GAMEINFORMER

COMPUTER & VIDEO GAME MAGAZINE®

WORLD EXCLUSIVE

SPLINTER CELL:
DOUBLE AGENT

Nowhere to Run...Nowhere to Hide...

Sam's Shocking New Tale

Will Leave You Guessing

AI Every Turn

www.gameinformer.com

0071791

Sam Fisher

D2334223424

Feb 5, 2008

Ellsworth Federal Penitentiary

JAK COMES IN SECOND, HE DIES.

THIRD, HE DIES.

FOURTH, HE DIES.

FIFTH, YOU GET THE IDEA.

PlayStation 2

JAK X
COMBAT RACING

This time, Jak's racing for his life.
You got crosshairs on your back, your engine's
in the red and, to top it off, there's poison
coursing through your veins. To survive
you'll have to power slide, turbo boost and
blast your way through 20 merciless tracks
in brutal circuit races and no-holds-barred
death matches. Sure, people will call you a
crazy driver. But only once.

intel®

SEQUEL TO THE GAME OF THE YEAR

CALL OF DUTY 2

Infinity Ward returns with more cinematic intensity and chaos than ever before, in World War II's most climactic battles. Join your squad and choose your single-player missions, or go online for intense multiplayer action.

WWW.CALLofDUTY.com

"Each area features such rich textures, atmospheric lighting, and creepy ambiance that you'd swear that they were real."

8.75/10 - Game Informer

"The fact that Condemned is pushing the 360 is awesome, but its clever tweak on the first-person genre and its grisly premise are what make it really tick."

8.5/10 - Official Xbox Magazine
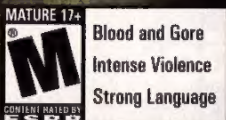
Forensics

Torches
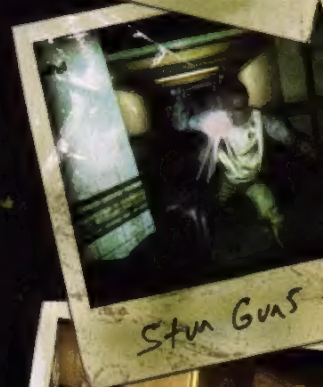
Stun Guns
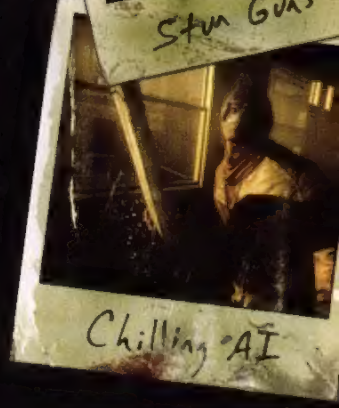
Chilling AI

You are FBI Agent Ethan Thomas. To hunt the world's most dangerous
serial killer you'll need to keep your eyes open. Starting now.
FOLLOW THE EVIDENCE TO CONDEMNEDGAME.COM

CONDEMNED:
CRIMINAL ORIGINS

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44 SPLINTER CELL: DOUBLE AGENT

We take a world-exclusive first look at the shocking new direction that Ubisoft is taking Sam Fisher in. And no, we don't mean the whole next-gen thing, either – this time around, Sam doesn't just take out the enemy. He becomes one of them. Learn more about Splinter Cell's incredible next chapter, and exactly what being a double agent means.

STAFF

People Who Actually Get Paid To Play Video Games

COVER: FOR THE PEOPLE

ANDY McNAMARA
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

As an editor-in-chief of a video game magazine, you have weird and unusual things that you sit around and think about. For this letter's entry, my obsession is the cover. Some would say I get way too hung up about it, but when video games and this magazine are your life it tends to take on a whole new level of importance.

That said, I'm quite proud of the things that we have done over the years. We have brought you the world exclusive first look at so many games it makes my head spin. If you look back through your magazine collection (you have a collection, don't you?) there are some pretty amazing games that have graced our cover: Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas, Halo 2, Metroid Prime: Echoes, Metal Gear Solid 4: Guns Of The Patriots, and Peter Jackson's King Kong, just to name a few.

These games are no-brainers. They are huge franchises that everyone wants to hear more about. In fact, I bet we could put Halo 3 on the cover every month for the next five months, and our readers would love it each and every time.

But my obsession with video games tells me that you can't JUST have covers of sure-fire franchises. You have to take a chance from time to time. Do some research – look for the next big thing. Game Informer has done that. When the Chronicles of Riddick appeared in your mailbox, you had no idea what it was. Six months later when you finally had a chance to play it, you saw the same thing we saw eight months prior: a game that would define graphics in the PS2, Xbox, and GameCube generation, and was a glimpse of what would be possible in the future on units like the Xbox 360, PlayStation 3, and Revolution.

I love those covers. And Riddick wasn't the first or last time. In 2004 alone, we showed up at your home with never-before-seen games like Gun, Condemned, Gears of War, and Crackdown just to name a few. When those magazines arrived, no one knew what these games were about or even why they were important. I can hear people picking up their magazines and saying, "What's a Crackdown?"

That, as they say, is music to my ears. We love getting a chance to show people new possibilities in gaming. And I can tell you, Game Informer works very hard to go out and find the best possible games we can, well-known or not, to grace our covers.
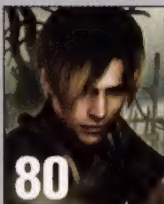
Obviously, Splinter Cell: Double Agent was a no-brainer this month. It had to be done. But hold onto your hats, boys and girls; we have some amazing things lined up for this year. Things you have never heard of and some that you have been waiting for, but which will define gaming today and tomorrow.

Oh, and I have a quick promise I made to myself that I wanted to share with you. This WILL be the best year of Game Informer, ever, without a doubt. We will bring games you never thought possible, and hopefully you will love getting the magazine as much as we love making it.

Cheers,

Andy >> *andy@gameinformer.com*
Handle: The Game Hombre **Expertise:** RPGs, Action/Platform, Driving, First-Person Shooters **Interests:** Curb Your Enthusiasm, Wedding Crashers, The Daily Show, Timberwolves Basketball **Dislikes:** Author "Two Sheds" Jackson, The Super Team That Is The San Antonio Spurs, Losing Power Supplies, Crashing Hard Drives **Current Favorite Games:** Call Of Duty 2, World Of Warcraft, Need For Speed: Most Wanted, Guitar Hero

Reiner >> *reiner@gameinformer.com*
Handle: The Raging Gamer **Expertise:** RPGs, Fighting, Action/Platform, Strategy, Sports **Interests:** Xbox Live Arcade (Geometry Wars: Retro Evolved, Wik: The Fable Of Souls), DC Comics' 52 (1 Year, 52 Issues…Brilliant), Importing Transformers Toys, A Game Of Thrones By George R. R. Martin **Dislikes:** Sony's Silence In The Next-Gen War, Gun & THAW Being Nearly Identical Ports On Xbox 360, Spending $800 On New Games In November **Current Favorite Games:** Peter Jackson's King Kong, True Crime: New York City, NBA 2K6 (360), Grand Theft Auto: Liberty City Stories, Call Of Duty 2 (360), Dragon Quest VIII: Journey Of The Cursed King

Matt >> *matt@gameinformer.com*
Handle: The Original Gamer **Expertise:** First-Person Shooters, Action/Platform, Action/Adventure, Action/Sports **Interests:** Rogue Wave – Descended Like Vultures, Sicbay – Suspicious Icons, Walk The Line, Shrimp, The Packers Being Even Worse Than The Vikings, Xbox 360 **Dislikes:** That Moment When You Realize You've Watched Enough Episodes Of Girlfriends On UPN To Know Which Character Is The "Uptight One", Winter, Short Holiday Deadlines **Current Favorite Games:** Peter Jackson's King Kong, True Crime: New York City, Tiger Woods PGA Tour 06 (Xbox 360), Call Of Duty 2, The Warriors

Kato >> *kato@gameinformer.com*
Handle: The Game Katana **Expertise:** Sports, Racing, Action/Adventure, Action/Platform **Interests:** Good Night, And Good Luck, Summer Of Sam, The Herbaliser Take Out London, Children Of Nuggets Boxset, Norway Mods The Indikation's Record In Terms Of… **Dislikes:** ESPN's Simulated Press Conferences, Saints Owner Tom Benson, AI Sliders In Sports Video Games (I Have A Feeling They Don't Do Anything), Battlestar Galactica's Starbuck – I'm Not Impressed, Baby **Current Favorite Games:** NBA 06, Infected, NHL 2K6 (Xbox 360), Project Gotham Racing 3, Splinter Cell: Double Agent

Lisa >> *lisa@gameinformer.com*
Handle: La Game Nikita **Expertise:** Survival Horror, Adventure, RPGs, Action/Platform, Racing **Interests:** My 360, Convincing Someone To Make A "Learn Japanese" Game For DS, Starting Up WoW, Star Wars: Episode III, Friends Coming Back To The States And Wanting To Go Game Shopping, Pumpkin Pie **Dislikes:** Kato Saying Anything Bad About Starbuck (She'd Totally Rule You, Sucka) **Current Favorite Games:** Peter Jackson's King Kong, Need For Speed: Most Wanted, X-Men Legends II: Rise Of Apocalypse (PSP), Splinter Cell: Double Agent, Prince Of Persia: The Two Thrones, World Of Warcraft

Jeremy >> *jeremy@gameinformer.com*
Handle: Gamezilla **Expertise:** First-Person Shooters, Survival Horror, Action/Platform, Fighting, Strategy/RPGs **Interests:** The Yu Yuan Garden In Shanghai, Authentic Chinese Food, Buying International Crap Instead Of Domestic Crap, Matt's Claim To Be The "Lance Armstrong Of Popcorn" **Dislikes:** The Crying Of Demonic Children On International Flights, How Amazingly Stupid The Lyrics Of Some Popular Bands Are **Current Favorite Games:** Splinter Cell: Double Agent, Infected, Tokobot, Call Of Duty 2, X-Men Legends II: Rise Of Apocalypse, Brothers In Arms: Earned In Blood

Adam >> *adam@gameinformer.com*
Handle: The Alpha Gamer **Expertise:** RPGs, Strategy, First-Person Shooters, Fighting **Interests:** Netflix, Returning To My Frost Mage Roots With Orion Pax Mark II (Even If Miller Still Needs Tanking Lessons), Having A Clean Apartment, Convincing My PC To Work Again **Dislikes:** Dealing With Stupid Hardware Problems, Clearly Defective Desks, Waiting For DVD Releases, Not Having The Gajillion Dollars I'd Need To Buy All The Comics I Want To Read **Current Favorite Games:** World Of Warcraft, Sid Meier's Civilization IV, X-Men Legends II: Rise Of Apocalypse, Castlevania: Dawn Of Sorrow, Call Of Duty 2

Joe >> *joe@gameinformer.com*
Handle: The Real American Gamer **Expertise:** RPGs, Adventure, Strategy, Platform, Puzzle **Interests:** Having A Computer That Could Beat Up Deep Blue (This One's For Kasporov, Nerdputer!) Breaking Into My Own Car, A New Onslaught Of Final Fantasy Figures, My Voidwalker **Dislikes:** Being Late To The WoW Party, Magna Carta's Rampant Androgyny, Rosemary (Why Would I Want My Food To Taste Like Church?) **Current Favorite Games:** Shadow Of The Colossus, World Of Warcraft, Magna Carta: Tears Of Blood, Fable: The Lost Chapters, Final Fantasy IV Advance

Miller >> *miller@gameinformer.com*
Handle: The Once And Future Gamer **Expertise:** RPGs, Action/Adventure, Fighting, Platform, First-Person Shooters **Interests:** A New Warrior On The Horde (Even If Adam Still Needs Shut Up Lessons), The Long Awaited Arrival Of The White Box In My Living Room, Heath Bars **Dislikes:** The Slow And Untimely Death Of My Bedspread, Server Queues, Hearing Christmas Music Starting In October **Current Favorite Games:** World Of Warcraft, Guitar Hero, Sid Meier's Civilization IV, Prince Of Persia: The Two Thrones, Dragonshard, City Of Villains, Final Fantasy IV Advance

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When you see this logo on a game preview, review, or feature, you can learn more about it by heading to www.gameinformer.com and clicking on the Unlimited logo. There are tons of other bonuses there (including movies, interviews, and screenshots) exclusively for Game Informer subscribers, so even if a game you like doesn't have the logo in the magazine, there is a good chance you can still learn more online.

1 Two of GI Spy's all-time power players, journalist extraordinaire Raymond Padilla and Sega's Bret Blount, join forces to take on all challengers 2 If there's one thing GI loves, it's dudes dressed up in silly video game suits! This year's BlizzCon was a treasure trove of goofiness, like this guy, dressed up as mage from World of Warcraft...3 ...or this "orc" getting a piggyback ride...4 ...or this nutcase, who's actually staging a "Save the Murlocs" protest outside the Anaheim Convention Center! Shine on, you crazy diamonds!!!! 5 Kato and ex-GI editor Jay Fitzloff's annual Vikings/Packers bet is heating up. The Vikes victory over the Pack in their first matchup of the season resulted in Jay baking Kato a delicious, homemade apple pie. It tasted better with a side of Packer humiliation! 6 Sibel Sunar of the Bohle Company and Vivendi Universal's Matt Frary fear the all-knowing gaze of the GI Spy camera 7 Ubisoft's Sam Saliba, Tyrone Miller, and Eric Low teach Jeremy the ancient ways of Chinese finger pointing in Shanghai 8 Sony Online Entertainment's Chris Kramer gives you the evil eye, while Kohnke Comm's Sean Kauppinen just wants to be friends

MISGUIDED ADORATION

Why do you guys hate Marvel so much? In Connect in issue 151(which, coincidentally, had DC's Superman on the cover), I noticed you asking who gave a s— about "b- and c-squad superheroes" like Power Pack and Ant-Man. Then in Game Over you say that Psylocke was a third-string character who had to bribe her way into X-Men Legends. Game Informer, cut Marvel some slack. Wait until you get all the facts before degrading these great heroes and cursing their names.

Nate
via sbcglobal.net

I give a s— about Power Pack! I enjoyed reading the stories of the Power children. The books were a delightful break between the more serious and expensive publications of Marvel Comics. After reading an issue, I'd imagine what the adventure would have been like if my family was in the situations. The point is, not every comic book can reach big-time status like Batman and Spider-Man, just as not every video game can achieve big-time status like Final Fantasy and The Sims. The big gears will always need the smaller gears in order to operate a machine smoothly. Show the minor leaguers some respect, please.

Lance Snead
East Orange, NJ

■ Look, guys. You're defending Ant-Man. Think about that for a second. Do you think this is a battle you can win? Remember, he looks like this (at right):

Now, we have all thrown our support behind some questionable superheroes (you should read Jeremy's "Why Spawn Rules" essay. It's seven pages, single-spaced!), but even the hardest of the hardcore Marvel fans need to acknowledge that this guy is a total toolbox. The sooner you accept it, the sooner the healing can begin.

PAY TO PLAY

When I read the Editor's Letter in issue 150, I completely understood where you were coming from in regards to the price of current consoles having to reflect the cost of what new technology goes along with them. Although I agree with this, I have to disagree with your comparison of next-gen consoles to Apple's iPod. Even though I realize why the price of next-gen consoles is rising, I'm still not completely thrilled about paying for them. With the portable music players, you at least have a choice. For example, instead of paying the $400 for the iPod, you could shell out $300 for another MP3 player and still have a decent product.

Phil H.
via hotmail.com

■ When buying electronic doodads of all sorts, part of the process is determining which features you can't live without, and then deciding how much you're willing to pay. While you're correct in saying that it isn't possible to get a budget, off-brand version of the Xbox 360 [insert Core System quip here], all three of the next-gen consoles will sport a variety of different capabilities and price points. The Revolution's rumored lower cost could be a big draw, but gamers looking for more traditional experiences (i.e. nun-chuck-style not required) may end up paying a bit

more for the PS3. You as a consumer still have a considerable amount of freedom in deciding what you want out of the next crop of consoles, even though it may not be possible to get a machine exactly like the Xbox 360 for a fraction of the cost. Sadly, living on the cutting edge of technology is never cheap.

LIVING ON THE EDGE

I can't believe you! You never give the GameCube "The Edge" C'mon, it must have it sometimes! You are all idiots! Your Edges SUCK! That is all. Thank you for your time.

Stevie Manning
via sbcglobal.net

I've noticed something about "The Edge" that you give to multi-platform game reviews. In almost every single one, it seems to go toward the Xbox version of the game. Why is that?

Tim Gilbert
via aol.com

■ When we add The Edge to a review, we do it for one reason only: to point out any notable differences among the various versions. We recognize that a pattern has developed, but it isn't the result of some Game Informer conspiracy to elevate Microsoft and degrade Nintendo (our only conspiracy currently in motion is to eliminate pleats). For many multi-platform games, the Xbox releases typically just have more perks, like sharper graphics and expanded online content. After all, "it's Nintendo" or "it's Sony" by themselves don't really qualify as reasons to buy a less full-bodied version of a game. The Edge is mainly there for gamers who have multiple consoles and want to get the most for their money; we aren't using it as some nefarious platform to make you feel bad if you don't have an Xbox.

GIVE PEACE A CHANCE

What the devil are people thinking? Nintendo unveils its new controller, and all of the sudden, the console war is only between Sony and Microsoft? People see how it works, and suddenly the Revolution doesn't stand a chance against PS3 and 360. I'm not trying to say that Nintendo is going to be any better off than Sony or Microsoft, but it is still in the battle! Video games themselves are an innovation, and in order for them to move forward, we must all have an open mind and accept new ideas, whether we think they are going to succeed or not.

Chet Birchmeier
via hotmail.com

■ Not to burst your bubble, Chet, but Shigeru Miyamoto seems to disagree with you on the upcoming console war. In our interview with Nintendo's legendary designer in issue 152, he plainly stated that "[W]e don't really look at it as a competition between ourselves and the other manufacturers." Of course, fans don't need to worry about

THE VOCAL CARTOGRAPHER

Since EA won't listen to me, I was hoping you would. My biggest gripe with this year's Madden, and almost every game for that matter, is the small amount of controller button-mapping freedom. Every button should be able to be mapped to the player's preference, which can help to more deeply immerse the player in the gameplay. Because many gamers are accustomed to certain actions being designated to certain buttons, making transitions from one game to the next difficult. Specifically, in Madden 06 the vision cone is controlled by the right thumbstick, which allows for two different modes of control at once: player movement and vision cone movement (controlled by the left and right thumbsticks, respectively). However, that configuration uses both thumbs, forcing you to let go of the right thumbstick in order to press the receiver button with that same thumb. If I were allowed to map the buttons the way I wanted, my passing plays would be a lot smoother. If fighting games can let you change configurations so easily, why can't more genres do the same?

Dan Szatkowski
via adelphia.net

■ There are some mysteries in this universe that will forever boggle the human mind. What happened to the dinosaurs? Where is Atlantis? Why is Brendan Fraser famous? Among these great quandaries is why gamers can't just map buttons the way they want to. We just don't know. While changing configurations might not be ideal for every game, it would be nice to be given the option more often. We were hoping that this would become a standardized feature on all next-gen games, but it doesn't look like that's going to be the case. We consulted our Answertron 4000 to find out why, but the only thing it told us was "Kruk the infernal overlord will defile your flatware!" Come to think of it, another great cosmic mystery is why Reiner won't stop messing with the Answertron.

NINTENDO'S GENIUS SPEAKS!

Nintendo's Shigeru Miyamoto

the company bowing out of the industry, but apparently the new possibilities the controller presents for the console will drive Nintendo further from the realm of traditional gaming. Still, even if it doesn't view itself as a part of the console war, we are very excited to see the big N's new philosophy in action. You are right in saying that is important to remain receptive to innovation, but it is also understandable that some gamers are apprehensive; keeping an open mind and blindly embracing an idea just because it is new are two different things.

PICTURE PERFECT

Why doesn't some company get together an insane budget and a six-year schedule and make the perfect game? I'm talking about one with no glitches whatsoever, versatile gameplay, lifelike graphics, Dolby Digital sound, perfectly solid controls, a story that lasts around a hundred hours, and everything else you can think of. Sure, it would be expensive to produce, but the company would profit in the end because everyone would want it. After all, it's the perfect game! I just don't get it.

David Stebbins
via yahoo.com
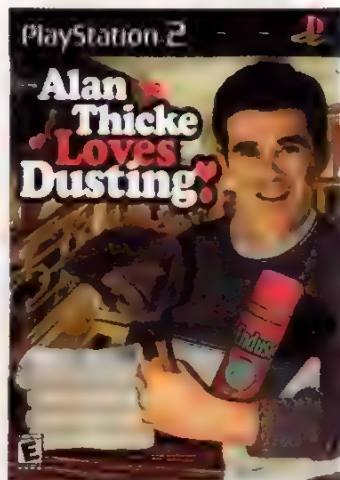
■ **You're right! The main character could be Alan Thicke (our favorite family sitcom star) as he eats burritos (our favorite food) and cleans his wooden furniture with Endust (our favorite aerosol dusting spray). That would be perfect! Everyone loves those things as much as we do, right? Do you see the problem, David?** It isn't possible to make a perfect game due to the simple fact that people like different things. Many gamers would revolt if forced to play through a 100-hour game, and one person's idea of versatile gameplay could feel like repetitive garbage to someone else. While there are certainly titles that stand out as paragons in their respective genres (like Resident Evil 4 and God of War), any attempt to make a single game that appeals to each and every gamer is doomed to failure. That may not be a bad thing, though. As it stands, developers are able to craft their titles with a specific type of gamer in mind. Instead of worrying whether a title will appeal to everyone, teams can focus on providing content tailored to fans of a particular style. We'd rather have many great games in a variety of shapes and sizes than a few games that are good for all the same reasons, wouldn't you?

RIDICULE FOR EVERYONE!

I'm writing to tell you that I cancelled my subscription to your magazine because of your constant Microsoft bashing. To be a reputable video game magazine you need to put prejudice aside, but after reading your recent issues, it would be clear to anyone that you have a problem being fair to Microsoft. How do you call yourself neutral or informative when you take sides?

Anonymous
via aol.com

■ **Do we make jokes at Microsoft's expense? Yes, we do. Are they the sole victims of our barbs? Not by a long shot. We try to spread out the jabs fairly among all the major players, and since we get angry letters like this from fans of Sony and Nintendo as well, we're probably striking a decent balance. In fact, the only person not getting enough disparaging comments in our pages is Ty the Tasmanian Tiger. Man, that guy sucks!**

ENVELOPE ART

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

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

WESSLY DIAZ
For the record, that's V8, and he's just sleeping
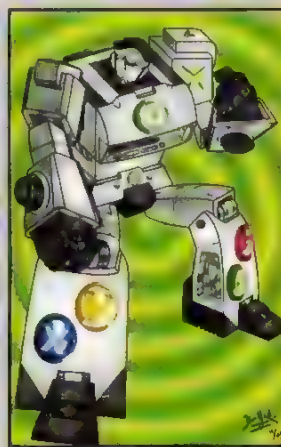
BARRY CHANDLER II
X-Bot, you're in. Take a hike, Bumblebee!
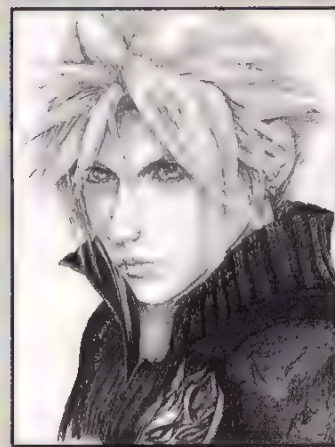
SHARECE OVERMYER
Just one more operation to go, Cloud

JAMES KING
We don't care how cute the girls are. Cirque du Soliel is still lame
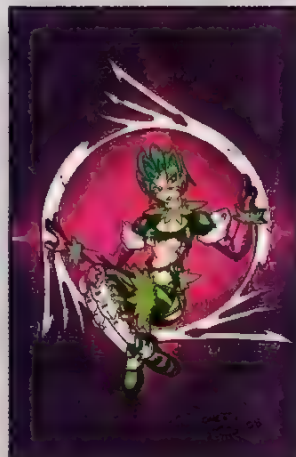
SAMUAL FIGUEROA
Master Chief may think he's won, but in five minutes he's about to find that his two comely lasses are totally dudes

Pandemic and BioWare have both tried their hand at Star Wars games, and now they are closer than ever. Here is Pandemic's Star Wars: Battlefront II

BIOWARE AND PANDEMIC MERGE
BONO ACTS AS MIDWIFE

Renowned developers BioWare (Jade Empire, Neverwinter Nights) and Pandemic (Star Wars: Battlefront, Mercenaries) have announced that they are forming a new holding company named BioWare/Pandemic that basically merges the two studios into one entity. The pair will now become one of the world's largest independent development houses, representing a combined investment of over $300 million.

Facilitating the deal was Elevation Partners, a venture-capital outfit headed by former EA president John Riccitiello and which features U2 singer Bono as one if its board members. Last year, Elevation made a failed bid for publisher/developer Eidos, which was eventually bought by SCi Entertainment for £103 million.

The founders of BioWare and Pandemic (Greg Zeschuk and Ray Muzyka for BioWare and Josh Resnick and Andrew Goldman for Pandemic) will become shareholders and senior executives in the new company, with Elevation's Riccitiello as the CEO. Both BioWare and Pandemic will remain as separate brands, and each will retain their own video game properties and studio locations around the world. Because of this keeping of the status quo, both BioWare and Pandemic will retain their existing partnerships with their publishers.

Joint CEO of BioWare Muzyka says that this deal is unlike the standard practice of a larger publisher swallowing up a smaller developer in that not only will each studio retain its identity, but that it's a "partnership of equals." Pandemic's Resnick stresses that since the operational structure of each company will remain intact, the employees of the studios will be protected and retained, maintaining the quality of the titles. "Our creative, production, and operational staff are as vital to our success as directors and stars are to blockbuster films, and we are giving them the stakeholder recognition they deserve. Our mutual goal is to build the industry's best place for talent."

Finally, rumors are that Elevation Partners is not done in its wheeling and dealing. The venture capital group is said to be looking at acquiring Peter Molyneux's Lionhead Studios.

THE GAMES THE PS3 PLAYS
PS3 RENDERS REGION ENCODING USELESS?

Sony's PlayStation 3 is expected to hit America sometime in 2006, and the system's playback features could change the landscape for consumers. Sony Computer Entertainment Australia managing director Michael Ephraim said that the company might not require region encoding for its PS3 games. This would mean that gamers could buy titles released in Japan and play them on their U.S.-bought consoles without modification. "If you look at the fact that [the PS3] will support high-definition TV, which will be a global standard," said Ephraim, "there's a good likelihood that it will be global region, as for example we've done with the PSP."

Interestingly, SCE Australia recently lost a court case that declared that although software piracy was illegal, it was perfectly legal for a person to use a mod chip to play worldwide software under the country's copyright laws. The court argued that region coding was an artificial trade barrier that restricted consumers' choice. However, the court did not rule on the issue of region encoding itself.

As much as a lack of region encoding would widen the scope of what games the PS3 could play, Sony has also apparently developed technology that could be used to block the playing of used games on the console. Rumor has it the company has recently secured a patent for technology developed by PlayStation creator Ken Kutaragi that would encrypt an authentication code upon the software. This could make a game playable only on the PS3 it was first played on, although Sony has not announced whether this technology would be used on the PS3 or not.

IGDA DELVES INTO DEVELOPER DIVERSITY
CONDUCTS WIDE-REACHING SURVEY

We all appreciate the time and work developers put into a game, but exactly who are the people who provide us with our hours and hours of fun? The International Game Developers Association has conducted a survey to help answer that question and understand the demographics that make up the game development community. What the IGDA found was that for what studios may have lacked in the diversity of their employees, they made up for with a progressive outlook for the future.

The IGDA's survey of developers not only tracked the sex and racial makeup of the over 3,000 people who responded to the study, but it also took a snapshot of parameters such as physical/mental disability, age, years in the industry, education, and sexual orientation. Some of the identity characteristics of developers were consistent, such as 80 percent having a university level education or better, or that your average person is a 31-year-old straight white male with just over five years in the industry. But it is the exceptions to this that will prove to be the rule by which developers' diversity must be judged. By looking in this mirror, we can see that the makers of games don't necessarily reflect all those who play them, which is something that's becoming more of an issue as the ranks of gamers across the nation and the globe swell to unprecedented proportions. The study believes that ignoring this could have an adverse effect on the industry. "The game industry will be blindsided by these trends in the coming years if they are not factored into the core of our strategic thinking. There is no doubt in our minds that the industry will benefit from a more diverse pool of talented creators."

IGDA executive director Jason Della Rocca agrees that it is important for the development community to catch up to the world it is selling games to. "We need to wake up to the fact that games exist in a broader societal context that is constantly changing." Unfortunately, the industry is in a bit of a chicken or egg situation, where employers often have hiring philosophies sympathetic to diversity, but run into the problem of not having diverse enough applicants. Della Rocca says that "well over half" of the studios say they just don't get enough diverse applicants. Of course, getting people of different races, abilities, sexual orientations, etc. into gaming may not be easier given the homogeneity of developers.

Still, Della Rocca is optimistic. "The IGDA hopes that by providing informational resources, mentorship, and community building opportunities, we can nudge things in a positive direction." Other changes need to be made along the line to help ensure that a more diverse group of people want to become developers. When looking simply at getting more women involved in the industry, not only will that come about by getting more females interested in more computer engineering courses, for example, but a change in industry culture would also help. For instance, the study says that the typical extreme workload of developers has been partly responsible for the industry's failure to attract females. Many women respondents also offered that getting rid of "boys-only" practices such as booth babes at conventions like E3 would attract more females. Of those women who answered the study, the majority were grouped in the human resources, public relations, or marketing sectors. Five percent of those answering were in programming, while 10 percent were in design, and 12 percent were executives.

Surprisingly, the study found that non-whites believe the industry is more diverse than whites actually do. Perhaps this can be taken as a hopeful sign that developers are more than ready to accept fellow employees that are different from themselves. Della Rocca believes in this optimism, telling us that studios are simply looking for the best and the brightest. "The good news is that the game industry is extremely merit based. That is to say, if you can demonstrate your talent and skill, you should have an easy time getting in. Many of the write-in comments to our survey expressed this with statements like 'I don't care what color/gender/age/etc. you are, as long as you can code.'"

IGDA executive director Jason Della Rocca

SMOKE THE

THQ MAKES CONAN KING
NEXT-GEN PLANS/DELAYS OUTLINED

T HQ recently talked at some length about its upcoming plans, including both the good and the bad. After already having been bumped from the Xbox 360's launch, open-world crime game Saint's Row is again being pushed back. This time the company expects the game to release between April and June of 2006. Also getting hit by the delay broom is the PC title S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Shadow of Chernobyl, which has already been waiting to hit the shelves for some time now. The title's updated release is now not expected until October at the earliest. That's what you get for developing a game on second-hand Russian computers left over from the Cold War! Just kidding.

Overall, THQ CEO Brian Farrell said that THQ has 13 games in development for next-gen systems, and he even gave a breakdown of the publisher/developer's priorities. He cited that both the Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3 will each garner 40 percent of THQ's love, with Nintendo's Revolution picking up sloppy thirds with 20 percent. "We'll focus a little less on Revolution until we see more," explained Farrell.

One franchise that is surely in THQ's next-gen and current-gen plans is Conan the Barbarian. The company has picked up the rights to use the Robert E. Howard character, although no details were given as to when THQ's first game based on the warrior king will surface.

■ Will Xbox 360's planned use of HD-DVD still not help games like Gears of War?

NO XBOX 360 GAMES ON HD-DVD?
HD-DVD PLANNED FOR MOVIES ONLY

I n a statement to Japanese magazine *Famitsu*, Japan's chief of Xbox operations, Yoshihiro Maruyama, said that although Bill Gates has mentioned the use of HD-DVD for future iterations of the Xbox 360, the system won't use the next-generation DVD standard for video games — just movies. In a specific response to Gates' comments on the matter, Maruyama said, "It's a possibility, but it won't have any relationship to gaming. If the Xbox 360 uses a next-generation DVD drive in the future, it will only be used for watching movies that run on next-generation DVDs."

If what Maruyama says is true, then even if Microsoft were to release an Xbox 360 with an HD-DVD drive, while that unit could play HD-DVD movies, game developers would not be able to utilize the higher-capacity HD-DVD discs for their games. The current Xbox 360 uses DVDs, meaning that some developers are running out of disc space and are anticipating releasing their titles on multiple discs. For instance, one marquee Xbox 360 title that Game Informer knows of is currently expected to ship on four discs.

This adherence to the DVD format makes sense, given that if developers were to offer HD-DVD games, those titles would not be playable on current Xbox 360s with the regular DVD drive.

music in every direction
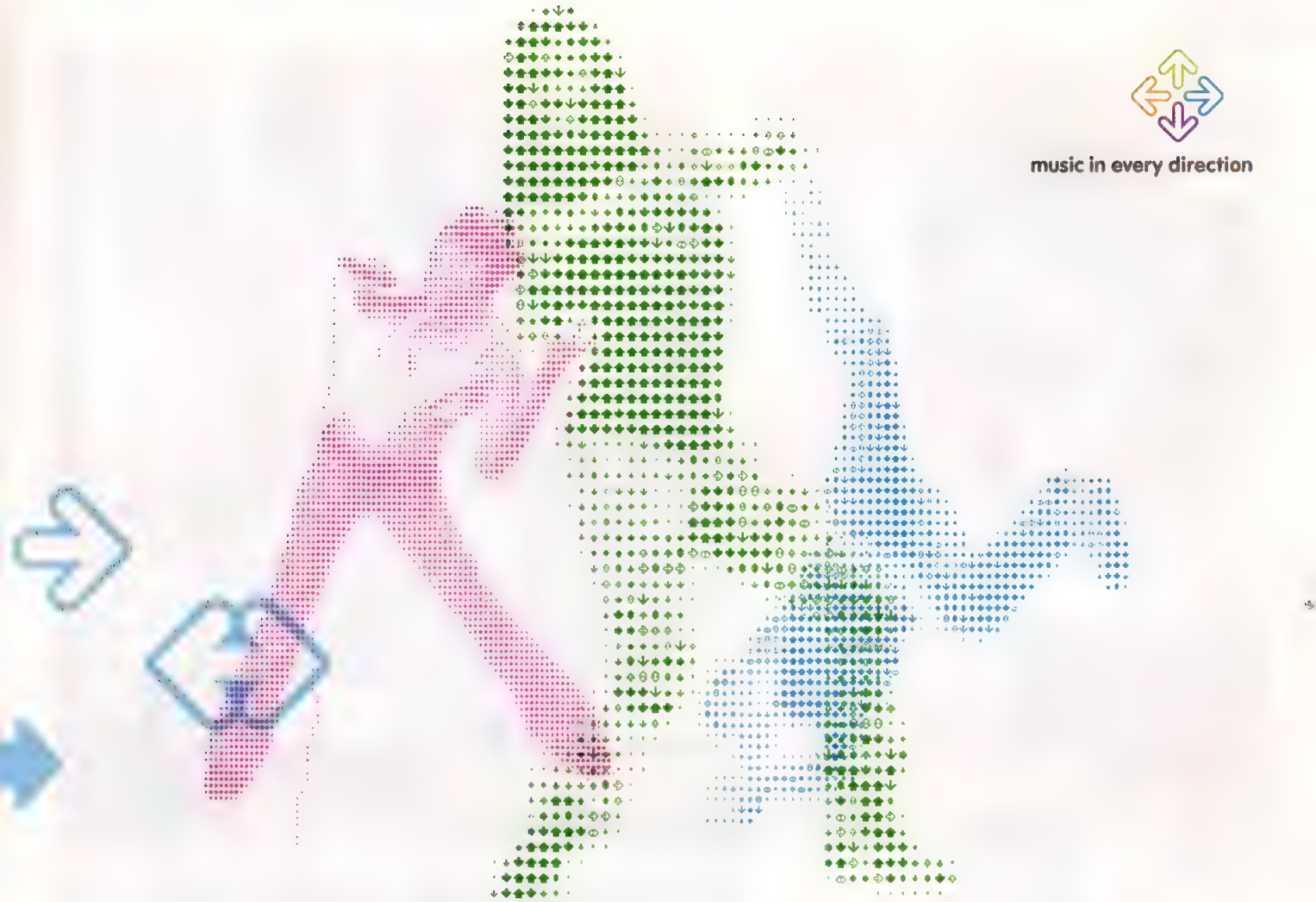
Gaming gets a beat.

The Konami Music Series. The ultimate in interactive singing and dancing. Hot new hits like Crazy in Love. And stone cold classics like Play that Funky Music. Choose your direction.

TXT 2 WIN. Text in "music" to ddrkr (33757) to win games and gear.

THE GOOD, THE BAD, THE UGLY

When You Want Your News Categorized With A Sarcastic Editorial Spin

BAD

■ EA's Burnout Revenge for the original Xbox won't be playable on your Xbox 360

The Xbox 360's backwards compatibility isn't what it should be. Microsoft released a list of Xbox titles that work on its new system, but hits such as any of the games in the Splinter Cell, Burnout, Madden NFL, and MechAssault series are missing, as are titles like Dead or Alive: Ultimate. Moreover, only Halo and Halo 2 are playable without special drivers needed. Drivers are necessary for other compatible games, and are available via download or from Microsoft.

GOOD

As a thank you to fans, Nintendo has released a retro Game Boy Micro honoring the 20th anniversary of the NES system. The handheld not only comes with a faceplate inspired by the Famicom (the name of the NES when it released in Japan), but also a $10 coupon that can be put towards the purchase of select GBA titles.
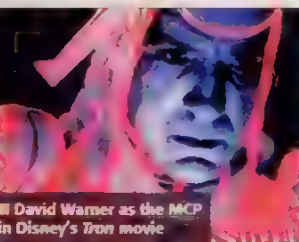
GOOD

■ David Warner as the MCP in Disney's Tron movie

Disney and Square Enix's Kingdom Hearts partnership has given gamers more joy than they ever could have expected, and Kingdom Hearts 2 is shaping up to continue the love. Sora and company will travel to the computer world from Disney's Tron movie, among other places – including a run-in with the evil MCP.

UGLY

PlayStation 2's "Disc Read Error" mess has finally bitten Sony in the ass. The company has settled a class action lawsuit covering certain model numbers of the system that would frequently show the error message. Claims are being taken until February 16, but the court won't approve the lawsuit until spring of next year. For more info, call the toll-free number 1-800-352-5331, or go to www.ps2settlement.com/

UGLY

King Kong director Peter Jackson backhands EA. Jackson says that one of the things that motivated him to work with EA competitor Ubisoft for the King Kong video game is the fact that he didn't like working with EA for the Lord of the Rings titles. A New York Times article quotes Jackson's manager as saying that EA "was not interested in input from the filmmaker." Earlier in the year, Godfather director Francis Ford Coppola slammed the company after playing a preview build of the gangster video game.

