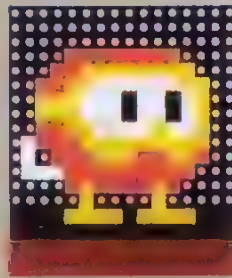
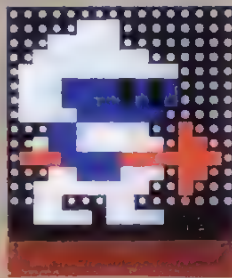
LIVE IN YOUR WORLD  
PLAY IN OURS



1



2



3 4

HOLIDAY  
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6

**1 MARIO AND GOOMBA MICE****List Price:** around \$23.00

Ergonomic, schmergonomic. This is about history, people. Charmingly blocky Mario and Goomba-shaped mice are listed as PC compatible, but with no special software required for them to work. Mac compatibility is also highly likely. Although available in Japan only right now, they are readily attainable through major importers.

**2 NINTENDO CONSOLE BOX KEYCHAIN****List Price:** \$5.95

Chronicing the history of Nintendo's hardware evolution, each Lucite 1.6-inch keychain holds a wee replica in suspended animation while text on the back describes the guts of the system shown. Sold as capsule toys, the set of five (Famicom, NTSC system, Super Famicom, N64, and GameCube) will be highly collectible indeed. We scored ours through online importer Lik-Sang.

**3 TOMYTEC DOT-PIN KITS****List Price:** \$15.00

Think Light-Brite without the hot, incandescent bulb and cooler iconic characters. Each set comes with a few hundred colored pegs, two boards to build images on, and instructions to make a handful of characters. Luigi, Mario, Space Invaders, Dig Dug (shown), and Pac-Man (shown) are the currently available configurations.

**4 RETRO NINTENDO GAMEWATCH WATCHES****List Price:** \$60

Choosing from Donkey Kong, Legend of Zelda, or G.I. Joe might be a big *Sophie's Choice*-like dilemma for many classic gamers out there, but Zelda's bright case could narrow the field a bit if pink's not your thing. Fully playable (at least, as much gameplay as these old-school sprites can dish out) and certainly a conversation piece, these

collectibles are most easily found at kitchy FredFlare.com.

**5 JAKKS PACIFIC MS. PAC-MAN 7-IN-1 WIRELESS TV GAME****List Price:** \$34.99

Updating its last Ms. Pac-Man collection with more games, a better control stick, and a wireless base unit, Jakks Pacific continues to provide great ways to experience classic games. Pole Position, Xevious, New Rally-X, Galaga, Mappy, and Bosconian accompany the title ditty in this arcade cocktail table, styled unit. The eight required AA batteries are a bit of a bummer, but at this price, what can you do?

**6 BANPRESTO FAMICOM CASHBOX****List Price:** \$19.00

Without a doubt, Banpresto makes the coolest classic gaming swag. This Famicom piggy bank comes in four different variants, each with their own "Yeah! I'm storing money!"

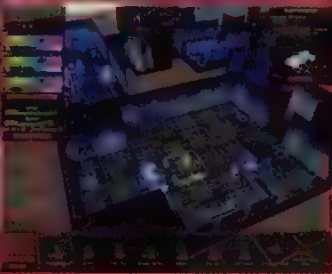
retro sound effect and faux top-loading cartridge. Tiny fake controllers strapped to the side add to the mini Family Computer illusion.

**7 GENERATION NEX CONSOLE****List Price:** \$59.99

Messiah Entertainment might have some 'splaining to do, but we're glad that the company's taking a plunge in updating classic technology in this way. Emulators are not the goal here, instead the console just plays existing NES and Famicom cartridges and can replace your busted front-loading classic hunk of plastic. While the system's function sounds entirely illegal, the company seems to have covered its bases and an announced launch date of mid-November is set in stone. Some tech upgrades like higher-quality connectors, stereo sound, and compatibility with Messiah's wireless NES controllers are great extra touches



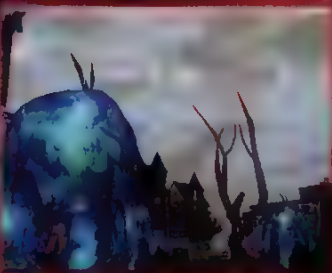
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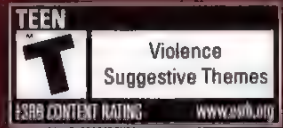
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1 2

## 1 MICROSOFT'S XBOX 360

List Price: \$299.99 (Core), \$399.99 (Premium Pack)

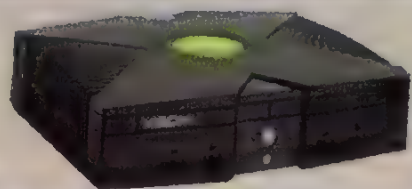
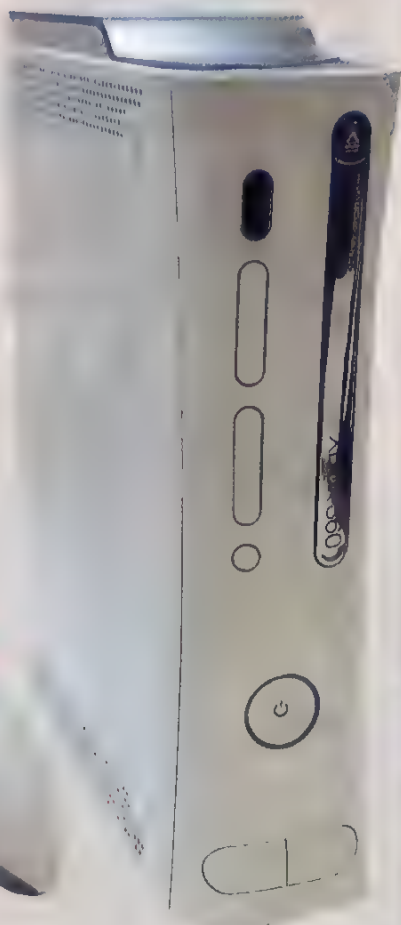
By now, everyone thinking about a launch day purchase should have already figured out which pack they need under the TV. But, for those still looking for the skinny on each, here's a little rundown of their differences:

### PREMIUM PACK

- Xbox 360 Game Console
- Wireless controller
- High-def and standard video cables
- 20 GB hard drive
- Ethernet cable
- Headset
- Universal Media Remote (for a limited time only)
- Xbox Live Silver
- Xbox Live Gold 30-Day Trial

### CORE

- Xbox 360 Game Console
- Wired controller
- Composite A/V cables
- Xbox Live Silver
- Xbox Live Gold 30-Day Trial



7 6



5



3



4



HOLIDAY BUYING GUIDE

## 2 G-PAK 360 CONSOLE TRAVEL CASE

List Price: \$29.99

Naki World, a company that consistently makes the best console travel cases, is back in action with the 360 carrying case. While not revolutionary in design, the case does let one strap the next-gen system inside and open up ports for easy play without having to unpack the whole bundle.

## 3 STUBBS THE ZOMBIE SOUNDTRACK

List Price: \$18.98

Aspyr Media, Shout! Factory, and Wideload Games are making great strides in video game soundtracks with the release of Stubbs the Zombie's song collection. Mid-century classics recorded by contemporary groups

like Death Cab for Cutie, Cake, and The Flaming Lips make great brain-chomping accompaniments.

## 4 XBOX 360 LIVE SUBSCRIPTION

List Price: \$69.99 (12-month Value Pack), \$49.99 (12-month plus one month free), \$39.99 (Three-month Value Pack), \$19.99 (Three-month), \$7.99 (One-month)

With the added features that Xbox Live's next generation throws into the mix, getting a long-term subscription at a discounted rate seems a pretty safe bet. The Value Packs come with a headset, a game rebate (\$20 for the year and \$10 for the quarter), marketplace points (200 with the 12-month package and 100 with the three-month),

and an Arcade title (Billiards for the long-term and Joust for the short).

## 5 OFFICIAL 15TH ANNIVERSARY STREET FIGHTER ARCADE STICK

List Price: \$59.99

We thought it was supposed to be crystal for a 15th anniversary, but Capcom and Nuby decided to shower the classic fighter with controllers and this amazing arcade stick instead. Great art and arcade-quality components make this a must-have for reverent fans. It's even compatible with Xbox Live and also works on the current-gen Sony console.

## 6 XBOX NEON LED CASE FEET

List Price: around \$17.50

Sold in sets of four with red, blue, or green

options and a switch to install on the back of the case, these puppies are a cheap way to spice up the 'box. Originally designed for PC cases, they are easily fitted to the Xbox and, by all appearances, the 360 as well. They are sold direct through WhiteDog Games, an English mod supply company.

## 7 MICROSOFT XBOX

List Price: \$149.99

Just because Microsoft is pimping a new console this holiday season, don't forget about the great (and quickly becoming more affordable) original Xbox. A substantial existing library, online capabilities, and at least another year of great new games makes this still worth checking out.



HOLIDAY BUYING GUIDE



Warning: Installation voids manufacturer's warranty. Proceed at your own risk.

Shown with PSP, disc, and headphones - all sold separately.



**1 SONY PLAYSTATION PORTABLE**  
List Price: \$249.99

In a year packed with great gear, the PSP continues to reign supreme. Potential is the name of the game for this new system, and while some of it hasn't been yet realized, the handheld's future is promising. Multimedia possibilities with UMD and downloadable content are unequaled in handheld gaming, and a collection of solid (if, admittedly, a little rehashed) games are a sturdy foundation on which we will hopefully see innovation, creativity, and whole new gameplay experiences.

**2 PROJECT ASTERIX FACEPLATES AND BUTTON SETS**

List Price: \$29.90 - \$59.90 (Faceplates), \$17.90 (Button Sets)  
Chinese manufacturer E-Linksoft has made some faceplate and button combinations for the PSP that convert the unit's entire top half to a variety of highly-saturated colors. Basic black and Japanese special edition-styled white are joined by Ferrari

red, liquid silver, chrysalis blue, and crystal dazzle. Installation hardware and instructions are included, but using this product downright spits in the face of Sony's manufacturer warranty, so go at your own peril.

**3 THE GAUNTLET BY LIFEPOD**  
List Price: \$29.99

It holds stuff. Do you really need a lot more? Well, Ziplock bags hold stuff too, but that won't work for the shiny PSP, so more is obviously required. Lifepod's Gauntlet case is smartly designed and walks the fine line of supplying storage without being gigantic, having a reasonable amount of style, and not looking pretentious.

**4 CANARY WIRELESS DIGITAL HOTSPOTTER #HS10**  
List Price: \$59.99

Looking for a Wi-Fi hotspot for some online gaming, but don't want to bust out the PSP for nothing? Inexpensive devices like this Canary Wireless model are small (about 2.5 inches square) and fast; and this particular one's LCD readout gives

you the skinny on whether the network is encrypted, what its name is, and which flavor of protocol it's running on (802.11b/g for this unit). Think of it as a divining rod for online gaming.

**5 ALTOIDS SOURS**  
List Price: \$1.95

Altoids are curiously strong and, in the case of the Sours line, curiously (and fortuitously) sized just right for UMDs. Sure, third party designers have come out with cases, but these are cheap, easy to find, hard sided, and come complete with a snack. Just wash them out first - you don't need sour apple dust all over your copy of Hot Shots Golf.

**6 DATEL HDD 4 GB WITH X2 BATTERY**  
List Price: \$199.99

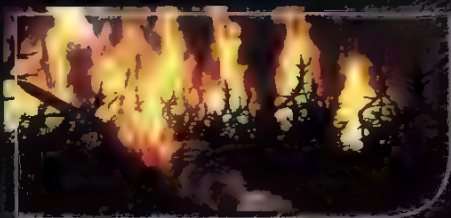
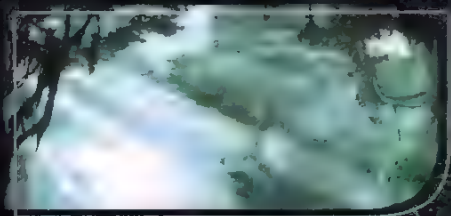
If all goes according to Datel's ambitious plan, this could be the absolute must-have accessory for the Sony PSP. The kit contains a few parts. One is the company's X2 battery, a rechargeable unit that doubles the PSP's standard battery life and fits into

the current battery slot. Also included is a four GB mini hard drive. With a size and shape similar to the extended battery, this extra storage will fit in on the opposite end of the unit and has a connector designed to fit into the PSP's memory stick slot. To manage the extra capacity, Datel's existing MAX Media Kit software and cable package is also included in the bundle.

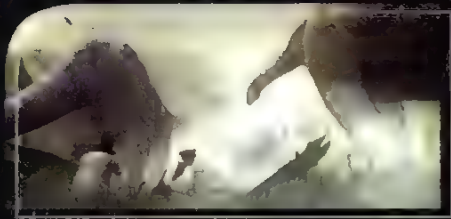
**7 SANDISK MEMORY STICK PRO DUO GAME CARDS WITH MADDEN NFL 06**  
List Price: \$49.99 to \$114.99 (256 MB to 1 GB)

Third party Memory Stick manufacturer Sandisk recently joined forces with EA and the union's first offspring is a free, bonus save file for Madden NFL 06 (PSP) on Sandisk's line of gaming cards. Available on all of the company's different Memory Stick sizes, the save file's biggest draw is 100 points players can use towards the new Assistant Coach feature.

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**THINK YOU KNOW KONG? THINK AGAIN.**

**BREATHING HEAVILY, YOU CROUCH IN A DENSE THicket OF JUNGLE VINES.** Twenty yards away, a hungry V-Rex rages through the trees, hunting for his dinner. Fear pierces your gut as you realize your trusty weapon is empty. Suddenly, an impossibly huge ape bodyslams the V-Rex, sending it sprawling. And a titanic struggle erupts before your eyes. Welcome to Skull Island – and the unforgettable world of Peter Jackson's *King Kong: The Official Game of the Movie*.

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# BEAST



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**ING KONG FIRST MADE HIS CINEMATIC DEBUT IN 1933, thrilling audiences with a powerful story and**

**groundbreaking special effects for its time. Peter Jackson's current reimagining promises to do no less, bringing the perilous world of Skull Island to life as only Jackson can – Jackson and famed game designer Michel Ancel, that is.**

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## **AN AVID GAMER, PETER JACKSON STARTED DREAMING UP IDEAS**

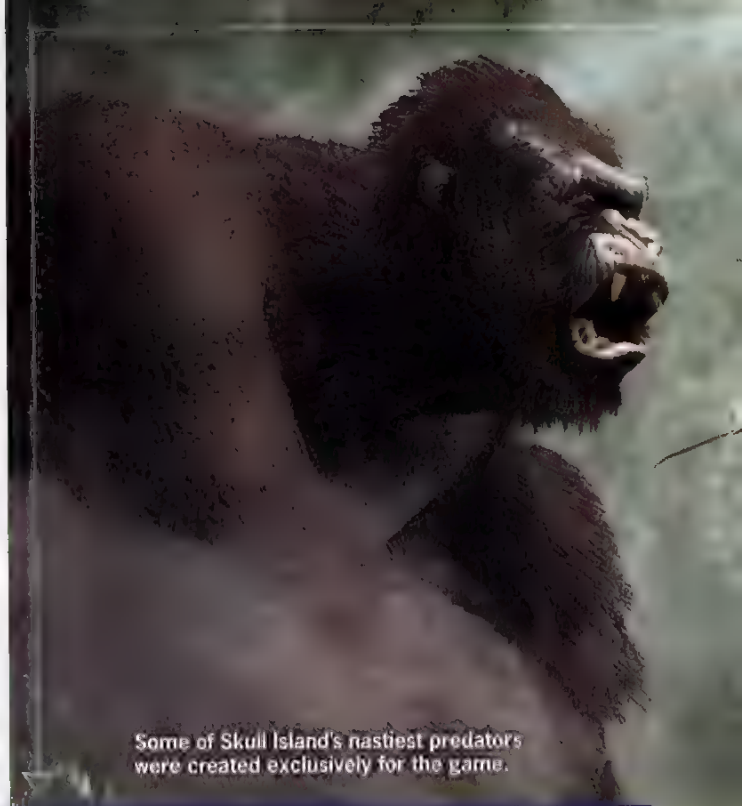
for a King Kong video game as soon as he started the movie. But to make a video game as memorable as the movie, he needed a creative partner with a true talent for rendering both fantasy and emotion. Then he played *Beyond Good & Evil™*, an epic adventure crafted by renowned game designer Michel Ancel. Right away, Jackson knew he'd found his man. And, judging by the jaw-dropping beauty and intensity of the gameplay, Jackson and Ancel have succeeded brilliantly.

## **BREATHING LIFE INTO A LEGEND**

Jackson and Ancel set out to create a game deeper and more immersive than the film itself. So the game had to look and feel just as convincing as the "real" world captured on film. To achieve this, the development team used every trick in the book – plus a few that aren't.

A rare technique called "inverse kinematics" adds frightening realism to the behavior of Skull Island's predators. This technique varies and synchronizes the animations used for each type of creature, depending on the creature's AI. For example, if you're detected by a V-Rex, you'll see the monster turn its eyes and head directly toward you, lunging over rocks and smashing through the jungle in a convincing attempt to make you its dinner.

But techniques like inverse kinematics would mean little without a sophisticated AI system governing the behavior of Skull Island's denizens. Some species attack alone, while others use clever pursuit tactics to attack in groups. Fortunately, your enemies aren't the only intelligent creatures on Skull Island. Your crew will protect you, suggest solutions to problems, and generally react as real humans – real scared humans – would.

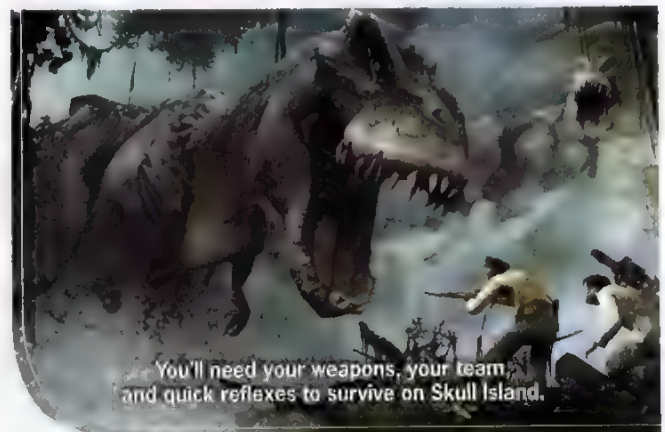


Some of Skull Island's nastiest predators were created exclusively for the game.

"[Ancel] has just a great storytelling skill in making you so involved in the game as a player that you actually become emotionally attached to the characters that you're playing with." – Peter Jackson.

And just wait till you feast your eyes on the stunningly detailed jungle of Skull Island. Thanks to clever layering of the largest number of 2D sprites, filters, and effects ever used in any video game – including meteorological effects like water, fog, wind, fire, and smoke – you'll almost be able to feel the hot, humid jungle air. Blades of grass rustle convincingly around your legs. Sunlight patterns shift subtly. In short, this jungle doesn't just look pretty. It feels alive.

Perhaps the greatest creation of all is Kong himself. Agile and powerful, Kong moves through Skull Island with remarkable force and speed. And take a close look at his fur; the dev team used intricate 3D effects to actually animate each separate strand. The overall effect is breathtakingly real.



You'll need your weapons, your team, and quick reflexes to survive on Skull Island.





with the weapons you can carry, you'll never win just by fighting. To stay alive, you'll need other strategies, such as tricking predators into battling each other and using the environment to set clever traps.

At a key moment, you begin playing Kong in third-person. When the camera pulls back to reveal Kong's mighty perspective, you feel a rush of freedom and power. Delivered from the harried perspective of Jack, you inherit swift movements, powerful battle attacks, and the gratifying ability to smash, throw, and scale just about everything around you. But playing as Kong isn't just a walk in the park. Confronted by multiple enemies with clever attack patterns, you'll have to fight hard to defeat huge V-Rexes and outsmart swarms of smaller predators.

The alternating gameplay intensifies the emotions already inherent in the story. Ancel, like Jackson, never loses sight of his audience, meting out new challenges just when you want them the most. The result is nothing short of an unforgettable game experience. ■

### A MASSIVE STEP FORWARD: INNOVATIONS IN IMMERSION

Every technical decision for Peter Jackson's King Kong has been made with an eye to thoroughly immersing the player in the world of the game. For example, you can still move and look around while scripted plot events occur, unlike nearly all other games. And the absence of a heads-up display makes the action feel more immediate. For example, when your character suffers an injury, you won't see any shrinking "health bar." Instead, your vision will blur and turn red.

The game also offers new experiences that don't appear in the movie. In addition to movie creatures, Jackson added beasts not seen in the film. Multiple pathways offer you a different experience every time you play, so that you'll never have to play the same game twice. The difficulty level scales fluidly according to your performance, growing more challenging as you improve.

Most impressive of all is the range of emotions evoked by the alternating gameplay possibilities. By inviting you to play as both Jack Driscoll and Kong himself, the game delivers an unforgettable mix of intensity, realism, and entertainment through a rare combination of first- and third-person play.

### PLAYING WITH POWER: HEROES GREAT AND SMALL

Conceived by Jackson and realized to phenomenal effect by the development team, the dual gameplay between Jack and Kong delivers a dramatic shift in perspective and power.

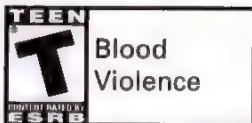
As Jack Driscoll, you're outnumbered and overpowered by predators bigger, stronger, and faster than you. To heighten the sense of fear and danger, you play Jack's role in first-person. You'll have to advance through a dense jungle, never knowing what lurks behind the next tree. Armed only

# PETER JACKSON'S KING KONG

## THE OFFICIAL GAME OF THE MOVIE



PlayStation.2



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HOLIDAY BUYING GUIDE



**1 GAME BOY ADVANCE SP**

**List Price: \$79.99**  
Quietly packed in with the SP's two newest colors (Graphite and Pearl Blue) is a wonderful surprise to gamers and industry followers – a fully backlit LCD. The difference is remarkable and the new case colors are quite spiffy as well. Think of it like a bigger Micro screen, with all of its bright, clear hues packed into a slightly larger, but more affordable unit.

**2 PLAY-YAN MICRO WITH MEDIASTAGE 4.2**

**List Price: \$79.90**  
Don't be fooled by its bland appearance – the Japan-only Play-Yan line packs a mean wallop of features. Running off of swappable SD memory, the cartridge and included software lets savvy users convert video and audio files into a format playable on the Micro. While it is an import product, they are widely available online, but buyer beware that configuring the files with the foreign-lan-

guage software can require a bit of fiddling. The unit shown here is for the Micro, but versions are available for other Game Boy Advance models and an eventual North American launch could be a possibility.

**3 NINTENDO WI-FI USB CONNECTOR**

**List Price: around \$30**  
While Nintendo had always promised that the DS would go online, specifics about the company's plan hadn't surfaced until recently. From a purchasing standpoint, there's only one thing to buy, and that's only if you have a very specific network setup for your home (broadband internet connection without a wireless network). This dongle (yes, that's a real word) will plug into a USB port and provide a safe, separate wireless connection for your DS.

**4 DS HOLIDAY BUNDLE OF JOY**

**List Price: \$149.99**  
We would rag on Nintendo for pimping cute puppies for the billionth time this year,

but then again, they're damn adorable pups, so we can forgive them just this one holiday season. The DS Bundle of Joy will offer two different bundle-exclusive colors (Pearl Pink and Teal), an exclusive mix of Nintendogs (starting with Labrador retriever, golden retriever, German shepherd, beagle, Yorkshire terrier, and miniature dachshund), a Nintendogs DS skin, and a bone-shaped screen wiper. Now go coo into your handheld gaming console and leave us alone.

**5 FINAL FANTASY IV GAME BOY MICRO FACEPLATE**

**List Price: TBA**  
Unfortunately, there are few specifics about how this stunning Yoshitaka Amano-designed faceplate will be distributed by Square Enix, but we do know that all FF fans should be thoroughly drooling by now. Hopefully, getting our mitts on one will be as simple as fulfilling our pre-order for the announced Final Fantasy IV Advance port.

**6 GAME BOY MICRO**

**List Price: \$99.99**  
Small almost to a fault for some people, but the Micro's screen is amazing and the size is unquestionably convenient. The Micro wasn't the new Game Boy that some were looking for, but it is also a force to respect and admire – it's ingeniously handy.

**7 FS1 HIGH DEFINITION EARPHONES**

**List Price: \$149.95**  
These might be a little overkill for most handheld gaming audio applications, but high quality earphones can be a bear to find. Luckily, XtremeMac and Future Sonics got together to make some professional quality earbuds that offer full sound even at low volumes and ship with a variety of attachments to make wearing them comfy, like a deep feather bed in some Edwardian castle. These were made for the iPod, but work with any electronic device sporting a standard headphone jack.



HOLIDAY BUYING GUIDE

## 1 OPUS FOOSBALL TABLE

List Price: \$73,000

Fulfilling the self-appointed goal of redefining table football, the Eleven Forty Company crafts customized foosball tables with style, precision, and wit... words we never thought we'd use in reference to the rumpus room classic. Buyers can modify players' heads and bodies (even having sculptures of themselves and/or friends made), the play surface's lighting, and more mundane options like cabinet and handle design. Making foosball pimp – what's next, intelligently sexy dart boards?

## 2 PIRATE PILLow SET

List Price: \$35 (two standard pillowcases), \$32 (throw pillow)

Sin in Linen makes witty and classic bedding designs based on tattoo flash art and mid-century pinups. Making skulls, anchors, and hearts with daggers kitchy design statements and not a trashy homage to misguided

youth, the company offers these pirate-friendly pillowcases in black or white, and throw pillows in black. These designers deserve our respect and thanks.

## 3 THE EX

List Price: \$79.99

Crassly named, but with an, um...whimsical voodoo subtext, this morbid knife rack is just what every kitchen needs. The stand is ABS plastic and the five knives (a slicing and dicing variety pack covering every need) are packed in. Shipping, handling, and the strength to carry on are not included in the base price.

## 4 POLYGRAPH SHIRTS

List Price: around \$25 (Gameboy Meets Gamegirl), around \$33 (My First Computer)

You have to cross the wide ocean to get the best video game shirts in the world – ones

that normal gamers, proud but not obnoxious, would wear without shame. Japanese supplier PolyGraph gives us what we're asking for in high-quality stock with great images. Shown here are Gameboy Meets Gamegirl and My First Computer.

## 5 GAMER BBQ APRON

List Price: \$19.99

For the gaming chefs, self-production site Café Press offers a bevy of choices. This design is in the Thisamine Gift Shop, but the homebrew stylings of similar-minded folk furnish pages upon pages of witty and interesting ways to express your love while you slave away over midnight munchies.

## 6 VIDEO GAME ART

List Price: \$29.95

This collection by Nic Kelman promises, "A first look from an art history and post-modern cultural perspective at the influences

behind and achievements of today's genre-defining video games." Hoity-toity sounding for sure, but it really just means awesome pictures laid out in a respectful manner. Published by Assouline.

## 7 TETRIS SHELving

List Price: around \$350/segment (configuration as shown is \$6,790)

We're not saying that these are overpriced, but it seems like most people with a level, a saw, and some lumber could make a reasonable facsimile with the same effect. But Brave Space's actual production units would far outstrip our crafty results and, in that way, are worth the cost for their fine materials – hand-rubbed hardwoods cut to replicate the beveled edges of the game's classic graphics.



### 1 RESIDENT EVIL 4 CHAINSAW CONTROLLER

List Price: \$59.99

A Chainsaw controller came out with Resident Evil's release on GameCube, and it's a happy time when gory, disgusting, horrific prop replicas are so popular that they deserve a re-release when the game hops to a second platform. Shown here in its collectible case, the PS2 Chainsaw edition is just as morbid and just as awesome as its GC counterpart.

### 2 INTEC GAMECUBE SOUND SYSTEM

List Price: \$36.99

Small, cheap, and styled to match either the black or indigo GameCube colors, Intec's quick solution adds just a touch of sound power to small-scale gaming setups. The dock designed to fit under the console

even has an A/V selector to make evil cable switching a thing of the past.

### 3 COLORWARE SLIM PLAYSTATION 2

List Price: \$249

Oh, what a good, professional paint job can do to spiffy anything up. ColorWare's tradition of high-gloss automotive jobs on everyday electronics is an easy (and pretty affordable) way to customize a unit to your liking with results that will last a lot longer than that old rusty can of spray paint. The price as listed includes a controller, which can be painted to match for an extra \$20.

### 4 HELLCUBE SE SKIN (SHOWN WITH CONSOLE)

List Price: \$14.99 (skin), \$99.99 (GameCube)

Completing puzzles that open a portal to Hell is never really the best thing to do on

a Friday night, but the *Hellraiser* movies have taught us that doing so almost always works out in the end...This GameCube skin by consistently impressive skin shop DecalGirl makes us giggle, but in that manic-al way. How else are you going to make the GC imposing?

### 5 GUITAR HERO CONTROLLER

List Price: TBA

If you really want to get the band back together, you're going to need two guitars. While most retail outlets are bundling Red Octane's Guitar Hero with one axe-styled controller, we suggest you get a second for those wailing duets. Five fret buttons, a strum sensor, and a whammy bar to make the neighbors scream are all details that haven't been overlooked in this bitchin' accessory. Consider this fair warning, though, that stand alone controllers won't be available at launch.

### 6 MADCATZ NFL CONTROLLER

List Price: \$29.99

Third party peripheral manufacturers are setting themselves apart more and more frequently by using interesting and lucrative licensing deals. MadCatz's association with the NFL brings football fans a specialized controller for their favorite team. Each team is widely available and all feature nice, big logo art for the hometown hero that dominates the controllers' fronts.

### 7 SHADOW THE HEDGEHOG CONTROLLER

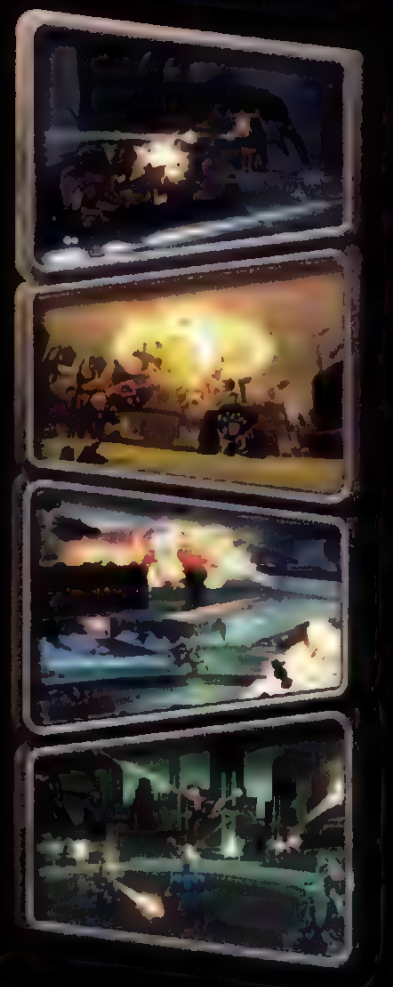
List Price: \$24.99

Commemorating the darker side of Sega's landmark franchise, an intense art piece wraps around the front of this collectible (but still totally usable) controller. Set to launch about a week after the game, it's a must-have for fans of the series.

# IN THIS GALACTIC BATTLE ARENA, ONLY ONE WILL SURVIVE.

## WITCHET DEADLOCKED

Captured by a deranged media mogul, you're now forced to compete for your life in the scarred arena of an underground game show. The good news? You're not alone. You've got badass robot friends to help blast you through anything. Because it's not just how you fire your weapons, it's how you fire your commands.



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Mild Language



PlayStation 2



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### 1 FINAL FANTASY VII: ADVENT CHILDREN ACTION FIGURES

List Price: \$19.99

Square Enix's Final Fantasy series has never been shy of the merchandising, but these Advent Children action figures really take the cake for us. You can fill time between now and when *Advent Children* releases by picking up these three stunning figures, each featuring tons of articulation and exquisite sculpting. Sephiroth, Vincent Valentine, and Tifa Lockheart make up the first set.

### 2 MEGA MAN TOYS

List Price: \$7.99

Jazwares is smart enough to do the right thing. In this case, it's releasing five-figure series of Mega Man characters sculpted from their original art designs. Two waves are currently planned with the first out now and the second hitting early in 2006. Series one includes Mega Man, Shadowman, Elecman, Gutsman, and Protoman. Next year will see

Dr. Wily, Heat Man, Wood Man, Ice Man, and an as-yet-unannounced surprise offering. Each is made of rotomolded PVC plastic and stands around six inches.

### 3 MARVEL FIGURE FACTORY

List Price: \$5.95

If there's one toy that's just too hard to find this year, it's not the crazy imports of Japanese resin statues or the limited-edition Final Fantasy ship recreations, it's the rare figures in the Marvel Figure Factory line. Sold in little wooden crates, each kit has 15 to 25 pieces fans assemble into miniature action figures. Each wave has eight known figures and 12 mystery characters. Collecting them all is no small feat, but the hunt is half of the fun.

### 4 RAGNAROK MOUSE

List Price: around \$53

Another Slime controller? Heck no — this is Ragnarok's take on super cute. This three-

button Pouring mouse comes with matching mouse pad, a copy of Ragnarok Online, and the potential to squelch any sort of sexual orientation questions on sight. While a similar form factor in the Dragon Quest controller produced something surprisingly usable, we haven't gotten our hands on this one to vouch for its ergonomics.

### 5 THE BATMAN HANDBOOK

List Price: \$15.95

The greatest detective to ever live has had his life's work and strategy distilled down into this slim, but stylish, tome. Topics covered include the training of a new sidekick, surviving poison gas attacks, instructions on bulletproofing a Batmobile, and how to throw a grappling hook. All of this (and more!) in an easy-to-reference format with two-color illustrations by DC Comic artists.

### 6 THE ZOMBIE SURVIVAL GUIDE: COMPLETE PROTECTION FROM THE LIVING DEAD

List Price: \$12.95

With great Boy Scout handbook-inspired illustrations, this reference guide walks survivors in training through strategies as varied as selecting opportune combat areas (eg. Get up the stairs, then destroy them) and advantageous weaponry ("Blades don't need reloading").

### 7 DEAD OR ALIVE 4 ARCADE STICK

List Price: TBA

Hopefully coming stateside with the release of DOA 4, this arcade stick was commissioned and designed by Team Ninja with the manufacturing of Hori Japan. Series creator Tomonobu Itagaki said of the design, "When I play with it my skill level goes up like 30 percent" If it's good enough for the master ninja, it's good enough for us.



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**Chart Ringtones<sup>1</sup>**

poly

- |                                 |          |
|---------------------------------|----------|
| 1) Grind With Me                | poly7480 |
| 2) Naked                        | poly7481 |
| 3) Sugar, We're Goin' Down      | poly7482 |
| 4) Candy Shop                   | poly7483 |
| 5) Listen To Your Heart         | poly7484 |
| 6) Wake Me Up When September... | poly7485 |
| 7) Wait (Whisper Song)          | poly7486 |
| 8) Drop It Like It's Hot        | poly7487 |
| 9) Back Then                    | poly7488 |
| 10) James Bond                  | poly7489 |

**All Time Favorites<sup>2</sup>**

- |                                |          |
|--------------------------------|----------|
| An Honest Mistake              | poly7490 |
| Between The Sheets             | poly7491 |
| Bohemian Rhapsody              | poly7492 |
| Chop Suey                      | poly7493 |
| Cotton Eye Joe                 | poly7494 |
| Cry Me A River                 | poly7495 |
| Dancing Queen                  | poly7496 |
| Dangerously In Love            | poly7497 |
| Dueling Banjos                 | poly7498 |
| Electric Avenue                | poly7499 |
| Free Bird                      | poly7500 |
| Good Times (TV Theme)          | poly7501 |
| I Believe I Can Fly            | poly7502 |
| Low Rider                      | poly7503 |
| Live And Let Die               | poly7504 |
| Love Will Tear Us Apart        | poly7505 |
| Miami Vice (TV Theme)          | poly7506 |
| Mr. Brightside                 | poly7507 |
| Power Rangers (TV Theme)       | poly7508 |
| Pump Up The Jam                | poly7509 |
| Red Red Wine                   | poly7510 |
| Saved By The Bell              | poly7511 |
| The Devil Went Down To Georgia | poly7512 |
| We're Off To See The Wizard    | poly7513 |

**TopSound FX<sup>4</sup>**

- |                               |         |
|-------------------------------|---------|
| BlingBling - Textmessage      | fun5205 |
| Catch This Text If You Can    | fun5206 |
| Drunk Tarzan                  | fun5207 |
| From Hell                     | fun5208 |
| Go Skate                      | fun5209 |
| Good Morn'g - Its Your Mom    | fun5210 |
| La Cucaracha Frog             | fun5211 |
| Laughing Horse                | fun5212 |
| Mail Mail Mail                | fun5213 |
| Mommie Your Phone Is Ringing  | fun5214 |
| Offensive Language            | fun5215 |
| Please Pick Me Up!            | fun5216 |
| Police Horn                   | fun5217 |
| Mr. Brightside                | fun5218 |
| Reggae Sng                    | fun5219 |
| Tennis Cry                    | fun5220 |
| The Annoying Thing 01         | fun5221 |
| The Crazy Frog - Teasing      | fun5222 |
| Turn Your Phone Off Next Time | fun5223 |
| U Have A Phone Call           | fun5224 |
| Whats Up?                     | fun5224 |

**Realsounds<sup>6</sup>**

- |                                     |          |
|-------------------------------------|----------|
| ASAP - T.I                          | real4575 |
| Back Then - Mike Jones              | real4576 |
| Bad Chick - Webbie                  | real4577 |
| Dem Boyz - Boyz N Da Hood           | real4578 |
| Don't Trip - Trina                  | real4579 |
| Down With The Sickness - Disturbed  | real4580 |
| Girl Tonite - Twista                | real4581 |
| Give Me That - Webbie               | real4582 |
| Grind With Me - Pretty Ricky        | real4583 |
| Headstrong - Trap                   | real4584 |
| Helena - My Chemical Romance        | real4585 |
| I'm A King - P\$C                   | real4586 |
| Knock If You Buck - Crime Mob       | real4587 |
| Lafly Taffy - DaL                   | real4588 |
| Lighters Up - Lil' Kim              | real4589 |
| Nothing But A Number - Pretty Ricky | real4590 |
| Sexy Gurl - Trina                   | real4591 |
| Sittin' Sideway - Paul Wall         | real4592 |
| Wake Me Up When... - Green Day      | real4593 |
| We Be Burnin' - Sean Paul           | real4594 |

**Hip Hop Ringtones<sup>1</sup>**

- |                        |          |
|------------------------|----------|
| Armageddon             | poly7514 |
| Beautiful              | poly7515 |
| Because I Got High     | poly7516 |
| Big Poppa              | poly7517 |
| Can I Kick It          | poly7518 |
| Caught Out There       | poly7519 |
| Get It On The Floor    | poly7520 |
| Get Ur Freak On        | poly7521 |
| Gimmie The Light       | poly7522 |
| Hip Hop Hooray         | poly7523 |
| I Ain't Mad At Cha     | poly7524 |
| In Love Wit Chu        | poly7525 |
| Jigga My Nigga         | poly7526 |
| Keep It Gangsta        | poly7527 |
| Lapdance               | poly7528 |
| Let The Rhythm Hit 'Em | poly7529 |
| Lets Talk About Sex    | poly7530 |
| Pass That Dutch        | poly7531 |
| Push It                | poly7532 |
| Ruff Ryder's Anthem    | poly7533 |



**Crazy Frog - Axel F**

RealTones <sup>7</sup>	
Crazy Frog - Axel F	frog2463
Crazy Frog - Axel F - Speed	frog2464
Crazy Frog - Axel F - Ringing	frog2465
Ringtones	
Crazy Frog	frog2450
Crazy Frog - Axel F	frog2451
Crazy Frog - Remix	frog2452
Sound FX <sup>4</sup>	
The Crazy Frog - Original	frog2465
The Crazy Frog - Nuts	frog2466
The Crazy Frog - Motor	frog2467

**Wallpapers<sup>3</sup>**

frog2458	frog2459	frog2460	frog2461	frog2463
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**Screensavers<sup>5</sup>**

frog2453	frog2454
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**Cool Wallpapers<sup>3</sup>**


**How to order...**

- Messages
- select Create Message in the menu
- type in the keyword of your favorite ringtones, e.g. for Crazy Frog - Axel F
- confirm with OK

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<b>\$ 5.99 per plan</b>						

**HANDSET SUPPORT: POLYPHONIC RINGTONES:** LG64011, G4015, G4020; MOTOROLA V180, V220, V300, V400; NOKIA 3100, 3595, 6010; SAMSUNG X426, X427, X427M, SIEMENS A56, CF62; SONY ERICSSON T226, T237; **REAL TONES:** LG64015; MOTOROLA V180, V220, V300, V400; NOKIA 3100, 3595, 6010; SAMSUNG X426, X427, X427M; SIEMENS A56, CF62; SONY ERICSSON T226, T237; **SOUND FX:** LG64015, G4020; MOTOROLA V180, V220, V300, V400; NOKIA 3100, 3595, 6010; SAMSUNG X426, X427, X427M; SIEMENS C61, CF62; SONY ERICSSON T226, T237; **COLOR WALLPAPERS:** LG64015, G4020, L1150; MOTOROLA V180, V220, V300, V400; NOKIA 3100, 3200, 3595, 6010; SAMSUNG X426, X427, X427M; SIEMENS C61, CF62; SONY ERICSSON T226, T237; **SCREENSAVERS:** LG 64015; MOTOROLA V180, V220, V300, V400; NOKIA 3100, 3595, 6010; SAMSUNG X426, X427, X427M; SIEMENS C61, CF62; SONY ERICSSON T226, T237 - for more handset information visit [www.jamster.com](http://www.jamster.com)

**Screensavers<sup>5</sup>**


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## BLOCKBUSTERS

**BATMAN BEGINS**

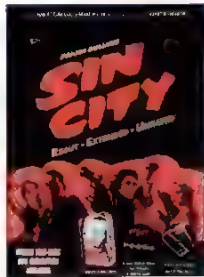
List Price: \$28.98

Finally, a Batman movie that resurrects the things we love best about this caped detective: dark, morbid, and wide open for sequels along this storyline (and no rubber nipples!).

**CHARLIE AND THE CHOCOLATE FACTORY**

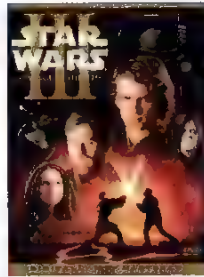
List Price: \$28.98

A whole new take on the acid-trip children's favorite with hysterical new musical numbers and trained squirrels.

**SIN CITY EXTENDED EDITION**

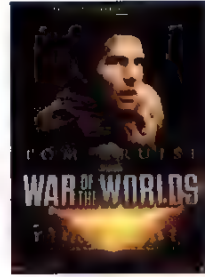
List Price: \$39.99

The DVD edition that should have come out right away; that obviously pared down disk that released months ago was almost insulting. This one should make it all better.

**STAR WARS EPISODE III: REVENGE OF THE SITH**

List Price: \$29.98

Ani kills younglings! Ani leads a done army! Ani goes crazy badass and kills everyone who has ever loved him for who he truly is!

**WAR OF THE WORLDS**

List Price: \$29.99

If you can hear that fog-horn-from-hell noise that the alien ships make and not get a little nervous, you're clearly dead inside. Sorry to have to be the ones to tell you.

UMD  
RELEASES**BILL AND TED'S EXCELLENT ADVENTURE**

List Price: \$19.95

**CHAPPELLE'S SHOW SEASON ONE, VOL. 1 UNCENSORED**

List Price: \$24.99

**HAPPY GILMORE**

List Price: \$19.95

**THE INCREDIBLES**

List Price: \$29.95

**SUNDAY DRIVER**

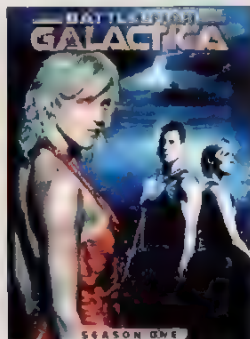
List Price: TBA

## COLLECTIONS

**BBC HISTORY OF WORLD WAR II**

List Price: \$149.98

With all of the WW II scenes we play in games, it's a good idea to get some extra education on what those conflicts really mean.

**BATTLESTAR GALACTICA SEASON ONE**

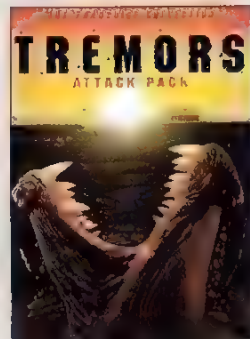
List Price: \$59.98

If you haven't been watching this Sci-Fi channel resurrection of the '70s dud, we don't even know where to start with how much you suck.

**THE BRAT PACK COLLECTION**

List Price: \$39.98

*The Breakfast Club*, *Sixteen Candles*, and *Weird Science* together at last? And, there's a bonus music CD with tunes from the great movies? Sold!

**TREMORS ATTACK PACK**

List Price: \$26.98

You want to know what's awesome? The first two Tremors flicks, that's what! Classic '80s humor-horror (a new genre we just made up) will never be uncool.

## LESSER-KNOWN GEMS

**IMMORTAL**

List Price: \$24.98

Don't say we didn't warn you — this French CGI/real people fantasy flick based on a comic is one of the weirdest things to come out in recent memory.

**OFFICE SPACE SPECIAL EDITION WITH FLAIR**

List Price: \$19.98

One of the greatest triumphs of a film finding its audience in the rental market, *Office Space* is well overdue for a more reverent treatment. Here's your flair! Now, go make your "O face".

**PHONE**

List Price: \$24.99

You really don't want to know anything about this movie except the recommendation that it maintains the high standards of Japanese horror that Americans are quickly learning to love.

**RIZE**

List Price: \$27.98

Cited among office personnel as, "The best movie this year," this documentary covers the Los Angeles-based dance movements of downing and krumping.

**STREET FIGHTER ALPHA: GENERATIONS**

List Price: \$24.98

If you want to know what happened before *Street Fighter Alpha* and why Akuma rules, this anime release is the only way to get answers. Directed by Ikuo Kuwana (*Steam Boy*, *Dead Leaves*).



# Emails, blogs and text messages.

I played *Zombie Feeders* and tried to get the proper number of living people to the Zombies' city for food. To get them there, I have to drive the live people in a big bus. But whenever more than ten live people come to *Zombie City* and the bus exceeds 65 MPH, it crashes and the screen goes dead. Is the irony accidental or designed into the game?

ZOMBIE DRIVER

**Dear Bus Driver,**  
Maybe you should drive yourself to *Zombie City*. And please don't exceed the speed limit.

On the 12th level of *Burger Blow-out*, I noticed a secret passageway under the deep fat fryer. It takes you to a lightning croquet match with the wallaby boss, but you can't utilize your tornado wind powers. I've built up these powers after my duel with the pyramid people, but I can't seem to make any progress. Is there a secret code to get my powers back?!

LOST IN LAS VEGAS

**Dear Loser...err, Lost Guy,**  
If we just gave you the code, it wouldn't be a secret code, would it? Try LLR, Up Down Down Up. That should get you...  
That'll help with...  
people.

I just heard a...  
claiming that...  
and watch...  
you smart...  
given...  
spent...  
here...  
Histor...

**Dear B...**  
There are...  
are book sm...  
seems you...

I've been into the wireless controllers since our TV is one of those

mounted Hi-Def jobs, but unfortunately, the wireless signal won't make it up there because the ceiling fan keeps breaking it up. Bummer city. Are there any wireless controllers out there that can work with these fancy new TVs or am I doomed to an old-fashioned cord?

WILL,  
WAUKEGAN, WI

**Dear Wireless,**  
Although it sounds like money is no object and you like to spend it, we're gonna help you out on this one. Look for the round switch on the wall - you know, the one that controls the fan. And press it in once. Problem solved. Please send the extra money we just saved you to the magazine, care of me:)

My brother has had some weird reactions to the *Goblin General* game. Every night he sleepwalks downstairs and eats a handful of dog food. He then makes all these weird, growling noises and sleeps in the hallway. Every morning my mom says to stop playing the game because it's causing my brother to act weird, but I think it's just puberty. Any thoughts?

TOMMY

**Dear Tommy Boy,**  
It is the game, but don't tell your mom that, tell her it's a phase he's going through and that she needs to give him...  
...attention...that should free you up...  
...play time.

TIMOTHY

...Guy,  
...obvious. They do every...  
...wards. And yes, no matter how...  
...much we persist, they still drive on the...  
...wrong side of the road as well.

I was playing *Space Clowns* the other day and when the Grand Poobah went into

warp drive, the power in Austin went out. I was reading the manual with a flashlight, and it said that every 20th time the *Space Clown* ship goes into warp drive, the engines will fail. Does this have anything to do with blowing the power out in Austin for six hours? I want to play again tonight but I don't think I can go another six hours without air conditioning.

ELECTRICITYLESS IN AUSTIN

**Dear Heat Miser,**  
While playing *Space Clowns* for six hours straight does have an affect on your electric bill, it won't cause black outs... at least not the electric kind.

I was playing *4th Dimension Wizards* and I dropped the control stick. A few things here and there were pushed and a character that looked like my Dad appeared in the game telling me it was time to go to bed and stop playing with video games. They wouldn't actually put an anti-game message in their games would they? If I'm wrong, explain to me how they knew what my dad looks like.

CONFUSED 8TH LEVEL WIZARD

**Dear Late Nighter,**  
Yeah, actually it is your Dad. He wrote a letter to us a few months back asking if there was anything we could do to get you to put down the game. We told him we'd look into it. Oh yeah, wait till you...  
...with your mom.

GHOUL

...talk people outside the...  
game, too? Please get out and meet...  
some real-life Zombies. It's healthy.

And I thought I was freaky.

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# Winner, Best RPG of E3



**“One look at Oblivion will shatter your conceptions about what is possible in a video game.”**

*– GameInformer*

**“Oblivion is, at this time, the best-looking game I have ever seen in my life.”**

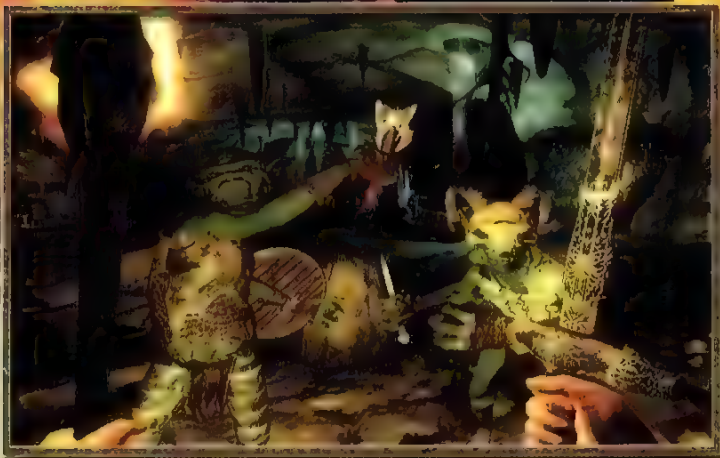
*– Xbox.com*

**“The biggest title for the Xbox 360™, and the one I'm most looking forward to.”**

*– GamePro Magazine*

**“To call the graphics ‘amazing’ is an extraordinary understatement.”**

*– GameSpy*



# THE FUTURE OF SPEECH IN GAMES



BY JEFF FOLEY, A FORMER BRAND MANAGER AT ATARI, NOW WORKS AT NUANCE COMMUNICATIONS, INC.

**P**erhaps you've noticed a growing trend in video gaming — extending the environment beyond the traditional interface to better bring gamers into the world. The push for immersion first appeared in coin-op arcade games (Spin the turret! Punch the pads! Pedal faster!) and has been steadily moving its way to home console systems (Steel Battalion, anyone?). Just witness the recent excitement surrounding the prototype controller for the Nintendo Revolution. From force feedback controllers to bongos, from the EyeToy to the dance pad, we're seeing more and more innovative offerings that encourage players to actually participate in the game rather than merely mashing buttons. What's the logical next step for immersive gaming? My prediction: speech recognition.

Automatic Speech Recognition (ASR) has been around on consoles for years, ever since its debut in the wisecracking Seaman game for the Sega Dreamcast. Yet for the most part, ASR has been a novelty, not a must-have. Its most acknowledged successes have been with games like SOCOM, Ghost Recon, and Rainbow Six, allowing you to bark orders at your computer-controlled teammates instead of navigating menu trees or remembering button sequences. The most innovative use of ASR was in Lifeline — an underappreciated PlayStation 2 game that gave you only a bank of monitors and your voice to guide an anime waitress-turned-heroine around an alien-infested space station. Though not without its design flaws, Lifeline demonstrated that innovations in speech recognition shouldn't be pigeonholed into the squad shooter genre.

Innovation is a good thing for an industry suffering from imitation. With well over a 1,000 console and PC releases every year, many of them well-established brands or sequels, it's hard for developers and publishers to get space on crowded store shelves, let alone pique mass interest in a title. Speech recognition can spice up an existing franchise (such as the GameCube's Mario Party 6) or differentiate a new title (such as the PSP's Talkman). Let's face it — unless a video game adds something unique and innovative to the market, it's usually dismissed as just another clone of today's genre-defin-

ing shooters, RPGs, and platformers.

With any discontinuous innovation, there are inevitable barriers to acceptance. Any Trekkies who have tried earlier versions of speech recognition were probably underwhelmed with the results. It's true — even the best implementations have limitations on what you can say as well as the occasional misrecognitions. One way to deal with that limitation has been to turn it into part of the game — such as Nintendogs has done. Who would blame a dog for misunderstanding your commands? But fortunately, the computationally intensive algorithms central to speech recognition have improved considerably in the last several years — just in time to take advantage of a new generation of console systems with enough juice to feature larger vocabulary ASR without dropping frame rates.