GOOD
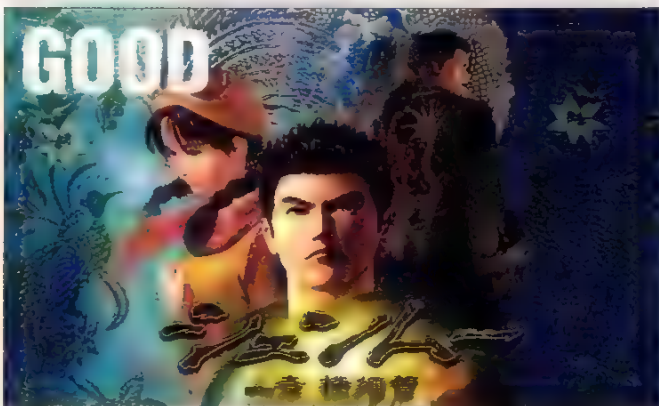
Yu Suzuki says that there's no Shenmue 3. There you go. That's it. Now stop bugging us about it and go clean your cosplay outfit. It stinks.
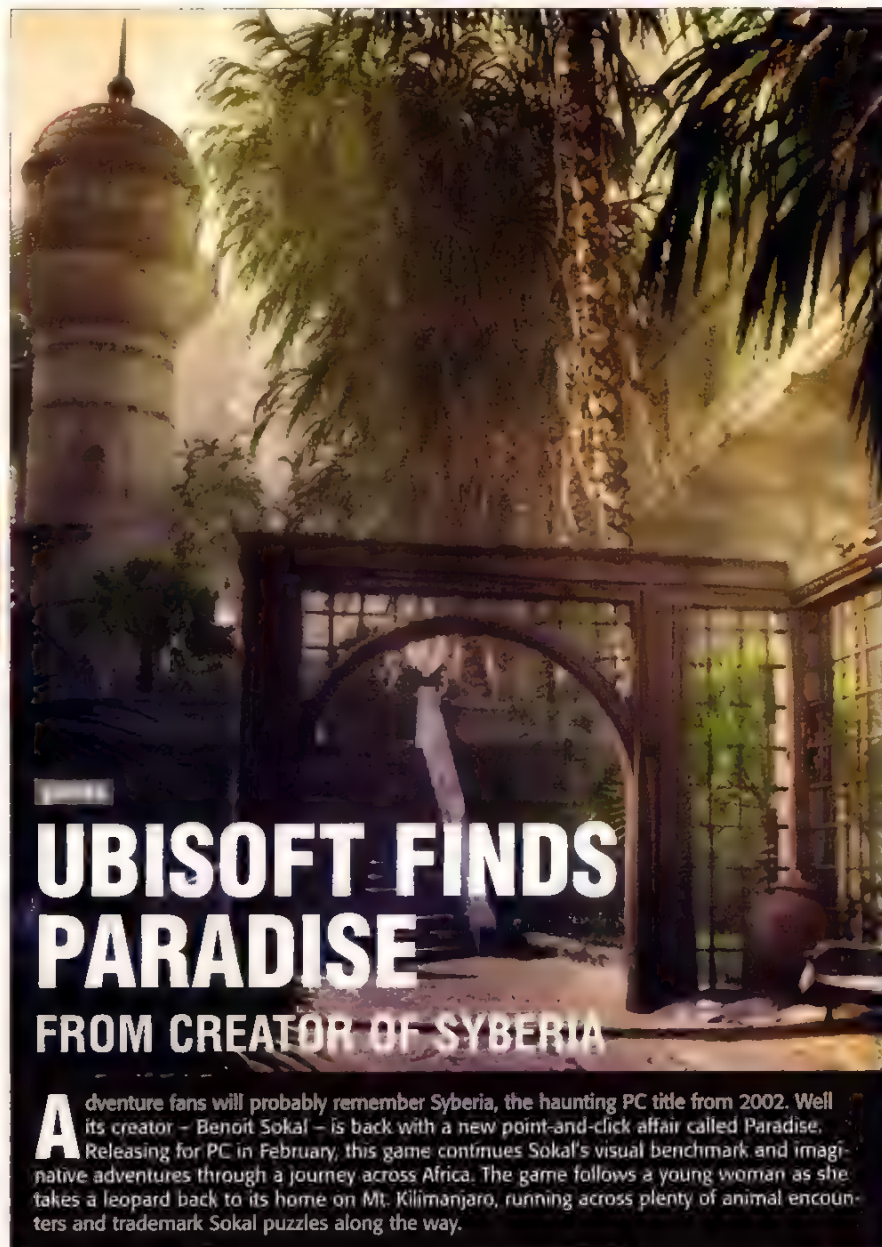
UBISOFT FINDS PARADISE

FROM CREATOR OF SYBERIA

Adventure fans will probably remember Syberia, the haunting PC title from 2002. Well its creator – Benoit Sokal – is back with a new point-and-click affair called Paradise. Releasing for PC in February, this game continues Sokal's visual benchmark and imaginative adventures through a journey across Africa. The game follows a young woman as she takes a leopard back to its home on Mt. Kilimanjaro, running across plenty of animal encounters and trademark Sokal puzzles along the way.

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

Sir Wilhelm Von Erglieght's Extreme Beard-Growing Championship

Ahoy, gaming enthusiasts! Competitive sports games are the bee's knees in today's modern world, and most of the major contests have already been locked up with exclusive arrangements. But that doesn't mean that there aren't a few recreational whimsies out there that are ripe for the video game treatment. But Sir Wilhelm Von Erglieght's Extreme Beard-Growing Championship would be a little incommensurable to all the others, as it would feature a more RPG-esque flair. In this game, you'd concoct your own character, a young immigrant to the 1800s United States, with big dreams of challenging the world's reigning beard champion, Sir Wilhelm Von Erglieght. But before you can duel with that dastardly follicle-fiend, you must first win some regional beard and moustache challenges around the maturing city of New York. Through a robust Construct-A-Beard feature, you'll be able to tweak the style, thickness, and color of your facial hair, and even be able to stimulate growth by purchasing tins of pomade or bottles of Doc Emmett Washburn's Revitalising Tonic and Detergent. But on your quest to dispute the best in beard-rearing, you'll run afoul of toughs that will try to halt your rise to fame with some barber shears and their own dreams of challenging Erglieght's reign. The Extreme Beard Growing Championship promises to be the most thrilling, old-timey facial hair growing adventure the gaming world has ever seen!

LOOSE TALK
Hot Gaming Gossip

Given the Gran Turismo series' penchant for delays, it was no surprise when Sony announced that the Japanese release of Gran Turismo 4 Mobile for the PSP would be pushed back until some time in 2006. Despite Sony's official line that the game is still on track, Loose Talk has heard that work on it hasn't even begun, and that the title is still in the planning phase. Polyphony is exploring the specs of the PSP, and a source has told us that the team at Polyphony is currently more enamored with poking and prodding the PS3 to see what it can do for Gran Turismo 5, rather than putting out GT 4 Mobile. It could be a while before the game hits the handheld.

GT MOBILE FOR PSP OFF TRACK?

TRUE CRIME'S NY STATE OF MIND

True Crime: New York City

Activision's True Crime series has rebounded nicely, thanks in part to its replication of the streets of New York. We've heard that for future outings, the franchise is going to remain in the city, and will also stay current-gen, as a move to the Xbox 360 is not being currently planned for the next True Crime title.

CAPCOM BUSY WITH HANDHELDS

Capcom is rumored to be working on a pair of handheld games for the PSP, as well as a title for the Nintendo DS. Devil May Cry: Dance of Sparda and a port of Resident Evil Outbreak are said to be in the works for Sony's system, while the DS will get a Devil May Cry of its own which will be animated in a more cartoon-like style similar to Viewtiful Joe.

Notice the football player to the left of the 2K Sports logo

VISUAL CONCEPTS BACK TO FOOTBALL?

We all know that 2K Sports and developer Visual Concepts are no longer doing NFL football games thanks to the NFL's exclusive deal with rival EA Sports. However, Visual Concepts has not dropped the pigskin just yet. Rumors have been flying for a while now that the studio was working on an NFL legends game – which would only require licenses with individual players and not the league itself – and there may be other hints that VC is returning to the gridiron. The company's new logo features a number of rendered athletes representing the company's various franchises – including a football player of an unrecognizable team. Mistake or sign of the future?

REGGIE TALKS REVOLUTION PRICE

Now that you've gotten to see the distinctive controller for Nintendo's Revolution, the company is slowly talking about other details for the system. Although he said an exact price has not been determined, Nintendo's marketing guru Reggie Fils-Aime told CNN/Money that there is no doubt that the system will be priced lower than both Sony and Microsoft's next-gen consoles. However, what is known is that Fils-Aime said that the system will not support high-definition televisions. In other chatter, Nintendo president Satoru Iwata said that the Revolution will come out between April 1 and the end of 2006. The launch will be near simultaneous, with the system releasing around the world over a 14-week period.

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

NAME THAT GAME
Test Your Sight

Capcom is well-known for its Street Fighter series, as well it should be – that franchise is fundamental to the fighting genre itself. But the company has also tried its hand at some other games in the genre. This peculiar title posits that high school kids around the world are disappearing, and the only way to get to the bottom of the mystery is for the remaining high schoolers to join together in a hand-to-hand fighting tournament. The game features team oriented battles and has characters based around your typical high school stereotypes.

(Answer on page 28)

BROTHERS IN ARMS MAKES HISTORY
HISTORY CHANNEL GETS IN ON ACTION

Just when you thought that the History Channel had covered every possible aspect of World War II, from Hitler's bed-wetting to what Churchill took for tea, the cable network is using video games to shed some more light on last century's most famous war.

Starting Sunday, December 18 at 8 p.m. EST/7 p.m. CST, the History Channel will start airing *Brothers in Arms*, a two-part special based on and featuring Ubisoft's strategic shooter of the same name. The video gaming franchise's second title, Earned in Blood, made our Top 50 Games of this year (check it out on page 91), and the folks over at the History Channel are using it to chronicle the adventures of the 101st Airborne, 502nd Parachute Infantry. Through real-life actor reenactments (shown here) and in-game footage, the shows will not only follow in the footsteps of the 502nd after D-Day, but demonstrate the importance and strategy behind certain crucial battles. Check your local listings for encore airings of the *Brothers in Arms* documentaries.

STAR WARS GALAXIES REBELLION
SOE EXECUTES ORDER NGE

Messing with the delicate sensibilities of Star Wars fans can get you into some trouble. Doing such with MMO Star Wars fans can be downright dangerous. Nevertheless, Sony Computer Entertainment has made sweeping, crucial changes to its Star Wars Galaxies MMO dubbed the New Game Enhancements (NGE), and the game's long-time fans are about as angry as Chewbacca losing at Dejarik.

The new changes to the game include reducing the character classes from 36 to nine, changing the combat system from a typical RPG system, and making it easier to become a Jedi. In essence, Galaxies producer Julio Torres says that the changes are designed to invite more new players to the game and to deliver a "heroic Star Wars experience."

But many of the MMO's players – particularly those that invested much of their time building up their existing characters – felt that these new changes undercut all the hard work they've put in developing their characters, strip away individuality, and make the game a shadow of its former self. Becoming a Jedi is a much, much easier experience, and many feel that the game's balance has been tipped too much in favor of newer players, as they felt SOE was trying to hard to make Galaxies a bad World of Warcraft clone. Although players had a chance to re-make their characters and still retain their level, many felt that Sony had pulled the rug out from under them.

A quick look at Galaxies' online forums at the time of this writing showed that all of the experienced players disliked the new face of the game, and many were quitting outright. For its part, SOE is offering incentives for old players to stay, and even offered up refunds for its recently released Trials of Obi-Wan expansion pack to those who bought it but are unhappy with the NGE. These changes rendered the player class quests of the Trials of Obi-Wan and Rage of Wookies expansion packs useless because of the overhaul of the classes. However, the refund period expired December 1.

TOP TEN
Lists...Everybody Loves Lists

Top Ten Overused Gaming Moments

10 The guy puking in the boat in any WWII game

9 The young hero's village burning down

8 Losing all your best powers after a short introductory level

7 "No, never mind that guy. I'm the REAL final boss!"

6 Explosion imminent. Time to evacuate – 4:59

5 The Princess/Girlfriend getting kidnapped...again

4 "Please guide this inept bungler from point A to point B!"

3 The door to the Science Lab is locked. Use Green Keycard to proceed.

2 "I'm just like you, with all your powers, except I'm evil."

1 Amnesia. Find a new disease!

Name That Game Answer: Rival Schools

news

TAKE-TWO TAKES OVER CIVILIZATION
FIRAXIS BOUGHT BY ROCKSTAR, 2K OWNER

Early last year Firaxis signed a publishing deal for its popular PC franchise Civilization (see our review of Civilization IV on page 152) with Take-Two, which put out the series under its 2K Games brand. Now Take-Two is buying developer Firaxis outright.

Terms of the deal were not disclosed, but all indications are that Take-Two is quite content to let creative director and game luminary Sid Meier and the rest of the crew over at Firaxis have continued freedom to create titles such as Civilization and Sid Meier's Pirates! to their hearts' content.

The acquisition of Firaxis leaves Take-Two with quite an impressive stable of developers that covers a wide swath of the video game market, from famous Grand Theft Auto creators Rockstar Games to sports studio Visual Concepts. The addition of not only Firaxis, but a co-publishing deal with Bethesda for the upcoming The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion, diversifies Take-Two's product considerably.

FROM PC TO PSP
SONY SELLS PSP MEDIA MANAGER

Sony is making transferring media such as photos or movies from your PC to your PSP easy with its PSP Media Manager kit. This was previously possible, but now Sony is making things much easier. The kit is available via download for $19.95 (at www.sony.com/mediasoftware) or through a boxed edition that also includes a six-foot USB 2.0 cable, sample media, and five free Sony Connect song downloads. This boxed edition is available through www.sonystyle.com for $29.95. A retail edition was not planned as of this writing.

The PSP Media Manager handles a variety of video, image, and audio formats, including MP3, WMA, AVI, MPG, WMV, JPG, GIF, and more. It also lets you set encoding quality settings such as your bit rate. Files are transferred between your PC and PSP via a drop-and-drag system, and the kit has other features, such as thumbnails for images for quick reference. The Manager also lets you subscribe to RSS feeds, video blogs, and podcasts. Finally, you can backup or store your PSP game saves by transferring them to your PC.

SEAMUSBLACKLEY

AGENT, CREATIVE ARTISTS AGENCY

>> Seamus Blackley is familiar to most gamers as one of the original architects of Microsoft's Xbox. Since leaving Microsoft in 2002, Blackley has been pioneering yet again in the video game industry, this time at Creative Artists Agency, the first major Hollywood agency to begin specializing in video game talent and projects. <<

For a lot of people, the idea of a talent agent working in video games is a fairly new phenomenon. Could you describe for our readers what it is that you do?

I think it's better to describe it like this: Steven Spielberg has an agent. Jerry Bruckheimer has an agent. I think it's important that Warren Spector has an agent and Tim Schafer has an agent and Will Wright has an agent. What the agent does is everything possible to create ideal conditions for that person to make awesome stuff. It's exactly that simple. It's everything associated with that. It means everything from deals to making sure that the packaging comes out right to making sure that the marketing is going well, and everything in between. The great lesson that was learned in Hollywood over the last many decades is that it's good business when cre-

sent Harmonix, which just released Guitar Hero.
We don't really list the client list, but the reason for that is pretty simple. Our entire work is about the clients, not about tooting our horn about who we work with. I've mentioned some of the guys previously, but we represent a cross-section of companies from Valve to id Software. I mentioned Will [Wright] and, at the other end of the spectrum, I mentioned guys like Tim Schafer. We help them in myriad ways like setting up television deals for them; a lot of these guys have amazing ideas for different media. Movie deals like the Halo deal, for instance, we just set up. Which is notable in that my partner Larry Shapiro worked very hard to ensure levels of creative control for the guys at Bungie in that movie. It's unprecedented and I think it speaks to the respectful nature that we have

not going to tell anyone that we did, because the CAA part of it isn't important.

Do you think that the Halo movie might have chance at breaking the terrible record of quality that game-based movies have had?

I think that the checkered history is [because] these deals have been seen as licensing opportunities or business deals driven by marketing needs or licensing departments. When you try to retrofit a game on a license or movie, or vice versa, without involving the creative people, you really aren't reaching the audience, because the audience can tell. Our philosophy in all of this is about getting the creative people together at the inception of every single project. That's really convergence. The people who are in charge of the studios and TV networks as

...suddenly you have film executives greenlighting big $150 million projects who are as excited to meet Will Wright as they are to meet any big Hollywood director.

ative people are doing creative stuff. It's bad business when they're distracted by anything. So, when you read stories about assistants being sent all the way across the city to find an exact size and type of bottled water that somebody wants – stories like that – they're exaggerated. But, in principal, what it's really saying is that Hollywood understands that the coolest stuff comes out of the smartest, most creative people who are really left to do great stuff.. really left to follow their vision. The job of an agent and this whole agency, Creative Artists Agency, is to remove impediments from creative people.

What other benefits are there for the game creators you represent, in terms of their careers?

What it means is that, when we have guys like Warren Spector, they have [access to] all of those motion picture agents working here, including the guy who does deals for Jerry Bruckheimer and the music managers who work on the careers of Marilyn Manson or Metallica. You can put together some really fascinating projects, none of which I'll specifically mention to you because [they] will kill me [laughs]. Essentially the deal is this large "connection" machine combined with the ability to create a force field of a protective bubble around these guys.

Are there any of the game clients that you work with that you can mention? I know you repre-

about the importance of getting the people who actually made the games connected with the audience as directly as possible.

You did a speech at DICE last year where you talked about the need for video games to seek out independent venture capital, and looking beyond the usual publisher/developer relationships. Is the Bioware/Pandemic deal an example of what you mean?

To make this more personal, I gave that big barn burning speech at DICE and have been very vocal about the sorts of things that need to happen to allow games to really take the next step as a medium. I think that the reason that I am here today as an agent is that I felt it was really important for me to put my money where my mouth was and try to make those things happen. Again, anything that happens in this industry in which the creative talent gets safer and gets in a better position to innovate is going to help the medium and is going to help everyone in it – publishers, developers, and most importantly, the fans. Actually, the morning of the announcement of the Pandemic deal, [Pandemic president] Josh Resnick called me up and was like, "Hey brother, look; it's all happening." I was ridiculously happy because every single time that something like that happens, that makes talent safer, it's great for everybody. That's really at the base of it all. There are deals that we've already done that we're

well are starting to be of the generation of gamers. That's going to be an enormous cultural shift, because suddenly you have film executives greenlighting big $150 million projects who are as excited to meet Will Wright as they are to meet any big director. Start a project with them and things start to get really interesting.

Do you try to get your developers more exposure as personalities? That seems to be lacking in the business. For example, it's common for a director like M. Night Shyamalan to be a guest on a late night talk show, but you'd never see that happen with Will Wright.

We agree very strongly with that. The way that we look at it is this – just from a strict business standpoint, the easiest way to sell things is with people. I think that something that Hollywood has done really well is leveraging the talent behind projects to sell projects. Everybody knows that a Steven Spielberg movie...

It's a big deal.

Yeah. There's a period of transition that we're going to go through in a few years which a lot of the publishers are a little uncomfortable with. [By] giving up some of that control they are going to actually gain a huge business advantage; by utilizing these incredibly articulate, funny, cool dudes to sell their games. It's just as simple as that.

A NEW VISION
FOR THE
GAME
BUSINESS

Seamus Blackley and the Creative Artists Agency are the first major Hollywood talent agency to begin focusing on video game management

GAME INFORMER 31

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ACTIVISION

MIDWAY HOME VIDEO ARCADE
BY BIGGAMES

Manufacturer: BigGames
Website: www.mybiggames.com **List Price:** $499

What's 62 inches tall, plays 12 original arcade games, and costs less than that '86 Tempo for sale by owner down the block? A BigGames licensed home video arcade unit, that's what. This is the first in what may become a continuing series for the company. The Midway edition features classics like Defender, Joust, Rampage, and Satan's Hollow, all in a sturdy (but slightly undersized) cabinet with all of the hardware you need. Just plug it in and flash back to the old school.

THE FULL GAMES LIST

- **Defender**
- **Defender II**
- **Robotron**
- **Joust**
- **Bubbles**
- **Splat**
- **Sinistar**
- **Rampage**
- **Rootbeer Tapper**
- **Wizard of Wor**
- **Timber**
- **Satan's Hollow**

[Shown with Xbox 360, not included]

tech

XBOX 360 CONTROL CENTER

Manufacturer: Joytech **Website:** www.joytech.net **List Price:** $99.99
This Microsoft-endorsed switchbox is packed with features that the high-def era requires. Four digital audio inputs, component video, S-video, and composite ports litter the back alongside one really unique feature -- a built-in five-port 10/100 Ethernet switch. An LCD automatically rotates to work with the 360's horizontal or vertical alignments, and the Control Center even has a removable faceplate.

etc

XBOX 360 FACEPLATE

Manufacturer: Microsoft
Website: www.xbox.com
List Price: $19.99
Staying true to its words, Microsoft is launching the 360 with some customization options for fashion-savvy gamers in the form of swappable faceplates. The initial batch includes Silver, Woody, and Hotrod, but we're sure to see promotional ones for special releases and as bonuses to hungry fans. A future addition will be dashboard themes built to coordinate with the faceplates.
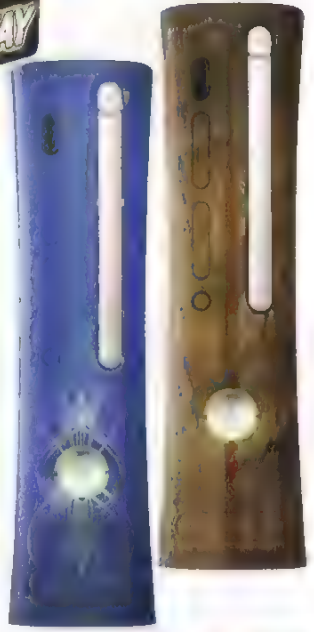
peripherals

MARIO KART DS BUNDLE

Manufacturer: Nintendo
Website: www.nintendo.com
List Price: $149.99

Unlike Nintendo's previous strategy, the new DS colors are all coming in bundles like this Mario Kart DS kit. For a slim price, the package offers Mario Kart DS, a Hot Rod Red console, a checkered flag wrist strap, and a variety of racing-themed decals like flames and numbers.

AMERICAN INTERNATIONAL TOY FAIR 2005

In honor of fall's greatest event, the American International Toy Fair (besides Halloween – who can argue with free candy?), we've collected the best video game figures coming out in the next few months. Many are early 2006 releases, so save up your post-holiday dough for some of this great gaming merch.

DOOM BFG MINI REPLICA

Manufacturer: First 4 Figures
Website: www.first4figures.com
List Price: $79.99
Limited to a numbered run of 1,500, this foot-long BFG replica is the first in a planned series of miniature Doom weaponry. The stand is included, but requires minimal assembly after purchase.
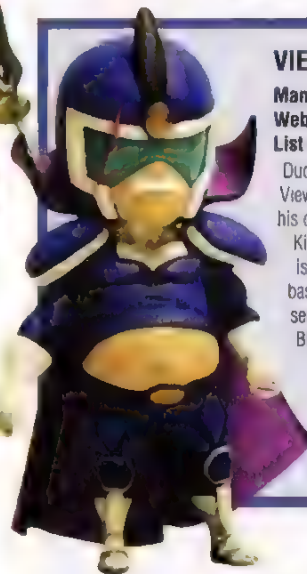
VIEWTIFUL JOE

Manufacturer: Jazwares
Website: www.jazwares.com
List Price: TBA
Dud is a harsh way to describe Viewtiful Joe's last two games, but his cartoon is rocking the timeslot on KidsWB With this success, Jazwares is planning four packs of figures based on the quirky characters of the series. Viewtiful Joe, Bianky, Captain Blue, Regular Joe, Charles the 3rd, and Captain Blue Jr. are each about four and a half inches tall, while Hulk Davidson, Fire Leo, and a different Viewtiful Joe will be around seven inches.

DRAGON QUEST VIII FIGURES

Manufacturer: Kotobukiya **Website:** www.diamondcomincs.com **List Price:** $18.99
Each standing around six inches high, these Dragon Quest VIII figures are a nice addition to any desk Imported by Diamond, the first wave includes Hero, Jessica, Yangus, and Angelo.
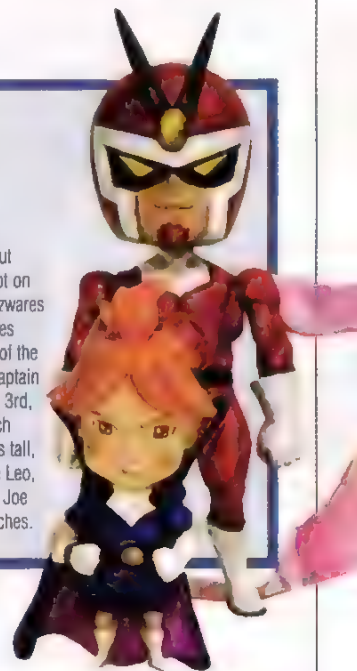
RESIDENT EVIL SERIES 2

Manufacturer: NECA
Website: www.necaonline.com
List Price: $11.99
We are gaga for these Resident Evil figures – they're big, bold, and super gory. This second wave, due out early in 2006, includes Garrador, Krauser, a handful of variants for the Illuminatus Monks, and two different looks for the Iron Maiden Regenerator.

KINGDOM HEARTS 2 "FORMATION ARTS" FIGURES

Manufacturer: Kotobukiya
Website: www.diamondcomics com
List Price: $12.99
These diorama figures culled from the large cast of Square Enix's upcoming Kingdom Hearts II were intended for Japan, but are being imported by North American distributor Diamond Thanks guys, you're swell!

SEAN CONNERY AS JAMES BOND

Manufacturer: Sideshow Collectibles
Website: www.sideshowtoy.com
List Price: $225.00

This one-quarter scale (about 18 inches tall) James Bond statuette is the pinnacle of 007 toys Sideshow's series of these large-scale figures generally includes moderate articulation and real fabric costuming. In fact, their upcoming Lord of the Rings line even uses leather and hammered metals for that series' iconic costumes. Be forewarned that the size and heft (around 30 lbs.) of this Bond incurs extra shipping costs

FINAL FANTASY VIII ACTION FIGURES

Manufacturer: Kotobukiya
Website:
www.diamondcomics.com
List Price: $23.99

It's a good season for Diamond — the company is importing a handful of great video game licensed toys that includes these six-inch FF VIII figures. Series one offers up Selphie Timmett, Rinoa Heartilly, and Squall Leonhart.
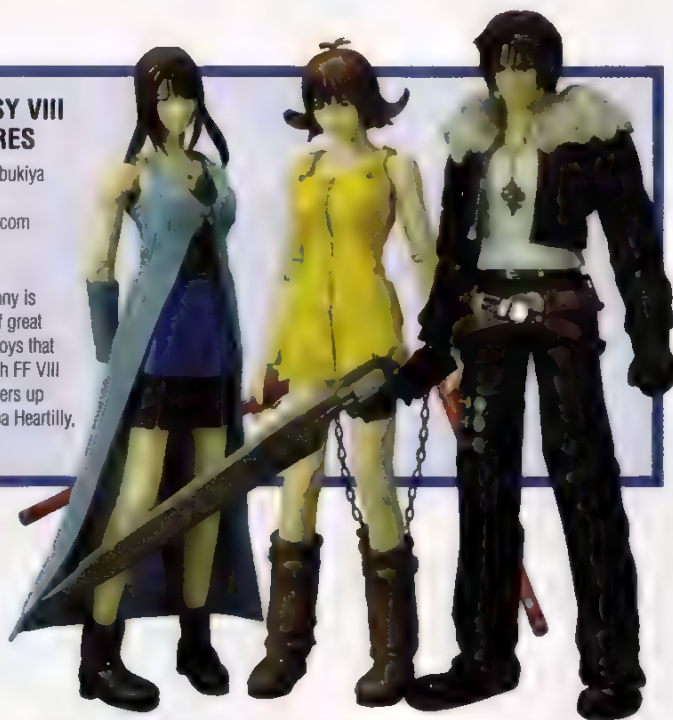
MORTAL KOMBAT ACTION FIGURES – WAVE 3

Manufacturer: Jazwares **Website:** www.jazwares.com **List Price:** $9.99

Based on designs from Mortal Kombat, Deception and Shaolin Monks, Jazwares' Mortal Kombat line will roll out a third group next year. The four figures will be Johnny Cage, Kano, Noob Saibot, and Reptile. The six-inch figures each have a bunch of articulation points, so get to recreating those climactic battles on your coffee table. Wow, that sounds a little sad.

THE CORPSE BRIDE

Manufacturer: McFarlane Toys
Website: www.spawn.com
List Price: $12.99

Based on the surreal Tim Burton animation flick that released this summer, McFarlane's take on the characters is so accurate it looks like the company must have used the original film sculpts. Each character (Corpse Bride, Victor, Victoria, Skeleton Girl and Boy, Dwarf General, and General Wellington) comes with a handful of accessories and a stand, as some of their spindly legs aren't too good for solid support. Affordable and wonderfully detailed, these are a must-have.

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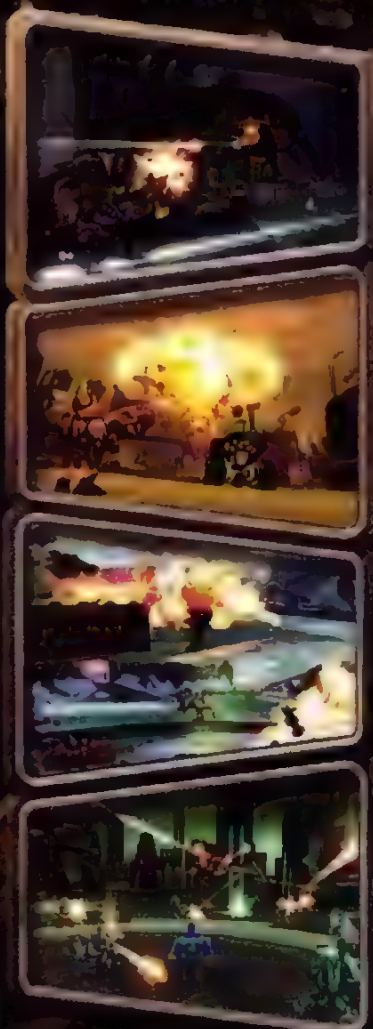
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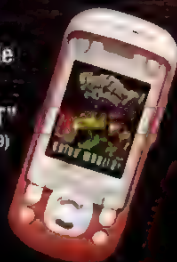
www.us.playstation.com   www.rcarsenal.com

THE REGURGITATION MOVEMENT

BY AMERICAN MCGEE, CREATIVE DIRECTOR, THE MAURETANIA IMPORT EXPORT COMPANY (TMIEC)

nnovation within interactive entertainment is being buried under a pile of regurgitated content. That content is served up by marketing-driven game development and a publishing model that stifles creativity. Limited development of truly new game genres, interface methods, and delivery systems means a lack of original content for you, the consumer. If the trend continues, you'll be stuck playing the games of yesterday when you could be playing the games of tomorrow.

The recent and increasingly obvious lack of movements in interactive entertainment is one sign of stagnation. Movements in the film industry marked periods of rebellious innovation and creativity that, to this day, continue to influence and enhance the production and experience of linear entertainment. Often movements were driven by alternately financed film productions that broke conventional rules of film language while inventing new genres and techniques.

The game industry has also had its movements, often coinciding with or driven by advances in technology. Over the years consumers have been presented with an exciting and often bewildering array of game technologies, platforms, genres, and distribution channels. The rabid consumption of this content has pushed industry growth at a blistering pace.

From a business perspective this success is a good thing because it drives gaming towards being the fastest growing entertainment segment in the world. Unfortunately, corporations crave sustainability and growth above all else, and these can only be achieved through predictability (i.e. licensed products, sequels). It is the nature of the beast: Corporatization of the games industry has led to a homogenization of game products that it produces.

Using another example from Hollywood, films were being experimented with for 20 years before they became a mass-market entertainment product. Early films were much like most of today's games, long continuous shots, filmed in first person, with highly linear plots. Concepts like multiple perspective storytelling, editing between perspectives, and temporal jumps were unheard of and had to be invented from scratch. Filmmakers had the time and the freedom to invent a language and to truly grasp what could be done with this new medium long before the executives showed up started talking about "formulas."

Sadly, in the current environment we'll never know what games could be. Video games have been turned into a multi-billion dollar "box product" industry before they even learned to walk, much less talk. We'll continue to be served what publishers know will give them the highest return for the least amount of risk. Innovation will happen only by accident or by slow degrees in the hands of the few designers who command complete creative control of their concepts. Taking a chance with an IP is seen as dangerous; publishers prefer safe bets that support their bottom line.

We are in the "regurgitation movement."

In their competition for your dollar, the major game publishers continue to up the stakes. Their production costs skyrocket, their development teams swell to nearly unmanageable sizes, and their development schedules lengthen. The marketing dollars being spent on a console game these days can meet or exceed the development costs. A single multi-platform game title can easily cost $25 million to develop, market, and distribute. This is a world in which titans clash.

But for every Goliath there is a David, and in this industry that David is taking the form of casual games distributed via the Internet aimed at the PC market. Every year publishers and retailers predict that the PC as a gaming platform is dead, and every year that prediction proves false. One has to wonder if this is wishful thinking on their part. While their costs skyrocket and their business model limits their ability to innovate quickly, the garage game maker is rallying the troops and preparing to stage a coup.

Truck Dismount, Grow, and the Crimson Room style of games are showing that there is a massive untapped market of casual gamers who get the cold shoulder from an ever more hardcore console game market. Companies that make casual games are reporting record incomes on products that cost almost nothing to make and less to market and distribute. These windfalls are allowing casual game developers to take more risks with the types of games that they develop.

Another hope lies in episodic game content developed and delivered in a TV-like fashion. One of the great things about TV development is that it acts as a creative Petri dish, giving writers and creators a chance to try new ideas every season in the form of pilots. I believe the advent of game pilots, delivered via systems like Valve's Steam, will do much to encourage creative development of game content.

Now add to the formula a concept that you think you despise, advertising-funded content, and you have the beginnings of a movement that could knock Goliath on his ass. Yeah, you retch at the idea of advertising in games or advertising-funded content, but hey, you're soaking in it. This magazine you're reading subsidises its existence on ad dollars. That gaming website you peruse while you should be working, same thing. Embrace it, and watch the game content mutate and breed like never before.

Then again, maybe the publishing giants will acquire all the small, cool companies, assimilate them into the machine, and destroy any chance of these ideas seeing the light of day. That is their game, and one that they are masters of. ■ ■ ■

> Corporatization of the games industry has led to a homogenization of game products that it produces.

sun	mon	tue	wed	thur	fri	sat

01 — YOUR REAL RESOLUTION DAY
On New Year's Eve, you probably made a really stupid resolution that dealt with silly things like bettering your life or helping others. Lame barfola! Don't worry, we have a brilliant backup plan for you. From this day forward, you will only talk to, wear, and eat things with interchangeable faceplates.

Metroid Prime Hunters

03 — NEW RELEASES
- Bust-A-Move Pocket – PSP
- College Hoops 2K6 – 360
- Dragon Ball GT: Transformation 2 – GBA
- Front Mission Online – PS2
- Guilty Gear: Dust Strikers – DS
- Jaws – PS2, Xbox, GC
- Metroid Prime Hunters – DS
- River King: A Wonderful Journey – PS2
- Top Spin 2 – 360, DS, GBA
- *Underworld* – UMD
- Wedding Dresses UMD

04 — DAY OF VENGEANCE INFINITE CRISIS SPECIAL
DC Comics' multi-year event continues in this special. Will Shadowpact finally be able to stop Spectre? Probably not, but in typical Infinite Crisis fashion, you know a bunch of heroes are going to die between pages one and 48.

06
Video game-inspired movies *BloodRayne* and *Grandma's Boy* open in theaters today. One film contains games, nudity, swearing, and old funny people. The other contains and actually smells like crap. Which one will you see?

BloodRayne

Grandma's Boy

10 — NEW RELEASES
- Electroplankton – DS
- Virtual Pro Wrestling Rumble – PSP
- Wild Arms 4 – PS2

Wild Arms 4
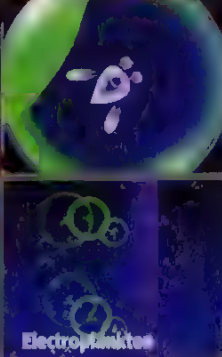
Electroplankton

13-15 — MAGFEST M4
Haters be damned! Run by fans for the fans, this video game convention is more about just hanging out and playing games than wheeling and dealing. If you just happen to be near Charlottesville, VA, you definitely gotta check out this convention...or party, as the hosts like to call it.

17 — NEW RELEASES
- 25 to Life – PS2, Xbox
- Ape Escape Academy – PSP
- Bounty Hounds – PSP
- Bully – PS2, Xbox

Bully

Bounty Hounds

18
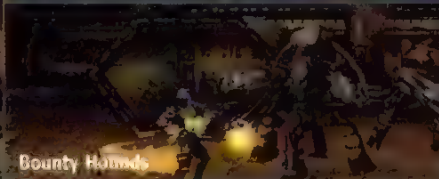
25 to Life

23
Underworld: Evolution sinks its fangs into the necks of theatergoers today. Kate Beckinsale battles against giant mutant Chihuahuas...oh wait, those are supposed to be werewolves.

Underworld: Evolution

24 — FINAL FANTASY TRADING ARTS VOL. 2
Square Enix enthusiasts are in for a real treat. This second collection of four-inch figures includes Zidane, Vincent, Tifa, Selphie, Tidus, Rikku, and a secret yet-to-be-named character. Check your local importer for these awesome figs today!

25 — STAR WARS: KNIGHTS OF THE OLD REPUBLIC #1
Set eight years prior to the video game series, this new monthly series by Dark Horse Comics centers on a Padawan named Zayne. Rather than working with the Jedi Order, Zayne is running from them. Framed for a barbarous act against the order, Zayne is on the run, forced to blend with the criminal underworld of the planet Taris.

26

Star Wars: Knights Of The Old Republic #1

31 — NEW RELEASES
- Age of Empires: The Age of Kings – DS

january

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DOUBLE AGENT

XBOX 360 | PLAYSTATION 2 | XBOX | GAMECUBE | PC
> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 6-PLAYER VIA XBOX LIVE, PS2 ONLINE, OR PC INTERNET OR LAN)
> **PUBLISHER** UBISOFT
> **DEVELOPER** UBISOFT SHANGHAI (XBOX 360), UBISOFT MONTREAL (PS2, XBOX, GC, PC)
> **RELEASE** MARCH

877-SF1SHER

To some Westerners, the Far East is a place of mystery and confusion. Half a world away, the major cities of Asia can feel simultaneously recognizable and totally foreign – places filled with different customs and language barriers, but peppered with familiar Western stores, restaurants, and other examples of the continuing globalization of the world. With its centuries of tradition, countries like China can be intimidating for unseasoned tourists, which is why the nation makes such a great setting for tales of espionage. The missions of Ubisoft's master spy Sam Fisher in the first three Splinter Cell games have taken him into the depths of China, as well as other Asian nations like Korea, Japan, and Indonesia. In his latest operation, Sam will once again be returning to China, finding himself in the city that serves as the modern heart of the country: Shanghai. But Sam's ties to the city go far deeper than just another mission, and his connection with it will find him in a situation that is unlike any he's taken on yet, one that will show gamers a side of the man they have never seen – half-broken and desperate.

UNDERCOVER IN THE EAST

Although Ubisoft's Montreal office has handled much of the development for the Splinter Cell series up to this point, the reins have been handed off to the company's younger Shanghai studio. Having previously taken on versions of games like Brothers in Arms and the multiplayer portion of Splinter Cell: Pandora Tomorrow, the Shanghai studio has landed its biggest project to date with the Xbox 360 version of the fourth Splinter Cell title. The team in Shanghai knows that this game is both their chance to prove themselves with a major project, as well as the crucial point in the series. It can't be too much of the same or too big of a departure. A misstep at this point could end the franchise, but the right move can rejuvenate it. So naturally, the Shanghai team has a big idea to change up the series and make it more accessible to new fans, while keeping what devoted followers like about the games. This new direction will definitely surprise some people, and is clearly reflected in the title: Splinter Cell: Double Agent.

Sam Fisher has taken on some monumental challenges over the course of the first three games, but none will be as difficult or as formidable as this one. As Sam is the symbol for it, it was critical to the team that he evolve along with the series. "We're going to break him," says co-producer Julian Gerighty, a little gleefully. Like many members of the Double Agent team, the French-born Gerighty relocated to Shanghai to be a part of the growing studio and the exciting projects it has in development. Sitting in the comfortable conference room of the Shanghai office, he explained to us what is in store for Sam Fisher, and it isn't pretty. As fans of the series know, Sam is an older man with a teenage daughter Sarah, who he doesn't see as much as he'd like. Unfortunately, tragedy strikes

Sam Fisher

D2334223424
Feb 5, 2008

Ellsworth Federal Penitentiary
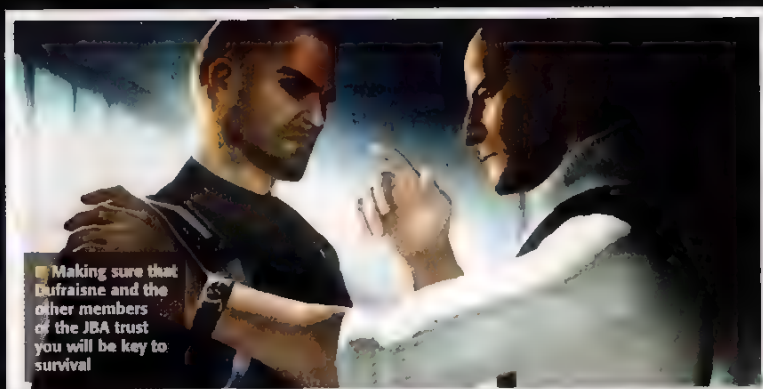
and Sarah is killed in a car accident. Away on a mission when she died, Sam is overcome with depression, struggling to deal with her death and his absence. Unable to concentrate on his critical work, his superior Irving Lambert is forced to pull Sam off of active duty.

Months pass, and Sam gets no closer to resolving his emotional trauma. Seeking solace in his work, Sam begs Lambert for a mission to distract him from his pain. Lambert offers him the only position he can: a mission as an NOC agent. CIA or NSA assets, NOC agents are Non-Official Cover operatives, meaning that they are inserted into criminal organizations to gather intel from within. But if their cover is blown, these agents are on their own -- the United States government will disavow any knowledge of their existence. As an NOC, any mistakes on Sam's part mean his death.

Immersing players in the world of international espionage more completely than any of the previous titles, Sam Fisher now finds himself going undercover to explore the motivations of a terrorist organization on U.S. soil called the JBA – John Brown's Army. The significance of the name hasn't been revealed, but is likely reference to John Brown, the anti-slavery crusader who raided a federal arsenal at Harper's Ferry in order to fund a personal army to battle pro-slavery forces. Convicted of treason, Brown was hanged on December 2, 1859. Like this historical John Brown, the JBA believe they must break certain laws in order to fight for what they believe is just and right. For Sam to discover these goals, he must first earn their trust, and the best route into their inner circle lies with a young man named Jamie Washington. But there is one problem -- he's in jail. To earn Jamie's trust Sam must break him out of prison. But first, he has to find a way in.

Sam and Lambert hatch an elaborate scheme to turn Fisher into one of the country's most notorious criminals. Using his military experience, Sam engages in a series of brutal and efficient bank robberies. Although the robberies are carefully staged by the NSA, Sam's final daring raid ends with a three-day hostage standoff and a carefully-faked death toll that lands Sam in Ellsworth Prison in Kansas, sharing a cell with Jamie Washington. Through some clever manipulations, Sam earns Jamie's trust, and together the two men (and the player) are tasked with getting out of the jail alive.

This early stage in the game clearly displays the big changes Double Agent has in store. Stripped of all his high-tech gear, Sam must use his stealthy nature and military skills to find a way out of prison with Jamie in tow, and thus earn an invitation into the JBA. Without his sophisticated night vision gear, darkness is no longer Sam's best ally, and he must use new forms of stealth, including chaos and distraction. Sam and Jamie break out of the prison by creating the best distraction they can – a full-fledged riot. In this level, Sam must not only use the madness around him to avoid guards and find a way through the heavily fortified jail, but he must also rely on Jamie's assistance. Drawing on the co-op mode introduced in Chaos Theory, Sam can order Jamie to execute cooperative moves, like boosts, shoulder climbs, and more. Though the campaign won't be playable with a second player, the AI has been retooled to act like a real human. Sam can give Jamie a boost to get around a locked door, and Jamie will then find a way to unlock it from the other side. Jamie can also help Sam get into new areas, so the player can then figure out a way to get the AI character through. Although players will only control Sam, many stages will use this type of cooperative gameplay mechanic with Jamie or another of the game's central characters. There will be far more important characters in Double Agent than the previous games, and if Sam is to maintain his cover, earning and keeping their trust will be key. Thus, these cooperative moments will be critical to success.

Once Sam breaks out of prison with Jamie, he'll be inducted into

■ Sam removes a carefully-hidden weapon, preparing himself to start some trouble in the jail

■ The cooperative moves introduced in Chaos Theory have now been integrated into the campaign mode and are essential to completing your missions
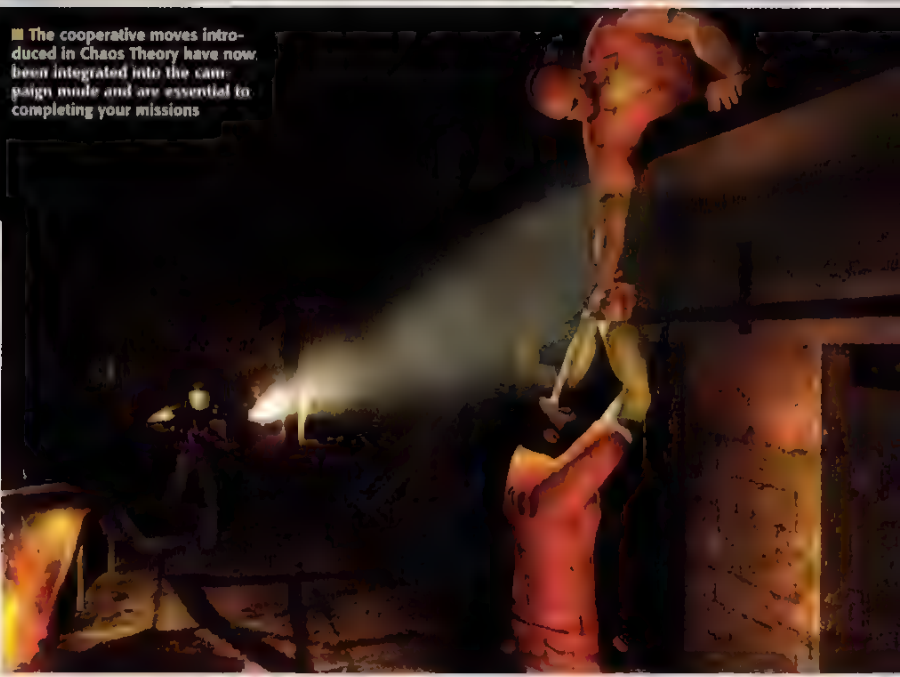
The world of international espionage is painted in shades of grey, and the decisions made by the player will primarily affect how the story plays out, rather than which side of the coin Sam's choice falls on.

■ Although dynamic lighting has always been a hallmark of the Splinter Cell series, the 360 version of Double Agent takes it to the next level

■ NSA agents help instigate the riot in the prison, but Sam may unfortunately have to use them as examples to maintain his cover
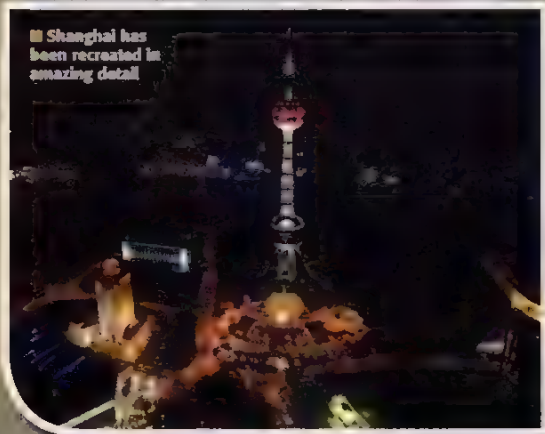
■ Shanghai has been recreated in amazing detail

the JBA, and from this point forward, Double Agent will play like no other Splinter Cell title before it. Although the gameplay mechanics and Sam's move set will remain basically unchanged, Double Agent has an entirely new take on mission objectives. Since he's still employed by the U.S. government, Sam will have NSA objectives that he needs to accomplish on each mission. But, because he's also passing himself off as one of the terrorists, he'll have JBA goals in each level as well. Ideally, Sam will be able to accomplish his NSA goals while simultaneously finishing his JBA goals and maintaining his cover. But sometimes, that simply won't be possible, and Sam will have to choose between the goals given to him by the two factions.

For example, one level we witnessed was set in a building inspired by the Jin Mao Tower, home of the Grand Hyatt Shanghai, the tallest hotel in the world. Accompanying the JBA leader Emile Dufraisne as his bodyguard, Sam is instructed to search the room of a Pakistani scientist as he meets with Dufraisne and steal a set of notes. However, his NSA objective is to eavesdrop on the meeting between Dufraisne, the scientist, and a third party and record the conversation. The team didn't want to spoil the secret of how to accomplish both goals, but did demonstrate how to listen in on the meeting: by rappelling down the side of one of the world's tallest buildings during a raging storm to record the conversation with a laser mic!
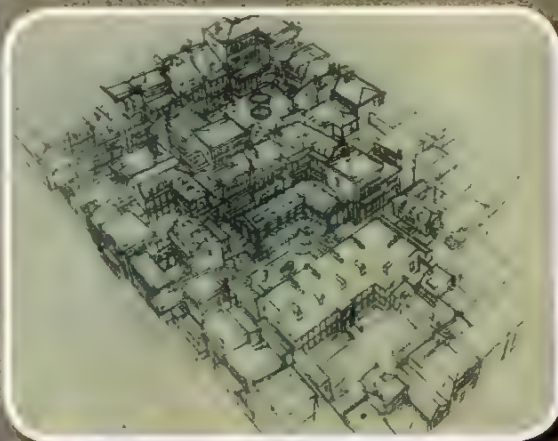
Of course, Sam will have to earn and keep the trust of the JBA before they will give him any missions, which plays into some other huge additions to the series. Several sections of the game will take place in the JBA headquarters, in which Sam will interact with several key JBA members to build relationships with them. And in other, more critical moments, Sam will have to make choices that demonstrate where his loyalties lie. At these points, players will have to examine their concepts of duty and morality, as Sam will be asked to make decisions with severe consequences. After escaping from prison, Sam and Jamie hijack a news helicopter

■ Throughout the course of the story, Sam will have to make a series of increasingly difficult moral choices. These will determine how the events unfold

for their escape, which they use to head back to the JBA base. Once there, Dufraisne asks Sam to do what will be the first in a series of increasingly difficult moral decisions: to execute the hostage helicopter pilot as a show of his loyalty.

Over the course of the game, Sam will be forced into several of these moments, and the results of his actions will always be made clear, so that the player can understand the gravity of his or her choice. But this is not a simple good or evil contest à la Fable or Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic. The world of international espionage is painted in shades of grey, and the decisions made by the player will primarily affect how the story plays out, rather than which side of the coin Sam's choice falls on. "No matter what decisions you make," Gerighty begins, "you'll never doubt that Sam is still a hero." These choices therefore serve as a tool to drastically increase the replay value of the game – for the first time in a Splinter Cell game, there is a branching story with multiple endings, giving the player a reason to go back through the game and make different choices.

Although much of the game will focus on the tension created by trying to uphold two disparate sets of goals and values, fans shouldn't worry that Double Agent will skimp on action. Looking back at the previous titles, the Shanghai team set out to meld the near-perfect technical gameplay of Chaos Theory with the more memorable and emotionally involving scenarios of Pandora Tomorrow. As such, Double Agent will feature some stunning levels that both go beyond what has been done in the series to date and draw upon the increased capabilities of the Xbox 360's next-gen

hardware. The prison level features dozens of angry inmates and guards locked in battle, the Shanghai stage recreates the city with stunning accuracy, and one mission even places Sam in the middle of a full-scale African civil war. Not only will this stage feature two distinct AI groups battling each other, but there will even be civilians caught in the middle of the conflict. Although Sam is allied with neither side, he can interfere in the battle if he sees fit or choose to stay hidden. But his usual tricks won't work in this

■ These two models show one the game's characters with (right) and without (left) normal mapping. Every character in the game will be just as detailed

Over the course of the game, Sam will don several unique costumes, including everything from his traditional ninja suit to his prison uniform, white arctic gear, and several more.

■ The multiplayer mercenaries are now called the Upsilion Force, and sport some new gadgets for hunting spies
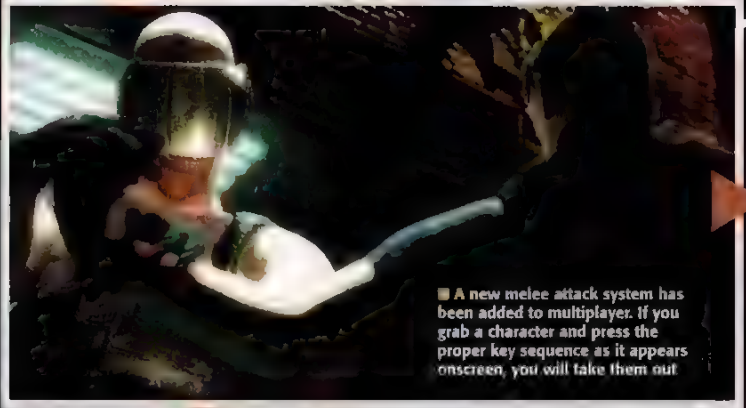
mission, as the entire stage takes place in broad daylight. Sam has to complete his goals without the comforting familiarity of shadows, and any civilians he chooses to rescue will put him immediately in the line of fire.

The Shanghai crew is focused on giving the player a variety of memorable scenes and creating moments that will imprint themselves on the player's memory. These scenes take place in daring new levels like the civil war, and also in what the team calls "directed moments." Directed moments are small, one-off bits of gameplay that formerly have been handled by cutscenes. The directed moment we saw involved Sam parachuting out of a plane to the chilly shores of Iceland. Rather than simply watching Sam jump in a cinematic sequence, players will control Sam as he free falls through the air. They can twist, flip, and do tricks in the air as much as they like until directed to open Sam's chute. Other directed moments include swimming, SCUBA diving, and more, usually taking place as Sam inserts himself into a mission area. These moments serve to bring a variety to the action that the team felt was missing from the previous games, and indeed are very different sequences than what has been featured in the series so far. Imagine a scene in which Sam swims through a sub-zero ocean, dives under a sheet of ice, bursts through the surface, grabs an enemy guard, and pulls him into the freezing water below!

Creative action sequences like this will only have their impact magnified by how amazing the game looks. Always a series known for its top-tier visuals, the latest Splinter Cell game is more beautiful than ever, thanks to the power of the Xbox 360. Double Agent features levels that are far larger and more detailed than anything in the series to date, and the Shanghai team brags that there are over 150 characters in the game, each with distinct looks – not even two grunts will look the same. These character models are obviously far more detailed than those in the previous games, but the team is going beyond the polygon count to make them look believable and distinct. One of the character modelers proudly showed off his contribution to the game – a display of the more than

■ A new melee attack system has been added to multiplayer. If you grab a character and press the proper key sequence as it appears onscreen, you will take them out

30 facial expressions Sam can now make, and a video that exhibited how fluidly the character can transition between them. Sam Fisher has always been a strongly defined character, but that has previously been due to the sharp writing and impeccable delivery of his lines by actor Michael Ironside. Now, Sam's face will contribute equally to his personality. Not surprisingly, the in-game model looks so good that it will also be used in Double Agent's rare cutscenes.

Of course, Sam isn't the only character that is receiving such strong attention to detail. The other characters will all feature similarly detailed models, and the main five will all sport distinct animation sets, which are smoother and more realistic than ever before, thanks to a seamless blending of key frame and motion capture animation. In the prison level, one section had Sam pulling himself across some ceiling pipes to bypass a patch of the riot, and we could actually see the individual muscles in his arms shifting beneath his skin. Over the course of the game, Sam will don several unique costumes, including everything from his traditional ninja suit to his prison uniform, white arctic gear, and several more. But there is another character that many players may be more excited to see in a variety of outfits: Enrica, a mysterious, sexy woman who serves as Sam's love interest for the game. Romantic entanglements with dangerous women have long been a staple of the spy genre, and Ubisoft Shanghai wanted to inject some of that vibe into the series for the first time.

Clearly, the team has huge changes in store for the single-player portion of Double Agent, and there are big updates in store for the multiplayer portion as well. The four-player spies versus mercenaries gameplay introduced in Pandora Tomorrow was a major innovation for both the stealth/action genre and online multiplayer in general, but the incredible devotion of some players created a hostile online environment that made it difficult for new players to get into the action. Experienced players would master levels and techniques so quickly that novices would find themselves killed before they could get a solid handle on the mechanics. Double Agent will change all that. The next-gen version of Splinter Cell's multiplayer has been in the planning stages since the completion of Pandora Tomorrow, and many decisions have been made that should greatly increase its online popularity without displeasing the devoted fans.

The basic setup of online Versus mode remains the same, with a team of spies trying to take an objective while a team of mercenaries tries to defend it. The spies still play in the third-person view, while the mercs (now called the Upsilon Force) remain in first-person. But the number of players has been expanded to three on each team, and the spies are more mobile and agile than ever before, while the Upsilon Force have new gadgets, such as a flying drone that can pursue spies into the confined spaces they themselves can't access. Spies can now transition seamlessly from any surface to another, meaning you

Director ... had ... player control actions that would normally be handled by cutscenes ...

The online spies also have some new tricks, and are more agile than ever before

THE SPIES
OF
TOMORROW AND TODAY

The technical differences between the Xbox 360 and the other consoles out there are obviously vast, and the current-gen versions of Double Agent won't be able to do everything that the 360 release can. Unlike some games that will appear on both generations of machines, the next-gen version isn't simply a prettier version of the current-gen game. The team at Ubisoft Montreal is working hard to emulate Ubisoft Shanghai's 360 version on PS2, Xbox, and GameCube. The Shanghai team is making the game they want to make, and the Montreal team is using smoke and mirrors to achieve similar goals on less-powerful hardware. For example, the prison level in the 360 version features dozens of guards and convicts duking it out in a massive riot, and the size of the level is far bigger than any the series has seen so far. The current-gen machines are unable to create a scene so big and complicated, but they can suggest it. Rather than show the whole riot, players will hear it, see flames, and witness small pockets of the conflict. While the story, areas, and art assets are shared across all the versions, the actual stages will vary due to necessity. The current-gen versions will also sport some exclusive features, both online and off. As the Xbox and PS2 versions of Double Agent simply can't feature the same online ranking system as the 360, these versions will see the debut of the long-awaited spy versus spy multiplayer, which won't be available on the next-gen release. Similar to how Ghost Recon 2 for PS2 and Xbox were different games with the same story and scenarios, the current-gen and next-gen versions of Double Agent will be distinct enough that hardcore fans will be compelled to play both.

These two surveillance photos are both in-game shots. Who is watching Sam?

can climb a pipe straight up to a ledge and start moving horizontally across it without hesitation. The camera now tracks with your character's head, so if you have your camera focused on a particular area, your teammates will be able to tell where you're looking by the position of your character's head. Each level will also be much easier to learn, thanks to landmarks that will be distinctly visible in each area, such as neon signs and graffiti, and have more vertical space than previous maps to take advantage of the spies' increased mobility. Learning the lay of the land will be more critical than ever, as reaching or defending an objective point is no longer the ultimate goal. To increase the tension and realism, spies will now have to locate an objective, capture it, and reach the extraction point to win the match. The Upsilon Force, naturally, has to stop them before they escape.

These decisions have been made to make it easier for new players to learn the levels, work with their team, and become familiar with the move set, and also to create a more immersive experience. Briefings at the start of each match will explain the objectives, and another new addition should please both new and returning players: a ranking system.

Just like Halo 2's matchmaking system pairs players with those of a similar skill level, Double Agent will divide gamers into rankings. But rather than an arbitrary numbering system, Double Agent ties its multiplayer into the

Splinter Cell universe with a clever rankings mechanic. All players will start as recruits, and these matches emphasize a pure expression of the stealth experience – few gadgets and a heavy focus on the hide and seek nature of the game. Players will first form a team, and accomplishing certain goals in a match earns a player Xbox Live Achievements, the reward system that is built into every 360 game. Earning achievements rewards your team with points, and points earn your entire team promotions to higher ranks, until you reach the level of a master spy like Sam Fisher. Once you reach the higher rank, you may be offered a position as an Instructor. Should you accept the role, you'll be placed on a team with two recruits, so that you can impart you wisdom and experience to the novice players. Not only does this new ranking system ensure that all players are squaring off with gamers of a similar skill level, it fits within the fiction of the franchise and encourages players to grow and learn.

The other aspect of the online experience that the series has offered is the co-op mode that was introduced in Chaos Theory. The moves and abilities of this mode have been largely incorporated into the campaign mode, and this game type has evolved into Challenge mode. While co-op mode was largely an exercise in figuring out where and when to use your teamwork moves, Challenge mode is a more freeform game type in which three players take on a group of AI-controlled enemies in scenarios that

Sam's first next-generation outing will see him in more realistic settings than ever before, and make the player approach stealth in a whole new way

are more along the lines of Splinter Cell's single-player missions. Challenge mode missions will also earn your team points, and can therefore be completed to advance through the ranks in Versus mode.

While the expanded teams, ranking system, and Challenge are natural evolutions of the multiplayer established in the last two games, once they get their hands on it, it will be clear to players that Double Agent's online modes are more than just polished versions of what they've played before. The next-generation hardware powering Double Agent means that there are new aspects of the gameplay that simply couldn't be done before. For example, while Splinter Cell is famous for its dynamic lighting, there have always been light sources that couldn't be extinguished, as current-gen hardware simply couldn't handle it. Now every single light source in the game can be dynamic – not only can you shoot out every light in a level if you wish, you can actually shut down the generator in some stages, plunging the entire area into complete darkness! Imagine a scenario in which the Upsilon Force has no choice but to search out the spies with the flashlights attached to their guns.

Clearly, the multiplayer aspect of Double Agent was designed around the Xbox 360, as it ties directly into the new features of Microsoft's online service and touts features that just aren't possible on the current

generation of gaming machines. Although the Xbox 360 release is the definitive version, the game is coming to current-generation machines as well, courtesy of Ubisoft Montreal (see sidebar). Regardless of which version that gamers choose, they should feel confident that they'll be picking up one hell of a game.

In our time at the Shanghai studio, we felt one distinct mood everywhere we turned in the office: dedication. Nearly every single expatriate we talked to mentioned that they had come to Shanghai specifically to be a part of the exciting projects being spearheaded by the studio. They had come from all around the world to be a part of the Double Agent team, and each person seemed completely determined to ensuring his or her contribution to the project was as good as it could be. Artists proudly displayed the sketches they had done for inspiration on an area, sound designers played individual music tracks to demonstrate how the score would react dynamically to the action unfolding in the game, and a character modeler produced some of the military clothing the team had purchased to ensure they captured the folds of the material just right. One animator even showed us the video he'd shot of himself jumping in a pool as reference material for how he'd animate Sam jumping into water. It was clear to us that everyone at Ubi would settle for nothing less than making Splinter Cell: Double Agent the best game in the series.

Thanks to their hard work, it seems likely that they will achieve their goal. While each game in the Splinter Cell series has been met with critical acclaim and strong sales, the Shanghai team is clearly aware of the potential pitfalls and opportunities of a fourth game. Their tenacity should make for a game that pleases the franchise's devoted fans, while making the somewhat niche stealth genre more accessible to new players. By delving into a plot that draws on more complex aspects of international espionage and creating branching paths, the campaign mode looks deeper than ever before, with a stronger replay value. The excellent multiplayer formula has gone through logical upgrades that should introduce legions of new fans to this truly unique online experience, while giving the hardcore players the reward of becoming instructors. Sam Fisher could have ventured back to China and beyond to tackle yet another set of missions with a new central threat, and that would have been enough for some players. But it wasn't enough for Ubisoft Shanghai. The team is bent on doing something different with Double Agent, and proving themselves as one of the company's most talented studios. These are two lofty goals, which is perhaps why they've chosen to give Sam Fisher two separate sets of objectives in his latest adventure. After all, if the studio can accomplish two difficult tasks at once, then their hero should be able to as well. ∎∎∎

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The Year In Review 2005

There's no such thing as a "slow year" in video games. The industry changes at lightning speed as new systems and groundbreaking titles redefine the gaming experience on a near-monthly basis. That said, 2005 was a more notable year than most. With two system launches and a ton of controversy, there was more than enough excitement to go around. Instead of a month-by-month recap of the year, we've decided to focus on the nine stories that changed gaming this year, and helped shape our industry for the years to come.

WILD ARMS 4

JUSTICE NEVER GROWS OLD
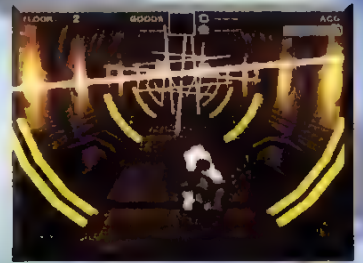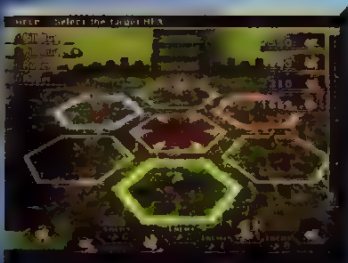
A boy from a village the war spared, a troubled girl on the run.
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MICROSOFT STARTS THE NEXT GENERATION

1

In going through the year's events to determine what would have a lasting influence, perhaps the most obvious was Microsoft's launch of the Xbox 360. After a shaky start, the company's Xbox platform enjoyed steadily improving sales and momentum over the past few years, gradually supplanting Nintendo as the number two home console maker in America.

Aiming to beat Sony to the punch, Microsoft came out swinging, launching the new system in both America and Europe on November 22nd (with a December release in Japan). Some have speculated that this timing is too soon, that the company is leaving itself open to being trumped later by Sony's PlayStation 3. Still, this is likely the only way that Microsoft could hope to seriously gain an advantage over the PlayStation brand, which has dominated sales for two consecutive console generations.

Still, delays in getting finalized "beta" development kits did take a toll on the console's launch lineup. Although Rare delivered its two high-profile titles (Kameo: Elements of Power and Perfect Dark Zero) on time, some titles, like THQ's Saint's Row and 2K Games' The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion, slipped into 2006. Although the launch lineup was dotted with big franchises, many of the games, particularly EA's sports lineup, felt more like prettied-up versions of the current-gen editions of the franchises. Some have worried whether this will negatively affect consumer perception of the console and that Sony, with its likely autumn 2006 launch, will debut with more groundbreaking software.

"They touted their ease of development; yet the most next-gen, real-time footage that we've seen has all been demoed on PS3 hardware – the Unreal 3 demo, the Fight Night Round 3 demo, and Metal Gear Solid 4," commented *Newsweek's* general technology editor N'Gai Croal. "That scares me for next gen as a whole. Microsoft is showing games. And while the games look better than current-gen games, it ranges from a little better to somewhat better. I'm not seeing a lot better. When I think 'next gen' and conjure images that I have in my head, it's either visual concept footage like Killzone or it's real-time footage that's real but not interactive, not playable."

So, what do we have in Xbox 360? Well, right now it's an attractive box packed with a powerful chipset and a whole lot of potential. The feeling in the development community on Xbox 360 seems to be overwhelmingly positive, and the company has already made some important inroads with Japanese publishers like Square Enix and Capcom. This is an important fact to note, since poor software support in Japan essentially crippled the original Xbox in that country.

Still, so much of what Microsoft seems to be staking its fortunes on are things of a more ephemeral nature – most notably its efforts at community building and personalization in Xbox Live [see page 78 for more]. In an effort to reach its self-stated goal of "one billion" gamers, it's going to take more than just next-gen visuals and strong software. If console gamers are truly ready to take the plunge into a fully realized online universe, it's quite likely that the Xbox 360 could unite the once-fractured world of gaming into a global community. If not, then the company could fall short of its goal of supplanting Sony as the dominant company in video games. Either way, the Xbox 360 appears to be one hell of a console, well designed and well supported with triple-A software franchises. If Microsoft succeeds in gaining the leadership position in home consoles, it would be the first time an American company has done so since Atari, and will represent one of the biggest sea changes in industry history.

2 PSP DEBUTS, UMD MOVIES TAKE OFF

Aside from a few odd pretenders to the throne, Nintendo's essentially had the handheld market to itself for close to 20 years. In 2005, the company was faced with the only serious threat to its dominance yet, the Sony PlayStation Portable.

■ *House of Flying Daggers* and *Resident Evil: Apocalypse* were the first two UMD titles to sell over 100,000 copies

Debuting in the U.S. on March 24, the PSP is clearly the most advanced handheld ever released. As Nintendo concentrated on creating new gameplay paradigms with the DS, Sony aimed the PSP in the same way it has the rest of the PlayStation brand: as a high-tech gaming device with serious multimedia capabilities.

Priced at $250 (an unheard-of figure for a modern handheld), it came out of the gate a bit slow with the launch day allotment of units not selling out for weeks. However, over the course of the year the PSP quickly established a large installed base. Right now, Sony claims that 2.4 million PSPs have sold in North America, with 10 million shipped worldwide, and it expects to double its American user base by the end of the 2005 holiday season. Rival Nintendo claims that PSP has sold only two million, and that DS has steadily outsold Sony's handheld each month since the release of Nintendogs. In any case, it's clear that PSP is the first true challenger to Nintendo's crown, and given that the '05 holiday season will be its first, it's

likely that it will increase its sales figures even more by the time this issue is published.

While clearly a success from a business standpoint, PSP's performance as a game machine is a bit spottier. While it featured a solid launch lineup, many gamers expressed misgivings that there were too few titles available as the year went on, and that too many were just adaptations of current home console titles. Outside of the excellent puzzler Lumines and Konami's unique Metal Gear Acid, there was a distinct drought of truly exciting PSP software as the year went on. Things took a turn for the better in late summer with EA releasing a great version of Madden NFL 06, followed in October by PSP's first true potential blockbuster, Rockstar's Grand Theft Auto: Liberty City Stories.

Despite some of the criticisms, *Newsweek's* N'Gai Croal thinks it's too early to say the PSP is a disappointment on the games front. "To me, it is much too early to write PSP off as a game machine; I don't think it makes sense," comments Croal.

"They're doing more than well enough as a game machine right now in terms of sales. I think there's room for the quality to improve, but that's always the case. If you look at the 360 lineup right now, a lot of stuff is very derivative of current-generation games."

If things were slow on the games side, PSP more than made up for it with the totally unexpected, massive success of UMD movies. While many were anticipating a slow and steady growth of prerecorded UMDs, the public took to the new format in droves, driving sales of two UMD films, *Resident Evil: Apocalypse* and *House of Flying Daggers*, over 100,000 each by the end of May (by comparison, it took more than a year for the first DVD to top 100,000). It looks like Sony's decision to include free *Spider-Man 2* UMDs with the first one million PSPs sold might well be the business decision of the year. So far, some estimates have Hollywood raking in nearly $250 million in UMD sales by year-end, and movies are making up over 50 percent of UMDs sold. The only kink in its plans is Sony's complete failure to deliver a

viable plan for downloadable content on the PSP. Despite the fact that the unit's Memory Stick can store MP3s, Sony continued to cede that territory to Apple's iPod, and even let Jobs and co. establish a foothold in the digital video market with the new video iPod, an initiative that might someday cut into UMD movie sales as well as Sony's planned PSP download service.

No matter what happens, PSP has changed the handheld game forever. Sony entered a market where it had no history, and gave a serious challenge to the current leader's new system in less than a year. It did it with a unit that was priced dramatically higher than past handhelds. Most importantly, the PSP represents the first time that a handheld came to market with graphical capabilities that are very close to the current home consoles. For the first time, a handheld offers us deep and immersive play experiences in true 3D with titles that are comparable to the games we're playing at home right now. That's certainly progress, and raises the bar for all future handheld systems.

MIDDLEWARE WARS: THE RISE OF UNREAL ENGINE 3 AND THE DECLINE OF RENDERWARE

It's no secret that, as games became more and more complex, publishers and developers increasingly turned to pre-made rendering and animation tools known as "middleware" to both increase the speed and ease of game creation, and save precious dollars that would otherwise be spent on creating custom-made graphics engines.

For the last few years, the middleware solution of choice in the industry has been Criterion's RenderWare. The English firm, which also develops such titles as the Burnout series and the upcoming Black, had essentially dominated the console development scene, with over 500 titles for PS2, Xbox, and GameCube taking advantage of the easy-to-use toolset – by its own estimate nearly one in four current-gen products.

In July of 2004, the company was purchased by U.S. super-publisher Electronic Arts, who was looking for an easy solution to next-generation cross-platform development and prized Criterion's technical know-how. At the time, both EA and Criterion said that RenderWare would continue to be readily available to any and all developers, and Criterion head David Kau-Lee promised in an GamesIndustry.biz interview that, "Right now, it's business as usual. Our intention is to continue exactly as we have before. The way to think about it from the RenderWare side of things, is that previously we had a parent company, and that was Canon, and now we have a new parent company and that's EA. In terms of how we operate and in terms of what we're doing, you know, business as usual."

Whether or not this was sincere, there were serious misgivings throughout the development community, which worried about the implications of a major competitor controlling one of the most used toolsets in the industry. An anonymous poster on GameDev.net best summed up the mood:

"EA is our competitor. That means that if we use RenderWare, they will make money off of us. When Criterion owned RenderWare that was not much of a problem, but with EA owning it now, who's to say they will [leave] the best features/fixes out to us while they keep everything to themselves to make their products look better. This is business, you do not do business with your competitors so they make money off of you."

Another added: "Here's a scenario. You've licensed RenderWare and you're developing a very cool third-person action/adventure game, but you've got a problem with your killer feature that you need to work with the RenderWare guys to get working. So, how comfortable are you going to be with sending those code samples to EA?"

In 2005, the console middleware market was a vastly different place, as the industry saw the rise of Epic Games' Unreal Engine 3 Technology as the industry standard. Epic's Unreal engines had been extremely popular in the PC market for years, but the company was quick to capitalize on misgivings about EA and RenderWare with impressive demonstrations of its Unreal Engine 3 technology running on both PS3 and Xbox 360, stunning crowds at E3 particularly during Sony's PS3 press conference.

Soon, a host of high-profile developers and publishers signed on as Unreal Engine 3 licensees. Such companies as BioWare, Midway, Buena Vista, Vivendi Universal, Brothers in Arms creator Gearbox, Silicon Knights, Real Time Worlds, and Atari have all announced that they will be using Unreal Engine 3 tools for next-gen development. Interestingly, Epic is even starting to crack the Asian market, where companies have traditionally avoided using Western middleware, as Namco and Korean powerhouse NCsoft are also licensing the engine. Even more importantly, both Microsoft Game Studios and Sony have announced that their development kits will support Unreal Engine 3 technology. By comparison, we could find no announcements of third-party companies using RenderWare for next-generation projects, and the RenderWare website lists only current-gen console projects as using the engine. Of course, it will be used across the board on all of EA's next-gen titles.

If 2005 in any indication, Epic seems to have pulled into a clear lead as the next-generation middleware solution of choice in the industry. Whether or not RenderWare can mount a comeback (or if EA ever truly meant to keep licensing out the technology in the first place) remains to be seen; but right now it appears that, if you're going to be gaming on Xbox 360 or PS3, odds are you'll be playing a game powered by Unreal Engine 3.

Epic's Unreal Engine 3 engine is capable of stunning texturing and lighting effects, making it tremendously popular for next-gen development

Even as the next generation gathers steam with the successful launch of the Xbox 360, one can't help but notice that new system launches aren't quite as exciting as they were back in the '80s and '90s. While we certainly aren't jaded enough to not be amazed at the gorgeous graphics and cinematic experiences that 360 and the PS3 have in store for us, the fact remains that there hasn't really been a truly revolutionary console launch since 1996, when the N64 was released.

■ Nintendo's motion-tracking controller could revolutionize gameplay as we know it

4 NINTENDO'S GAMEPLAY REVOLUTION

Of course, each successive generation will allow for vast improvements in visual presentation. Powerful rendering technology will let game designers attempt more and more elaborate scenarios. However, the relative leap between, for example, Xbox and Xbox 360 just doesn't compare to moving from the Atari 2600 to the side-scrolling adventures of the Nintendo Entertainment System, or when you first experienced true analog control and 3D environments in Super Mario 64.

After having lost ground to Sony's PlayStation brand for two successive home console generations and facing a serious threat from Microsoft's Xbox in America, Nintendo seemed to be playing an entirely different game altogether in 2005. Adopting the philosophy that chasing the competition's tech spec numbers is a fool's game, the company appears intent on redefining the gameplay experience for the next generation of gamers.

Of course, the most tangible example of this new approach in 2005 was the success of the Nintendo DS. Offering a completely new style of touch-screen control, the unit

quickly gained a rabid audience in the U.S. and (especially) in Japan. The handheld's sales were buoyed by the August launch of Nintendogs, a charming pet simulator that has already sold in excess of two million copies worldwide. If anything, the DS and Nintendogs seems to prove Nintendo's theory that there is a real thirst in the gaming community (and beyond) for games that challenge traditional design paradigms.

Little did we know that the DS was only the beginning of this bold new strategy. In September, Nintendo finally unveiled its much-anticipated design for the Revolution controller at the Tokyo Game Show. Many of the company's main players, including president Satoru Iwata and development head Shigeru Miyamoto had hinted that it would be a departure from conventional controller design. They weren't kidding. Resembling a DVD remote with a minimal button configuration, the unit will use motion sensors placed on the television to allow players to manipulate onscreen action by swinging the controller like a sword, for example. If developers embrace it, the Revolution will represent the first sweeping

change in controller design since Nintendo itself debuted the d-pad with the NES in the mid-'80s.

It's too early to say just how this scheme will work, but a large number of developers and publishers seem to be ready to embrace the daring new system. "What we're seeing from this controller is the same thing we saw with Nintendo DS," said Chuck Huebner, head of worldwide studios for Activision. "It's a system that's designed with an eye on enticing new players to the video game industry, and that's something we firmly support."

However, not everyone is so supportive. Epic Games' famously outspoken vice president, Mark Rein, recently bashed the controller at an IGN Live event. "Don't kid yourself," he argued. "You're going to see more gimmicky, crappy, cheap, 'I wish I hadn't bought it' gimmick games based around that controller than you can ever possibly imagine. I guarantee you there's going to be lots of people who say the whole reason for this game is this controller; we made the perfect game for the controller. And all it'll be about is the controller and not necessarily a great game."

It should be pointed out that Rein, as an employee of one of the most popular middleware tool companies for PS3 and Xbox 360, isn't exactly speaking from a neutral position. Still, his place in the industry as a tools provider probably gives him a better perspective than most to gauge the current needs and desires of the development community. Also, Epic's success and independent status means that he's largely free of the PR constraints placed on employees of the major publishers.

In all likelihood, there is probably some truth to his concerns. However, there's also truth in Nintendo's idea that innovation in gaming must come in areas other than just graphics and technology. For anyone that's been playing a great number of games in recent years, there's a definite glut of "me-too" action titles, ranging from cookie-cutter shooters to uninspired hack n' slashers. Nintendo's designers are staking their future on the premise that gamers will flock to something new and original if given the chance. If you genuinely care about the future of games as an art form, you can't help but wish them well.

Ubisoft's Shanghai studio currently employs roughly 600 staffers, and that number will grow to over 1,000 by 2007

Although this process has been happening for years, 2005 brought home the point with startling clarity: The little video game business has grown up, and now resembles any major entertainment industry. As the costs of production steadily increase, more and more of the true power in the industry is concentrated in the hands of a few huge mega-publishers. Although this certainly provides benefits for both gamers and developers, as it allows for more efficient sharing of resources and more money to be spent on certain projects, it is also changing the traditional face of the art form, which since its inception has looked to small start-ups as the source of innovation and progress.

In the current climate, large companies are looking to secure their creative talent farther beyond the traditional single- or multi-game publisher/developer deals of the past. Often, all it takes is one well-received game for a developer to suddenly find itself a part of a major publisher's stable. The examples of this in 2005 were almost too numerous to list. Midway, fresh off buying Paradox (Shaolin Monks) and Inevitable Entertainment (Area 51), continued its buying spree by purchasing The Suffering developer Surreal Software. Activision, which already owns many of its most trusted development houses like Neversoft, scooped up longtime partner Vicarious Visions, which was in the process of making the Xbox port of Doom 3. Additionally, in January, Take-Two Interactive made respected sports developer Visual Concepts a wholly owned subsidiary. Later, Take-Two added Civ developer Firaxis to its stable.