Mind you, speech recognition doesn't make sense for every game any more than steering wheels or light guns do. It's much easier to move a thumbstick than it is to say "go right — no, go left", and it's certainly faster to fire a weapon by button than by voice. (Though c'mon, admit it, wouldn't yelling "PEW PEW PEW!" at your console be kinda fun?) Nevertheless, ASR is a great fit for many games, especially when it can do the following:

Enhance the fantasy of the game. In many games, a player or his avatar needs to speak to a computer-controlled character — perhaps a teammate, a shopkeeper, or an arch-rival. Sometimes it feels more natural to order characters around than it does to remember button mappings. Imagine having a back-and-forth conversation with a key game character instead of navigating a list of responses or hitting controller buttons. That's a new style of interaction that brings the player further into the game's environment.

Create a more usable interface. Similarly, a complicated series of drop menus or an obscure sequence of buttons can interfere with enjoyment of the game. You'd rather say "Wield the purple lightsaber," than call up an inventory screen, scroll, scroll, (where is that damn thing anyways), scroll, right, right, select (which button was equip again?), left, left, select, exit...Or consider the painful roster management screens in most sports games — it'd

“...speech recognition doesn't make sense for every game any more than steering wheels or light guns do.”

be much easier to say "Put Modano on the second line" or "Trade Ramirez for A-Rod." Players want to be in the game, not diving into menus looking for an option, browsing through long lists, or cycling through a dizzying array of choices.

It's easy to see why squad shooters have embraced speech recognition — ordering "Bravo: Move To Checkpoint Zulu" is easy to use and fits the fantasy. But as the new generation of consoles raise the bar on what ASR can accomplish, we should expect more innovative uses. Role-playing games are all about immersion in a new world — so why not actually say conversation choices instead of selecting menu responses? And "Show me your best armor" or "I'll pay 50 for that, no more" make for more interesting haggling with in-game merchants than scroll bars. Shooters rely more on quick reflexes than quick tongues, but today's shooters typically feature a storyline — mysterious characters to interact with, computer terminals to access, and spoken passwords to get past locked doors. Besides, "Gimme the BFG" is more satisfying than 5 button presses while squinting at weapon icons. Sports games are ripe for ASR — what if you actually called out your plays from the huddle, or gave a verbal audible at the line of scrimmage? Told your infield to move in? Warned the pit crew to get ready? Not to mention the possibilities for embedding cheats and Easter eggs in a game that are unlocked with the proper voice command.

So what barrier remains? Simply put: demand. Consumers and reviewers alike evaluate games based on today's most popular features — the best graphics, the best audio, the best storylines — not the lack of a discontinuous innovation like speech. (Who would criticize Halo for not supporting weapon-swapping by voice?) In the end, it's up to us gamers to encourage technology such as speech recognition to take root. Reward the studios that innovate by talking up their titles within your gamer communities, and then vote with your wallet. The alternative? To be doomed to a gaming life of unimaginative sequels. ■■■■

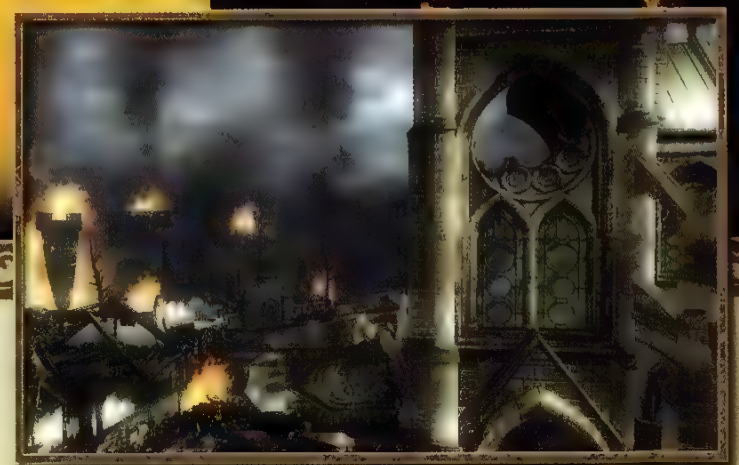
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The Elder Scrolls IV

# OBLIVION™

The RPG for the Next Generation





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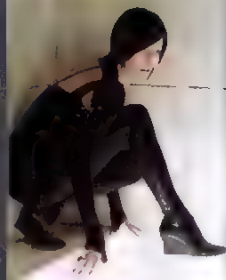
# december

01

**AUSTRALIAN GAME DEVELOPERS CONFERENCE (1-3)**  
This conference, also known as Who Wants to Get Bit By A Really Venomous Snake, showcases everything from the latest in video game technology to insightful keynote speeches.

02

The ridiculously twisty and overly hot *Aeon Flux* graces the silver screen today. This could be the best "sexy bond-age sci-fi secret agent" movie that you don't need to get from the backroom of your video store.



The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion

06

**NEW RELEASES**  
• Animal Crossing: Wild World - DS  
• Crash Tag Team Racing - PSP  
• The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion - 360  
• Golden Nugget Casino - DS  
• Mario Tennis - GBA  
• Mega Man X Collection - PS2  
• Pac-Man World 3 - PSP  
• PopoLoCris - PSP

07

**THE DARK KNIGHT TRILOGY**  
Batman Begins, The Dark Knight, and The Dark Knight Rises are the most powerful superhero films ever made. They're also the most powerful superhero films ever made.

09

*The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe* dazzles moviegoers of all ages today. Not us, though. We're holding out for the special edition re-release *The Lion, The Witch, The Wardrobe, and The Erotic Dancer*.

10

**PHILGDN (#11)**  
People named Phil wish to meet with others who are also named Phil are in luck! Actually, this is the Philadelphia Conference of Science Fiction and Fantasy. With a big push of Phils, however, it could become something far greater.



Prince of Persia Revelations - PSP

11

*King Kong* opens in theaters today. It has a giant ape and dinosaurs. Oooh! A Gorillasaurus Rex would be the coolest thing ever!

12

**NEW RELEASES**  
• Dragon Ball Z: The Legacy of Goku I & II - GBA  
• Gauntlet: Seven Sorrows - PS2, Xbox  
• Godzilla: Final Wars - DVD  
• Metal Slug Advance - GBA  
• Midway Arcade Treasures: Ultimate Classics - PSP

13

**VILLAINS UNITED TRADE**  
Have you ever wondered what would happen if the villains of the DC universe united with the single goal of taking down the heroes? As you can probably imagine, it's bloody chaos. Sweet bloody chaos! This is an absolute must-read for everyone!

14



King Kong

20

*Battlestar Galactica* Season 2 releases on DVD today. On this note, if you have seen an episode of *Joey* and have not yet seen the brilliance that is *Battlestar*, please find an excruciatingly painful way to destroy yourself.



BATTLESTAR GALACTICA



Villains United Trade

24

**FREE COOKIE & MILK DAY**  
Before everyone goes to bed tonight, we hear that most people are setting out a tree-glass of milk and plate of cookies on their coffee tables. We suggest going to their house around midnight. According to tradition, you are not supposed to use the doorbell. Just bang on the door and yell, "Yo! Open the door, suckers!" This could be the best night of your life.

25



Bad Santa Day

28

**STAR WARS: PURGE**  
This one-shot comic book follow-up to *Revenge of the Sith* picks up right after Order 66 is given. A small band of Jedi rally together to find a way to stop the newly formed Empire. Unfortunately, Lord Vader is aware of their plans and would like for nothing more than to deal with this problem himself!



BRAVO, PASS THE SALSA!

31

**SOCOMIZATION DAY**  
On this very special holiday, which we totally didn't just make up, everything that you say has to be in SOCOM speak. For instance, if you want some food say "Fireteam, Morn, deploy tacos!" You can also try "Alpha, escort to Zulu" if you need a ride to the unemployment office.

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## III THE OLD SOLDIER'S RETURN III

Without question, one game at the recent Tokyo Game Show outshone all others. One game amazed both those in attendance and those following the show online with its incredible graphics and cinematic presentation. That game was **Metal Gear Solid 4: Guns of the Patriots**. A stunning nine-minute trailer of the title debuted on the show floor, and it so astounded showgoers that MGS 4 instantly became the hottest topic of the convention. Created with the powerful PlayStation 3 hardware, the trailer detailed the new direction for the beloved Metal Gear Solid series with amazing realism: A battlefield setting, intense action, and most surprisingly, a shockingly old and gray Solid Snake.



TACTICAL ESPIONAGE ACTION

# METAL GEAR SOLID 4

## GUNS OF THE PATRIOTS

While Solid Snake is synonymous with Metal Gear for many players, another name immediately leaps to mind for others: Hideo Kojima, the creator and mastermind behind the series. Kojima's name is tied to his signature series more completely than nearly any other creator in the game world. To understand the future of the Metal Gear Solid franchise, one simply must talk with Hideo Kojima. In the aftermath of the Tokyo Game Show, Mr. Kojima granted Game Informer one of the longest interviews he's ever given, and we sat down with him to learn about the past, present, and future of the Metal Gear Solid games.

Kojima has a reputation of providing misleading information about his games and playing his cards close to his chest, as was most famously evidenced by Solid Snake's shocking second-fiddle

role in Metal Gear Solid 2: Sons of Liberty. But despite this, we found Mr. Kojima to be surprisingly candid and willing to talk about his plans for Metal Gear Solid 4. But before we got in depth on the next game, Mr. Kojima spoke at length about the franchise's past, and how it has dictated the path for the series' first next-gen iteration. To Mr. Kojima, it was an obvious choice that Metal Gear Solid 4 debut on PlayStation 3, because the series is inextricably linked to the PlayStation brand.

"When I joined Konami, Metal Gear was the first project that I worked on. It was for the MSX [a Japanese home computer - ed.], and that was in 1987," explained Kojima. "I was in a division that was concentrating only on PC game software, so I was working on things for the PC Engine, PC, and 3DO. At the time of 3DO, there were some rumors

that the PlayStation would come out, and that was quite shocking, because it was the first time that a consumer machine would be able to create a 3D polygon. And I thought about this and thought that I would like to recreate Metal Gear in 3D for that platform. The name Metal Gear Solid came from the creation of the PSone. The Solid means 3D. That's why we named it Metal Gear Solid, because it was the first time 3D could be used."

Metal Gear Solid was one of the defining games of the original PlayStation, and was obviously a huge hit. Excited to explore the capabilities of the PlayStation 2, Kojima developed Metal Gear Solid 2 specifically to take advantage of the new system's abilities, and it was an even bigger success than the first. "For MGS 3, it was therefore a very natural choice to stay with the PlayStation platform,"

said Kojima. "The reason why I always select the PlayStation format is because at the same time that I was unknown, the PlayStation was unknown. We were a good match, and we evolved to what Metal Gear and PlayStation are today together."

Although the series has appeared on both Xbox and GameCube, Kojima feels that Metal Gear Solid will always be a PlayStation series. To Kojima, the fact that the MGS games on the other systems weren't nearly as successful is because they weren't designed around those consoles. He views ports of games as unfair and disloyal to the fans, and isn't interested in creating them. He is eager to develop for other systems, but wants to make original titles for them as well. "For MGS 4, we have already started the project for the PS3 platform, so we would like to concentrate specifically on what we could do just for the PS3. So for example, if I were to create MGS 5 or another title for the 360, I would create solely for the 360, taking advantage of the hardware, and would not convert to PS3, because that will not be a very good conversion. An example is the Revolution. I will try to create a title specifically taking advantage of the Revolution hardware."

Originally, Kojima did not plan to direct Metal Gear Solid 4, like he had the previous titles. Although he intended to work on the story design, plot, and gameplay systems, his intention was to step back into a producer role and let the teams

from the previous games take over the project. But apparently, some die-hard Metal Gear Solid fans had other plans. When Kojima announced that he would merely be producing the title during a European press tour earlier this year, some fans were so incensed that he actually received death threats. Hearing this, the staff at the newly-formed Kojima Productions became concerned and implored him to direct the game. Kojima decided to return to his old role one last time. Eager to work on other game ideas, Kojima won't be in the director's position for future Metal Gear titles, although he will certainly still be closely involved in the projects.

For the time being, however, Kojima is focused on MGS 4. He has lofty goals for the title, many of which are revolutionary for the action genre. For MGS 4, Kojima is interested in working on what he calls the "inner qualities" of a game — the things that a player can't immediately see. He sees this approach as the future of game development, because there will be fewer revolutionary jumps in gaming machines from this point forward.

"Even though hardware has evolved, games have not evolved or been revolutionized for the last couple of years," explains Kojima. "Games are like movie sets. It's a battle of making the movie set prettier or bigger. This development practice has gone for a couple of years now. The leap from Famicom to PlayStation was revolutionary because

**The reason why I always select the PlayStation format is because at the same time that I was unknown, the PlayStation was unknown. We were a good match, and we evolved to what Metal Gear and PlayStation are today together.**

**— Hideo Kojima**

■ Since the action on the battlefield will change constantly, Snake's ability to hide from his enemies will be based more on situation than location

3D became 3D, and everyone could walk around in a 3D environment. There was nothing that was much of a drastic change from the PlayStation to the PS2. Of course, the graphics look prettier and the sound is better, and there is a touch of online, but 3D remained 3D. With the next generation, there's still not a big change. 3D is not going to 4D. So if the hardware will not take us to the next level in games, we thought that we have to bring ourselves to the higher level on the game side."

"In the past, if we made a jungle, it was just a set. The trees were plastic. We could make the trees prettier, or make more plastic trees to look like real jungles. Or make the details more intense. But plastic will remain plastic, and this is what I don't want to do. There should be life in that tree. If we water the tree it will grow, if we burn the tree it will die. I want to create this kind of simulation world. This is the direction of what we want to do. What worries me is that if we actually try to do this, it might take up a lot of CPU power, meaning the visual side might not be the up to the standard of what the users expect. So, we will always think about the balance of what we can see and what we can't see. However, it's a next-gen platform. The users will expect upgraded graphics and sound, so that was another reason for the TGS trailer. It was expressing that we will go up to this kind of visual standard. Of course, that was not the completed version, so we will go even higher. However, that is the level that Kojima productions will produce in MGS 4. After that, we will concentrate on the things you cannot see."

Kojima's comments about creating a living, breathing world may seem somewhat out of place for a typical action game, but incredibly exciting when coupled with what we know about MGS 4's setting. As the trailer suggested and Kojima confirmed, Metal Gear Solid 4 will primar-

ily take place on war-torn battlefields. The thought of a world that reacts realistically and dynamically to the chaos of war is simply ripe for inventive new gameplay scenarios. Kojima confirmed that the player will encounter civilians in the course of his missions, although what is even more exciting is the way that Snake will interact with the soldiers he runs into.

"The troops you encounter will not necessarily be your enemies like they have always been in the MGS series," Kojima offered. "For instance, say there is a battle between Country A and Country B, and Snake belongs to Country C. He is not directly involved with either A or B. But if, for example, Snake's goal is on the battlefield of A vs. B, Snake has the option to interfere in the battle or not. To complete a mission, the simplest way will be to sneak into the battlefield without getting noticed by either of the armies. However, if Snake is attacked by Country A and kills one of their troopers, that means he becomes an enemy of Country A. So, if he continues to fight Country A, that makes him an ally of Country B, and that makes him a hero from the Country B point of view. And of course, it's up to the player. Snake could kill somebody from Country B, and that will make him Country B's enemy as well. So he will have two enemies, Country A and Country B. The situation will change in real time." This constantly evolving situation on the battlefield is what Kojima meant when he used the phrase "no place to hide" to describe the game at E3 — you'll have to adjust to an ever-changing situation, meaning that places that were once safe can instantly become deadly.

The Metal Gear Solid games have always rewarded players for not killing, and with such extreme consequences for the deaths of the soldiers in Metal Gear Solid 4, this moral lesson seems to be even more prevalent. But it also



■ The Solid Eye system replaces many of the old gadgets including the radar, night vision, and thermal goggles

■ Although Snake's appearance may be tweaked for the final game, he will definitely appear prematurely aged due to the breakdown of his clone biology



has a huge impact on the stealth aspect of the gameplay. Kojima stressed that it's always preferable not to interact with the troops, as your actions may have effects that ripple throughout the game. If you kill all the soldiers from one side in an area, you've effectively won the battle for their enemies, meaning the opposing team is free to pursue their own objectives in the area. But this can also lead to new ways to evade detection. If the army of Country A is strong in one area, slipping into one of their uniforms may be the perfect way to prevent detection. However, if you're spotted by one of their enemies, the other team will assume that you're a foe. This all ties into one of the central ideas behind MGS 4: identity on the battlefield.

"I'm interested in the concept of the substitution of war," explained Kojima. "For instance, if there is a country A and B against each other, even today, maybe some countries don't have troops or

military. Maybe they hire mercenaries to represent them to fight a war. So it could be that on a battlefield, both sides are actually Americans. Another example is that it should be a battle of nation vs. nation, but sometimes robots are battling against each other, meaning that they are substituting the actual humans. It should be a battle of nations, but what's happening is substitution of war. The actual battle is only happening between professional troops and mercenaries."

Kojima isn't ready to reveal who the different forces at work in MGS 4's conflict will be, largely because the story is still being worked on. But one character that he's ready to confirm for certain is Solid Snake. The elderly appearance of the character in the trailer led some to speculate that the main character of Metal Gear Solid 4 wasn't actually Snake, and many elaborate theories immediately appeared on the Internet. Given the series' history, it's natural to assume that the old

soldier in the trailer isn't Solid Snake. After all, the character only truly starred in one game, as Raiden took center stage in Sons of Liberty and Naked Snake (Big Boss) was the focus in Snake Eater. However, Kojima assured us that the main character in MGS 4 is definitely Solid Snake, and his new look was deliberately designed to throw people off. "It's definitely Snake. It's not Raiden wearing a Snake mask," Kojima explained with a laugh. "The reason why he looks much older is because of course he is a clone of Big Boss, and the technology during the seventies was not as mature as it is today."

At one point in the trailer, the aged Snake is overcome with a coughing fit, and injects a syringe into his neck to calm the attack. Although Kojima wouldn't confirm this point, it would seem that the injection combats the effect of Snake's inferior clone technology, and it seems logical that this may replace the need to eat introduced in Metal

■ The TGS trailer features a long FPS segment designed to fool the viewer. However, this doesn't mean that there won't be first-person sections in MGS 4



■ In the trailer, it appears that Snake's CODEC isn't working. But he certainly won't be all alone on the battlefield.



■ Otacon is back to assist Snake, and accompanies him into battle via a remote-controlled robot, which sharp-eyed viewers will recognize as the Metal Gear MK-II from Kojima's Snatcher

Gear Solid 3. Although Snake's age will certainly play into the gameplay, it definitely serves another purpose. The Metal Gear Solid games have always been thematic, and in MGS 4, Mr. Kojima wants to use Snake's age to say something about the character, the series, and even the players.

First of all, Snake's new look is a comment on the character's ongoing struggle against nuclear proliferation. Throughout the series, Snake has tried to destroy the Metal Gear technology in order to bring peace to the world, but has ultimately failed. His premature aging is a reflection of his failure to complete his mission. It is also a bit of Kojima's black humor, a way of saying that the Metal Gear Solid series is past its prime, although few who have seen the trailer would agree with that assessment.

Kojima also wants to use Snake's new look as an acknowledgement of the series' longstanding fans. "It has been 18 years

It's definitely Snake. It's not Raiden wearing a Snake mask.

— Hideo Kojima



■ CQC looks like it will make a return in MGS 4



“since the first Metal Gear game, and probably the fans have changed along with the series,” said Kojima. “They’ve gotten married, or have children, or are living in food boxes. I wanted to give those users a pat on the shoulder, and say, ‘Snake’s this old, but he keeps on going.’”

Creating a character with flaws and imperfec-

tions is also more representative of what next-generation hardware can do, according to Mr. Kojima. Although the machines can create beautiful young girls with flawless skin, creating a wrinkled old man with a moustache is a far better way to express the power of the hardware in his view.

“Because the PlayStation 3 is capable of creating such incredibly lifelike visuals, far more intricate and detailed characters must be created as a result. Not only does the elderly Snake have a moustache and wrinkles, his new stealth suit is also absolutely packed with fine detail. To demonstrate that the MGS 4 trailer was not pre-rendered, he moved the camera around in a live demonstration at the Tokyo Game Show, and zoomed in on some of the finer points of the suit. Individual bolts were clearly visible, and all text on the suit is actually legible close up. The suit has an intricate logo on the chest, a Japanese kanji symbol with the message “to let the world be,” written underneath. The symbol is a combination of the name Otacon, Snake’s long-time ally in his battle against the spread of the Metal Gear technology, and the symbol for “spirit.” In the game this symbol will be visible on any equipment created by Otacon.

Another aspect of Snake’s new look that has received a lot of attention is the high-tech eyepatch worn over his left eye. The name Solid Eye is visible on the device, and Kojima admits that part of the reason he included the eyepatch in the trailer is that he wanted to mislead people into believing the character was Big Boss. But the Solid Eye also has a more practical purpose: In the trailer, Snake switches the device on to get a tactical readout of the battlefield, and

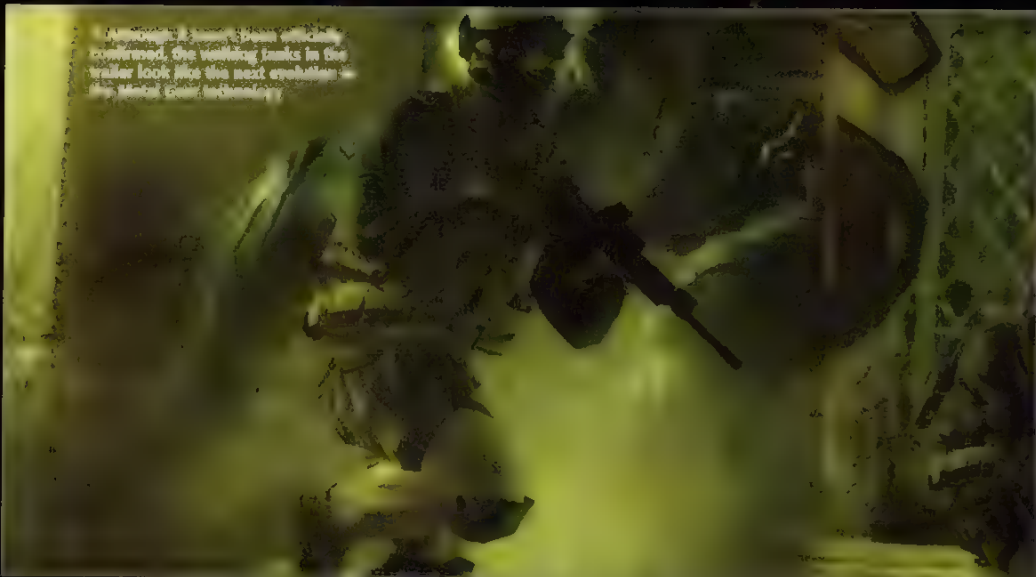
■ Kojima referred to the trailer as the “minimum bar” for the visuals in MGS 4 – he’s confident that the finished game will look even better!



It has been 18 years since the first Metal Gear game, and probably the fans have changed along with the series. They've gotten married, or have children, or are living in hard times. I wanted to give those users a pat on the shoulder, and say, 'Snake's this old, but he keeps on going.'

— Hideo Kojima

■ The Metal Gear MK-II, which was confirmed, the walking tanks in the trailer look like the most evolution in the series' combat technology



Kojima confirmed that this device will indeed take the place of the radar system from the first two games. It will also replace several other gadgets, including thermal goggles. Although the Solid Eye shares a name with the 3D peripheral device packaged with the upcoming Metal Gear Acid 2, players shouldn't read too much into the similarity. The name was originally created for the MGA 2 device, and Kojima simply decided he liked the name and used it for the trailer — without telling Shinta Nojiri, the producer of MGA 2.

Although the character in the trailer definitely isn't Big Boss, other cast members from the previous titles should make appearances in MGS 4. Kojima wasn't ready to confirm any specifically, but did say that he would like to have the characters from the first two games appear in MGS 4 as much as possible. Approximately 10 years have passed since the end of Metal Gear Solid 2 (although the exact amount of time hasn't been decided), and each of the returning friends or foes will have aged appropriately. Kojima wants the player to get a sense of what kind of life the character lived based on their changes.

The trailer only revealed the presence of two for sure: Snake and his friend Otacon. Otacon only appeared on the screen of a tiny robot, which he was presumably controlling from a safe location. Those familiar with Kojima's portfolio of games will recognize the robot as the Metal Gear MK-II from

the Sega CD game Snatcher. Of course, the MK-II wasn't the only Metal Gear visible in the trailer — not only is there what appears to be a smaller version of the Metal Gear Rex in the trailer, there are more than one! Whether one army on the battlefield controls multiple Metal Gears, or if each

side has their own mobile nuclear missile launcher remains to be seen. However, it is clear that these robots have new functions that the old Metal Gears didn't, some that are far more insidious than you might expect. Kojima claims that the enemy AI in MGS 4 will be so realistic that each character will react exactly like a real human, meaning that using psychological warfare on your foes will be more crucial than ever before. Of course, you're not the only one who can play this game — the Metal Gears will now play with your mind as well.

"In the trailer, there is a new Metal Gear," explained Kojima. "When this comes closer, it makes the noises of a cicada. To most Japanese people, this sound makes you think about your childhood days, because you were going outside into nature and catching cicadas. And the actual sound of the Metal Gear walking is a horse clapping. And that cry it makes is a sound of a cow. So combined, these three aspects, the sounds of the cicada, the horse, and the cow makes the person who hears the sounds a little bit peaceful, because it makes you go back into your childhood memories. You're supposed to feel tense in a battlefield, but when you hear this, it really cuts the tense feeling. And when that happens, the Metal Gear attacks you. It's nasty, and it's a psychological

■ The soldiers Snake encounters aren't necessarily his enemies — his objectives lie in the middle of a conflict between two different countries





■ Otacon scans Snake with the sensors in his robot, and discovers that his friend hasn't quite kicked his smoking habit

element of this Metal Gear title."

Kojima continued on to describe this subtle joking inflex that the Metal Gear comes to the opposite of the infamous beach scene from *Apocalypse Now*, in which attack choppers blast Wagner's "Ride of the Valkyries" in order to overwhelm their enemies. He stated that players will be able to use the Metal Gear's lulling abilities against Snake's foes. By waiting until the Metal Gear emits its strangely calming cry, Snake can then sneak up to the nearby soldiers while their defenses are down. Of course, this will end Snake in close proximity to the deadly war machine.

Although we don't know exactly who will be controlling the Metal Gears in MGS 4, or even who the mainline forces in the conflict will be, there are a few clues out there as to what the plot will be. We know that the game takes place roughly 10 years after the end of MGS 2, and that Snake is still working with Otacon to destroy the Metal Gear technology, and that he is dying prematurely due to the primitive cloning technology that created him. But perhaps what is most telling is the game's setting. Gone are the Patriots. Obviously, the Patriots (the group revealed in MGS 2 as the secret power behind the United States) are involved, although the end of the second game implied that they were long-

dead. Given Kojima's comments about the theme of professional soldiers fighting a war in the place of a nation, it seems that the "Guns" in the title refers to these troops. Therefore, we can assume that much of the game revolves around mercenaries hired by the Patriots to fight their wars for them. But who could they be fighting? Perhaps multiple factions within the Patriots' organization will be fighting each other.

Kojima certainly won't reveal much about the plot until after the game is in the hands of the players, but he would confirm that MGS 4 will continue with the use of the series' many cinematic cutscenes. While avowed movie fan Kojima clearly loves using these scenes to convey emotion and thematic elements, he plans on making some changes to the way these cinematic sequences are used. Since the PS3 is capable of creating such amazing graphics, there will be no difference between the look of the cutscenes and the in-game graphics, and in at least some instances, the camera will transition seamlessly between the two elements. Kojima has also looked at how some other games convey story elements, and will be adding new techniques into the game. For example, he cited games like *Halo 2* and *Halo-Lite*, in which players encounter characters in the game who speak to the player to impart information and advance the plot. Since



these moments take place entirely in-game, the player is free to move around and control the scene. "Of course, we will make it better and not a complete copy of those games," said Kojima with a smile. "We will add some flavor and special touches as well."

Story has always been paramount in the Metal Gear Solid series, and we have no doubt that MGS 4 will deliver just as well as the previous games in this area. The plot is usually the first thing that MGS fans speculate about whenever a new title in the franchise is announced, and theories are already running rampant. Of course, the breathtaking graphics of the latest game are generating just as much discussion. Between the two topics, fans haven't been asking as many questions about other elements of the game, such as the actual gameplay. The trailer suggests that a totally new camera system will be used, and Kojima has also alluded to this idea. The clip begins with an intentionally misleading section in the first-person perspective, but then plainly



**MGS 4 will be so realistic that each character will react exactly like a real human, meaning that using psychological warfare on your foes will be more crucial than ever before. Of course, you're not the only one who can play this game – the Metal Gears will now play with your mind as well.**

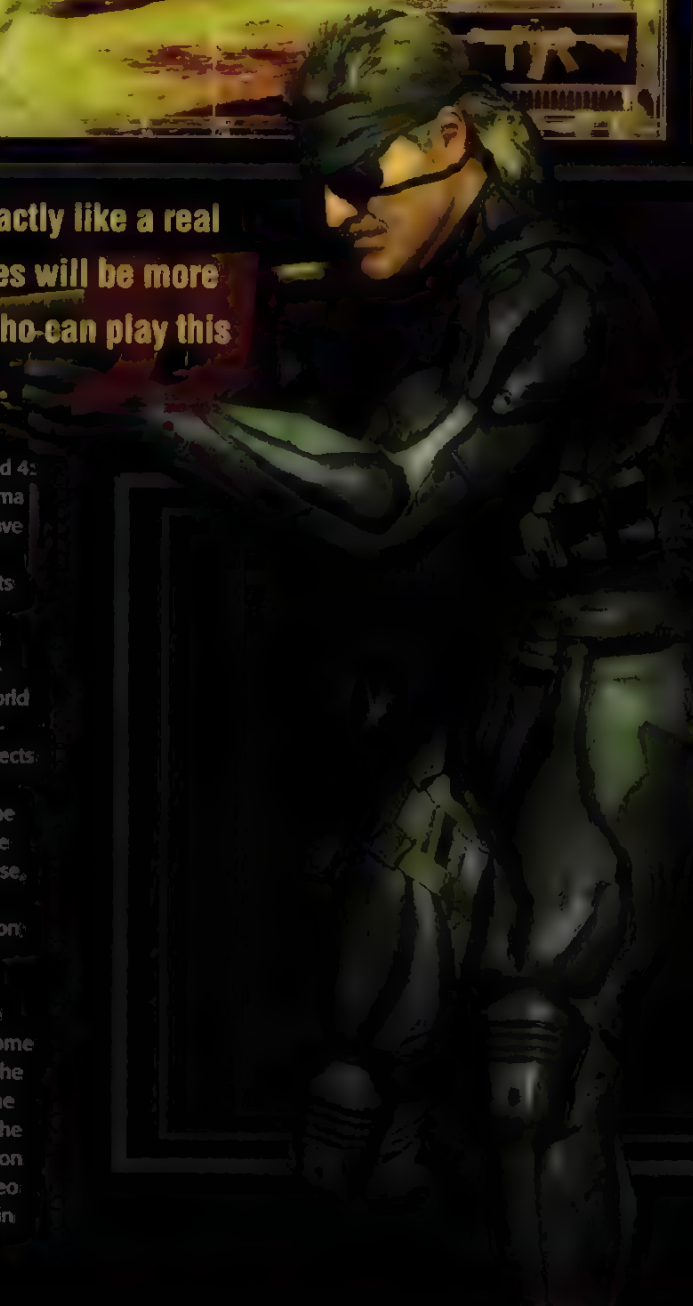
states that Metal Gear Solid 4 won't be a first-person shooter. However, it never states explicitly that it won't use the first-person perspective. Based on our time talking with Kojima, as well as the new tweaks to the camera system in Subsistence, the updated version of Metal Gear Solid 3, we're guessing that MGS 4 will use a combination of first- and third-person perspectives more completely than the previous games in the series. That's purely speculation on our part, but the first-person section of the trailer is amazing to look at, and it would seem odd to create something so impressive simply as a joke.

Whether or not the new camera system in Subsistence will carry over to MGS 4 remains to be seen, but the new version of MGS 3 does sport one feature that indicates something that players will see in MGS 4: online play. Subsistence takes the series online for the first time, and Kojima confirmed that this feature is indeed a hint at what to expect in the fourth game. He didn't have many details to reveal, but did say that "Subsistence is restricted to the PS2 format, and therefore PS2 online. In MGS 4, we will not be restricted to eight players. So you can probably look forward to having a wider and deeper online experience."

As with any Metal Gear game, we have more

questions than answers about Metal Gear Solid 4: Guns of the Patriots. But after our time at Kojima Productions, a lot of the thematic elements have been laid bare, the basic setting is clear, and Kojima shared some surprisingly frank thoughts on both the series and its protagonist, Solid Snake. The trailer gave us a good idea what to expect from the visuals, and we know that the gameplay will feature a constantly-evolving world unlike we've ever seen in an action game, psychological elements, online play, and new aspects to the storytelling. With its first iteration on PlayStation 3, the series looks like it will use the power of the next-generation platform to make significant evolutions to the gameplay. Of course, we'd expect nothing less. By Kojima's own words, the Metal Gear series and the PlayStation platform are permanently bonded, and he's always used the advances in the hardware to further the growth of the games. It is therefore fitting that Metal Gear Solid 4 has already become the flagship title for the upcoming platform – the one game that seems to quantify everything the upcoming console will deliver. Hideo Kojima, the Metal Gear Solid series, and the Sony PlayStation are taking their next step into the future of video games together, and the partnership once again

looks likely to set the world ablaze. ■■■



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# BLACK

**HIDDEN IN THE QUIANT CITY** of Guildford, England lies Criterion Games, a developer best know for its blazing-fast Burnout series. We are here on a covert mission. We are here to discover the mysteries of its newest franchise, known simply as Black.

Black was first introduced to us at E3 2004, where in a behind-closed-doors meeting we were given a glimpse of Criterion's "bullets are our babies" and "guns are the stars" attitude. The demo was filled with smoke, ricocheting shells, and ear-splitting gunplay, with little time for such niceties as plot and character development. At the time it was impressive, and perhaps a little silly, but it made its simple point. Hollywood makes a handgun sound like a howitzer, so why can't video games?

So Criterion set off with a simple objective: Make the best first-person shooter the PlayStation 2 or Xbox has ever seen. A lofty goal indeed, but there is little doubt that Criterion Games is one of an elite group of developers who can really make software sing on both the PlayStation 2 and Xbox. And as you look at the screens on these pages, remember that this game will be delivered on both consoles in 480p progressive scan with widescreen support. Criterion isn't cutting any corners in its attempt to prove that current-gen technology still has plenty of life left in it.

SHOT

A



**IN THE  
DARK**





## THE COLOR AND THE SHAPE

Looking at a screenshot of *Black* is like seeing *Star Wars* without the special effects. It simply isn't the full experience. The secret to *Black* is that no gun is just another gun — all of *Black*'s 13 weapons are tenderly cared for by the team. From the loading motion to the rate of fire, the designers pay a lot of attention to all of the details, because oddly enough the team is what some might consider "gun nuts" — a trait not often associated with the English.

Looking at them is one thing, but firing them is something completely different. True to its Hollywood inspiration, the game doesn't really come alive until you pull the trigger.

The first thing you notice is the audio, which offers a booming, over-the-top crackle of fire. But it's the fireworks that follow that people will remember *Black* for. A shotgun blasts a door off its hinges. Machine guns lay a line of fire that leaves dust and debris flying. We aren't just talk-

ing about a small puff of smoke or a barrel that blows up. *Black* is destructive.

At a basic level, you can blast letters off of buildings or signs off street posts to drop down on enemies. But the level of interaction with the environment goes much deeper than that. Turn a machine gun on a vehicle and you can pop the tires to lower the car down so you can get head shots on the enemies hiding behind it. Or just keep the trigger pressed to fill it so full of lead that eventually it blows up in a spectacular explosion, taking out all those near it. If you want to be more precise, you're able to shoot the doors off to expose the baddies hiding inside. It's really up to you.

"If you can't blow it up, don't put it in," says producer Craig Sullivan. Game Informer got a chance to put a couple of levels through their paces, and found this philosophy to be evident in every second of *Black*. In one level, we laid waste to columns that would make the lobby scene in *The Matrix* jealous. There was

so much smoke and debris flying up into the screen that we could barely make out what was in front of us. All we could do was keep the pressure on and the bullets flying.

The team assured us that the build we played was unbalanced, and that they were working hard to lower the amount of things flying on screen, or as they call it "thick air," as it was simply too much in their opinion. When's the last time you remember a game having too much stuff flying on screen? Never, and that's why *Black* is such a visceral experience. Creative director Alex Ward puts it best, "We are more overt than covert." We couldn't agree more.

Of course, not every level of *Black* is a non-stop assault of bullets laying waste to everything in their path, though quite a lot of them are. In total there will be nine levels of play, but there will be plenty of variety in the environments. While there is no dual-wielding in *Black*, the team did put in the expected silencers and sniper

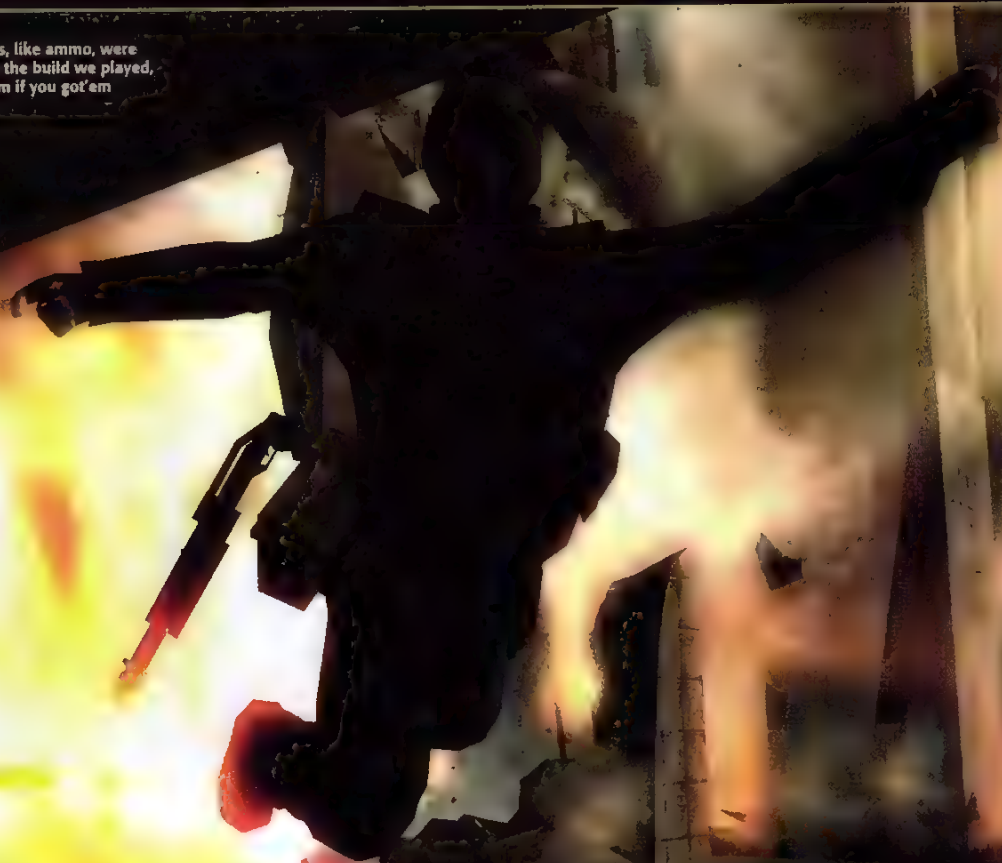
rifle. In an outdoor level we saw, the team experiments with forcing you to use cover and deliberate movement to work your way across a graveyard. The change of pace is needed, as it makes blowing the oil refinery to kingdom come in later levels all the more impressive.

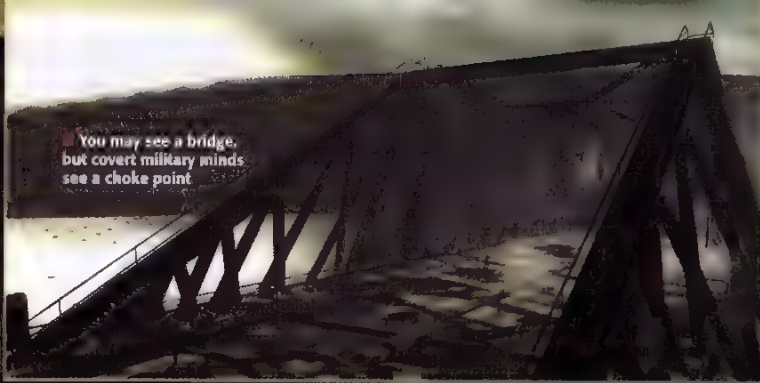
So, why are you destroying anything and everything in your path? As you would expect from the name, *Black* is all about the covert, off-the-record military operations that you don't see on CNN. You play Jack Kelar, a hotshot member of *Black*, an elite force that accepts only the best of the best. Your mission finds you in Eastern Europe, where through a series of flashbacks you chase down America's biggest threat. The twist is, he's not some outsider. He's one of our own — an American, a traitor to his own country.

Also in true Hollywood fashion, the team doesn't want to reveal much more of the story. However, they do assure us that the game will end in a cliffhanger.

(Continued on page 97)

Grenades, like ammo, were plentiful in the build we played, so throw 'em if you got 'em





You may see a bridge, but covert military minds see a choke point



You can score ricochet kills by bouncing bullets off hard surfaces



The guns are simply amazing to look at. Even watching them reload is mesmerizing.

“THE GAME IS AN EXPERIENCE UNLIKE ANY WE HAVE SEEN BEFORE”



The shield enemies are more than a little annoying. We prescribe a high diet of lead to rectify the problem

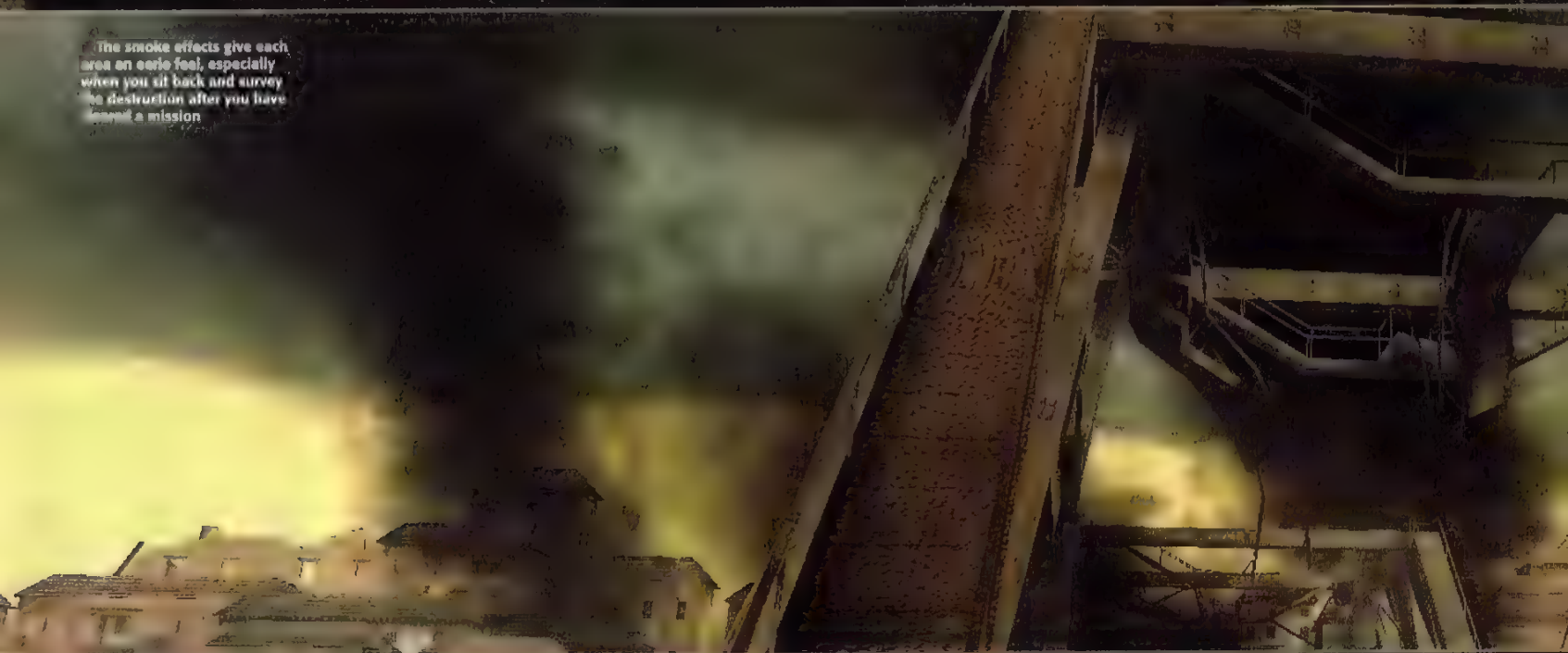


A silencer is obviously needed in this area, as no one is going to hear you coming when you blow the living crap out of the entire room. Silent...like a ninja



■ As smoke fills a room, the light refracts to great effect

■ The smoke effects give each area an eerie feel, especially when you sit back and survey the destruction after you have cleared a mission



■ Every time people look at these screens they ask the same question: "Is this next-gen?"



■ With massive amounts of particles and impressive lighting, every level is an explosive display

(Continued from page 96)

## MULTIPLAYER SCHMULTIPLAYER

Since the announcement of the Xbox 360, many rumors have run their course that *Black* would be moving to the next generation of gaming, but Criterion thinks this is the wrong choice. In fact, not only is it avoiding next-generation systems, there will also be no multiplayer or split-screen in *Black*. It's all about the single-player experience.

"We know what everyone wants from us, and that's a kick-ass shooter,"

explains Ward. "We are not doing multiplayer online, so we have no excuses here. We have to go balls out. We have to make a killer single-player game. So, we have had lots of ambition in terms of other modes we have thought of and prototyped. And whether they are in or not is all coming down to where we are going and where we are now."

The game is still in motion. The team is iterating every day. They are looking for

what's fun and what's not, and cutting the wheat from the chaff. Ward continues, "We want to give PlayStation 2 and Xbox owners a quality shooter, the likes of which they have never seen before. They are tired of WWII, they are tired of ray-guns, and what they really want is the AK-47. Or at least, that is what we want. I want the guys that play *Halo* to dig this game. I want it to be a world-class shooter."

After putting in our time with the title, it appears the team is not far off from reaching this lofty goal. The game is an experience unlike any we have seen before. Firing the weapons is scary. The AI of the enemies is solid, and the team isn't approaching this timidly. There are a lot of enemies to mow down. There are a lot of things to blow up. And, at the end of the day, isn't that what a great shooter is all about? ■ ■ ■



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> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION

> PUBLISHER MIDWAY

> DEVELOPER TERMINAL REALITY

> RELEASE SUMMER 2006

# SPY HUNTER

## NOWHERE TO RUN





# ROCK AND ROLL

*Spy Hunter is one of those unforgettable classic games often cited as a key part of the early development in the lives of gamers. No one who frequented arcades in the '80s can hear the iconic Peter Gunn theme song without having fond visions of oil slicks and exploding wreckage. In 2001, Spy Hunter made the transition from a*

*happy memory to a current-gen presence when a critically-acclaimed modern version of the franchise appeared on the PS2 (with Xbox and GameCube iterations appearing a few months later). Unfortunately, any credibility the series gained with that title was compromised with the 2003 release of the disappointing Spy Hunter 2. As it*

*moves forward with the next entry, the series needs to redeem itself in the eyes of gamers. It needs to go somewhere it has never been before. So, when a new installment entitled Spy Hunter: Nowhere to Run hits next summer, Spy Hunter will finally step out of the driver's seat and stand on two feet – The Rock's two feet.*



**E**ven the most hardcore Spy Hunter games have been focused solely on vehicular mayhem, but the production of a Spy Hunter film starring Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson has prompted Midway and developer Terminal Reality to take the franchise in a brand new direction. Breaking with tradition, *Nowhere to Run* will be divided into approximately 50 percent driving and 50 percent on-foot as players control The Rock as agent Alec Decker through third-person action segments full of gunplay, violence, and the signature style that has become associated with The Rock's various projects.

"People have a certain preconceived notion about what Dwayne, or The Rock, is like," explains the game's producer Jeremy Airey. "It's his wrestling persona. It's his movie persona. There's a certain expectation. For us, we want to make sure we capitalize on that expectation, and that people get what they think they are going to get from this character, but also give them something else."

Part of this additional material Airey refers to is considerable amount of backstory dealing with the origin of the *Interceptor* and Alec Decker, the man behind the wheel. After all, this is not a video game version of the upcoming film; even though they will share

the protagonist and some other elements, *Nowhere to Run* is an original tale that acts as a prequel to the whole *Spy Hunter* series. "Since this is the first time players actually see Alec, we really wanted to tell his story," Airey tells us. "One of the big differences between this *Spy Hunter* and the previous ones is that it's a very story-driven game. We haven't really defined before who Alec is. He's never had a persona, and this is our chance to create and portray it."

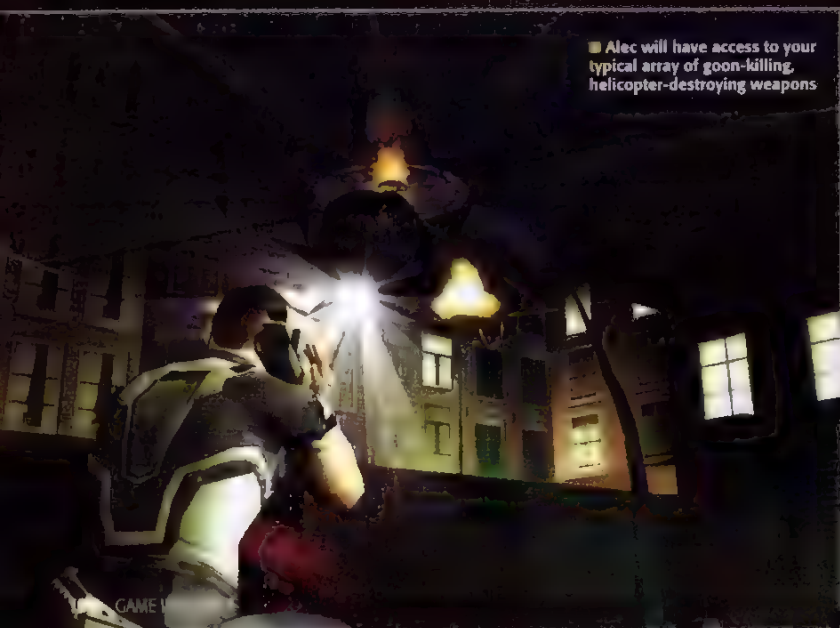
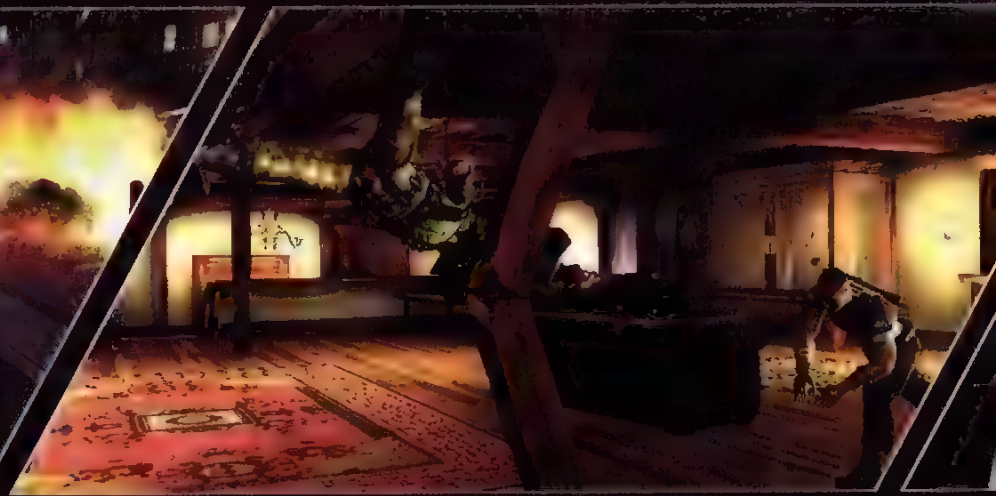
Fortunately, when it comes to personality, The Rock can deliver in spades. Not only does he have a familiar ready-made persona made famous from his days as a

#### YOU SEXY DECKER

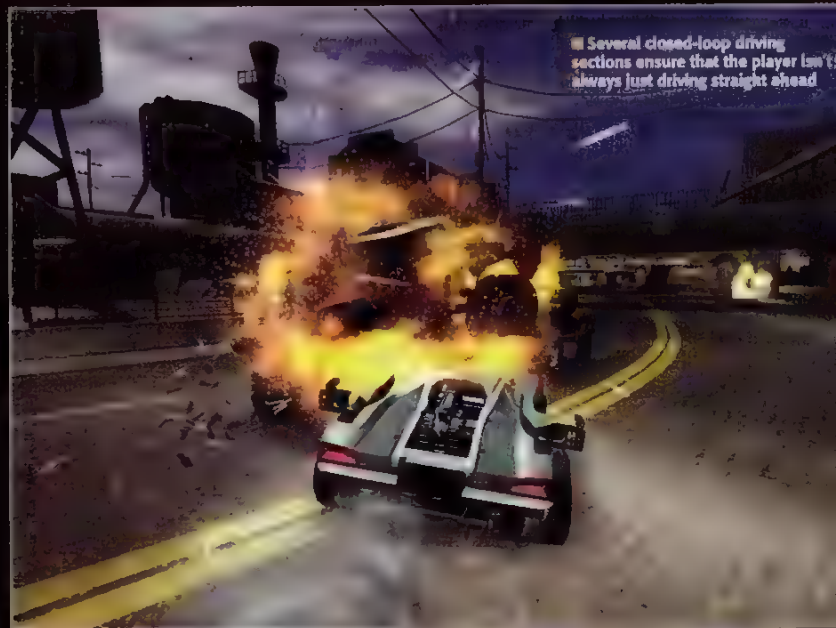
Astute fans will notice that the lead character has undergone a name change for the latest installment of the series. Rest assured that it is the same character that has appeared in all previous *Spy Hunter* games. Actually, it was because of the necessity of voice acting in *Nowhere to Run* that prompted the identity overhaul. "They tried the shotgun approach in *Spy Hunter 2* in giving Alec a name, and they didn't really think it through," confides Airey. "We tried some preliminary voice acting, and it sounds a little inappropriate to have people yelling 'Sects, get in here!' It just didn't work."

professional wrestler, but he is also capable of bringing in the kind of extreme physicality necessary to the role of Alec Decker. For instance, every area in the game will have a handful of context sensitive "Rock moments" that allow Alec to showcase his fighting prowess and brutality mixed with The Rock's off-kilter sense of humor. In addition to including classic moves like drop kicks and the People's Elbow, these Rock moments will often use objects in the environment for some improvised carnage. In one case where Alec is fighting in the bar area of a club, he can grab an enemy's head and smash it directly into the bar — repeatedly. Another possibility is that Alec may throw a goon through an aquarium before grabbing one of the flopping fish and slapping the guy upside the face with it. Not only are these maneuvers entertaining, but as an added bonus for finding them, players will eventually be able to unlock classic Midway arcade titles including the original '80s *Spy Hunter* and *Gauntlet*.