Larger scale mergers were also a commonplace occurrence, as well-known and respected publishers joined forces in the face of rising costs and sagging sales. In May, two long-standing Japanese toy and game manufacturers, Bandai and Namco, merged, dispelling persistent rumors that Namco and Sega had been courting each other. In Europe, SCI bought Tomb Raider publisher Eidos, winning out in a heated bidding war with Elevation Partners, a group partially funded by U2 frontman Bono and ex-EA head John Riccitiello.

Even if a company wanted to stay independent, it proved easier said than done in 2005. Electronic Arts, which already dominates the industry, showed a willingness to make hostile moves against both partners and rivals. Despite protests from many shareholders, EA was successful in a takeover of Battlefield 2 developer Digital Illusions CE. In the year's most controversial move, it also purchased a 20 percent share of French super-publisher Ubisoft, which was seen as a possible prelude to a takeover bid. Despite the reluctance of Ubisoft and stern statements from the French government, the deal went through, although EA has since made no further overtures. Also heated was a lawsuit between developer Spark Unlimited and Activision. Spark accused

5

CONSOLIDATION, CONTROVERSY STRIKE THE GAMES BIZ

Sega's Shenmue Online is currently being developed in Korea by JC Entertainment

Activision of handing over its plans for Call of Duty: Big Red One to internal developer Treyarch in order to increase profits, while Activision rallied back with charges of mismanagement and incompetence on Spark's part. Other developers that struggled in this new climate were respected studio Ion Storm, which Eidos dissolved and rolled into its Crystal Dynamics teams, and Myst creator Cyan Worlds, which went out of business temporarily and later secured funding to continue operations.

It's no surprise that workers in the industry were less than satisfied with some of the new realities of the business. In October, EA settled a $15 million lawsuit brought by employees who felt they were owed back overtime wages. Despite this settlement, rumors of discontent with EA and its modular "factory" style development process persisted. *Newsweek's* N'Gai Croal speculates that these concerns have less to do with the actual money or time involved, but rather with EA's breaking of the traditional "team" mold for game development.

"The bigger EA gets, the more they absorb, the more the people in there are numbers," Croal said. "If you're doing the tree design for level 12 of the DS version of Harry Potter, it's hard to feel like a really valuable contributor. Eventually those guys are going to say, 'I'm not moving up, I need to go out and find something.'"

Of course, faced with unrest in the U.S. and Europe, many publishers are following the lead of other industries: looking to the emerging Chinese marketplace, where

workers are plentiful, well-educated, and much cheaper. Ubisoft, Sega, and Midway already have large-scale operations in place, and EA opened a new studio in China in 2005, which will eventually staff more than 500 employees.

One thing is clear: It's certainly harder to be an independent, small game developer that owns its own IP than it has been in years past. While that era might not be completely over, it's quickly coming to an end. However, there may be more inventive solutions to the problem. Towards the end of the year, two of the industry's most respected developers, BioWare and Pandemic, joined forces in a merger funded partially by Elevation Partners [for more details, see page 18]. This partnership, on paper at least, seems to be a match made in heaven. Two creative, innovative companies, coming together with heavy financial support from a venture capital firm, allowing them the money to take chances on daring projects and more aggressively negotiate for both creative freedom and ownership of their properties with publishers.

Talking with several top industry professionals off the record, 2006 could very well see more deals of this nature as developers court venture capital from outside of the games business to fund their projects. Although the future of games will most certainly see more and more resources in the hands of fewer and fewer companies, we hold out hope that the creative people of our industry will find innovative ways to get their visions into the hands of the public.
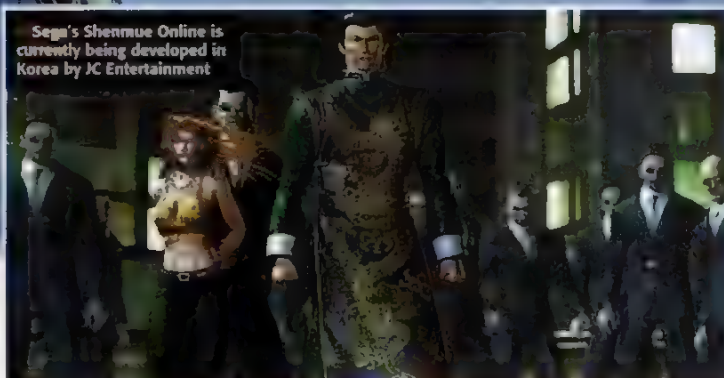
China's cheap labor markets and strong production of math and science majors makes it an ideal talent pool for game development

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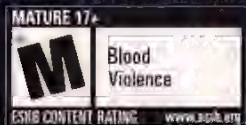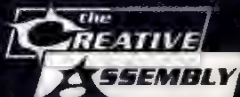
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PlayStation 2

6 HOT COFFEE BURNS THE INDUSTRY

Controversy surrounding violence and "adult" content in games is certainly nothing new, but in 2005 these issues seemed to be coming to the forefront like never before, mostly thanks to a scandal surrounding Rockstar's infamous and highly successful Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas. As the year began, who knew that the words "Hot Coffee" would take on such a salacious new meaning?

The trouble started in June, when the PC version of Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas was released. Soon, pictures of the game's main character C.J. and a female engaging in several explicit sexual acts started circulating the Internet. Making what would later prove to be a crucial error, publisher Rockstar Games claimed that that scenes were not a part of the game, rather a result of a user-created mod. "In violation of the software user agreement, hackers created the 'Hot Coffee' modification by disassembling and then combining, recompiling, and altering the game's source code," read a statement released by the company at the time.

Unfortunately for Rockstar, Hot Coffee cheat codes (which work with the easily available Action Replay Max device) soon began to appear on several popular gaming blogs and cheat code sites. Although difficult and time-consuming, several news sites tested the PS2-compatible codes and it became clear that Hot Coffee did, in fact, exist somewhere in the game's original code, since users cannot modify console games.

This directly contradicted Rockstar's previous statement on the issue. Apparently, the truth was that the content had been created by developer Rockstar North, but later pulled from the game. Unfortunately, the actual code remained in the game as an artifact of the development process, allowing it to eventually be accessed through cheat codes.

The Entertainment Software Ratings Board, which oversees the content of all video games, acted swiftly, looking to make an example of Rockstar. All existing copies of San Andreas were reclassified as Adults Only and, as such, pulled from most major retailers. Rockstar was forced to take back all current retail copies, recompile a version of the game that didn't include the Hot Coffee scene, and restock stores with new, Mature-rated discs. All told, it's estimated that the scandal cost the company between 20 and 40 million dollars in publishing costs and lost sales.

Of course, the politicians soon stepped in with Senator Hillary Clinton calling for an FTC investigation of the Hot Coffee scandal

to explore how the game was mislabeled as Mature instead of Adults Only, and vowing to look into legislative ways to stem the violent content in games. Oddly, video game violence is one of the few areas in which Republicans and Democrats seem to be united, as California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger signed legislation that would require warning labels to be placed on games and would also levy fines against retailers that sold M-rated titles to minors. The Entertainment Software Association is currently challenging that bill, as well as a similar one in Michigan.

Unsurprisingly, eccentric anti-game crusader Jack Thompson was all over the place, decrying Rockstar's GTA and Bully franchises, comparing ESA head Doug Lowenstein to Hitler, and getting in a well-publicized feud with popular Internet comic strip Penny Arcade. The lawyer also offered a $10,000 donation to the charity of Take-Two Interactive president Paul Eibler's choice if any game developer would make a game in which the goal was to murder the executive (he later reneged on the deal when some modders actually made the game).

While Hot Coffee eventually cooled, the spillover from the controversy will affect the industry for years to come. For one, companies across the board will have to be much more careful in making sure that there is no objectionable content hidden somewhere in their code. In addition, the scenes of video game characters having sex onscreen will be a visual that

■ **Controversial game critic Jack Thompson**

can be easily pulled out when a politician or social critic wants to demonize video games. In this way, the scandal will haunt the industry for a very long while, especially for Rockstar's games.

What's probably more troubling is the fact that all the bluster and posturing on both sides will further delay what's really needed: an adult and reasoned discussion about video games' place in our culture, and what (if any) effect the art form has on people who play games. If 2005 is any indication, scare tactics and rhetoric are going to continue to overshadow real dialogue. Speaking recently with *Newsweek's* N'Gai Croal, he lamented the situation.

"We almost don't have the vocabulary to discuss it, even those of us who believe in games as a medium and freedom of creativity," observes Croal. "There's still something slightly different about it. You're making the choices; you're the one pulling the trigger. These questions are not going to go away. A lot of it will depend on the science, but I don't think that science will ever fully explain it. I doubt you're ever going to find a direct correlation between video games and real violence, but my gut tells me that there are some very important debates that need to be had about interactivity and its effect on people before we get to the 'holodeck' level [of technology]. My fear is that, by the time those debates are had seriously, it's going to be too late."

The Hot Coffee mode depicted scenes of explicit sex between C.J. and a female character

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7

DIGITAL HOLLYWOOD: GAMES AND MOVIES LEARN TO PLAY TOGETHER

Video games' relationship with movies has been a troubled one...usually resulting in bad games based on movies and bad movies based on games. Usually making a game into a movie or a movie into a game is similar to a drunk guy deciding to try his hand at blackjack for the first time in Vegas. A lot of money is lost, and everybody goes home embarrassed.

In 2005, while the situation is still far from perfect, it was apparent that Hollywood and the game industry were beginning to understand that there needs to be a more real partnership in order to make games and movies that will be embraced by an increasingly discerning audience. This partnership needs to work, because both businesses are merging their intellectual properties and talents at an unprecedented rate.

From Quentin Tarantino's cult hit *Reservoir Dogs* to a brand-new property created by horror master George Romero called City of the Dead, dozens of movie-based games were in various stages of development. More notably, many of the games are based on

classic, "heritage" properties, not just the current crop of summer action blockbusters, including EA's The Godfather, Vivendi's Scarface, and an untitled game project based on Clint Eastwood's *Dirty Harry* films. In Japan, Koei began work on a game tentatively titled Oni, which will be released in conjunction with the film of the same name based on an unfinished script by legendary director Akira Kurosawa.

Of course, not all of these game projects will be good, and 2005 showed us that both developers and movie companies haven't quite figured out how to make the celluloid-to-gameplay transition. Two of the summer's hottest movies, *Batman Begins* and

Fantastic Four, were followed by mediocre games that failed to capture the magic of the films. EA's Godfather game drew criticism from director Francis Ford Coppola, who said that the entire project had been conceived without his consent.

Games were also increasingly being tapped as source material for movies, but sadly remained fairly low in quality. The Doom movie opened to both mediocre box office and reviews. However, star Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson is already signed on to two other video game-related projects, Eidos' Hitman and a Spy Hunter movie. Midway's The Suffering is also being adapted as a theatrical feature by MTV Films. Also sullying

the screens of theaters was *Alone in the Dark*, directed by the infamous Uwe Boll, who was also working on (we expect) bringing terrible versions of BloodRayne and Microsoft's Dungeon Siege to film. The fact that Boll continues to nab the rights to high-profile games seems to indicate that the problem in creating good game movies is more the video game industry's fault than it is Hollywood's. "The game industry has to take itself seriously," observes *Newsweek*'s N'Gai Croal. "Why do people sell their game rights to Uwe Boll? It's better to not do a Dungeon Siege movie than to have Uwe Boll do a s— movie. I don't blame Hollywood; I blame the game industry."

Thankfully, there were many signs in 2005

Created by a partnership between director Peter Jackson and developer Michel Ancel, King Kong is a great example of a true partnership between Hollywood and the game industry

Famed action director John Woo is doing the sequel to his classic film Hard Boiled as a game entitled Stranglehold

Uwe Boll's low-budget flicks are an example of how to do game movie projects the wrong way

that people were starting to get it. Ubisoft's excellent King Kong game showed what is possible when a great director (Peter Jackson) and a great developer (Rayman, Beyond Good & Evil creator Michel Ancel) form an alliance to create a game that stays true to the film and stands on its own as a great gameplay experience. Rockstar's The Warriors, a beat-'em-up tribute to the classic '70s street gang film, did an amazing job of capturing the vibe of its source material and even added a dramatic backstory that fleshed out characters' saga prior to the events of the film. Rockstar also tried its hand at documentary filmmaking with the release of Sunday Driver, a film about a Southern California lowrider car club. Square Enix's original CG movie, Final Fantasy VII: Advent Children, was a smash in Japan, where it sold over 200,000 copies in a few weeks.

Even more encouraging were announcements that some of movieland's top directors were going to be helping to create all-new

game projects. Boyz 'N The Hood director John Singleton and Midway debuted Fear & Respect in late '04, but later decided to move the game to next-gen systems. Hong Kong legend John Woo also inked an agreement

with Midway to make a game entitled Stranglehold, which would continue the saga of his classic movie Hard Boiled. Perhaps most notable was the late-year revelation that Steven Spielberg will be partnering with

Electronic Arts to make three all-new properties.

There was even a bit of hope on the horizon for game-based movies. In October, it was announced that The Lord of the Rings director Peter Jackson, in a deal orchestrated by veteran Hollywood talent agency CAA, would be producing the Halo movie. Although he won't be directing, he did promise to take a hands-on approach to the film. Another promising sign was the fact that respected script writer, 28 Days Later scribe Alex Garland, had already been signed to the project.

Yes, there is still much work to be done, but this year at least the solution to the problem of reconciling Silicon Valley and Hollywood became apparent. Unsurprisingly, the solution itself is a simple one — put talented people together, and give them the money and freedom to do their jobs. That's not so hard, is it?

8 THE DEATH OF COMPETITION IN SPORTS GAMING

Although the deal awarding EA Sports sole ownership of the NFL license was completed in late 2004, this year saw even more consolidation of the sports marketplace. In contrast to years past, where gamers would look forward to handicapping the race between the major players in video sports, 2005 was a more barren landscape where the winners are decided by exclusive deals, not quality of gameplay.

In late December of 2004, EA and the NFL reached terms on a deal that awarded EA the exclusive rights to use all NFL teams and players. In one stroke, this effectively eliminated EA's primary competition – Visual Concept's NFL 2K series, which had provided Madden with some stiff competition based on both rave critical reviews and a discounted $19.99 price point. At the time, Take-Two interactive, which had published NFL 2K5 with Sega, issued a statement decrying EA's monopolistic tactics. Also left out to dry were Sony's 989 Sports GameDay franchise and Midway's NFL Blitz, which released later in the year as the retooled Blitz: The League, with fictional teams and a greater emphasis on movie-style storytelling. As fall came, gamers noticed that the sports section of their local store were much more barren.

"We believe that the decisions of the National Football League and Players Inc. to grant an exclusive license for video games does a tremendous disservice to the consumers and sports fans whose funds

ultimately support the NFL, by limiting their choices, curbing creativity, and almost certainly leading to higher game prices," said a Take-Two representative.

A month later, Take-Two experienced a change of heart, signing its own deal to cut EA out of the Major League Baseball license. Interestingly, the deal only granted the company the right to "third party" exclusivity, which meant that console makers and publishers Sony and Nintendo (which both had plans for baseball titles) could still continue to use the MLB license. Unfortunately, Take-Two's use of ESPN network assets in its baseball game would have to be scrapped, as EA had a week prior signed an exclusive deal with the network.

While EA's MVP Baseball series was assumed

to be scuttled, the company did manage to stay in the game by moving the franchise over to college baseball, with the announcement of MVP 06 NCAA Baseball. Tellingly, it had also made a move to ensure that 2K Games was not able to do the same on the football front, signing an exclusive, six-year deal with NCAA football. In this way, the company has essentially guaranteed football exclusivity for the foreseeable future, as by the time the NFL and NCAA deals run out, no other publisher or developer might have the know-how and talent to even compete with EA in the football marketplace. However, it's been rumored that Visual Concepts is keeping a skeleton team on staff in the event that it could eventually re-enter the football market. Also, we've

heard that an NFL "legends" title featuring all old-school players could be in the offing, as retired players can license their likeness without the consent of Players Inc.

Of course, it will take years to evaluate how this byzantine series of deals affects the bottom line for the companies and sports organizations involved. However, there is one clear loser in all of this: gamers. Most notably, the thousands that finally discovered the excellence of Visual Concept's football games last year found that, for 2005, they had exactly one choice when fall came around. Next spring, MLB fans will have to make do without the critically-acclaimed MVP series, unless they want to play with a bunch of college also-rans. While, so far, the NBA and NHL are choosing to allow competition, it seems likely that EA might eventually be able convince them to go exclusive as well. By any measure, the sports game scene changed forever in 2005 – in the years to come, the slogan may have to be changed from "EA Sports: It's in the game" to "EA Sports: Or else."

SEASON CANCELLED

MICROSOFT PUSHES INDIVIDUALITY

9

Console

■ Microsoft's Robbie Bach

Americans like to think of themselves as a nation of individualists, no matter the messy details of reality. On the Internet, you can find a cornucopia of niche websites catering to every obscure interest or social group one can imagine. Odds are, no matter how strange your kick, you're likely to run across a peer group out there somewhere, each member being "different" in exactly the same way.

Video games have long standardized the experience across the board for all players; Mario was Mario, no matter if you were playing in Belgium or Boston. Now that online gaming has become a major part of many game players' everyday experience, it's no wonder that companies in 2005 were looking for ways to push individuality (or at least the illusion of it) to gamers across the board.

Microsoft, in particular, publicly stated that stressing its customers' individuality was core to its plan for Xbox 360. In a message on the company's viral marketing "Our Colony" website, corporate vice president J. Allard urged consumers to, "Make Xbox 360 yours; take it out of our hands. 360 was birthed by the Xbox team at Microsoft, but you're the ones who give it life."

This will be accomplished through a number of features for the console, the most obvious being the console's removable faceplate. Although there are only a handful available at launch, soon you'll be able to make your console look far different from your friends. While a lot of gamers scoffed at the company's aggressive marketing of the faceplates during E3 and at other Xbox 360 events, we suspect a deluge of licensed faces will soon have even the cynics eating crow and forking over their dollars. Hate if you must, but with all the possibilities in comic book, film, sports, and gaming licenses, it might be hard for most to resist. Whether it's your favorite NFL team or musical artist, there will be a faceplate for you. Even more intriguing, we've heard that the company is working on ways to embed data in the faceplates, meaning that, for example, a Halo 3 faceplate could allow you to access unlockable or additional content in the game itself.

Interestingly, some of the impetus for these moves seems to be coming from the legal and illegal mod communities. Companies like Colorware have been providing custom paint jobs for Xbox (as well as other consoles and iPods) for years, meeting with much success. It seems only natural that Microsoft would turn this phenomenon into faceplates, a less expensive and less intrusive way of personalizing your console.

This push towards personalization extends beyond mere aesthetics, and will be a central part of the company's next-gen Xbox Live strategy. We've all heard about Gamer Cards, which list your accomplishments and skill level in a variety of games and go a long ways towards making the oft-anonymous world of online gaming a more inviting place. Also, being able to do things like download unique desktop patterns, use custom soundtracks on any Xbox 360 game, and create and sell goods on Xbox Live

Marketplace, seem to fit Microsoft's concept of creating an Internet world for the iPod generation. While the thought of being able to better track your skills, rankings, and interests among the millions of 360 users certainly sounds great, it will be interesting to see if it's actually embraced by the community in the way that Microsoft wants. Hopefully, this initiative can only mean good things for the industry in years to come, as hardware hopefully becomes more customizable and players are more able to tailor their online experience to suit their needs. It will be interesting to see if these type of strategies are adopted by Sony and

For the first time, gamers will have a more detailed online identity on Xbox Live, which Microsoft hopes will help build better communities

Burning Sky
Rep
Gamer
Zone   Pro

Messages   3
Friends   5
Marketplace

Mystery Gamer

With Gotham TV gamers can watch any player in the world on live news feeds.

▶ Play Project Gotham Racing 3

Nintendo (which is embracing face plates with the Micro), two companies that have usually stressed a homogenous, across-the-board strategy for all users.

Best
Xbox 360 Game
- GameSpot

E3
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EDITOR'S CHOICE
AWARD"

Gamespy

"BEST RACING
GAME OF SHOW"

-Hardcore Gamer Mag

"BEST OF SHOW:
RACING"

-DailyGame.net

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FEBRUARY 2006

The Top 50
Games of 2005

Mercenaries: Playground of Destruction

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox **Release:** January 11

The subtitle says it all: blowing stuff up for money is awesome. Mercenaries stands out as a game that gives the player plenty of opportunities to experiment and bask in pure, shameless destruction. Taking place in an open world full of military weapons and vehicles ripe for the taking, Pandemic's free-roaming romp through a warzone has an endless potential for "did you see that?" moments. As if that weren't enough, the game's dazzling particle effects make every smoking heap of metal a mesmerizing work of art.

The Legend of Zelda: The Minish Cap

System: Game Boy Advance **Release:** January 11

Just the mere mention of Zelda around the Nintendo faithful brings about a soul-wrenching sigh. Link may have turned his back on Nintendo's purple box, but thanks to the development muscle of Capcom, he still made quite an impact on the Game Boy Advance in 2005. With a talking hat that possesses the magical ability to shrink Link to the size of a pea, The Minish Cap may sound like a frightening mishmash of Harry Potter and Honey, I Shrunk the Kids, but these elements actually come together to create one of the most memorable and inventive Zelda adventures to date.

RESIDENT EVIL 4

System: GameCube, PlayStation 2
Release: January 11 (GameCube), October 25 (PS2)

No game this year managed to eclipse the monumentally fantastic Resident Evil 4. RE 4 reinvents the series as a cinematic, expertly-paced adventure packed with frantic action, lethal enemies, incredible boss fights, and amazing visuals. In doing so, RE 4 easily overshadows all other horror titles by perfectly balancing gunplay and mood. This is an experience for the ages, and earns our award for 2005's Game of the Year.

**GAME INFORMER
Game
★ OF THE ★
yeaR
2005**

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1 ZELDA SLIPS, GAMECUBE FALLS

With what was unquestionably a lackluster year for the 'Cube, the shining star was a new Zelda adventure. That was, at least, until the game got pushed into next year. Fans cried and more GameCubes were relegated to players' closets until something compelling actually releases on the system.

2 Microsoft and the HDD Screw-Job
Always on, always connected, always high definition…but not always pre-loading. Microsoft's decision to release a version of its next-generation console without a hard drive could spell trouble for gigantic games like The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion that were counting on the extra hardware.

3 Microsoft Turns its Back on the Xbox
Jumpstarting the next generation doesn't mean that the previous one is dead on arrival – for a long time, there will be more Xboxes than 360s out there. But Microsoft doesn't seem to feel like its current fans need any love, as the company has officially stopped support of the previous console and no new first-party titles will be released for the system…ever.

4 Xenosaga II is no Fun
The intense role-playing series' first outing is a rite of passage for fans of the genre. The second was highly – even rabidly – anticipated. Sadly, the game didn't live up to the first in many ways, leaving gamers hungry for what should have been.

5 You
Great games come out every year that the general gaming population doesn't latch on to, and lack of sales means less experimentation and evolution in the pastime we all love so much. Get out there and buy what's good, support what you love, and give weird a chance.

6 With Loading We'll Break Half-Life 2
Announcing the Xbox port of contemporary PC gaming's greatest jewel caused unparalleled giddiness in the hearts of players that couldn't afford a high-end gaming rig. But disappointment was all that the game provided by chopping up the open-ended gameplay with unacceptable load times. A dream was crushed for many.

7 EA Sports' Disappointing 360 Showing
Next-gen, in the sports gaming world, won't be very different from current-gen – at least for a while. EA Sports made an admirable showing with the 360, but by cutting many of the features to make space for more sweat and transitional animations, the games lost some of their edge.

8 The Decline of Movie Games
Two steps forward and one step back. Movie-licensed games made strides last year with the promising releases of The Lord of the Rings action games and a totally different point of view with Chronicles of Riddick: Escape From Butcher Bay. With the exception of King Kong, this year saw a return to the derivative, uninspired, and just plain boring knock-offs. For shame.

9 Rare Drops The Ball (Three Times)
After a disappointing multiplayer version of Conker for Xbox, we thought that Rare had been saving its best work for its two Xbox 360 titles, Kameo: Elements of Power and Perfect Dark Zero. Sadly, both those games were nothing more than prettied-up, deeply flawed rehashes of archaic platforming and FPS design. At this point, one has to wonder whether Rare's just plain lost it.

10 Advent Rising and the Million Dollar (aka Two Games) Contest
Majesco had a great year punctuated with promising titles we were hoping to see more polished versions of, like Psychonauts and Advent Rising. But the company's financial woes led to the cancellation of Advent's million-dollar contest and squashed any hope of getting more Advent entries to tie up the first game's cliffhanger ending.

Oddworld: Stranger's Wrath
System: Xbox
Release: January 27
We've yet to meet the gamer who doesn't enjoy Oddworld's quirky style after picking up any of the series' games, and Stranger's Wrath is no exception. Offering its own brand of first-person shooting, your "live ammo" is quite literally that, as you pop off vicious squirrels and stinging bugs. There's also some great 3D platforming through the old west-themed world of the game. Add in a wrenching story twist near the end, and this hilarious and evocative tale becomes a must-play.

Gran Turismo 4
System: PlayStation 2
Release: February 22
It was long in coming and lacking some promised features, but Polyphony Digital's Gran Turismo 4 delivered the kind of racing simulation that only this franchise can. A gigantic collection of cars, great graphics, and rock-solid physics are really all that's required of a title like this; but Gran Turismo 4 delivered more with location variety and the ability to really get your collection to legendary status. Racing may be a genre that is difficult to truly innovate in, but GT 4 makes up for that with a level of polish that simply can't be beat.

Fight Night: Round 2
System: PlayStation 2, Xbox, GameCube
Release: February 28
Fight Night: Round 2 is the perfect sequel: a title that made many improvements both big and small to a series that has already provided tons of innovation in the genre. The all-analog control scheme was great to begin with, and Round 2 only added more depth and polish. Despite boxing's relatively low profile as a professional sport, Round 2 sold well based on one thing and one thing only: great gameplay.

Devil May Cry 3: Dante's Awakening
System: PlayStation 2
Release: March 1
Serving as a kind of formal apology for the debacle that was Devil May Cry 2, Dante's third outing returns the hero to his roots in more ways than one. Most importantly, the gameplay is focused on what made the series fun to begin with. Players switch between several customizable styles as they slice and blast their way through the unrelentingly difficult (and undeniably stylish) missions. Complete with gigantic boss battles and over-the-top cinematics, Devil May Cry 3 has what it takes to rekindle your love of eviscerating demons with a huge sword.

Timesplitters: Future Perfect
System: PlayStation 2, Xbox, GameCube
Release: March 22
It's amazing how much a little laughter can spice up a shooter. Such is the case with the sidesplitting antics of Cortez as he hopscotches his way through time. He's just one of those lovably idiotic bumblers you can't help but cheer for. The single-player fun is only the tip of the iceberg, however, since online multiplayer really makes the game shine. Dozens and dozens of playable avatars, a wealth of gameplay types and modes, a sweeping array of weaponry – Timesplitters has it all.

There are heroes, and then there is Kratos. As he swings the fiery blades that have been grafted to his arms, he conveys an unparalleled sense of raw fury and passes the grim satisfaction on to you. God of War has all the makings of a timeless classic: cinematic battles, an epic and haunting story, and plenty of gratuitous nudity. From its stylish, visceral action to the sad tale that gradually unfolds, God of War sets the standard for all straight-up action games that follow it. It is one of the premiere titles of the year, and among the very best games available on PS2.

GOD OF WAR
System: PlayStation 2
Release: March 22

Top 10 Heroes of 2005
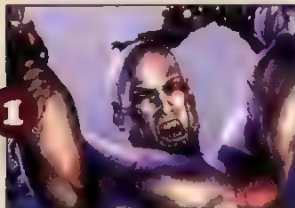
1
Kratos (God of War)
The star of God of War has earned this year's honor as Hero of the Year, largely because he's not a nice man and we're a little afraid of him. His tragic backstory means he's a little deeper than your average action star. This bad mofo takes down gods, so we're just gonna hope he doesn't take our lunch money.
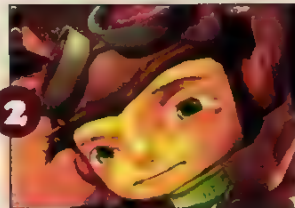
2
Raz (Psychonauts)
Out of all the characters this year, none were funnier or more likable than young psychic Raz. In a game filled with some of the most colorful characters ever, Raz could easily have gotten lost in the shuffle, but his witty lines and likable personality made him one character we'd love to see return.

3
Leon (Resident Evil 4)
He may look a bit like David Bowie, but Leon ain't no delicate glam rocker. Resident Evil 4 is the craziest adventure of the year, and Leon handled the hordes of possessed villagers, giant fish, and more with grit and determination. Plus, he wasn't in the horrible Resident Evil: Apocalypse movie, which is a big plus.

4
The Wanderer (Shadow of the Colossus)
Imagine climbing Mt. Everest alone, and then killing it. The Wanderer single-handedly scales and destroys monolithic creatures, fully aware of the terrible price it costs him. He does it all for love, so we have to say, "Big ups, Wanderer."

5
Ezlo (The Legend of Zelda: The Minish Cap)
Ahh, there's nothing like a funny, boastful talking hat. Actually, we're just grateful that we're supposed to hear him. Normally when our clothes start talking, we know it's time to refill our medication.

Lumines

System: PSP **Release:** March 24

Lumines has been hailed by many as one of the most addictive puzzle games since Tetris, and given the fact that "Shinin'" is now permanently engraved into our musical memory, we're inclined to agree. Integrating a responsive, dynamic soundtrack with classic block-dropping, Lumines is scientifically proven to be the only handheld pathway to true enlightenment. Well, maybe not, but it certainly inspires a state of gaming zen unrivaled by any of its PSP peers. The star of the system's launch lineup, Lumines is instantly accessible and oddly irresistible to all varieties of gamers, from the casual enthusiast to the hardcore devotee.

Splinter Cell: Chaos Theory

System: Xbox **Release:** March 28

Chaos Theory released on all three consoles, but the Xbox version was clearly superior to the other two. Chaos Theory places protagonist Sam Fisher in his most high-stakes adventure to date and gives the player more control over how to achieve goals with open-ended level designs. The campaign is tense, intelligent, and packed with some truly amazing moments. Also, not only does the excellent four-player versus mode return, but a new two-player co-op mode has been added as well, which takes the series in an amazing new direction.

Jade Empire

System: Xbox **Release:** April 12

Delivering a swift roundhouse kick to the face of those who thought that BioWare was a company just for turn-based D&D nerds, Jade Empire is another smartly written RPG from the Canadians that packs quite a punch of pure action gameplay. Giving you a plethora of combat styles to choose from, the game is a well-blended mix of martial arts, RPG elements, and a story that keeps you riveted. With all the sidequests, humorous dialogue, and moral choices you'd expect from BioWare, Jade Empire is a must for Xbox owners looking for an original title to bolster their library.

MIDNIGHT CLUB 3: DUB EDITION

Systems: PlayStation 2, Xbox
Release: April 11

Need for Speed might still win the sales crown, but for true street racing enthusiasts, there's no question that Rockstar's Midnight Club 3 was the game of the year. The series was an early leader in open-city racing on the PlayStation 2, and by adding a whole new layer of radical car customization (helped by a partnership with *DUB Magazine*, the bible of the underground car tuner scene) Rockstar San Diego finally created its masterpiece. For auto enthusiasts, this is a virtual playground, featuring a customization mode that is almost a game unto itself and the some of the year's most hectic racing. Graphically, it's a stunner, featuring amazing particle and blur effects, giving DUB Edition a sense of speed that most of its competitors would kill for. Although it didn't debut at the top of the charts, word of mouth kept this in the sales charts for months, resulting in one of 2005's under-the-radar blockbusters.

6

Jack Russel (Radiata Stories)

Cocky, arrogant, self-assured, punchy, and totally not a breed of small dog, Jack Russel is like that jerk you know that you still like for some reason. Hey, he can make 177 friends in the game, which is a lot better than us.

7

Colton White (Gun)

Thanks to a great script and some top-notch voice acting from Thomas Jane, Colton White is a believable Western tough guy who never seems clichéd or stereotypical. If Jane keeps reprising his role as Colton in future Gun games, then he won't have time to make Deep Blue Sea 2. Yay!

8

Stranger (Oddworld: Stranger)

He looks like Joe Camel, talks like Clint Eastwood, and has a secret you won't believe. But the real reason we like him so much is that he uses living creatures as ammo. Throwing small woodland animals at people always earns bonus points in our book.
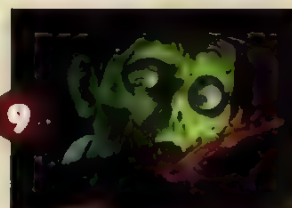
9

Stubbs (Stubbs the Zombie)

He may be a rotten, shambling corpse, but he's really a big softie underneath it all. Sure, he destroys an entire city with his brain-eating, limb-throwing, gas-releasing ways, but we've done weirder things to get a date.

10

Kong (King Kong)

Why is Kong so kool...er, cool? Because nothing's cooler than a monkey, except perhaps a giant monkey that wrestles dinosaurs. Okay, so technically he's an ape, but any ape that can get some sugar from Naomi Watts is a hero to us!

Top 10 Publishers of 2005

1 ELECTRONIC ARTS (LAST YEAR: 1)

Electronic Arts' commitment to this year's two new handhelds was certainly a deciding factor in the continued proliferation of portable gaming, and the company's continued excellence in a variety of genres makes it hard to deny that EA is still the most influential force in the industry.

2 Activision (last year: 3)
With great support across every console, Activision explored new territory with Gun and held steady with more Tony Hawk and X-Men. Activision had a little something for everyone.

3 Ubisoft (last year: 2)
Whether it was redefining the movie game genre with King Kong or revisiting its mainstay series like Splinter Cell and Prince of Persia, Ubisoft offered several exceptionally entertaining games – even some without "Tom Clancy's..." in the title.

4 Sony (last year: 8)
An impressive launch of the PSP (not to mention the overwhelming success of UMD movies) and a host of quality PS2 titles put Sony a cut above the other two major console manufacturers, even with its relative silence regarding the PS3.

5 Nintendo (last year: 5)
Despite the disappointing GameCube delays, Nintendo did an outstanding job this year in helping the DS find its footing with some unique and compelling software. The whole innovation thing seems to be working out!

6 Microsoft (last year: 4)
Orchestrating one of the best console launch line-ups in history is no small task, but Microsoft rose to the challenge by providing a selection of solid games with familiar faces.

7 Vivendi Universal (last year: N/A)
As World of Warcraft continued to gain momentum, Vivendi also made strides forward with F.E.A.R. and The Incredible Hulk: Ultimate Destruction.

8 Rockstar (last year: 6)
It may have had a rough few months in terms of media attention, but thankfully the quality of Rockstar's games didn't slip. The controversial company proved that, even under pressure, it can still deliver the goods with style.

9 Capcom (last year: N/A)
By producing unique content for several platforms (like the only lawyer game on DS), Capcom had a year of colorful experimentation. Oh, and it was also responsible for a little something called Resident Evil 4.

10 Square Enix (last year: N/A)
The ruler of the RPG genre drew us into a brand new universe with Radiata Stories, as well as finally releasing a Dragon Quest U.S. gamers could embrace. Even without FF XII and Advent Children, Square Enix continued to give its fans exactly what they want.

Top 10 Developers of 2005

1 PRODUCTION STUDIO 4

Simply put, Capcom's Production Studio 4 made Resident Evil 4. If crafting the best game of the year (and, let's be honest, probably the best of this generation) isn't enough to earn it the top spot among developers, then there is no justice in this world.

2 SCEA Santa Monica
Sony Santa Monica blazed its own trail in the action genre with spectacularly violent Neopets: The Darkest Faerie. Now, just kidding Kratos! We really mean God of War, the best pure action game of the year.

3 Intelligent Systems
More than just a clever naming ploy, Intelligent Systems' titles require a sharp mind and ever-evolving strategies. With its Fire Emblem titles and the fantastic Advance Wars DS, Intelligent Systems is the leading name in virtual tactics.

4 Ubisoft Montreal
Sam Fisher's sneakery and the Prince's acrobatics have become highly-anticipated yearly events, and Ubisoft's Montreal studio made sure that each of these characters had yet another spectacular showing.

5 Infinity Ward
Call of Duty 2 took the familiar World War II setting and turned it into a fresh, thrilling new experience. Capturing fevered intensity like never before, Infinity Ward raised the bar for harrowing and authentic battlefield combat.

6 Lionhead Studios
For a developer that has traditionally taken its sweet time, Peter Molyneux's studio gave gamers three great titles about godliness, heroism, and movies with chickens kissing cowboys.

7 Pandemic
With a stable of high-quality titles like Mercenaries, Destroy All Humans, and Star Wars: Battlefront II, the recently-merged Pandemic doesn't need to worry about living in BioWare's shadow.

8 Monolith Productions
Dead psychic girls and serial killers don't make for happy stories. With masterful use of atmosphere in F.E.A.R. and Condemned, high tension was the name of the game for Monolith.

9 Q Entertainment
All hail Q Entertainment, Puzzle Overlords of Earth. With an unequaled skill for inspiring addiction, Tetsuya Mizuguchi's Lumines and Meteos are the closest thing our handhelds will ever get to doing crack.

10 Raven Software
Not only did Raven make the second X-Men Legends a Marvel fan's dream come true, but it also brought the rock-solid Quake IV to PC and Xbox 360 for the people who prefer big guns to spandex .

Unreal Championship 2
System: Xbox **Release:** April 19

On top of being gorgeous, Unreal Championship 2 offers a variety of fast-paced online play that is totally unique. The unrivaled mobility you have once you've mastered the acrobatic style of movement in UC 2 is as thrilling as being unshackled from the strict confines of gravity in real life would be. Truly taking advantage of this title's crazy mix of melee and ranged combat takes a lot of practice and skill, but it's worth it – once you do, a door opens to a whole new level of devastation. Excellent map design along with a slew of different characters to play as give UC 2 the kind of shelf life you'd expect out of the wonderfully-talented Epic Games.

Psychonauts
Systems: Xbox, PC, PlayStation 2 **Release:** April 19 (Xbox, PC), June 21 (PS2)

Doublefine Productions' Tim Schafer has a reputation as one of the most creative game designers in the industry, and Psychonauts was another amazing chapter in a career that has included such beloved cult classics as Grim Fandango and Day of the Tentacle. Proving that there is still a lot of life left in the platforming genre, Psychonauts turns its satirical gaze on the mind itself, bringing to life the delusions and neurosis of its characters in some of the most memorable and creative level designs you'll ever see. Although it largely sticks close to well-worn platforming traditions, Psychonauts is a well-crafted title from top to bottom, and the imaginative worlds and script make even the most clichéd collection aspects of the game feel fresh and new.

Guild Wars
System: PC **Release:** April 28

If persistent-world MMORPGs sound interesting to you, but the thought of putting in 40 hours of play just to get your character to level 10 is a little daunting, Guild Wars could be for you. Eschewing the usual experience grind for fast-paced combat and hectic player-versus-player action, this title is really in a genre of its own. Beautiful graphics aside, Guild Wars also gives players a huge amount of control over their characters' powers and capabilities, while maintaining a delicate balance of power between heroes for a healthy PvP environment. Tournaments and worldwide ladders are even provided, and all without charging a monthly fee.

Hot Shots Golf: Open Tee
System: PlayStation Portable **Release:** May 3

The quirky arcade stylings of Hot Shots Golf belies the game's complex golf physics and strategy. The portable rendition for Sony's handheld is spot-on in the graphics department and throws in different unlockables, a great online mode, and scads of character customization. The pickings might have been slim for part of the PSP's year, but this title sucked up some major time between releases.

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Top 10 Moments of 2005

1 KRATOS' ORIGIN (GOD OF WAR)

Where did his amazing combat prowess come from? What happened to his skin? Why is he in such a terrible mood all the time? Once you learn the truth it all makes sense - perfect, bloody, horrible sense. We won't ruin it for you, but Kratos ought to be pissed off enough about his past for at least a few sequels.

2 The Knife Fight (Resident Evil 4)
Any other game might reach this point and offer players an exciting cinematic conflict to watch, but RE 4 is too good for all that. Instead, the incredible martial arts-infused conflict is still a cutscene, but one you control. If the rest of the game had us on the edge of our seats, we fell off that edge when the knives came out.

3 The Mind of The Milkman (Psychonauts)
This clear favorite among Psychonauts' many excellent levels stands out. Within, the warped paranoia and misperceptions of the world manifest as an M.C. Escher-esque neighborhood of chaos and confusion. I am the Milkman. My milk is delicious.

4 The Scale of the Colossi (Shadow of the Colossus)
These guys are big. Really big. They're so gigantic that you actually have to platform up their bodies. In short, we were impressed. The immensity of these ancient creatures dwarfs anything in the past, and their size makes their defeat all the more satisfying, and their fall all the more tragic.

5 The Raft Scene (Peter Jackson's King Kong)
Floating vulnerable on a raft deep in the jungle is a pretty grim situation, but throw two hungry T-Rexes into this mix and you have one of the most nerve-wracking sequences you've ever played. Think you can take them? Don't try it. They have the high ground.

6 Guitar Hero ROCKS! (Guitar Hero)
The first time you nail the solo riff on "More Than A Feeling", you know you're hooked. Never has a music game offered such a genuine feeling of being on the stage and in the moment. Admittedly, if you're playing it for hours into the night, you likely aren't cool, but don't worry. We won't tell. We aren't cool either.

7 Police Chases (Need for Speed: Most Wanted)
In Most Wanted, the cops don't mess around. They're on your rear like...well, we probably shouldn't finish that sentence. It turns the whole race into a more strategic affair – what's the best way to get away from the cops? And your mom said games would never teach you anything.

8 Nuclear Missile Launch (Splinter Cell: Chaos Theory)
Racing through the halls of the launch facility, time is against you and the world hangs in the balance. Responsibility looms large, and the threat of failure is intense and real. You all should consider yourselves lucky that we had a continue button. You look way better unmelted.

9 "It's Milkin' Time!" (Grand Theft Auto: Liberty City Stories)
Liberty City Stories certainly doesn't disappoint in regards to GTA's traditional over-the-top ways. There's a complex plot that we don't want to ruin for you, but it's enough to tell you that the scene in reference involves a fat man in a bonnet, a soiled diaper, some well-paid young ladies of the night, and a camera. We're pretty sure Jack Thompson would sue us if we say any more, so we'll leave it at that.

10 The Farmhouse (Condemned: Criminal Origins)
The farmhouse level of Condemned had us shrieking for our mommies as we desperately stared into derelict hallways with only a killer's clues to guide us – think the end of Silence of the Lambs, but with more psychos. We like being scared as much as the next schmuck, but this is just too much. What's that? We're wimps? Yeah. Yeah, you're right.

Fire Emblem: The Sacred Stones
System: Game Boy Advance
Release: May 23
Fire Emblem proves to us that there is still a place in gaming for the basics. With nothing but some sprites taking turns moving around on a grid and some text dialogue, The Sacred Stones manages to draw players into a world in conflict. Of course, there's the requisite band of unlikely heroes who have to save the world, but this title's delicate balancing and strategic depth on the battlefield make directing their efforts fun. Like few other games, The Sacred Stones rewards sound tactics and deliberate strategizing, and earns its place among the best of the genre.

Madden NFL 06
System: PlayStation 2, Xbox, GameCube
Release: August 9
In a year that everyone expected nothing, developer EA Tiburon came out with two bold new features that should be a staple from now on: Vision Passing and NFL Superstar. The former imparts an intelligent realism into the game while the latter is a fun way for non-Franchise mode gamers to enjoy themselves. More than a simple create-a-character, NFL Superstar is the beginning of the merging of dry sports simulation with engaging, almost RPG-like elements – a direction that the genre needs to renew itself with.

Kirby: Canvas Curse
System: Nintendo DS
Release: June 13
Although Kirby: Canvas Curse is probably not the best DS game released this year (that would be either Advance Wars: Dual Strike or Castlevania: Dawn of Sorrow), it will probably stand as the most important in the years to come. Nintendo has promised that the system's unique touchscreen control will result in some next-level gameplay possibilities. Kirby is the first to show that it could tackle the action/platform genre in new and unexpected ways. Taking the blueprint of the too-repetitive Yoshi Touch & Go, Canvas Curse uses the simple mechanics of drawing lines and poking the screen in a full-blown sidescrolling masterpiece, one that exhibits all the great level design and ingratiating art style that marks the best of Nintendo's 8- and 16-bit games.

Advance Wars: Dual Strike
System: Nintendo DS
Release: August 23
Intelligent Systems is renowned for its fantastic turn-based strategy games, and Advance Wars: Dual Strike is possibly its best to date. Not only is the game an awesome new entry in the Advance Wars franchise, but it also uses the two screens of the DS to offer completely new types of battles. The airtight gameplay and incredible depth here are rivaled only by the best in the strategy genre. Plus, huge amounts of replay value ensure that Dual Strike will be popping in and out of your DS for a long time.

Battlefield 2
System: PC
Release: June 21
It's always nice when a developer follows up a stellar original title with a sequel that plays off of its strengths while streamlining and improving the gameplay. Battlefield 2 does just that. Modern graphics, huge and diverse maps, and rewards for good teamwork all make this one of the absolute best online FPSs to date. Once you put in the time to find a good server to play on – or, better yet, a regular clan – Battlefield 2's entertainment value skyrockets. The built-in support for high levels of play, in particular the squad and command systems, make an intense match of Battlefield 2 an experience like nothing else.

Nintendogs
System: Nintendo DS
Release: August 23
When Shigeru Miyamoto first announced Nintendogs, many (including us) speculated that perhaps he had gone a little batty. Fast forward a year, and it's apparent that the Mario and Zelda creator is, in fact, crazy like a fox. Although it's perhaps a bit repetitive, one can't deny that there's something addictive and undeniably charming about Nintendogs. Despite its simple gameplay, this might just be one of the games that points the way towards a new style of gaming in the future – one based on relationships and experiences rather than competition. Plus, who could look into the eyes of an adorable Chihuahua and refuse to toss it the ball? Only a heartless monster...or Reiner.

THE INCREDIBLE HULK: ULTIMATE DESTRUCTION

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox, GameCube
Release: August 23

"Hulk Smash" must have been a guiding principle for Radical Entertainment when designing the super powered explosion-fest that is Ultimate Destruction. Communicating a profound sense of violent superhuman power made it abundantly clear why no one should particularly like the Hulk when he's angry. A vast open world, an endless stream of moves, and some of the most frantic combat to ever hit your gaming screen makes the Hulk's recent foray an easy pick for games you must play from 2005.

Radiata Stories

System: PlayStation 2 **Release:** September 6

Jack Russell, the hero of Radiata Stories, is the kind of guy that would drive you crazy if you actually had to hang out with him. Fortunately, his brash and childish antics provide non-stop entertainment as the player guides him through the vibrant kingdom of Radiata. Since the game is populated with a staggering array of characters with their own lives and schedules, the core gameplay revolves around recruiting a veritable army for Jack to lead into battle against the forces of evil. To sweeten the deal, Jack can pretty much kick every person, animal, and object he encounters, which is worth hours of mischievous fun by itself.

Rebelstar Tactical Command

System: Game Boy Advance
Release: September 6

This game has been compared to PC's X-Com: UFO Defense, and it makes sense: Julian and Nick Gollop of developer Codo Games were on the team that created UFO. But this strategy title isn't just about turn-based play. Since you can set up your characters to perform actions outside of your turn, the game encourages you to plan your moves around the board well in advance, which also keeps you constantly involved. With destructible environments, multiplayer play, and a single-player story that unfolds in anime-like storyboards and an overall cartoonish look, this game serves strategy fans quite well.

Top 10 Villains of 2005

1 Toni Cipriani's Mom (Grand Theft Auto: Liberty City Stories)

Rather than settling for the old sitcom standbys, the Cipriani matron ends up putting out a hit on her own son. Although, dealing with a hitman is probably less stressful than twenty years of ugly sweaters for your birthday and the inevitable nursing home tirade.

2 Ares (God of War)

Tall as the Sears Tower and with hair made of fire, the god of war eschews moustache-twirling machinations for a more direct approach. Ares is the horrors of war made flesh. Also, he can throw a building-sized wooden stake with pinpoint accuracy from halfway across the globe. Mess with him, we dare you.

3 The Critic (Psychonauts)

Any boss battle in which you have to avoid every nasty thing ever said about White Chicks is worth notice. Strangely, the Critic's anger is fueled by the fact that he'd much rather be writing stories than reviewing them. We're pretty sure that never happens in reality.

4 Thomas Magruder (Gun)

Most villains are content to kill off incompetent minions. Magruder just maims them and lets their deformity speak to their failure. When he's not massacring innocents, he's torturing your friends. Villainy just doesn't get any more evil than this guy.

5 Alma (F.E.A.R.)

Not really a ghost or a person, Alma's always one step ahead of you, literally exploding people with her mind. And yet, once you find out her whole story, you can't help but feel bad for her. Except for when she's trying to kill you, anyway.

Burnout: Revenge

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox

Release: September 13

With 60-car pileups, scraps of metal soaring high into the sky, and blazing infernos as far as the eye can see, it's hard to imagine a game that could offer more in terms of vehicular carnage. Enter the next installment in the series. In Burnout: Revenge, a friendly tap on the bumper of a law-abiding citizen transforms their trusty car into a lethal projectile that screams uncontrollably toward other hapless commuters. The result is pure bliss. Pure "Ha ha! That truck just totally crushed that station wagon" bliss.
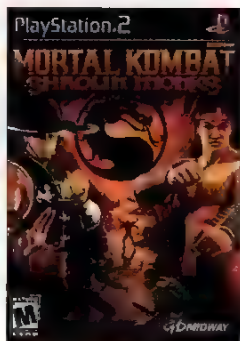
Mortal Kombat: Shaolin Monks

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox

Release: September 20

The series that invited gamers to decapitate, gut, and completely humiliate their closest friends is now asking that you put aside your differences, sedate your bloodlust however you can, and give peace a chance. It may be difficult to shake the hand of your friend without sucker punching 'em in the kidney, but after you spend a few seconds with Shaolin Monks' exceptional cooperative play, you'll be giving each other high fives, chest bumps, and questionable hugs.

X-Men Legends II: Rise of Apocalypse

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox, GameCube, PSP

Release: September 20 (PS2, Xbox, GameCube) October 25 (PSP)

Mixing constant four-player action with a role-playing tale of everyone's favorite mutants adds up to explosive fun – especially with cooperative online play for all four players. There are over a dozen characters each with a wealth of superpowers, and an even mix of playables from both the X-Men and the Brotherhood. You don't have to be a comic fan to recognize the value here.

Indigo Prophecy

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox, PC

Release: September 22

Indigo Prophecy is certainly one of the year's most unique experiences – an interactive story that defines a new breed of adventure game. The tale of Indigo Prophecy has players exploring bizarre murders and ancient traditions as they control the fugitive Lucas Kane in addition to the two detectives assigned to capture him. Be warned, the subtle storytelling and deliberate pace sort of take a nose-dive at the end, but the concept and execution earn this one a place among the definitive releases of 2005.

Heroes of the Pacific

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox

Release: September 27

Heroes of the Pacific came out of nowhere to become one of the most pleasant surprises of the year. Featuring both arcade-style and realistic control schemes, Heroes of the Pacific is a flexible flight sim with some blistering difficulty, even on the easiest setting. But with some truly tense action, online multiplayer, and wide variety of authentic WWII aircraft, Heroes of the Pacific should not be missed. There may be many shooters vying for the title of best WWII FPS, but clearly Heroes of the Pacific rules the skies.

Brothers in Arms: Earned in Blood

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox

Release: October 4

The series' latest, Earned in Blood, best represents a new wrinkle in the squad-based military genre. Using flanking tactics, you'll defeat the Nazi menace in a cinematic game that mixes both strategic gameplay and first-person shooting. You'll even control tanks and multiple squads over maps that put a premium on not getting your head blown off in the crossfire. This series delivers a fresh experience to a genre already littered with the corpses of the uninspired.

Castlevania: Dawn of Sorrow

System: Nintendo DS **Release:** October 4

The "Metroid-vania" formula that has been the mainstay of 2D Castlevania since the late '90s has its most spectacular showing in this side-scrolling DS adventure. The sheer number of different attacks at your disposal as you rid the castle of evil once again is almost overwhelming, while collecting the souls that give you those powers holds the same inexplicable draw as the whole Pokémon craze. Some of the most interesting (and difficult) bosses to ever appear in the franchise, as well as some clever touch-screen puzzles, make this one of the best Castlevanias ever – and for a franchise that started almost 20 years ago, that's no small feat.

F.E.A.R.

System: PC **Release:** October 18

What's worse than working in a lifeless cubicle all day long? Being hunted by an army of clone soldiers and a murderous, psychic little girl through abandoned office buildings, of course. F.E.A.R. taps into this kind of postmodern horror with great results, and offers some of the most visceral, sensory-overloading FPS combat to ever grace video games. Using your time-slowing abilities is key to survival, and watching the absolute destruction firefights create in slo-mo is a real treat. A chilling twist in the last few hours of the game, along with the outstanding combat, makes playing through F.E.A.R. a must for any FPS fan.

6 Death's Hand (Jade Empire)

Feared among the populace like Vader among the Ewoks, Death's Hand is bad news. Except that he actually lives up to the hype instead of wussing out at the end. Plus, you can bind him to your will if you play as a bad guy – something Luke could never do regardless of how much he whined.

7 Krauser (Resident Evil 4)

This is one recurring boss character that goes a long way toward selling the game on his own. You might think he's just a badass mercenary that hounds your trail, but believe us when we say that your final confrontation with Krauser gives his actions a whole new meaning.

8 Dhoulmagus (Dragon Quest VIII: Journey of the Cursed King)

Dhoulmagus drives home his unbeatable power in a novel way. Every time you learn something new about him, the knowledge that he can kill you with his pinky finger solidifies deeper in your mind. Evil clowns are definitely the new Sephiroth.
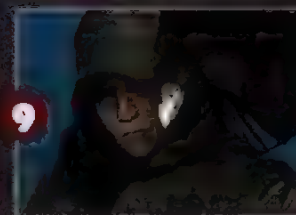
9 The Oracle (Indigo Prophecy)

It takes a true schemer to pull Indigo Prophecy's deliciously twisted strings. What's even better, the Oracle refuses to get hands-on with anything, and just possesses people to do his dirty work. That's about as devious as it gets.
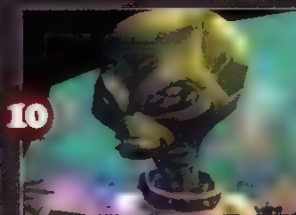
10 Cryptosporidium-137 (Destroy All Humans)

Sure, he's the main character of the game and he talks like Jack Nicholson, but he also carries out his mission with a hilarious, gleeful disdain for human life. And he comes an anal probe gun around at all times. We'll always love Crypto for that.
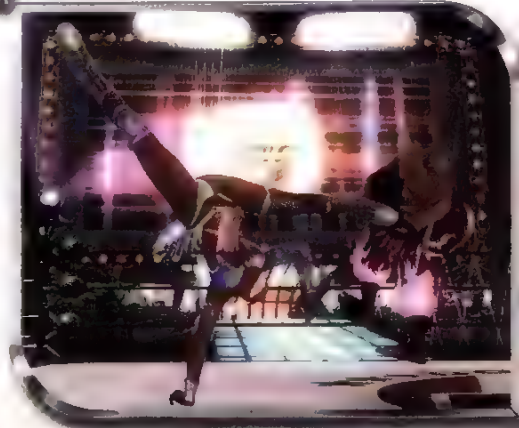
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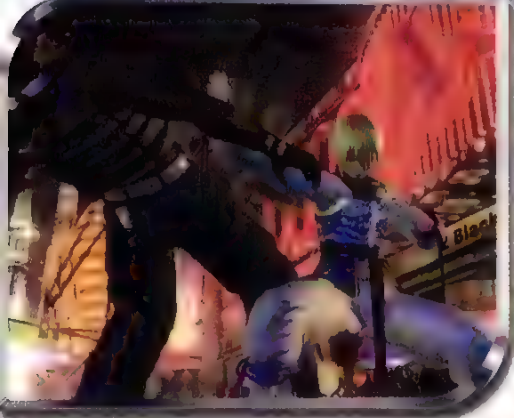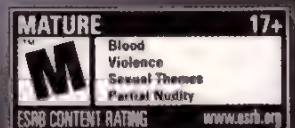
Fire Emblem: Path of Radiance

System: GameCube **Release:** October 18

In bringing Fire Emblem back to home consoles for the first time since Japan's Super Famicom, Nintendo realized a long-standing dream of many fans. Fortunately, none of the series' hallmark strengths were affected by the jump, and 'Cube owners got a rare treat. Path of Radiance exemplifies so much of what makes turn-based gaming interesting: Deep thought, intricate strategies, and good tactics are all you need to succeed here. It may not have the flash of a shiny new action title, but Path of Radiance offers a fantastic time to those willing to plumb its depths.

Shadow of the Colossus

System: PlayStation 2 **Release:** October 18

While many gamers may be content to pick up a generic weapon to gun down super villain Twisty McMoustache, Shadow of the Colossus offers something unique for the more aesthetically-minded player. The 16 gargantuan Colossi aren't blatantly sinister like your typical video game opponents, and each one of them you slay is a visually stunning and heart-wrenching masterpiece. From the team that created ICO, this title is a rare mix of awe and artistry. The distinctive style and unconventional gameplay won't appeal to everyone, but they are definitely a testament to the fact that there is still plenty of exciting uncharted territory for video games to explore.

THE WARRIORS

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox
Release: October 18

If there's one thing that Rockstar consistently does better than anyone, it's mood. The Warriors, based on the late '70s flick, oozes the details that made that era so unique – soundtrack, dialogue, and setting are each masterfully used here to make the sometimes-cheesy adventures of one crazy night believable and compelling. While not a perfect execution, Warriors also excels at being a real update to the brawler genre, a time-honored favorite that few have tackled well in the current generation.

Top 10 Biggest Dorks of 2005
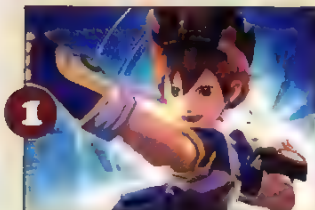
1

Sei (Virtua Quest)
What does it take to be our Dork of the Year? Choreographed, synchronized dances with all of the main characters from Virtua Fighter. With every graceful pirouette, Sei whittles away whatever dignity he had left after installing his festive pink grappling beam.

2

Tom Hansen (Cold Fear)
An obvious result of a malfunctioning Generic Grizzled Hero Generator, Tom Hansen is a transparent corporate attempt at "cool." All Tom Hansen's got is a boatload of zombies. Happy sailing, chump!
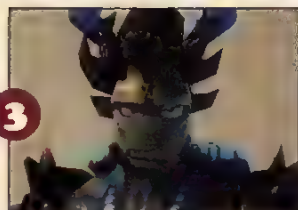
3

Raze (Raze's Hell)
Raze is a mixture of many unforgettable gaming legends, like Azurik, Vexx, and Shadow the Hedgehog. This laughable pedigree resulted in what was one of the most forced and lifeless protagonists of the year. Plus, he doesn't have a nose. That's worth, like, a million suck points.

4

Ronnie McCrae (Need For Speed: Most Wanted)
"Eyyy! You're gonna need more rep to roll with the big dogs! I hang with the most wanted, g-flava! The kids used to call me a hoser, but I showed them by wearing these awesome shades! Sweet mercy, I am so lonely."

5

The Entire Cast of Romancing Saga
Romancing Saga sets a new standard in ensemble moronism with eight unlikable characters that are appalling on every level. Wooden and devoid of personality, these flimsy shells of humanity are an insult to anyone who has ever had a creative thought.

Grand Theft Auto: Liberty City Stories

System: PSP

Release: October 25

Liberty City Stories, thankfully, is not a spinoff. It's the next great thing in this illustrious series. Featuring the same technology found in the console games, you can't help cracking a smile when you take your first car for a drive as you try to become a made man in this crime-ridden city. It may be on a much smaller screen, but this installment of GTA boasts a new story, the same great gameplay, plus the series' first competitive multiplayer. Without question, this is the PSP's first killer app.
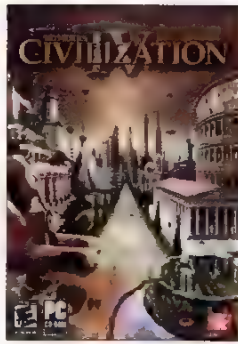
Sid Meier's Civilization IV

System: PC

Release: October 25

Excuse us if we adopt a suitably reverent tone when we speak of the masterpiece that is Civ IV. It's hard not to develop a near religious fervor about a game that demands so much of your time, thought, and energy. Immensely intelligent and challenging, this fourth installment of the landmark franchise refines the whole experience down to its best aspects. Civ IV manages to still be incredibly accessible, even to the beginner. Unique, flexible, and absorbing, your PC hungers for this game on its hard drive.

Soul Calibur 3

System: PlayStation 2

Release: October 25

One of the very best fighting franchises in gaming hasn't lost anything in the move to being a PS2 exclusive. Soul Calibur 3 has all of the fast-paced, smooth, and responsive combat that fans could wish for, some nice graphical upgrades, and more characters than ever to play with. Weapon-based fighting simply doesn't get much better than this. Don't let the lack of online play or worthwhile single-player modes fool you -- Soul Calibur 3 is one of the best competitive games around. Get ready to sit on the couch and wail on your friends for a good long time.

Guitar Hero

System: PlayStation 2

Release: November 8

Just when you thought your dreams of rock stardom should be shelved, stage godhood can now be assured. Offering some of the best electric guitar music in the instrument's history, the game makes you feel so much like you're creating the music as you go that it's hard to put down the controller. And what a controller it is -- with a five button fret board, whammy bar, and even a tilt sensor, you'll be hard-pressed to have more fun with a musical instrument without those years of lessons you almost certainly lost patience for when you were 13.

Gun

System: Xbox 360, PlayStation 2, Xbox, GameCube

Release: November 8 (PlayStation 2, Xbox, GameCube), November 15 (Xbox 360)

Gun gives gamers an original take on familiar Western conventions. Fingers get blown off, the greedy kill over secret stashes, and stuff gets blown sky-high with dynamite. Native Americans are an ever-present threat, and you can bolster your character stats with side missions such as helping ranchers or donning a deputy's badge. With an excellent voice cast and a grade-A script, Gun is a video game world that comes alive in every sense.
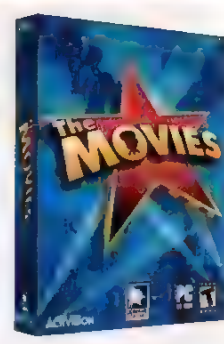
The Movies

System: PC

Release: November 8

A unique game with some very familiar trappings, The Movies should appeal to just about everyone. Whether you just want to make movies (which can be shared online) or you want to build up your studio and take care of your actors Sims-style, this game gives you a fair amount to chew on. It allows you a great amount of freedom, yet at the same time can cater to a quick, no-fuss experience. In an industry where we often expect great gaming moments to be served up for us, The Movies lets you create your own to your heart's content.

Dragon Quest VIII: Journey of the Cursed King

System: PlayStation 2 **Release:** November 15

It may have taken eight games, but Dragon Quest will finally be on the minds of American role-players. Akira Toriyama's extraordinary art leads the way in this whimsical and brilliantly penned tale. No one can deny the allure that this story brings. As you count the days until your big confrontation with Dhoulmagus, your quest is brought to life with each gorgeous cel. In a year without Final Fantasy, Dragon Quest keeps the traditional RPG alive and well.

Need for Speed: Most Wanted

System: Xbox 360, PlayStation 2, Xbox, GameCube, PC

Release: November 15 (PS2, Xbox, GC, PC), November 22 (Xbox 360)

High concept and high-tension police pursuits are the name of this game. With a skillfully balanced open city that always offers something new to do, the time spent between races is the most rewarding. Police pursuits are an experience not to be missed, as they require players to apply action game-like strategy to traditional street racing. EA has created a juggernaut version of cops and robbers with this release.

6. Johnny Cage (Mortal Kombat: Shaolin Monks)

A bona fide bonehead through and through, this poser actually turns his last named into a verb, as in "You've been Caged!" We think a better usage is "Pass the Charmin, dude. I've gotta go take a Cage."
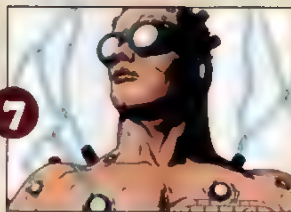
7. Johnny Ohm (Marvel Nemesis)

He gained his special powers through a botched execution in the electric chair. Does that sound familiar? It should if you've seen Ernest Goes to Jail, and when your whole existence rips off a Jim Varney movie, you know you've hit rock bottom.
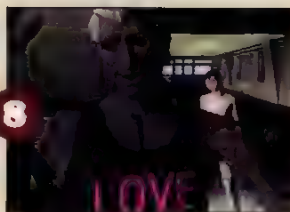
8. Travis (Killer 7)

Where does he buy those shirts? Ironic Goth Teen Boutique? We'll let you in on a little tip, Travis: You aren't "raging against the machine" or "freaking out the conformists" with your "individuality." And you don't get any bonus teen goth points for already being dead, either.
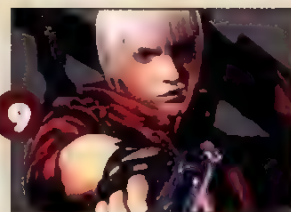
9. Dante (Devil May Cry 3)

Fresh with new hairstyle from PoindexterCuts, this "edgy" fratboy version of Dante apparently went to Ninja Turtle University, scarfing pizza while spouting generic one-liners like "This party's getting crazy!" That might have cut it in the '80s, man, but so did Dave Coulier. Now go put a shirt on.

10. The Alliance (World of Warcraft)

Comprised of 90% Hunters and 100% pansies, the Alliance is "teh weaksauce." Did you blockheads know that it isn't mandatory to have a naked Night Elf dancing on every mailbox? It's true...but you'd know that if you weren't playing on Easy Mode. /moo.

Top 10 Worst Games of 2005

1 CHICAGO ENFORCER

If only Prohibition outlawed crappy games instead of alcohol. This poisonously awful shooter has the dubious distinction of being the yin to Halo 2's yang – the worst FPS we've ever played. It just goes to show that there will always be balance in the universe.

2 Predator: Concrete Jungle
Congrats, Vivendi Universal. You've actually managed to take a cool character and create a bigger embarrassment for him than fighting Danny Glover and losing.

3 Red Ninja: End of Honor
When the only thing in a game that works as intended is the frequency in which the protagonist flashes her panties, then you know honor truly has come to an end.

4 Iron Phoenix
The phoenix always rises again, but we pray this one stays dead. If the worst parts of every fighting game you've ever played got together and had a baby, it would be Iron Phoenix. An ugly, ugly baby with severe motor skill problems.

5 Charlie and the Chocolate Factory
This factory is pumping out something brown and sticky, but it sure ain't chocolate.

6 Shadow the Hedgehog
This game will tear up your childhood and pee on the shreds. As thematically inappropriate as a very special episode of Sesame Street dealing with Elmo's meth problem, Shadow the Hedgehog still sucks even if you can get past the concept, thanks to some truly broketacular gameplay.

7 Narc
Here is the game that proves that people don't play Grand Theft Auto merely to partake in deviant behavior. Narc lets you revel in debauchery, drugs, and violence, but in a profoundly crappy, annoying way. The fact that this unplayable junkpile was largely ignored just goes to show that being shocking doesn't equal being popular. Suck it, Tom Green!

8 Lunar: Dragon Song
We're pretty sure this was actually more of a cruel sociological experiment than an actual game. What else could explain taking a beloved franchise and filling it with the most bizarre, counter-intuitive design decisions imaginable? Taking damage from running? Surely that was added simply to gauge the various stages of human despair and disbelief.

9 Dead to Rights 2
It's rare that a sequel takes such a pronounced step backwards in quality. You know what, diamonds are rare, too. Think of this as a piece of coal that hasn't become a diamond yet – a really hard-featured and entirely worthless piece of coal.

10 Death by Degrees
Combining all the traditional shortcomings of the action genre while innovating new ways to suck, Death by Degrees deserves a special achievement award in the field of "Most Shameless Debasement of a Beloved Franchise." We hear that the Tekken games have officially disowned this one.
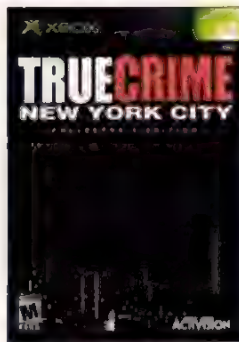
True Crime: New York City
System: PlayStation 2, Xbox, GameCube
Release: November 15
Offering the first GTA knockoff that stands out and, in some ways, stands eye-to-eye with the granddaddy franchise, Activision's True Crime: New York City is an experience not to be missed. A great story winds players through the city and highlights the bounty of things that gamers can do when they're not directly furthering the tale, so open up that car trunk and see what's inside. We promise it's not that doofus Nick Kang.
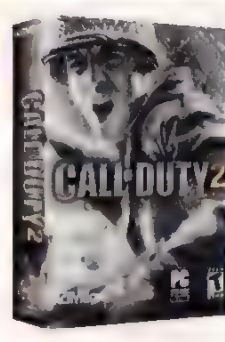
Call of Duty 2
System: Xbox 360, PC
Release: November 22 (360), October 25 (PC)
Call of Duty 2 blows away the bar set by its precursor and delivers the most engaging and enjoyable WWII experience to date. AI that reacts intelligently to changing situations and brilliant level design push this title completely over the top, beyond the shellshock that the outstanding presentation gives you. And, of course, the stunning next-gen graphics don't exactly hurt, either. No matter which system you play this on, Call of Duty 2 is a great way to see the future of FPS.

Peter Jackson's King Kong
System: Xbox 360, PlayStation 2, Xbox, GameCube, PC
Release: November 22
On Skull Island, players are nothing more than fodder for the gigantic creatures that wage their own battles with each other. You are merely surviving and, while you can learn to hold your own, the human characters will never tame this world. What the game lacks in length, it makes up for in supplying a consistent tension worth experiencing more than once.

Mario & Luigi: Partners in Time
System: Nintendo DS **Release:** November 29
A real, adult RPG based on these two childhood icons was a sweet treat when the first game came out on GBA. The sequel, Partners in Time, tweaks the formula with a time-traveling story and baby plumbers, highlighting the series' mix of timed button-press, but still turn-based action. Besides these great gameplay dynamics, the laugh-out-loud dialogue and poppy graphics make the surreal trip through the Mushroom Kingdom all the more enjoyable.

Prince of Persia: The Two Thrones
System: PlayStation 2, Xbox, GameCube **Release:** December 1

A bang-up trilogy-ending closer, Prince of Persia: The Two Thrones delivers a mix of the greatest parts from the series' earlier games. Brutalizing players with fast-paced platforming sections and scads of challenging enemy encounters, the game also liberally rewards success with a great story, genius level design, and a kick-ass soundtrack. Plus, the Dark Prince shuts the hero up when he goes into one of his pretentious monologues.

BRIDGING THE GAP

ICEMAN

WOLVERINE

NIGHTCRAWLER

F eared and hated by those they've sworn to protect, the X-Men have carved out a unique niche for themselves in comics and the wider arena of popular culture. Unlike the superheroes that came before them, the X-Men were born as a team of outcasts – misunderstood freaks of nature who stood apart from the frightened populace. But there's a strange thing about the misfit persona: People like it. Everyone wants to root for the underdog who pushes past prejudice and anger in order to do the right thing. Perhaps that's why the X-Men have met with the immense success that has grown up around them in the last 40 years. Hundreds of millions of comic books sold and over a billion dollars in revenue for their first two feature films are evidence enough of that. It was the most recent of those films that has left both movie and comic fans in anticipation for the last two years. As the movie closes, an uncertain future looms for mutantkind. Before the third movie begins, that future will be revealed.

XBOX 360 I PLAYSTATION 2 I XBOX I GAMECUBE I PC I PSP
> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION > **PUBLISHER** ACTIVISON > **DEVELOPER** Z-AXIS
> **RELEASE** MAY

(All screens shown are PlayStation 2)

The teleport attack is astoundingly cool
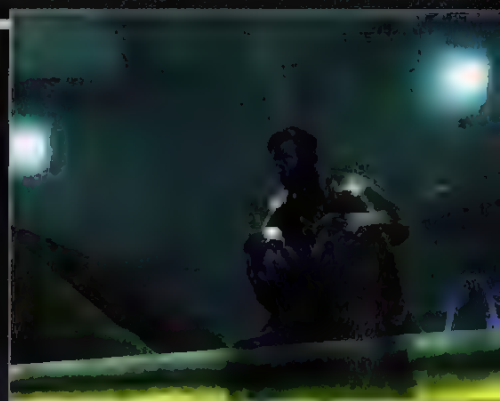
"Our characters really couldn't be more different, which is one of the most exciting things about our game"

"Our story begins shortly after the climatic ending of X2. We tell the backstory of the X-Men as it pertains to the next film, and pick up some of the story threads that were left unanswered in X2," Z-Axis executive producer Scott Bandy tells us. In the time between when the credits roll in X2 and the curtain rises on X3, there are all sorts of questions to be explored. What happened to Jean Grey in the waters of Alkali Lake? What dark secrets surround Wolverine's past? How will the government respond to the growing crisis of mutants in the world? X-Men 3 the game begins shortly after the X-Men's mysterious visit to the Oval Office to see the President. After the attack on their home mansion, Cerebro has been damaged and is in need of parts and repair. Unfortunately, the only place to get those parts is through a return trip to the Alkali Lake military base and the ruined remains of the Dark Cerebro machine that lies within. The X-Men are dispatched, only to discover that the flooded base is far from abandoned, and that the military has a new project in the works. They also learn almost immediately that some part of the warped psychic mind of Jason Stryker remains somehow tied to the place of his apparent death. Finally, Wolverine discovers that his frenzied fight with Lady Deathstrike might not have been as final as he had hoped. From these inauspicious beginnings, the team is launched into confronting a new worldwide threat to mutants, while Wolverine's encounter with Deathstrike leads him on a continued quest into his past for answers and revenge.

A surprising combination of talent has been tapped to create this tale that will connect the second and third films. Zak Penn was one of the writers who penned both the second and third movie scripts, helping to bring a touch of realism and character to the overly fantastic mythos of the X-Men. Meanwhile, Chris Claremont has made a career out of telling tales of the X-Men as he firmly established the driving conflicts of the comics with his early work on the characters in the '80s, and continues in his unique style with them today. Together, these two writers have collaborated to craft the story of the new game. Claremont's world-spanning, character-focused writing has combined with Penn's believable vision for the movies to result in an adventure that will hopefully attract both excited fans of the comics as well as the wider film audience. "Working with Chris ensured that we would have a story that met the very high expectations of the comic community regarding the story arc and character development, while working with Zak gave us the opportunity to more closely weave our fiction into the story from X3," Bandy tells us. To do this, the development team from Z-Axis has focused on three of the most interesting characters from the fiction – each
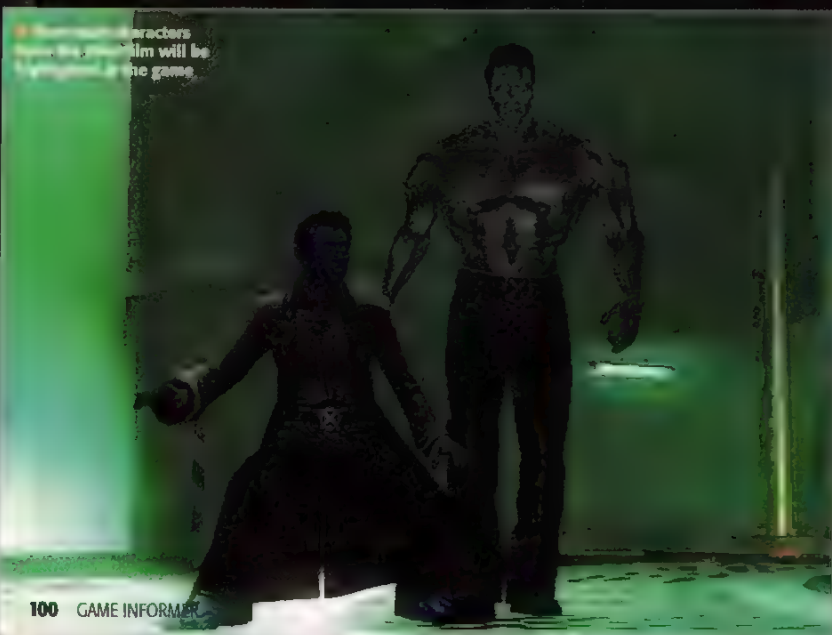
Several characters from the new film will be highlighted in the game
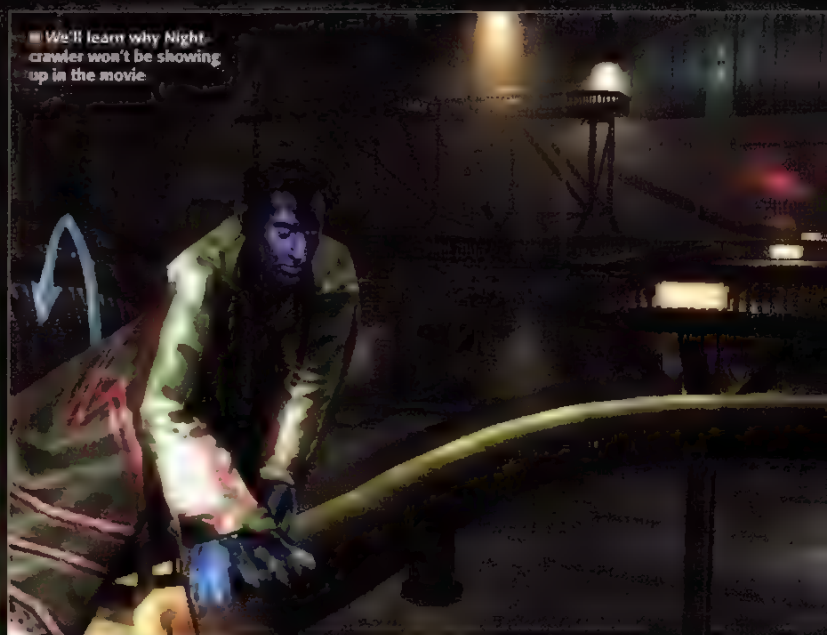
We'll learn why Nightcrawler won't be showing up in the movie

Nightcrawler

chosen both because of the unresolved stories that need to be told and the unique powers and gameplay possibilities that they represent. Nightcrawler, Wolverine, and Iceman all get to tackle different levels in the game, and each one of them has something unique to offer. "Our characters really couldn't be more different, which is one of the most exciting things about our game," we're told by Jason VandenBerghe, the lead character designer on the game. "Many super hero team games struggle with the generalization of characters' powers to fit within the game's mechanic set. With our game, we took the opposite approach; each level is tailored to that character."

Fans who've been rabidly following news of the upcoming movie have been universally surprised by one strange absence in the cast — Nightcrawler. The blue devil won't be showing up in the new movie, which begs the question within the storyline of why not? The intervening fiction of the game offers the perfect opportunity to address exactly that, and we'll learn definitively in the game how and why the morally conflicted Catholic departs on a new path away from the team. In the meantime, gamers will get the chance to play as the teleporting mutant through a unique combination of acrobatics and hit-and-run stealth. "Nightcrawler prefers to take enemies on one-on-one, and is a lot more fragile than his adamantium-clawed friend, so he relies on skill and maneuverability in combat to win the day," VandenBerghe tells us. The traditional third-person action concept is profoundly altered by the use of teleportation. Players will have the use of two main approaches to the power. Combat teleporting allows Nightcrawler to target an enemy and then disappear and reappear directly behind or in front

of him, taking the goon by surprise with an array of fast kicks and strikes. "Bamfing" can even be used to literally surround a whole group of foes, as you pop in and out around and among them before they can react. Meanwhile, object teleporting allows Nightcrawler to target an area in the environment and instantly reappear in that location. All of his levels are designed with numerous rails, pipes, and other perches that Nightcrawler can maneuver around and on top of. The combination of this strange style of platforming and stealth gameplay is a refreshing departure from the usual fare of third-person games. We saw a level where Nightcrawler had been dispatched to the Alkali facility to help infiltrate Dark Cerebro. As he moves through the darkened corridors, his devilish tail flicks around behind him. Moving less like a man and more like a feral creature, all of his movements are lithe and quick. Swinging from bars and dropping down on foes, a blurred blue speed overlay appears for the player as he zips across a room in an instant of teleportation. After accessing a computer panel, he opens a door to let in the hulking metal form of Colossus, and with his added help they move toward their objective. This characterizes a plan that Z-Axis wants to bring out throughout the game. While only three characters have their own playable sections and gameplay styles, you'll constantly run into additional team members, including exciting new spotlight characters like Colossus and Multiple Man.