Unsurprisingly, The Rock has demonstrated a high level of enthusiasm and dedication to creating these standout moments. "We had some standard moves, but then he asked if we wanted them the normal way or the super badass way," says Airey of a motion capture session with The Rock. "He said the super



■ Alec will have access to your typical array of goon-killing, helicopter-destroying weapons



■ Several closed-loop driving sections ensure that the player isn't always just driving straight ahead



The newly-designed Interceptor will correspond to the look of the vehicle in the upcoming film.

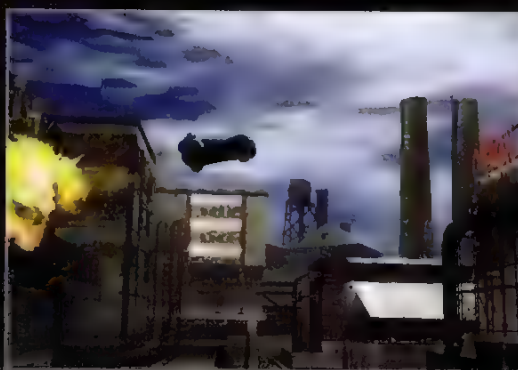
**"WE HAVEN'T REALLY DEFINED BEFORE WHO ALEC IS. HE'S NEVER HAD A PERSONA, AND THIS IS OUR CHANCE TO CREATE AND PORTRAY IT."**



badass way is how they can't perform them in the ring because they would kill people. We said, 'Do it the super badass way.' He ripped the dummy we were using apart. It's duct taped at the stomach." This is definitely a good sign for gamers waiting to see some bone-crunching devastation even when they aren't driving a fully-loaded, missile-equipped transforming speedster.

While The Rock and Alec Decker are integral to the over-the-top action of *Nowhere to Run*, Midway hasn't forgotten that the Interceptor has always been the true star of the *Spy Hunter* series. Even though the car has been redesigned, there is still a concentrated effort to take the driving segments back to their roots. The team at Terminal Reality has studied what exactly made the 1983 coin-op version of *Spy Hunter* so much fun. Obviously, they can't revert to that visual style, but they did come up with several gameplay mechanics that can easily make the move to current consoles.

"One of the things that we wanted to do that was



a hallmark of the original arcade game is lateral combat," describes Airey. "The Interceptor can shoot from the sides, fire flamethrowers, and it has the wheel spikes on there as well to get that sense of ramming enemies side-to-side." Of course, with such an array of weapons, the team had to come up with

an intuitive way to select and use these weapons, and one of the perks of driving an intelligent vehicle is that it can do a lot of the work for you. Players will primarily be concentrating on destroying enemies directly in front of them, and while the main weapons are firing, the Interceptor itself will assess threats from the sides and behind and deal with them accordingly. In essence, even if you are just aiming ahead, you can send salvos in all directions when you hit the attack button.

This doesn't mean that the player will have no control over their armaments, however. Even though you won't directly fire your secondary weapons, you will have the opportunity to select which ones the Interceptor utilizes. On the sides, you can equip skip mines, wheel spikes, or flamethrowers, depending on the situation. If you're going up against ramming enemies, wheel spikes would be the best choice, while the flamethrowers would be better suited for enemies who keep their distance. In the back, you'll be able



■ Driving will account for about half of the gameplay, with the other half spent in third-person



■ A renewed focus on lateral combat will be one of things that sets Nowhere to Run apart from previous games

to select the classic oil slick or an obscuring smoke screen. The team's goal is to make it fun and easy to use the Interceptor's vast weapons array without ever removing the player from the intense action. "We want to make weapon selection smart, so you don't have to switch to your side weapons or something when there's action onscreen," says Airey. "We want the car to be as smart as possible and react to the context."

This vehicular intelligence extends beyond offensive capabilities. Like previous iterations, the Interceptor can transform into several vehicles, and this time around it will also analyze the current terrain and shift to its most appropriate form. In other words, players can simply

Gamers who have stuck with Spy Hunter through thick and thin will understandably be hesitant to line up for another ride after the last entry in the series. Dated graphics and repetitive gameplay don't usually generate much enthusiasm for a follow-up. Oddly enough, Midway completely understands these reservations. "The second Spy Hunter was ass. We don't have any misconceptions about that," Airey jokingly admits. "I volunteered for this project because I thought there could be so many ways to do it right. We can revitalize this franchise."

In the past, games that stray from their roots in this fashion have not been well-received. While the list of



**"THE SECOND SPY HUNTER WAS ASS. WE DON'T HAVE ANY MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT THAT."**

drive off a cliff into the ocean while in motorcycle form, and by the time they hit the water they'll be in a high-tech speedboat. Additionally, to accommodate the Interceptor's three forms (car, motorcycle, and boat), many levels will be built with several tracks for the player to flip between these forms at will. Drive off the cliff as a motorcycle, blast some enemies from the water, and then drive up an embankment to become a car again and take to the open road - all the while having confidence in the Interceptor's ability to do what it should be doing. These intuitive and easy-to-manage controls will be a sharp contrast to the more convoluted mechanics of Spy Hunter 2, which relied on the player to constantly tell the vehicle what to do.

those missteps is a long one, Spy Hunter's transition to on-foot action with the help of a personality as dynamic as The Rock could be the evolution the series needs to distinguish itself from its sub-par predecessor. Of course, if the third-person action segments are successful, fans will be expecting them in future installments. Would that mean that we could be seeing The Rock as a mainstay in the Spy Hunter series in the coming years? According to Airey, that's a very good possibility. "It's a marriage. You've got to make it last." Just so long as no one starts insinuating that The Rock is the bride in the marriage, Spy Hunter: Nowhere to Run could be a very happy union for Midway, Dwayne Johnson, and gamers alike.

**A FITTING CAMEO**  
 This series is experiencing a revival on current consoles thanks to Terminal Reality, but the original 1983 arcade version of Spy Hunter was designed by Midway's own George Gomez. In fact, the original serial number of the Interceptor GG6155 is Gomez's birthday (June 1, 1955). While Gomez isn't taking an active role in the development of Nowhere to Run, he still has a surprising place in the game: as the sinister leader of NOSTRA. Even stranger is the fact that it wasn't until after a product review meeting that Gomez saw this concept art and discovered that he was the ranking mastermind behind the diabolical organization. He will, of course, be voicing his own character.



## An Interview With

# DWAYNE "THE ROCK" JOHNSON

Game Informer chats with the People's Champion about *Spy Hunter: Nowhere to Run*, *the Interceptor*, and the joy of destroying mo-cap dummies.

and many moves came to my twisted, demented mind. [laughs] With our hands, by the way. I put variations on some cool wrestling moves, and the variation is that intent to kill somebody. It was awesome! Everyone was going crazy when we were in the motion capture studios. After every move, everyone was like "Ohhhhhh!" And then I would sit there, and tell those guys to give me another minute, and I would think of something, put it together in my head, and I would say "Okay, run the tape. Action!" and there would be silence as I'd do the move and afterward there would be literally 40 people yelling, "Ohhh, s—I That's gonna be great!"

Actually, Jeremy Airey at Midway told us that you actually left one of the motion capture dummies in need of some serious repair. It had to be duct taped to keep the stuffing in!

[Laughs] I completely busted that dummy up. It's like the big kid in me came out, and I had a really great time. There's nothing like pure, "Okay, I'm throwing the guns down and now I'm gonna take this guy and do something to him like you've never seen."

What do you think it is about the *Spy Hunter* franchise that has kept people interested in it for so long?

I can speak only on a personal level, why I've been interested in it since I was 10 years old. First and foremost, let's talk about the star of *Spy Hunter*: the *Interceptor*. It's every kid's fantasy—even a big kid's fantasy—to actually own a vehicle like this. Another thing is this: James Bond is cool. He's a world-renowned spy, and that's cool, but I wanna be the guy that hunts James Bond. Spies and espionage are great, but when you're the guy trained to take them down, that just makes you that much cooler. As a kid growing up, I liked Superman. But I liked Lex Luthor even more. I'll never forget this—let me share this with you—I was a big fan of the *Super Friends*. And when I saw the *Green Lantern* kick Superman's ass, oh, that did it for me. Big fan. Big fan of the *Green Lantern*.

Do you think it's going to be challenging to co-star with a vehicle?

No, are you kidding me? It'll be an honor. I've shared the big screen with many co-stars, and there will be nothing like sharing it with the *Interceptor*.

You have the chance to create a new character now that Alec is finally getting out of the *Interceptor*.

Has your persona of The Rock been helpful in this?

Well, it's much like creating a persona in movies. In creating the character, what I think is important is the little things we can do to set Alec apart, like the face smash to the bar.

Then there's bottles of whiskey on the bar—let's see if we can bust those over the guy's head. And instead of just throwing him into a piano, slam the lid down on him and hear the "Broooong" noise. I even went so far as to ask if the programmers could have Alec then go around and play his favorite tune for about 10 seconds on the piano! [laughs] I'm not not so sure that'll fly, but that's the kind of stuff we were throwing out there. How different can we make this? Let's pick up a fish and smack a guy in the face with it! I know it's difficult from a design perspective to make the character do these things, but I think players appreciate little treats like that. It's the tasty icing, but the meat and potatoes of the whole thing is how creatively can this guy—who is literally one of the baddest [expletive deleted] on the planet—kill other guys.

If the *Spy Hunter* movie does well, do you think it has the potential to develop into a franchise like the *James Bond* series?

That's what we're all hoping for. If the movie's good, if it's well-written, and well-executed, and we do what we should be doing—which is staying loyal to the game and that creative process—and then throw in the fact that it's big daddy Rock ass-whuppin' time, then we've got a shot at making a really good movie and, at the end of the day, entertaining the fans.

How did your involvement with the *Spy Hunter* project begin?

The movie project came up a few years ago, and it was something I was interested in because I was such a big fan of the game, then Midway approached me about being a part of something really dynamic—about being a part of the *Spy Hunter* game. I was familiar with *Spy Hunter* and *Spy Hunter 2* for the current consoles, but my biggest question was how was the new one going to be different. They said that the player is now going to be able to get out of the *Interceptor*, and when they get out, they're going to be getting out as big daddy ass-whuppin' Rock. I said "I love it!"

Has the work you've done so far for the *Spy Hunter* game been different from your previous video game projects?

Absolutely. It's been different in terms of the moves I've been able to execute, and I'll tell you why: The video games I've been a part of in the past have all been wrestling video games. But the difference is when you're executing those moves in the scheme of professional wrestling, you don't, you know, execute the moves to actually kill somebody. [laughs] Being able to do that kind of thing in games is part of what makes them cool. We sat around at a table and thought of how many ways we could kill someone,

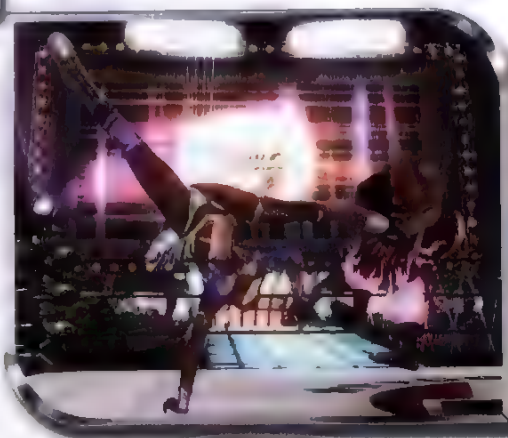


This poor dummy smelled what The Rock was cookin' and didn't stand a chance.



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# PREVIEWS

A Glimpse Into The Future Of Gaming

XBOX 360

## Alone in the Dark

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION > PUBLISHER ATARI > DEVELOPER EDEN STUDIOS > RELEASE TBA

### CLASSIC HORROR REBORN

**A**lthough the series has lain dormant for four years now, the *Alone in the Dark* franchise is primed for a return from the grave. The original game was highly influential on the survival horror genre, establishing conventions that were popularized by the later *Resident Evil* and *Silent Hill* games. Atari announced a new title in the franchise for Xbox 360 at the European X05 event, and this new game will be scrapping many of the conventions it established.

To find out more about *Alone in the Dark*, we dialed up France and got connected with the game's developer, Eden Studios. Although the company is known for its *V-Rally* games and *Kya: Dark Lineage*, AitD's director David Nadal feels his team has what it takes to create the next big thing in horror games. By combining the action of *Kya* with the precise, technical gameplay of the *V-Rally* series, Nadal believes his team can revolutionize a somewhat stagnant genre.

Indeed, the plans for *Alone in the Dark* are surprising. Although it will once again star Edward Camby, it is a new start for the series, with a new setting and gameplay mechanics. This supernatural thriller features a free-roaming, open world—a far cry from the narrow hallways and fixed camera of the previous games. The setting is Central Park in New York, and Eden has recreated

it exactly to scale, with all the familiar landmarks. While this seems like a strange setting for a horror game, Nadal assures us that the open world lets the player imagine that danger can come from any direction, and the contemporary setting will modernize the series.

Eden has been working on next-gen technology since finishing *Kya* two years ago, and is confident that the gameplay will be as big of a revolution for the series as the graphics. Although he couldn't reveal much about it at this point, Nadal said that a big component of the game will be environmental interactions that go beyond what has been seen in games to date. *Alone in the Dark* will utilize Havok physics, and when Eden told Havok what they had planned, the physics experts told them that the studio was crazy for trying something so ambitious!

The *Alone in the Dark* series has had its ups and downs, but things are looking promising for this series' relaunch. Eden clearly has big plans for the game, and Nadal confessed to being a huge fan of the original. With passion for the project and ambitious goals, the new *Alone in the Dark* title has the potential to revitalize the series and reclaim its place as the king of video game horror. ■ ■ ■



■ "Yay! It's Choppy, the magical friendly ghost helicopter!"





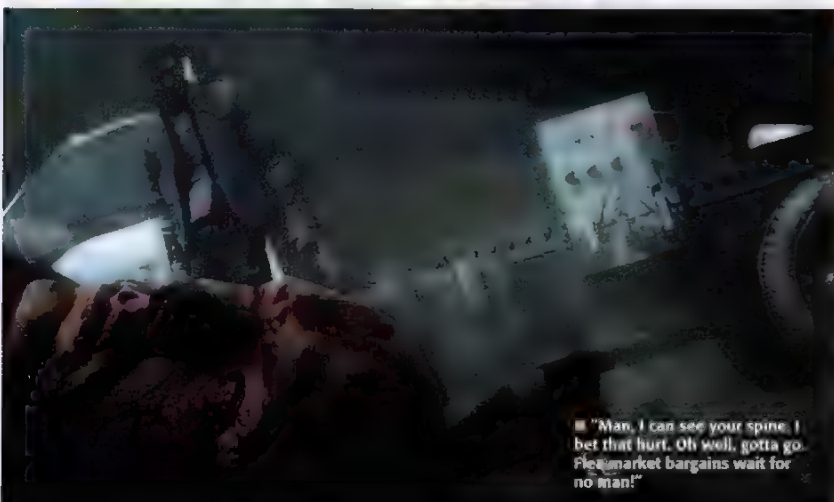
■ "I'll just take a nap here in the middle of Central Park. I'm sure no one would ever hassle me in New York!"



■ We don't know what this gross guy is, but think we saw him on Jerry Springer once



■ Carnby realizes that perhaps it has been a bit too long since he cleaned up his basement



■ "Man, I can see your spine. I bet that hurt. Oh well, gotta go. Flea market bargains wait for no man!"



■ We wonder if Progressive covers demon-related car accidents







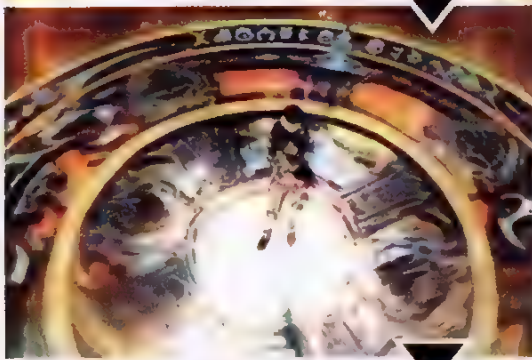
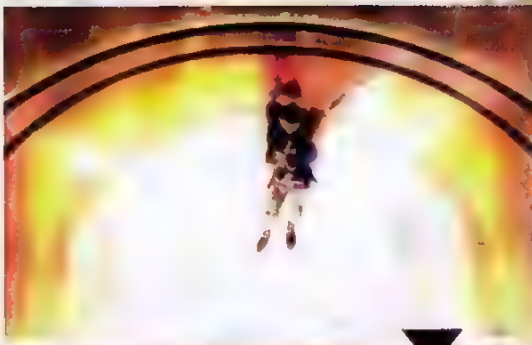
# GAUNTLET

SEVEN SORROWS

 MIDWAY

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■ This sequence shows Ashe summoning the Esper Bellias as it emerges from the ethereal plane and then fights alongside her.



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PLAYSTATION 2

# Final Fantasy XII

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ROLE-PLAYING GAME > PUBLISHER SQUARE ENIX > DEVELOPER SQUARE ENIX > RELEASE 2006

## A LITTLE BIT OF IVALICE

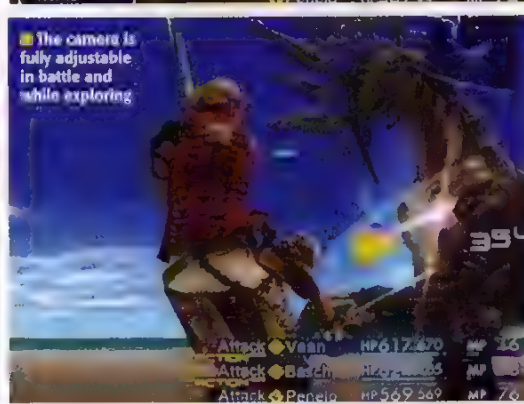
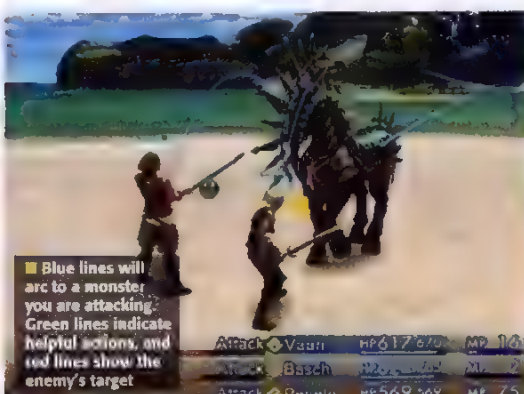
In the wake of Square Enix's year-long silence regarding the latest entry in the Final Fantasy series, some fans began to joke that Final Fantasy XIII might beat XII to store shelves. After all, a company can't withhold information about the most popular RPG franchise in the nation and expect people not to notice. However, whatever the true cause of the delay, a few months ago Square Enix proved that the wait was not in vain when it presented a playable demo of Final Fantasy XII at an event in Tokyo. Now American gamers will be getting their first real taste of the game with the English version of the same demo, packaged with Dragon Quest VIII. Fortunately, we were able to get our hands on this thin slice of sweet gameplay, and we have some savory details about the new mechanics.

Those who have been following the progress of the FFXII drama won't be surprised to learn that the combat system is no longer turn-based. While the newest entry sheds this traditional framework, it still incorporates enough familiar elements to make gamers feel right at home with the new system. For instance, the choice between Wait and Active battle modes makes a return, and drastically affects the combat dynamic. When Active is selected, the real-time fights progress without pause, allowing players to issue commands from the menus. In this mode, combat has the same fast-and-furious vibe of Final Fantasy X-2. On the other hand, Wait mode pauses the game every time you activate the menu, giving you ample time to select your actions. It may

be more old-school and deliberate, but it definitely slows things down. Players will get a chance to try out both choices since each of the two scenarios in the demo showcases one of the styles.

Because of the elimination of random battles, you will need to pay attention to monsters even when you aren't hacking them apart with a sword. In fact, the way you deal with monsters on the map can have a serious impact on the outcome of battle. If you try to just run through an area, you may find yourself in a situation familiar to any MMORPG player — leading a train of baddies who link up and attack as soon as you stop moving. There are smarter ways to approach the situation, though; some of the monsters actually interact with each other. In one level, you will be charged with killing three creatures called Sleipnirs, who are racial foes of the onion-like Mandragoras. If you wait until these two beasts find each other and start fighting, you can do major damage to the Sleipnir while its attention is focused on its mortal enemy.

There are other elements of the short demo (it's about 30 minutes long) that are best for you to experience yourself, like the Summon spells that once again call beasts dubbed Espers. While it doesn't illuminate much about the story, the demo does reveal some exciting elements that walk a thin line between classic RPG and action/RPG, and should give anxious fans a good idea of what they can look forward to when the game finally hits the U.S. late next year. ■■■



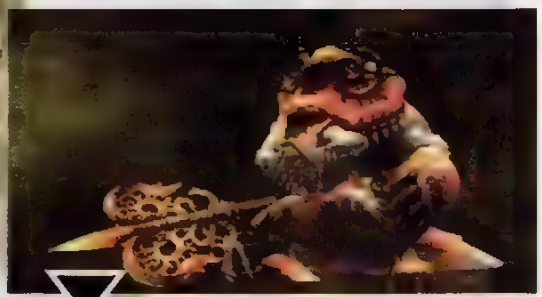
Here you see Belias performing his Hellfire spell. Similar to summoned beasts in previous games, this is a powerful attack with some stunning visuals.



Mandragora begins casting Fire.

The yellow icon by characters' names indicates whether they will be using AI or acting solely on given commands.

Blizzara	Vaan	HP 641 670	MP 63
Agro	Basch	HP 642 708	MP 7
Attack	Penelo	HP 569 569	MP 75



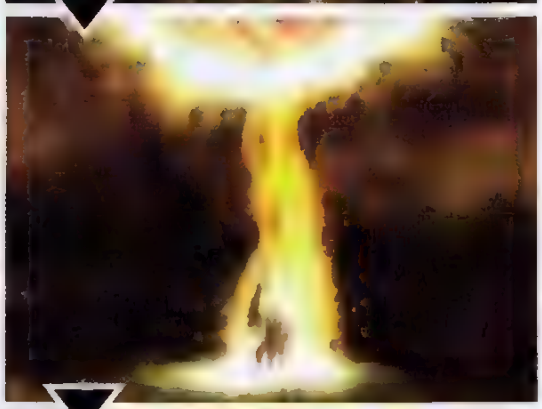
Bomb readies Charge.

Several familiar enemies will be making a return.

Attack	Ashe	HP 312 649	MP 74
	Fran	HP 481 671	MP 74
Attack	Balthier	HP 530 693	MP 66

Judges will figure prominently into the events.

A judge's duty is to the law.



Instead of having to cast Scan all the time, bosses' health is displayed onscreen.

Attack	Ashe	HP 366 649	MP 86
Cure	Fran	HP 527 671	MP 9

Headless begins casting Slow.

The battle log in the upper left chronicles the most recent actions in a fight.

Attack	Vaan	HP 641 670	MP 63
Attack	Basch	HP 381 705	MP 8



lv. 20 Sleipnir D  
HP 1801 / 1801  
Weakness: Wind

Choosing your commands while in Active mode can be hectic when surrounded by foes.

Attack	Ashe	HP 314 649	MP 82
Cure	Fran	HP 267 628	MP 45
Attack	Balthier	HP 606 648	MP 62

Even with new battle features, expect to see the return of familiar status ailments.

Attack	Vaan	HP 206 670	MP 62
Attack	Basch	HP 642 705	MP 13
Cure	Penelo	HP 569 569	MP 17





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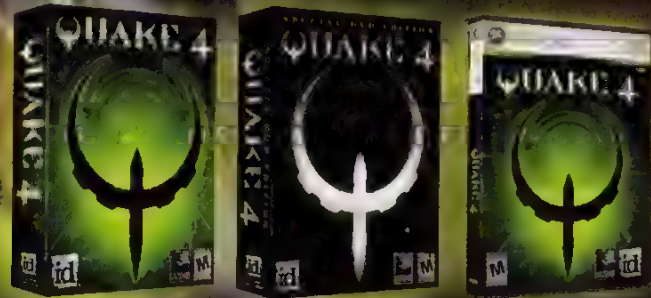
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PLAYSTATION 2

# Kingdom Hearts II

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION/RPG > PUBLISHER SQUARE ENIX > DEVELOPER SQUARE ENIX > RELEASE SPRING 2006

## MORE NEW WORLDS

Excitement continues to mount for the follow-up to Square's unique cooperative venture with the Disney folks. The meeting of Final Fantasy characters and Disney mainstays may once have seemed strange, but the 2002 Kingdom Hearts relieved those concerns with a humorous and emotionally powerful journey spanning all sorts of compelling worlds. The sequel looks to capitalize on that idea by introducing even more far-flung environments, thoroughly plumbing the depths and the history of Disney mythology for new territory.

Recent demos and screens continue to reveal more of these varied environments. One new playable level finds players protecting Queen Minnie while wandering the enchanted halls of Disney's Castle. Another revealed area was the Aladdin-inspired Cave of Wonders, where Abu the monkey helps

provide some laughs. Boss levels placed within the Beauty and the Beast and Mulan worlds offer an exciting twist. Traveling even further afield, Pirates of the Caribbean, The Little Mermaid, and even some intriguing levels set in the old *Steamboat Willie* world (one of Disney's first animated features) have us more than ready to see the way it all wraps together. The most fascinating aspect of these visuals is the way each world manages to feel true to itself, and yet meld so seamlessly with the art style of Sora and his other companions.

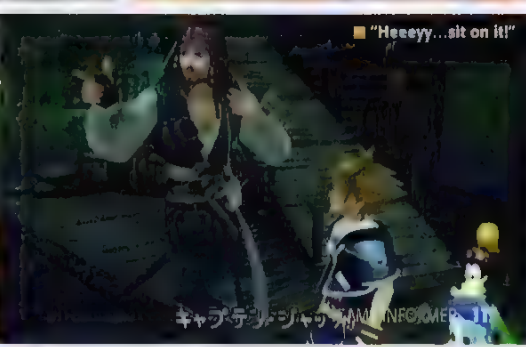
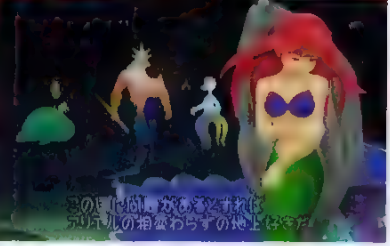
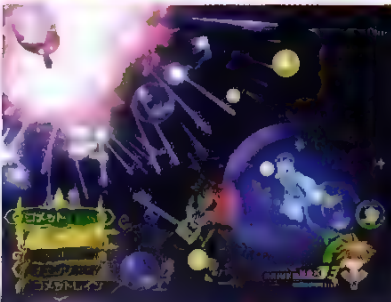
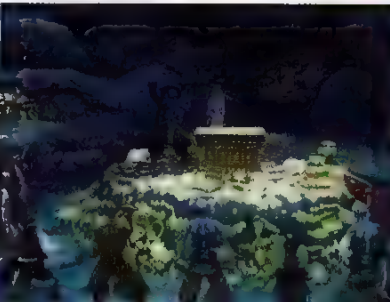
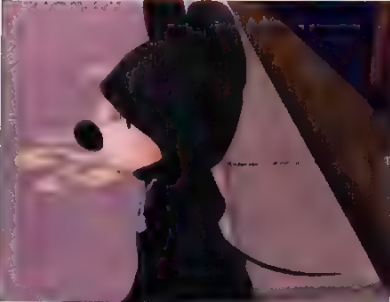
Even though we know that the storyline will directly relate and follow up from the first game, specific plot points remain largely unknown. Meanwhile, there are just too many great screens this month for us to take up any more room talking about them. ■■■



Battles play out similarly to the first game

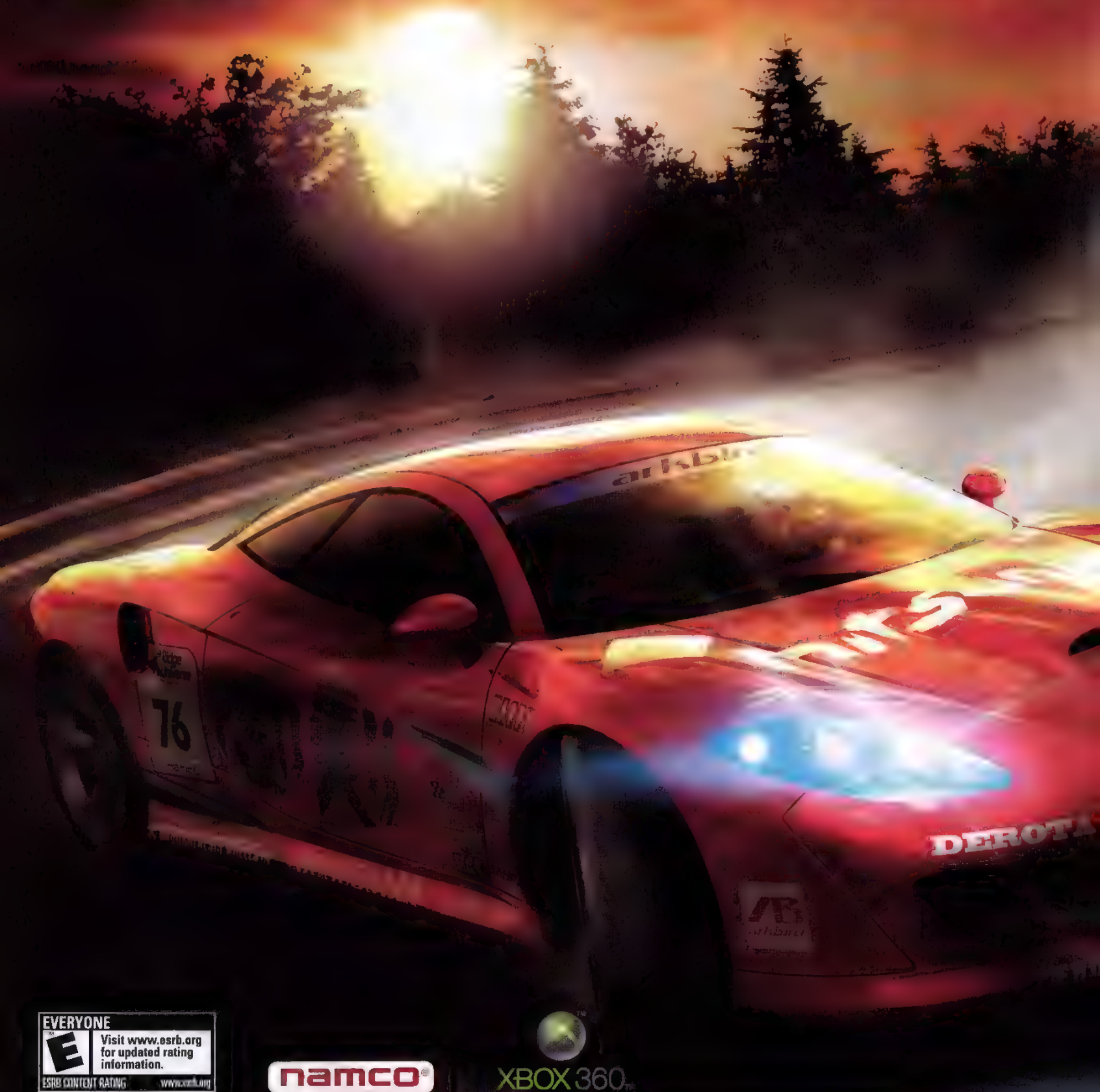


You see, Sora? Don't you feel more comfortable now without your pants?





# SMOKE THE



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XBOX 360

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COMING NOVEMBER 2005



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XBOX 360

## Full Auto

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION/RACING (MULTIPLAYER TBA) > **PUBLISHER** SEGA > **DEVELOPER** PSEUDO INTERACTIVE  
 > **RELEASE** FEBRUARY

### VEHICULAR MADNESS REVEALED

**F**or several months now, we've been hyped about the ultra-destructive, fast-paced demolition racer Full Auto. We've played a few races on the actual 360 hardware, unleashed the armaments of its weapons-bearing vehicles, and had a chance to undo our mistakes with its innovative Unwreck features. In short, we've had enough hands-on time with the game to get really excited about this chaotic next-gen racer. But the one thing we hadn't gotten yet was a good look at the roster of vehicles. Well, producer Cord Smith decided not only to give us an exclusive look at several of the cars in the game (including a brief glimpse at Full Auto's ultimate ride, the

Warlord), he shared his thoughts on each of the machines as well.

"Early in development we realized there wasn't a car manufacturer on Earth who'd allow us to decimate their beautiful creations the way we planned to blow apart the vehicles in our game. Did we sweat it? Nope. We were out to make a driving fantasy, not a reality, so we created rough concepts of dream cars based on popular archetypes, contracted a professional car designer out of California, and modeled a whole garage that's as fun to drive as it is to destroy," says Smith. His comments on each of the individual vehicles are included in the captions. ■ ■ ■



#### Kodiak – B Class

"Didn't expect 4X4s in Full Auto? Get over yourself. This BFT pushes the limits of 'tough.'"

#### Outlow – A Class

"For those of you tired of constantly turning left, we've got the perfect solution. Blow your way off the track and finally put those reflexes to the test."



#### Opulent – B Class

"Sleek and distinctive with a deadly disposition, the beauty doesn't die here during your typical 'Sunday Drive.'"





**Phantom - A Class**

"This open-road classic is one of our most maneuverable vehicles. It may be small, but its speed and firepower will leave you in the dust or leave you in pieces."



**Hookzilla - C Class**

"What's that you say? You got it by a hair? Well, you're right. Hookzilla only caters to destruction."



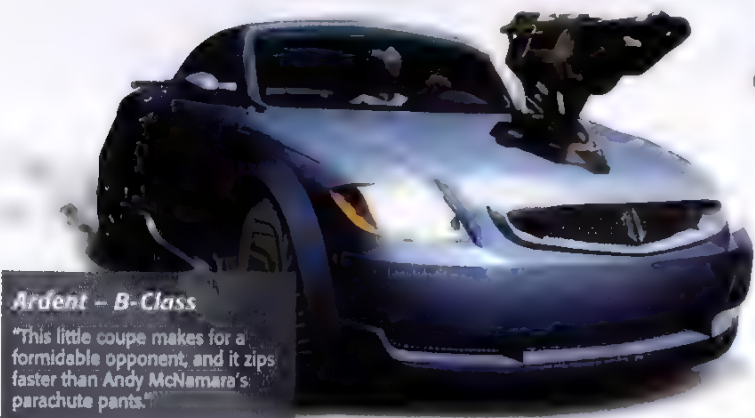
**Jupiter - C Class**

"Combat-ready meets 'Vintage Heaven.' This is the ride you want when your next 'sock hop goes bad.'"



**Streamline - A Class**

"A studio favorite and an excellent all-around ride, this work of art has distinctive lines, solid acceleration, and a feel so professional it should come with a suit."



**Ardent - B-Class**

"This little coupe makes for a formidable opponent, and it zips faster than Andy McNamara's parachute pants."



**Vulcan - B-Class**

"What's not to love about a muscle car with heavy artillery mounted to its hood? Attitude is nothing unless you've got the strength to back it up, and the Vulcan has strength to spare."

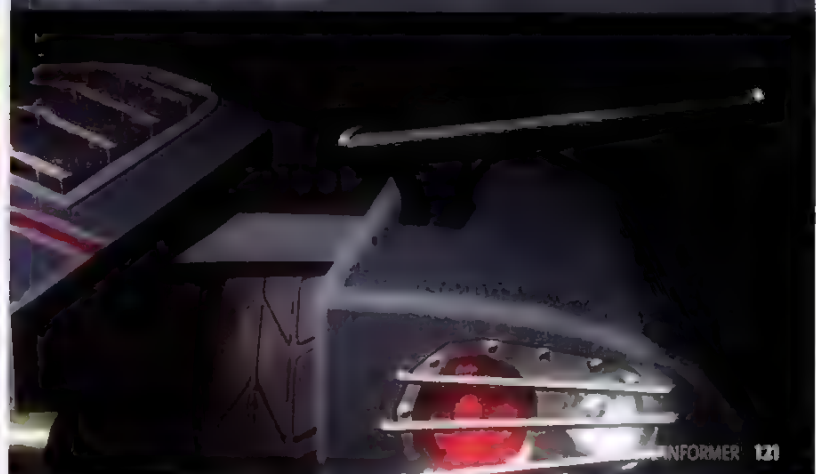
**Guardian - C Class**

"Before you ask, yes, it has a stocked bar. However, we had to remove the seats in the trunk to make room for the additional armor plating."



**Warlord - S Class**

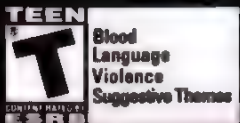
"Top secret. Spell it with me: U.B.E.R."



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PlayStation 2



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A promotional poster for the video game 'The Matrix: Path of Neo'. The central image shows Keanu Reeves as Neo, wearing his signature black trench coat and sunglasses, with his right hand held out palm up. He is positioned in a dark, digital space filled with vertical green columns of light, reminiscent of the 'Matrix rain' effect. The background is a dark, textured surface with faint, glowing green patterns.

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# The Lord Of The Rings: The Battle For Middle-Earth II

> STYLE 1-PLAYER STRATEGY (MULTIPLAYER TBA) > PUBLISHER ELECTRONIC ARTS > DEVELOPER EALA > RELEASE SUMMER 2006

## THE UNTOLD STORIES

**T**he events of Peter Jackson's adaptations of The Lord of the Rings movies have been pretty well covered at this point with Electronic Arts' earlier games. Now, with the company's acquisition of the license to the content of Tolkein's books as well, it's branching out farther into the LOTR fiction. The Battle For Middle-Earth II puts gamers in control of the War in the North, which takes place more or less concurrently with the more famous conflicts in the south of Middle-earth, opening up a whole new section of Tolkein's world for the exploring. And, of course, it comes with a whole host of gameplay improvements over the original.

In the words of Mike Verdu, executive producer on the project, "We're able to bring the Elves and Dwarves into the fray and tell their stories." Instead of re-enacting the Battle of Helm's Deep for the umpteenth time (cool as it may be), you'll take control of the Dwarves and defend their homeland of Erebor. At Rivendell, you'll be able to use the might of Elrond and his kin to repel a goblin invasion out of the Misty Mountains. And finally, the fate of the grand army that marches on Sauron's Mirkwood fortress, Dol Goldur, will be in your hands. While many of these conflicts are only referenced in passing in Tolkein's work, Verdu tells us that "We're filling in some of the gaps that were left in the

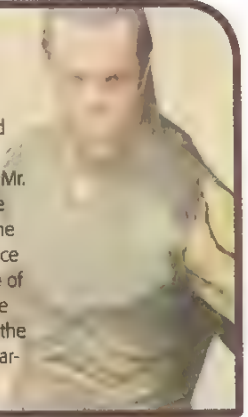
fiction." If EA's treatment of Tolkein's beloved world is as respectful as the publisher's earlier games, we've got no qualms — even if Tom Bombadil is a summonable hero.

On the nuts-and-bolts RTS level, BFME II shelves a few of the less well-received systems of its predecessor and injects a couple fresh ideas itself. The overly-limiting "plot building" paradigm (which only let players construct buildings on predefined areas) is gone, replaced by an economy model that rewards holding lots of territory. Unit AI is reportedly greatly improved, both on a basic level and with the introduction of EALA's new melee coding and "formation preview" system. Previewing your formations will theoretically allow you to quickly and easily select various ways for your units to deploy, and the revamped melee system will supposedly make large-scale conflicts behave much more like you'd expect them to, rather than simply being a big mess of units whacking each other willy-nilly. We can't speak to the end result of either addition as we haven't gotten our hands on the game yet, but they sound fantastic in theory.

The far and away most intriguing element of this title is the new mode. "You can go into War of the Ring mode and essentially create your own campaign," according to Verdu.

## WEAVING THE STORY TOGETHER

Lending that much more authenticity and gravity to The Battle For Middle-Earth II's story are the considerable talents of one Mr. Hugo Weaving (who played Elrond in the films, if you've been living in a cave for the last few years). Since the game takes place in the North and even includes the siege of Elrond's home, Rivendell, Weaving's voice will undoubtedly be put to good use. As the senior sage of Elvenkind, Weaving also narrates the campaign's storyline.



This means that the gorgeous, practically living 3D map of Middle-earth that was in the first game serves a much greater purpose this time around. Commanding any one of the six factions (Men of the West, Dwarves, Elves, Goblins, Isengard, or Mordor), players can direct the War of the Ring as they see fit on a strategic level, and fight it out in the RTS engine. "You can actually build structures on the living world level that you'll see in the RTS mode," explains Verdu. You'll even be able to create a customized hero to lead your armies, in case Gandalf and Aragorn just aren't cool enough for you. And yes, you can take this mode online and conquer or defend Middle-earth in a persistent world against another player. How cool is that?

EALA seems to be addressing most of the concerns with the first title in the series, as well as adding a whole extra level of content and improvements that look fantastic. After all, why should the awesomeness of The Lord of the Rings stop just because the movies are finished? ■ ■ ■



Just because the game doesn't follow the Fellowship doesn't mean the battles aren't epic.

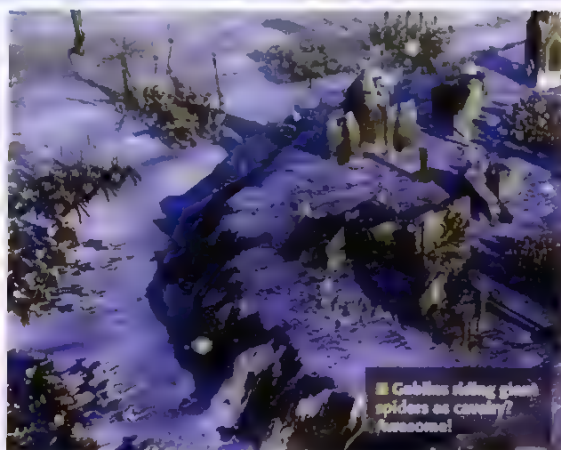
■ Wall-building is a huge part of the strategy in this title



■ Twilight may be upon the Elves, but they are a force to be reckoned with nonetheless



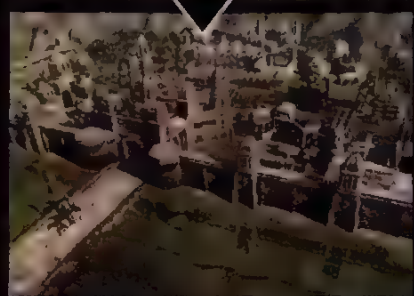
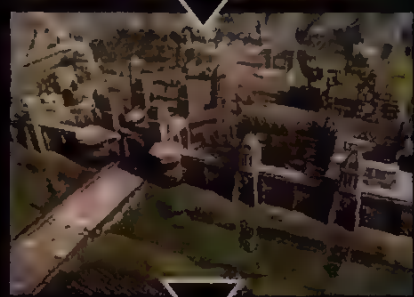
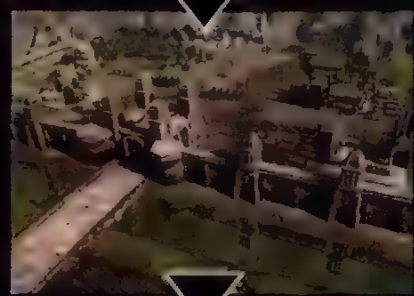
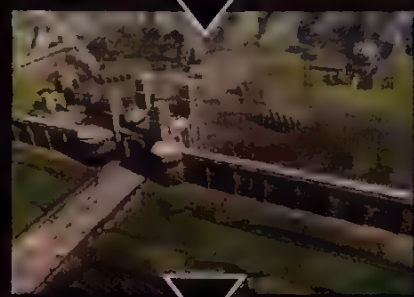
■ Goblins using giant spiders as cavalry? Awesome!



■ Galadriel finally gets his due as he leads the Elves in battle



■ This sequence illustrates the new base-building mechanic. With the robust wall construction tool and the upgradeable main fortress, players will be able to make some seriously awesome encampments, leading in turn to fighting epic siege battles over territory.





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PLAYSTATION 2 | XBOX | PC

# NFL Head Coach

> STYLE 1-PLAYER STRATEGY (MULTIPLAYER TBA) > PUBLISHER EA SPORTS > DEVELOPER EA TIBURON > RELEASE SPRING

## IN THE HOT SEAT

**F**ootball is a sport that is often described as a contest of physical skill. Man versus man in a brutal showdown meant to crush the body of your opponent into the turf. In video games, it's also described in physical terms. Mastering the complex controls of Madden has turned into a contest of twitch gaming. But the mental side of the game is one that cannot be ignored if one hopes to win many games. What can strategy do for you? Good strategy is exploiting the weaknesses of your opponent through play calling and the matching up of the right players. Good general managers identify college and free agent talent for your team. Smart coaches know how to formulate and run a gameplan as well as keep the players ready and motivated to execute that plan. NFL Head Coach lets you do all of these things.

Far from being a boring text-based simulator that other sports strategy games have been, NFL Head Coach wants to make your role as coach and GM of your favorite football team come alive in 3D.

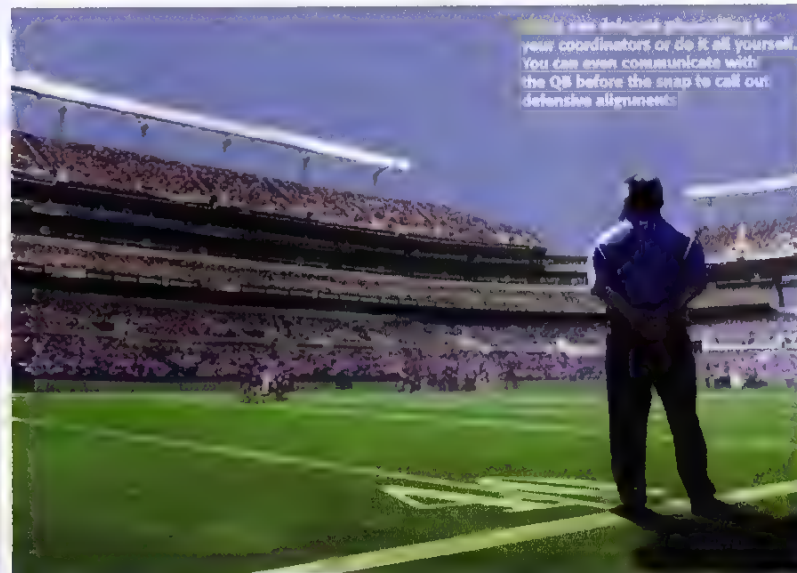
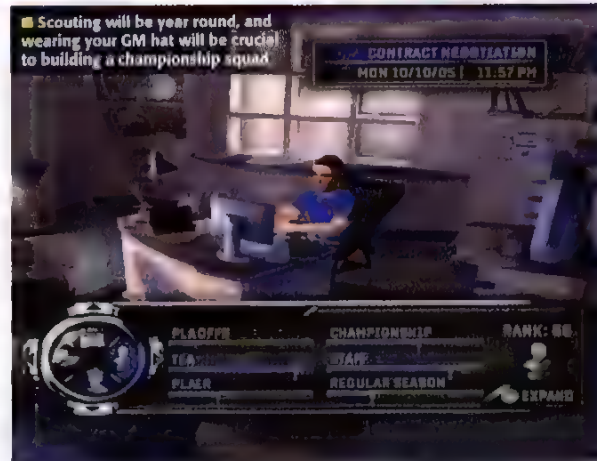
You'll sit in your office and formulate weekly gameplans and talk with other coordinators. All conversations will unfold via a branching, multi-choice system. On the practice field you'll oversee workouts and the creation of plays using the Madden football engine. And of course, on gameday, you'll roam the sidelines and call plays and work with players. If this sounds like a walk in the turf to you, then imagine how short 40 seconds between plays is. In this time you'll be delegating responsibilities to your coordinators on the sideline and up in the booth, coaching players who may need motivation (which will likely manifest as stat bumps during the play), and of course, calling the right play according to down, distance, and game situation. Then you'll sit back and watch the action unfold like a normal game of Madden. Sounds easier being a Monday-morning quarterback, doesn't it? All of this direction can be performed using a voice headset for those who really think they can compare to Cowher.

Apart from managing gameday responsibilities, a lot rides on your shoulders as coach. Players have to be developed and motivated to ensure that their skills emerge. Cowboys coach Bill Parcells is a master at getting the most out of his players. Can you fulfill the promise of your team or will you run it into the ground? Your skills also extend to hiring the best staff, looking at free agents, and going to the scouting combine to evaluate college players for the draft as a general manager. You will have to deal with agents and negotiate the best contracts to not only keep your team stocked with talent, but also under the league's salary cap.

Do this well enough and you'll get into the NFL Hall of Fame. This not only depends on your win/loss record, but such things as how many of your coordinators

have gone on to be head coaches in their own right, kind of like the long lineage that Bill Walsh and Bill Belichick have created. Other features such as online and multiplayer have yet to be announced, but developer EA Tiburon did tell us that there will be some kind of cross-over with the current generation of Madden.

You've thrown 60-yard bombs and stiff armed your way down the field in Madden, but are you smart enough to stare down Andy Reid in a cold playoff game in Philly and call the right play to convert a 3rd and 13 with no timeouts during the two minute drill? ■ ■ ■





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XBOX 360

# Mass Effect

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION/RPG > **PUBLISHER** MICROSOFT GAME STUDIOS > **DEVELOPER** BLOWARE  
> **RELEASE** TBA

## OUR FIRST STEPS INTO A LARGER WORLD



■ Facial detail will allow you to read more emotion from characters when you interact with them. This guy looks "determinedly aggressive"



■ Unlike previous BioWare titles, Mass Effect will feature full voiceovers for the characters, and the branching dialogue system is now more in-depth

ong appreciated in the PC world, Canadian developer BioWare has quickly established a trusted reputation with console gamers. The studio's first original console IP, Jade Empire, proved beyond a shadow of a doubt that the company's success with Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic wasn't all thanks to the license. Jade Empire was an incredibly rich world filled to the brim with imagination, and BioWare's newest console project – an Xbox 360 exclusive entitled Mass Effect – explores what awaits humanity as it stretches out and explores the galaxy.

The game takes place in the 23rd century, when humankind has just started to explore space with manned craft – an endeavor that soon takes our race beyond the familiar confines of our solar system and into the heart of the galaxy. What we encounter is a war between artificial and organic life that has dangerous and far-reaching consequences. To protect the peace, your character becomes the first human to be indoctrinated into an elite military force called Spectres. You will control a spaceship and crew to enforce your mandate, with your first mission being to subdue a rogue agent.

Of course, this job is just the beginning of a larger

adventure, and BioWare even plans to make Mass Effect a trilogy – something BioWare joint CEO and co-executive producer Dr. Ray Muzyka says is easily done. "We're investing in a whole suite of development tools and planning a story arc spanning games and expansions in the future that will allow us to quickly and efficiently create content for future games. We are quite confident that BioWare will be able to successfully create and deliver the entire experience to the players, and our goals is to do so during the life span of the Xbox 360." The game's other executive producer and fellow CEO, Dr. Greg Zeschuk, told us that although features such as space combat won't be included in the first chapter in Mass Effect, the company has big plans for the trilogy's future.

Mass Effect is similar to previous action/RPGs from the company in that the choices you make will influence the game's outcome. However, this title will also give the player added customization in the way of character appearance, extending to your equipment and weapons. Character development is also under your control, while the game's combat is squad based. Although BioWare has yet to delineate the specifics of combat, we imagine that

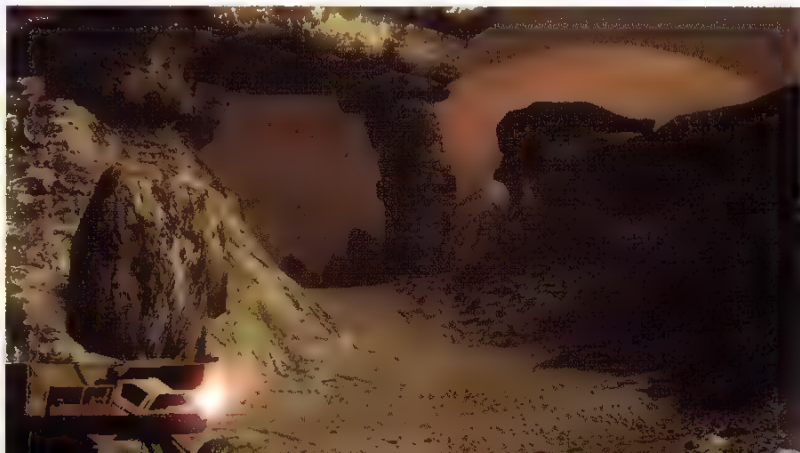
an AI ordering system will once again be used, as will the skills system and bio-enhancements familiar to BioWare fans. The company isn't talking about multiplayer or co-op possibilities just yet, but Zeschuk told us it would use Xbox Live's Gamer card and achievement system, and he hinted at cooperative aspects. Downloads are also expected.