If Nightcrawler offers a new and surprising gameplay style, Wolverine is present to give players some good old-fashioned brawling. Xavier sends Wolverine on a mission when brute force is called for, and each of his levels is chock full of enemies to be mown
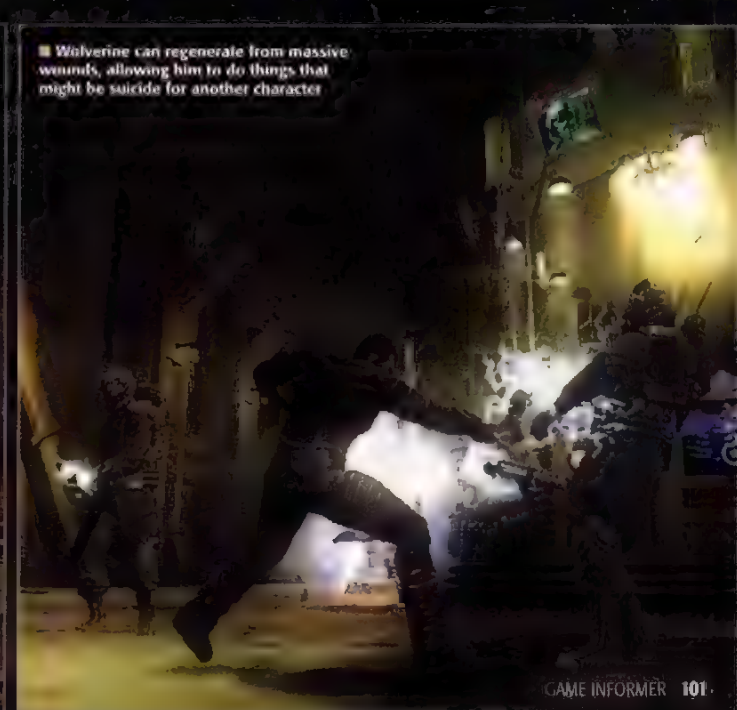
Logan's battles are intense and frantic, as hordes of enemies seek to take him down

Wolverine can regenerate from massive wounds, allowing him to do things that might be suicide for another character

> "Iceman presented us a unique opportunity: his ice slide lets him effectively fly through his environment, while freezing everything in sight..."

down. The unanswered questions for Wolverine continue to be rooted in his amnesiac past, and the game promises to help answer some of those nagging unknowns. In the course of his levels, one of the most interesting aspects looks to be the return of Lady Deathstrike, Wolverine's clawed nemesis from the second film. Through the course of learning of Logan's past, we'll also find out about her origin, how she became involved in the events of the second movie, and how in the world she managed to survive the grisly end that resulted from her scrap with Wolverine. As for Logan, in addition to seeing some throw downs at the Alkali Lake facility, we were also privy to some scenes set in a Japanese dojo. Could his quest for revenge introduce a version of the Silver Samurai to the movie universe? It seems almost guaranteed. In the course of these levels, it was clear that Wolverine is just as ferocious and unstoppable as fans would hope. "While playing Wolverine, you'll fight enemies. A lot of enemies...a lot of enemies that are very angry at you," VandenBerghe excitedly relays. His claws "snikt" open as he dives into hordes of opponents. One move showed him tackling a guard, throwing him to the ground, and then straddling the stricken foe's chest to eviscerate him with his claws. Destructible environmental objects abound – rice paper walls are torn to pieces, and metal barred cages can be totally destroyed. Wolverine will build up to a fury mode, which can be triggered to make both him and the player see red as he bursts into even faster paced action. The character will also have a dual health bar. The first shows incidental damage that Logan takes, which regenerates easily over time. However, let too many bullets past and he'll begin to take serious damage, which will drain down the maximum line that he can regenerate up

to. Eventually you'll be thrown up against foes with energy-based shock weapons meant to stun Wolverine, and later even teleporting ones. The focus is always on delivering intense and satisfying combat on a scale that actually makes for a challenge – not an easy feat with the nearly indestructible Canuck on the case.

Iceman offers a dramatic opportunity both from a story and gameplay perspective. Here is a mutant only just discovering the extent of his powers. Desperate to prove himself as a worthwhile addition to the team, the game details Bobby Drake's rise from just another student at the mansion to one of the leather-clad members of the X-Men. As you play him, he'll be trying out aspects of his powers for the first time, never sure if they'll do what he wants, but ready to take a chance to do what needs to be done. As yet another distinct departure from the other two playable characters, Iceman's levels are all about speed. You'll constantly be moving about the world in the classic style familiar to comic readers – on an ice slide. "Iceman presented us a unique opportunity: his ice slide lets him effectively fly through his environment while freezing everything in sight, and we've focused our gameplay around that mechanic," VandenBerghe explains. Consequently, playing as Iceman has a frantic sense of motion and obstacle-dodging about it. Several levels have players moving through what are basically tunnels – avoiding obstructions and getting to the end as fast as possible – with a feel not unlike racing to the bottom of a hill in a snowboarding game. Other levels find Bobby in a much larger open arena, where he will use the buildings and ground below him as anchors to create a rollercoaster of ice to move through the world. Aim him down to the ground and gravity will send him zooming ahead. Just before crashing,

■ Bobby desperately wants to prove himself to Logan and the rest of the team

■ The ice slide plays like you're building a rollercoaster as you go

A return to Alkali Lake leaves many mysteries unresolved
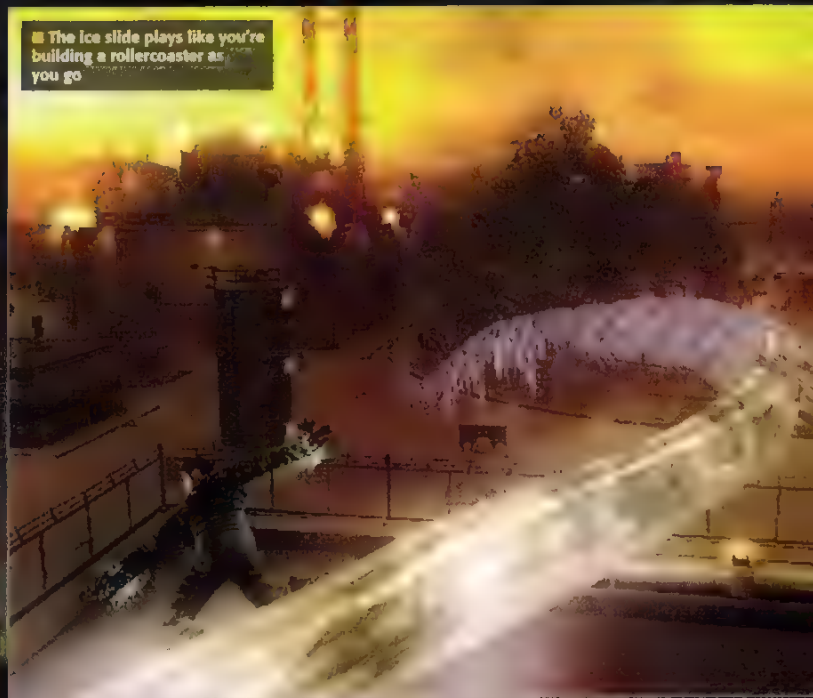
Seemingly impossible conflicts await the team

you can throw down an ice pillar to push off from, giving you a boost of speed as you fling yourself back up into the air on your slide. As you move through the world, you can throw out a hail storm of icicles to damage foes, or alternately fire an ice beam that freezes enemies in place. Your ice beam can also make metal and other objects brittle, and once frozen you can create an ice plow to break through barriers or push aside your adversaries. If you flip around and head back the other direction, you'll see the ice slide beginning to decay behind you, as slushy pieces drop to the ground in a shower. We were shown one remarkable level that had Iceman deployed to a dangerously unstable situation at a nuclear power plant. Arriving on the scene, a giant serpent of fire was coiled around the reactor, and bursting forth from its body were smaller raptor-like fire beasts. The boss fight had Iceman desperately trying to defeat the mammoth foe and

stop a nuclear disaster. We can't help but surmise that Bobby's former friend Pyro might be involved in the chaos, but we'll have to wait and see.

To fill in the gaps, the team has a lot of things in place to flesh out the game and offer a more complete experience. For each of these divergent characters you'll constantly be building up points in the game's mutant evolution system. As an example, you might manage to complete a great combo attack with Wolverine that will earn you points that can be expended to upgrade his abilities and physical traits. "To reflect each character's development, each of them has five unique stars, which you grow through earned upgrades as the game progresses. These upgrades are called Mutations, and there are a certain number of Mutations available in each mission," VandenBerghe informs us.

There will also be cutscenes to move the story forward, told through moving

2D animated panels, similar to the approach used in the popular Max Payne games. "We wanted to present our players with a unique look at the X-Men that bridges the comic and movie worlds creatively," Scott Bandy explains. "In order to achieve this, we decided to use a 2D animation technique we're calling 'hyper-boards.' It's a style that one might compare to an animated graphic novel." While the contents of those cutscenes remain secret, we definitely caught glances of some things we can't wait to hear more about. The mammoth mutant-destroying robot Sentinels are certainly making an appearance, and even their progenitor Master Mold looks to be involved. And it should come as no surprise that Magneto is also embroiled in the conflict, including an apparent visit to his new lair that should definitely be exciting. The whole game is designed around giving gamers what they want from the X-Men, and simultaneously

setting the scene for the excitement of the third movie.

Every imaginable platform looks to be receiving a version of the game, so nobody should have to worry about missing out. Even the next-gen Xbox 360 has a version in the works, one that will exhibit custom-built models for the system and normal mapping on all the environments. Whatever format you choose, you'll have to wait until May to dive in, when the game is planned for a launch just days before the movie release. It's certainly a big upcoming summer for comic fans, both in the movie and video game world. Without a doubt, our first look at the game proved how ambitiously Z-Axis is attempting to relay the exciting universe of the films. There are several months yet before we'll know how the final version of the game is going to turn out, but our first look offers a good reason to be thrilled about yet another summer of X-Men hysteria. ■ ■ ■
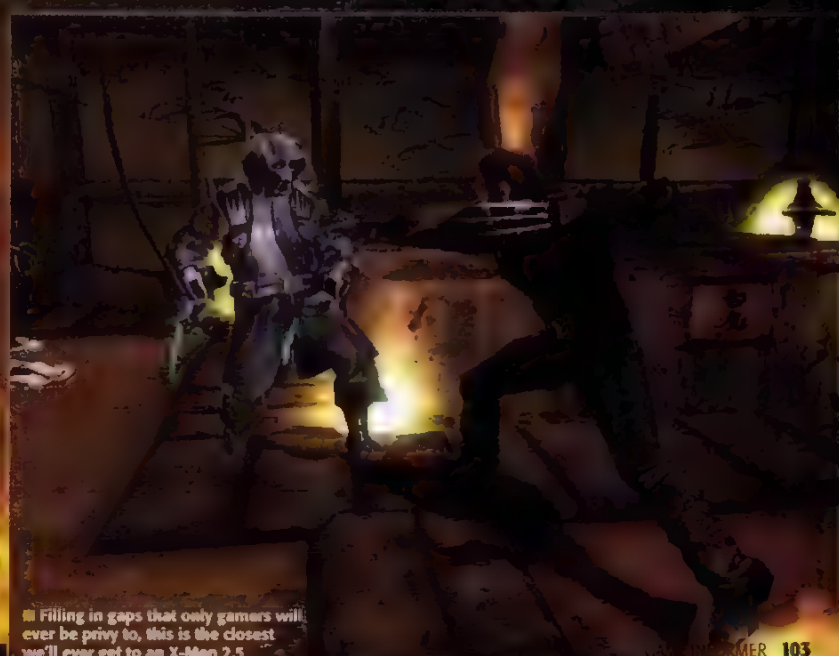
Filling in gaps that only gamers will ever be privy to, this is the closest we'll ever get to an X-Men 2.5

If this isn't the power of next-gen, we don't know what is

XBOX 360 | XBOX | PC

Ghost Recon:
Advanced Warfighter

> **STYLE** 1 TO 4-PLAYER ACTION (XBOX 360, XBOX), 1-PLAYER ACTION (PC) (UP TO 16-PLAYER VIA XBOX LIVE OR SYSTEM LINK, OR UP TO 32-PLAYER VIA PC INTERNET OR LAN) > **PUBLISHER** UBISOFT > **DEVELOPER** RED STORM ENTERTAINMENT > **RELEASE** SPRING 2006

Widescreen makes for some interesting viewing angles

SOUTH OF THE BORDER

We've taken our share of potshots at the Ghost Recon series in the past, calling out things like bad AI, boring level design, and generic plotlines. The next step for the series, Ghost Recon: Advanced Warfighter, has us all the more excited because of our historic disdain for the franchise's problems. Beyond all of the usual talk by the publisher about how the AI will be better and the levels more open, some interesting information has surfaced about the project that has us convinced that this might be the game to really break the series out into the spotlight. Due to our interview with Adrian Fernandez-Lacey, senior coordinator on the 360 title, as well as a live demonstration of the current-gen version, our cynicism has broken and we've got that feeling of anticipation that only the possibility of greatness can bring on.

To give Advanced Warfighter a bit of a unique flavor amid the many modern combat squad shooters out there, Red Storm is looking no farther than its past. "Ghost Recon has always been about behind-the-lines Special Forces operations: big weapons, air strikes, and so on," states Fernandez-Lacey. This entry in the series aims to incorporate those elements like never before. According to Fernandez-Lacey, "The player is now able to fly across the city in a Blackhawk and take out enemy targets on the rooftops, and when on the battlefield he can use ground support units such as Strikers or M1A1 tanks, and air support troops such as Apaches." Of course, Advanced Warfighter's Cross-Com tactical display will show you real-time visual feeds from the point of view of your support forces, giving you a much better idea of the overall tactical situation.

While all versions of the game will be using the same core design, a lot of special love is being given to the Xbox 360 incarnation. "We are in a fortunate position that we are building and expanding our technology for next-generation platforms," says Fernandez-Lacey. "The difficulty is to use the three processors to calculate, for example, physics, post effects, animations, AI, and pathfinding simultaneously, which the GRAW technology lets us do." In other words, all the talk about the Xbox 360's announced lineup only using one of the console's CPU cores (and therefore roughly only 33 percent of its computing power) doesn't apply to Advanced Warfighter, since Ubisoft is able to tap the full horsepower of the machine. This is encouraging, because frankly even we need some confirmation that the screenshots on these pages are real. Also intriguing about this new chapter in the Ghost Recon series is that it seems to be borrowing heavily from the elegant squad control scheme from Ubisoft's Brothers In Arms. And while we don't have a big problem with the previously-used Rainbow Six 3 control layout, the BIA scheme looks to fit Advanced Warfighter's gameplay like a glove.

All of this new information gives us great hopes for the single-player portion of the game, but Ghost Recon has always been as much about online as off. Fortunately, Red Storm is giving this aspect lots of attention, too. For starters, players will be able to customize their game types to a large extent through a system similar to Unreal Tournament's mutators. Also, you'll choose a class for your customized avatar and be able to earn military-style ranks through an international ranking system. And finally, online co-op will take you through a whole new campaign set in Nicaragua after the events of the offline story, which Red Storm even plans to update periodically with episodic content. Couple all these goodies with gameplay that seems to be shaping up into the best the series has ever offered, and it looks like Advanced Warfighter is going to be the real deal. Only time and playtesting will tell, but right now things are looking better than ever for Ghost Recon fans. ■ ■ ■

FUENTES DEL COCHES

You guys head over there. There probably aren't any terrorists

Assault

Recon

47
234

From what we gather, a large majority of this will be the play area
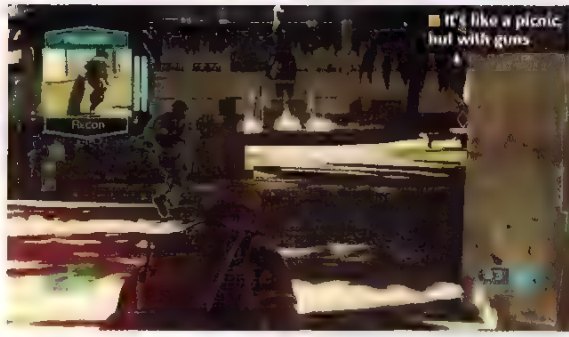
It's like a picnic, but with guns

This is the only current-gen shot shown – and it still looks pretty good

Assault

Recon

Apparently, the future of war includes a targeting display beamed into your mind

43
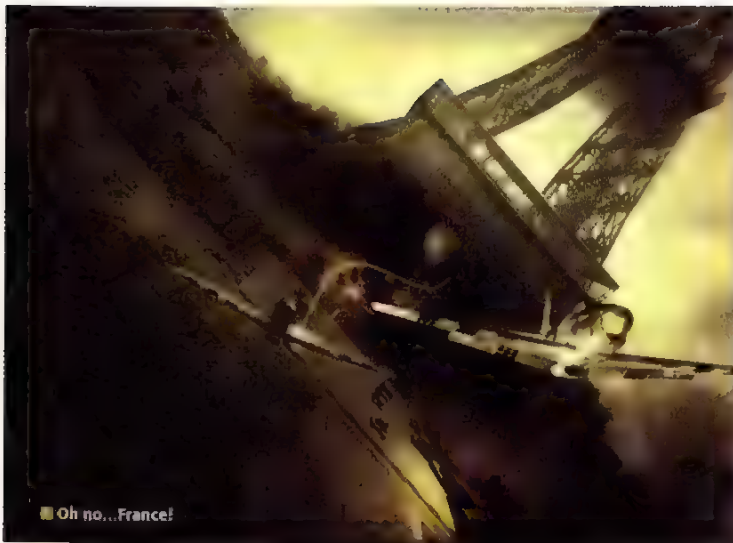
Oh no...France!

Check out the huge city below. You could totally hack a lougy on someone down there

Blazing Angels:
Squadrons of World War II

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION > **PUBLISHER** UBISOFT > **DEVELOPER** UBISOFT ROMANIA > **RELEASE** MARCH

TAKE TO THE SKIES

Fellow aviators, today is a good day to be a fan of arcade-style flight simulators. Following quickly on the heels of the stellar Heroes of the Pacific, Ubisoft will be releasing Blazing Angels: Squadrons of World War II this March. At this year's E3, the Xbox build of this game impressed us with its detailed graphics and frantic dogfights, but then Ubisoft dropped this bomb on us: Blazing Angels is also soaring onto Xbox 360. And as you can see, the next-gen version of this historical flying title looks simply jaw-dropping.

Over the course of 18 missions, Blazing Angels will recreate some of the most infamous battles of World War II including the Battle of Britain, Pearl Harbor, and the fierce combat over the skies of Berlin. In the 360 version, the 38 different plane models will be accurate down to the very rivets on the body! Obviously, the graphics will be one of the major differences between the 360 release and the current-gen build, with specular lighting used on the planes, sun glare, better textures, and more detailed touches. Shafts of light will pour through the clouds, heatwaves and shockwaves will emanate from explosions, and battle damage will be taken to a new level. Damage to both planes and environmental objects is persistent, so bullets will tear holes in your plane that will last through the whole level. Not only that, but any damage that you do to the environment stays as well! You can actually shoot down trees and blow buildings apart.

Over the course of Blazing Angels' campaign mode, players will grow from green recruits to battle-hardened aces and lead a squadron of fighters into intense aerial combat. You will be able to issue commands to your wingmen and take control of the most famous WWII aircraft, including the P-51 Mustang, B-17 Flying Fortress, and more. Of course, Blazing Angels will also feature robust Xbox Live support, with up to 16 players shooting it out online. Flight simulators are somewhat of a niche genre, but with such a gorgeous and action-packed title coming to 360, we have a feeling there may be record numbers of new pilots taking wing. ■ ■ ■

"We're bringing every man back alive from this mission. The bowling team can't take another loss!!"

"I just wanted to tell you something, Frank. I love you. Sorry, I get sweet before bombing runs."
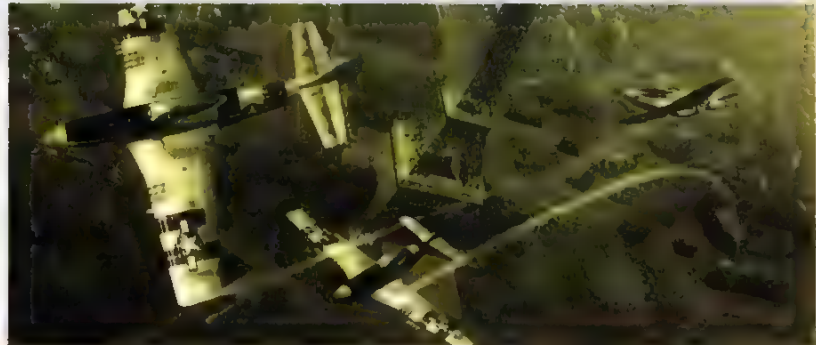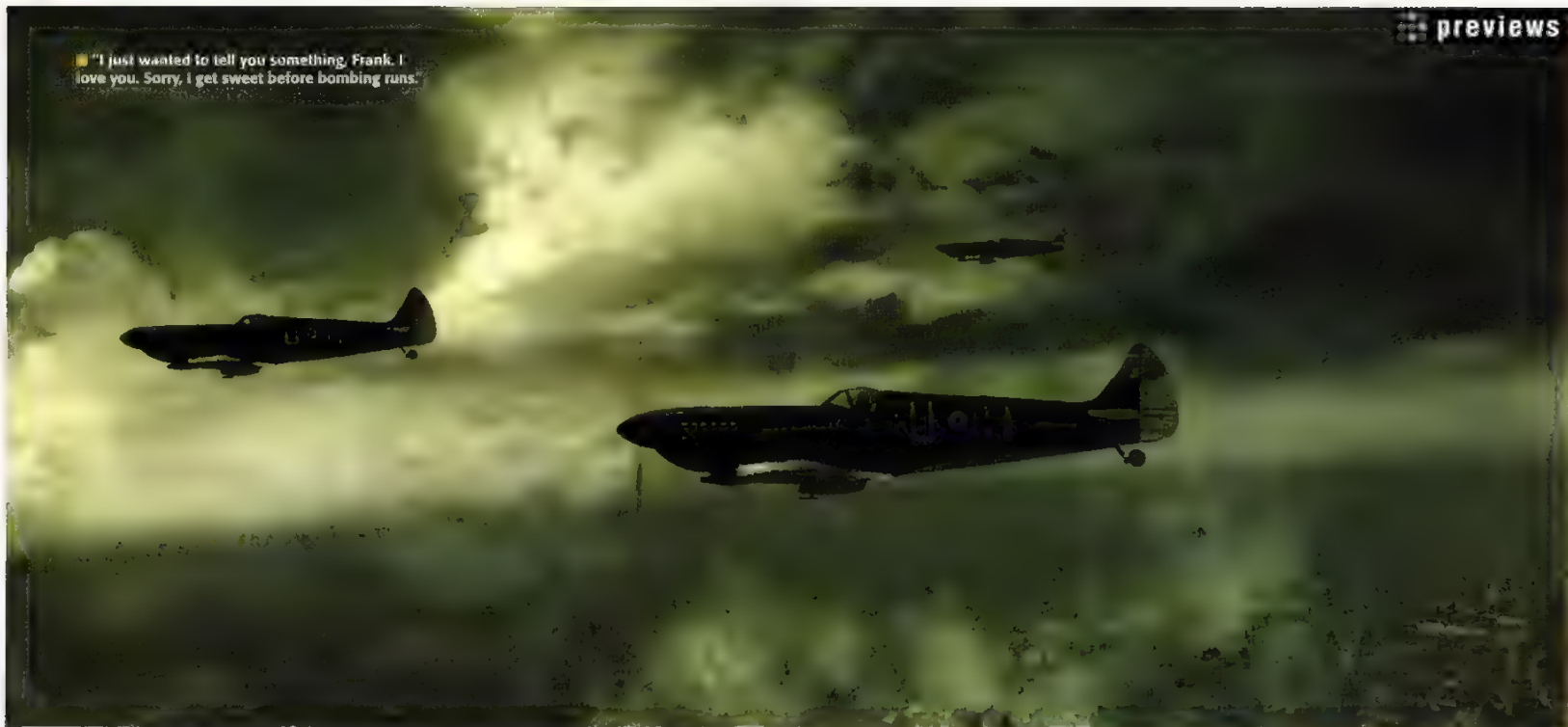
"Lieutenant James to HQ, I know that destroying the Eiffel Tower isn't one of my objectives, but I'm doing it anyway."

Tourist Trophy

> **STYLE** 1 OR 2-PLAYER RACING > **PUBLISHER** SONY COMPUTER ENTERTAINMENT AMERICA
> **DEVELOPER** POLYPHONY DIGITAL > **RELEASE** SPRING

A NEW WORLD OF RACING

"It's made by another crazy fanatic," says Tourist Trophy U.S. producer Taku Imasaki in reference to the game's mastermind, Takamasa Shichisawa. Polyphony Digital's inaugural motorcycle title might not be the brainchild of Gran Turismo's Kazunori Yamauchi, but it will not fall short of the developer's stringent attention to detail and love of racing. Yamauchi is overseeing the business and scheduling aspects of the project, but Tourist Trophy is the baby of motorcycle racer Shichisawa and his team. "It's definitely coming from passion and a love of the sport, so fans can count on it," Imasaki tells us.

Tourist Trophy wants to do for motorcycle racing what Gran Turismo did for cars – to foster a passion for the perfect racing line and to fuel players to understand their machines and push them to the edge. Although the game will not feature nearly as many motorcycles as GT does cars, there will be no less focus to make each of the more than 80 bikes perfect in both appearance and performance to its real-life counterpart. Despite a desire for fidelity, Tourist Trophy won't demand that players tweak a minutia of parts on their bikes. Simple alterations are possible, such as changing the suspension or tires, but Imasaki says this is for the benefit of your average player. "I think we're making the right choice with that, because it's more about bringing more people into the sport than appealing to the hardcore people." Other customizations are available, such as getting real-life gear for your rider like helmets, gloves, and racing suits.

Building off the dedication that Polyphony shows for all it does, Tourist Trophy is able to use much of the detailed data that makes Gran Turismo such a top-notch simulation. In fact, Imasaki tells us that over 90 percent of the courses in this title are from the expertly replicated tracks of Gran Turismo. However, this isn't just a case of importing the same Laguna Seca track you've raced a zillion times. In real life these courses must be changed to accommodate motorcycles – something that Tourist Trophy does as well. The incline of banks must be lowered, curbs have to be made safe for bikes, and the track configurations themselves must be redone. This is appropriate, because as you'll find out, racing bikes is not like racing cars.

"It's a longer learning curve," says Imasaki, "but once you get it it's pretty addicting." One of the first things you'll notice that's different about riding a motorcycle, Imasaki notes, is a change in your visual perspective. Since you can see further ahead, it's easier to mentally prepare yourself for future turns. However, you also have to concentrate more on making those turns. Here is where a rider's balance is important, as your lean will dictate how steep or shallow your angle through a turn is. "There's a certain art you have to master for making turns, and the motorcycle riders [that have been consulted for the game] have said the same thing. Even if you take the same course you've driven in Gran Turismo, it's a totally different thing." It is this figurative melding of man and machine that makes bike riding more exhilarating than car racing. If racing a car makes you the driver of that car, then riding a bike is a much more personal experience, as your body physically commands the bike's sway through the curves of a track's esses.

Tourist Trophy will feature a similar career structure to Gran Turismo, but it will be more streamlined. Also, your progress won't be dictated as much by needing a vehicle that meets certain race requirements, as it will be by earning the game's licenses. These will not only teach you how to race a bike, but will throw in challenges where you take on opponents in races. The class of bike you ride, however, will be important, as the game features a wide selection of two-wheeled machines from scooters to super bikes. It all sounds similar to Gran Turismo, but Tourist Trophy takes the training wheels off and dares you to race in a whole new way. ▪ ▪ ▪

The track work used for Gran Turismo 4 is utilized in Tourist Trophy

"We can say that the
bikes in this game look
better than any other
game out there."
– Taku Imasaki
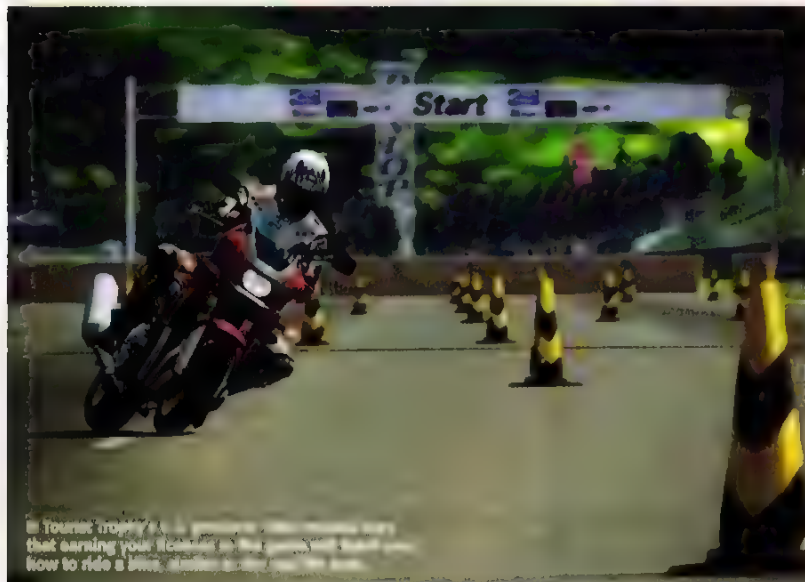
Start

■ Tourist Trophy is so genuine that through it's that earning your license in the game will teach you how to ride a bike, similar to if you rode the bike.

■ Polyphony had to work hard at not only modeling the bikes but the human figure as well, since body lean is such an important part of motorcycle racing

UNLIMITED ENABLED

Starcraft: Ghost

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 16-PLAYER VIA PS2 ONLINE OR XBOX LIVE) > PUBLISHER BLIZZARD ENTERTAINMENT > DEVELOPER BLIZZARD ENTERTAINMENT > RELEASE TBA

A THREE-HEADED BEAST

A t Blizzard's recent BlizzCon, we were able to go head-to-head with thousands of other fans and developers in Starcraft: Ghost multiplayer, and what we played was enough to restore our faith in the long-delayed project. At this point, with the sure hand of the former Swingin' Ape Studios (now part of Blizzard) at the helm, it's clear that Ghost is well on its way to living up to the Blizzard legacy. The four playable unit types for each of the three factions in objective-based multiplayer make damn sure that everyone knows that this is Starcraft. Yes, that's right – you'll be able to play as your choice of Terran, Protoss, or Zerg online.

The ability to use points gained by killing enemies and completing objectives to spawn as (or mutate into) a more powerful unit makes both modes of Ghost multiplayer that we saw a unique way to fight it out online. A round of Mobile Conquest can be an elaborate undertaking, with two sides using a mix of both ground vehicles and aircraft to take over a flying Terran factory. This mode is very teamwork-oriented, and tends to reward planning and organization as much as twitch skill for you Battlefield junkies out

there. Invasion mode, on the other hand, borrows heavily from Unreal Tournament 2004's Onslaught gametype, charging players with the capture of midfield nodes and eventual destruction of the enemy base. Having played this extensively at BlizzCon, we have to admit to being quite impressed.

The difference between Terran and Zerg playstyles is stark. The Terrans have vehicles such as Vultures (hoverbikes with grenade launchers, basically) and two-seater Jeeps to tool around the map, and deployable turrets to aid in node defense, which would make you think that they hold an advantage against the Zerg. However, a few key strengths on the part of the bugs offset the Terran technology. Zerglings and Hydralisks, in addition to having powerful melee attacks, are able to burrow to regenerate health and set up ambushes for unsuspecting enemies. Infested Marines can instantly turn the tide of battle with their incredibly strong suicide attack. And finally, once a Zerg player has enough points, he can take to the skies as a mighty Mutalisk and decimate Terran forces from above. Controlling these old RTS favorites in fast-paced action gameplay is a fan's

dream come true.

As for the single-player campaign, it seems to be shaping up similarly. Though Ghost features a mix of stealth and action (a difficult concept that can utterly destroy a game if done poorly), the team seems to be attacking the problem in the right way. "The balance [between stealth and action] is really up to the player." says Steve Ranck, vice president of console development at Blizzard. To give an idea of what he's talking about, Ranck explains further: "Take a great game like Half-Life 2, which is very action-oriented, and change the main character to a Ghost. Not only you do have access to the weaponry you would in a game like that, but you have access to these very unique Ghost abilities."

Though main character Nova will be armed to the teeth with the very best in futuristic death-dealing weapons, the deadly situations she faces will ensure that her cool psionic and super-spy powers don't go to waste. "You're not just running and gunning through it. You have to think like a Ghost," says Ranck. And really, that's the entire point of playing something more complex than a standard "kill all the enemies to open the next door" fragfest. ■ ■ ■

■ Marines aren't the little grunts they were in the RTS

■ Protoss Dragoons require some serious weaponry to take down

■ Flying around as a Mutalisk is half the point of playing as Zerg

■ Stealth will serve you well, but it's not always an option

>>>>>>>>> Zerg <<<<<<<<<

Zergling – 0 Points
Small, fast, and melee-only, the Zergling is the bugs' storm-trooper. Burrowing and the ability to detect cloaked Ghosts at close range gives Zerglings purpose.

Hydralisk – 1 Point
Melee attacks strong enough to knock vehicles flying, projectile spine firing, and burrowing make the Hydralisk a fantastic front-line Zerg shock trooper.

Infested Marine – 2 Points
A basic assault rifle gets the job done at range, but the infamous suicide attack is these nasties' real strength.

Mutalisk – 5 Points
The ultimate Zerg death machine in Ghost multiplayer. Rain acid death on opponents from the sky, or pick them up and eat them to regain health.

Delays And Developers

Ghost has had a somewhat troubled development history. After being announced on the cover of our November 2002 issue, the game has been delayed several times and even had the original developer, Nihilistic, pulled off of the project. About fifteen months ago, Blizzard acquired Metal Arms creator Swingin' Ape Studios to continue work on Ghost as part of the Blizzard family. Far from being a hostile takeover, however, this move was greeted with enthusiasm. "It's our dream project," gushes Ranck, who is also former president of Swingin' Ape. "Blizzard approached us and said, 'Are you interested in being acquired?' and we said, 'Are you kidding? You're Blizzard.'"

And just to dispel all of those nasty Xbox 360 rumors, Ranck gave us a straight answer to the next-gen question. "It's always been very clear that we wanted to stay on Xbox and PlayStation 2," says Ranck. "We know, based on the PSone to PS2 transition, that PlayStation 2 and Xbox titles will have longevity beyond the release of the next-gen consoles. And that's where Ghost belongs." Take that, Internet message boards!
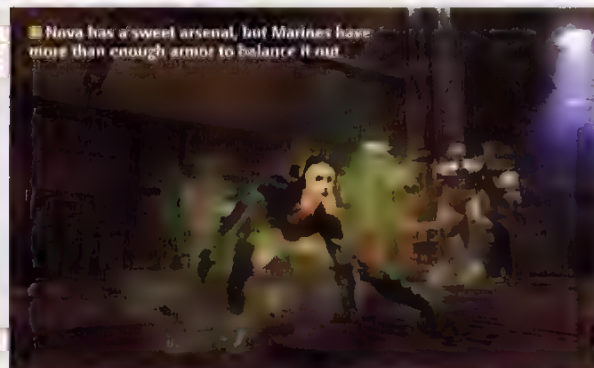
■ Nova has a sweet arsenal, but Marines have more than enough armor to balance it out
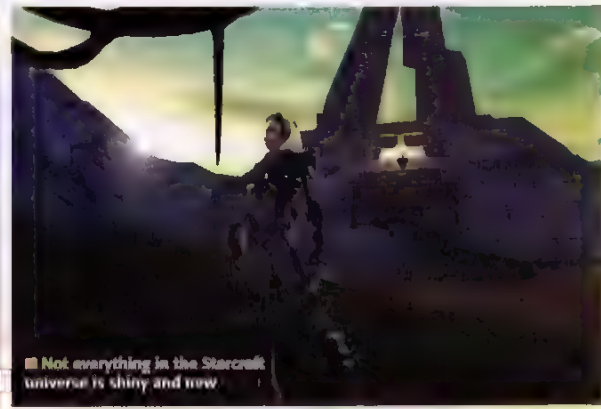
■ Not everything in the Starcraft universe is shiny and new
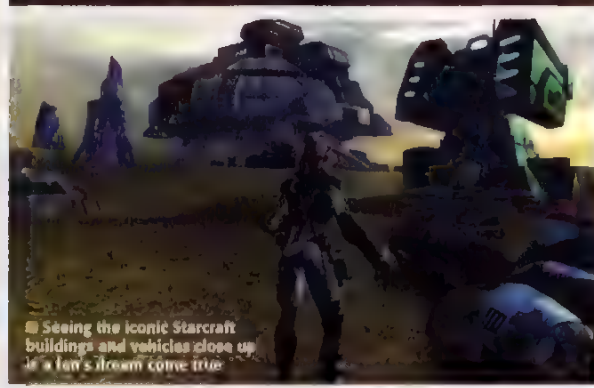
■ Seeing the iconic Starcraft buildings and vehicles close up is a fan's dream come true

■ Siege Tanks are not to be trifled with – unless you're a Ghost
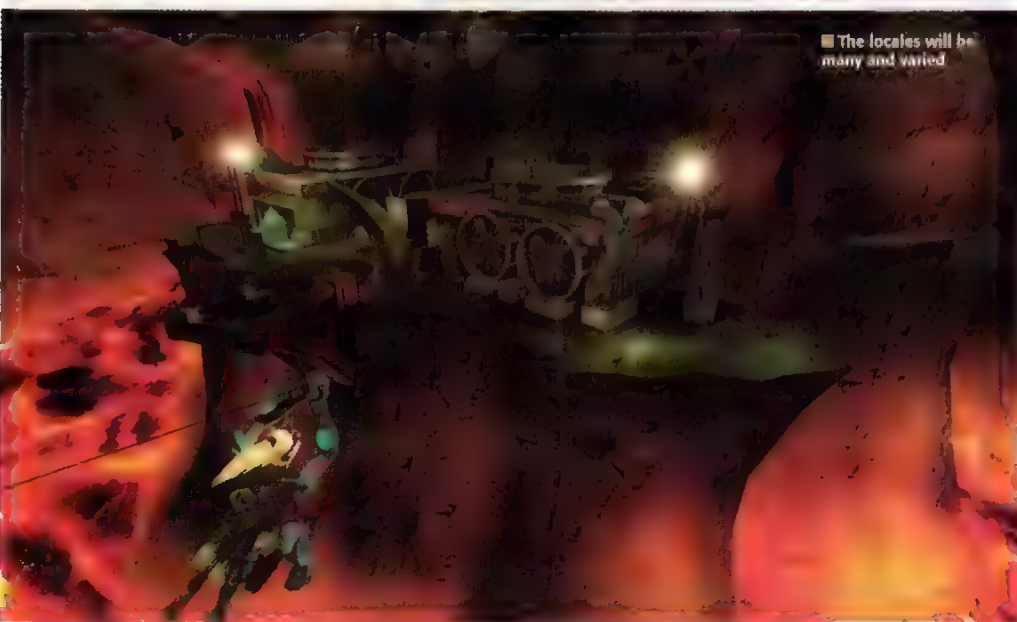
■ The locales will be many and varied

>>>>>>>> Terrans <<<<<<<<

Light Infantry – 0 Points
Though they lack the firepower of a Marine or Firebat, the grunts have the crucial capabilities of turret deployment and vehicle piloting.

Marine – 1 Point
A huge powered armor suit outfitted with assault rifles, rocket launchers, and more makes the Marine the backbone of the Terran forces.

Firebat – 2 Points
Although they look similar to Marines, Firebats pack dual flame-throwers for close combat. A great counter to Zerglings.

Ghost – 5 Points
The ultimate stealth unit. Ghosts are permanently cloaked, wield both assault and sniper rifles, and can fire tactical nukes to take out enemy emplacements.

The environments just scream "Fantasy!"

Neverwinter Nights 2

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ROLE-PLAYING GAME (MULTIPLAYER TBA) > **PUBLISHER** ATARI > **DEVELOPER** OBSIDIAN > **RELEASE** JUNE

REMEMBERING THE REALMS

Back in 2002, BioWare unleashed its heavily moddable Dungeons & Dragons-based RPG, Neverwinter Nights, into the wilds of PC gaming. Two expansions and nearly three years later, NWN still has a healthy community of modders and players online. Now, developer Obsidian (which also made Knights of the Old Republic II, another BioWare sequel) is ready to start talking about a true follow-up. Neverwinter Nights 2 still casts players as adventurers caught amid epic events in the Forgotten Realms, but a completely re-written engine (and perhaps more importantly, a similarly new modding toolset) and a few key gameplay changes guarantee that NWN 2 has plenty going for itself beyond the name.

Developing a sequel to somebody else's game is a tricky business, but Obsidian's an old hand at it. "Many of the folks here have a rich history working with BioWare, which makes things much smoother and better for everyone," said Ferret Baudoin, NWN 2's lead designer, in a recent interview

with Game Informer. Indeed, much of Obsidian's staff consists of former Black Isle Studios employees; old-school gamers will recognize Black Isle for its collaborations on early BioWare work, including the Baldur's Gate franchise. And even though NWN 2 is based to some extent on the ancient (by gaming standards) 2002 Aurora engine, this title should be as gorgeous as we all expect out of a brand-new title. "The Electron engine is a real next-generation engine," Baudoin assures us. And the screenshots can attest to it.

Rather than being a lone adventurer as was the case in the original game, NWN 2 will give you the opportunity to recruit up to three other heroes to aid you in your quest. Obviously, this changes the way that you'll approach problems. "You can have the classic party with you – rogue, wizard, cleric, and fighter," explains Baudoin. "All your bases will be covered, and a lot of options will be open to you on your adventures. And with direct control you get a whole new level of tactical options." Sure, this may
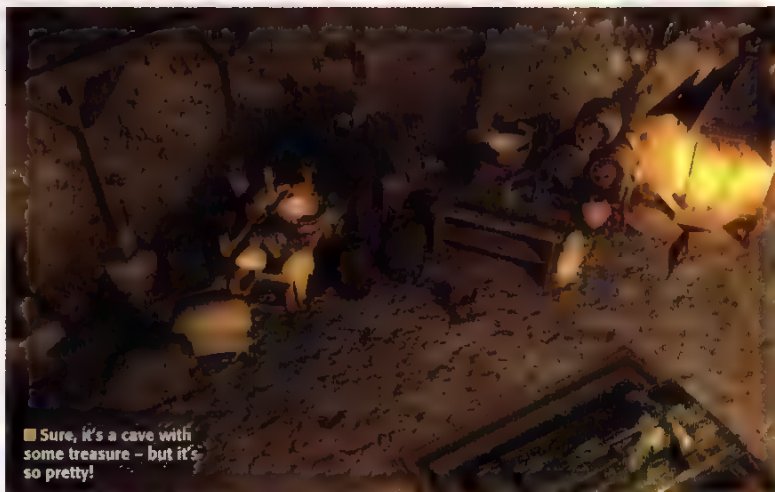
Sure, it's a cave with some treasure – but it's so pretty!

sound somewhat similar to Knights of the Old Republic or Baldur's Gate, but what's to complain about there? Given the depth of the D&D system, we can't wait to see what kinds of interesting tactical stunts we'll be able to pull off.

The out-of-the-box campaign is certainly important, but the replay value and popularity of the original Neverwinter Nights grows almost exclusively out of the huge mass of user-created content (read: mods) that is available. Fortunately, Obsidian is well aware of this fact, and is taking steps to make sure that this sequel is as easily-modded as the first game. "We've opened up the toolset and given users even more control and options on how they make a level," says Baudoin. "Scripts now take parameters which greatly diminishes the need for custom scripts. Everything is modal so you can switch between areas, scripts, and conversations with ease." Don't worry if you don't speak developer-language – the upshot is that modders will have an easier time creating better mods for you to play. And at the end of the day, that's what Neverwinter (and D&D, for that matter) is all about. ■ ■ ■

We're pretty confident that nothing bad ever happens in this house

Unicorns would've been totally kick...

If this isn't the newb area, we'll eat our shoes

Blood Elves will add a little fancy flavor to the Horde

The higher level cap will undoubtedly be necessary
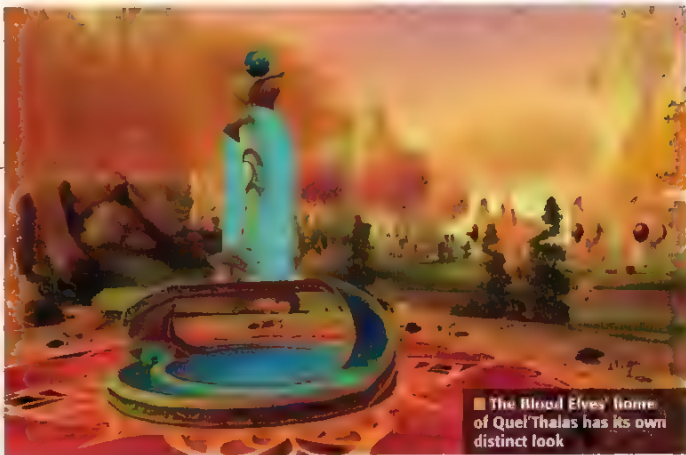
PC

World of Warcraft:
The Burning Crusade

> **STYLE** MASSIVELY MULTIPLAYER ONLINE ROLE-PLAYING GAME > **PUBLISHER** BLIZZARD ENTERTAINMENT > **DEVELOPER** BLIZZARD ENTERTAINMENT > **RELEASE** TBA

ANOTHER DIMENSION

Even the most optimistic of analysts couldn't have predicted the astounding success of World of Warcraft. The game's popularity exploded beyond what anyone thought would be possible (and, frankly, what Blizzard was prepared for). Now, a year later, the developer is finally ready to talk about the first expansion to the biggest MMORPG around. World of Warcraft: The Burning Crusade will take players up to a new level cap of 70 and through a new set of dungeons; but, most importantly, heroes will have access to another world entirely. The Orcish homeworld of Draenor, known simply as Outland in its current shattered form, will feel the tread of adventurers' boots when this releases.

At Blizzard's recent BlizzCon, we were able to go hands-on with the starting area of the new playable Horde race, the Blood Elves. Reclaiming their ancestral homeland of Quel'Thalas, the Blood Elves return to Azeroth with a thirst for vengeance that leads them into an alliance of convenience with the Horde. Their unique racial abilities, stemming from the race's age-long connection to the darker magics of the world, allow Blood Elves to drain their opponents' mana energy and convert it into fuel for their own special abilities. Though they will be allied with the Horde, the Blood Elves'

place in the continuing Warcraft story suggests that they have some other, more insidious purpose behind returning to the stage of Azeroth's history.

Aside from the much-heralded new content for players to experience – namely, tons of new dungeons, zones, and quests to go through – the coolest announced feature of The Burning Crusade is the Outland-only flying mounts. Though exploit concerns prevent Blizzard from allowing players to fly freely through the existing areas of the game, the team is building the new zones with aerial movement in mind. Words can't accurately describe the excitement we feel about the prospect of zooming through the skies of the World of Warcraft.

The new profession of jewel crafting, the introduction of socketed items (which will allow players to improve their equipment through slotting magical trinkets into it, much like in Diablo II), and the as-yet-unannounced new playable Alliance race round out the revealed features of The Burning Crusade. If that sounds like a lot, it is – and we wouldn't be surprised in the least if Blizzard announces even more as this expansion nears release. The company is one of the most beloved developers in PC gaming for a reason. ■ ■ ■

The Blood Elves' home of Quel'Thalas has its own distinct look

The World of Warcraft isn't all happy shiny cartoons...

One Wants to Free His People...

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.

■ When they aired the "punch each other in the face" sketch, it was clear that the *Jackass* crew had run out of ideas

■ "Why must he keep me from my beloved barrel? Where is it written that man and barrel cannot marry?"

■ "Okay, he's down. Let the tickling begin!"

■ There simply can be no mercy for people who wear yellow suits

XBOX 360 | PLAYSTATION 2 | XBOX | PC

The Godfather

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION > **PUBLISHER** ELECTRONIC ARTS > **DEVELOPER** EA REDWOOD SHORES > **RELEASE** TBA

EA'S MOBSTER COMES OUT OF WITNESS PROTECTION

For a while there, it seemed like EA's ambitious video game adaptation of The Godfather asked the wrong questions at Vito's Deli and wound up sleeping with the fishes. But as it turns out, the development team has been using the game's delay to clean up some issues and ensure that it lives up to the potential of the license. Hunter Smith, senior producer on the title was happy to give us the scoop on the current-gen version, but as for the 360 iteration…fugeddaboudit. The wiseguy wasn't talking. But according to Smith, the team is now focusing on refining gameplay. "The early focus was on the living world and the technology needed to support our core gameplay," said Smith. "Now we are almost done locking down all our missions and story-driven gameplay and really starting to focus on polish and tuning throughout the game. With a game this big we wanted to allow ourselves a lot of time to make sure everything felt great."

We pressed Smith to see if any new features were being added, but Smith waved the question off. He did, however, elaborate a bit on the Black Hand control scheme that was previously announced for the game.

"Instead of hitting a button and watching something happen, you'll be using the analog sticks to decide exactly how much force to use," said Smith. "Everything from threatening a shopkeeper with a pulled-back fist to taking down a rival gangster with garrote wire and feeling his heartbeat in the controller as his life drains away."

We're all for innovations in interactive virtual strangling, and are happy to hear that the gameplay is shaping up, and it sounds like the story is coming together as well. "We worked closely with Mark Weingardner on recreating authenticity in the mafia world of the '40s and the voice of the Godfather in particular," continued Smith. "He was hand-selected by the Puzo family to continue the Godfather legacy, and has come in several times to work with us on bringing the Godfather world to life through dialogue and character development that fit the style and tone of the books." The involvement of an author so intimately tied to a franchise can only mean good things for the game. As many players who are eagerly anticipating this game know, director Francis Ford Coppola has publicly decried the project and wants no part of it. But Smith had some sage words on this issue, ones that may calm those who think Coppola's non-involvement spells doom: "We think people should reserve judgment until they've played the final game. Just as Francis Ford Coppola's film had to earn the respect of Mario Puzo's readers, we think the Godfather game is going to show people how exciting interactive entertainment can be." ■ ■ ■

(Current-gen screens shown)
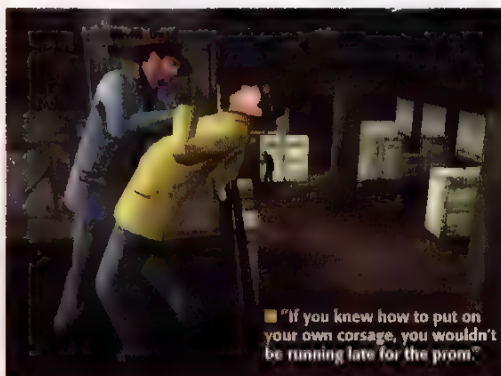
■ "If you knew how to put on your own corsage, you wouldn't be running late for the prom."
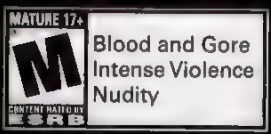
Tanks in the Mist: A sensitive portrayal of the social habits of WWII

Tanks are impressive...

...but explosions are far more awesome

XBOX 360

Battlefield 2: Modern Combat

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 24-PLAYER VIA XBOX LIVE OR SYSTEM LINK) > **PUBLISHER** ELECTRONIC ARTS > **DEVELOPER** DICE/EAUK
> **RELEASE** MARCH

MOVING FORWARD

Though we've already reviewed Battlefield 2: Modern Combat on the current-gen consoles, it has recently been announced that EA has an Xbox 360 version in the works. Even if Modern Combat doesn't quite stack up to Battlefield 2 on PC (they are two completely different games), we're anxious to see if EA can smooth out some of the wrinkles and hopefully take advantage of the brand-new Live features of the 360. And who really needs an excuse to talk about next-gen games, anyway?

Unfortunately, there's not a whole lot of information coming out of EA in regards to Live play on the 360. While it seems like a no-brainer that it'll be smoother and more robust than in the already-released Xbox and PS2 versions, we can't say definitively one way or the other. The only difference that EA is talking about for the 360 release (besides the absolutely fantastic graphics, of course) is the inclusion of some upcoming current-gen downloadable content on the disc. This primarily consists of three new maps and a couple

new vehicles – including a van with two miniguns mounted on it and snowmobiles for some arctic conflict – to extend the online battling.

Though this title is largely a port of the existing versions of Modern Combat, we've got to admit that it looks head and shoulders better. Whether or not the gameplay is any tighter won't be known until we put it under the microscope in our full review, but we can always hope. After all, the horsepower of the 360 isn't just for more polygons and fancy shader effects. It should ideally be able to push somewhat smarter AI and better draw distances, too – but whether or not EA takes advantage of that fact remains to be seen. ■ ■ ■

Look at the pretty, pretty trees! No, seriously, look at them

Compensation? Nah
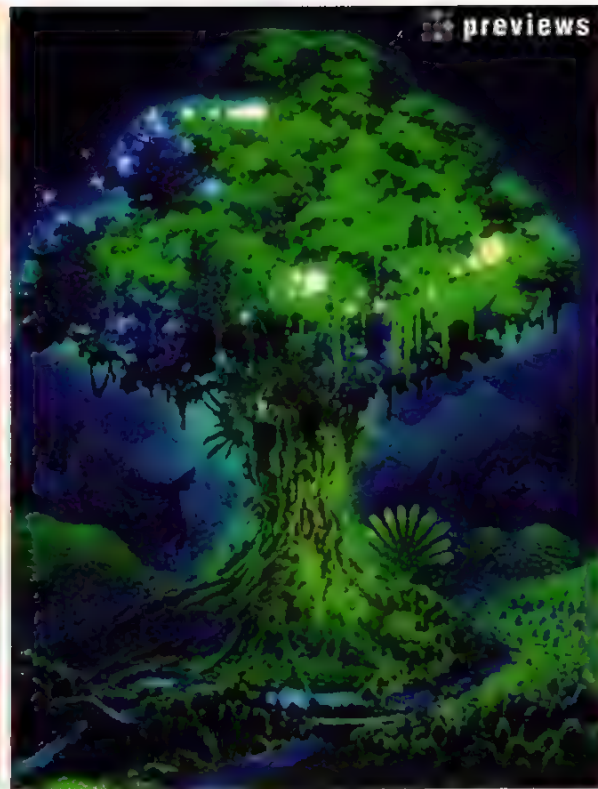
NINTENDO DS

Children of Mana

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION/RPG (MULTIPLAYER TBA) > **PUBLISHER** SQUARE ENIX
> **DEVELOPER** NEXT ENTERTAINMENT > **RELEASE** TBA

ADVENTURES IN MANASITTING

Known in Japan as Seiken Densetsu, the Secret of Mana series debuted Stateside in 1993 and has since become a favorite of action/RPG fans everywhere. The newest entry, Children of Mana, will be the inaugural title in Square Enix's World of Mana project and integrates many of the classic elements that made gamers fall in love with the franchise in the first place.

Taking place on the island of Illusia, the story revolves around three youngsters named Pop, Flick, and Tumble who gather at the ancient Mana Tree. A disaster has wiped out a significant portion of the island's population, and it is up to the these orphans to combat a growing evil and unravel the mysteries surrounding the Mana Goddess.

Using co-op multiplayer (much like the original Secret of Mana), players will be able to fight with swords, bows, and flails. Each of the attacks differ in range, power, and speed, but they have unique limit break-like abilities to turn the tide in battle. Since the three heroes will be able to equip two of these weapons at a time, there should be an interesting strategy element mixed in to the action gameplay.

Details about the combat system are still emerging, but the biggest unknown at this point is how the game will utilize the DS touch screen. The face buttons will control most of the action, but Square Enix has announced that the game will feature some sort of stylus functionality. It won't change the experience drastically, though, so Manaphiles can still look forward to Children of Mana kicking off this revival in true old-school style. ■ ■ ■

■ How the game uses the two screens is unknown, but action will remain traditional

HP 78/100   UP 3/5

■ Multiplayer details are scarce, but it will probably support three players like the original

HP 94/100   UP 15/25

■ The sword has a short range, but is a powerful weapon

HP 71/100   UP 3/5
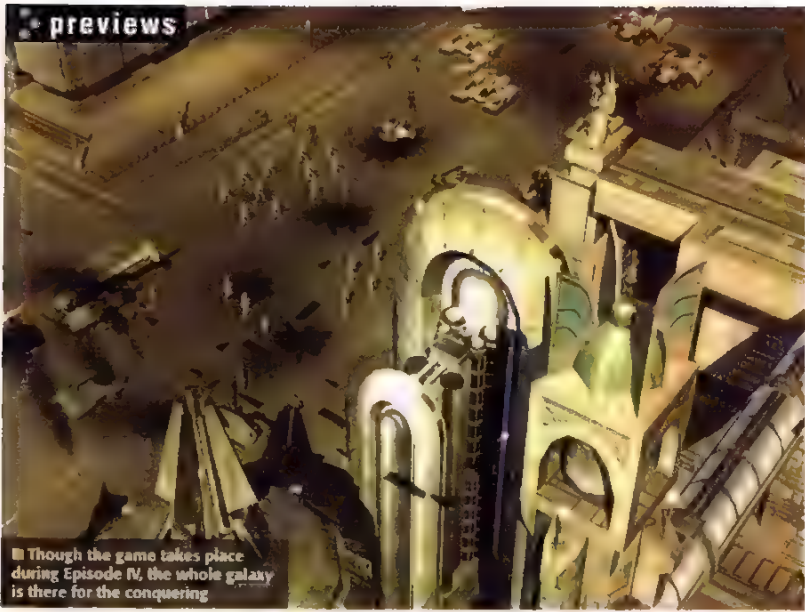
■ Though the game takes place during Episode IV, the whole galaxy is there for the conquering

■ If we ran the Empire, we'd fire every single engineer in the military. How many weak points do our war machines really need?

PC

Star Wars: Empire At War

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION (MULTIPLAYER TBA) > **PUBLISHER** LUCASARTS > **DEVELOPER** PETROGLYPH > **RELEASE** FEBRUARY 7

THE ULTIMATE WEAPON

It goes without saying, given the theme of Empire at War, that the Death Star will make an appearance. This time, though, getting the thing operational is the player's responsibility. You'll have to hold the worlds of Geonosis (for its vast mineral resources) and Kashyyyk (for the slave Wookiee labor) as well as have lots of experience building space stations to create the Death Star. Even then it'll still have those pesky exhaust ports... But surely some sort of legendary Sith pilot would be able to defend those from a ragtag group of whiny Rebels.

FORGET THE PREQUELS

D eveloped by much of the former Command & Conquer team over at new studio Petroglyph, Star Wars: Empire at War holds a lot of promise for strategy and Star Wars fans both. David Silverstein, the game's associate producer, had a lot to say in our recent interview with him. "It's not the same old traditional RTS experience or historical timeframe and fantasy genres," he declares. "You can create some great battles and really get a good Star Wars movie feel and gaming experience."

Obviously, the man has some good things to say about his own game. But from what we've seen and heard of the gameplay, Silverstein's praise is well-grounded in reality. For one thing, the scope of the project is hugely ambitious. Players will command all of the war efforts of either the Empire or the Alliance, both on a strategic (managing the movements of troops and ships on the galactic map) and a tactical (running individual battles RTS-style) level. Space combat, ground assaults, building Death Stars — it's all by your orders. Even the best tactician has to have an army to win battles. "The galactic mode in Empire at War is played in real time and has an effect on space and ground

combat. The fleets and ground troops you build in galactic mode will be the fleets and troops you get to bring into combat when you attack a planet," says Silverstein.

As you can clearly see, Empire at War is far from another "me-too" RTS. "We tried to draw upon the fun and positive features of other RTS games as well as improve upon other features that aren't as fun," says Silverstein. "We don't have traditional resource gathering, like cutting stone or mining gold. We've removed the tedium from the process — it just didn't feel very Star Wars to have droids chopping wood." Instead, you'll have to hold planets that have industrial capacities, or improve more primitive worlds. Ideally, this will divorce the economic aspects of the game from the fun of stomping around with a big army, while keeping that element still present and important.

As with any project that tries to break away from genre norms, it's not guaranteed that Empire at War will be able to deliver everything Lucasarts is promising. But with the RTS experience of the talented development

team at Petroglyph part of the equation, we're more than eager to get the game into our hands and find out for ourselves. ■ ■ ■

■ Some vehicles from the Clone Wars era, along with expanded universe designs, will appear

■ Now this is an army

■ "Sir, are you okay? I seem to have mistakenly struck you unconscious or dead."
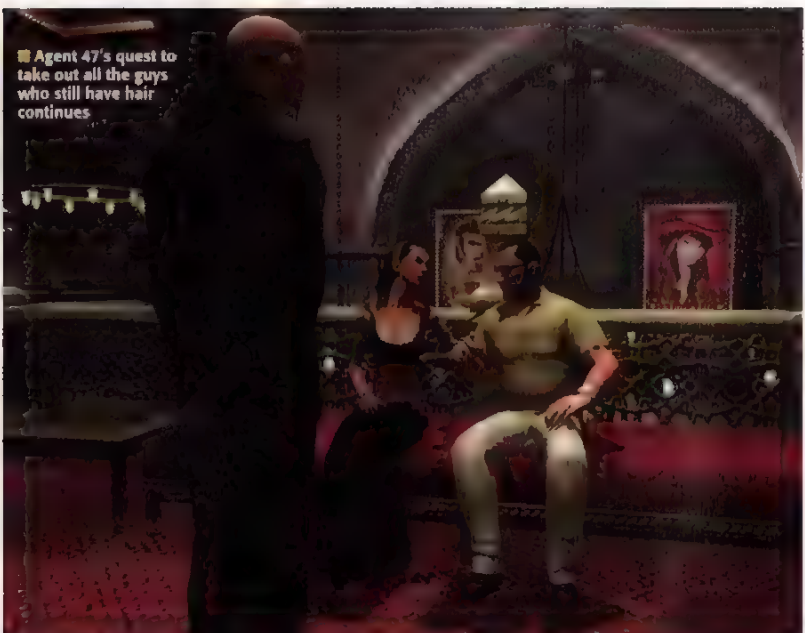
■ Agent 47's quest to take out all the guys who still have hair continues
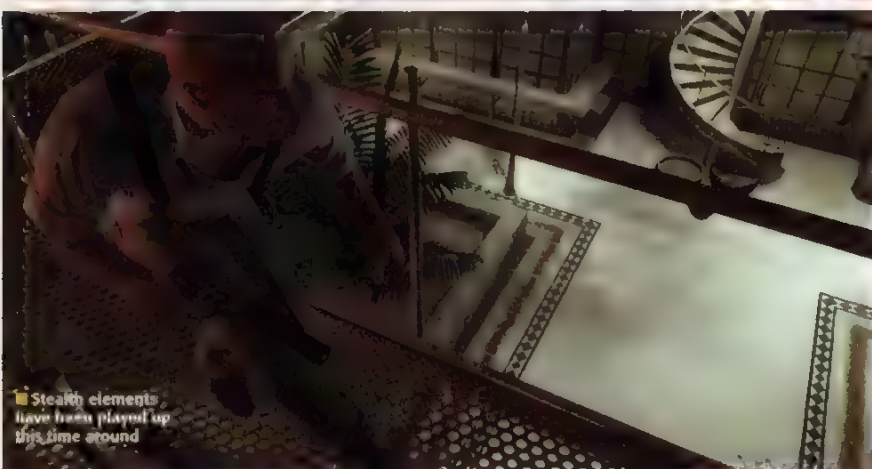
■ Stealth elements have been played up this time around

■ When nobody wants to have anybody else whacked, 47 is forced to return to his college job of waiting tables
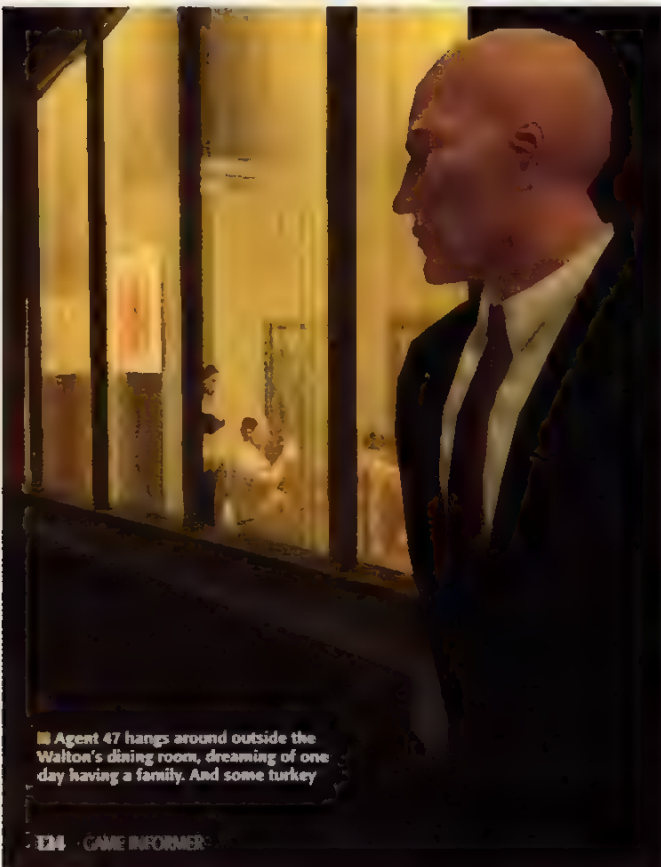
■ Agent 47 hangs around outside the Walton's dining room, dreaming of one day having a family. And some turkey

PLAYSTATION 2 | XBOX | PC

Hitman: Blood Money

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION > **PUBLISHER** EIDOS > **DEVELOPER** IO INTERACTIVE > **RELEASE** SPRING 2006

IF SOME UNLIKELY ACCIDENT SHOULD BEFALL…

Assassins get an unfair rap. Nobody likes them. Just because they get paid to kill people, people think they're the bad guys. Huh. Okay, well maybe that is a tad bit evil when it comes right down to it. But that has never stopped Agent 47 from sticking to his guns and finishing the job right, even if that job might involve a goodly amount of stalking and murder. Everyone's favorite hit man is planning to continue his career this spring in Blood Money, a title that has grabbed our interest with some exciting new features that have the potential to reinvigorate the franchise.

Foremost among these new ideas is the accident system. Sometimes a hit needs to look like a freak mishap, and Agent 47 will now be equipped with the tools to make exactly that happen. Whether you push the mark off a high balcony or arrange for a chandelier to mysteriously fall on the target, the new challenge is in being so good no one even knows there was a murder. Other sneaky additions allow creative kills by hanging from above, or even hiding your gun so no one knows your true intentions. In addition, players can dispose of bodies in what we'll refer to here as creative ways.

To combat your newfound capabilities, AI this time around has been thoroughly beefed up. If you mistakenly leave subtle signs of a kill behind, foes will recognize what is out of place and be alerted to your presence. As you complete your grisly work, your blood money can go towards upgrading assassination skills or even bribing the press to keep your picture out of the newspaper. Storywise, we'll see Agent 47 now in competition against a rival agency of assassins, who will be trying to vie for the top targets. On a more sinister level, these assassins may attempt to use your own tactics to hunt you down. A new rookie difficulty mode should fit the bill if the challenge is just too much, and regardless of your difficulty setting, you'll be able to track your feats and skills online with other players.

Hitman has always had a unique appeal with its dark persona and brutally unapologetic style. Our early glances of the game confirm a continuation of that tradition, with an added focus on stealth and secrecy to help change things up. We'll definitely keep an eye on this one as its release nears -- it looks to have the markings of more than a simple rehash. ■ ■ ■

PLAYSTATION 2 | XBOX

Driver: Parallel Lines

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION/RACING (UP TO 8-PLAYER VIA PS2 ONLINE OR XBOX LIVE) > **PUBLISHER** ATARI
> **DEVELOPER** REFLECTIONS > **RELEASE** MARCH 2006

THE BIG PAYBACK

It's no secret that the Driver franchise, after being one of the top-selling and best-loved of the PSone era, is in disarray. Driv3r was a flat-out bust, getting generally poor reviews and bad word of mouth virtually across the board. However, developer Reflections has not given up, and is hard at work rectifying the situation with a fourth installment, named Driver: Parallel Lines. Recently, we got a hands-on demo of the game, one that indicates that the company has a good grip on both where Driv3r went wrong, and where the series needs to go in the future.

As promised, the emphasis in Parallel Lines is right where it should be: on driving. While there is still some out-of-the-car action, which seems to be much improved in terms of control and targeting, over 70 percent of the experience will revolve around pulling missions in any of the game's 80 vehicles – each of which can now be given multiple upgrades both cosmetic and performance-oriented.

As you may have heard, longtime Driver protagonist Tanner is gone, replaced with T.K. (or "The Kid"), an up-and-coming wheelman making his way up the criminal ranks in late-'70s New York. While the initial plot seems a bit clichéd, Reflections has a great twist in store. About midway through, T.K. will be set up to take the fall for an organized crime ring, at which point the game switches time periods to the present day as he is released from prison, intent on getting revenge on the people that betrayed him over 25 years ago. As you might expect, everything is different, from the selection of cars to the cityscape itself.

After investing some serious time into the preview build, we can safely say that – at the very least – this looks to be a compelling driving title. Reflections has always done car physics well, and this time around the experience is enhanced by a number of unique gameplay modes like closed track races and demolition derbies – all of which are playable in the game's excellent online multiplayer mode. Whether this will become the next great open-city racer is still up for debate, but we can't help but think that Reflections is driving in the right direction with Parallel Lines. ■ ■ ■

■ In classic Driver style, chases are over-the-top, car-mangling affairs

■ You can now target and shoot out of the driver's side window

XBOX 360 | PC

TimeShift

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION (MULTIPLAYER TBA) > **PUBLISHER** ATARI
> **DEVELOPER** SABER INTERACTIVE > **RELEASE** MARCH

THE PHYSICS OF TIME

First-person shooters aren't exactly an endangered species on either the Xbox 360 or PC platforms, but Atari's upcoming TimeShift has enough going for it to make it stick out in the 2006 FPS lineup. It's obviously very pretty (we can attest to having seen the game running, and yes, it looks even better in motion than it does in these screens), and it's got amazing physics and cool time powers to top it off. But what makes TimeShift truly intriguing is how it integrates physics with time control to create new types of gameplay.

Beyond the standard uses of slowing down time to gain an edge in a firefight or sneak past enemy patrols, TimeShift allows players to use their powers to pull off totally unique stunts. Because every physics object in the world (including enemies, of course) responds to your time control while you yourself remain unaffected, brand new possibilities

emerge. Blow up a crate, freeze time, and climb up the suspended debris to get past a wall. Slow the world down to get through the force field that only opens to let fresh enemy troops out. TimeShift doesn't just expect you to bust out your powers to defeat impossible odds – it makes you think about how best to take advantage of them.

The little we've seen of the game so far has been enough to whet our appetites, but questions still remain. Will the developer figure out a way to make multiplayer fun while retaining TimeShift's distinctive flavor? Will the gameplay end up being too formulaic, and stop coming up with new challenges after the first few levels? These are common pits for action games to fall into, and the only way to find out whether TimeShift tackles these hurdles or falls on its face is to play it. Regardless, we can't wait to see for ourselves. ■ ■ ■

■ You'd be hard-pressed to tell a difference between this PC screenshot...

■ ...and this Xbox 360 image. Man, next-gen games rule

■ The weapons are all original and unique
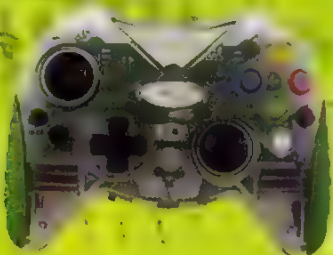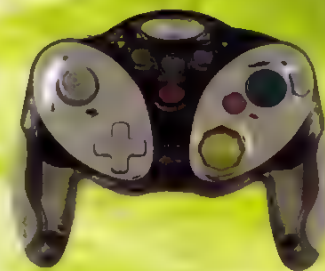
Zero Tolerance

We have zero tolerance for raisins in cookies. Seriously, who would put these mouse turds in instead of chocolate chips? They look like chocolate, but they taste like crap! Somehow, we don't think that's what the game Zero Tolerance is about, although we'd like to see a game about preventing people from ruining baked goods. Nope, this one (coming to PS2, Xbox, and PC from Eidos next year) puts you in the shoes of Nick Mason, head of the elite T-Zero unit, which is charged with protecting a city on the brink of chaos. You'll negotiate with terrorists; enlist the help of firemen, police, and paramedics; and probably many things having to do with guns. Yup, we've got a feeling that a lot of the game will involve shooting people. In the clutch. With a shotgun. Or perhaps that's just the way we roll.
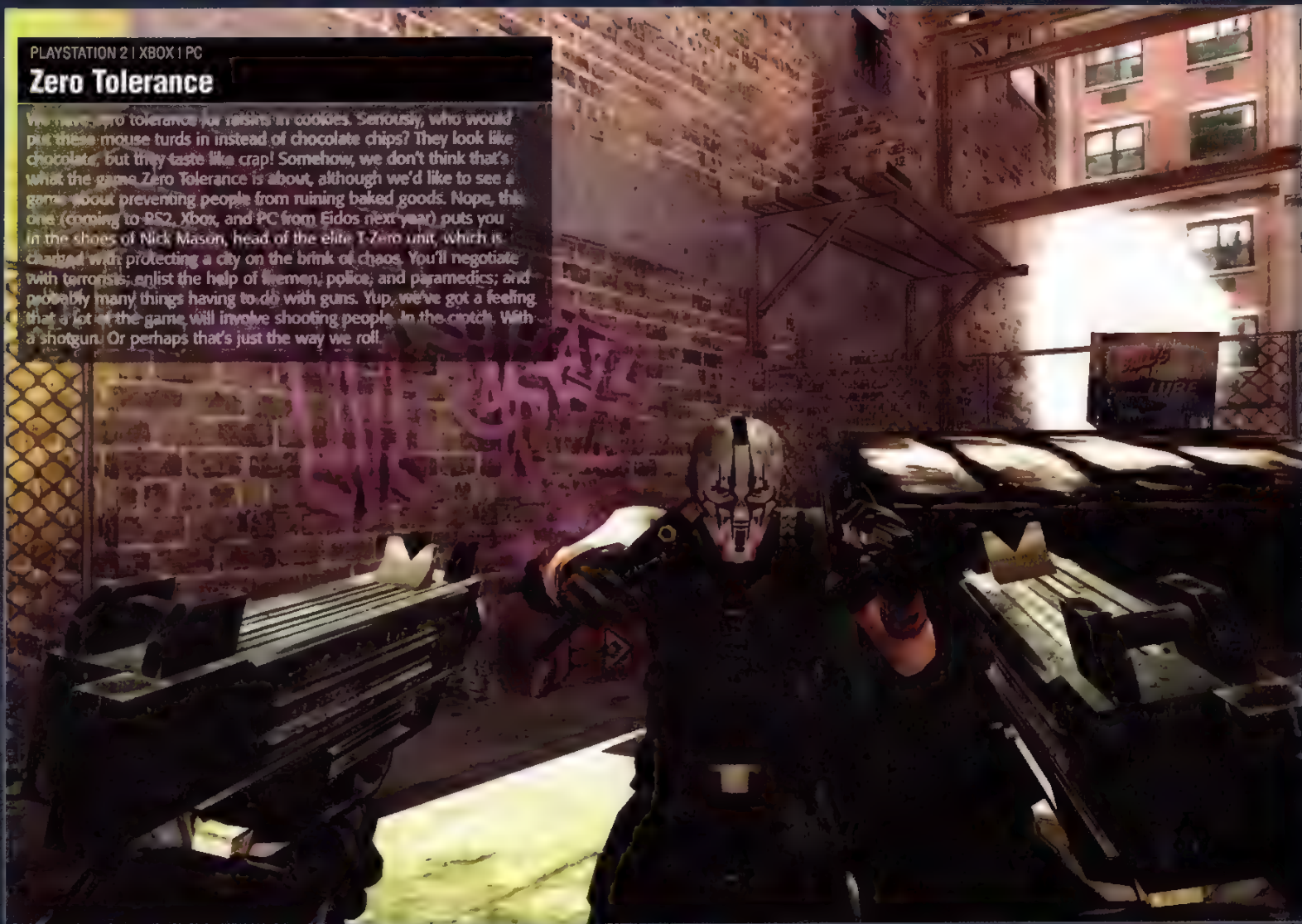
Final Fantasy XI

Those irresistible, football-sized Tarutaru continue to expand their adorable online empire as Final Fantasy XI prepares to bring another console into the world of Vana'diel. With a unique interface designed to accommodate different gaming machines, FF XI will bring together players on PC, PS2, and Xbox 360 for the first time. While you may be hoping to give the new Blue Mage class a try, it hasn't been announced whether the upcoming Treasures of Aht Urhgan expansion will be included with this version. Still, you can count on seeing the previous ones (Rise of the Zilart and Chains of Promathia) packaged along with the game when it releases this spring.
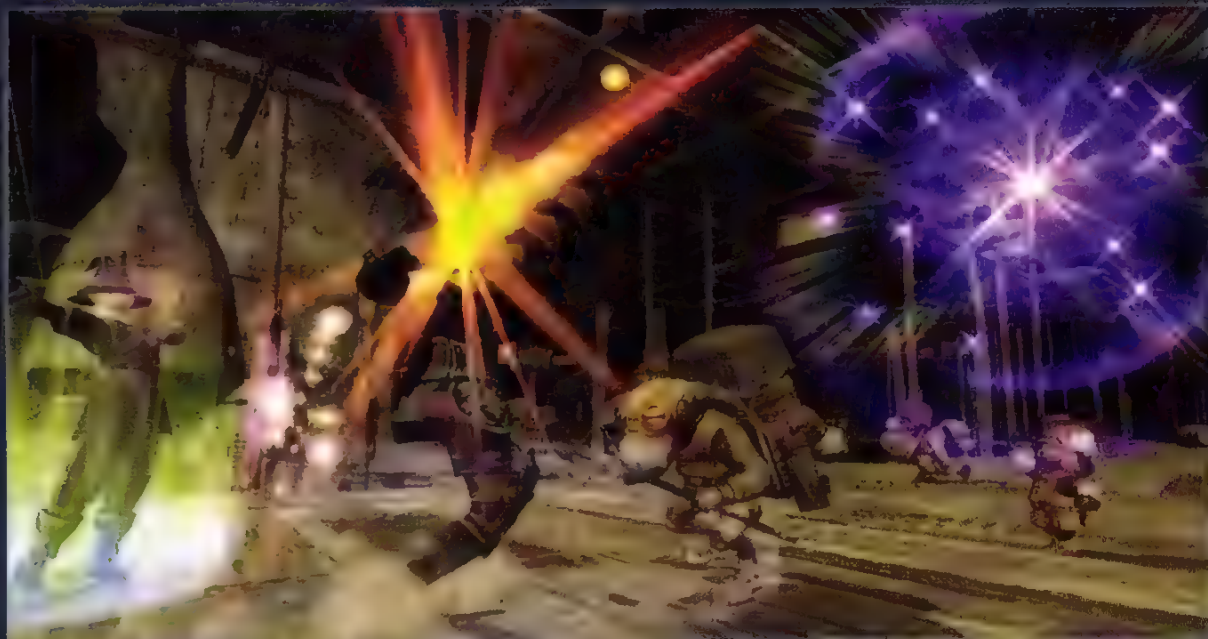
PSP
Me and My Katamari

Unless you've been living in a cave for the last couple years, you've heard about the quirky awesomeness that are the Katamari Damacy games. Heck, even some of your hipper cave-dwellers have checked out these crazy ball-rolling adventures by now. Well, although no official date has been announced yet, it seems that Namco is sending the Prince of All Cosmos to the PSP in the new title Me and My Katamari. The core of the game will still revolve around picking stuff up with the Katamari, but this PSP version does have a few tweaks in store, namely seasonal changes. You may play a beach level in the summer, only to return to the stage in the fall to find the water frozen over! This concept has a lot of potential, and hopefully Namco improves the inelegant control scheme present in the TGS version of the game. We definitely love Katamari, and we love the PSP, so we hope their meeting is every bit as sweet as it should be.