The title uses Epic's Unreal Engine 3 to full effect, and Mass Effect promises to show gamers some pretty gorgeous surroundings. Players are free to explore uncharted worlds, which Zeschuk told us will yield some tantalizing results. "The locations themselves are very large and exceptionally inhospitable; they allow the player opportunities for exploration and combat, all with a goal of unearthing ancient artifacts the player will find useful during the main story." As with other titles from the company, the world of the game will be filled with many detailed civilizations and unforgettable characters.

BioWare doesn't expect Mass Effect to be ready for another year or even year-and-a-half, but we're already looking to the future and gazing at the stars dreaming of adventures beyond our imagination. ■■■■



■ Mass Effect uses Epic's Unreal Engine 3, and the results speak for themselves





XBOX 360 | PLAYSTATION 2 | XBOX | PSP | PC

# Tomb Raider: Legend

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION > PUBLISHER EIDOS > DEVELOPER CRYSTAL DYNAMICS > RELEASE SPRING 2006

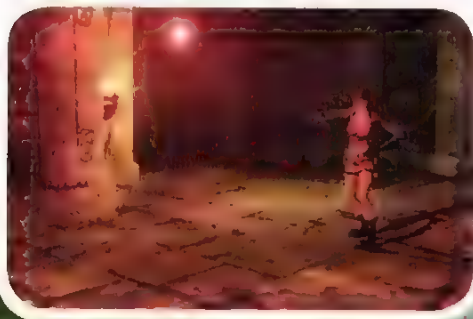
## FASHIONABLY LATE

There's good news and there's bad news, so which do you want to hear first? Well, let's get the bad out of the way. Lara's return to your video game screen has been pushed out of the holiday season and is now firmly entrenched in 2006. On the bright side, a recent glimpse into the Xbox 360 development of the game indicates that the delay may be worth the wait.

The 360 version certainly has some graphical power to offer up. Normal mapping as well as per-pixel lighting and shadows should offer quite a boost to the excitement of the game. We also continue to be impressed with the

changes to the overall look and feel of the game. Lara's more natural appearance and movement are aided tremendously by the fact that the game world is no longer built on a rigid square grid. There's a fluidity to her movements that allows free action throughout the environments. Furthermore, since every object in the world has interactive weight and physics to it, there are frequently multiple ways to confront puzzles. Knocking a pillar down to form a bridge can be completed by tossing a grenade or by swinging Lara across the room to slam into it. Challenges like these illustrate the change from the box and switch puzzles of earlier games to more realistic problems and solutions within the environment.

There was a time when Tomb Raider was right up there on everyone's top list of gaming stars. Lara's steady fall from grace has left many skeptical as to whether the franchise is really capable of reinvention. Nonetheless, there are certainly several reasons to hold out hope, not the least of which is the appearance of the new game on a next-generation console. It looks as if we're going to have to wait a little bit longer before we know how the project turns out, but don't give up hope quite yet. ■■■



■ Lara searches for her lost contact lens, and while she's down there, looks for her dignity



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XBOX 360

# Too Human

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION (MULTIPLAYER TBA)  
 > PUBLISHER MICROSOFT GAME STUDIOS  
 > DEVELOPER SILICON KNIGHTS > RELEASE TBA

A GOD AMONG MEN

■ The setting will clearly be more than mere Matrix-like post-apocalyptic darkness

Since breaking away from its long-standing close relationship with Nintendo for waters unknown, not much news has been coming out of Eternal Darkness developer Silicon Knights, leaving fans of the studio's excellent work desperate for any crumbs of knowledge. At Microsoft's recent X05 event in Amsterdam, however, the doors were blown off of the company's latest project: a third-person epic action title called Too Human. Though the game is now on its third platform (it had been previously cancelled for both PSone and GameCube), its use of Unreal Engine 3 couldn't be fresher from the looks of the trailer shown at X05.

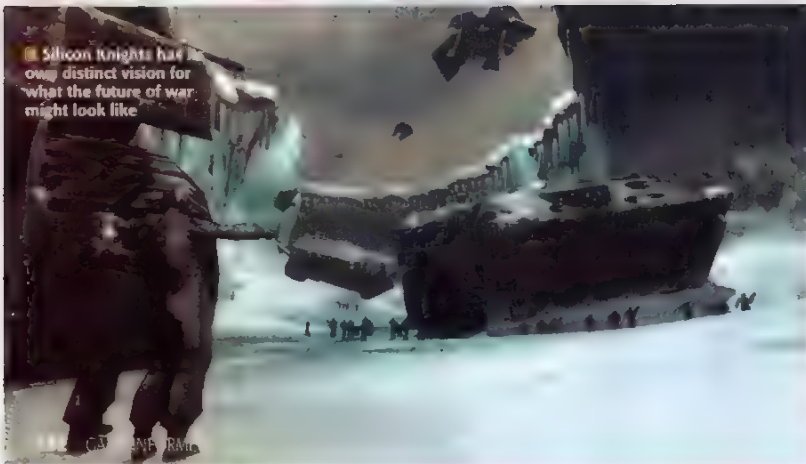
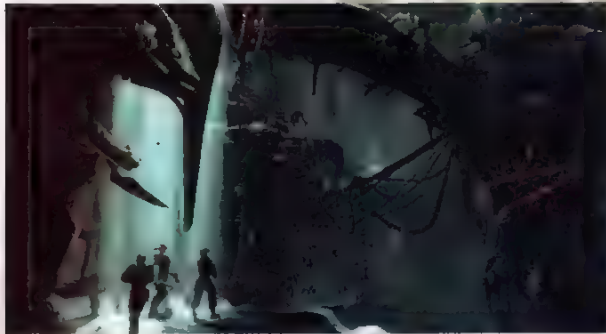
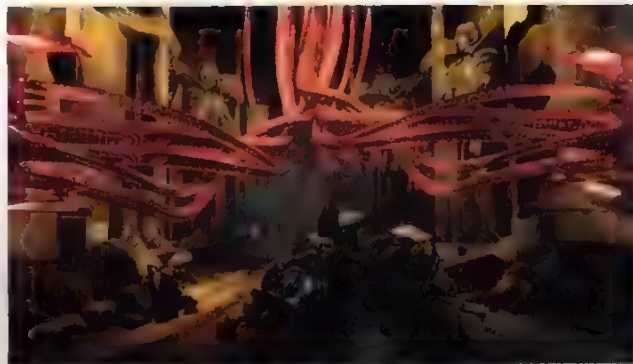
The core conflict of Too Human is a story known to anyone with a passing acquaintance with science fiction:

man versus machine. In the distant future, a race of evil war machines is out to destroy humanity – and, if you can believe it, you'll take control of one of the only entities able to stop them. Heavily influenced by Norse mythology, Too Human casts the player in the role of an elite military commando who is severely enhanced by cybernetic implants. Known as "gods," these commandos use the powers granted by their cyberization to defend the human race against those who threaten it. The protagonist, Baldur, is not as heavily modified as his comrades, however – hence the stigma of being "too human." This same quality confers a unique popularity among the human populace, though.

As the cybematic god Baldur, players will utilize what the developer is touting as a simple-to-learn, tough-to-master combo system to plow through the hordes of deadly robots. The use of both firearms and melee combat will be necessary, as the trailer clearly showcased a wide variety of foes thirsting for Baldur's blood. This won't be yet another Devil May Cry ripoff, though; while Silicon Knights is keeping quiet about the specifics of the combat system, the company has confirmed that the two analog sticks and the trigger buttons will be the main methods of

input. Given the developer's track record, we can't wait to see what new kinds of tricks this will allow.

Though the developer isn't talking about either feature quite yet, the existences of both a cybematic upgrade system and extensive online functionality is confirmed as well. However, it has been hinted that the Xbox Live component will be much different than standard deathmatch or capture-the-flag modes – reportedly, Silicon Knights is looking at making the online portion tie into the core single-player game. These interesting potentials, combined with Too Human's epic scope (the game is planned to be the first installment of a trilogy), certainly make it seem that the Xbox 360 is slated for yet another great franchise. ■ ■ ■



■ Silicon Knights has a own distinct vision for what the future of war might look like



■ Epic action, indeed



UNLIMITED ENABLED

PLAYSTATION 2

# Onimusha: Dawn of Dreams

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION > PUBLISHER CAPCOM > DEVELOPER CAPCOM > RELEASE JANUARY 1

## GOATBOY WILL KICK YOU CURBSIDE

**W**ho didn't have doubts about Onimusha 4 (now officially subtitled Dawn of Dreams)? The series' trilogy-ending entry was awesome and tied up the franchise's loose ends, so what would another do? Of even more pressing concern was the new game's concept at highlighting a main character with horns – seriously, he has goat-like horns. Yet when the disc arrived, we shoved those reservations aside and dove into the first hands-on playable code of Onimusha: Dawn of Dreams.

Doubting Goatboy (who is actually called Soki) was the wrong decision. Dawn of Dreams' opening cinematic has him defending an ancient city from hordes of Genma goons and a handful of colossi outfitted in samurai-style armor. They topple the city's buildings and the scene continues until the player is in control, fighting back waves of enemies and biding time to face one of the gigantic warriors. In this build, the actual giant fight is short but impressive, with a rarely used fixed camera and Soki running

along the rooftops, fighting off the towering demon.

Although that climactic first boss fight was too easy in our build (this early version only had easy mode available), the combat system opened up shortly afterwards and made even simple enemy encounters a flurry of impressive samurai action. Never known for a complicated control scheme, this Onimusha title maintains that ideal while adding cooperative attacks with another party member (who can be switched out between a handful of new characters), virtue challenges to get rare items, and more Critical attacks. Overall, the vibe is more strategic than the first two entries and along the lines of the third, and the animations are a blast.

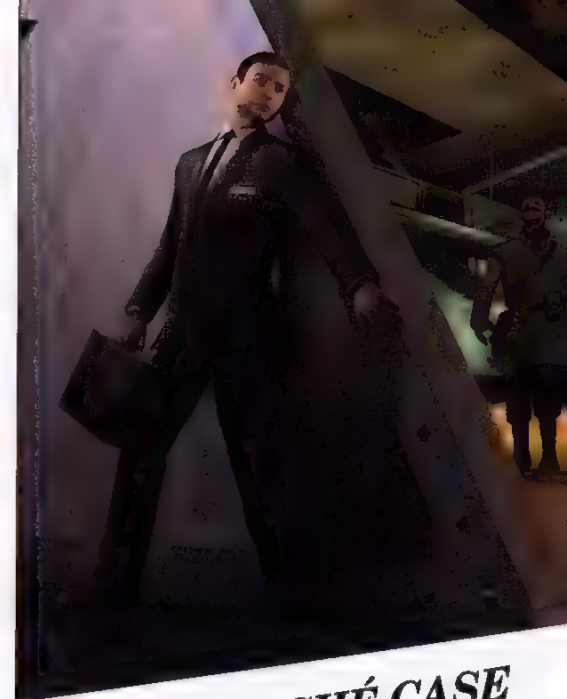
This post-holiday release is looking promising, and even with our early nervousness about the title, a few hours of hands-on time have destroyed the doubts about Goatboy, the pertinence of another start in the series, and how the long-running franchise would hold up to the current competition. Put Dawn of Dreams on your post-holiday list of things to look forward to. ■■■



■ Magic is available immediately and is a warrior's best friend



■ A new party member, Ohatsu, specializes in firearms, but also excels at more traditional combat methods



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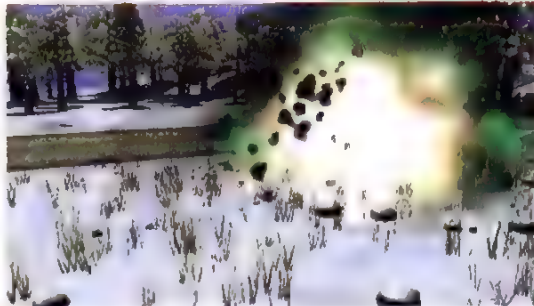
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■ Animations for attacks take place in the main view - no cutting away to different screens



UNLIMITED ENABLED

PSP

# Field Commander

> **STYLE** 1 OR 2-PLAYER STRATEGY (2-PLAYER VIA AD HOC OR INFRASTRUCTURE) > **PUBLISHER** SONY ONLINE ENTERTAINMENT > **DEVELOPER** SONY ONLINE ENTERTAINMENT > **RELEASE** FEBRUARY 28

## A WEE WAR

**T**he PSP is a young machine, and holes are still being plugged in its software lineup. Field Commander will be taking care of one of those gaps. Turn-based strategic warfare may not be everyone's cup of tea, but as Nintendo's long-standing (and very successful) Advance Wars series shows, the genre is a fantastic fit for handheld consoles. Unlike similar games, however, Field Commander is taking advantage of every bit of power Sony Online is able to squeeze out of the PSP. The fully 3D engine looks excellent, and makes the game's stylized modern war machines look very impressive.

Similarities between Field Commander and Advance Wars don't stop at the genre level, but that's hardly a bad thing. A round of play proceeds nearly identically to Nintendo's franchise, with each player moving and attacking with all of their units and then handing over control to the enemy. Each of the 15 unit types has a mere 10 hit points, and lose strength as they get damaged. Artillery-type units can fire from afar, but get quickly stomped if you let a tank engage them point-blank. Infantry are weak, but will be able to capture bases and other buildings - which is a big deal, as the napalm factory and laser satellite control center can give

your army a huge advantage.

Unique to Field Commander, though, is the fact that the terrain is somewhat destructible. Tanks may not be able to pass through forests, but they can blow the hell out of them and clear a path. Likewise, the aforementioned napalm will burn down trees and buildings alike. Also, in this title players will accumulate upgrade points as the game goes on. Spending these during the opponent's turn to gives their army global bonuses to either attack or defense. This should minimize the boredom of waiting for your enemy to take his turn, which is always a problem in turn-based titles.

Speaking of multiplayer, Field Commander will offer a ton of ways to fight against other humans. Both ad-hoc (local) and infrastructure (internet) modes of play will be available, as well as a "play by email" option for a more laid-back gametype. A matchmaking service will even be available to hook you up with other players online. Additionally, Sony Online's Station website will track all kinds of stats, as well as host user-created maps that one can download to a Memory Stick. It's a shame that none of the 20 multiplayer maps support any more than two players, but that's more of an annoyance than anything else - who wants to wait for three other slowpokes to finish their moves before being able to do something again?

We haven't been able to get our hands on it yet, but since the engine is already running very well on the PSP hardware, we're confident that Field Commander will at the very least be a solid title for the handheld. Whether or not Sony Online can walk the delicate line of perfect balancing that makes Advance Wars such a fantastic series is another question, but we can't wait to find out for ourselves. ■■■







PLAYSTATION 2

# Tales of Legendia

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ROLE-PLAYING GAME > PUBLISHER NAMCO > DEVELOPER NAMCO > RELEASE FEBRUARY

## GETTING SOME TALE

**N**amco's Tales series hasn't seen quite as many entries here in North America as it has in Japan, but the last one we got, Tales of Symphonia, is still one of the best RPGs available for the GameCube. Next year Namco will take the series back to Sony's console with another anime-styled adventure entitled Tales of Legendia, taking place in a brand new world with an original cast of characters.

The story stars a gifted young man named Senel Coolidge who is skilled using an ability called "eres," the art of manipulating latent environmental energy to perform extraordinary skills and attacks. Senel and his sister Shirley are adrift in the ocean when they come across a lush island...or so it seems. Soon they realize that the island is actually a relic of a lost civilization - a gargantuan ship called the Legacy. They meet and team up with several residents of the island in their quest to

unravel the mystery of the vessel. Utilizing a new combat mechanic called X-LIMBS (crossover linear motion battle system), the fights in Legendia will feel familiar to Tales fans while bringing in some new tricks. Using either crystal or iron eres, you'll set up special attacks and combos in the real-time battles. All encounters take place on a single line, with the player controlling one party member while the others are handled by AI. Even though the multiplayer of Tales of Symphonia will no longer be an option, the system still looks like it will provide fast and frantic action for the player.

It may not be the sequel to Symphonia that many RPG enthusiasts were hoping for, but Tales of Legendia's combat, distinctive art style, and compelling story should be enough to set it apart and give eager fans another promising entry in this long-running franchise. ■■■



PSP

# WWE Smackdown vs. Raw 2006

> STYLE 1-PLAYER FIGHTING (UP TO 4-PLAYER VIA AD HOC) > PUBLISHER THQ > DEVELOPER YUKE'S > RELEASE DECEMBER 7

## IS THAT A WRESTLER IN YOUR POCKET?



**D**o you consider your John Cena jersey appropriate attire for weddings and court appearances?

Did you erase the birth of your first child to tape Wrestlemania 21? Then you probably have an unhealthy obsession with the WWE. As medical doctors (we graduated from the Discount Correspondence College of Butte, Montana), we recommend that you not separate yourself from wrestling-related material for more than five minutes at a time. We prescribe THQ's first PSP title, WWE Smackdown vs. Raw 2006.

The PS2 version of this title is the best WWE product THQ has released in some time (see the review on page 172), and it just so happens that the PSP version is virtually the same game. In fact, every feature from the console edition is being included, save for the commentary and customizable locker rooms. The two will even sync up with each other, and you'll actually be able to play matches from your PS2 season mode on your PSP. If that doesn't stop you from getting the wrestling withdrawal shakes, we don't know what will.



Smackdown vs. Raw 2006 for PSP will be some pretty powerful medicine for your affliction, and it even features exclusive content not found on the console versions. It sports the exclusive Legend Jake the Snake, as well as three non-wrestling minigames for some pick up and play fun: a trivia game, a poker game with WWE stars, and Eugene's airplane race, which is just as ridiculous as it sounds.

We're excited to see THQ enter the PSP world with an ambitious title, and being able to play one season across both versions is one heck of a feature. You see, we've got the same unhealthy connection to wrestling. Once, we sold our mom's insulin to pay for the Backlash Pay-Per-View. She'll be missed. ■■■



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PlayStation 2

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PSP

# Tokobot

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION > PUBLISHER TECMO > DEVELOPER TECMO > RELEASE NOVEMBER

## ROBOT RUMBLE

**A**lthough the PSP has been home to numerous ports and updates, there haven't been too many original titles for the system that have found much of an audience. Tecmo's new game Tokobot was designed specifically to bring something fresh and new to the system, and after some hands-on time with the game, we're happy to say that this may be exactly the pleasant surprise the system needs.

Tokobot puts players in the role of Bolt, a young man exploring ancient ruins, but he's not alone. At his side are several small robots that he can use to overcome his obstacles: the titular

Tokobots. With the press of a button, you can change the formation of the Tokobots, and they gain different abilities for each formation. Make them fall in line behind you, and they can be linked to form a ladder, bridge, or whip. Spread them out to your sides to perform a helicopter spin, or gather them around you for a devastating slam attack.

The Tokobots will gain new moves and upgrades throughout the game, and even acquire the ability to transform into larger robots. Based on our time with the title, Tokobot came across as a fun, accessible platformer with a good deal of creativity. The various Tokobot abilities are clever and easy to

learn, and the game has a bright, colorful look that should appeal to all ages. The demo level we played was brief and simple, but with enough ingenuity and solid gameplay that even older players should enjoy it. Tokobot has the kind of classic appeal that has made games like the Pokémon and Mario titles hits across all age groups.

In a time when the boundaries of mature content are the amongst the most discussed aspects of the industry, it's nice to see a title like Tokobot come along to remind us that games can be about fun, whimsy, and simple joy. ■■■



The hand-drawn sprites are beautifully detailed

PLAYSTATION 2

# Atelier Iris: Eternal Mana 2

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ROLE-PLAYING GAME > PUBLISHER NIPPON ICHI > DEVELOPER GUST > RELEASE SPRING 2006

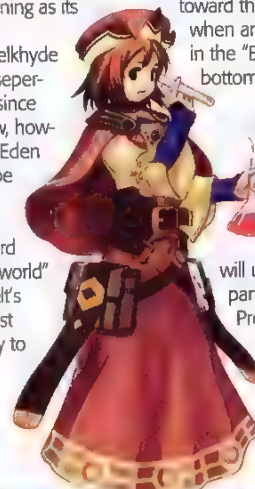
## TWO WORLDS, TWO HEROES

**N**iche publisher Nippon Ichi is coming through once again for fans of classically styled Japanese RPGs. Next spring, the company will be bringing the sequel to Atelier Iris: Eternal Mana to our shores, and our inner RPG nerds couldn't be happier. The excellent Zelda-esque exploration and crafting aspects of the original game remain intact for Eternal Mana 2, and a new real-time battle system along with an interesting plot device look to make this title just as entertaining as its predecessor.

The two worlds of Belkhyde and Eden have been separated from each other since time immemorial. Now, however, a threat to idyllic Eden forces young hero-to-be Felt to go to war-torn Belkhyde to save his beloved land – standard “young boy saves the world” RPG fare. However, Felt's accomplice, Viese, must remain in Eden and try to stem the chaos there while also supporting Felt's quest with her alchemical abilities. How this mechanic

precisely works out is unknown, but it will apparently involve switching between the two characters to progress. If it works anywhere nearly as well as the fantastically complex systems of the first Eternal Mana, we'll gladly embrace it.

The new real-time battle format looks interesting, as well. Characters will take actions when their turn comes up on the “Action Cost Time Battle” track, and depending on what they do, they'll be knocked down toward the bottom. However, when an enemy (or ally) is in the “Break Zone” near the bottom of the track, they'll be vulnerable to attack chains for extra damage. Apparently, certain abilities will alter track positions as well, so manipulating it to your advantage will undoubtedly be a major part of success in combat. Presuming that this title meets the expectations built by the first game, Eternal Mana 2 will be another worthy addition to any RPG fan's collection. ■■■



The Tokobots can be swung around Bolt for a helicopter spin attack



Bolt's insistence on making his Tokobots follow in a perfect single-file line is really a glimpse at his crippling obsessive/compulsive disorder



Exploring the isometric world is a huge part of the game



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PC

## Hellgate: London

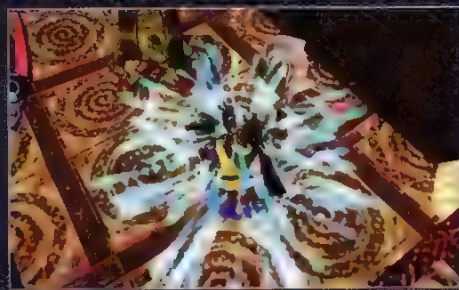
There may be no word yet on a release date for this post-apocalyptic action/RPG from Flagship Studios (which counts many ex-Diablo developers among its ranks), but that doesn't mean it's not worth getting excited about. As you can see from this shot, Hellgate: London just keeps looking better and better – and with the caliber of talent that's working on the game, we simply can't wait to get our hands on it. Nothing has been said yet about a possible appearance on next-gen consoles, but it's hard to imagine a title this appealing in the action/RPG genre staying PC-exclusive. We'll let you know more as it becomes available.



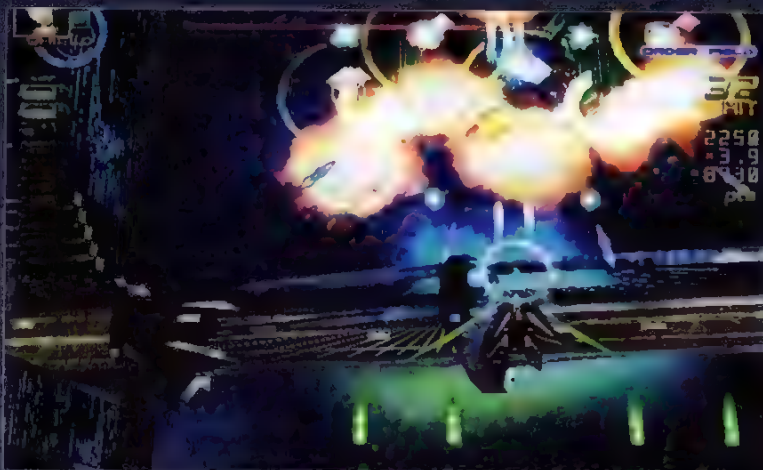
PSP

## Untold Legends: The Warrior's Code

When we brought you the first word on this sequel back in September, we were delighted to hear that developer/publisher Sony Online Entertainment planned to fix and upgrade more or less everything we didn't like about the first Untold Legends. Now, after seeing the latest build of the game running in real-time, we're happy to report that it's looking fantastic. Not only are the graphics an order of magnitude better in The Warrior's Code, but the tweaks to the combat



system will clearly make this much more than a simple button-masher. It's too bad that co-op over infrastructure or ad hoc is limited to two players, but given the slew of improvements to every aspect of the game, we're not going to complain too much.



GAMECUBE

### Chaos Field

Woot! Do you know what the hottest new title coming to the GameCube is? Well, it's the Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess. But since that game has been delayed until next year (or is possibly moving to Revolution), Nintendo fans are going to need something to keep them from having a sad, mopey holiday season. Well, fortunately, O-3 Entertainment will be stuffing Chaos Field down your Mario stocking this December, so there's no reason to spend New Year's Eve with a pitcher of eggnog and a Yoshi doll. An arcade-style space shooter, Chaos Field was a hit in Japan with five levels of non-stop action, multiple characters, and buttload of weapons. Anyone who has scored a rare copy of Ikaruga or played the hidden gem that is Mobile Light Force 2 should instantly understand the potential for awesomeness that Chaos Field has, so maybe a Zelda-free year is a blessing in disguise. Now your schedule is free to play games you might have overlooked, like Chaos Field.



PSP

### Prince of Persia Revelations

If Ubisoft's plans come to fruition, this PSP update of last year's Warrior Within will be bigger and better, yet formatted to fit on the smaller handheld format. Developer Pipeworks is planning on adding new puzzles, extra maps, and some re-worked levels. Although the PSP button configuration (and just one analog stick) has been a problem for many of the handheld's action/platforming titles, we're hoping that Prince's freeform fighting system keeps the same feel and that the acrobatics are just as compelling. Revelations is set for release by the end of this year.

PC

### RF Online

Another MMORPG this way comes. Originally hailing from Korea, RF Online will be making its way here early next year courtesy of Codemasters. This fantasy/sci-fi hybrid title boasts a unique mix of player-vs-environment and player-vs-player content, with central resource nodes being fought over by the game's three playable factions. Here, the magic-using, monster-summoning Holy Alliance Cora dukies it out with the evil robots of the Accretian Empire and the Bellato Union's formidable mechs in epic combat, all in the framework of an online RPG. RF Online has already been running smoothly in Korea for some time now, so it should be free of the usual technical hiccups when it releases here. Delicious visuals aside, this title could be an interesting option for PvP-minded players who are looking for a new world to adventure in.





# REVIEWS

We Play The Crap So You Don't Have To

MULTI



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## Call Of Duty 2

Every once in a while, a game comes out that undisputedly stands at the top of its genre. Call of Duty 2 is one such title, whether you're playing it on a bumpin' gaming PC or a brand-new Xbox 360. Clearly the best World War II game to date, an argument could be made for Call of Duty 2 over the best FPSs no matter the setting. With a level of intensity to the action throughout the entire experience that most other games can only hit in their best moments and multiplayer so fine that you won't want to put it down to take care of basic hygienic needs, this is the World War II shooter we've all been waiting for.

146

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 denved in extremely small quantities, if at all.                     |
| 1  | Carrot Top. A game so obnoxious and worthless it fills even itself with an unbearable, crushing shame. It also uses prop gags to little effect.                      |

> **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.

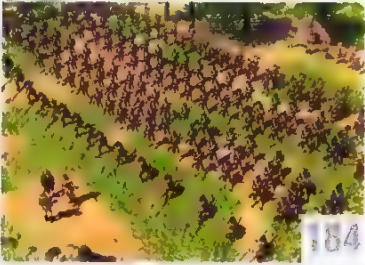
**Moderately High** – Good for a long while, but the thrills won't last forever.

**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.

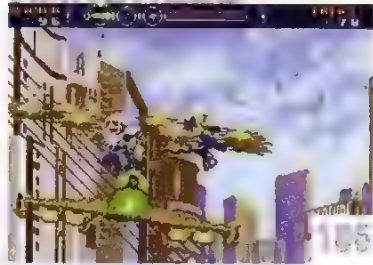
**Low** – You'll quit playing before you complete the game.

PC



Age of Empires III

HANDHELD



Gunstar Super Heroes



**Grand Theft Auto: Liberty City Stories**

For the first time ever, the PC and console Games of the Month are one and the same. In light of this unusual development, we're happily free to bestow Grand Theft Auto: Liberty City Stories with a Handheld Game of the Month award. Rockstar has achieved some sort of technological voodoo to fit the GTA formula onto Sony's portable, and the end result is nothing short of spectacular. GTA has lost little on the transition to the PSP hardware, and could easily be the smash hit the system has been waiting for.

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**In-edge**

When All Games Aren't Created Equal  
 This is where GI breaks down multi-platform games. So whenever you see this logo, there is important multi-system information regarding that product.

<b>C</b> CONTENT RATED BY ESRB CONTENT SUITABLE FOR PERSONS AGES 5 AND OLDER	<b>M</b> MATURE CONTENT SUITABLE FOR PERSONS 17 AGES AND OLDER
<b>E</b> EVERYONE CONTENT SUITABLE FOR PERSONS AGES 6 AND OLDER	<b>A</b> ADOLESCENT ONLY CONTENT SUITABLE ONLY FOR ADULTS.
<b>E</b> EVERYONE CONTENT SUITABLE FOR PERSONS AGES 10 AND OLDER	<b>RP</b> RATED BY PARENTS PRODUCT IS AWAITING FINAL RATING.
<b>T</b> TEEN CONTENT SUITABLE FOR PERSONS AGES 13 AND OLDER	

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 (= 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 Devil May Cry and Viewtiful Joe.
- ad hoc** - A type of wireless connection that connects you with other players in your immediate vicinity.
- 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.
- bloom** - An effect that simulates the soft, blurred glow of bright light reflecting off of surfaces.
- board** - A term we use for games like Jeopardy! and Mano Party.
- cel shading** - A technique used to create 3D rendered objects that resemble hand-drawn animation cels.
- E3** - Electronic Entertainment Expo. The world's largest convention for video games.
- fighting** - A term we use for games like Mortal Kombat and Dead or Alive.
- first-party** - A game made by a console manufacturer's internal development teams exclusively for its own system.
- 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 Halo, Doom, and Call of Duty.
- framerate** - The frames of animation used to create the illusion of movement.
- frontend** - A game's menus and options.
- GBA** - Game Boy Advance.
- GC** - GameCube.
- HDTV** - High Definition Television.
- infrastructure** - A type of wireless connection that uses the Internet to connect with other players over long distances.
- isometric** - Three-quarters top down view, like StarCraft or Baldur's Gate. Dark Alliance.
- 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.
- MMO** - Massively Multiplayer Online. Usually applied to role-playing titles, we use this term for games with persistent, multi-user online worlds like EverQuest and World of Warcraft.
- motion blur** - Phantom frames follow an object to give the impression of realistic speed.
- normal mapping** - A graphical technique in which a hi-res skin containing 3D information, revealed by light reflecting off the surface, is wrapped around a low-res model.
- 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.
- platform** - A term we use for games like Super Mario and Crash Bandicoot.
- pop-up** - When objects onscreen suddenly appear, typically due to poor draw distance.
- PS2** - Sony PlayStation 2.
- puzzle** - A term we use for games like Tetris and Puyo Pop.
- 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 Xenosaga.
- shooter** - A term we use for games like Ikaruga and Gradius.
- sports** - A term we use for games like Madden NFL.
- strategy** - A term we use for games like La Pucelle and Front Mission.
- The Meganing** - The process an editor's desk undergoes as part of an office prank. The active ingredient is the school photo of a reader foolish enough to send it to us unsolicited.
- third-party** - Something made for a console by a company other than the console manufacturer.

## Top 10 PC Games of the Year

### The Readers Pick

# GAMEINFORMER

MAGAZINE

Last month, the Editors of Game Informer made their picks on the best PC Games in 2005. Now the Readers have spoken, and one lucky sweepstakes winner, Carrie Clouse of Elizabethtown, Kentucky, has been chosen from entries submitted on [www.gameinformer.com](http://www.gameinformer.com) as our grand prize winner. Game Informer would like to introduce Carrie's Top 10 List of PC Games of the Year.

1	Guild Wars
2	Sid Meier's Civilization IV
3	The Sims 2: University
4	The Sims 2: Nightlife
5	Rome Total War: Barbarian Invasion
6	Age of Empires III
7	The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion
8	Black and White 2
9	Ultima Online: The 8th Age
10	Fable: The Lost Chapters



**Carrie Clouse, Age 25  
Elizabethtown, KY**

"I play games on many systems, but the PC is the best choice for my simulation and strategy games. I find the control interface to be more natural and I enjoy the ability to create or download custom content."



Guild Wars 1



Sid Meier's Civilization IV 2



The Sims 2: University 3



The Sims 2: Nightlife 4



Rome Total War: Barbarian Invasion 5

# Walk the Walk of Extreme PC Gamers

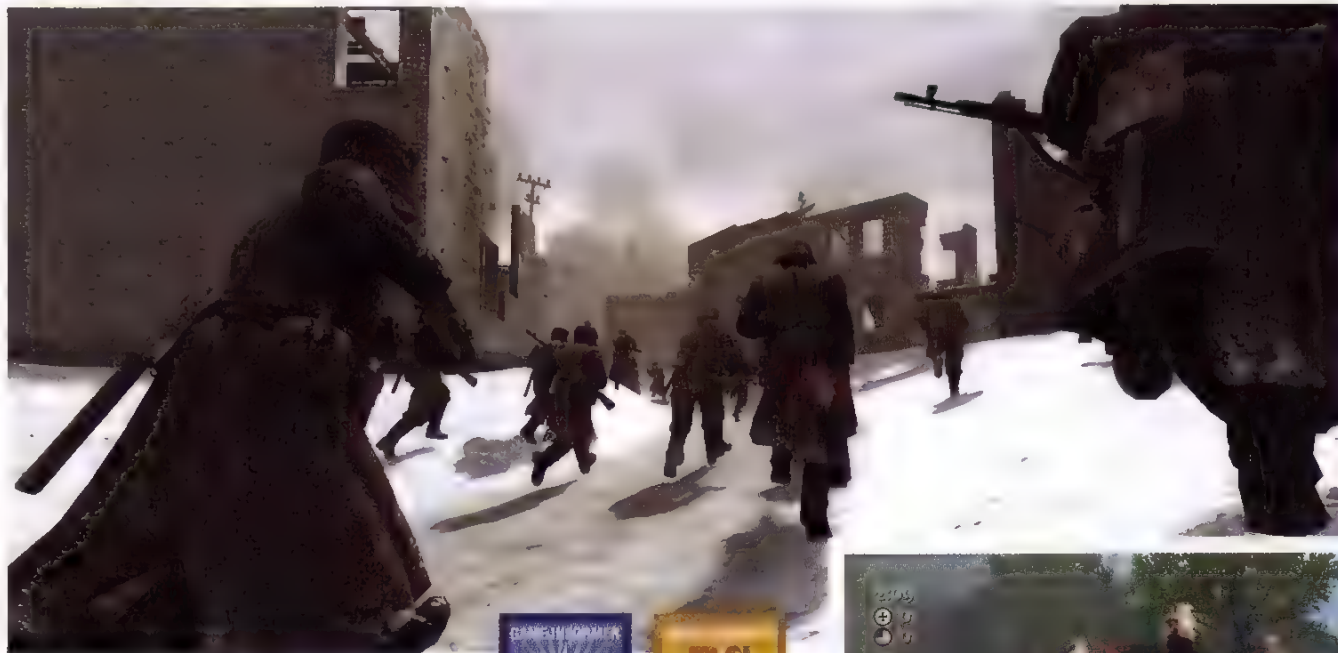


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**BOTTOM LINE** **9.75**

> **Concept:** Show all the chumps what a real World War II game is like

> **Graphics:** Gorgeous, and even more so when you consider that no matter how crazy the action gets, the framerate never wavers

> **Sound:** Fantastic. I love how squadmates will shout out the locations of spotted enemies

> **Playability:** On PC, it's great as always for FPS. On 360, it has the best console FPS control scheme I've ever used

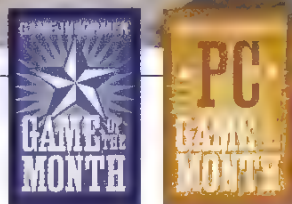
> **Entertainment:** This is the WWII game you've been waiting for, and likely the best 360 launch title

> **Replay Value:** High

XBOX 360 | PC

# Call of Duty 2

> **STYLE** 1 TO 4-PLAYER ACTION (360), 1-PLAYER (PC) (UP TO 8-PLAYER VIA XBOX LIVE, UP TO 16-PLAYER VIA XBOX 360 SYSTEM LINK, UP TO 32-PLAYER VIA PC INTERNET OR LAN)  
 > **PUBLISHER** ACTIVISION > **DEVELOPER** INFINITY WARD > **RELEASE** NOVEMBER 15 (360), OCTOBER 25 (PC) > **ESRB** M



■ The smoke and noise of the battlefield are unparalleled

## KING OF THE HILL

**D**eveloper Infinity Ward did a lot of things right with the first Call of Duty, especially in terms of cinematic presentation and intense action. In a lot of ways, it was the best wartime FPS of its time. Call of Duty 2, whether you play it on a gaming PC or the Xbox 360, is to its predecessor as the 360 itself is to the NES. Everything that makes war games entertaining — the feeling of defending freedom, the immersion in a warzone, and the glorious thrill of being a hero — is done far better in this title than in any before it. Quite simply, this is the best WWII game ever made.

The greatness of Call of Duty 2 starts with the little things. The level of precision in the technical aspects, from the airtight control to the flawless hit detection, is superb. AI for non-player characters is some of the best I've ever seen, with enemies and allies alike reacting to fluid battlefield situations like actual soldiers. Never has AI been able to intelligently use covering fire to advance or grenades to flush out entrenched infantry like this. Your comrades will even call out spotted enemy positions using landmarks and relative directions. "Enemy infantry up on our left, behind those crates!" is infinitely more help-

ful than the "Nazis incoming!" of previous games. There are no pickups other than the dropped weapons of fallen soldiers, so rather than scouring a level for enough health to complete your objective, you're just trying to successfully carry your mission out. The little touches, like the grenade indicator that tells you when you're standing next to a live 'nade, just make the experience that much smoother. And it honestly doesn't get much smoother than this.

Everyone (myself included) loves to talk about the "intensity of the action" in games like this to the point that the phrase has lost much of its meaning. Unfortunately, there's really no other way to describe the gameplay of Call of Duty 2. Upon finishing a mission, I literally had to sit back, close my eyes, and just breathe for a few seconds to remind myself that I lived through it. To get an idea of how crazy it is, take all of the most awesome moments in all of the action games you've ever played, and imagine going through them all in a row for twelve hours. The Nazi war machine didn't allow the Allies any time to rest, and neither does this game. As never before, the player is smack in the middle of a freaking warzone.

You'll typically have a half-dozen allies and two to three times that number of enemies active onscreen at a time, plus the added chaos of various tanks, halftracks, emplaced guns, and incoming artillery. And it doesn't stop until you drive the Wehrmacht out of France.

The only knocks I have on this otherwise flawless experience are fairly minor. The regenerating health (it works much like Halo shields, where you regain stamina if you don't get hit for several seconds) cheapens the tension of several levels. When the encounters are only with a few enemies at a time, it's easy to drop them before they could possibly hit you enough to kill you. Also, while the enemy AI is unquestionably fantastic, by the end of the game it's fairly simple to convince them to react the way you want them to. Finally, multiplayer may not be the revolution in the genre that the single-player campaign is, but it is extensive and entertaining. At the end of the day, Call of Duty 2 delivers more than enough on both fronts to be a great purchase. —**ADAM**

## Second Opinion 9.75

Looking back at the World War II games that I've played over the years, I can clearly recall the memorable moments from each title. Medal of Honor's interpretation of D-Day is a good example of this. With that said, it's impossible to accurately pinpoint Call of Duty 2's highest point. I wish I was exaggerating, but every second of gameplay is a bombardment of relentless, teeth-gritting chaos. With tracer bullets zipping by, smoke blanketing my vision, soldiers barking orders at me, and a Nazi sprinting toward me with the butt of his rifle raised high, I can easily say that I have never been so overwhelmed by a game. I really didn't expect to find a launch game that would at long last put an end to my Halo 2 multiplayer addiction, but Call of Duty 2 is easily the next best thing in online. As remarkable as the visuals are, what makes this game great isn't intrinsic to the next generation. It's Infinity Ward's brilliant gameplay and outstanding level designs that push it over the top. —**REINER**



■ The tags above allies in multiplayer leave no excuse for teamkilling



■ The single tank level is fun, but more of a bonus shooting gallery than a real mission

IT AIN'T WHERE YOU FROM

WHERE YOU AT



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"Where You At?"



■ The police amp up their hunting tactics in remarkable and really fun ways



■ Even the Xbox suffers a bit in graphical detail, but still looks great at high speeds

PLAYSTATION 2 | XBOX | GAMECUBE

# Need for Speed: Most Wanted

> **STYLE** 1 OR 2-PLAYER RACING (2-PLAYER VIA PS2 ONLINE OR XBOX LIVE) > **PUBLISHER** ELECTRONIC ARTS > **DEVELOPER** EA CANADA > **RELEASE** NOVEMBER 15 > **ESRB** T

## IF YOU'RE LOSING, WE'LL LET YOU WIN

**W**hile I didn't review the last Need for Speed game, here's my take on it — the open city is a pain and the difficulty wasn't balanced very well. So, Most Wanted being a sort-of sequel, does it bring the series back to its current-gen high point of NFS: Underground? Largely, yes. But as a whole, it's not quite there yet.

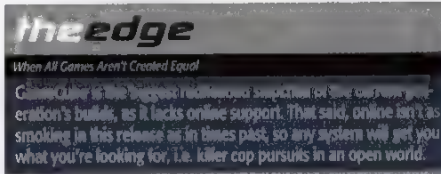
The introductory sequence lets you play with a smoking car, introduces you to the biggest toolbox of characters in recent memory, and then takes it all away to supply the game's progression crutch: the blacklist. You've got to earn reputation and bounty by completing goals laid out by members of the police squad's blacklist. Meeting these benchmarks lets you challenge the next name on the list. You'll go through this process for each of the 15 blacklist members, and after a few, the schtick wears a little thin.

While I started to care less and less about getting my car back and earning the top spot on the cop's radar, the game's hybrid of open city and quick zapping to events strikes a great balance between the two schools of new racing franchises. Player

choice is the name of the game, and you rarely have to do anything that you don't want to.

The one exception to this is increasing your bounty, rap sheet, and reputation. You have to do it, but you'll be glad for the task. By attracting police attention, you'll initiate pursuits that become increasingly more intense and, in my experience, more fun. I was ripping through an open golf course chased by a handful of cops who had backup 25 seconds away. I needed to lose them, get into Cooldown mode, and find a hiding spot before their reinforcements arrived. Five minutes of treacherous drift turns into alleys, breakneck speeds down highways, and artful (okay, aggressive) dodging of roadblocks later and I was nestled in the back of a parking structure, palms sweating and intensely listening to the police scanner, hoping I'd finally lost them.

My rap sheet has all of the details from this epic chase, along with unserved infractions and the police's take on my favorite ride and hangouts. Pumping up this chronicle became more of a compelling goal for me than getting up on the career mode's blacklist. I think that this switch



*the edge*

When All Games Aren't Created Equal

GameCube is the biggest redheaded stepchild for the current generation's builds, as it lacks online support. That said, online isn't as smoking in this release as in times past, so any system will get you what you're looking for, i.e. killer cop pursuits in an open world.

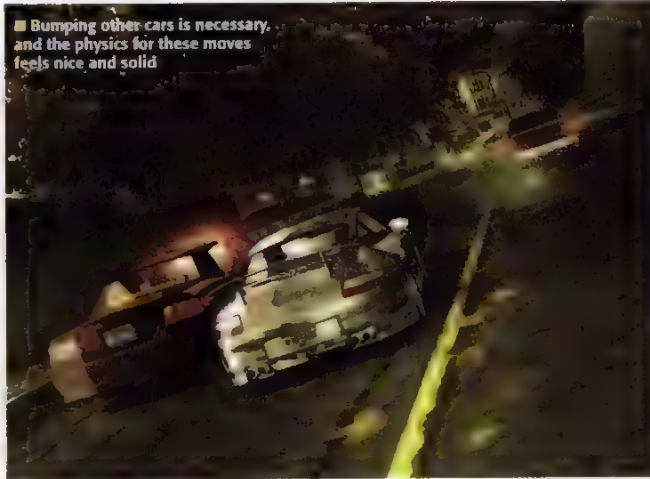
in my focus is due to one fault in the game's design — opponent AI is pretty stupid.

I finished off two blacklist members with a 15-second lead. Another fell nine seconds behind me. Once, I crashed and the other racer roared past me. When I got back up to speed and came around a corner, my opponent was braking in the middle of a wide-open road without another car, median, police cruiser, or obstruction in view. Huh? I left him there and took the race with a hefty lead.

Despite this glitch, I had a blast with Most Wanted. While I yearned for a little more in a few areas (difficulty curve and graphical polish in particular), the overall experience lies somewhere between the first Underground and the second...meaning that it's easy fun, but not genre-defining. —LISA



■ As before, you can make some seriously obnoxious-looking rides, but the customization seems less robust than the first Underground.



■ Bumping other cars is necessary, and the physics for these moves feels nice and solid

**BOTTOM LINE** **8.5**

> **Concept:** Halfway merge old Need for Speeds, the Underground series, and hint at aspects of Burnout

> **Graphics:** Weirdly, the game looks a little foggy. Jaggeds are a problem and backgrounds look okay at 130 mph, but show their low-res tricks at slower cruising speeds

> **Sound:** The game holds its own in the soundtrack department and surround is almost a necessity during police pursuits

> **Playability:** A little too easy for my tastes, but the tighter cityscape is a great addition

> **Entertainment:** Unchallenging fun certainly has its place, and NFS: MW supplies it in spades

> **Replay Value:** Moderate

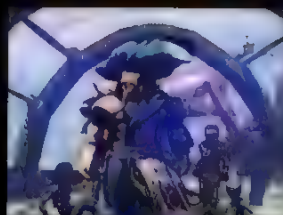
### Second Opinion **9**

I can't begin to explain how pleased I am that the Need For Speed team really looked at issues with last year's game and fixed basically every single one of the problems I personally had with it. On top of that, the addition of the police chases within the world are simply classic. Finishing a race and finding five cops on your tail makes for an exhilarating experience. I often found myself just driving around looking to cause trouble so I could do my best to create the chase scene from *The Blues Brothers*. The game is basically the same on all three current-gen platforms, but if you have the means, I highly recommend the 360 version. We didn't get it in for review, but I've seen it and it is absolutely gorgeous, and one of the premier racing games on the system. Unless, of course, EA screws it up. —ANDY

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PlayStation 2







■ They were the good old days, back when you could impress a strumpet by blowing a guy's head off.



■ Gun's story arc is a grand tale...



■ "How's your aim?" "It's okay. But for the right price, it's excellent."

PLAYSTATION 2 | XBOX | GAMECUBE

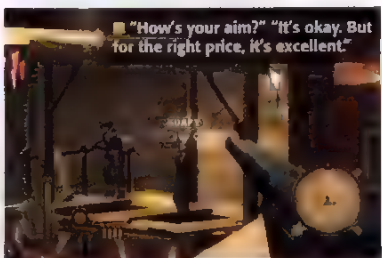
# Gun

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION > PUBLISHER ACTIVISION > DEVELOPER NEVERSOFT > RELEASE NOVEMBER 8 > ESRB M

## THE PALE RIDER

**G**un takes place in the Wild West, but dust and horses alone aren't enough to make the journey worth taking. Instead of filling in the backdrop of the adventure with clichés, however, developer Neversoft has worked very hard to create a world that is made of more than sand. It's not just that there is a slew of side missions to take on, or that you can roam the open-environment freely in search of them—it's that Gun surrounds you with characters and a story that put their own stamp on the genre and make you a participant in a grand adventure that stands up to the rich tales of the legendary west.

The trail of Colton White through this game may take him in contact with some staples of the western genre such as hookers, saloons, and Native Americans, but at each turn Neversoft does a good job of adding its own touches to make the experience anything but stale. Whether it's half-crazed renegade cavalry soldiers or sadistically brutal villains, the game's world is original enough to be compelling but realistic enough to ring true. The voice-acting talent really nails the script, and with lines like, "I'll slit you open and make a boasting of your guts," it is as good, if not better, than that of any other game.



### 360 Lowdown

Gun also appears on the Xbox 360, but due to circumstances beyond our control, we were unable to review it in this issue. Activision assures us that the differences between the current and next generation editions are only graphical polishes and nothing feature- or gameplay-related. In the future we will analyze the 360 version and if there are any notable differences, we will follow up with a separate review. If there aren't any major changes, take this as our definitive review.

**BOTTOM LINE** 8.75

> **Concept:** Neversoft creates a gritty, captivating portrait of the West.

> **Graphics:** There is the occasional tearing or collision issue, but there are lots of little details done just right.

> **Sound:** The voice acting in this game is excellent in every way. Its musical score is perfect as well.

> **Playability:** I wish you could Quickdraw with weapons other than the pistol, but the on-horse combat is surprisingly solid and smooth.

> **Entertainment:** Gun's story is engaging at every twist and turn, and the side missions keep things rolling, too.

> **Replay Value:** Moderately High

### Second Opinion 9

Breaking away from over-used spaghetti western archetypes, Gun draws its six shooters to deliver one of the most subversive, gripping, and powerful experiences to ever grace the West. Simply put, Sergio Leone would have killed for a script like this. Untamed, smoking barreled gameplay backs the ticking time bomb of a tale, allowing players to build great disdain for a wanted man, then moments later deliver justice by placing steel directly between his wretched eyes. Horse riding is used to great effect, but the surprisingly small world poisons the sensation of galloping across the high plains. The game also suffers from vesting too much faith in players actually completing optional missions, thus leading to a fairly short-lived critical path. However, if you take the time to explore every facet of Gun, it can easily be summed up as one of the most thrilling games of the year. The West has never been this wild. —REINER



■ If you looked at this picture and thought, "That's a TIE Fighter," slap yourself as hard as you can. It's a TIE Interceptor, fool!



**BOTTOM LINE** **8.5**

> **Concept:** Adds wildly entertaining space battles and lightsaber combat to the already incredible skirmishes

> **Graphics:** The annoying motion-blur effect is gone. Troop and environment details are better defined as well

> **Sound:** Having Temuera Morrison do the trooper voice work is a nice touch. Additionally, how much has John Williams made off of these movies anyway?

> **Playability:** The new dash maneuver is awesome (especially with Jedi and Sith). The vehicle controls have also received a much-needed upgrade

> **Entertainment:** Big battles... big explosions... huge thrills

> **Replay Value:** High

UNLIMITED ENABLED

PLAYSTATION 2 | XBOX | PC

# Star Wars: Battlefront II

> **STYLE** 1 OR 2-PLAYER ACTION (PS2), 1 TO 4-PLAYER (XBOX), 1-PLAYER (PC) (UP TO 24-PLAYER VIA PS2 ONLINE, UP TO 32-PLAYER VIA XBOX LIVE, UP TO 64-PLAYER VIA PC ONLINE) > **PUBLISHER** LUCASARTS

> **DEVELOPER** PANDEMIC STUDIOS > **RELEASE** NOVEMBER 1 > **ESRB** T

## INITIATE ORDER 66

For most people, the perfect day usually consists of stupid things like a clear blue sky, the sun beating down, and some sort of fruity drink with an umbrella in it. I've never really thought about what it would take to hold me in a state of ultimate bliss. That changed when I played Battlefront II. On a typical lazy afternoon, I started a dozen Ewoks on fire, raided the Jedi Temple and slaughtered all of the pathetic do-gooder younglings, blew open the door on the Tantive IV and captured that whimpering Princess, then killed some more hopeless Jedi for kicks. In other words, it was a very good day.

Rather than following the actions of the wimpy Rebellion and the misinformed Jedi that truly believe that the light side of the Force will bring balance to the galaxy, this sequel places players into the battle-hardened boots of Vader's personal Trooper division, the 501st Legion. As the game unfolds, you will experience the fear, destruction, and death that Vader mercilessly unleashed upon the galaxy.

The first Battlefront game didn't offer much in terms of a rewarding single-player experience, and in this regard, the presentation in this sequel is still lacking, consisting entirely of grainy stock footage and dialogue over shoddy in-game sequences. While it would be nice to see George Lucas empty out his pockets to liven up this aspect of the game, the story that is conveyed is quite interesting and loaded with material that Star Wars fans have been dying to learn about. The missions in this mode no longer solely revolve around capturing points on the map. You'll find yourself undertaking protect, destroy, and assassina-

tion missions as well. All told, the single player component now offers roughly seven to eight hours of must-play material.

This may be enough to satisfy a Kowakian monkey-lizard, but by no means is it enough to justify a purchase. Battlefront II is still primarily an online multiplayer game. Developer Pandemic Studios has made great strides to make this online experience seem more like a cohesive part of the Star Wars universe. In the first game, most of the vehicles were extremely frustrating to control. Hopping into a spacecraft such as an X-Wing spelled instantaneous death due to the small arena sizes and dreadful controls.

This time around, the vehicles are actually one of the most exciting elements. Jumping into a TIE Fighter and having two of your friends form up on your wing as you battle against a Rebel frigate is something that everyone who has a little nerd in their blood absolutely needs to see. Through highly responsive and smartly mapped controls, dogfighting is skillful and fun. This element of the game is brilliantly devised, but the



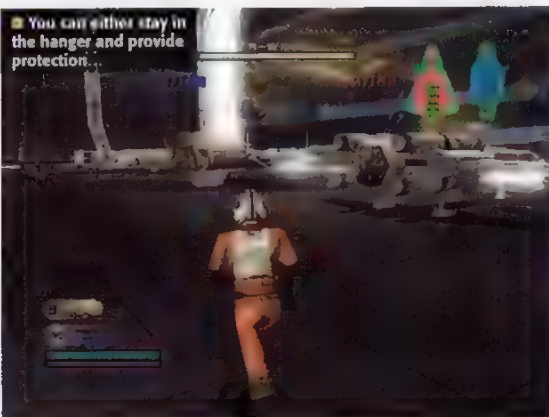
pockets of space prove to be a little small. You really can't coordinate defensive tactics within the allotted room.

GoldenEye had the golden gun. The equivalent of this in Battlefront II are the new hero characters. Skilled players will actually get a chance to use a Jedi, Sith, or bounty hunter. Just picture Yoda slicing through stormtroopers only to have his killing streak come to an end by the saber of Darth Maul. Shivers...everywhere.

As George Lucas swims through his mountains of money and dreams up what Jar Jar's cousins might be like, developers like Pandemic are creating some of the most memorable Star Wars experiences to date. The movies may be done, but with games like Battlefront II, I have a feeling that the best in Star Wars is yet to come.—**REINER**

## Second Opinion

The way that the single-player Rise of the Empire mode in Battlefront II weaves the tale of your clone regiment into the events of Episode III and beyond is more engrossing than it has the right to be—and that's before you get to cut off droid heads as Yoda on Kashyyyk. As often is the case with Star Wars titles, however, your imagination and love of the movies carries you a fair amount through the experience. The gameplay has evolved slightly from the first Battlefront, but not as much as it should. Although good fun, this series still revolves around advancing from point to point on a map through some simple combat. The new space dogfights are decent, but it's not like you've all of sudden stepped into the Rogue Squadron series. Levels are fairly short, and you're never that absorbed into things before a poorly-compressed cutscene pops up to introduce the next mission. Even a faceless clone years for a life of significance every now and again.—**KATO**



■ You can either stay in the hanger and provide protection...



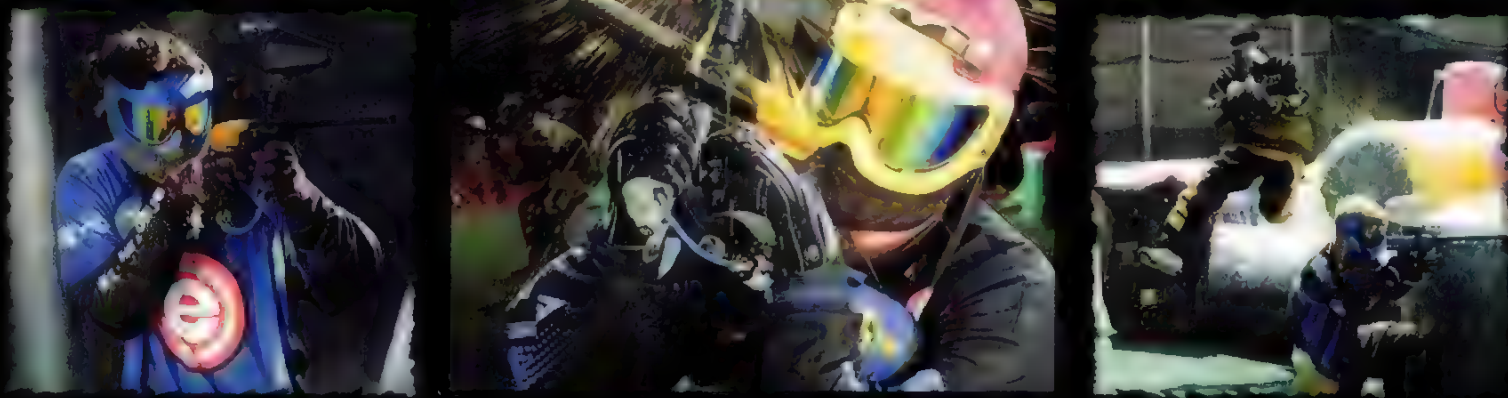
■ ...or hop into a craft and launch an offensive strike

## The Edge

When All Games Aren't Created Equal

While its console performance is pretty good, this game. The PC allows up to 64-people to play at once, whereas Xbox offers 32, and PS2 supports only 24. Regardless, it's a remarkable play on every platform.

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PLAYSTATION 2 | XBOX | GAMECUBE

# Tony Hawk's American Wasteland

► **STYLE** 1 OR 2-PLAYER ACTION/SPORTS (UP TO 8-PLAYER VIA PS2 ONLINE OR XBOX LIVE) ► **PUBLISHER** ACTIVISION  
 ► **DEVELOPER** NEVERSOFT ► **RELEASE** OCTOBER 18 ► **ESRB** T

## THRASHING WITH TRAINING WHEELS

The gameplay that honed our reflexes to the point that we could easily snatch a bullet out of the air has mysteriously vanished in this latest entry. Long gone are the glory days of spending countless hours concocting massive combo strings to achieve the sickest score possible. In American Wasteland, thrashing holds little relevance. Rather than standing tall as the greatest skater in the world, you are now pushed to secure the undesirable title of helper monkey.

The entire game revolves around completing meaningless tasks for brain-dead skaters. "Hey, gnarly skater dude! Could you, like, do me a huge favor? I need you to do a Natas Spin on top of that tower. If you could do that, you'd be royally sick and stuff." Further tarnishing the experience, almost every objective doubles as a tutorial. Even through

the final missions, the game holds your hand and shows you exactly what you need to do. Veteran players really don't need to know how to perform a kickflip. Neversoft even sunk to the level of marking the environment with arrows showing you where you need to grind or jump. In a sense, story mode has transformed into the longest training mode in all of gaming. You'll only run into one scoring challenge, and never once does the game push players to create combo strings.

This is especially frustrating considering that everywhere you look you see drool-inducing lines. Neversoft even included a handful of killer new moves (like the grind stall) that will allow you to construct lengthy combos. These high-flying thrills are only for your own satisfaction, however. I really want to see Neversoft get back to kicking gamers in

## the edge

When All Games Aren't Created Equal

The PlayStation 2 version isn't the only one with all the bells and whistles. For the first time in franchise history, the Xbox version now features the same great online play as the PS2. It also boasts superior graphics. The GameCube is once again left in the dust.

**BOTTOM LINE** 8.25

► **Concept:** Neversoft decided that this seventh entry should be the one that lures new players into the mix. It's all about learning how to play the game

► **Graphics:** Jimbo Phillips' art is amazing. The character models no longer look like midgets, but now they look like zombies

► **Sound:** The soundtrack is massive, greatly varied, and loaded with rockin' songs that you've likely never heard before

► **Playability:** The new stall maneuver is a great addition. I never really used the Bert Slide, however

► **Entertainment:** Capable of sucking your life away, but it doesn't push your skills

► **Replay Value:** Moderately High



### 360 Degrees of Thrashing

THAW is also hitting the Xbox 360 on November 22. Due to reasons that are out of our control, we were not able to play this next-gen version. In the future, we will assess this version and if there are any notable changes, follow up with another review. If there are no significant changes, consider this our definitive review.



### A Special Edition Worth the Green

The Collector's Edition of American Wasteland will set you back an extra ten-spot, but it's loaded with enough killer content that you won't mind eating ramen for a week. In this snazzy package you'll find two exclusive classic mode levels (Marseille from THPS 2 and Atlanta from THUG 2 Remix), two additional characters (Robo Tony and 70's Alva), a Jimbo Phillips art gallery, a franchise retrospective, a look at the history of the series' music, and footage from E3.

### Second Opinion

I must admit, I am an avid fan of the Tony Hawk series, so I tend to look at each release through rose-colored glasses, and this one is no different. However, this year's game does have its fair share of problems. For one, the much-touted open world really isn't all that open. In fact, it's just a bunch of standard levels tied together by tunnels that hide the loading. Which wouldn't be so bad, if these areas weren't so devoid of things to skate on. Secondly, the single-player game, in my opinion, is getting worse. It's basically one giant tutorial, and any of the lines the mission may teach you are ruined once you send the items back to your ranch. That said, the skating (and in particular the new moves) is fantastic. In fact, I found more enjoyment in just skating around than I did completing the game. Hawk fans will enjoy it, but Neversoft really needs to put the skill and inventiveness back into the single-player experience. —ANDY



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Crash animations don't look good, but even minor bumper kisses seem to make the action stop so that you have to watch them



Environments are largely flat, but the different neighborhoods do each have a different look



**BOTTOM LINE** 6.25

> **Concept:** A nasty bangers and mash of better known, better made racers

> **Graphics:** I haven't seen Vaseline lens like this in years – muddy, mushy, and icky

> **Sound:** A decent soundtrack (that benefits from the game's association with MTV, I would guess) and actually acceptable voice acting

> **Playability:** Super arcadey to a fault, and the mission structure is all kinds of awful

> **Entertainment:** There are some great moments that no other game provides, but there is far more total muck to dig through to get there

> **Replay Value:** Low



PLAYSTATION 2 | XBOX

# L.A. Rush

> **STYLE** 1 OR 2-PLAYER RACING > **PUBLISHER** MIDWAY > **DEVELOPER** MIDWAY SAN DIEGO > **RELEASE** OCTOBER 11 > **ESRB** T

## GOOD NAME GOES BAD

People, myself included, remember the Rush games fondly. Hopefully, after some serious psychiatric therapy, I'll be able to do that again without calling to mind this most unfortunate outing. I see where the design plan was going with the mix of import tuner standbys, Burnout crashes, and sprinkling of old Rush title flavor this game has going on, but there isn't a single part done right.

If I were the owner of an aging but still memorable racing franchise I could understand the allure of

bringing it up to date. Open-city street racing titles are flying off of the shelves. MTV and its *Pimp My Ride* tuner's West Coast Customs are tops in the 18 to 25 male demo. "Rush should really do that," they say. Then MTV signs on to do L.A. Rush's soundtrack and the WCC shop is the only place in town to get your ride customized.

To my mind, feel free to make Rush do all of those things, but at least ape accurately from the franchises in question. Don't make me re-race uninteresting mini circuits just to get enough cash to do something else that could potentially be fun. Don't have 15-second impact animations that look like butt after every fender bender (in fairness, you can speed up the crashes, but they still happen entirely too often). Avoid randomized traffic, unless you can do it well (which it isn't here). I'd also like a little more control on how my garage shapes up early on. Oh, and I'd want a touch more control when driving said cars. Arcade-style physics I can

deal with, but this takes it way out of line.

And yet, even with all of this hating going on, I would be remiss to not point out that there are some amazingly cool moments in this game. Cruise mode (i.e. maintaining a certain speed without crashing wins the race) is one of the best things ever. If you get rolling, it can put racers in that zen-like trance that's the goal of players the world 'round. Large-scale destruction is also a sweet idea, although I wish the game made a bigger deal about it.

Instead, I'm jostling through the very large cityscape that the team has created, wishing that the whole experience were more compact and a little prettier. I get the distinct impression that more was bitten off than could have been chewed, and I wish some miles of road had been cut in favor of graphics that don't look like early prototype renders from four years ago.

Maybe someone out there can look at L.A. Rush and say that it's unintentionally bad, and therefore good...like a *A Sound Of Thunder*. But the overriding feeling during my entire playtime was, "Oh no. I have to do another race." And that's not so-bad-it's-good; that's just not fun. —LISA

**Second Opinion** 6.5

Like a bat out of hell with rockets strapped to its wings, my pimped out '64 Camaro Impala SS took flight and crashed through the Hollywood sign that overlooks the City of Angels. Outside of this awesomely destructive moment, L.A. Rush is just as brutally torturous as rush hour traffic on the 10. The vehicle physics appear to duplicate the realism of a rusty tin can with LEGO wheels duct taped to it. Spinning the obnoximeter even faster, the game forces players to repeat races just to earn enough cash to pay for the entrance fee to a new event. This cheap tactic is used to artificially lengthen the time that gamers spend with this highly annoying racer. On this note, I'd much rather test my luck with a lighter in a gasoline fight than get behind the wheel of this game again. —REINER



Police show up regularly, but are off the pursuit with little fruit on player's parts

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PLAYSTATION 2 | XBOX

# Battlefield 2: Modern Combat

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 24-PLAYER VIA XBOX LIVE OR PS2 ONLINE) > **PUBLISHER** ELECTRONIC ARTS > **DEVELOPER** DIGITAL ILLUSIONS CE > **RELEASE** NOVEMBER 1 > **ESRB** T

## WHICH ONE OF THE INTERNETS DO YOU PLAY ON?

This is the first time this PC series has appeared on consoles, and there's a natural reason for that. On the PC, this game thrives because of its online portion. For the consoles, however, you've got to make the single-player portion work in order to have a game with any depth or interest — since the vast majority of its players won't be online. But instead of giving you a single-player campaign that is indistinguishable from all the other video game soldiers out there, *Battlefield 2: Modern Combat* attempts to tap into its strengths to offer something a little different.

*Modern Combat's* single-player campaign attempts to duplicate the feel of online play by letting you hotswap (as EA calls it) to any of your other squad members at any time during battle. This replicates the feeling of a persistent battle where getting your head blown off isn't a huge deal since there's always a new body to spawn into during battle. Of course, there are different unit types, and although you can specialize in one particular unit that becomes your favorite, it pays to be well-versed in each type. The game will virtually require you to switch among soldiers to coordinate attacks — similar to the teamwork involved in a good online squad. However, vehicles with space for multiple characters don't always work well since they often require you to more or less drive and shoot at the same time by constantly switching guys. If the game had co-op, this could be fixed.

Even though *Modern Combat* takes you through missions from the viewpoint of different armies, you always remain a single character with a single profile. Thus, the medals and brass rank stars you earn will stick with you regardless



■ Player switching is not only a fun way to use all the soldier classes, but it's often a necessity

of which side you're playing on at the moment. Accomplishing certain feats, such as getting a headshot from over 200 meters, earns you medals. Despite these accolades, the game's focus on anonymous play leaves it feeling just that — unfocused and shallow. I never cared which army I was fighting alongside or the context in which the battles were fought. Thus, in some ways *Modern Combat* succeeds in making its single-player campaign feel like an online experience. The problem is that it doesn't feel like it has much substance, either. It also doesn't quite give you that rush of satisfaction like when you defeat your enemies online.

The game's lack of polish is also another problem. The graphics and textures aren't impressive at all, and the title is hampered by oddities such as enemies that spawn out of nowhere or destroyed vehicles that simply disappear instead of remaining as smoldering wrecks. Also, the rate of movement — particularly in going to and from a crouch position — is too slow, and the vehicle controls could be better.

If you're as disappointed in the rapid single-player campaign as I was, you can fittingly play *Modern Combat* online. Here the game really comes to life as you and your comrades work together to take over territory in modes like Conquest. While playing online certainly won't solve the clunky vehicles, even mindless hours of Conquest mode are more engaging by far than the single-player. Of course, if you call yourself a *Battlefield* fan, you're probably not reading this review because you're too busy playing the PC version online already. —KATO



■ Air strikes are a good way to destroy any U2 fans in your multiplayer midst

**BOTTOM LINE** 7.5

> **Concept:** Turn the single-player mode of a traditionally online title into an online-like experience

> **Graphics:** Not that great, to be honest. Not very memorable. Drab

> **Sound:** Even with a radar, there's a lot of chatter telling you where the next enemy is coming from

> **Playability:** As ever, the vehicles in this game handle like crap

> **Entertainment:** Replicates the casual, throwaway feel of an online battle, and that's just what this game is

> **Replay Value:** Moderately High

### Second Opinion 7

*Modern Combat* is one of those "modern combat" games that manages to feel hopelessly generic. I guess with the name I shouldn't be terribly surprised. Lacking any discernible personality, the game offers up some no-frills shooting in an entirely decent but unremarkable package. The effort at single player in what is otherwise a purely online multiplayer game is admirable, but the result feels pretty shallow. The hotswap feature that allows you to zoom across the battlefield and inhabit a new soldier's body is admittedly pretty cool. However, it's about the only thing that sets the game apart, other than some rather awesome sound effects. Meanwhile, low resolution textures and generally stupid AI set the overall tone of the game. If multiplayer PC gaming wasn't an option when *Battlefield 2* came out, I guess this is an alternative. It's just not a very good one. —MILLER



■ Attention to detail isn't this game's strong suit. Notice your enemies' failure to find cover



■ Manning vehicle turrets is much more fun than actually flying

# The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe

> STYLE 1 OR 2-PLAYER ACTION > PUBLISHER BUENA VISTA GAMES > DEVELOPER TRAVELLER'S TALES > RELEASE NOVEMBER 15 > ESRB E



## HACKING THROUGH A MAGICAL REALM

I'm pretty excited for the film adaptation of CS Lewis's *The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe*. Regardless of your feelings about Lewis' heavy Christian propaganda (spoiler alert: Aslan is Jesus!), it's a timeless tale, right up there with *The Lord of the Rings* series in terms of seminal fantasy writing. No doubt this new film was made possible by the success of Peter Jackson's interpretation of Tolkien, and it's also clear that this game takes a good deal of inspiration from Stormfront Studios' video game version of *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers*.

Like *The Two Towers*, *The Chronicles of Narnia* emphasizes small-group hack n' slash combat, with a simple control scheme augmented by various co-op, special, and unlockable moves to add some depth. Each of the children has their own abilities (Lucy is a healer, Edmund can climb poles, etc.) and you'll frequently have to switch between

them to solve puzzles and keep ahead of the often hectic battles. It's not a bad concept; I just wish it were implemented better. Playing solo, the AI members of your party are painfully dim — instead of helping out in the battle, they'll just follow you around like cute English zombies. As the game throws tons of enemy fodder at you, it gets annoying having to deal with, for example, defending yourself and trying to use a ranged weapon to hit a boss character at the same time. Also, the level and puzzle designs are too bogged down in tedious busywork, making what should be a thrilling epic feel more like herding a group of kindergarteners through an obstacle course. As the game wears on, the simple pleasures of the gameplay fade, and the incredibly frustrating boss battles mount in aggravation, leaving us with nothing more than another unsatisfying licensed game. —MATT

**BOTTOM LINE** 6.5

> **Concept:** A nice looking film adaptation, heavy on action puzzles and hack n' slash combat

> **Graphics:** Really nice, on par with *The Lord of the Rings* games in terms of visuals. English children look silly in pimped-out fur coats!

> **Sound:** A rousing orchestral score bodes well for the movie soundtrack.

> **Playability:** Decent, but hampered by frustrating sequences and dumb-as-a-post AI

> **Entertainment:** Unoriginal, and plagued by overly difficult and arbitrary boss battles

> **Replay Value:** Moderate

**Second Opinion** 9.75

Narnia is a magical place of angst, frustration, and bit-tempered wonder of being sent to bed with no supper. At least, that's what this movie-accompanying game seems to communicate. Playing like the younger and stupider cousin of *The Two Towers* game, the levels can't help but feel hopelessly contrived as the Pevensie children are thrust into one martial conflict after another, collecting coins and statues as they go. Basic design flaws gnaw away at the otherwise enjoyable hack n' slash combat, as endlessly repetitive objectives mix with a cheap sort of difficulty that makes ending a level a relief more than anything else. For its part, the game looks pretty decent, and the movie clips offer a fun glimpse into the film. Even so, it's hard for me to recommend a game to children or adults that made me take Aslan's name in vain so many times. —MILLER

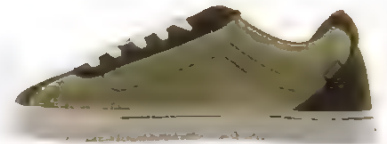
■ The rave scene in Narnia is really weird



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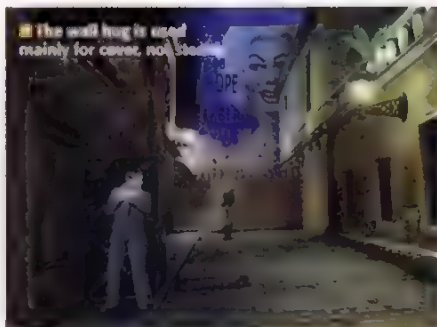
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■ Players will be able to choose from a variety of classic Bond attire



■ The wall hug is used mainly for cover, not shooting



■ James Bond's favorite practical jokes: "Kneck, knock," "Who's there?" "Kunch in groin," "Ughhh..."

**BOTTOM LINE** **7.75**

> **Concept:** Revisit the era of James Bond that established him as the world's premiere superspy

> **Graphics:** All of the main character models look remarkably accurate, and the world is styled with a slick '60s vibe

> **Sound:** It's great to hear Sean Connery as 007 again, but it's clear he's not the strapping young lad he once was

> **Playability:** The driving physics are pretty wonky, and I can't understand why James won't lock on to an enemy in plain view

> **Entertainment:** Solid action, but the gameplay doesn't switch often enough to make things really interesting

> **Replay Value:** Moderate

PLAYSTATION 2 | XBOX | GAMECUBE

# From Russia With Love

> **STYLE** 1 TO 4-PLAYER ACTION > **PUBLISHER** ELECTRONIC ARTS > **DEVELOPER** EA REDWOOD SHORES > **RELEASE** NOVEMBER 1 > **ESRB** T

## TRY ANOTHER DAY

**F**rom his innocuous-looking gadgets to his debonair smile, James Bond is not an easy man to imitate. EA did a spectacular job duplicating the feeling of an original Bond film in last year's *Everything or Nothing*, and now *From Russia With Love* attempts the same feat in the secret agent's classic era. However, even with Sean Connery himself in the lead role, this follow-up just isn't as good at putting the player in the finely tailored suit of 007.

Don't misunderstand me — *From Russia With Love* is definitely a decent action game, but it uses some design elements that compromise Bond's unique flair. A full inventory of weapons means you have a firearm for every occasion, but it takes the sense of improvisation away from the gunplay. Plus, even though each level has a Bond Moment like *Everything or Nothing*, they are a lot lamer now. Instead of jumping over trains and blowing up gas

pumps, this time you're entering gift shops and shooting radios. Extreme!

Apart from these qualms, there are a host of tweaks to the gameplay that make it much easier to play than its predecessor. The Focus mode adds a cool dynamic to shooting by allowing you to zero in on specific objects, and you can use it as often as you like to take out enemies in creative ways. It would have been nice to see more objects highlighted when using this feature though, since eventually you're just shooting grenades off of every soldier's belt. The difficulty has been toned down considerably as well; enemies no longer spontaneously generate behind you and mow you down, which means you can pretty much just blast your way through any stage without concern.

On the whole, *From Russia With Love* is an average third-person shooter (plagued by many control issues common in the genre) with some



### For Your Fans Only

If you like the film *From Russia With Love*, there are both surprises and disappointments to be had in the game adaptation. The faithful representations of the characters are a nice touch, and the many memorable moments from the movie (like the gypsy catfight and boat chase) pay tribute to the source material. The absence of a real fight with Red Grant on the Orient Express is pretty stupid, and "Octopus" has replaced the organization SPECTRE for some reason. Of course, seeing the movie isn't necessary to enjoy the game, but it does add a cool dimension to some of the scenes



**Second Opinion** **7.5**

Sean Connery may be the voice and face of this Bond adventure, but his spirit reminds me more of Timothy Dalton. Sure, the name says Bond, but the rather generic feel of the action doesn't truly recall the feeling *Everything or Nothing* did a great job of constantly switching up the action to make you feel like you were really living a Bond movie, and was easily more engaging than the last couple Brosnan films. But *From Russia With Love* focuses too much on running and gunning, without as many of the cool one-off segments that made *EoN* so successful. Granted, the core combat is fun, and the Focus aiming makes for some really entertaining moments. I'll never get tired of shooting grenades off of soldiers' belts and watching them explode. But now that we know who the new Bond is, hopefully EA will break free of the past and start crafting its own Bond adventures again with new guy Daniel Craig. *From Russia With Love* is fun, but lacks the vigor that made Brosnan's final game outing a blast. —JEREMY

cool Bond-related aspects. The driving, shooting, and gadgets are all fun, but none of them capture the feel of a full James Bond production as well as *Everything or Nothing*. Only the multiplayer, while no match for the classic glory of the N64 *GoldenEye*, excels beyond the largely ignored online mode of the previous title. Even with the man who created the 007 persona back in the starring role, this sequel just can't measure up to the standards of excellence set by the Bond films or by the action game genre in general. —JOE



■ "If you get in my car, I promise to give you lots of candy and ponies"



■ The gypsy camp level has several different gameplay styles, like sniping and protection

# MULTI-SYSTEM QUICKIES

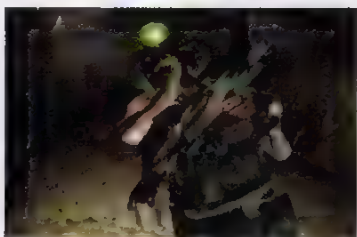
XBOX | PC

## Cold War

BOTTOM LINE **6**

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION > **PUBLISHER** DREAMCATCHER > **DEVELOPER** MINDWARE STUDIOS  
> **RELEASE** SEPTEMBER 29 > **ESRB** T

**B**elieve it or not, this isn't quite the adventure of a lifetime. The fact that the game feels it necessary to explicitly tell the player such obvious advice as "don't step into the red beam coming off of the security camera" is a good indicator of the quality here. Cold War's third-person stealth/action gameplay manages to meet a minimum bar of competency, and the hero's MacGyver-esque ability to make useful gadgets out of cans, plastic bottles, and rags serves to add a bit of spice. However, your astonishingly slow movement speed and the lack of a checkpoint system (although you can save at any time, it gets annoying nonetheless), along with the merely mediocre action, clearly destines this title for the bargain bin.—**ADAM**



PLAYSTATION 2 | XBOX | GAMECUBE

## Karaoke Revolution Party

BOTTOM LINE **8.5**

> **STYLE** 1 TO 8-PLAYER ACTION > **PUBLISHER** KONAMI > **DEVELOPER** HARMONIX  
> **RELEASE** NOVEMBER 8 > **ESRB** E10+



**T**his is everything I've wanted this franchise to become. An incredible mix of dozens of songs from several genres form the core of the title, but it's all the additions that push this one over the top. Quite literally a peripheral lover's dream, this party game includes functionality for the EyeToy, the

dance pad, and duet microphones. Constant unlockables, modes, and mini-games keep players busy as you get new songs and characters. The Create-A-Character mode is flexible and fun, even allowing you to put in your own face as created by the EyeToy Cameo capability. By yourself or singing duets with a partner, there is a ton to explore and laugh about—especially on Xbox, where around 100 additional songs are available for download. Karaoke still isn't even remotely for everyone, but if you don't have a problem making a fool of yourself, this year's installment is the one to play.—**MILLER**

PLAYSTATION 2 | XBOX | GAMECUBE

## Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire

BOTTOM LINE **6.5**

> **STYLE** 1 TO 3-PLAYER ACTION > **PUBLISHER** ELECTRONIC ARTS > **DEVELOPER** EA UK  
> **RELEASE** NOVEMBER 8 > **ESRB** E

**J**.K. Rowling has found a way to transform people of all ages into devoted Harry Potter followers. Electronic Arts, on the other hand, can't seem to create a Harry Potter game that appeals to anyone. Although you still spend a great deal of time chasing after runaway jellybeans, the Goblet of Fire has a much heavier focus on button-mashing action than the previous entries in the series. In a way, it seems that EA is trying to rekindle the success it had with The Lord of the Rings games. This is also the first console version that allows players to play as Ron and Hermione. Cooperative play is included, which is a nice perk, but not even having two friends at your side can overcome the boredom of zapping small woodland creatures with a wand. The team-based obstacles are greatly overused and usually have you doing stupid things like putting out fires. Goblet of Fire is the best console Harry Potter action game yet, but it's still a far cry from good.—**REINER**



PLAYSTATION 2 | XBOX

# The Matrix: Path of Neo

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION > **PUBLISHER** ATARI > **DEVELOPER** SHINY ENTERTAINMENT > **RELEASE** NOVEMBER 7 > **ESRB** T



## YOU KNOW KUNG FU

**I**t's taken over six years for them to get around to it, but at long last we have a game that offers what fans of the Matrix have really wanted since they walked out of the theater after that first movie in 1999—to be Neo. More than that, we get some new glimpses into the Matrix storyline, re-edited clips from the movies, an entirely rewritten end to the story, and a steady flow of martial arts craziness for good measure. The question, of course, is if the whole thing turned out to be any good.

The Path of Neo is a mixed bag from beginning to end. There's definitely something cool about the combat system that lets you reenact all those sweet "wire-fu" maneuvers and slow-motion bullets that first made the films popular. A complex control scheme within the game is made simpler through onscreen contextual clues, assuring that if you follow their instructions you'll end up with a cinematic and exciting move to kick, punch, slash, throw or otherwise beat upon your foe. For brief moments, the combat is smooth and exciting. Other times, it feels awkward and choppy. It's an interesting combat system that is just shy of working really well. Some players are inevitably going to become bored and leave the game unfinished, while I have no doubt others won't even

notice the problems and will have an absolute blast all the way through.

Visually, there's that same mix of good and bad. Character models and environments are uniformly more blocky and textureless than they should be, particularly on PS2. At the same time, transitions between the hundreds and hundreds of character animations are impressive, and the further you move into the game the more you notice the variety of levels. It's a lengthy game for an action title, and a couple of the levels are incredibly imaginative—including an Escher-esque world of rooms and stairways at impossible angles to each other. In addition to pretty much every major conflict Neo fought in the films, the game is vastly expanded to show other areas and fights that the movie never revealed. Whether you have the patience to keep battling through to the end—well, that's another story.

If you do make it, you'll be treated to a brand new ending to the whole epic story (the quality of which I'll leave for you to decide). All told, while the game certainly isn't everything I hoped it would be, it's definitely a step up from where I feared this franchise might be going, and I could see a lot of people willing to overlook the missteps in exchange for finally getting a real shot at being The One.—**MILLER**

BOTTOM LINE **7.25**

> **Concept:** Relive the Matrix movies entirely from Neo's perspective

> **Graphics:** Lots of variety and a wealth of animations don't change the fact that none of it looks particularly sharp or detailed

> **Sound:** A new soundtrack stays true to the source and keeps the engine rewinding

> **Playability:** Hit or miss, depending on the situation

> **Entertainment:** A fun retreat through the story falls short of greatness due to spotty implementation

> **Replay Value:** Moderately low

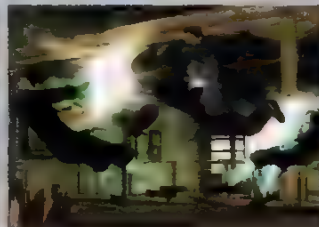
Second Opinion **8.75**

Do you hear that, Mr. Anderson? That is the sound of inevitability. It is the sound of thousands of people wishing that they would have spared themselves the agony and just taken the blue pill at the beginning of this dismal and ramshackle game. For those unfortunate enough to jump down the rabbit hole, Path of Neo offers a solid two hours of mandatory in-game tutorials, character models that look like grotesque corpses doing cosplay, and more Matrix movie clips than a fan-made Static X music video. The light scenes miraculously hang on to the films' stylized martial arts feel, making combat fun to watch, but the contextual and overcomplicated combat mechanics always manage to keep you off-balance. I feel saturated by the awfulness of this game. I can taste its stink whenever I play it.—**JOE**

## The Edge

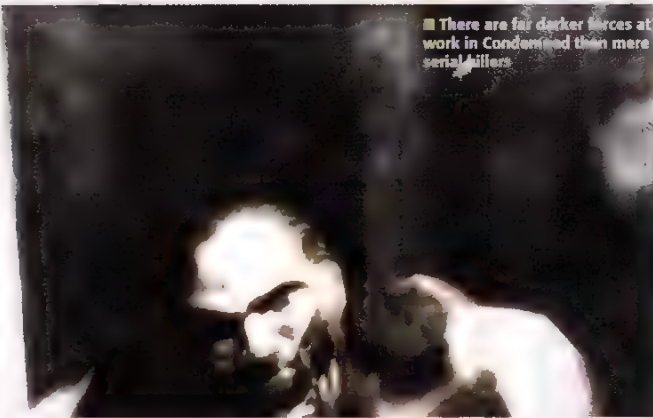
When All Games Aren't Created Equal

If you're one of those people who always goes around definitely goes to the Xbox version. A noticeable improvement in textures, character models, and overall graphical quality is apparent, even if the core content on both versions is pretty much identical.





■ The melee combat is a bit repetitive, but always brutal



■ There are far darker forces at work in *Condemned* than mere serial killers

**BOTTOM LINE** **8.75**

- > **Concept:** Hunt down serial killers as a disgraced FBI agent in a new take on the horror genre
- > **Graphics:** The environments are stunning and look every bit as impressive as you'd expect from a next-gen game. The character models look a bit rubbery, though
- > **Sound:** Creepy, subtle music and solid voice acting bring even more effectiveness to the foreboding atmosphere
- > **Playability:** The combat is brutal and visceral, and the forensic tools are perfectly utilized to spur the player forward
- > **Entertainment:** Guaranteed to make you jump out of your seat, *Condemned* points to great things for the future of scary games
- > **Replay Value:** Moderate

XBOX 360

# Condemned: Criminal Origins

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION > **PUBLISHER** SEGA > **DEVELOPER** MONOLITH PRODUCTIONS > **RELEASE** NOVEMBER 15 > **ESRB** M

## THE NEW FEAR

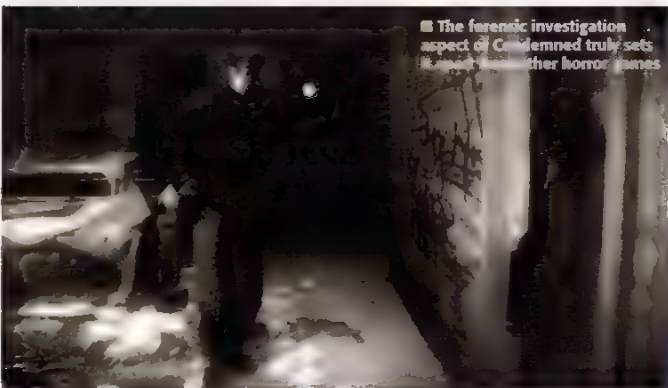
As any fans of horror movies know, what is truly scary are the things that could be real, rather than the films that delve into the realms of the blatantly supernatural. That's why *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* will always be scarier than *Pumpkinhead* or any of the thousands of other creature features out there. It's also why *Condemned: Criminal Origins* is so successful. Although it is far more closely related to *The Chronicles of Riddick: Escape from Butcher Bay* than *Resident Evil*, *Condemned* still manages to be scary as hell because of the way it grounds its thrills in the real world.

As Ethan Thomas, an FBI agent on a case that quickly goes bad, the player is tasked with tracking down a killer in order to clear his name of crimes he didn't commit. To do this, he must progress through some of the most sinister real-world locations ever seen in a game by finding clues with forensic tools that locate biological and chemical compounds, detect gasses, and sample DNA. These tools add an adventure game-like element to the exploration and move the player forward in a way that is far more believable than the "find the key" puzzles of traditional survival horror games. Of course, *Condemned* doesn't feature the glacial pacing of *Myst* — in fact, quite the opposite. The dilapidated structures Ethan explores are populated by deranged vagrants, people who have been driven to madness by a mysterious force tied to the game's underlying mythology. Although there are firearms in the game, most of the derelicts must be engaged with melee combat, which is fast-paced and

brutal. Blocking is key to survival, and any foe you encounter can take you out if you're not careful. Your enemies are smart, vicious, and bloodthirsty, and walking through a burned-out basement knowing that these crazies are waiting for you puts you constantly on edge.

Obviously, a lot of tension is generated by the environments, which are simply gorgeous in their ugliness. Each level simply oozes atmosphere, with beautifully ugly textures everywhere. *Condemned* simply masters atmosphere, and those who have said that the 360 doesn't seem like a big leap from the current Xbox will be singing a different tune when they see some of *Condemned*'s environments.

As much as I enjoy this game, I certainly can't say that it's flawless, although my complaints are largely minor. The character models don't look quite as impressive as the environments, and the interaction points are a bit touchy. The game is a bit on the short side, and even after completing it, I think some players will still have questions about the plot. But even with some complaints, I have no qualms about recommending *Condemned* to horror fans grabbing a 360 at launch. It packs some true scares, a fresh approach to its genre, great graphics, and fun gameplay mechanics. In short, *Condemned: Criminal Origins* is the start of the next great horror series. —JEREMY



■ The forensic investigation aspect of *Condemned* truly sets it apart from other horror games

**Second Opinion** **8.75**

Rare are the games that make me feel this way — hunted, unarmed, uneasy, and downright scared. When a gun with more than three shots left in it comes your way, a self-indulgent giggle isn't out of line in the context of this game. For a majority of *Condemned: Criminal Origins*'s run, I tensely gripped the controller and said aloud that I did not want to go into that classroom, basement, or decrepit attic. Besides the showstopping graphics, the game succeeds in making players tense by making every encounter life or death. It's all immediate and it's all important. It does all start to feel repetitive, though. There's a lot of running through hallways, kicking debris underfoot, and hitting dudes with shovels. It's good stuff, and the repetition isn't nearly enough to lessen what this experience really is (i.e. a damn good scare). Actually, it's a good looking, well executed scare, so check it out. —LISA

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Craft your own combat style with  
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crafty Speed Kills.

Deliver vicious new combo  
attacks unique to the Dark Prince.

Perform long-range attacks and navigate the  
environment with the deadly new Daggertail.



■ For a game the developer admitted didn't look 100 percent next-gen, Amped 3 is no slouch



■ Haters will occasionally throw snowballs at you, but you can throw them right back



■ Bust a good string of tricks and you'll start to exude Awesomeness, which is shown by the customizable halo around your character



■ You'll get points for bailing off of unbreakable sleds like this port-

**BOTTOM LINE** 8.5

> **Concept:** Erase that yellow snowball taste left in your mouth from previous Amped games

> **Graphics:** Not totally next-gen, but they don't look bad by any means. The various art styles used are awesome

> **Sound:** Amped stays true to its roots by offering a ton of tunes from unknown bands. Many are excellent

> **Playability:** The most playable Amped ever. Mapping tricks to the face buttons was a good decision

> **Entertainment:** Easily keeps you entertained for hours with its gameplay, humor, and sheer amount of stuff to do

> **Replay Value:** Moderately High

XBOX 360

# Amped 3

> **STYLE** 1 OR 2-PLAYER SPORTS > **PUBLISHER** 2K SPORTS > **DEVELOPER** INDIE BUILT INC. > **RELEASE** NOVEMBER 22 > **ESRB** T

## JUMP ON THE WIENERMOBILE

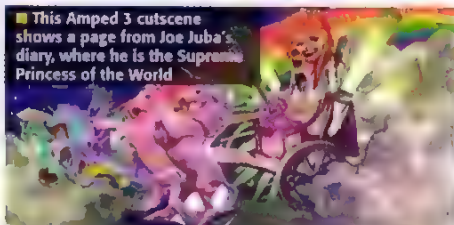
**B**efore the Xbox 360 launch, Amped 3 was a mess. Nobody really cared about it because the first two Amped titles were greeted with a very chilly reception. Over the summer, after the game's behind-closed-doors showing at E3, even publisher 2K Sports admitted the title wasn't in good shape. But now the stars have aligned and Amped 3's gotten its act together. Some may pick up this game because they'll be looking for something to play on their new Xbox 360, but I suggest you buy it simply because it's a sweet game.

Amped 3 improves upon the franchise in every way. It turned its weaknesses into core strengths, and it turned its assets into features that everyone will be talking about and other companies emulating in the future. Focusing in on the gameplay, devel-

oper Indie Built put a premium on making Amped 3 a title where it's simple to bust tricks (which are mapped onto the face buttons). Granted, the game does help you coming in and out of rail slides, for example, but I'll take that over having an unplayable mess any day. Furthermore, you can link tricks together with moves like butter (which is so much easier this time), surface tricks, style tweaks, or carving. The result is fluid runs that seemingly never stop.

Another thing that will keep you playing this game is the tremendous work done on the details outside of the straight gameplay. The cutscenes are hilarious; keeping things rolling with tongue-in-cheek parodies of 8-bit video gaming, rap, anime, Paris Hilton, and '80s-era Soviet game shows featuring grotesque bearded hand puppets begging for bread. What Indie Built has done to bring this game to life has to be seen to be believed. I could tell you Amped 3 sets action figures on fire over a BBQ grill, but you'd still have no idea what's in store for you.

The game does



■ This Amped 3 cutscene shows a page from Joe Juba's diary, where he is the Supreme Princess of the World



■ One character's cutscenes are all sold through action figures



■ This map shows just a small segment of one of Amped's seven mountains. You can even zoom in to see where rails are

an excellent job of giving you an insane amount of stuff to do, but it's all easily accessible. Each of Amped 3's seven mountains are large in scope and jam-packed with stuff to do, whether it's trying to kill yourself sledding down a mountain on a toilet, battling pros, or going through trick runs for a Doug Henning-wannabe permanently stuck on an acid trip aboard the Yellow Submarine. Good times, good times. And if you don't like the landscape of a particular run or mountain (i.e. you can't score enough points on it), you can even put down objects you've earned to make it more conducive to tricks.

Amped 3's great strides forward are in relation to the previous games in the franchise, so it still has things to improve to hit elite status. As easy as it is to play, there are still some moments when the game's habit of helping you in and out of tricks gets awkward, and the camera can leave you blind. Although I found the graphics more than good enough, I was disappointed to see some pop-up. However, Amped 3 isn't just a game that works, it's a title that will suck hours away of your life and demand that you dominate its mountains.—KATO

## Second Opinion 8.5

Did I eat some bad lasagna for lunch, or is this game really just stark raving mad? Through a cutscene comprised of stop-motion action figures, I watched a character named Wienerboy ride a dragon down a hill, launch off of a jump, and crash land into a group of demonic gnomes. This was actually one of the saner moments I experienced in Amped 3. A good sense of humor can go a long way, but ultimately, gameplay is everything. The first two installments in the series were plagued by so many problematic elements that they were nearly unplayable. Amped 3 is still a little rough around the edges, but it now performs quite admirably, allowing players to trick out and chain together combos with ease. With seven huge mountains, 300 songs, tons of event types, and some of the best unlockables around, I think you'll agree that we need more highly deranged snowboarding games just like this.—REINER

ONE WANTS TO FREE HIS PEOPLE...



ONE WARRIOR. TWO SOULS.



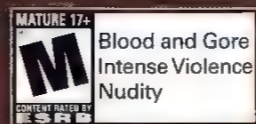
# PRINCE OF PERSIA

## THE TWO THRONES

I RETURNED HOME EXPECTING PEACE. INSTEAD I FOUND MY KINGDOM RAVAGED BY WAR AND MY PEOPLE ENSLAVED. NOW I AM A FUGITIVE, HUNTED BY HOSTILE ARMIES AND PLAGUED BY A CURSE THAT IS GRADUALLY POSSESSING MY SOUL. A DARKER PRINCE RESIDES IN ME NOW, AND I MUST EMBRACE HIS POWERS AND SKILL IF I WANT TO RESTORE PEACE TO MY LAND, MY PEOPLE, AND MY SOUL.

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PlayStation 2



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XBOX 360

# NBA Live 06

> **STYLE** 1 TO 4-PLAYER SPORTS (2-PLAYER VIA XBOX LIVE) > **PUBLISHER** EA SPORTS  
 > **DEVELOPER** EA CANADA > **RELEASE** NOVEMBER 22 > **ESRB** E

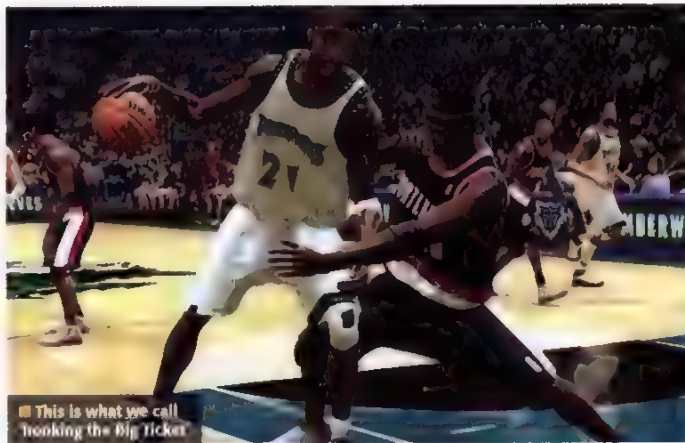
## THROWING UP A PRAYER

**T**his game might be called "NBA Live 06", but there's no confusing this title with the current-gen b-ball game EA Sports recently put out with this same name. Shorn of all its features except Xbox Live and a season mode, the gameplay in this title simply isn't strong enough to stand alone without the supporting scenery.

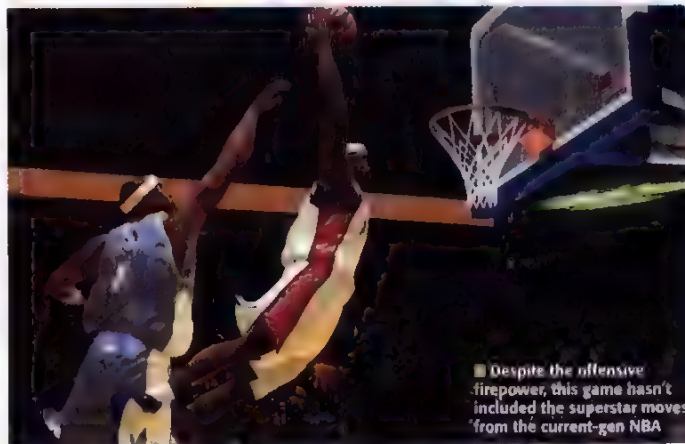
Of course, even if it had a Dynasty mode (which I repeat — it doesn't), the problem with the series has always been its predominance of offense. Part of this is because the lay-up and dunk animations trigger freely, often with little regard to collision with other players. However, tip-ins felt right and it did seem that the AI defense on the perimeter was a little better, resulting in some more steals and blocked jumpers. Even with its offensive focus, this game strangely lacks an identity. Perhaps it's because the NBA Superstars

feature from the current-gen version of Live is missing — along with the rest of the features. Even the game's next-gen graphics can't imbue much excitement or vibe, as the players lack any facial expressions at all. For all the glory of the sculpted models, they just stand there and listlessly sweat. If, as EA has told us, next-gen graphics will result in more realism and therefore illicit more interest from gamers, than this title is missing something. Moreover, the gameplay has problems and this title moves so slowly it should be arrested for even using the term "fast break".

You could have a worse time than banging the boards with NBA Live, but this offering does nothing to service fans. If anything, Live serves up an alley-oop pass for NBA 2K developers Visual Concepts to dunk home with its superior franchise. —**KATO**



■ This is what we call 'trouking the Big Ticket'



■ Despite the offensive firepower, this game hasn't included the superstar moves from the current-gen NBA

**BOTTOM LINE** **6.75**

> **Concept:** A very basic basketball game that leaves off all of the current-gen title's feature set

> **Graphics:** Good detail on player musculature and tattoos

> **Sound:** The commentary is good, but there's not much different here

> **Playability:** I don't like the lack of feedback on free throws, and the game is slower than a post-Wheaties dump

> **Entertainment:** Lacking the superstar angle of the other Live 06 title, this game is too neutered even for the offensively minded fans

> **Replay Value:** Moderate

### Second Opinion **6**

Worst sales pitch ever: "To achieve Patrick Ewing caliber sweat in our graphics, we are going to have to drop Dynasty mode, the dunk contest, all of the unique superstar moves, and even the instant replay. What do you think?" Sadly, this is exactly what happened to NBA Live's inaugural next-generation season. Player detailing and movements are greatly improved, but the series' problematic "dunce AI" is still ever-present. In the end, this game feels like a demo. —**REINER**

# GAME SCREENS

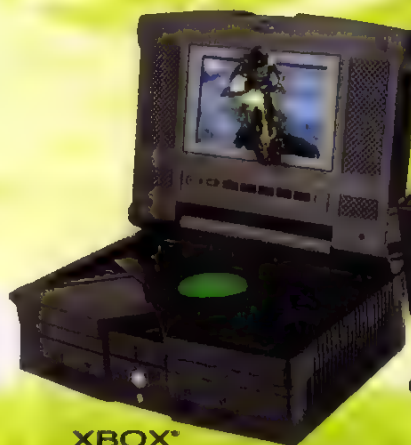
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■ While load times for games can be lengthy, the delay is alleviated by a minigame that has you taking some quick shots on goal in a practice field while you wait



XBOX 360

# FIFA 06

> **STYLE** 1 TO 4-PLAYER SPORTS (2-PLAYER VIA XBOX LIVE) > **PUBLISHER** EA SPORTS > **DEVELOPER** EA CANADA > **RELEASE** NOVEMBER 22 > **ESRB** E

## KICO DEBALLO

**W**ell, they've finally done it. After several years of devotion to the Winning Eleven series to get my soccer fix, I'm actually contemplating a defection into the FIFA camp. While ball control and fielding are still not quite as complex as I'd like them to be, the newest FIFA nonetheless strikes a great balance between simplicity and flexibility. If not for the decision to leave out some of the modes that were already present in the current-gen version, I'd almost certainly declare this the soccer game I'm going to be playing this year.

The problem for me in the past FIFA titles has been that I frequently felt less in control and more like I was a spectator in my own game. Now, through passes seem to be smoother and successfully completing a give and go has been made easier. Maintaining control on free kicks, shoot outs, and throw-ins feels intuitive. After an initial period of getting a handle on the controls, things just worked the way I wanted them to.

Meanwhile, the horsepower of a

new system has allowed for some small but noticeable graphical advancements. While faces look way too plastic-coated, they nonetheless appear remarkably lifelike. There's too much bloom on almost every object onscreen, but it's a minor visual complaint overall. Another excellent soundtrack includes a wide variety of international bands, and it was several hours into playing before I realized how little repeat I'd heard from the announcers.

The glaring problem with the 360 version of this year's release is that it is missing several features that were present in the current-gen version, most notably the managerial modes. My personal interest lies more in the actual in-game action. But for those who want to be more hands on with your team, stick with current gen. Also, truly hardcore gameplay enthusiasts may still want to get their kicks from Konami's stellar but complicated annual kick-around. But for the time being, FIFA's got my attention. —**MILLER**

**BOTTOM LINE** 8.25

> **Concept:** A strong next gen soccer debut, even if some modes are missing

> **Graphics:** It's the little details that matter, and this game's got 'em

> **Sound:** Great music and voiceovers, but crowd noise and sound effects could still use some work

> **Playability:** Still not quite as complex as the other great soccer franchise, but easier to get into and enjoy

> **Entertainment:** A good debut for the franchise on a new system, but missing some of the features of the current-gen version

> **Replay Value:** High

### Second Opinion 7.75

This title feels exactly like the current-gen game you just bought, and the on-the-pitch animations are similar as well. Player faces are a bit shiny and waxy, so graphics aren't a magical trump card that glosses over the usual FIFA problems. Without the managerial or chemistry considerations of the Xbox FIFA, this title is little more than a giant tournament — one that you can even replicate on the current-gen FIFA. —**KATO**

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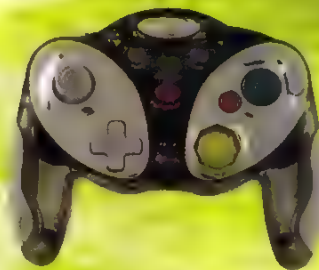
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Welcome to the new adventures of Sgt. Fred, our favorite soldier of questionable intelligence. When we last left Sgt. Fred, he and his pals were following a treasure map written on the back of a Wendy's placemat. Unfortunately, the soldiers waiting in the bushes nearby wrote it.

**BOTTOM LINE** 7.75

- > **Concept:** Go online. Shoot fools
- > **Graphics:** Although blocky and lacking texture, the new environments look distinct enough to navigate easily
- > **Sound:** You'll hear yourself cursing a lot thanks to the somewhat spotty voice controls
- > **Playability:** The new quick command button streamlines the overly-complicated squad command menus
- > **Entertainment:** Basically unchanged from the first two games, SOCOM 3 will please fans without winning many new converts
- > **Replay Value:** Moderately High

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PLAYSTATION 2

# SOCOM 3: U.S. Navy SEALs

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 32-PLAYER VIA PS2 ONLINE) > **PUBLISHER** SONY COMPUTER ENTERTAINMENT AMERICA  
 > **DEVELOPER** ZIPPER INTERACTIVE > **RELEASE** OCTOBER 11 > **ESRB** M

## SO-SOCOM

The SOCOM series is like the video game version of the band AC/DC – the basic gimmick hasn't evolved in any serious way since its debut, and you either like it or you don't. However, if you tell fans of either that each release has brought little new to the table, you can probably expect an enraged beatdown. Well, I've got to say that SOCOM 3 is once again more of the same (Ow! Stop punching me!). If you still play the previous games, then you can probably stop reading now and go buy the latest iteration. But, if those titles left you cold, then nothing in SOCOM 3 will change your mind.

To be fair, SOCOM 3 does have a more fully developed single-player mode than the previous two games. The storyline is more cohesive, and

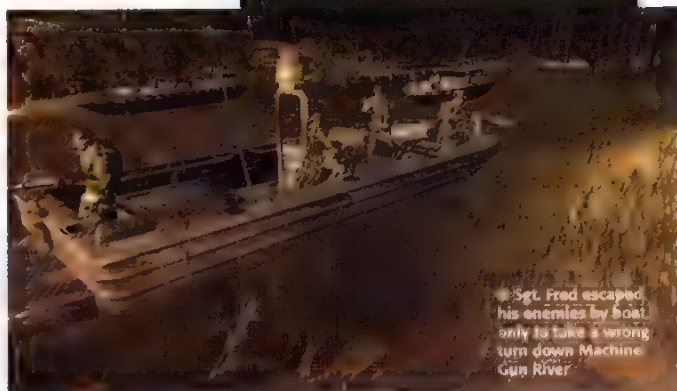
new elements like vehicles and swimming add some variety to the mission objectives. But the AI (for both your units and enemies) is painfully braindead. If real terrorists stood around during hails of bullets until they finally took one in the head, the war on terror would have been over long ago. A new quick command function (mapped to the L2 button) streamlines squad commands a bit, but the manual system is still inelegant compared to Rainbow Six's, and the audio command option suffers from voice recognition problems. But all of these problems are mostly irrelevant, as single-player is little more than a primer for online play.

SOCOM 3 is all about online play. The maps were built around 32-player support, which means they're so big it can be hard to find

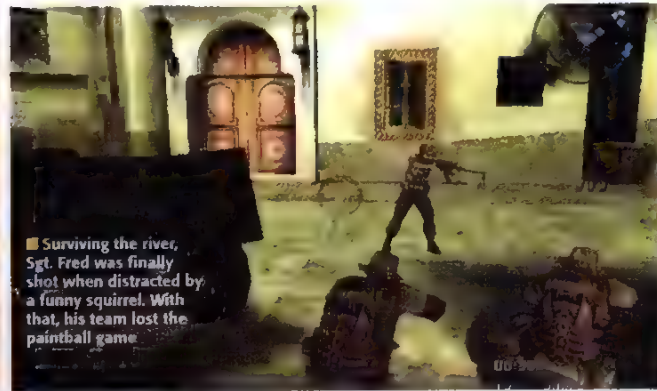
your enemy, and once you do, you can't always tell friend from foe. Thanks to some muddy graphics, both teams look pretty similar down the barrel of your gun.

There are a bevy of game types, but lagginess dogged me during my whole online experience. Vehicles and swimming make this entry feel a little different than the previous entries, but are more like gravy than gameplay revolutions. In short, SOCOM 3's online is basically more of the same. If you've spent any time with online military shooters, you've already had an experience just like this one. Sure, this series has some polish that others lack, but gunning down dudes in fatigues online is no longer a unique experience. SOCOM 3 is definitely a decent game, but if the franchise doesn't evolve, it runs the risk of losing its crown as the dominant PS2 shooter. But until then, SOCOM fans will be just as happy with this franchise as they always have been. —JEREMY

One new feature that SOCOM 3 has added is connectivity with SOCOM US NAVY SEALs: Fireteam Bravo, the debut PSP game for the franchise. With its Crosstalk feature completing objectives on the PS2 version will actually change conditions in the handheld version. We'll have a complete report on this feature when we review Fireteam Bravo in our next issue.



Sgt. Fred escaped his enemies by boat only to take a wrong turn down Machine Gun River.



Surviving the river, Sgt. Fred was finally shot when distracted by a funny squirrel. With that, his team lost the paintball game.

## Second Opinion 7.25

I know that all of you SOCOM players out there are going to love this title for what it is, with little regard for what it isn't. That's great, and I wish you all of the online bliss in the world. Myself, I can't get over the fact that SOCOM 3 online feels a lot like playing Hexen II over a dial-up connection. Choppy framerate, average-quality PS2 visuals, and standard game types simply don't do it for me. Also, I couldn't get the auto-matchmaker to work no matter the settings. However, the actual design of the multiplayer is pretty good, the maps are laid out well and are a decent size for objective-based modes. Simple deathmatch, on the other hand, is too unstructured for the size of the levels, and I frequently wound up wandering for minutes at a time before finding any enemies to shoot at. This is definitely one of the better PS2 games to take online, but then again PS2 online is a pale, weak imitation of both Xbox Live or PC multiplayer. Oh, and the single-player is broken and boring, as usual. —ADAM

# An Epic Tale of War, Romance and Betrayal...

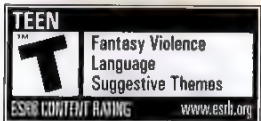
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PLAYSTATION 2

# Dragon Quest VIII: Journey of the Cursed King

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ROLE-PLAYING GAME > PUBLISHER SQUARE ENIX > DEVELOPER LEVEL 5 > RELEASE NOVEMBER 22 > ESRB T

## MELDING PAST AND PRESENT

**W**ith lines of people snaking from the locked doors of a small Tokyo software retailer into the city's neon-lit streets, the arrival of a new chapter in Enix's Dragon Quest series commands a level of fanfare comparable in America only to the release of a new *Star Wars* film. As powerful of a game as Dragon Quest has become over the years in its native country, this series has not found a way to apply a stranglehold on the American market. It has, in fact, bombed miserably while its closest competitor, Square Soft's *Final Fantasy*, which has always trailed in a distant second in Japan, has grown into a worldwide phenomenon. Just when it appeared that *Final Fantasy* would rule the west and Dragon Quest would control the east, Square Soft merged with Enix in 2003, putting an end to the decade-long rivalry.

In many ways Dragon Quest VIII is the first release that truly exemplifies how the marriage of these two role-playing giants is affecting the philosophy of design. Dragon Quest's traditional gameplay dominates this release, but you'll also see concepts borrowed from *Final Fantasy* sprinkled about. It wouldn't be fair of me to say that American gamers are graphics snobs, but one of the biggest reasons why Dragon Quest VII didn't move off of retail shelves was because of its severely dated visuals. Renowned

comic artist Akira Toriyama's brilliant character designs simply went to waste. This is perhaps the biggest area where you can see Square's influence. With the sure-handed Level 5 at the development helm, Dragon Quest is no longer the ugly duckling. Level 5 has brought Toriyama's art to life through what I believe are the most striking cel-shaded graphics to date. It's an absolutely gorgeous game.

The red carpet has definitely been rolled out for this sequel. Dragon Quest VIII moves the role-playing genre forward in a number of key areas, but as it tries to soar, nostalgia tugs at its shirt tail and keeps it grounded. When gamers can spend 100-plus hours with an RPG, the gameplay needs to be the driving force. As much as I want to bow down and praise the gorgeous graphics, I continually find myself wondering why the combat system is so simple, why character progression is this linear, and why the world seems to be based off of 16-bit blueprints. It's an enjoyable game, but in a retro "I've already done this a billion times" kind of way.

Given how drastically the majority of the game has changed, I really expected to see the series deviate from its heritage in the most crucial area: gameplay. If you can live with the concept of simply getting a new spell when your character gains a level, don't mind wandering aimlessly to find your next destina-

tion, and can handle the concept of backtracking to town to revive a fallen party member, Dragon Quest VIII will absolutely knock you off of your feet with its phenomenal story. The visuals may convey the playfulness of a Saturday morning cartoon, but in a surprise, this tale is quite dark. It touches on a number of controversial themes, is loaded with unexpected death and chaos, and is quite clever in its delivery of dialogue. Even within the early stages of the quest, you'll see that the villain Dhoulmagus gives Sephiroth a run for his money in terms of sheer, undisguised evil. The only area where this story stumbles is through the silent hero concept. As lively as the rest of the party is, having a wooden protagonist spearheading the adventure just doesn't work.

Holding onto the past works for some games, but it keeps this title from making an impact in this market like *Final Fantasy* does consistently with each release. It has the "I need to see what happens next" plot hooks, offers great longevity in the form of monster recruits, and continually baffles the mind with its visuals. However, it will likely only appease battle-hardened role-players who have already lived through a thousand hours of gameplay just like this and wouldn't mind taking on another hundred. —REINER

**BOTTOM LINE** 8.75

> **Concept:** Akira Toriyama's artwork leads the way in this emotionally moving, yet dated RPG

> **Graphics:** As hard as it is to believe, Level 5's cel-shading is even more stunning in this game than it is in the *Dark Cloud* series. It can best be summed up as a cartoon come to life

> **Sound:** Koichi Sugiyama's score is whimsical and blends perfectly with the storybook visuals

> **Playability:** Aged in oak and well behind the current RPG benchmarks

> **Entertainment:** This is a story every role-playing fanatic has to see, but the gameplay is too far behind the times to appeal to the casual gamer

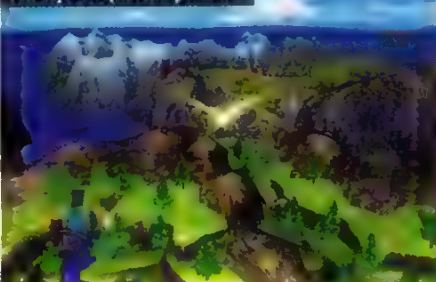
> **Replay Value:** Low

## Second Opinion 8.5

In a dream come true for Dragon Quest fans, this eighth installment requires enough dedication to qualify it as more of a relationship than a game. But, like a farm girl whose pappy keeps shotgun shells in his shirt pocket, you'd better keep your hands to yourself unless you are willing to commit to DQ VIII body and soul. The rewards to be reaped, while great, come only through perseverance; the story plods along, you gain new abilities very slowly, and the characters gradually develop in miniscule ways over the course of the entire adventure. In addition to pacing problems, the game adheres too closely to an aging formula; some may call it old-school homage, but neither the battles nor the exploration do anything particularly exciting. Dragon Quest VIII is a solidly built game, but its visual style and sense of humor are what truly distinguish it. —JOE



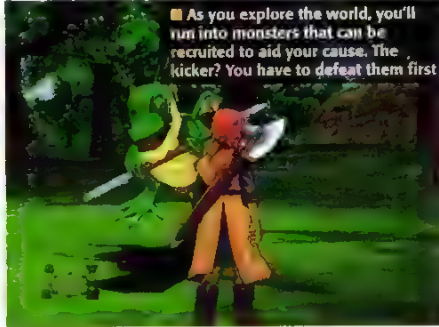
■ World exploration speeds up when you acquire the phoenix



■ Yangus and King Trode provide comic relief in an otherwise dark story.



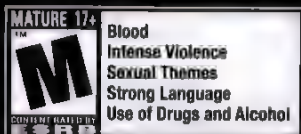
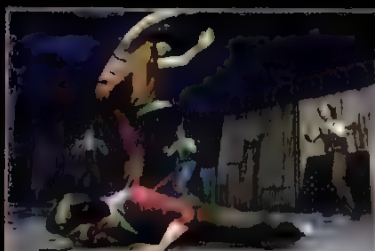
■ As you explore the world, you'll run into monsters that can be recruited to aid your cause. The kicker? You have to defeat them first



# THE WARRIORS

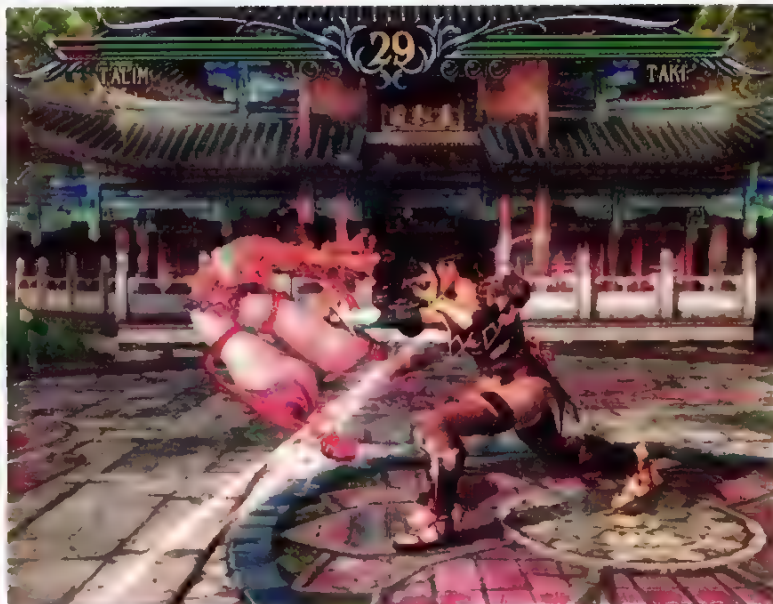
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PlayStation 2





PLAYSTATION 2

# Soul Calibur III

> STYLE 1 OR 2-PLAYER FIGHTING > PUBLISHER NAMCO > DEVELOPER NAMCO > RELEASE OCTOBER 25 > ESRB T

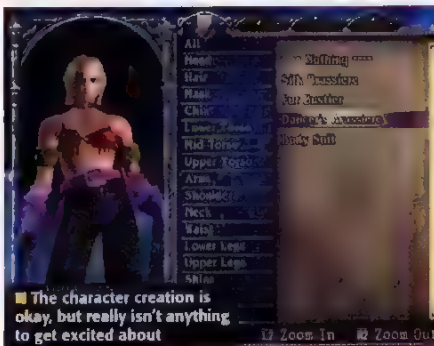
## THESE SOULS KEEP ON BURNING

Even as a long-standing Soul Calibur fanatic, I was a bit leery of this title after its lackluster showing at E3. Given that my platform of choice for Soul Cal II was the GameCube, I was disappointed at Soul Calibur III's PS2 exclusivity, and it looked an awful lot like just a little more Soul Calibur II. Happily, the game has made huge strides since then, and honestly turns out a good bit better than I thought it would. Despite being on the PS2, this entry looks significantly better than even the 'Cube and Xbox versions of its predecessor (and the load times between matches are what I'd expect on those more powerful machines, thankfully). And, more importantly, the combat is just as fast and smooth as we fanboys demand.

Ever since the series' inception, Soul Calibur has been a fantastic-looking game. This is no exception. Backgrounds, animation, modeling, effects — this has the full visual package. In particular, the full-screen distortion on some of the more brutal hits adds even more punch to the impact. Also, I can't

think of a single instance where I took exception to the collision detection, which is obviously a core component of a fighting game. Namco's expertise in this genre is clearly evident, and there isn't a single part of the core fighting that I can find fault with. Sure, some other franchise's style might be more to your personal tastes, but Soul Calibur III succeeds at everything it aspires to with precision and style.

All of the fighters, old and new, feel unique and fairly well-balanced. It continues to astound me that Namco is able to create new characters — beyond the already-huge Soul Calibur stable — who have their own style and flavor, while remaining in line with the established warriors. As with all of the best competitive games, Soul Calibur III keeps evolving levels of strategy the more you play. What's overpowered today could well be weak sauce a week later. Add all this up, and it's going to take one hell of a fighting game to pull me away from this one, as I can guarantee you that I'll be playing this con-



■ The character creation is okay, but really isn't anything to get excited about

stantly for the next few years — or at least until the next Soul Calibur comes out.

Single-player is as banal and cheap as ever, new Chronicles of the Sword mode or no. As usual, the only thing playing against the computer is good for is learning timing and combos. Also, Soul Calibur III feels a little bit more abusive once you get knocked down. Ukemi (quick pop-up) timing is somewhat easier, but if you miss it you'd better prepare for the pain. Sidestepping still doesn't seem to avoid as many attacks as it should, but nonetheless has its place in combat. These are all very minor gripes, though, and shouldn't deter anyone from adding this to their collection. Once again, Soul Calibur is one of the very top-tier fighting franchises. —ADAM

**BOTTOM LINE** 9

> **Concept:** Optimize the franchise for the PS2, and throw in some worthless extra modes

> **Graphics:** This is one of those games that reminds you just how powerful the PS2 can be

> **Sound:** The voiceovers are as hilarious as ever

> **Playability:** As usual, Soul Calibur is smooth and responsive

> **Entertainment:** Easily my new fighter of choice. A worthy entry in a fantastic series

> **Replay Value:** High

**Second Opinion** 8.5

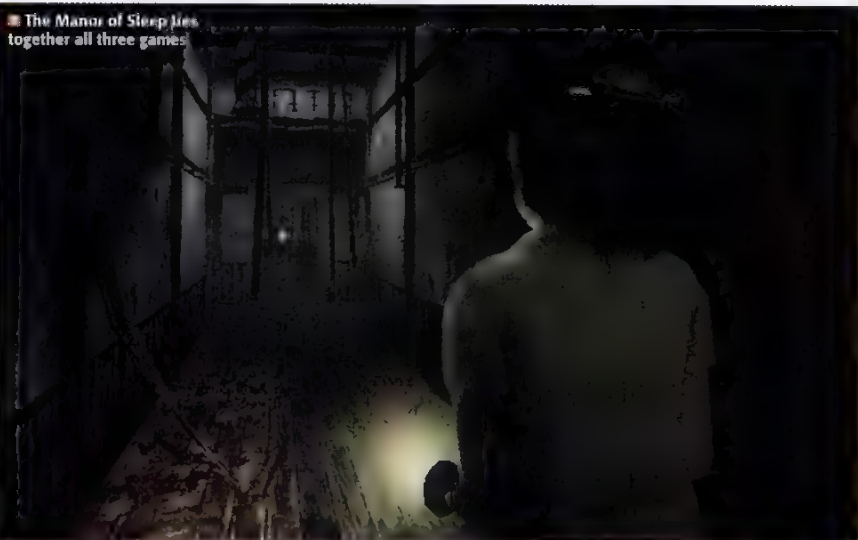
Despite the fact that getting continually owned by Adam isn't a damn bit of fun, Soul Calibur III is a heck of a good fighting game. The combat engine is simple but extremely elegant, meaning that even new players can quickly pick up on how it works and start forming complex strategies. The game looks great as well, with fantastic character models and some of the prettiest environments ever on the PS2. However, the third iteration of the series doesn't feel a whole lot different than the excellent Soul Calibur II, and the new features didn't really do much for me, although the character creation aspect is a nice touch. But all in all, Soul Calibur III is an extremely polished fighter that truly shines with a friend (even if it is Adam). Yes, it is a bit of a bummer that it lacks online and is now console-exclusive, but fighting fans still shouldn't hesitate to pick this up. —JEREMY



PLAYSTATION 2

# Fatal Frame III: The Tormented

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION > PUBLISHER TECMO > DEVELOPER TECMO > RELEASE NOVEMBER 1 > ESRB M



■ The Manor of Sleep lies together all three games

## FATAL FLAWS

**H**orror is a touchy and subjective genre. What's terrifying to one might not even raise a single hair on another. And yet, there are some creeds to stand by when crafting a scary tale — let the environments sink in, don't let participants know what is safe and what is dangerous, and never tell enough to let people guess the ultimate lynchpin.

While I've pushed and prodded curious horror aficionados to try out the Fatal Frame series, this is an entry that I won't be recommending. Both the first game and its follow up, *Crimson Butterfly*, expertly wove ancient mysticism, horrific chapters in superstitious ceremony, and good ol' family ties into brilliantly paced and outright terrifying experiences many found too scary to complete.

While *The Tormented* has an interesting goal of looping those stories together and knitting them into the present day, the overall effect is generally less hair-raising. I think that the main problem is that this game breaks a tenet of psychological horror: you're never in the same place for long enough. Switching between the nightly dream worlds of three characters and the present-day

hub world is too frequent, and the desperation felt in the first two titles never has a chance to sink in.

Part of this level design problem is also magnified by the old-school fixed camera system. These labyrinthine interiors are hard enough to maneuver when you're really familiar with them, and even more so when you're constantly being plucked out and dropped back in every 15 minutes.

My problems with the game, both big and small, each contribute to the one big issue that *The Tormented* has: It's just not very scary. As a fan of the earlier games, I already know too much about this world, and the frequent jumps between areas never let the environments' desolation take root. It's all just too explained, and the greatest asset of the series (up to this point) was its mystery. Not knowing is always scarier. —LISA



**BOTTOM LINE** 7.75

> **Concept:** While tying together the earlier two games' stories, abandon much of what makes the series so special

> **Graphics:** Creepy lighting, better ghost effects, and nice character models all make the title stand out

> **Sound:** A great sound design, but chatty specters lessen the scares

> **Playability:** The fixed camera will be a problem for some

> **Entertainment:** Nice touches for fans, but certainly not the best entry in the series

> **Replay Value:** Moderate

**Second Opinion** 8

Few games create an atmosphere of ominous dread better than the Fatal Frame series, and *The Tormented* couples this with an intelligent, complex storyline that kept me consistently engaged and spurred me to continue exploring its dark, disturbing world. However, the actual gameplay is nearly as creaky as the floorboards in the haunted mansions that comprise the story's setting. If you don't care for the conventions of survival horror (slow pacing, tank-style controls, fixed camera angles, etc.), then *Fatal Frame III* is probably not for you. But if you can get past the somewhat archaic gameplay, *The Tormented* is one of the most creepy, unsettling, and psychologically twisted experiences in the entire gaming world. —JEREMY



■ A two-player mode lets you and a friend each play at once in your own style

PLAYSTATION 2

# Guitar Hero

> STYLE 1 OR 2-PLAYER ACTION > PUBLISHER RED OCTANE > DEVELOPER HARMONIX > RELEASE NOVEMBER 8 > ESRB T

## SAY GOODBYE TO AIR GUITAR

I have a total recognition that music games don't do it for everyone. They have a tendency to make you look pretty silly, and trying to keep the beat certainly doesn't hold the same drama as pulling a trigger. If you're convinced that game music should remain strictly passive, you may wish to move on to the next review. For the rest of you whose curiosity about this title lies between mild and exuberant — go find *Guitar Hero* right away.

The makers of *Karaoke Revolution* and *Amplitude* put their experience to good use this time around. *Guitar Hero* manages to make you feel like you're genuinely creating melody and harmony in a way that almost no other interactive games have achieved. Thirty well-known tunes played by excellent sound-alikes stay pretty firmly grounded in a couple of genres — mostly metal and rock, with a little blues for flavor. In addition, another 17 "underground" tracks by the original artists make for uniformly great unlockables.

The guitar controller itself is a great little peripheral. Five fret buttons can be held down while you flick the strum bar in time with onscreen indicators. A whammy bar lets you bend the pitch and a tilt sensor allows you to flip the guitar vertical to enter into a special overdrive mode. The game can even detect hammer-ons and pull-offs, just like the real thing.

I desperately hope that this game garners enough attention to afford some sequels, if for no other reason than I'd like to see the team experiment with some other genres. With great music, steady challenge for hours and hours, and style to burn, *Guitar Hero* may not be for everyone, but for my money it doesn't get much more fun. —MILLER



■ If you've ever looked out anyone from the band to the real deal, this game is the Queen of the Rock Age, you should feel a sense of place

**BOTTOM LINE** 9

> **Concept:** Wait like a rock star in one of the finest music games to ever hit console

> **Graphics:** Exaggerated characters and backgrounds look good, but you won't be paying attention to them

> **Sound:** A phenomenal soundtrack filled with some of the greatest electric guitar songs ever

> **Playability:** Only a development team that really knew music and games could have made the guitar controller feel this much like the real thing, while still being easy enough for beginners

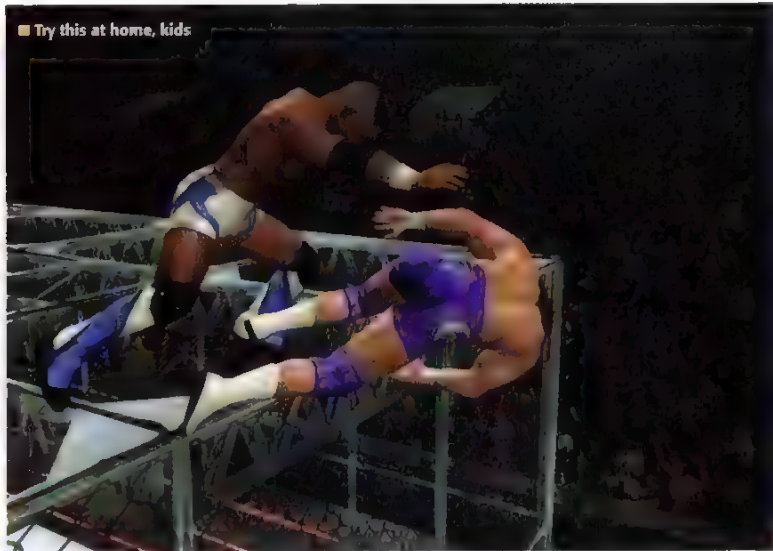
> **Entertainment:** Crank it up to 11. You must try this

> **Replay Value:** High

**Second Opinion** 8.5

Sure, I know you've spent some time miming Velvet Revolver songs in front of the mirror wearing nothing but boxers and a tennis racket, but do you have what it takes to be a guitar hero? You think you're ready to tackle "Frankenstein" by Edgar Winter, the world's second-greatest albino blues guitarists? Well, now's your chance. Harmonix can do no wrong in my book, and this ingenious game, along with its groundbreaking controller, does a great job of simulating the actual experience of playing guitar. The easy-to-understand onscreen grid will be familiar to anyone who's played *Frequency* or *Amplitude*. With a great selection of classic rock songs, both old and new, this sure-fire party hit will turn your living room into Madison Square Garden. —MATT





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PLAYSTATION 2

# WWE Smackdown Vs. Raw 2006

> **STYLE** 1 TO 6-PLAYER FIGHTING (UP TO 4-PLAYER VIA PS2 ONLINE) > **PUBLISHER** THQ > **DEVELOPER** YUKE'S > **RELEASE** NOVEMBER 15 > **ESRB** T

## THE NEXT GREAT CHAMPION

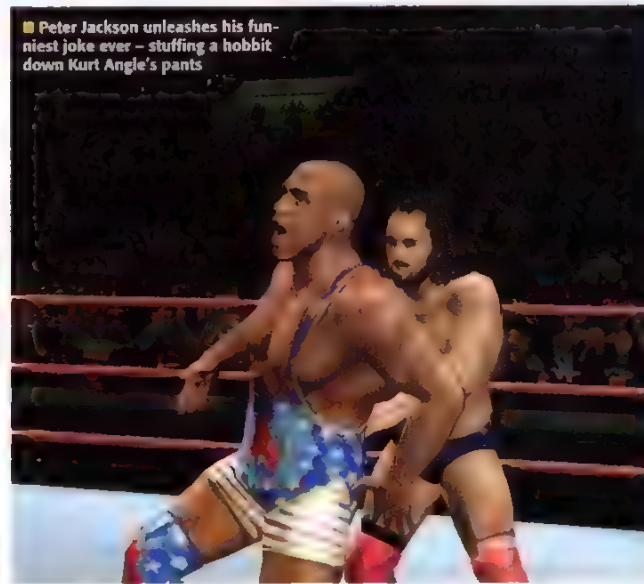
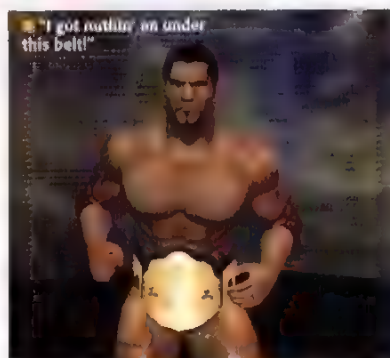
I never thought that I would play a wrestling game that finally dethroned the two Aki-developed WCW titles for N64 as my all time favorites, but WWE Smackdown vs. Raw 2006 may just be that game. Nostalgia is a powerful force to overcome, but this new grappler from Yuke's is so overstuffed with content that even the most jaded wrestling fans will have to admit that 2006 is THQ's best wrestling game to date.

The basic fighting engine in this iteration is largely unchanged, but a few additions give new depth to the combat. A new momentum meter replaces all the previous gauges, which increases and decreases based on your performance. When full, you can unleash a finishing move, or store it for later use. Storing your finisher also allows you to fake your opponent out with a possum pin or steal their taunt and momentum. You can also simply unleash your finisher or do a Super Clean/Dirty move. The other major change is the Stamina system, which adds realism by making your wrestler tire after performing big moves. The Stamina system can be turned off for a more arcade-style experience, which is a move I applaud, as maintaining your stamina levels makes 2006 a noticeably harder game than the last title.

There are a handful of other tweaks included, and some new match types, like the slick Buried Alive match and the shamefully stupid Fulfill Your Fantasy match, which replaces the Bra and Panties match. Season mode has been blown out with separate Smackdown and Raw storylines, each with branching paths. The cutscenes now feature full voiceover for every character, and nearly every element of the presentation has been polished. Creation modes have been expanded as well: Now you can create characters,

championships, Pay-Per-Views, stables, and even customize your own virtual locker room. But perhaps the most significant addition is the new GM mode, which lets you run either Smackdown or Raw by drafting wrestlers, scheduling matches, creating rivalries, and more. GM mode certainly isn't for everyone, but it is nonetheless the single biggest addition THQ's WWE titles have yet seen. I'm a terrible GM, by the way — I practically got Smackdown cancelled!

Whether your skills at management shine or not, WWE Smackdown vs. Raw 2006 is nearly everything a wrestling fan could want. Now that the formula has been polished to the point that it gleams, and every addition you could think of has been added, I would like to see Yuke's take some chances on switching up the core gameplay a little. But you definitely can't accuse them of not having high ambitions, as this title is simply the most fully-loaded wrestling title yet. Can you dig it, suckas?—**JEREMY**



**BOTTOM LINE** 8.75

> **Concept:** The Biggie-sized combo meal of wrestling games has finally arrived

> **Graphics:** Character models accurately represent the WWE stars in all their sweaty glory

> **Sound:** The full voiceovers in the cutscenes is a great addition, but the announcing team repeats lines way too often

> **Playability:** The familiar WWE controls are back, with some new polish and few significant changes

> **Entertainment:** Wrestling fans will have to look hard to find something lacking in this title

> **Replay Value:** High

**Second Opinion** 8.75

The thought of John Madden wearing a singlet is enough to make any sane person leap off of a bridge, but it actually speaks volumes about this latest wrestling endeavor. Many of the enhancements in this year's game draw inspiration from the sports genre. You can simulate seasons, test your hand as a general manager, and pimp out your very own locker room. A heavy focus has also been applied to tailoring the story to the wrestler that you choose. You really get a great feel for the different personalities in the league. This even goes for some of the unlockable legends like Hulk Hogan. This is easily the largest wrestling game that THQ has ever made, but as you can see, most of the changes occur outside of the ring. The gameplay is considerably tighter, but it hasn't made a significant jump from last year's effort. This console generation is drawing to a close, but THQ has finally delivered the breakthrough release that wrestling fans have anxiously awaited.

—REINER

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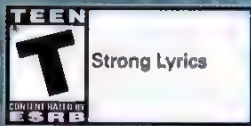


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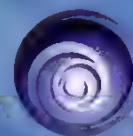


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PlayStation.2



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PLAYSTATION 2

# Trapt

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION > PUBLISHER TECMO > DEVELOPER TECMO > RELEASE OCTOBER 18 > ESRB M

## HOME ALONE: THE DEMONIC CUT

**R**usty, bloodstained medieval traps? Check. A main character who fell under a spell in the last 24 hours that forces her to do the devil's work? Check. Enemies brain-dead to the point that they'll trigger the same trap that had — just minutes ago — brutally taken out a handful of their comrades? Double check. Just spending a few minutes with Trapt will have your imagination swimming with methodically maniacal aspirations. You'll be surprised what kind of thoughts enter your mind. "If I place this spring floor gadget near this railing, I should be able to launch this dimwit into a wall of spikes, at which point he'll land directly on my carefully placed bear trap!"

If nothing else, Trapt is good for an uncontrollable cackle or two, but it's by no means a fully-loaded experience. While it genuinely feels good to trick an idiot into an intense and overly painful death, the slim selection of trap types leads to repetition fairly early on in the game. With many of the traps sharing similar functionality, the highly violent murders that you

commit lose their luster after a few hours. Thanks to a troublesome camera system, it's next to impossible to get a good look at the elaborate deaths that you create. If you can make a pot fall on someone's head so that they blindly walk into a wall of electricity, you should be able to see it from a decent perspective.

The only traps that offer a cinematic vantage point are the environment-based Dark Illusions. Much like a Mortal Kombat game, these deaths are gruesome and usually unfold in lengthy sequences. You just have to figure out how to use them. For instance, to use the dock, you'll need to light two candles in the environment, then force an enemy to walk near it. Within the course of the game, you'll be lucky to find any of these traps.

I enjoyed the Deception series on PSone, but this sequel hasn't made any strides forward. Inflicting unspeakable pain on mindless video game drones puts you into the shoes of wily Kevin McCallister, but as you'll soon learn, anything that reminds you of Macaulay Culkin is not good. —REINER

**BOTTOM LINE 6.75**

> **Concept:** Carry out the work of the devil in an ironically torturous game

> **Graphics:** Every significant character looks like a French maid. Wait a minute... why am I complaining about this?!

> **Sound:** Features Japanese voiceovers with English subtitles. The soundtrack appears to be taken from the greatest hits of Weak Sauce

> **Playability:** Setting traps is as easy as breathing, and it doesn't take much to convince a foe to wander into one

> **Entertainment:** Limited in scope and grows repetitious after a few hours of play

> **Replay Value:** Moderately Low

### Second Opinion 7

Some may deem it "abnormal" to gleefully watch a woman in a saucy French maid outfit impale, burn, grind, sever, and explode hapless soldiers... but something that feels so right can't possibly be wrong. Tecmo has done a great job pandering to sadistic gamers by allowing for numerous ingenious trap combinations, not to mention a little biography of each victim detailing their life goals that will go forever unrealized. Unfortunately, the game manages to work in plenty of masochism, too; the camera controls inflict searing pain, and the process of endlessly evading foes until the critical moment feels like a punishment itself. Trapt is good for some laughs and bloodshed, but the gameplay doesn't quite make the cut. —JOE



PLAYSTATION 2

# Suikoden Tactics

> STYLE 1-PLAYER STRATEGY > PUBLISHER KONAMI > DEVELOPER KONAMI > RELEASE NOVEMBER 8 > ESRB T



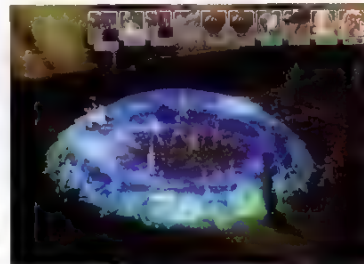
## SUCKODEN

**G**amers who play strategy titles are accustomed to taking risks. Maybe your archer will counterattack. Maybe your paladin will score a critical hit. Maybe your healer will be just fine out there. Judiciously weighing these choices is typically the mark of a good commander, but in Suikoden Tactics these key decisions take a back seat to simply considering the ground you walk on.

Instead of actually balancing the combat, Suikoden Tactics relies almost entirely on the elemental properties of the battleground to suit your warriors' strengths. Each character has an innate elemental affinity and a corresponding weakness, and you will use items and spells to imbue parts of the grid with these powers. It's a neat idea, but individual combat abilities are rendered practically irrelevant since attack and defense are so radically affected by these properties. As a result, many battles feel more like "cap-

ture the squares" board games than actual fights. There's still strategy involved, but not the kind you'd want or expect.

There are numerous problems off the battlefield, as well. The system for learning and equipping skills works well, but the game arbitrarily caps your ability to advance them. The story is a pure bother, sometimes forcing you to sit through 20 minutes of half-witted garbage between fights. I appreciate the way this title attempts to add depth beyond simple rock-paper-scissors weapons triangles, but it just feels like the screws are loose around every facet of the combat. I'd rather have a simple and well-balanced game than a complicated and lopsided one, and Suikoden Tactics definitely has too many short legs. —JOE



**BOTTOM LINE 6.75**

> **Concept:** Set sail on an unremarkable tactical voyage

> **Graphics:** Supports progressive scan for some reason, making the blocky character models and pug-ugly environments shine through with hideous clarity

> **Sound:** A respectable amount of voice acting, though the quality is somewhat suspect

> **Playability:** Balloons around characters' heads are a nice touch, but can't outweigh the frustrating element system

> **Entertainment:** Fun until you realize that you have too little control over the aspects of combat that matter most

> **Replay Value:** Moderate

### Second Opinion 6

It takes a lot for a strategy/RPG to fail to entertain me. The genre is one of my absolute favorites, and even average releases tend to provide me with a good amount of enjoyment. Suikoden Tactics, however, doesn't meet even this low bar. The game's bizarre fixation on changing the elements of the terrain rather than actually fighting, as well as its lackluster story and irritating characters, simply doesn't do anything for me. The nuts-and-bolts combat is actually fairly decent, and I definitely enjoy unleashing the power of the uber combo attacks. Having spent far more time painting the ground and trying to stay awake through horrendously long dialogues, though, I can't recommend this even to the most hardcore fans of the genre. —ADAM

### The Console Connection

Taking place in the Island Nations of Suikoden IV, Suikoden Tactics has some nice surprises in store for those who have played its RPG counterpart. Not only will you see familiar characters, but you'll also gain insight into their personalities as you learn the details of their past. Discover how Brandeau was branded with the Rune of Punishment, and how Kiki lost her love at sea. These tidbits don't make the game any better, but they're still a nice bonus.

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PLAYSTATION 2

# Magna Carta: Tears of Blood

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ROLE-PLAYING GAME > **PUBLISHER** ATLUS > **DEVELOPER** SOFTMAX > **RELEASE** NOVEMBER 15 > **ESRB** T

## BLOODY GOOD

I'll admit that I was a little apprehensive of a game named after a historical document at first (I once had an emotionally-scaring nightmare about Tony Hawk's Code of Hammurabi), but I was delighted to discover that there is absolutely nothing educational about Magna Carta. Well, not in the traditional sense anyway...though I'm pretty sure that my IQ got kicked up a couple of points in the process of figuring out the game's unique battle system that serves as the heart of this surprisingly intricate adventure.

It took a while for Magna Carta to grow on me; not since Final Fantasy VIII's Junction tutorial have I been so overwhelmed by a game's attempt to teach me its own mechanics. It would be impossible to clarify everything in a single review, but I will say that the complexity definitely serves the game well by adding several layers of depth to every encounter. In

a single fight, it's never just a question of wiping out the monsters. You need to perfect your timing-based attacks (similar to Shadow Hearts or Legend of Dragoon), manage the kinds of energy your attacks consume, and concentrate on learning new and more devastating techniques.

As involving as the combat is, it would have been nice to see more of it. Once you clear an area of enemies, they don't show up again for a while, which caps your ability to improve your skills until you reach a new area. Also, the speed of the battles is hardly lightning quick since it not only relies on waiting for a gauge to charge, but also on sitting through brief load times (disguised as characters "gathering energy") prior to each attack's execution.

Even though the pacing sometimes drags its heels, Magna Carta has enough cool points to hold your

interest in other areas when your attention starts to wane. Side missions, upgradeable weapons, and a striking art style all complement a story that deals with sophisticated themes (even with a group of somewhat familiar character archetypes). While not quite as dark as Shin Megami Tensei, this is far more than your average feel-good fantasy romp through Faerietown.

While I definitely appreciate the classic elements of titles like Dragon Quest VIII (which is technically a better game), there are so many downright compelling aspects of Magna Carta that I actually enjoyed it more. It takes some risks, and though they don't all pay off, the game as a whole is unconventional, addictive, and a must-have for veterans driven to expand their horizons. —**JOE**



The character designs are equally intriguing and

Here's a capable general, trusted by the Commander himself. He was called "The Golden Lion" in his younger days.

**BOTTOM LINE** 8.25

> **Concept:** A stylish, clever RPG starring heroes in questionable clothing

> **Graphics:** Some of the environments get repetitive, but the FMV and character designs are fabulous (though most of the females appear to be smuggling cantaloupes)

> **Sound:** A low point. Despite the fact the voice actors clearly speak English, their cadence is stilted and ridiculous

> **Playability:** The timing-based attacks work perfectly. If only it didn't have to load before each and every one

> **Entertainment:** Great when you're fightin' stuff. Things plod along a little slowly otherwise

> **Replay Value:** Moderate

### Second Opinion 8

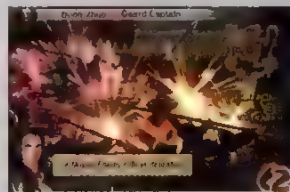
The Final Fantasy-style eastern RPG is a long-established genre in gaming. While this is a good thing for fans (myself included), it can mean that we don't get as much innovation as we'd like at times. Magna Carta, from previously unknown Korean developer Softmax, is a soothing balm for that itchy rash of stale gameplay. It is without the slightest doubt that I tell you that this game has my absolute favorite RPG combat system to date. Its great mix of timing-based attacks and strategic depth blows more staid battle engines totally out of the water. However, the story is merely competent, presentation is average (with the exception of the fantastic character models), and frequent overly-long load times constantly mar the experience. Magna Carta is still an enjoyable fantasy adventure, though, and a great pickup for RPG fans looking for something a little different. —**ADAM**

## PS2 QUICKIES

PLAYSTATION 2

### Dynasty Warriors 5 Xtreme Legends

> **STYLE** 1 OR 2-PLAYER ACTION  
> **PUBLISHER** KOEI  
> **DEVELOPER** OMEGA FORCE  
> **RELEASE** NOVEMBER 8 > **ESRB** T



**BOTTOM LINE** 6.75

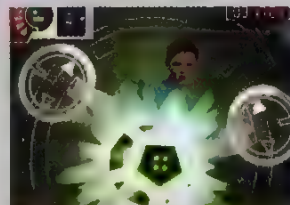
It would seem that you need another Dynasty Warriors title like you need another John

Zorn record, but this game offers something different for the franchise. Destiny mode lets you create a character and move up the ranks of the army, earning the ability to set up fire attacks or raids along the way. In the beginning, it also forces you to fight more strategically, since you aren't quite the big dog on the battlefield yet. Here is where setting up ambushes helps you out. If you've been waiting to get a new DW title, this one would be the one to get, even though the basic gameplay remains painfully the same. —**KATO**

PLAYSTATION 2

### EyeToy: Operation Spy

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION  
> **PUBLISHER** SONY COMPUTER ENTERTAINMENT AMERICA  
> **DEVELOPER** SONY COMPUTER ENTERTAINMENT EUROPE  
> **RELEASE** NOVEMBER 15 > **ESRB** E

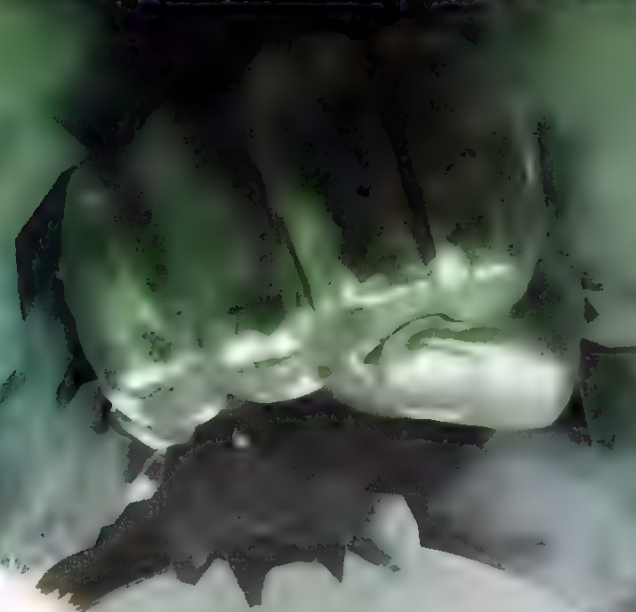


**BOTTOM LINE** 6

I love Sony's EyeToy camera; it's a great gadget that's been translated into some

genuinely fun party games with the Play series. However, Operation Spy reveals that its brand of unique, motion-based gameplay does have its limits. Instead of charming minigames, you're asked to perform perfunctory "spy" activities like decrypting code, taking aerial satellite photos, and parachuting onto rooftops. Basically, you do this by touching icons onscreen, à la *Minority Report* — which basically means that it makes relatively simple tasks somewhat frustrating. A great concept, but I just don't think the PS2 version of the EyeToy technology has the horsepower to pull it off. —**MATT**

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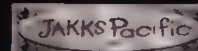


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GAMECUBE

## Mario Party 7

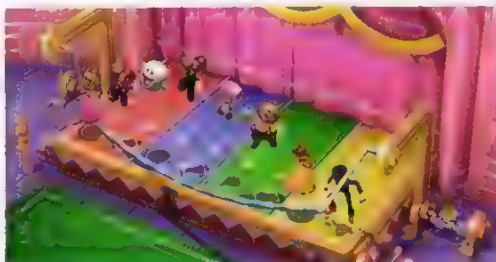
> **STYLE** 1 TO 8-PLAYER BOARD > **PUBLISHER** NINTENDO  
> **DEVELOPER** HUDSON SOFT > **RELEASE** NOVEMBER 7 > **ESRB** E

### A PARTY IN SOILED PANTS

**M**ario Party 7, despite its kid-friendly facade, is the most insidious and deceptive title in recent memory. Here's how the scheme works. Step one: Provide dozens of arbitrary and mindless exercises that can only be tolerated for 45 seconds each. Step two: Tell a bunch of chumps that, for maximum enjoyment, these chores need to be played by a group of people already predisposed to having a good time together. Step three: Light up a victory cigar as the people succumb to the misconception that the game, not present company, is actually delivering the entertainment.

If you want Mario Party 7 to be fun, you're going to do all of the work. The board game aspects are still too random and boring to serve as anything but a thin excuse to pit players against each other in simplistic minigames. Granted, a few of these challenges are pretty clever, but since there are only trace elements of skill involved, every victory is a hollow and humiliating achievement.

Even if you loved Mario Party 6, the only reason to buy this is the fact that you can sucker up to seven other people into jumping onboard with your mistake, just like a pyramid scheme! There are plenty of better ways to do a bunch of crap with your friends that isn't any fun and doesn't make any sense, like hiding batteries in people's shoes. Go do that instead. —**JOE**



**BOTTOM LINE** 5

> **Concept:** Throw a party where everyone cries and passes out, minus the booze

> **Graphics:** Bright and cheery visuals complement the player's dour and venomous expressions

> **Sound:** Plop. Yeah, that sounds about right

> **Playability:** The controls for the minigames are pretty tight, but the delayed response time for the mic is still out of control

> **Entertainment:** Not included. Self-assembly required

> **Replay Value:** Low

**Second Opinion** 6

"Mario Party is so fun to play with a bunch of friends! Yay!" Yeah, well it's fun hanging out with your friends. Nintendo didn't invent that, and this game is not well made. "But kids love it!" Well, when I was a kid I liked to throw rocks at things. Does "rock throwing" deserve a 9/10? Actually, rock throwing is pretty great, way better than this collection of decent-to-aggravating minigames built around the most annoying, dull, and arbitrary board game in the history of mankind. —**MATT**



GAMECUBE

## Super Mario Strikers

> **STYLE** 1 TO 4-PLAYER SPORTS > **PUBLISHER** NINTENDO  
> **DEVELOPER** NEXT LEVEL GAMES > **RELEASE** DECEMBER 5 > **ESRB** E

### MARIO GETS KICKED

**M**ario's woes in the sports genre continue. First Nintendo delayed its sim-baseball title indefinitely, then Mario Superstar Baseball totally whiffed. At first glance you might be inclined to blame those events on the fact that baseball is a completely lame-ass sport — and you wouldn't be wrong in doing so. But even with soccer, which is far superior, it's clear that Nintendo has lost much of its magic touch.

Mario Baseball had its gameplay problems, but at least it was structured far better. It had minigames. It had an over-world map to play around on. Conversely, Mario Strikers is as basic as basic gets. Play through a bunch of similar tournaments and repeat until you're so bored you're tempted to turn on the tube and watch a baseball game. The thing is, the title's gameplay is solid enough that if Nintendo or developer Next Level tried to go the extra mile and maybe give players' characters stats or at least characters who play and feel different from each other, we wouldn't be having this conversation. Because it's fun to send Chain Chomps through the pitch and have Bowser crash the party every now and again, Mario Strikers can be fun as a multiplayer title. However, the fact that the gameplay never evolves and the defensive stops are too powerful means this game's legs aren't very long — just like Mario's stubby little limbs.

This is only suitable for small children who don't know any better and those who like to be tickled by Mario mustache rides. —**KATO**



**BOTTOM LINE** 6.75

> **Concept:** This is not the GameCUBE resurrection you're looking for. As a matter of fact, there isn't much here at all

> **Graphics:** Like this game as a whole, it's nothing that couldn't have been done years ago

> **Sound:** Mario-speak at its finest

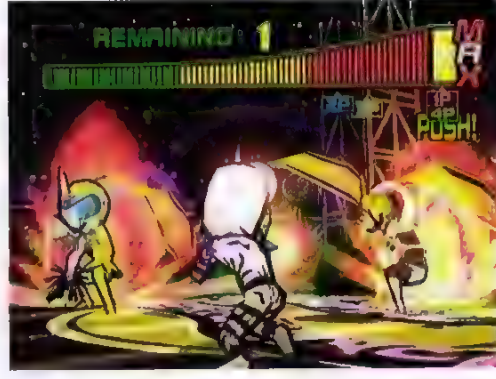
> **Playability:** After you've played your first tournament, it doesn't change much

> **Entertainment:** Even as a multiplayer game among friends, this title has little staying power

> **Replay Value:** Moderately Low

**Second Opinion** 7.75

There's certainly not a lot more here than the bare bones of a good soccer game. However, presentation can be worth a lot, and this one is hilarious. Electrified sidelines, flailing slide tackles, and an occasionally rampaging Bowser are all it takes to make this a fun addition to the Mario sports family — and my personal favorite of the bunch, as it happens. There's actually a decent amount of skill in getting good at the game, but darned if you'll know it once you start a four-player match and you have the chance to blindside your buddy as he tries to shoot. Sometimes the simple joys in life are the greatest. —**MILLER**



GAMECUBE

## Viewtiful Joe: Red Hot Rumble

> **STYLE** 1 TO 4-PLAYER ACTION > **PUBLISHER** CAPCOM  
> **DEVELOPER** CLOVER > **RELEASE** NOVEMBER 8 > **ESRB** T

### CHEAP THRILLS

**T**his is one of those games where the degree of fun is going to be directly proportional to your mood and setting. As a single player follow-up to the excellent Viewtiful Joe games, Red Hot Rumble fails on a very basic level. As a multiplayer party game, it fares better, if for no other reason than you ought to be able to laugh at the incredible chaos that ensues on the screen. Make no mistake — this tries to be Super Smash Bros. with some new bells and whistles, and much less-beloved characters. If that sounds like fun, don't let my average score frighten you too much.

The very first Viewtiful Joe game was praised in large part because of its blistering, but always fair, difficulty. Red Hot Rumble maintains that challenge. Unfortunately, in this newer game, the difficulty frequently feels cheap and your losses are sometimes unavoidable accidents. For this reason, advancing through the story mode to unlock new characters is tedious, while the plot itself is entirely nonsensical. Now, I'm not just talking normal Japanese quirk — the dialogue between characters is completely unintelligible. Seriously.

The degree of onscreen chaos is definitely a matter of taste. It made me laugh at some points and curse at others. As a party game, I definitely think there is some promise. Every stage certainly offers unique objectives and situations, even if many of them are frustrating. This is a game carried away with its own silliness, and your enjoyment is going to be based on how willing you are to go along for the ride. —**MILLER**



**BOTTOM LINE** 7

> **Concept:** Frantically jam the buttons and hope for the best in this variation on the Super Smash Bros. theme

> **Graphics:** Bright and capable of an enormous amount of onscreen action, the visuals are as nice as the other stylized Viewtiful Joe games

> **Sound:** If waiting guitars and constant noise is your thing, you should be more than pleased

> **Playability:** Enjoyable gameplay is hampered by confusing goals and iffy hit detection

> **Entertainment:** Chaotic party atmospheres are really the only place that this is going to be great fun

> **Replay Value:** Moderate

**Second Opinion** 8

What I've always liked about the Viewtiful Joe games was how they really made you think, bringing intelligence back to side-scrolling action. Unfortunately, Red Hot Rumble takes all of the strategy out, leaving you with a fast-paced, chaotic mess. Sure, it looks nice and there is a lot of variety in the mission objectives, but nothing outside of blind luck will get you through a battle. Super Smash Brothers this ain't. —**JEREMY**

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**BOTTOM LINE** 8

**> Concept:** After years of killing zombies in games, Stubbs finally gives you a chance to get some unholy revenge on the living as a dead travelling salesman back from the grave

**> Graphics:** Low budget, like the movies that inspired the game

**> Sound:** Killing people makes them shout absolutely hilarious things, and the covers of classic '50s tunes are awesome

**> Playability:** Your nasty zombie powers give you a lot of flexibility in combat, but some deeper zombie control would be nice

**> Entertainment:** Stubbs is filled with cheesy thrills, but doesn't quite live up to its potential

**> Replay Value:** Moderately High

**Second Opinion** 7.5

It's not every day that you see a zombie love story. Developer Wideload Games can certainly spin a hilarious yarn, but as comforting as it is to see something fresh, *Stubbs the Zombie* is the video game equivalent of a warm spot in a pool. Munching on the brains of happy-go-lucky citizens is highly entertaining, but it's a short-lived pleasure before you realize that it's time to get out of the pool. The developer did try to inject variety through vehicle-based sections, but these segments do little to raise this game up from being short, repetitive, and dull. I really wanted to see if *Stubbs* ended up with the love of his undead life, but I had to slap myself a few times to stay awake. The only things that really kept me going were the side-splitting cutscenes and the swinging soundtrack. *Stubbs* is definitely unique, it just needs to be fleshed out with greater variety to truly captivate. —REINER

## XBOX Stubbs the Zombie in "Rebel Without A Pulse"

> STYLE 1 OR 2-PLAYER ACTION > PUBLISHER ASPYR MEDIA > DEVELOPER WIDELOAD GAMES > RELEASE OCTOBER 20 > ESRB M

### DAY OF THE DEAD

I'll admit to having a zombie problem. I think George A. Romero is a god, *Return of the Living Dead* is one of the funniest movies ever, and have even written some of my own zombie fiction. I'm simply a huge dork for the undead. Therefore, playing as a zombie in a video game is something I've been craving for a long time, which is why I've been eagerly anticipating *Stubbs the Zombie*. After playing through the game, I've both had my fill of brain-eating mayhem, and been slightly underwhelmed. *Stubbs* is a fun-filled, hilariously gory romp with tons of personality, but the gameplay gets repetitive in parts and falters a bit in other areas.

Developed by Wideload, a small core team of ex-Bungie employees, *Stubbs the Zombie* is may be the last original title that will be released exclusively for the Xbox. Although it uses the Halo engine, *Stubbs* doesn't live up to that title graphically, and features

tons of flat and repeated textures. Like a rotted walking corpse, *Stubbs* isn't very pretty to look at. But Wideload makes up for the graphics with some truly funny audio (the various death screams of your victims are hilarious), a cool concept, and gameplay mechanics that offer a surprising level of strategy.

As *Stubbs*, an undead salesman wrecking havoc in a "futuristic" town in the 1950s, you have the ability to turn others into your undead comrades by eating their brains or hitting them with some of your special attacks like gut grenades and your explosive bowling ball head. You can also possess people with your severed hand and mow down your enemies with their guns. Or you can simply mob your foes with the hordes of the living dead. Between your four zombie powers and your rudimentary control over other zombies, there are a lot of different ways to tackle each combat situation. Do you possess a guard

to ambush your enemies from behind, stun them with your deadly flatulence, or simply send a bunch of zombies their way? It's pretty open. Unfortunately, once you master all of your powers, there isn't a lot of variety to the gameplay, aside from a few driving sequences. You're constantly tasked with taking out the living, and little else.

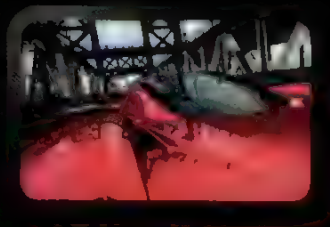
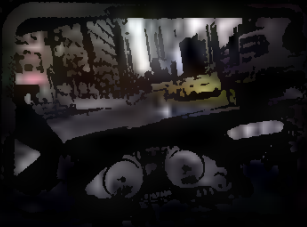
Although the gameplay is pretty linear and gets repetitive towards the end of the game, *Stubbs* mostly overcomes this flaw (and unimpressive graphics) with sheer personality. *Stubbs* is a likable character, the story and dialogue is funny, co-op mode plays just like *Halo*, and the soundtrack is phenomenal. *Stubbs the Zombie* isn't quite the masterpiece for the Xbox that it could have been, but is still a great action game that delivers something different. For zombie fans, this one is a no-brainer — pun definitely intended. —JEREMY





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■ This hunter helicopter hounds your trail for a good hour of gameplay



■ The intensity of being chased by aliens is lost when the game loads every 45 seconds

XBOX

# Half-Life 2

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION > **PUBLISHER** ELECTRONIC ARTS/VALVE SOFTWARE > **DEVELOPER** VALVE SOFTWARE  
 > **RELEASE** NOVEMBER 15 > **ESRB** M

## AVOID THIS PORT REGARDLESS OF THE STORM

I love Half-Life 2. A year ago, it was easily my favorite single-player first-person shooter. It's still up there — on PC. This port, while retaining the fantastic storytelling, memorable characters, and wildly entertaining physics that made Half-Life 2 a classic, suffers from one gigantic flaw that taints the entire package. What could possibly mess up Half-Life 2 to the extent that it's merely an average game, instead of the outstanding must-play adventure it was in its original form? The loading. The ubiquitous, maddening, unforgivable loading that breaks every single level up into tiny chunks. The inconsistent framerate and lack of visual splendor are compromises we all expected with this conversion, but the load times are insufferable.

On the plus side, the frequent jaw-dropping moments of sheer awesomeness that make Half-Life 2 so great are preserved intact. Hurting out of a tunnel in an airboat only to find a huge, heavily armed chopper ready to gun you down is just as impressive in this version. Abusing zombies with

Father Grigon's physics-based traps in Ravenholm is still one of the finest moments in gaming. Taking out the trash in the final sequence remains as exhilarating as can be. However, getting to these defining moments is infinitely more tedious and boring than it was in the PC original. Not only does the generous aim assistance take much of the skill out of combat, but the incessant pauses for the game to load the next map take you out of the action so often it's hard to get back in.

The vehicle segments are particularly problematic. These sequences were the weak point of the PC version, but this time the obnoxious frequency with which your reticle re-centers itself on the vertical plane makes actually shooting anything nearly impossible while moving. Furthermore, loads are even more prevalent when driving the airboat or buggy — in some spots, there is literally 30 seconds of gameplay in between 20-second bouts of load-



■ Battling Striders is harrowing, to say the least

ing. You can imagine how much fun that is.

It's really too bad that Valve, for all of its technical wizardry, was unable to make Half-Life 2 fit into the Xbox in a reasonably intact form. The PC version is one of the defining games of the last few years, and a great many gamers are going to miss out on it because of the expense of owning a gaming computer. Rather than trying to get in on their PC-enabled brethren's mojo, though, console players would be much better served enjoying their own defining games. Playing this incarnation of Valve's masterpiece is like watching *Return of the King* on your grandmother's scratched-up 13-inch black-and-white TV with no sound. —ADAM

**BOTTOM LINE** 7.25

- > **Concept:** Squeeze the massive PC blockbuster into the Xbox's wee frame
- > **Graphics:** Character models still look great, but environments have taken a huge hit in the transition
- > **Sound:** The voiceovers are top-notch, but effects have lost much of their oomph
- > **Playability:** Dual-analog control may not be as precise as a mouse and keyboard, but there's no reason for this much aim assistance
- > **Entertainment:** Don't kid yourself. Play the PC version
- > **Replay Value:** Moderate

**Second Opinion** 7.25

As someone who primarily plays console games and has never spent a second with Half-Life 2, a game that most people herald as the best title released last year for PC, I can't even begin to tell you how excited I was to play it on Xbox. Unfortunately, like a movie that has lost its sharpness from being recorded numerous times onto VHS, Half-Life 2's arrival on Xbox is a monumental letdown. Indings of its brilliant gameplay design are certainly evident, but most of your time is spent complaining about the ugly texturing and 20-second load times that surround microscopic 40-second gameplay segments. Even the sound effects grate on your nerves. If you absolutely need to play this game, sell a kidney or lung, or open up a lemonade stand. Do everything that you can to raise enough money to purchase a PC that can support the only version of this game that is worth a damn. —REINER

■ Character models are just about the best around



■ The juxtaposition of modern-day artifacts with oppressive alien technology is a powerful motif



# HARVEST MOON

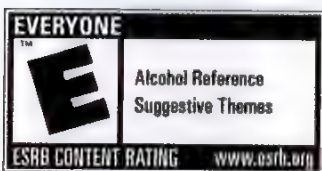
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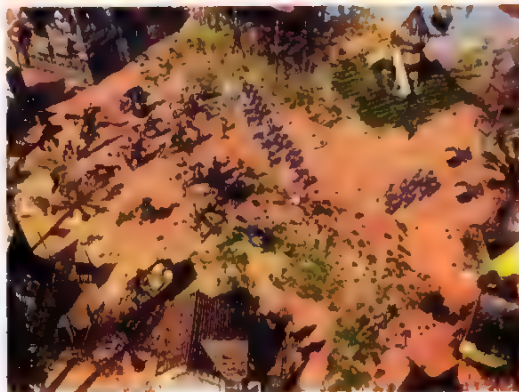
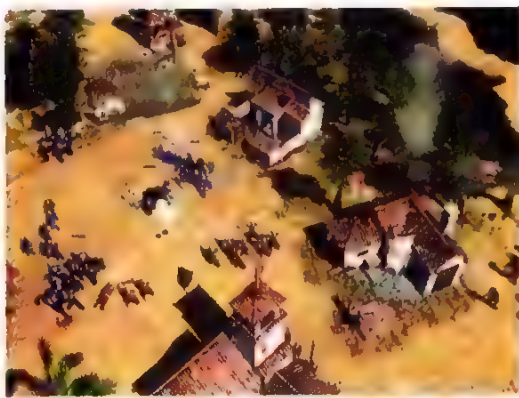


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■ Whatever this game's faults may be, artillery is flat-out awesome

**BOTTOM LINE** 8.25

> **Concept:** Change the Age of Empires formula a bit and move the setting to colonial America

> **Graphics:** Best water ever! Also, watching the dynamic destruction as your cannons rip apart an enemy settlement is awesome

> **Sound:** The rumble of distant artillery fire brings a tear to my eye

> **Playability:** Why are there no useful hotkeys for units and no AI stances, and why is economy management so frustrating?

> **Entertainment:** A good, fun historical RTS. The next evolution of the genre this is not, though

> **Replay Value:** High

PC

# Age of Empires III

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER STRATEGY (UP TO 8-PLAYER VIA INTERNET OR LAN) > **PUBLISHER** MICROSOFT GAME STUDIOS  
> **DEVELOPER** ENSEMBLE STUDIOS > **RELEASE** OCTOBER 18 > **ESRB** T

## EVERY EMPIRE HAS ITS AGE

Coming into Age of Empires III, I had extremely high hopes and expectations. From the trailers and the screenshots, this game looked like everything I wanted out of real-time strategy. Unfortunately, it's not. In a lot of ways, it's more Age of Empires with some shiny new graphical tech for your viewing pleasure. And while that's far from a bad thing, I frankly expected more out of the wonderfully-talented Ensemble Studios. When this title does something well, it knocks it out of the park. Cannon fire booms with the kind

of intensity Francis Scott Key wrote about. Buildings crumble and get pieces blown off in spectacular fashion. And the large-scale battles that inevitably take place in the later stages of the game are absolutely fantastic. Overall, the presentation is top-notch in just about every way it can be, and watching the destruction your magnificent armies can unleash is a blast. Bringing about these wonderful sequences, however, is another matter entirely. I understand that the Age of Empires games have never really been about micro-managing your

forces, but the failure of AoE III to meet a basic standard for control of your armies is inexcusable. There's no way to get your troops to hold ground or patrol, and even basic attack-move orders are routinely botched by your minions. I could deal with the temble unit AI if I had a decent way to control them directly, but the combination of these two irritations is too much. It's like trying to play a guitar while wearing mittens.

The addition of the persistent Home City, one of the trumpeted features of AoE III, simply isn't something I feel terribly strongly about. It's cool to level it up and gain new things to send your colony, and I like the way you earn shipments by building, exploring and fighting, but it's just not a huge impact on the game one way or the other. Also, beyond the Home City, it feels like Age of Empires III has been simplified in a lot of ways from its predecessors. Economies are built on a much more bare-bones model (even so, I miss Empire Earth II's economic tracking functions). Advancing through the Ages doesn't feel as epic as it did in previous titles, either; promoting my Musketeers to veteran status hardly gives me that "Haha! The opposition will be crushed by my superior technology!" feeling.

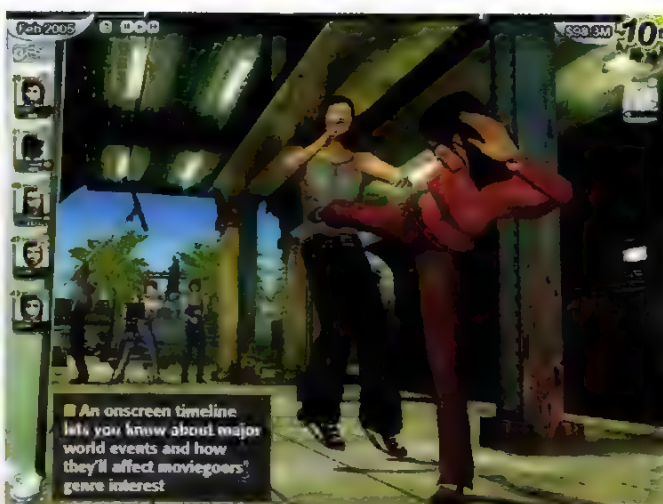
Age of Empires III is a solid, fun game with a lot going for it. On many fronts, though, the series is trading water or even moving backwards with this installment. Dedicated players online will doubtless get a lot of mileage out of it, though, and the pleasantly lengthy single-player campaign ain't half bad. Hopefully Ensemble will focus a little more on substance than style with its next game. —ADAM

## Second Opinion 8.75

Few games in recent months have inspired as many oohs and ahhs as the screenshots from this newest Age of Empires, at least around these parts. While those breathtaking scenes may be a mild exaggeration of the overall visual quality, it has to be said that this title is easily one of the most gorgeous PC games in recent memory. The appeal is aided by an excellent musical score and sound effects that pull you back in time with distant cannon blasts and musket fire. Gameplay has been simplified since AoE II, leaving a streamlined interface that should appeal to a wider margin of gamers, and disappoint a few of the hardcore. The only major innovation is the availability of shipping new materials to your colony from your Home City as you gain experience. It's a cool addition, but doesn't drastically change the game. Well balanced, beautiful, and easily accessible to any RTS faithful, Age of Empires III may not offer a lot of surprises, but it has the fundamentals pretty well covered. —MILLER

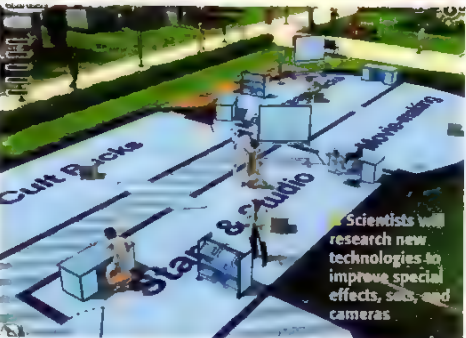
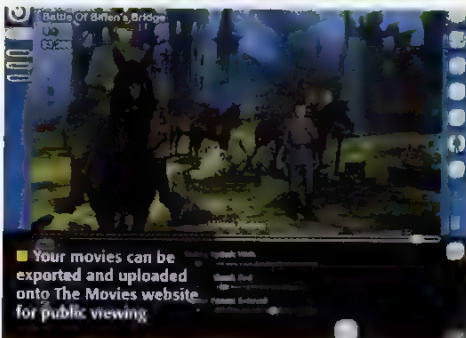


■ Gee, it sure would be nice if rifles couldn't shoot right through my city walls



**BOTTOM LINE** **8.75**

- > **Concept:** Become a movie mogul by building a studio, grooming your stars, and most enjoyable, creating films from scratch
- > **Graphics:** Fairly reminiscent of the best-selling Sims franchise in what I'm totally sure was a fluke accident
- > **Sound:** An ever-changing soundtrack takes you through the decades, with tunes that are reminiscent of a dozen film scores you almost remember
- > **Playability:** Extremely user-friendly controls and a brilliant movie creation tool are the real innovations
- > **Entertainment:** Immensely fun, creative, and flexible – there's a broad appeal here that should draw in the crowds
- > **Replay Value:** High



UNLIMITED ENABLED

PC

# The Movies

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER SIMULATION > **PUBLISHER** ACTMISION > **DEVELOPER** LIONHEAD STUDIOS  
 > **RELEASE** NOVEMBER 8 > **ESRB** T

## MOVE OVER, SPIELBERG

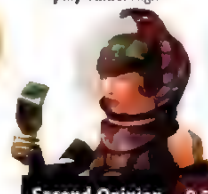
It's been a productive year for Lionhead Studios. With a couple of new and well-reviewed games already under its belt in the last few months, the release of *The Movies* takes things in an entirely new direction. Through an ingenious combination of building simulation and actual honest-to-goodness movie creation, the studio has struck gold in offering something that people have wanted to try for a long time. This is the ultimate game of pretend for Hollywood wannabes – a unique gaming sensation that I feel comfortable recommending with only minor reservations.

The game starts you right at the birth of the movie industry in the 1920s as a fledgling studio exec trying to get some silent movies off the ground. As the years pass you must guide your studio to greatness by managing a number of factors. Maintaining a clean and attractive lot, keeping your stars happy and out of rehab, picking scripts, and of course making a healthy profit all figure in to your success. Regularly scheduled awards shows let you know how you stack up with the competition, and you'll watch and participate as the movie industry grows from its infancy into the giant it becomes in later years.

All of the studio upkeep and sim-style people management is all for one end – making your own movies. And that's where the game really shines. Early on, all your scripts are arranged by your writers, and the earliest black and white silent films you create are generally pretty dull. All of that changes when you gain the ability to write your own scripts. While the studio management aspects of the game offer more objective-based gameplay, the movie making lets you do things you've never been able to do in a game before. Through a simplified and streamlined engine, you'll craft a film by piecing together scenes and charac-

ters into a unified whole. Hundreds of pre-made template scenes can each be tweaked in dozens of ways to set them apart. A vast array of costumes, props, sets, and camera angles change the look. Meanwhile, sliders let you alter the weather, the attitude of the characters, and the degree of action in the scene. Pick your actors from pre-made hires in your studio, or import cast members of your own creation from the flexible *Star Maker* program. Finish a script and it will go into shooting. Upon completion, you can even drag the movie into post production. Here you can make edits, add sound effects, music, subtitles, or even record your own dialogue through a microphone which will then be lip-synched by the actors.

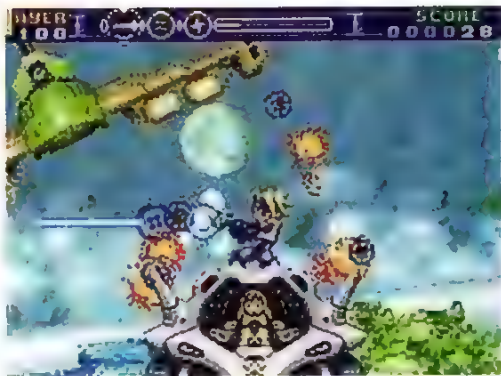
Crafting these short epics is simultaneously time-consuming and hilarious, offering a degree of creative freedom that interactive experiences rarely achieve. In fact, it is the incredible level of innovation that ultimately left me frustrated, as I found myself hungering for even more ways to adjust the onscreen action. Also, the studio management aspect of *The Movies* could be dull for the wrong player, so it's a good thing that a sandbox mode is included that eliminates most of the distractions beyond movie creation. You'll certainly notice the glass ceiling on your creative freedom in the game, but *The Movies* offers 500 percent more flexibility than anything that has come before. —MILLER



**Second Opinion** 8.5

There are a lot of power struggles in Hollywood, and wearing the hat of director and studio mogul can be like trying to walk in two different directions at the same time. Although *The Movies* does a good job of keeping the creative side of my brain happy with filming movies, while still making the day-to-day concerns of the studio engaging as well, the transition isn't seamless. I was disappointed that the time and effort I put into making my movies wasn't rewarded in the quality rating it was given. I could have a cell phone scene in a 1930s movie or a totally nonsensical plot, and it would fare the same as a film where I'd personally placed every prop. As aggravating as that was, the deep movie-making tools are a lot of fun, and the game as a whole is definitely worth playing. Although not without its problems, *The Movies* should have you seeing stars for hours and hours. —KATO





GAME BOY ADVANCE

## Gunstar Super Heroes

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION > **PUBLISHER** SEGA  
> **DEVELOPER** TREASURE > **RELEASE** OCTOBER 25 > **ESRB** E 10+

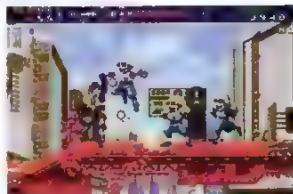
### WORTH THE WAIT

**G**unstar Super Heroes developer Treasure is widely lauded as one of the most proficient studios in the world when it comes to 2D action, and for good reason. This long-awaited sequel simply adds another gem to the company's lengthy list of fantastic titles, and is one of the most diverse and entertaining shooters to appear on any system. It's easy to make a repetitive, simple side-scroller, but Treasure has turned the genre into an art form. And for my money, Gunstar Super Heroes is about as good as it gets.

The true genius of this game is in its pacing and variety. Stages are long enough to satisfy without being frustrating, and no two are alike. Not just in the sense of throwing new enemies and imaginative bosses at you, either—these levels change all the rules of engagement on a regular basis. Whether you're piloting spaceships, riding on their wings, or running through more classic platforming maps, the control is tight and the challenges stiff. However, this title avoids the punishing sort of difficulty that can turn off gamers whose skills are less than elite—due to the unlimited-continue system, even average players can progress through the several campaigns.

Even so, there are still moments that feel cheap, especially in a couple of the boss battles. Collision detection is occasionally wonky, and the controls can be weird to get used to, especially since they switch around depending on the format of the level you're on. Regardless, this is a fine adventure with a lot of old-school charm.

—ADAM



**BOTTOM LINE** 8.75

> **Concept:** At long last, a follow-up to the classic side-scrolling Genesis shooter Gunstar Heroes

> **Graphics:** One of the best-looking titles to grace Nintendo's handheld, hands down

> **Sound:** Standard fare. Spastic techno and laser blasts

> **Playability:** Using the power-blasts can be a pain, but a stable framerate is worth a mint

> **Entertainment:** This is one of the best shooters around, regardless of the system

> **Replay Value:** Moderately High

### Second Opinion

It took me awhile to get into the new Gunstar game, but I steadily warmed up to this side-scrolling action title the more I played it. Those whose primary interest in Treasure games is the punishing difficulty shouldn't be disappointed—there's challenge to be had even on the lower difficulty settings. The short length of the game is still stuffed pretty full with various styles of gameplay, including even some brief space shooter segments. While I didn't enjoy this quite as much as my favorite Treasure game (Astro Boy), Gunstar does fix one of the biggest problems from that title—slowdown. Action is smooth and fast, bosses are mammoth, and the explosive fun serves notice that 2D action is far from dead. —MILLER



PSP

## Ghost in the Shell: Stand Alone Complex

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 6-PLAYER VIA AD HOC) > **PUBLISHER** BANDAI > **DEVELOPER** BANDAI > **RELEASE** OCTOBER 25 > **ESRB** T

### JUSTIFIED INFERIORITY COMPLEX

**I**f you're a super-secret government operative in the middle of a futuristic firefight, you have to be prepared for anything. Stand Alone Complex conveys this feeling perfectly: If you clear out a room, you have to be prepared for newer, stupider enemies to materialize right behind you. You have to prepare for your own inability to accurately line up a shot, and be ready to turn the game off in frustration at moment's notice. It's a tough, thankless job.

The strange thing is that while the gameplay is appalling, there are a few good ideas that just wound up being pointless. The ability to play as different Section 9 operatives is nice, but they're all equally bland. You'll often have a customizable Tachikoma partner by your side, but instead of decent buddy AI, they pretty much just get into trouble and steal your kills. The story is filled with all of the inscrutable political twists and turns worthy of the TV show (most of which play out in over-long events between chapters), but the catch is that you actually have to play the game to see them. Even the multiplayer, which could have been cool, is an utter waste of time.

There is a choking abundance of shoddy anime-related video games that feed on franchise devotees' ability to forgive grievous errors so long as their favorite pointy-haired heroes appear. Unfortunately, the only thing Stand Alone Complex fans will notice staying true to the series is their own pure, boiling rage at the incessant prattling of those damn Tachikomas. I want to strangle this game with my bare hands. —JOE

**BOTTOM LINE** 5.5

> **Concept:** Create a portable form of mental anguish

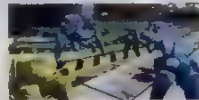
> **Graphics:** The visuals aren't bad, but after a few minutes you just won't want to look at this game anymore

> **Sound:** Please, make the Tachikomas shut up. The voice-work from the show's cast is solid otherwise

> **Playability:** The basic controls are well suited to the PSP, but aiming can be a pain unless you lock on to everything. Then it's just boring

> **Entertainment:** I've sat on benches that were more entertaining than this. Honest-to-goodness wooden benches!

> **Replay Value:** Low



**Second Opinion** 3.75

Thanks to Stand Alone Complex, I now know that I am capable of throwing a UMD exactly 63.8 feet. I have also learned that UMDs are quite resilient and can withstand most types of aggression—minus a direct hit with a hammer. There really is nothing in this game that works. Granted, it is possible to move your character, but even this simple function can be extremely frustrating. I can't remember the last time I've seen level designs this poor, nor can I recall a tag-along character that annoyed me so greatly. Targeting is difficult to begin with, but it becomes flat out criminal when enemies spawn around you. Ghost in the Shell still has great potential in video games, but for some reason, I just don't see it succeeding as an FPS on PSP. —REINER



NINTENDO DS

## Animal Crossing: Wild World

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER SIMULATION (UP TO 4-PLAYER VIA WIRELESS OR NINTENDO WI-FI) > **PUBLISHER** NINTENDO > **DEVELOPER** NINTENDO  
> **RELEASE** DECEMBER 5 > **ESRB** E

### AC 1.5

**N**intendo has never been misleading about the Animal Crossing DS entry. The game has always been discussed as more of an update than a sequel and, even though Wild World is true to its word, I'm a little bummed that more tweaks hadn't been made. Added items, new characters, and some new events are nice but predictable additions. I'm not knocking them, it's just that they're exactly what you expect and not much more.

What's great about this offering is that the few aggravating control issues in the GC title are largely taken care of in Wild World. The stylus makes selling items (now in bulk!), designing clothes, and writing letters a snap. In fact, the entire game can be played with the stylus alone, and a full control scheme allows the same functionality with just the face buttons.

The other major reason to look at this title, even for obsessive AC fans like myself, is the Wi-Fi enabled online. The friend code system keeps like-minded players in the same villages, as there is no lobby setup to roam through the world. You have to know the people running the villages you're visiting. It's a limiting way to do online, but I understand Nintendo's desire to keep this online arena prim and proper for those who care about naughty flags and inappropriate messages. —LISA

**BOTTOM LINE** 8.75

> **Concept:** Bring back the cult hit Animal Crossing in a handy, online, portable form

> **Graphics:** The art style is still poppy (if a bit more jagggy), but the top screen isn't used enough

> **Sound:** This title seems to revel in its 8-bit design scheme. A good thing depending on how bleeps and blurps make you feel

> **Playability:** On the fly switching between stylus and buttons is a good idea, although not executed perfectly (you have to double tap to switch and it just feels poky)

> **Entertainment:** Still capable of making normal people totally obsessive about collecting bugs and talking to rats, which means that it's good

> **Replay Value:** Moderately High

**Second Opinion** 8.25

It's hard to say something bad about Animal Crossing. It's kind of like boozing and throwing tomatoes at a Kindergarten play—it's just too cute and unique to disparage. Oh well, I'm going to do it anyway. Animal Crossing can be boring. In fact, if you're a particular breed of twitch gamer, it's going to be really boring. For everybody else, you'd be hard pressed to beat the charm, humor, and style of these cutesy characters living out their petty but surprisingly genuine-feeling lives. Give it a chance. You might be surprised. —MILLER

NINTENDO DS

# Mario Kart DS

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER RACING (UP TO 8-PLAYER VIA WIRELESS OR NINTENDO WI-FI CONNECTION) > **PUBLISHER** NINTENDO  
> **DEVELOPER** NINTENDO > **RELEASE** NOVEMBER 14 > **ESRB** E

## VOLUPTUOUS PLUMBER SEEKS GAMERS FOR GROUP ACTION



**BOTTOM LINE** 8.5

> **Concept:** A Mario Kart game for the fans, providing Wi-Fi multiplayer and favorite tracks from past titles  
> **Graphics:** It's not "true" 3D, but it's colorful, detailed, and moves out fast  
> **Sound:** A licensed soundtrack featuring some of the best bands in the crustpunk, grind, and death metal scenes—Psych! It's Nintendo music, folks  
> **Playability:** Nothing's really changed here, it's the same reliably fun gameplay you're used to  
> **Entertainment:** No one would accuse Mario Kart of being innovative, but it's good solid fun with great multiplayer features  
> **Replay Value:** High

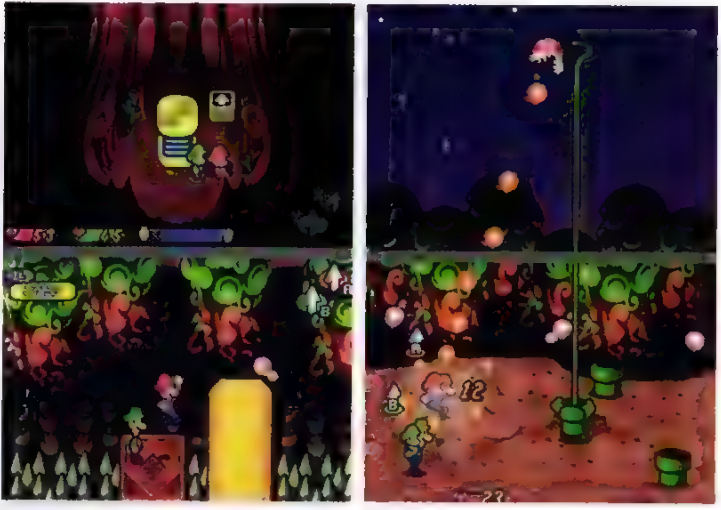
**Second Opinion** 7.5

This game is almost a museum collection, what with its retro tracks from previous Mario Kart titles. That being said, the classic fun of the series is definitely intact, even if the game itself is perpetually stuck in time. Although beating up on your friends is always fun, other racing games have spoiled me. I want to do more than just pop a shell at someone. At least the DS's bottom screen is put to good use with a handy map. As someone who's never fallen in love with this series, I can understand its basic appeal, but I feel that few besides than hardcore fans will get much more than a passing enjoyment out of it.—KATO

**M**ario Kart has held a special place in gamers' hearts since the 16-bit era, and has always delivered well-made variations on its simple, fun, and power-up laden racing formula. If you're the type that longs for the days of video game racing before vehicle physics came along and ruined everything, you're probably already a fan. Although this game certainly won't win over those who feel that it's become a bit dated over the years, Mario Kart DS goes out of its way to please the faithful, and adds a varied and excellent selection of multiplayer modes to boot.

While Mario Kart doesn't offer the high-speed thrills of games like *Midnight Club* and *Project Gotham*, it's an excellently crafted title for those that prefer a more sedate brand of driving. As always, the tracks are cleverly designed, the control is dead solid, and the action relies heavily on the use of power-ups and weapons. The DS functionality is minimal, but this is one of the first games where I found the real-time map on the bottom screen to be extremely useful. For example, when another player launches a squid attack that sprays the top screen with ink, it's actually possible to steer for a few moments by using the map display. Also, you can sometimes avoid a long-range shell attack by tracking it's movement below and taking evasive action.

As far as multiplayer, this game has you covered in spades. Whether via wireless LAN play or hooking up to Nintendo's Wi-Fi Internet network, you'll be able to go toe-to-toe with up to eight friends in your area or across the world. I really like that the LAN option allows you to play a stripped down version with only one cartridge. Even more exciting for the hardcore fans, the game features retooled tracks from the SNES, GBA, and GameCube versions. While I'd love to see the series move forward, this title is an excellent tribute to its heritage.—MATT



NINTENDO DS

# Mario & Luigi: Partners in Time

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ROLE-PLAYING GAME > **PUBLISHER** NINTENDO > **DEVELOPER** ALPHA DREAM  
> **RELEASE** NOVEMBER 28 > **ESRB** E

## BACK TO ADVENTURE!

It's always a good idea to beware of smooth talkers. People who rely solely on their charm to ingratiate themselves to others usually do so because of a severe deficiency in some other critical area. Thankfully, that is not the case with *Mario & Luigi: Partners in Time*; it has plenty of substance behind its witty dialogue and pretty exterior. Plus, if you take this charmer home for a romp, you can wake up free of any self-loathing and save yourself the hassle of getting tested for any diseases.

Did that cross the line? Sometimes it can be difficult to strike a decent balance between youth- and adult-oriented humor. Much like *Superstar Saga*, however, this sequel does a commendable job of using age-appropriate humor with plenty of winks in the direction of an older crowd (the Hammer Brothers now speak 133t and insist on "pwning n00bs"). Even the usually cute/annoying babies have their moments.

While this level of character carries *Partners in Time* a long way, the gameplay sometimes fails to hold up its end of the bargain. The general exploration is far more linear than the previous entry, and I can only put up with so many variations of the "switch to the babies, then hit this block, then switch back to the brothers" method of advancement. The timing-based battle system makes a triumphant return though, with the addition of new "Brothers items" that provide funny and effective ways to team up against foes.

Even though the story itself falls flat (if you're not *Chrono Trigger* or *Back to the Future*, stay an arm's length from time travel, please), *Partners in Time* is saved by its colorful cast, addictively simple battle mechanics, and magnetic appeal. It may not be the most emotionally complex RPG on the market, but it's solid entertainment with a quirky twist.—JOE



**BOTTOM LINE** 8.25

> **Concept:** The plumbers and their baby selves team up. It's time travel, duh!  
> **Graphics:** These are the most expressive 2D sprites I've seen, though the environments are a little repetitive sometimes  
> **Sound:** No matter how many times Mario and Luigi "talk," it's always hilarious  
> **Playability:** The timing for dodging enemy attacks is pretty touchy, but otherwise the controls are pleasantly manageable. I should also note that it doesn't use any DS-specific features apart from the two screens  
> **Entertainment:** The clever writing and funny moments keep coming long after the gameplay has exhausted its tricks  
> **Replay Value:** Moderate

**Second Opinion** 8.75

Call me a super geek for this series—I just recently started replaying *Superstar Saga*. It's the holiday season, and I'm starting again a GBA game from forever ago. But, while playing *Partners in Time*, I realized that I could probably upgrade, because this one is nearly as good. While it seems simple on the surface, there are great depths to mine in *Partners'* storytelling and combat engine (which adds new moves at exactly the right time). I miss some of the exploration and adult-friendly kid humor from the first, but really, this is a grown-up RPG hiding inside the skin of a classic and beloved children's character.—LISA



PSP

# Grand Theft Auto: Liberty City Stories

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION/RACING (UP TO 6-PLAYER VIA AD HOC) > **PUBLISHER** ROCKSTAR GAMES > **DEVELOPER** ROCKSTAR LEEDS  
> **RELEASE** OCTOBER 25 > **ESRB** M



## YOU CAN GO HOME AGAIN

**H**ere it is folks, the game that will likely make a large group of you actually buy a PSP. Rockstar is careful with its flagship franchise, and this title reflects the effort that it puts into all its GTA games. This is not a half-assed port; this is a full-on game chock full of all the unlockables, side-missions, and over-the-top action you've come to expect from Rockstar.

The first thing you'll notice is how damn good this game looks. The fact that the team at Rockstar Leeds managed to pack all this content onto one UMD and have it running as good as it does is a technical marvel. Loads are minimal, averaging around five to six seconds between cutscenes. Pop-up is largely nonexistent, and the texturing and reflective effects are quite nice. Despite the PSP's troublesome analog stick, car control is dead solid and fun. Out of the car the gun targeting is...well, as good as it is in San Andreas (it uses a similar scheme) — which is to say, serviceable but still less than ideal. What's more, the wireless multiplayer is a great new facet of the game, bringing many popular FPS modes into GTA's open urban environment, an important first for the series.

The storyline brings us back into the seedy

world of Liberty City, which is still rife with gang warfare and political corruption (a union strike provides the setting for the large-scale conflicts in the game). Toni Cipiani is another grim Rockstar protagonist, although he finds himself with some darkly comic foils like J.D. O'Toole, a perverted club owner (who we eventually see in an adult diaper — don't ask) and his mother, a woman so unsupportive of her son that she actually orders a hit on Toni!

The only thing that holds it back from hitting the heights of Vice City and San Andreas is the fact that, for the first time, this is a return to the past for Grand Theft Auto. While I love being back in Liberty City, which is even better now with motorcycles and some more elaborate boating sequences, the game doesn't deliver that sense of surprise and exploration that the past two titles did with their all-new cities and time periods. In addition, some of the missions do give one a sensation of déjà vu. Still, this is a minor complaint. I, for one, am happy to be back home where it all began, and find myself falling in love with Liberty City all over again. The addition of a robust multiplayer mode makes this homecoming all the sweeter. —**MATT**



■ During one level, you'll do some challenging track shooting from a speeding boat

**BOTTOM LINE** 9.25

> **Concept:** A full-on sequel to GTA III, brought to spectacular life on the PSP

> **Graphics:** Easily better looking than GTA III, with great reflections and weather effects. The cutscenes lack the cinematic flair of San Andreas's though

> **Sound:** A great, eclectic soundtrack that's less gimmicky than the last two; I really love the excellent world music and jungle stations. Talk radio is predictably hilarious

> **Playability:** Despite the lack of a second analog and fewer buttons, this plays as well as any GTA title

> **Entertainment:** This is the blockbuster title that PSP fans have been waiting for

> **Replay Value:** High



**Second Opinion** 9.5

As many people have so politely pointed out, my reaction to having a fully featured Grand Theft Auto in the palm of my hands is similar to that of having an actual child. I can't stop talking about it, I freak out whenever people get close to it, and I find myself crawling out of bed late at night to check up on it. Revisiting the old stomping grounds in Liberty City certainly recalled a number of fond memories, but never once did I relive them. Everything in this game, right down to the placement of hidden packages, is new. No sacrifices were made to the gameplay, either. If anything, it plays even better than GTA III did. Tack on multiplayer and you'll likely spend more time with this game than you did any other GTA. The only area where the game comes up a bit short is in often animation-less story sequences. It may be on a handheld system, but fans should consider this the next installment in the illustrious GTA franchise. —**REINER**

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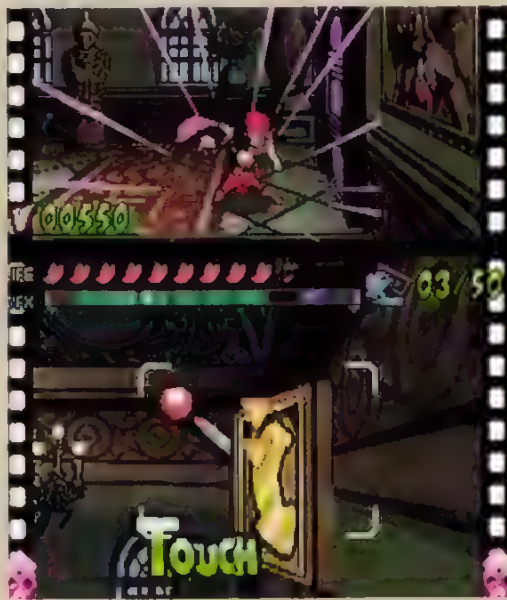
**MATURE** 17+  
**M** Blood and Gore  
Strong Language  
Intense Violence  
ESRB CONTENT RATING www.esrb.org



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NINTENDO DS

## Viewtiful Joe Double Trouble!

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION > **PUBLISHER** CAPCOM  
> **DEVELOPER** CLOVER STUDIOS > **RELEASE** NOVEMBER 29 > **ESRB** T

### JOE'S GROWING PAINS

I'm a big fan of the first two Viewtiful Joe games, although this month has seen the character star in two new titles that both disappoint me. I certainly enjoy Viewtiful Joe Double Trouble a heck of a lot more than Red Hot Rumble, but Joe's new side-scrolling adventure is still not without its flaws.

Joe's DS debut plays much like his first two console games, and replicates their look perfectly. However, this game doesn't take place in Movie Land—it's set in the real world, and Joe can only use his powers when a special VFX camera is aimed at him, which means that there is a giant reticle on the screen at all times. While annoying, new VFX powers are a bigger flaw—they all rely on the touchscreen. The problem is that using them means that you have to take one hand away from the controls, slowing down the fast-paced action that the series is known for. The new powers (Scratch, Split, and Slide) certainly continue the series' pedigree of innovating in the side-scrolling genre, but they simply don't work well enough to feel natural, as the powers in the console games do. And because the action is slower, the game doesn't feature the blistering difficulty the series is also known for. In short, Viewtiful Joe's first DS adventure is by no means a bad game, simply one that falls a bit short of the excellence displayed by the franchise so far.

—JEREMY

**BOTTOM LINE** 7.5

> **Concept:** Viewtiful Joe travels to the DS and the "real world" and learns some new VFX tricks along the way

> **Graphics:** The unique cel-shaded look of the console games has been replicated perfectly on the DS

> **Sound:** Little of the funny voice work from the console games has survived the transition to the handheld

> **Playability:** The touch screen powers force you to remove your hand from the face buttons and slows down the action

> **Entertainment:** The creativity of the series is here in full force, but the touch screen features are definitely a mixed bag

> **Replay Value:** Moderate

**Second Opinion** 7.75

Boasting most of the side-scrolling goodness that made the first two games in the series such a success, Double Trouble is a worthy handheld addition to the franchise. Barely while the basic look and style is intact, the gameplay has migrated from a combat focus over to having many more obstacle-based puzzles. The subsequent slowdown in gameplay pace hurts the overall experience. The touch screen super powers are a mixed bag. I was also annoyed that the game constantly had a little camera viewfinder overlay onscreen. The exaggerated action, colorful visuals, and ridiculous story are all still present and accounted for—they're just not as exciting this time.

—MILLER

# HANDHELD QUICKIES

## NBA 06

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER SPORTS (2-PLAYER VIA AD HOC OR INFRASTRUCTURE) > **PUBLISHER** 989 SPORTS  
> **DEVELOPER** 989 SPORTS > **RELEASE** OCTOBER 4 > **ESRB** E



NBA 06 has the grace of an erratic air ball. Passing is inconsistent to the point that I'm surprised that I didn't bean an innocent fan with the ball. While it's hilarious to watch a defender bite on every pump fake that you make, having your player pull up his dribble upon the subtlest contact with a defender is no laughing matter. Players also suffer from sudden blindness as they completely ignore drives to the net. The action on the court reeks of Shaq's game-worn underwear, but NBA 06 does have some thrills tucked off to the side in the forms of an amusing dodgeball minigame, a slick three-point contest, and tons of collectible sports cards. All of the pieces are coming together. It just needs to get its butt back into training camp to iron out the fundamentals of the game.—REINER

**BOTTOM LINE** 6.5

## SSX On Tour

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION/SPORTS (UP TO 4-PLAYER VIA AD HOC) > **PUBLISHER** EA SPORTS BIG > **DEVELOPER** EA MONTREAL  
> **RELEASE** OCTOBER 18 > **ESRB** E

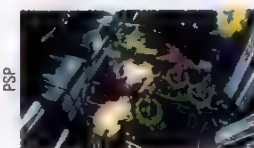


The first thing that will strike you about SSX On Tour is how good it looks. It's a step behind the console versions, but it's damn impressive and even better for how fast it moves. Thankfully, this graphical excellence doesn't come with the price of huge load times. However, like many PSP games, it also suffers a bit from the "little brother" syndrome. It's almost the same thing, but with just a little less. I really didn't feel compelled by the career mode, which eschews SSX 3's awesome open mountain design for a menu-based approach, making the game feel like just a series of disconnected modes and challenges, with no sense of real exploration. Also, echoing my feelings about SSX on Xbox, the series was clearly designed for the PS2's four shoulder buttons. Even more disappointing, you'll find that all the tracks here are repeats of courses from SSX 3.—MATT

**BOTTOM LINE** 7.75

## X-Men Legends II: Rise of Apocalypse

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION/RPG (UP TO 4-PLAYER VIA AD HOC OR INFRASTRUCTURE) > **PUBLISHER** ACTIVISION  
> **DEVELOPER** RAVEN > **RELEASE** OCTOBER 18 > **ESRB** T

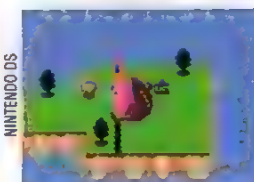


Pay attention. I don't have a lot of space here, and this is important. Take three of your PSP-wielding friends and each of you find a copy of this game. Wirelessly connect by ad hoc if you're all close by, or find a wireless location and go online. Play through the mammoth multiplayer-enabled campaign, and don't forget to check out the extra characters or the new flashback comic book-based missions that you couldn't get in the console release. Revel in the pixel-perfect CG and destructive, slowdown-free gameplay. You can thank me later.—MILLER

**BOTTOM LINE** 9

## Dig Dug: Digging Strike

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION (2-PLAYER VIA WIRELESS) > **PUBLISHER** NAMCO > **DEVELOPER** NAMCO > **RELEASE** OCTOBER 18 > **ESRB** E

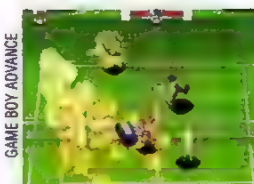


Dig Dug: Digging Strike is exactly the same game as classic Dig Dug, although in this DS edition, your goal is make surface cracks with your mining that are large enough to drop monster-infested landmasses into the ocean. This puzzle element is actually a lot deeper and more clever than I expected, but that doesn't change the fact that the core of the game is over 20 years old. The classic Dig Dug formula is still fun to a degree, but not enough that I need a new version with minor changes. Although I do give Namco points for not shoehorning in pointless touch screen features simply because the game is for DS. I certainly don't need to touch the little guy's drill.—JEREMY

**BOTTOM LINE** 6.75

## Mario Tennis: Power Tour

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER SPORTS (UP TO 4-PLAYER VIA LINK CABLE) > **PUBLISHER** NINTENDO > **DEVELOPER** CAMELOT > **RELEASE** DECEMBER 5 > **ESRB** E

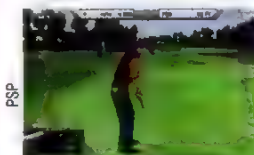


Not quite the same as Mario Power Tennis for the GameCube, Power Tour puts you in the shoes of a young tennis player going through the ranks of a prestigious tennis academy. Of course, in the end you'll earn a spot in Peach's tournament, but the game focuses more on pure tennis than the wacky courts of the GameCube tennis title. Minigames can be played to build up skill and Power Shots can be earned, but this game mainly relies on the standard video game tactic of storming the net. Tracking down lobs, however, can be tricky as the camera scrolls up and down, making it hard to judge where a lob is going to land behind you. Power Tour is a solid title, but it's not as tight as Bjorn Borg's headband.—KATO

**BOTTOM LINE** 7.75

## Tiger Woods PGA Tour 06

> **STYLE** 1 TO 4-PLAYER SPORTS (2-PLAYER VIA AD HOC) > **PUBLISHER** EA SPORTS > **DEVELOPER** EA CANADA > **RELEASE** SEPTEMBER 27 > **ESRB** E



This Tiger takes to the links less than a year after the golfer's first outing on the PSP, and although the two games aren't worlds apart from each other, analog putting is implemented in this version. Unfortunately, the game's fundamental problems with the handheld's analog stick continue. Between the sensitivity of the analog stick and the fact that the stroke tips you get don't always match up with your shot power, you're gonna inexplicably shank a few balls. I know that some like the new analog putting while others don't, so let that be your guide when deciding between this game and the edition put out this last May. Given that Tiger can't always get a good handle on his shots, I'd say that Hot Shots still rules the greens of the PSP.—KATO

**BOTTOM LINE** 7.5

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## INSTANT GAMING GRATIFICATION

The screenshot shows the Game Informer website layout. At the top, there's a navigation bar with 'HOME', 'NEWS', 'REVIEWS', 'GUIDES', 'GAMES', 'MAGAZINE', 'FORUMS', and 'STORE'. Below this is a 'Welcome Back, Bill!' message and a promotional banner for 'PLAY HUNDREDS OF THE GREATEST VIDEO GAMES, RIGHT FROM YOUR PC. JUST \$14.95/MONTH.' The main content area is divided into several sections: 'Latest headlines' with a list of articles, 'top story' featuring 'Rock On Harmonix: The Daniel Sussman interview', 'features' with a 'MAGAZINE COUNTDOWN' section, 'store' with 'download game instructions', and 'media' with 'Gun Hands-On Preview, Modes, And Screenshots'. A vertical sidebar on the left contains 'VIDEO GAMES', 'PC GAMES', 'INTERNET', 'HANDHELD', 'STRATEGIES', and 'GAMES'. A vertical sidebar on the right contains 'THE GAMERS PICK', 'intel', 'store', and 'download game instructions'.

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# CHARTS

An In-Depth Listing Of The Best Selling Games

## TOP 20

Listings Based Upon NPD Data For September 2005 Based On Units Sold

### 1 MADDEN NFL 06 (PS2)



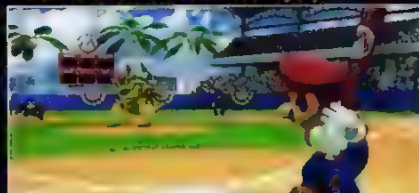
This game should really be called Madden NFL 06: A Heartwarming Underdog Story. This unknown, spirited scrapper managed to persevere against overwhelming odds and hang on to the number one spot. Keep dreaming and never give up hope, Madden NFL 06! Chalk one up for the little guy.

### 2 NBA LIVE 06 (PS2)



The last time we went to a basketball game, we accidentally ordered a tall, frosty cup of nacho cheese, drank it all, and then passed out in the restroom (right under the whizzin' trough). We won't reveal what was done to us as we slept; suffice it to say that foam "We're #1" fingers still give us nightmares.

### 3 MARIO SUPERSTAR BASEBALL (GC)



How can one guy with a moustache (Mario) inspire a love of baseball, and another guy with a moustache (Billy Dee Williams) inspire nothing but unrestrained animal passion? Lando, you can start up an illegal mining operation on us anytime.

### 4 MADDEN NFL 06 (XBOX)



Did you know that in Europe, and pretty much the rest of the world, "football" means soccer? You might say that makes us wrong, but in England they call French fries "chips" and flashlights "torches," so take those foreign devils with a grain of salt.

### 5 RAINBOW SIX: LOCKDOWN (XBOX)



Despite what the title would lead you to believe, there are no Yetis in this game. Oh, wait... it says "Lockdown," not "Yeti Jamboree." Sometimes we get those two mixed up.

Rank	Title	L. Mo.	System	Score	Release	Price
1	Madden NFL 06	1	PS2	8	08-05	\$48
2	NBA Live 06	N/A	PS2	7.5	09-05	\$49
3	Mario Superstar Baseball	N/A	GC	7	09-05	\$50
4	Madden NFL 06	2	XBOX	9	08-05	\$48
5	Rainbow Six: Lockdown	N/A	XBOX	8.5	09-05	\$49
6	NASCAR 06: Total Team Control	N/A	PS2	8.25	09-05	\$49
7	Tiger Woods PGA Tour 06	N/A	PS2	8.28	09-05	\$49
8	WWE Day of Reckoning 2	N/A	GC	7.25	09-05	\$50
9	Nintendogs: Chihuahua & Friends	12	DS	8	08-05	\$30
10	Burnout Revenge	N/A	XBOX	9.25	09-05	\$50
11	NBA Live 06	N/A	XBOX	7.5	09-05	\$49
12	Madden NFL 06	N/A	PSP	8.5	09-05	\$49
13	Nintendogs: Labrador Retriever & Friends	9	DS	8	08-05	\$30
14	X-Men Legends II: Rise of Apocalypse	N/A	PS2	9	09-05	\$50
15	X-Men Legends II: Rise of Apocalypse	N/A	XBOX	9	09-05	\$50
16	Nintendogs: Dachshund & Friends	5	DS	8	09-05	\$30
17	NCAA Football 06	3	PS2	8.5	07-05	\$50
18	Burnout Revenge	N/A	PS2	9.25	09-05	\$50
19	Pokémon Emerald	6	GBA	7.75	04-05	\$35
20	Star Wars: Battlefront	8	PS2	8	09-04	\$20

## TOP 10 JAPAN

Rank	Title	System
1	Fancom Mini: Super Mario Bros.	GBA
2	Tamagotchi No PuchiPuchi Omisechi	DS
3	Urban Reign	PS2
4	Dynasty Warriors 5: Xtreme Legends	PS2
5	DS Training for Adults: Work Your Brain	DS
6	Winning Eleven 9: Ubiquitous Evolution	PSP
7	Gentle Brain Exercises	DS
8	Gully Gear XX #Reload	PS2
9	Super Robot Taisen J	GBA
10	Gundam Battle Tactics	PSP



## TOP 10 GI

Rank	Title	L. Mo.	System
1	Call of Duty 2	N/A	Multi
2	Grand Theft Auto: Liberty City Stories	N/A	PSP
3	Gun	N/A	Multi
4	Castlevania: Dawn of Sorrow	1	DS
5	Soul Calibur III	N/A	PS2
6	Condemned: Criminal Origins	N/A	360
7	The Movies	N/A	PC
8	X-Men Legends II: Rise of Apocalypse	5	Multi
9	Fire Emblem: Path of Radiance	2	GC
10	Dragon Quest VIII	N/A	PS2



The Staff's Favorite Picks

## TOP 10 PC

Rank	Title	L. Mo.	Price
1	The Sims 2 Nightlife	N/A	\$34
2	World Of Warcraft	2	\$48
3	RollerCoaster Tycoon 3	3	\$26
4	Battlefield 2	1	\$47
5	Guild Wars	4	\$48
6	Dungeon Siege 2	5	\$47
7	The Sims Deluxe	8	\$18
8	The Sims 2	6	\$48
9	EverQuest: Depths Of Darkholow	N/A	\$29
10	Warhammer 40,000: Dawn Of War - Winter Assault	N/A	\$29



Based On Monthly Units Sold





## Gun

### Making The Wild West Your Playground



Tom Hess, Game Designer

#### THE RIGHT WEAPON FOR THE JOB

In *Gun* you will discover very quickly that just about everyone carries a weapon, so choosing your weapon becomes even more important. The rifle is an all-around best friend and great in almost all situations. Your pistol is good for up close when you need to get a bunch of rounds off quickly. When you come across a large group of enemies, use your Quickdraw to dispose of them. The shotgun comes in handy in close quarters and against melee attackers. Aim in the middle of two guys and take advantage of the shotgun's spread. The scoped rifle is great for taking out enemies that aren't even aware of your presence yet. Stay far away and aim for the head. The bow and arrow is a great weapon for stealth and pure enjoyment. Use the arrow to take out unsuspecting enemies in silence so that more enemies don't get alerted. Use your fire arrow to ignite the enemy and watch him burn. Finally, lodge a dynamite arrow into an enemy and watch as he runs for his life before the fuse finally burns down.

Ted Brown, Game Designer

#### BRING OUT THE TOOTHPICK

It ain't something you want to put in your teeth, if that's what you're wondering. It's your Bowie knife, which you can use to get close to your enemies and, you know, gut them like a fish. Tapping the melee attack button makes Colton lunge forward and take a swipe at the nearest bad guy. A few more taps and your opponent is usually on the ground, bleeding like a stuck pig. This is an incredibly powerful technique on Easy and Normal. On Hard and Insane, you'll usually have to follow up with some pistol shots to finish them off before they hurt you back. Better yet, grab them and execute them.



#### HUG SOMEONE YOU HATE

Hostages will radically extend your life expectancy. In harder difficulty levels, grabbing a hostage and shooting up his buddies is crucial to your success. But don't hold on to them too long, or they'll break free. And if they know you're after them, you'll have to stun them first, with either a melee hit or a gun shot.

Use this technique to grab those bounties that are shooting at you, so you can subdue them.

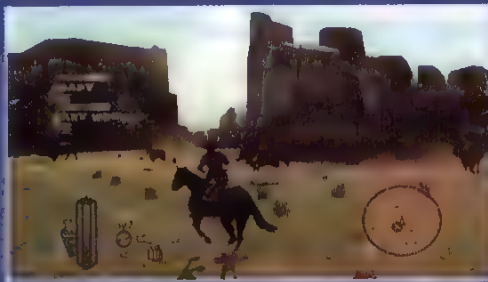
#### THE ORIGINAL BOOM STICK

Dynamite and gasoline bombs are like grenades, but with style. Throw one at a group of fellas, then Quickdraw and blast it when it's close. You can even toss them while in Quickdraw, just be sure to not shoot it too quickly. Dynamite can be done after it's lit, so you can put several in a big pile to blow up. There's a big crate of the stuff by Piper Lake if you're near there.

Jacob Biegel, Game Designer

#### PREPARING COLTON FOR BATTLE

Through various side missions that are scattered throughout the world of *Gun*, Colton has the opportunity to increase a broad range of his abilities and skills. As you progress through the story and explore more of the world, Colton will come upon a variety of side missions. The Deputy, Bounty Hunter, and Pony Express side missions are offered when you reach Dodge. After completing the Bridge and escorting the whores to Empire, Colton will be offered additional Bounties and Pony Express missions, as well as the Federal Marshal missions offered in Empire. Hunting missions from the Indian Hunter near Piper Lake, and Ranch Hand jobs from the rancher at Hecht Ranch. By completing these side missions Colton will receive stat upgrades for his Gunhand, Quickdraw, Melee Attack, and Horse skills. These upgrades are crucial to your progression through the story, as Colton will find that many opponents and challenges will have their difficulty exacerbated if these upgrades are not obtained beforehand.



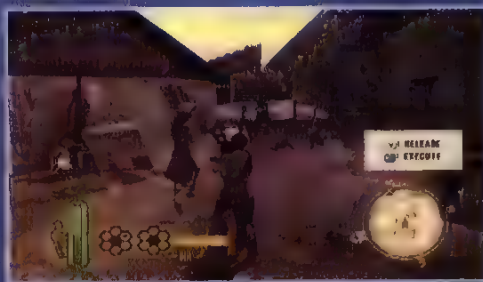
Colton will also be able to purchase upgrades for his weapons from the shopkeepers located in Empire and Dodge as well as the Indian trader located near Piper Lake. Using your hard-earned cash you can purchase upgrades for Colton's weapons that increase their shot and reload rate, as well as their damage. At these stores you can also buy additional upgrades like an extra health slot that permanently increases Colton's health. If at anytime during the game you feel weak in comparison to your opponents, complete more side missions for stat upgrades and money, and then use the money to improve your weapons and equipment at the store.

Thai Tran, Game Designer

#### START HORSING AROUND

Throughout the game, there will be numerous opportunities to saddle up and ride a horse. Maximizing use of a horse is key to your success, and this means integrating it into your combat strategies. One of the biggest advantages is during battle, as it shields you from taking damage. While in battle on your trusty steed, try your best to keep moving, as enemies have a hard

time hitting you while you are moving quickly. Horses don't last forever though, so just before your horse dies, do your best to time it so you are close to an unmounted horse. In doing so, you are able to quickly dismount and mount a healthy horse. You can also find cover and rest, and your horse will slowly recover from combat damage.



Daryl Kimoto, Game Designer

#### COMBAT ESSENTIALS AND QUICKDRAW

Adapting to different combat situations is vital to Colton's survival. While on foot, you'll find that there are three key strategies you can use to minimize risk and effectively eliminate anyone who stands in your way: cover, strafing, and Quickdraw. Using cover should be your first tactic if it is available. Whether it's crouching behind a barrel or a wall, you can catch an enemy by surprise if you take aim, stand up, and shoot. Unfortunately there will be cases where there is little or no cover, and this is when constant movement is key. Strafing (moving left or right while keeping your aim on target) is an important tactic to use when out in the open. You are always going to be harder to hit as a moving target. Keep that in mind when facing some of the tougher enemies.

Then there is Quickdraw. Often a lifesaver in hairy situations, it is most effective when dealing with multiple targets. Pinned down behind cover by several enemies? Pop up, go into Quickdraw, and shoot for each of their heads, switching between targets with a quick flick to the left or right. It's important to remember that your Quickdraw meter goes down as you use it, but can be quickly refilled by turning a regular shootout into a bloody masterpiece. Simply killing an enemy restores a bit of Quickdraw, but a triple pistol headshot combo will restore a lot more. Throw in some dynamite for an explosive dismemberment combo and you're ready to Quickdraw again. Every scenario has different combo chains you can master, but with enough practice, you'll be playing with some serious style.

Stephen Okasaki, Game Designer

#### USING YOUR HORSE AS A WEAPON

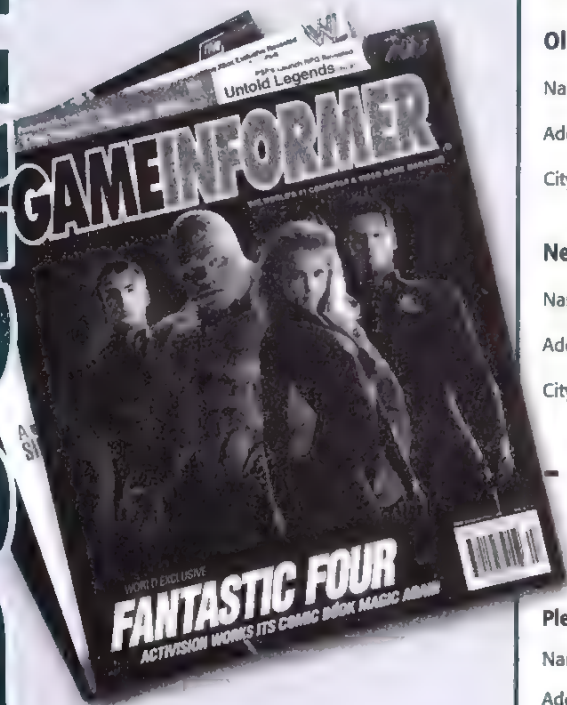
One of the most powerful weapons in the game is the horse slide attack. It does a lot more damage than just simply running a guy over, usually resulting in an instant kill, and is especially good for taking out multiple enemies at once. To make your horse slide attack even more deadly, try rotating your horse while sliding; this will make your profile larger which makes it easy to take out multiple enemies with one slide. To increase your chances of hitting enemies with a slide, try charging your horse at them before the slide, as this will give your enemies less time to avoid your attack. Be careful, as charging too often will exhaust your horse and eventually kill it.

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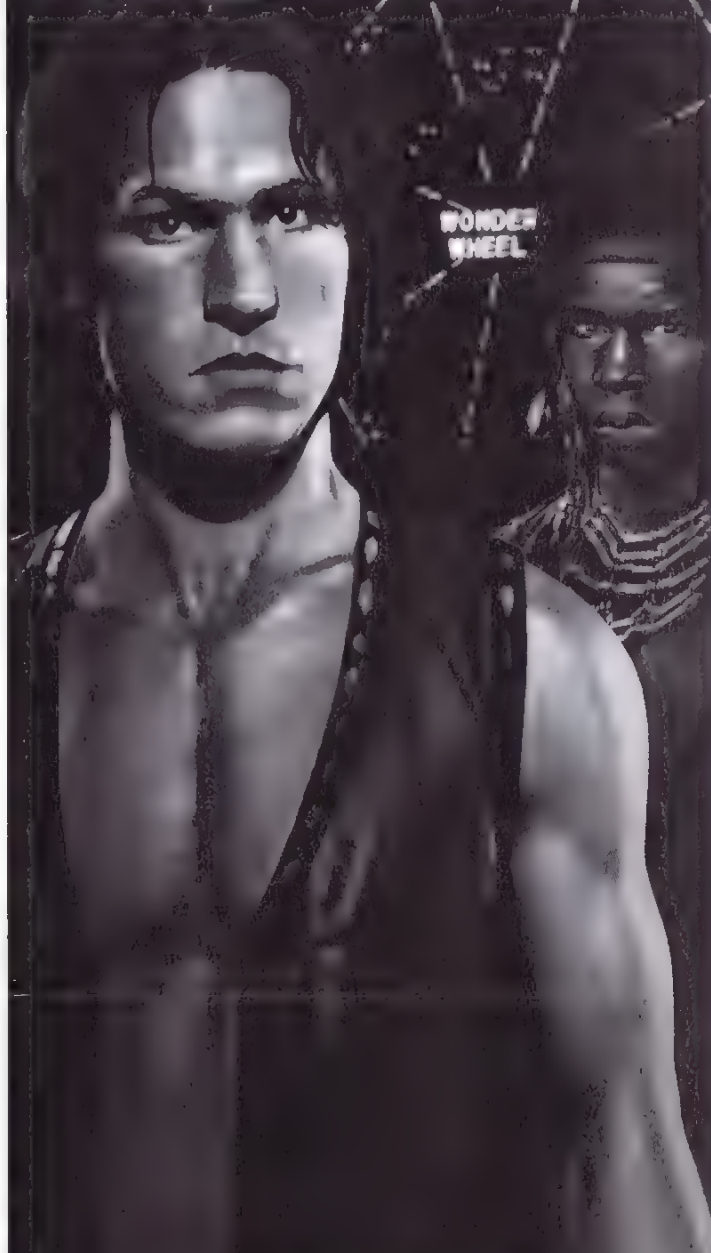
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**Attention All Cheaters!**

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](mailto:secretaccess@gameinformer.com) for a chance to be featured here and win a very special prize!

**MULTI-SYSTEM****Marvel Nemesis: Rise of the Imperfects**

> PLAYSTATION 2, XBOX, GAMECUBE

Enter the Options menu to find the Cheats screen.

**Elektra Swimsuit Model Card** – THEHAND

**Solara Swimsuit Model Card** – REIKO

**Storm Swimsuit Model Card** – MONROE

**Unlock All Fantastic Four Comics** – SAVAGELAND

**Unlock All Tomorrow People Comics** – NZONE

**Ultimate Spider-Man**

> PLAYSTATION 2, XBOX, GAMECUBE

While playing the game, pause and enter the Options menu. Then go into the Controller Set-Up window. While there, enter the following codes.

**All Characters** – Right, Down, Right, Down, Left, Up, Left, Right

**All Comics** – Left, (x2), Right, Left, Up, Left (x2), Down

**All Concept Art** – Down (x3), Up, Down, Up, Left (x2)

**All Landmarks** – Up, Right, Down, Left, Down, Up, Right, Left

**X-Men Legends 2: Rise of Apocalypse**

> PLAYSTATION 2, XBOX, GAMECUBE

Input these codes after you enter the Review menu.

**Unlock All Cinematics** – Left, Right (x2), Left, Down (x2), Left, Start

**Unlock All Comics** – Right, Left (x2), Right, Up (x2), Right, Start

**PLAYSTATION 2****Mortal Kombat: Shaolin Monks**

At the main menu, hold down L2 while you enter the following codes.

**Unlock Scorpion In Story Mode** – □, Up, L1, R1, Left, Right, □

**Unlock Sub-Zero In Story Mode** – □, Down, Up, L1 (x2), Up, □

**XBOX****Far Cry Instincts**

During gameplay, pause and enter the Cheat menu. Note that these codes are case-sensitive.

**100 Health Points** – GiveMeHealth

**All Maps** – The WorldsMine

**Infinite Adrenaline** – VitruvianRush

**Infinite Ammo** – BulletsofHell

**Mortal Kombat: Shaolin Monks**

At the main menu, hold down the White button while you enter the following codes.

**Unlock Scorpion In Story Mode** – X, Up, L, R, Left, Right, X

**Unlock Sub-Zero In Story Mode** – X, Down, Up, L (x2), Up, X

**The Suffering: Ties That Bind**

All of the following codes can be entered while in the game without pausing. For each of them, you'll need to be holding down L+R+X while you enter the rest of the code sequence.

**All Weapons/Items** – Down, Up, Down, Left, Right, Left, A, Up, Left, Down, Right, Up, Right, Down, Left, A, Down (x3), A (x2)

**Black And White Mode** – Up, A, Left, A, Down, A, Right, A

**Full Flashlight** – Up, Left, Down, Right, Up, Right, Down, Left, A

**Increase Evil Alignment** – Left (x2), Down, Up

**Increase Good Alignment** – Up (x2), Right, Up

**Invulnerability** – Down, Up, Down, Up

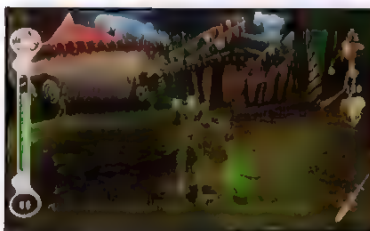
**Molotov Cocktails** – Down (x3), Up (x3)

**Restock Grenades** – Right (x3), Left (x3)

**Restore Health** – Down (x3), A, Up (x2), Down, Up, A

"GI Droid"

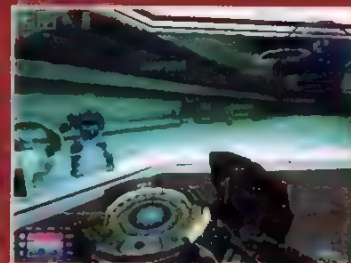
(location unknown – last seen with your mom)

**PSP****MediEvil Resurrection**

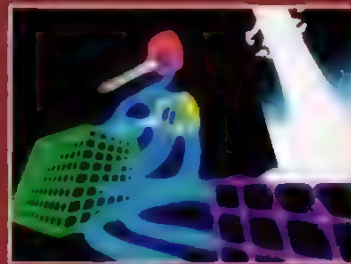
**Unlock Invincibility and All Weapons Cheat Menu** – While playing, pause the game and hold down R. Enter Down, Up, □, △ (x2), ○, Down, Up, □, △. A new category will appear on the pause menu screen. Enter it to toggle either code on or off.

**Mod World****HAL-LIFE 2  
Dystopia**

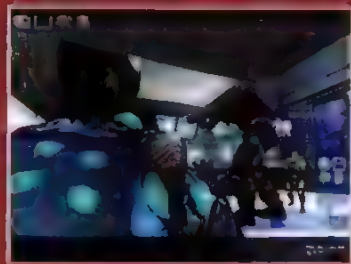
<http://www.half-life-2.com>



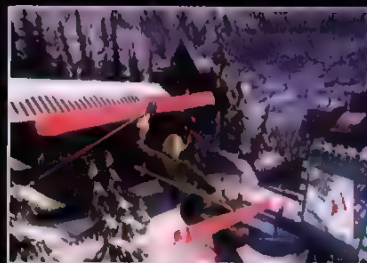
Cyberpunk has been a wacky, negotiating genre in recent years. Where are the mad Blade Runners; what happened to the genre that brought us *Neuromancer* and *Snow Crash*? Gaming is a prime candidate to receive further work in the genre, but with a rare few exceptions, even our favorite pastime hasn't seen much in the last few years. Fortunately, a dedicated crew of mostly Australian coders has brought us relief from the drought in the form of *Dystopia*.



This total conversion of *Half-Life 2* is multiplayer-only, but it's easily more fun than any number of uninspired retail products. The two teams alternate between offense and defense, similar to *Unreal Tournament's* Assault mode, but the twist is that infiltrating the cyber-world is just as mission-critical as blowing enemies up in the real world. Ideally, your team will split between "heavies" with big guns and bomb armor, various other combat specialties (snipers, etc.) and hackers.



Hackers literally jack into the cyber-world from certain access points, and can impact the real world – open doors, disable security, etc. – from the virtual one. Of course, their physical bodies stay in the real world, defenseless, while they hack. Protecting your hackers, obviously, is a priority. While it may not be impossible to complete your objectives without their services, it's definitely a lot harder. Go download the mod from the homepage above to see it all for yourself.

**Code of the Month****SSX On Tour**

The cold months are upon us, but who are we to watch the weather? Brave the frigid temperatures and hit the slopes with a little help from these fresh little snow bunny codes. What's that? We're not actually going outside, but just sitting on our couch? Be quiet and put in the codes, smart-aleck. You'll find the cheat entry screen comfortably nestled in the Extras menu.

**All Clothing** – FLYTHREADS

**All Levels** – BACKSTAGE PASS

**All Movies** – THEBIGPICTURE

**Extra Cash** – LOOTSNOOT

**Infinite Boost** – ZOOMJUICE

**Monster Tricks** – JACKALOPESTYLE

**Snowball Fight** – LETSPARTY

**Stat Boost** – POWERPLAY

**Unlock Characters** – ROADIEROUNDUP

**Unlock Conrad** – BIGPARTYTIME

**Unlock Mitch Koobski** – MOREPUNTHANONE

**Unlock Nigel** – THREEISACROWD

**Unlock Ski Patrol Character** – FOURSOME

Ned Johnston

Seattle, WA

# Age of Empires III



## The How-To On Establishing Your New Colony

By Lead Designer Greg Street And Assistant Lead Designer Jerome Jones



### GATHERING RESOURCES

You can make herds run toward your Town Center or in the direction you want by attacking from one side. Dead animals rot quickly, losing their Food, so it's generally not advisable to kill all the animals in an area before gathering from them. Instead, pick them off one at a time, then move on to the next one.

Farming and Plantations are very slow ways to gather resources. Don't use them unless you have exhausted other nearby resources, especially hunting and mining, or are trapped in your town.

Market improvements such as Hunting Dogs generally don't pay for themselves fast enough until you have 10 gatherers on a resource. The Mill and Plantation upgrades on the other hand, are usually worth getting quickly.

Your Town Center should almost never be idle. To be competitive, you generally need to always have Settlers or Coureurs queued up. Having 70-plus villagers at the end of a long game is not uncommon.

When working with Fishing Boats, remember that fish gather quickly but expire. Whales gather more slowly but never expire. This means that once you have exhausted all the fish in the area, task your Fishing Boats on the whales. Most improvements that affect fishing also affect whaling.

If you have a civilization with an economic bonus like British Manors or Dutch Banks, you probably don't want to attempt to leverage your bonus until the Colonial Age. Most players do better by just pumping villagers in the Discovery Age, and switching over to gathering more Wood for Manors or Banks once they reach the second Age.

Learn which maps have free livestock that you can collect, such as New England, Saguenay, Great Lakes, Patagonia, and Texas. On these maps, you almost always want to build a Livestock Pen to benefit

from the livestock's faster fattening.

Because of Mills and Plantations, Food and Coin are essentially infinite. This means that defending areas that are a good source of Wood can become crucial in the late game, especially on maps with fewer forests, such as Texas, Sonora, and Great Plains.

### DEPLOYING AN ARMY

You can select all buildings of one type (like Barracks) by double-clicking them, and you can then right-click to assign a single gather point.

Don't neglect the use of Culverins. These cannons are deadly against other artillery. If you have a vulnerable Fort or Town Center, stationing a few Culverins near it can take out incoming Mortars or other heavy cannon. It is usually a good idea to build an Artillery Foundry near a Fort, since the Fort can't train artillery.

Formations move at the speed of the slowest unit in the group. So you may lose the speed of your Hussars if you select them with slower Halberdiers or Falconets. Selecting the cavalry separately will get them to their destination faster. Of course, sometimes you may want them to stay near the artillery to defend them.

Native Americans and warships don't cost population. If you are at your max population, or just can't afford any more Houses, consider adding them to your army.

Even though you can queue five soldiers at a time, you generally will want to have at least two Barracks or Stables in order to make soldiers fast enough. Also, don't forget that when using the five-at-a-time queue, you can always add additional units to the queue just before they are finished training. This is particularly useful for expensive units like Mortars.

Ranged infantry (like Musketeers or Longbowmen) are weakest at destroying buildings. Cavalry are slightly better, but take extra damage from building attacks. Hand infantry (such as Pikemen or Halberdiers), Grenadiers and all cannon (except the Organ Gun and Culverin) are great against buildings.

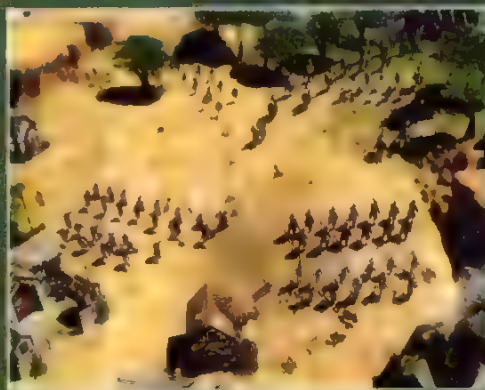
Although you can't train soldiers in the Discovery Age, you can attack faster in Colonial Age if you have a military building already constructed. Barracks and Stables can't be constructed in Discovery, but

Native Trading Posts and the Russian Blockhouse can. On Texas, everyone starts with a Barracks or Blockhouse.

Building a Navy, even on maps that are mostly land like Saguenay can still be beneficial. Galleons can transport (or train) soldiers into enemy lands. The Monitor warship has a special attack with a range of 100, allowing you to bombard far from the ocean.

### CHOOSING TARGETS

Foundations take much greater damage than completed buildings. If you come upon enemy villagers building a building, attack the foundations, not the villagers. If there are enemy soldiers nearby, try and kill the soldiers first, then the foundation.



Covered, Fort, Outpost, and Factory Wagons are very weak. Don't try to construct a building, even a powerful one such as a Fort, in the middle of a battle. Wait until you control the area. If you see enemy wagons, it's often worth it to chase them down and destroy them, denying the enemy such a powerful building. When you have large groups of ranged units selected, don't target them all on the same enemy. They will do so much damage that much of it is wasted (we call this overkill). Select the army in three or smaller groups, and assign them each a different target.

If you don't mess with Advanced Formations much, you may still want to use Melee attack for Musketeers when attacking artillery. Artillery have huge range resistance, so Musketeers will usually die before they can shoot a Falconet down. (You can turn on the Advanced Formation UI through the UI Options menu.)

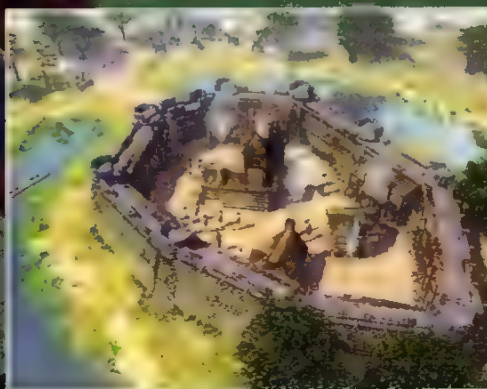
The Explorer can drop any infantry or cavalry with a single Crack Shot in the Industrial Age. This can be particularly useful against expensive units like German Doppelsoldners or French Cuirassiers.

### COLONY DEFENSE

Settlers, and especially French Coureurs, can sometimes aid in defense of your colony, especially if they have the Blunderbuss and Great Coat improvements, and particularly the awesome Home City Card Pioneers. Their relatively weak attack is compensated by the fact that you often have so many of them.

While the Town Center can be great for early defense, only 10 villagers contribute towards its attack. If you have gatherers on the far side of a colony who are not immediately threatened, you may want to leave them out gathering once you have 10 villagers in your Town Center.

Minutemen lose hit points over time, but not their attack. They are generally weak on offense, but are great on defense. It is usually a mistake to muster Minutemen and send them far across





the map to fight.

You can't always completely protect a colony with walls, but you can sometimes funnel the enemy to attack from a particular direction. At the very least, you'll slow them down and get advanced warning that a force is about to hit you.

Whenever your Town Center is threatened, immediately try and locate your Explorer, ransoming him or asking allies to rescue him if necessary. Only the Explorer can build a new Town Center. If you've lost all your TCs, your Explorer can't be rescued, and you have no Covered Wagons in the Home City (and a plan for Home City Shipments such as an Outpost), you are probably out of the game.

#### HOME CITY CARDS

The 300 Food Card may feel like an obvious decision over a Two Settler Card, but consider that the Settlers will have several seconds to gather that can really pay for itself early in the game. Sending a Settler Card early is almost always a good idea.

You can change the Home City Shipments arrival location to any Town Center, Outpost, Blockhouse, or Fort. This makes it easy to get armies deployed to the front more quickly. You can also change the location where naval Shipments arrive to any Dock.

It can be exciting to send soldier Shipments all the time, but don't neglect Cards which can improve gather rates or unit hit points. Sending Crates can be one of the fastest ways to get up in Age.

Even if you are focusing on economy or defense, it's often a good idea to send at least one Shipment of soldiers over early. Defensive buildings are much more powerful with even a few soldiers to back them up. Ranged units are generally the best at defending.

If you go to the imperial Age (fifth Age), most of your unit Shipments will be renewed and you can send them again. You may want to wait to go Imperial until you've exhausted your Shipments though.

If you have recently hit the Age Up button, you may want to delay sending a Shipment or two until you have reached the next Age and its more powerful Cards. You can always send the earlier Cards later in the game, if it lasts that long.

You can only earn 30,000 Experience Points in one game, so there is no real benefit to delaying the end of a game just to "farm" more Experience. In fact, because of the post-game Experience awards, you are usually better off just starting a new game than you are trying to prolong an existing one.

Every civilization has a few unusual Cards, so choose carefully when you get to pick a new one. Getting Balloons can be a lot of fun – they allow your Explorer to train an invulnerable recon



unit anywhere on the map every few minutes. The Spanish have a Card to increase War Dog limits, the Ottomans can increase the size of resource Crates or allow Janissaries to build, and the Portuguese have a Card to send over two more Explorers!

#### WORKING WITH TEAMS

You generally always need one player on your team focusing on cavalry. Otherwise, you'll have almost no way to stop artillery.

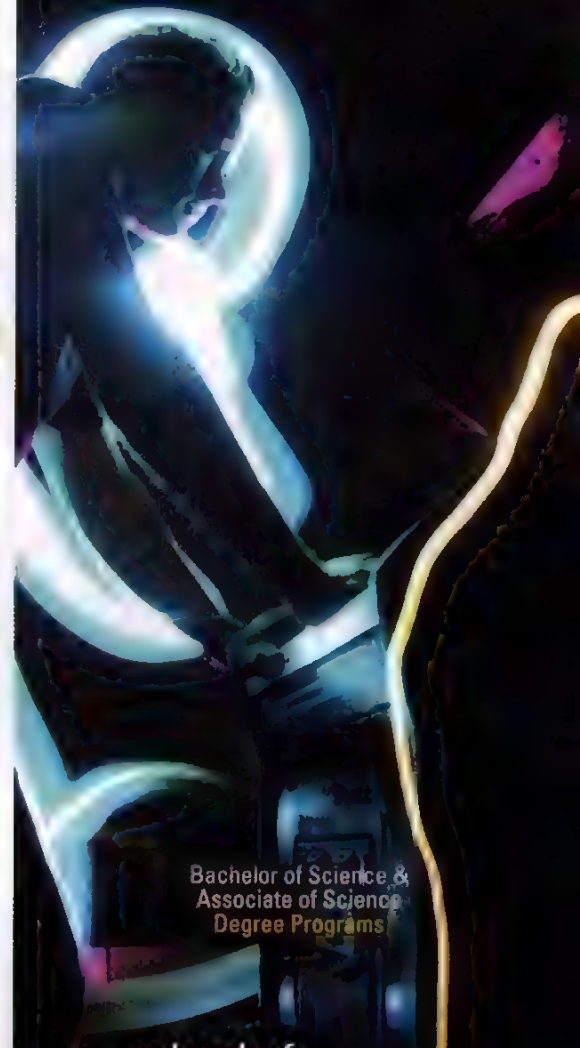
Tributing resources to other players can get a weak player into the game faster, or help an ally recover from an attack faster. Just remember that there is a slight penalty assessed on tributing others. You cannot tribute enemies.

If you and your ally keep your Explorers together, you can take on more powerful Treasure guardians early in the game. If you both use your Sharpshooter attack, you can take on even four tough guardians and still get the Treasure. You can take turns claiming each Treasure.

Team Cards of the same type don't stack. Once I send "Faster Houses," you can't send it. This is one of the reasons that teams of different civilizations are usually more versatile than teams of all the same civilization.

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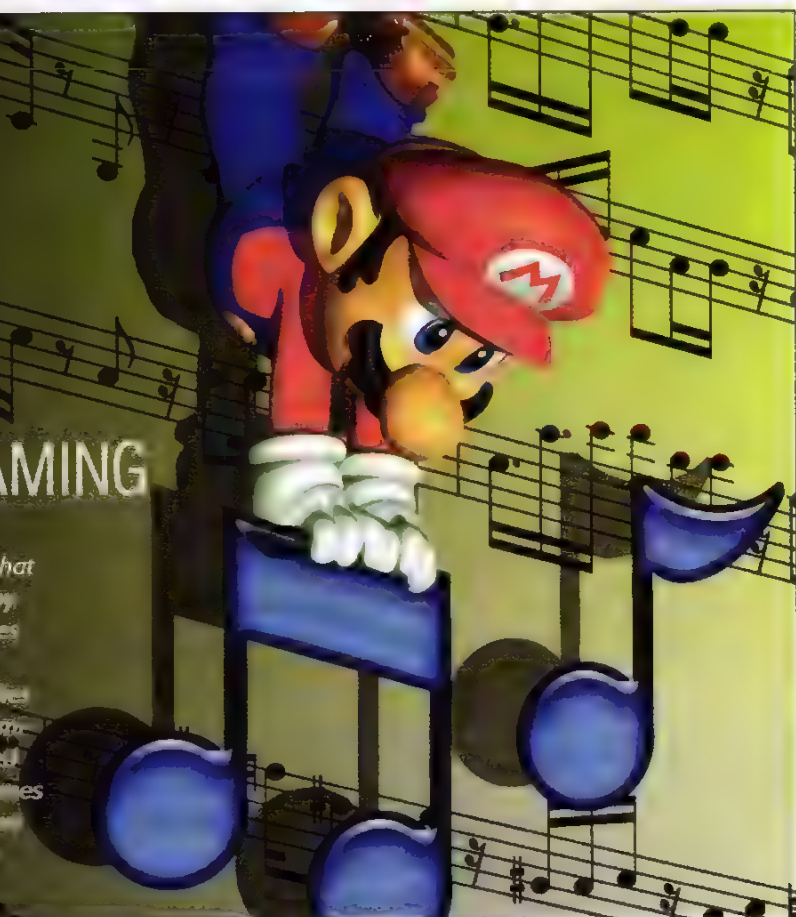
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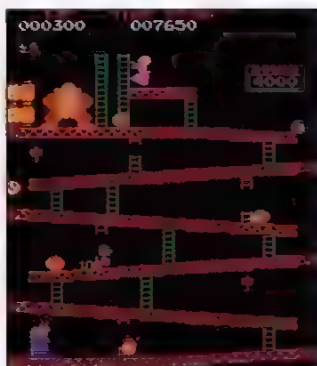
# MELODIC ROOTS

## THE INFANCY OF MUSIC IN GAMING

*"You know the trouble with real life is there's no danger music. This dilemma, presented by Jim Carrey's character in The Cable Guy, is one that gamers are all too familiar with. Thankfully, it's a problem that our hobby has had the solution to for years, as immersive soundtracks and melodies have populated games almost from the beginning. But games haven't always been so aurally pleasing. Not so long ago, the simplest of melodies had to entice the player, and creators of the music had a mountain of limitations on their form of expression. But from time to time limits can breed excellence, and it's perhaps for that reason that some of those early themes are now the most memorable to the gaming public. With that in mind, we took a look back at the birth of music in video games to find out all we could about exactly where those iconic themes came from."*



The earliest home consoles had dramatic technological limits on their functionality. The most popular one that also featured what might pass as tunes was, of course, the Atari 2600. First sold in 1977, the 2600 was a marvel of gaming hardware, even though it took programmers several years to find workarounds for all its strange eccentricities. Whole games couldn't exceed 4K for the entire code, and audio was limited to only two sound voices. Whatever small amount of sound data that could be included was outputted through two mono channels. Due to these constraints, some of the earliest Atari titles had some impressive sound effect work, but most lacked what anyone would definitively call music. This would change as the years passed, particularly as arcade machines began to offer recognizable melodies and rhythms, and 2600 programmers followed suit. One notable melody came from the godfather of games himself, Shigeru Miyamoto. In his first great success, Donkey Kong, he used a small electronic keyboard to program the familiar intro theme to the original arcade game. By 1983, games like Pitfall were available that included the memorable Tarzan-like yell as you swung on the vines, and others like the space shooter Vanguard had full-on scores of sorts.



■ Donkey Kong Arcade

of its own. The system allowed for a full five-voice polyphony. Two pulse waves could create both melody and backup, and an old-style triangle wave usually served as the bass.

At the same time, a noise channel was most commonly used for drums. Often, only these four were used, but later on a fifth sampling channel, normally reserved for sound effects, began to be used for heavier drum sounds and even a vague approximation of the human voice. With these tools in hand, developers had all sorts of sound possibilities to explore, and all of a sudden game credits could include an actual composer.

Of these, the most influential is certainly Koji Kondo. A native of Osaka, Japan, Kondo had studied classical music and several different instruments before being recruited by Nintendo. In the space of just a few months, he crafted several of the pieces

that are now inseparable from the world's aural perception of video games. The Super Mario theme was his first and perhaps greatest contribution, but his score to The Legend of Zelda was certainly no less powerful. Surprisingly, it might very well have been studies of classical baroque counterpoint that did the most to establish the familiar style of early game music,

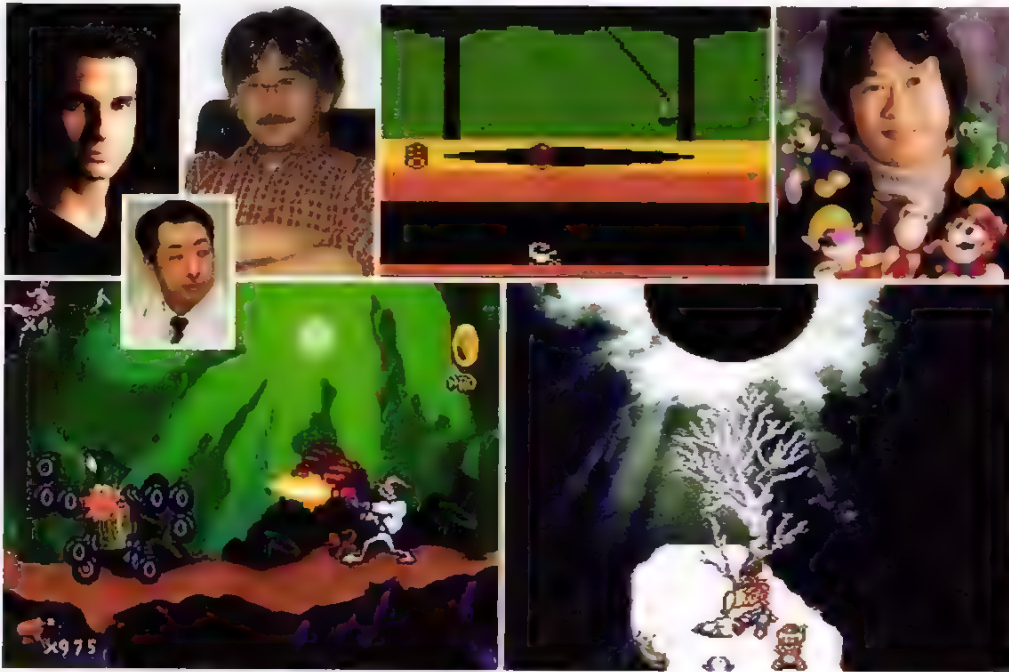
as you could frequently hear the interplay of two or more independent melodies that formed together into harmony. Simultaneously, strong Latin and jazz influences are almost constantly present in his work, offering the bouncy and toe-tapping quality that so many others would emulate. More than anything, however, Kondo's own unique style was all about the melody. Since hardware limitations meant an almost incessant degree of repetition, his ability to craft themes that you could actually enjoy hearing over and over again was nothing short of genius.

Of no less widespread impact are the musical compositions of Nobuo Uematsu. Uematsu, a pianist from a young age, is largely a self-taught composer. He began his musical career creating compositions for commercials until he was hired by Square Soft in 1986. It was a tenure that would continue until 2004, when Uematsu left to start his own business, even though he is still composing extensively for his old employer. In those first years, he contributed his talents to what was thought might be the last product from the nearly bankrupt Square — Final Fantasy. The NES game,

which released in 1987 in Japan and three years later in the States, was a phenomenal success, and ensured the company's survival. Even then, a great deal of the credit was heaped on Uematsu's epic score, which was filled with orchestral flair and sweeping melodies akin to the best film soundtracks of the 20th century. A majority of his career has revolved around his continuing work on the Final Fantasy brand,



■ Nintendo Entertainment System



■ Clockwise from top left: Tommy Tallarico, Nobuo Uematsu, Pitfall, Shigeru Miyamoto, Chrono Trigger, Earthworm Jim, Inset: Koji Kondo

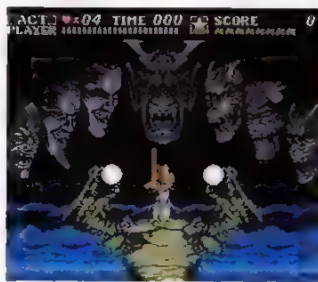
even as his efforts have begun to receive more mainstream attention. His music continues to be a force to legitimize game music the world over, as recent years have seen performances of his scores by some of the finest international symphonies.

Even while the NES was establishing itself as the definitive home console, the best-selling computer model of all time was carving out its own niche, both financially and musically. The Commodore 64 had a tremendously long run for a home computer system, first going on sale in 1982 and not being discontinued until 1993. While the sound hardware for the C64 was not necessarily more powerful than the Nintendo, many would argue that it was significantly more flexible. A special sound chip called the Sound Interface Device (SID) had only three independently programmable voices, but each one had an eight octave range and could produce any of several different sound wave types. Talented composers like Rob Hubbard and Martin Galway made names for themselves on the C64 by turning the limited options into stunningly catchy tunes. Both composers worked on dozens of titles for the system. In addition to his compositions, Galway was the first to figure out how to use sampled sound in C64 games. Meanwhile, after countless titles for the Commodore, Hubbard would eventually move on and become the first person solely devoted to working on sound and music at Electronic Arts. Later years would find the C64 sound emulated extensively in techno and other electronica, and the unique wave patterns of the SID are cult underground favorites even today.

While several other home consoles and computers made significant contributions to the earliest days of game music, the next big shift would come with the arrival of 16-bit systems. The Sega Megadrive (known as the Genesis in the US) would be the first mainstream unit to utilize true frequency modulation, which gave composers the flexibility to create much more realistic instrument sounds. Of at least equal

importance was the successor to the NES – the Super Nintendo. Offering a whopping eight channels of sound, it was the first time that many game composers were able to craft the truly complex pieces they'd hoped for all along. In addition to the numerous available voices, the SNES allowed for a broad range of effects on the sound, including filters and delays, further enhancing the musical variety. For audiophiles, the greatest aspect of the SNES was its stereo output, which dramatically enhanced the musical listening experience and would remain the industry standard until surround sound began its reign in recent years.

With its increased potential, composers like Uematsu were able to expand their musical vision from catchy melodies into stirring and involved digital compositions. Other artists offered similar levels of exceptional talent on the SNES. Uematsu's friend Yasunori Mitsuda crafted some unforgettable music for Chrono Trigger. Another standout was Yozo Koshiro's ActRaiser



■ ActRaiser

music. The incredibly elaborate score by Koshiro was the clear highlight of an already excellent title, and the composer was one of the first to orchestrate his score and have it performed live by a symphony orchestra. More western composers also started to get in on the game during the 16-bit era as well. Robin Beanland, Eveline Fischer, and David Wise helped to put Rareware at the forefront of game development on the SNES, particularly with their amusing and high quality soundtrack to Donkey Kong Country. This timeframe also saw the entry of several highly prolific composers that continue working in the industry today, such as Tommy Tallarico, whose early work included the hilarious score for Earthworm Jim.

The childhood of game music came to an effective end a few years later with the arrival of the first PlayStation. While systems like the TurboGrafx-16 had utilized a CD format years before, it was Sony's PlayStation that was the first to offer what could truly be considered CD-quality sound. Twenty-four channels of sound had the potential to totally



■ Commodore 64 computer

# Double-Click

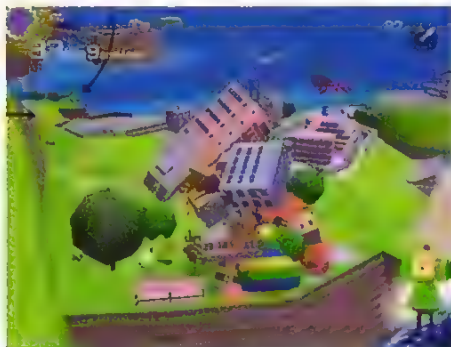
## Your Bersebellum



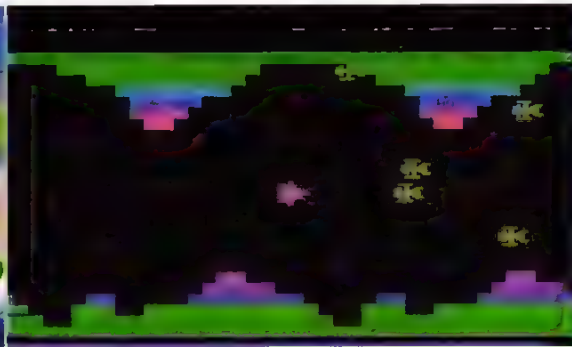
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■ Katamari Damacy



■ Vanguard

envelop the game player, and for the first time licensed music could be included without seriously compromising its audio integrity. With this step, the bleeps and bloops of early games began to disappear, to make room for more genuine-sounding original instruments. Eventually, as the years passed, synthesized orchestras would often be replaced with recordings by real orchestras, and the lines between "game music" and "real music" would begin to blur.

Many of today's game soundtracks rival summer blockbuster films, as is the case with Martin O'Donnell's stunning Halo score. Others, like the Tony Hawk series, have intricate soundtracks of licensed tunes that help to immerse players in the culture of the game. Still others, like 2004's Katamari Damacy, have such an eclectic and strange musical palette as to set the game completely apart. While this continued push for deeper

and higher quality music is certainly a welcome thing, many gamers hold a fond place in their hearts for the early classic style pioneered in the '80s. The most telling aspect of

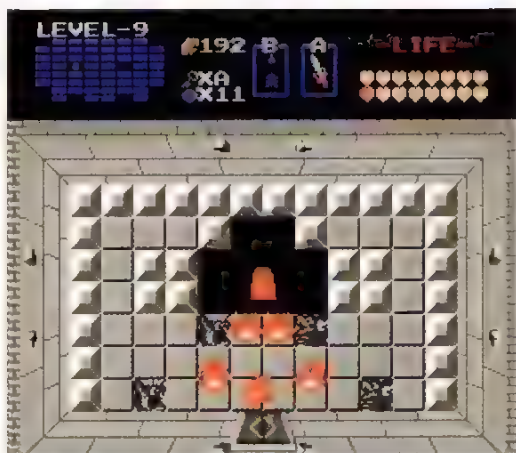
this fondness is the degree to which many remember those earliest melodies. Perhaps it's because they spark memories of childhood. More likely it's because they were repeated ad nauseam into willing ears for one playthrough after another. But it's also possible that at least part of the appeal comes from a certain complexity and musical strength born out of intense limitations and constraints. Those early electronic music pioneers were constantly striving to push their way out of a box way too small for their ideas. And while the box would eventually stretch, it was those first struggles that offered up some of the most iconic and memorable melodies, and set a benchmark for those that would follow. ■ ■ ■

### An Enduring Legacy

*While the style of early game music may be long gone, its influence continues to this day. A thriving sub-culture has grown out of reworking the melodies and rhythms of classic game music into a new form. Modern bands like The Minibosses and The Advantage constantly meld game tunes into their music. Meanwhile, websites like OverClocked Remix (ocremix.org) include a wealth of composers who use the original music of games as a stepping stone to form their own unique creations. The last few years have also seen the rise of orchestral performances of video game music. 2004 saw the premier of Dear Friends, a concert series highlighting the music of Final Fantasy. More recently, industry veterans Tommy Tallarico and Jack Wall introduced the Video Games Live tour, which included a wide spread of musical arrangements from across the history of interactive entertainment.*



■ Clockwise from top left: Sega Genesis, Chrono Trigger, Final Fantasy, Super Mario Bros., The Legend of Zelda



## GREATEST GAME OF ALL TIME

By Chris De Meo



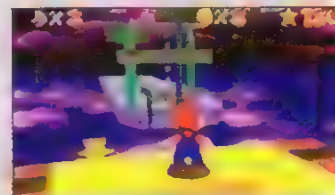
### SUPER MARIO 64

> FORMAT N64  
> PUBLISHER NINTENDO

Super Mario 64 was the first 3D game I ever played. I was eight years old and I had just gotten my N64; Mario came with it for free. I'd always been a Mario fan, and was dying to know what the newest one had in store for me. I was blown away. From the moment the familiar green pipe came out of the sand I was in for the ride of my life. The graphics simply blew me away. As I approached the castle, Mario became the first and only male video game character whose behind I didn't mind having stuck in front of me for so much time. This was simply because getting to see my good old 2D friend Mario given some depth was like a dream come true (Yes, I am a complete and utter Mario FREAK). Looking over the bridge into the moat, I was astounded by how great the water looked, compared to the solid blue I was used to seeing on my SNES. The Lakitu in his little cloud with the camera was explaining how to use the camera function, and I began to experiment with Mario's new moves. Originally there was pretty much just jump, duck, and run. Now he could do backflips, side jumps, triple jumps, butt-slam jumps, etc. All this was great, but the game really kicked off once I got into the castle. As always, Peach is missing, and I had to find her. But the novel part was having to jump in and out of paintings (which, when done, showed a great water-ripple effect) to go to different worlds to collect little yellow stars. There was so much to do, so many worlds to see, and the only thing I felt was missing were the good old fireballs, but for that one missing thing there were hundreds of new things to make up for it. Mario could now change (or lose) his hat, giving him the power to fly, become invisible, or become metal. I would have given the game a solid 10 out of 10. The graphics (at that time) were the

best to be found, the gameplay was innovative, the story was typical yet engrossing, and the sound just sucked you right into the Mushroom Kingdom. The combination of all the above, along with just having Mario himself, a somewhat nonlinear gaming experience,

and an overall impossible-to-stop-playing game made it the greatest video game experience of my blossoming childhood, and even now, eight years later, I still put it in from time to time. That, in my opinion, is what makes it the greatest game of all time.



## THIS MONTH IN GAMING HISTORY

December of 1982 saw Atari hit the peak number of employees (10,000) in its thriving but ultimately bloated company. The turn of the new year saw the beginnings of drastic layoffs across the board, which continued until July of 1984, when Atari had only 200 employees left. The fall of the company that had dominated the industry for those few years left behind a wicked backlash that would guide the entire industry to be creatively and economically conservative for years.





N64

## MACE: THE DARK AGE

> STYLE 1 OR 2-PLAYER FIGHTING > PUBLISHER MIDWAY > DEVELOPER MIDWAY > RELEASE 1997

**C**ertain genres, like racing games, don't hold up over time, simply because advances in technology bring improvements that are hard to let go of once you're used to them.

Fighting games are another genre affected by this phenomenon, which explains why games like Mace: The Dark Age seem so bad in retrospect.

While Mace is certainly not a terrible game, it feels slow and clunky in comparison to modern fighters and the combat engine is overly simple — there are only three attack buttons and an evade key, and it's hard to overcome the lack of the double-tap evade from modern fighters. Also, the character designs simply feel uninspired — there is the Viking guy, the samurai, the knight, and the like. But regardless, Mace has aged better than many early 3D fighters, and one can see a similarity between it and the recent 3D Mortal Kombat titles. You certainly have no reason to play Mace instead of those games, but revisiting Midway's earlier forays into 3D fighting has some historical interest if nothing else.



PSONE

## RAYSTORM

> STYLE 1 OR 2-PLAYER SHOOTER > PUBLISHER WORKING DESIGNS > DEVELOPER SPAZ > RELEASE 1997

**H**ere's a title that's maintained its value pretty well over the years, but certainly hasn't become a true classic by any means. The space shooter formula is an old one with only minor variations. That difference in Raystorm is a lock-on attack that allows destruction of multiple enemies in one fell swoop. Between your ship's impressive weaponry and the steady flow of assaulting forces, there's a lot of explosive action onscreen at any one time. Add in a second player, and you're pretty much flying blind in that crazy, fun sort of way. Multiple difficulty settings, some varied but unsurprising levels, and a couple of different primary ship designs all lump this into a pretty familiar category of games. That doesn't make it bad, however, and shooter fans who have never tried this lesser-known franchise should definitely give it a look.



SNES

## BATTLETOADS & DOUBLE DRAGON: THE ULTIMATE TEAM

> STYLE 1 OR 2-PLAYER ACTION > PUBLISHER TRADEWEST > DEVELOPER RARE > RELEASE 1993

**I**f you're playing a side-scrolling brawler, you probably aren't expecting a great deal of innovation. You just want to punch some dudes in the face. Even though Battletoads & Double Dragon does provide that thrill on some level, it also fills you with you with the unfortunate desire to punch yourself in the face as well. The starring characters (three Toads and two Lee brothers) technically have different moves, but no matter whom you choose, you just mash the attack button until you get ganged up on and die. The game does feature a bunch of characters from both franchises as enemies, but let's face it: Abobo and Robo Man aren't exactly legendary gaming villains. The whole affair is frustrating on many of the same levels that Rare's original Battletoads is, especially with its terrible hit detection and cheap kills, except it just doesn't have any charm. It's a mix of embarrassing early '90s cool and dodgy controls that fails to elicit even a kind of pleasant nostalgia as you vacillate between bored and cheesed-off.







# GAMEOVER

"Snake? Snake!? Snaaaaaaaake!"

## VIDEO GAME TRIVIA

Video games are growing up, and their protagonists are getting older. We now know how Solid Snake will look when he hits his 50s, but we can't help but wonder if other classic characters will age as gracefully. Answer the following questions to reveal how your favorite heroes will hold up when they finally make it over the hill.

**1 Cereals are the only true way to measure fame. Which of the following characters has never been a part of this complete breakfast?**

- A. Mario
- B. Donkey Kong
- C. Captain N
- D. Pac-Man



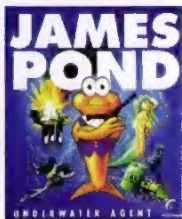
**2 The name Cid is clearly making a comeback lately, but it will always be known for its place in the Final Fantasy series. This character art of Cid is taken from which entry in the franchise?**

- A. Final Fantasy IV
- B. Final Fantasy V
- C. Final Fantasy VI
- D. Final Fantasy Tactics



**3 Not all secret agents can enjoy lasting success like James Bond. Which of these video game spies saw only one sequel?**

- A. Sam Fisher
- B. James Pond
- C. Golgo 13
- D. Tex Murphy



**4 This screen was captured from which long-lost gem of the side-scrolling brawler genre?**

- A. The Combatribes
- B. Renegade
- C. River City Ransom
- D. Double Dragon



**5 The SNES was the console of choice for many fledgling evil deities. In the original ActRaiser, which miracle could be used to destroy your villagers' houses?**

- A. Lightning bolts
- B. Focused sunlight
- C. Torrential rains
- D. Miracle Whip

**6 Which of the following N64 titles was not created by Kameo developer Rare?**

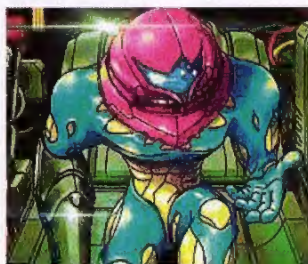
- A. Jet Force Gemini
- B. Body Harvest
- C. Blast Corps
- D. Killer Instinct Gold

**7 Before becoming Rockstar North, DMA Designs wasn't so prone to pushing the ethical envelope. The Scotland-based developer was responsible for which of the following innocuous titles?**

- A. Spyro the Dragon
- B. Stupid Invaders
- C. Gex: Enter the Gecko
- D. Space Station: Silicon Valley

**8 Dark Samus from Metroid Prime 2: Echoes was formed from which one of Samus' stylish armored suits?**

- A. Phazon Suit
- B. Fusion Suit
- C. Varia Suit
- D. Sweatsuit



**9 Tecmo's Tomonubu Itagaki may be singing the praises of the Xbox 360, but his Dead or Alive fighting franchise made its console debut on which non-Microsoft platform?**

- A. Dreamcast
- B. PlayStation
- C. Saturn
- D. Phantom (Bwa ha!)



**10 Before he picked up Molotov cocktails and machine guns, what was the profession of the main character in 2003's Freedom Fighters?**

- A. Police Officer
- B. Mechanic
- C. Pants-taster
- D. Plumber

## BREAKDOWN

**16.7%** of people featured in our Interview section in the last year have been fired. Are we the new Madden cover curse?

**17,000,000** A recent approximation of the number of gamers in South Korea (about 35% of its total population)

**89%** of our time at X05 was spent in various stages of debauchery. In Amsterdam, they have no regulations on whole milk at all!

**100%** of the films we created with The Movies are impossibly stupid. Seriously. They make *Dude, Where's My Car?* look like *Citizen Kane*.

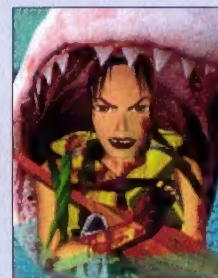
**7%** of game retailers accept trade-ins on younger siblings to help pay for the Xbox 360

## ★ Trivia Score & Rank ★



0-1

Morbidity Obese Mario



2-3

Lara Croft, Shark Attack Victim



4-5

Subsonic the Hedgehog



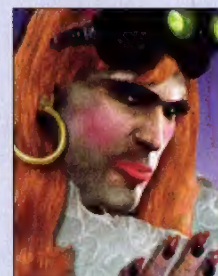
6-7

Blinx the Peniless Hobo



8-9

President Chief



10

Samantha Fisher

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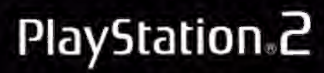
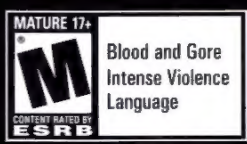


# Resident evil

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