PLAYSTATION 2 | XBOX | PC
Rogue Trooper

Hoo boy, we don't know where to start with this one. Next spring, Eidos is bringing the Rebellion-developed title Rogue Trooper to PS2, Xbox, and PC. Set on the planet Nu Earth (where everyone listens to Nu Metal!), a war is raging between the Norts and Southers, who both must wear breathing apparatus to survive the poisoned atmosphere. In fact, no one can survive without protection, except the mysterious Rogue Trooper, a blue-skinned super-soldier with a talking helmet, gun, and backpack. That's right, his hat, bag and gun talk. When is the last time you said "I like shooters but I wish my character could be blue, and have a talking hat?" Never, that's when. But hey, Rogue Trooper is touting splitscreen and online multiplayer, upgradable equipment, environmental interactions, and the ability to create your own ammo, so maybe it won't be so dorky after all. Who are we kidding? Rogue Trooper makes Azurik look cool!

NINTENDO DS
Battles of Prince of Persia

There's some wackiness afoot over at Ubisoft, but it seems that gamers are the better for it. The company's stance of tailoring each release to its intended platform has led to a card-based tactical strategy title called Battles of Prince of Persia that sheds light on the war between Persia and India after the evil sands of time are released. The story mode is a full-featured single-player campaign, but the cartridge will also support multiplayer contests and card swapping. It's a different angle to take with regard to the Prince, but if executed well, has really interesting potential. As with the other editions, look for Battles of Prince of Persia around this holiday season.

PSP
Gradius Portable

There's only one thing that's better than shooting lasers: shooting more lasers! Thankfully, the volume dealers of side-scrolling violence at Konami have prepared a nifty little package for us with Gradius Portable. The first four entries in the acclaimed space shooter are all included here, as is Gradius Gaiden. With five fantastic old-school games in one package, this is one of the hottest upcoming PSP titles around. There is no official word on a U.S. release yet, but we're pretty confident it's coming to our country. If not, we're going over to Konami and busting some heads.

PSP
Monster Hunter Portable

We'll admit that we found the original Monster Hunter to be about as much fun as stuffing hot coals down our pants, but apparently others out there liked it. Actually, the game was a pretty big hit in Japan, which is why Capcom is porting it to PSP over there. For better or for worse, Monster Hunter Portable is likely to come Stateside with ad hoc multiplayer. Infrastructure mode won't be supported, but there probably won't be anyone online playing anyway. If you missed it on PS2, you may want to check it out on PSP simply to discover that it is indeed possible to take a cool concept like hunting giant monsters and make it boring.

NINTENDO DS
New Super Mario Bros.

For the first time in a Mario sidescroller, two players will be able to play together. The option of teamwork is certainly available, but Nintendo believes that the two-player action will be mostly competitive. Yes, this means that Luigi will finally get the chance to upstage his do-gooder brother. While clinging tightly to this series' classic roots, such as hidden 1up blocks, Nintendo is adding new elements to the experience. Rather than just kicking koopa troopa shells, Mario can actually hop into one and use it to slide around. This is shaping up to be one of 2006's most exciting DS titles, but sadly, we likely won't see it until the third quarter.

PSP
Samurai Warriors: State of War

We're not quite sure what is more satisfying: slaying thousands of mindless foes in an hour, or completely making a fool of your closest friends in a matter of minutes. Koei is adding a ton of new content to this port of the console game. In addition to enhanced visuals, up to four players can compete in a handful of multiplayer modes, including straight-up deathmatching. State of War will release in Japan shortly. Sadly, a U.S. release date has not been announced.

NINTENDO DS
Resident Evil: Deadly Silence

The undead must have gotten a new agent, because they're all over the place these days. Fortunately, we believe the more zombies, the better. That's why we're so excited about Resident Evil: Deadly Silence, coming to the DS this year from Capcom. It's the second time the company has remade the original game, but this one is simply bloated with content. You can replay the first game in its original form (including horribly-acted live-action cutscenes), or take on the new Rebirth mode, which takes advantage of the DS's unique features. The touchscreen can be used for knife fights or shaking free from zombies, the second screen serves as an inventory, and there are new puzzles built around the hardware. There's even multiplayer, including co-op and four-player versus mode. With so much extra zombie love, it looks like we'll be heading back to Raccoon City yet again.

NINTENDO DS
The Rub Rabbits

Feel the Magic XY/XX was one of the best and weirdest titles of the DS launch, but was a far bigger hit in Japan than it was in the U.S. Regardless, its sequel The Rub Rabbits is coming Stateside, and promises the unique visual style and wacky minigames of the original, plus some new twists. In this game, you're still trying to win a girl's affection by completing minigames with the touch screen and microphone, but now you have a female admirer you need to fend off as well. But the biggest addition is "Baby Making Mode," in which two DS owners create a virtual child together, which they can then let play with other babies in a park similar to Nintendogs' Bark mode. Finally, a game has come along that will explain how babies are made! We've been wondering about that.
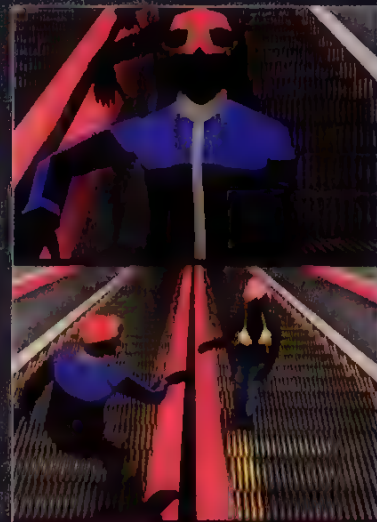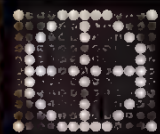
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GAME INFORMER
GAME OF THE MONTH

Prince of Persia:
The Two Thrones

Tying up the loose ends of a complex story and making delicious platform-ing even better is an ambitious goal for any game, but Ubisoft Montreal has done that and more with this lat-est Prince of Persia entry. Free-flowing levels mixed with a new flavor of brutal combat make the trip through war-torn Babylon one that few will forget and all gamers should experience.

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

THE SCORING SYSTEM

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

> **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 vol-ume 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.

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SID MEIER'S CIVILIZATION IV

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Sid Meier's Civilization IV

PC GAME OF THE MONTH

For some people, it's not enough to be top dog in their field for more than 10 years running. Sid Meier is one of them. This new entry in the lauded Civilization series is everything a fan could wish for – streamlined gameplay, new features, better graphics, it's all here. Don't blame us when your life collapses under a crushing need to guide just one more civilization to cultural, military, and/or scientific dominance of the globe.

pg. 149

the 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.

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

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

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

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

action – A term we use for games like 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 Mario 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

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

Launch Lepers – Pathetic saps who pre-ordered Xbox 360s but still didn't get one at launch. Avoid them at all costs. Isenttis is contagious

■ Chariot races are quick diversions that switch up the action

■ The Speed Kills take a few tries to get used to, but once you've got the timing, they are smooth and satisfying...like pudding

> **Concept:** Bring the trilogy to a close in legendary fashion

> **Graphics:** The game's environments are diverse, which offers a lot of different locations and methods for platforming

> **Sound:** Not a riff of butt metal to be found. Instead, the score is intense, appropriate, and a wonderful touch

> **Playability:** PoP platforming is still one of gaming's greatest experiences, and the combat has improved again

> **Entertainment:** Perhaps better than the original and a necessary adventure for all players to experience

> **Replay Value:** Moderately High

PLAYSTATION 2 | XBOX | GAMECUBE

The Prince of Persia: The Two Thrones

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION > **PUBLISHER** UBISOFT > **DEVELOPER** UBISOFT MONTREAL > **RELEASE** DECEMBER 1 > **ESRB** M

GAME INFORMER
GAME OF THE MONTH

theedge
When All Games Aren't Created Equal

As with all other entries in the series, the game is the same on all systems. Keep in mind, though, that the Xbox version offers prettier particle effects, graphical clarity, cloth physics, and lighting, each of which really adds to the game's experience.

EQUAL RETURNS

You can't always get what you want, but Prince of Persia's trilogy-ending entry gives something that everyone can get behind. Intense platforming segments are perfectly balanced to highlight the joy of movement and the glory of getting a sequence right. Brutal combat gets a facelift with cinematic finishers and more ties between action and platforming. In all, the Ubisoft Montreal team appears to have split the difference between the two earlier, excellent games with design ideas clearly aped from each, while judiciously cutting less-successful ones. The balance is spot-on, meaning that only the good is left and the jaggy parts of this title are largely new hurdles for the series.

Platforming is still the main show for the Prince, and the inclusion of the Dark Prince alter ego adds a different flavor to this part of the game. When in Dark Prince form, the character is constantly losing health that is restored with sand found either in fallen opponents or by breaking the crates and baskets strewn about. This built-in race against time makes every action more urgent and forces players to think faster. To the game's credit, the platforming sections while in this form are just intuitive enough to make the intended path readily apparent, but still hard enough to make you feel like a total rock star

for getting through them.

Combat also benefits from the hero's dual personas. After a series of difficult battles with the Prince, the Dark Prince's brutal efficiency is a welcome reward. Cutting viciously through guards is intensely satisfying after struggling with teams of them just minutes before. The game's other new feature, stealth kills, also provides the same rewarding satisfaction. These deaths are highly scripted, but require precise button presses for success. Frustratingly, successfully getting speed kills is practically required in certain battles, making them less of a fun diversion and more of an aggravating hindrance on occasion. Most (if not practically all) of the game is set up to enable stealth kills for every enemy, usually in diabolically clever ways.

The faults that that Two Thrones has are few, occur infrequently, and are, without a doubt, worth bullying through. The biggest of these is an uneven
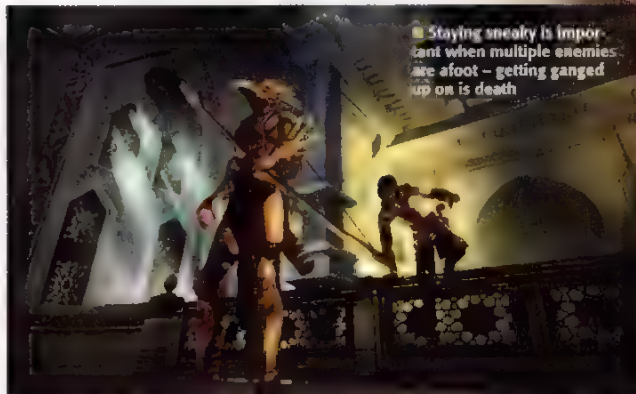
■ Staying sneaky is important when multiple enemies are afoot – getting ganged up on is death

difficulty level that really changes the focus of the gameplay – with more falling platforms and the Dark Prince's ticking time bomb of a health meter, most of the game has a very fast, fluid, just-give-it-a-go mentality. Interrupting these joyfully smooth sections is a series of very hard fights with no health between them. This (and a few less jarring examples of the same idea) brings the flow to a screeching halt, and, to be blunt, are no fun at all.

As I said before, though, don't let that stop you. The delicious platforming is paired with great writing, nice art direction, and a story that you don't want me to spoil for you. It's certainly up for debate, but I would say that this is probably the best-made Prince of Persia title overall. Even if you don't agree with that heady assertion, it's a noble entry in the series and proves once again why I'm always grateful that Ubisoft brought this franchise back.—**LISA**

■ The Dark Prince's brutal style fits this alter ego and is a sweet reward after the Prince's more tactical fights

■ Not everything is brand new, and we're glad to see some nice nods to the traps of the first game

I heaved an immense sigh of relief when Two Thrones started up, and not a lick of crappy metal music entered my ears. It's not the only misstep from the second installment that has been repaired, and I found myself loving almost all of the time I spent with the third installment of what I consider some of the finest platforming ever to grace the gaming screen. Alas, the parts that don't work in Two Thrones *really* don't work – namely a couple of insanely frustrating fights and some downright nasty respawn points. The environments are also slightly less interesting than I had hoped for. On the bright side, the new platforming tricks are wholly brilliant, and the speed kills serve a double purpose of being immensely satisfying and also allowing people to avoid much of the potential combat if that element of the game doesn't interest them. This is a fitting conclusion to the arc that began with the first current-gen Prince game, and its cinematic moments do nothing if not excite me for what this franchise can become in the next generation.—**MILLER**

Reed never knew that his favorite baseball bat was actually a chain gun
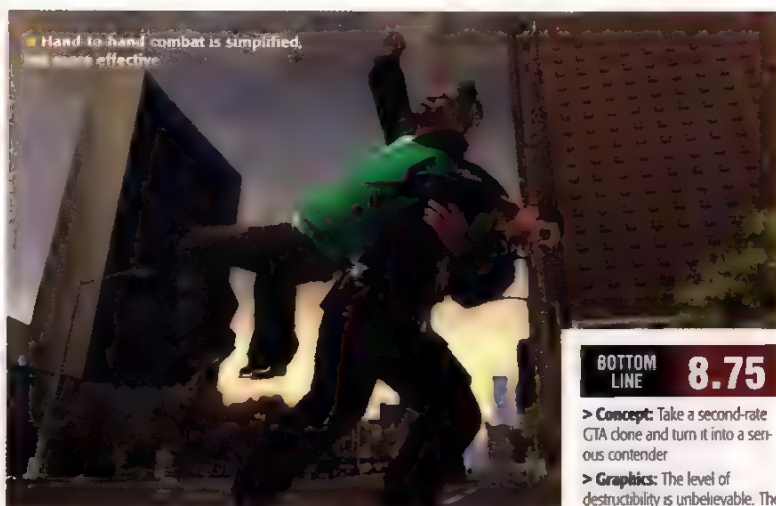
Hand-to-hand combat is simplified, more effective

PLAYSTATION 2 | XBOX | GAMECUBE

True Crime: New York City

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION > **PUBLISHER** ACTIVISION > **DEVELOPER** LUXOFLUX > **RELEASE** NOVEMBER 15 > **ESRB** M

Reed always wanted to be in *The Firm*

NEW YORK, NEW YORK!

It's been a busy day. The kind of day that you wouldn't wish on your worst enemy. From the moment that I placed my hands around my police cruiser's wheel, pandemonium has swept over the Big Apple. Some desperate soul thought that he could get his life back on track by robbing a bank. Big mistake. From there, my day just spiraled out of control. I ran over a flamethrower-wielding arsonist with a delivery truck, chased a suspect up a fitness club's climbing wall, beat a maniac to death with a dead chicken in an underground fighting tournament, diffused a bomb in an office building, and even managed to squeeze in a sword fight with a samurai atop one of the city's tallest towers. All of this, and I still don't have a lead for my case. Like I said, it's been a bad day.

For True Crime's new protagonist Marcus Reed, life is hell. For the gamers that are controlling him, however, his cataclysmic endeavors will likely bring about a joyous fist pump and the desire to play this game well into the small hours of the morning.

Right out of the box, this sequel pulls you in more than the original game ever did. Reed's bravado and emotional instability make him a strong leading character, something that the first True Crime desperately needed. I mean no ill will to the residents of Los Angeles, but your city isn't an ideal setting for a

video game. Driving down Santa Monica Boulevard is not an engaging venture. Moving the action to the architectural wonder that is New York City creates an environment that you wouldn't mind getting lost in.

Although this game pokes fun at GTA's quirky missions, developer Luxoflux has definitely learned a few tricks of the trade from its closest competitor. The story in the first True Crime absolutely suffocated gamers. Random missions were available, but there really was only one destination that you needed to travel to. In this installment, Luxoflux has given the player breathing room by offering a handful of possible missions at any time. Given the immense size of this city, moving from one way point to the next can be a time-consuming and yawn-inducing exercise. This entire genre, in fact, is built on purposeless driving. The GTA games allowed gamers to expedite their travels with planes and boats. Luxoflux has taken a different approach. If you see a cab, you can hop into it as a passenger. When this happens, a map will flash onto screen. Simply point to where you want to go, and after a few seconds of loading, you'll be dropped off there.

The plot is once again gritty and serious, but it's no longer so tightly wound. I really got the impression that Luxoflux approached each mission with the thought of "let's make this as crazy as possible."

Whether you are a good cop (making arrests, turning in evidence, keeping the peace) or a bad cop (killing everyone, selling evidence to pawnshops, extorting store owners), most of the objectives that are thrown your way feel like they are taken out of a high-octane action movie. Thanks to completely destructible environments, most of the levels that you enter end up looking like the lobby in *The Matrix* by the time you leave. Reed's movements are a bit slow, but between the great targeting system and weapons, you could take down an army with ease. You'll now have the chance to interrogate people, but the mechanics that are used for this action are too simple in scope.

When you are not on a mission, there's plenty to do. Almost every shop can be entered, allowing players to purchase new music and clothing, among other things. The random objectives offer greater variety and actually tap into every gameplay dynamic, such as frisking someone to find evidence, going toe-to-toe with them, then tailing them in a high-speed chase that ends with you shooting out their tires.

It still has a ways to go to catch GTA, but with this finely crafted sequel Luxoflux has raised this series up from another me-too title to a necessity for fans of this genre.—**REINER**

New vehicles can be purchased with the cash you earn. Just talk to a garage keep, and he'll bring your car around

Reed's solution to his dog's tick problem didn't go as planned. Rest in peace, Mr. Ruffy

■ The potential for an epic conclusion to the game is wasted on a too short rampage through New York City

■ Guns and armor are in short supply...

...so you'll have to rely on your wits and your spear

XBOX 360 | PLAYSTATION 2 | XBOX | GAMECUBE

Peter Jackson's King Kong

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION > **PUBLISHER** UBISOFT > **DEVELOPER** UBISOFT MONTPELLIER > **RELEASE** NOVEMBER 22 > **ESRB** T

AN EPIC INTERRUPTED

King Kong should make one thing abundantly clear: Ubisoft's Michel Ancel is one of the industry's most gifted game creators. A vast majority of this game is a seminar on how to create a world that is intense and dramatic, as well as providing gameplay that's both deep enough for hardcore gamers and intuitive enough for even the most casual movie fan. In terms of truly capturing the spirit of the film on which it's based, Kong is probably the most accomplished movie-to-game translation to date, due in part to the close partnership between Ancel and director Peter Jackson.

In making Kong, Ancel gambled on a game that emphasizes the human characters instead of the giant of the title. This was a stroke of genius, as it succeeds in putting you in the shoes of an adventurer facing a mysterious island filled with creatures that are large and fearsome beyond imagination. These portions of the game, which make up a bulk of the experience, are simply brilliant.

Breaking with FPS conventions, Kong's unique mechanics stress realism, eschewing traditional HUD displays like ammo meters or even an aiming reticle. While this might sound annoying in practice, it actually helps make every moment of gameplay absolutely harrowing. You must depress the L trigger or shoulder to raise your weapons, at which time you can only walk slowly, forcing you to constantly

retreat, find shelter, and desperately take aim. Of course, many of the giant beasts can't be taken down by one (or even dozens) of bullets, meaning that you'll often just be trying to slow them down until you can take refuge. Weapons and ammo are at a premium, so every shot you take must be on target, or else you'll soon be using the many spears strewn through the world Spear throwing is actually surprisingly satisfying, as you quickly learn to launch one through a giant bat's skull, grab the spear out of its falling body, then quickly throw it at another oncoming foe.

The enemy AI is well done, as they relentlessly pursue you across Skull Island. No part of the game feels contrived; solutions to puzzles are always organic to the environment, like burning away brush or finding a stray bit of wood to operate a gate. You'll also have to care for your fellow NPCs, often defending them from afar as they try to accomplish a level goal.

Graphically, it's a masterpiece. It's definitely one of the most gorgeous current-gen games I've played, and of course it looks even better on Xbox 360. Nowhere is this visual splendor more evident than in the sections where you get to play as Kong, combating huge creatures and effortlessly swinging through the lush jungle canopy. After completing a hectic on-foot section, it's a sheer joy to lay waste to your foes

as the giant ape. Jackson and Ancel also manage to make the titular simian a genuinely affecting character, by cleverly showing many key plot points from the perspective of both Kong and the humans.

As much as I love this game, it's also a bit of a disappointment. Quite literally, Ubisoft Montpellier has created half a masterpiece here. Most people will plough through the game in between five and six hours, and there is no multiplayer to extend the play experience further. Even worse, once the game reaches New York City, what could be an epic climax quickly fizzles out in little more than 20 minutes. Sure, you'll get to knock a few cop cars and planes around, but honestly after all the memorable moments on Skull Island, it feels anticlimactic and tacked-on, especially given all the potential inherent in letting Kong loose in an open-city environment. I will say that the alternate ending is well worth unlocking, but even that isn't enough to satisfy my urge for a really compelling conclusion. Still, despite its brevity and the somewhat shoddy ending, there are many moments in this game that I will remember for a lifetime, and I commend the developers for creating an amazing experience. I just wish there were more of it.—**MATT**

> **Concept:** A collaboration between Rayman creator Michel Ancel and director Peter Jackson melds gripping first-person gameplay with epic monster battles

> **Graphics:** On any system, this is a graphical powerhouse, due in large part to fantastic art direction and a dramatic sense of scale

> **Sound:** The all-new score (different from the film's) is rousing, containing some of the best compositions I've heard in gaming

> **Playability:** The first-person mechanics are unique and inspired, and playing as Kong is a visceral treat

> **Entertainment:** It's too short, and the climax is a major letdown, but I'll remember moments from this game forever

> **Replay Value:** Moderately Low

Second Opinion

With tangled vines clenched tightly in my hands, I kicked off of the canyon wall with my mighty legs and dropped all of my weight onto an unsuspecting raptor I curled my hand under its lifeless body and hurled it 70 feet into the air directly into a human-made structure that housed a squadron of archers. Needless to say, the chest pounding that followed was justified In video games, Kong is king. The power that he puts into your hands is like nothing that you've experienced before. You feel unstoppable. And you are. Controlling the eighth wonder of the world is only a small portion of what makes this game truly shine Surprisingly, Jack is the real star. His fight for survival is what legends are made of. It's man versus beast captured in astonishing gameplay, creating one great memory after another. It's too bad it only clocks in at six hours. The final scene in NY is a letdown, as well Regardless, this shouldn't steer you away from one of the most intense adventures to date —**REINER**

■ The game's giant bats are some of your most fearsome foes

■ Whether pulling the wings off a giant bat or splitting the jaws of a T-Rex, Kong is brutal

■ Whatever its other faults, the visuals here rock

■ Multiplayer is fine, but nothing to drool over

■ Enemies do use cover, but only in a very basic way

PLAYSTATION 2 | XBOX | GAMECUBE

Call of Duty 2: Big Red One

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 16-PLAYER VIA PS2 ONLINE OR XBOX LIVE) > **PUBLISHER** ACTIVISION > **DEVELOPER** TREYARCH
> **RELEASE** NOVEMBER 1 > **ESRB** T

NOTHING SPECIAL

Sometimes we have the pleasure of bringing a truly excellent yet under-exposed game to light, and telling the world about a buried gem. Other times, it's our unfortunate duty to tell you that a game that's been hyped up as the next big thing simply doesn't deliver on its promises. As you can probably guess, Call of Duty 2: Big Red One forces me into the latter role. While it's clear that the big budget Activision put into this internally developed sequel has paid great dividends in terms of technology and polish, somewhere along the line the game has lost its soul.

Infinity Ward's PC original (as well as the fantastic follow-up on both PC and Xbox 360) layers a truly cinematic feel on top of a brilliantly conceived, complete gameplay package. Even Spark Unlimited's console-only Call of Duty: Finest Hour managed to deliver some wonderfully intense thrills despite its technical limitations. Big Red One, however, shoots well wide of the mark in the atmosphere and gameplay departments — even though the engine in this release is vastly superior to the one used in Finest Hour. The visuals

are great, especially viewed in progressive scan, and the action is competent, but everything else about Big Red One falls squarely into the category of mediocre.

Don't get me wrong – gunning down the Axis war machine piece by bloody piece is still fun, to an extent. But when you're doing it in the context of mowing through endless hordes of identical enemies with the collective intelligence of a postage stamp, it wears thin rather quickly. This is especially true when the level designs consist almost exclusively of moving down a linear path until you trigger a mass enemy spawn, shoot them, and repeat ad nauseum. I can't stress enough how flat-out boring the majority of the levels in Big Red One are. Whether you're dispatching Italians in Sicily or thinning the ranks of the Afrika Korps in Egypt, the action is formulaic and repetitive. The occasional off-beat sniper mission or vehicle level breaks up the monotony somewhat, but as soon as you finish up one of those, it's back to the same old grind. The tank control is great, though, so that's something.

The final nail in Big Red One's coffin of mediocrity is the baffling aim assistance. The game goes the usual route of simply giving players a little bit of leeway as far as having your shots connect with the bad guys, but then takes it two steps further. When looking down the sights, your reticle will slow down as it nears an enemy, and even follow them for a short distance if they move. This could help in theory, but in practice simply serves to screw up my timing and make me miss shots. Frustrating.

The total lack of soul in Big Red One, along with the irritating level design, are simply too much for the technical excellence embodied in its smooth framerate and slick graphics to overcome. If an average, run-of-the-mill shooter can convince you to drop $50, then you won't be disappointed here. For FPS fans looking for something new and interesting, this would be a good title to skip.—**ADAM**

■ See this little path? That's the overriding level design philosophy

■ This PS2 screenshot shows how great the game looks even on that less-powerful system
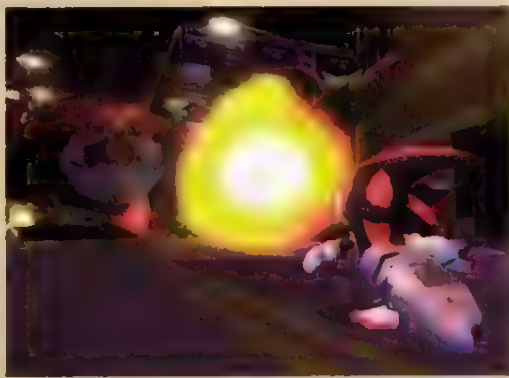
UNLIMITED ENABLED

PLAYSTATION 2 I XBOX I GAMECUBE

Shadow the Hedgehog

> **STYLE** 1 OR 2-PLAYER ACTION/PLATFORM > **PUBLISHER** SEGA
> **DEVELOPER** SONIC TEAM > **RELEASE** NOVEMBER 15 > **ESRB** E 10+

THEY SHOOT HEDGEHOGS, DON'T THEY?

Sonic the Hedgehog's stock is at an all-time low; if not for the popular cartoon series, I wonder if they'd still be making Sonic titles in 2005. Every one of these games since Sonic Adventure on Dreamcast has tried and failed to establish its identity in 3D, usually offering workmanlike, somewhat frustrating, yet solidly mediocre gameplay. Desperate to find its way in the post-Halo and GTA gaming world, Sonic Team has taken a much-needed gamble with a franchise that's played it safe for far too long. Unfortunately, they've lost this million-dollar bet in spectacular fashion.

First off, just let me say that not only is the this new "adult" interpretation of Sonic painfully dumb, it's also ill-advised and almost feels like a betrayal to longtime fans. Shadow exhibits little to no personality and talks in a ridiculous Clint Eastwood rasp. It's just laughable. The plot makes no sense, and after all these years, I'm still running around collecting Chaos Emeralds, for crap's sake. Hey Sega, here's a clue: If you want to be "mature" and "edgy", having a robot bee character named "Charmy" is probably a bad idea.

The gameplay is even worse. Shadow "skates" around the environment, jutting around erratically, making it impossible for the crippled camera to keep up with the action. The new gun combat is horrid, and your other main attack — a homing dash move — frequently sends you careening off into nothingness, resulting in cheap death after cheap death. More traditional Sonic running levels are poorly designed and made even worse on the PS2 version, which has a horrible framerate. Chaotic, arbitrary, dull, and needlessly frustrating; this is video game design at its absolute worst. I'm afraid even Dr. Robotnik couldn't have killed Sonic off so effectively as Sega has managed to do with this game.——**MATT**

BOTTOM LINE 4

> **Concept:** Paint the ol' hedgehog black, stick a gun in his hand, and send him on a suicide mission

> **Graphics:** Could this series actually be deteriorating graphically? It seems even worse than Sonic Heroes. Also, the PS2 framerate is just unacceptable

> **Sound:** The nu-metal song in the opening movie lets you know what your in for: aural hell

> **Playability:** Shadow controls like a drunk on ice skates, and the homing attack often throws you off cliffs

> **Entertainment:** Seriously, I don't know if the Sonic series can ever recover from this debacle

> **Replay Value:** Low

Second Opinion 2

Wait. This game is mislabeled. This isn't Shadow the Hedgehog. It's that miserable Broken the Hedgehog! With the scent of a dirty diaper permeating from his speedy wake, this killer of classic gaming franchises does what he does best. He sucks. Not since Bubsy have I seen a mascot-based action game corner the market in unresponsive controls, disastrous level designs, inconsistent framerates, traumatizing character designs, and (my favorite) just being flat out broken. At the very least, this game has its place in the history of gaming for that. Shame on you, Sega.——**REINER**

MULTI-SYSTEM QUICKIES

Aeon Flux

BOTTOM LINE 7.25

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION > **PUBLISHER** MAJESCO
> **DEVELOPER** TERMINAL REALITY > **RELEASE** NOVEMBER 15 > **ESRB** T

PS2 I XBOX
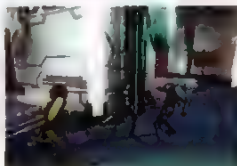
If I didn't use the word "bizarre" and "nonsensical" to describe an Aeon Flux game, then the developers would truly have failed to capture the essence of the show. But Aeon Flux indeed features an inscrutable plot and some creatively unusual platforming that has you flipping around like a monkey on crack. This is easily the best aspect of the game, as the combat is a bit rudimentary, the camera is wobbly, and general controls are a bit loose and sloppy. But Aeon Flux manages to transcend its problems with clever platforming and some interesting level designs. It's barely above average for an action game, but captures enough of the spirit of the show (and movie) to make it worthwhile for fans.——**JEREMY**

Total Overdose

BOTTOM LINE 6.25

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION > **PUBLISHER** EIDOS > **DEVELOPER** DEADLINE GAMES > **RELEASE** SEPTEMBER 28 > **ESRB** M

PS2 I XBOX

If famed movie director Robert Rodriguez created a sequel to Namco's Dead to Rights, there's a good chance that the game would be similar to Total Overdose. If your character isn't diving to the side in slow motion, then he's probably mowing down tequila-filled goons with dual guitar case machine guns. You can also ram into them like a bull. This game's idea of adding insult to injury is to steal the hats of the adversaries that you have downed. As you've probably concluded by now, Total Overdose is foaming-at-the-mouth crazy. It's also plagued by technical defects in almost every conceivable way that a game could be. As much as I would like to recommend that people see the insanity that unfolds, the shoddy play will likely drive most gamers into a mental institution.——**REINER**

Taito Legends

BOTTOM LINE 8.5

> **STYLE** 1 OR 2-PLAYER ACTION > **PUBLISHER** SEGA > **DEVELOPER** TAITO > **RELEASE** OCTOBER 25 > **ESRB** T

PS2 I XBOX I PC

Classic game compilations are a lot like finding one of your old high school mix tapes under the seat of your car, only with 100 percent less Sepultura songs. There are a lot of memories contained within, and some of them remain as awesome as you remembered (Super Qix, Tube-it, Volfied), while others are still fun, despite obvious flaws (Rastan, Operation Wolf, Exzisus). Some now seem like crap (Rainbow Islands, Plump Pop), and some are so horrible that they're awesome (Ninja Kids, Thunderfox). With 29 classic Taito titles, including indisputable classics like Space Invaders, there's a little something for everyone on this disc. Trips down memory lane have peaks and valleys, but this one is definitely worth taking.——**JEREMY**

Pac-Man World 3

BOTTOM LINE 6.25

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION > **PUBLISHER** NAMCO > **DEVELOPER** BLITZ > **RELEASE** NOVEMBER 15 > **ESRB** E

PS2 I XBOX I GC
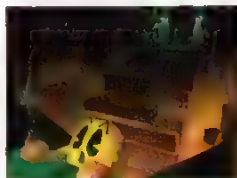
Don't laugh, this game actually has way more going for it than most people would believe at first glance. Then again, don't get too excited either, as Pac-Man's 25th anniversary Pac-Man World 3 has a lot of problems. The good bits are mostly in the game's museum section, which offers up a nice interview with Pac-Man's real-world daddy and the 1980 arcade game. The bad bits are familiar to all action/platform fans – icky camera, obtuse level design, and loose movement controls. Weirdly, the dialogue is actually charming and sometimes clever, but the loose controls found in the main game also plague the arcade port to a degree, which to me, is the biggest bummer of this outing.——**LISA**

College Hoops 2K6

BOTTOM LINE 8

> **STYLE** 1 TO 10-PLAYER SPORTS (PS2), 1 TO 4-PLAYER (XBOX) (UP TO 10-PLAYER VIA PS2 ONLINE, UP TO 8-PLAYER VIA XBOX LIVE)
> **PUBLISHER** 2K SPORTS > **DEVELOPER** VISUAL CONCEPTS > **RELEASE** NOVEMBER 7 > **ESRB** E

PS2 I XBOX

Although I'd rather go through NBA 2K6's 24/7 mode, College Hoops gives players something to chew on with in-season recruiting options for would-be dynasty builders. On the court, coaches can also now instruct players during time outs. Like NBA, however, the defensive steal system just doesn't feel right, and the interaction animations between players can produce some funky results. As much as the dynasty portion of the game has gotten an upgrade with some extensive video spots, I feel that there is something missing from the college experience. In recent years we've seen 2K competitor EA Sports try some new things in college sports, and I'd like to see 2K come forth with their rebuttal.——**KATO**

Shattered Union

BOTTOM LINE 4

> **STYLE** 1 OR 2-PLAYER STRATEGY (2-PLAYER VIA XBOX LIVE, PC INTERNET, OR LAN) > **PUBLISHER** 2K GAMES
> **DEVELOPER** POPTOP SOFTWARE > **RELEASE** OCTOBER 18 > **ESRB** E

XBOX I PC
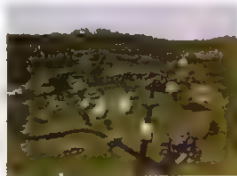
You know, I really like turn-based strategy. I get way into the tactics of holding territory, abusing lines of sight, and planning out my offensives in great detail. Maybe that's why I hate this game so much. Shattered Union does an amazing job of taking all of the worst parts of the genre – pug-ugly graphics, irritating menu-driven controls, and needlessly complex rule structures – and combines them into a leprous pile of boring gameplay. What kills this title completely for me, though, is the ridiculous emphasis on scouting. How am I supposed to conquer the continent when I can only see what's happening on 20 percent of any given battle map?——**ADAM**

PLAYSTATION 2

NBA 06

> **STYLE** 1 TO 8-PLAYER SPORTS (2-PLAYER VIA PS2 ONLINE) > **PUBLISHER** SONY COMPUTER ENTERTAINMENT AMERICA
> **DEVELOPER** SCEA SAN DIEGO > **RELEASE** NOVEMBER 1 > **ESRB** E

BASKETBALL'S BIG TICKET

I 've played 162-game seasons, decked out my mansion with furniture, adjusted hot dog prices, and created my likeness in sports games before, but never have I been so personally sucked into a sports title like I am with NBA 06. Although NBA's The Life mode doesn't give you control of an NBA team like a normal Franchise mode would, it gives you something better than boring GM scouting numbers – a reason to keep playing. Sports gamers, this is your Life.

The structure of The Life is different than your average Franchise mode (although you can play through a normal NBA season). Not only does the first part of the game run you through drills as you prepare for the draft and to make the squad of your favorite team, but the game also segments the season into discrete scenarios that contain goals. For instance, you may play the first half of a game and be asked to dish some assists or hold an opponent to so many points. Others may just ask you to win in the waning moments of a contest.

It gives you more than enough basketball, but doesn't bore you with the standard calendar full of games. Meanwhile, the off-the-court drama unfolds through well-scripted and voice-acted cutscenes. All the sports clichés are here, from the estranged father to the inter-team personalities, but I ate all of them up and wanted more. As The Life told the story of my created character Bif Choosy – cousin of superstar Jif – I was always eager to see what was coming next, and this is the most excited I've been to play a sports title in a while.

As much as The Life keeps things rolling, this game would score much higher if the gameplay were better. Action in the low post can be a mess, the AI is off (my opponent once had a backcourt violation on a fast break), and I was surprised that there weren't more fouls. It sounds like a big deal to say that gameplay is the only thing holding this title back – and it is – but regardless, you don't know what you're missing unless you walk a mile in these shoes.—**KATO**

> **Concept:** Make the first sports game with an interesting story that's worth playing
> **Graphics:** Standard PS2 stuff, not remarkable in any way
> **Sound:** The game has an original score and about four or five original songs. They are played over and over, but they are great
> **Playability:** There is a delay in executing low post moves, which gets annoying
> **Entertainment:** With a story that is more absorbing than most non-sports games out there, this title had me constantly hooked
> **Replay Value:** Moderately High

Second Opinion 7.75

Home to this year's greatest achievement in video game sports, NBA 06 pushes the genre forward in ways that you cannot even begin to imagine. Because of this, NBA 06 can be considered the first sports RPG. In a mode dubbed The Life, cinematic storytelling is dispersed throughout the framework of an NBA season. By pitting the player against a hotheaded rival, this tale is effectively *Top Gun* in a locker room. It's campy, but at the same time great. There really is no better reward than a cutscene after a tough game. Tough usually pertains to problematic AI, slippery defense controls, and animation glitches. Suffice it to say, it's not the best playing game in the world, but it's good enough to allow players to enjoy an ingenious new mode.—**REINER**

■ The Life of the sports genre's most promising new mode
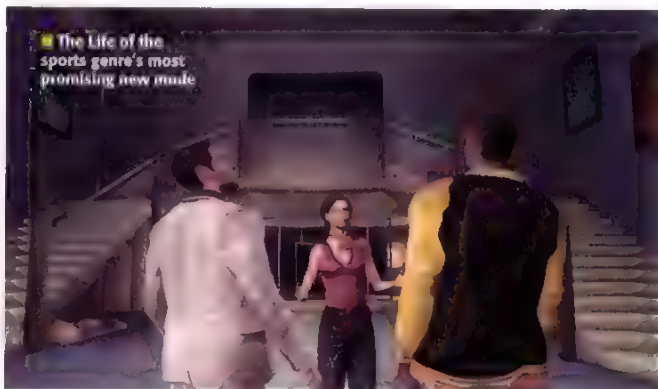
PLAYSTATION 2

Wild Arms: Alter Code F

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ROLE-PLAYING GAME > **PUBLISHER** AGETEC > **DEVELOPER** MEDIA VISION
> **RELEASE** NOVEMBER 15 > **ESRB** T

WILD ARMS CAN BE BROKEN

I 'll admit that Wild Arms isn't my first choice for a classic 1997 PSone RPG remake, but it was still a decent game for its time. The interesting characters and 2D style mixed with a western theme made an exciting adventure that was sadly overshadowed by the titanic Final Fantasy VII. Alter Code F had the opportunity to right this wrong by updating the gameplay and graphics to bring the adventure to a new generation, but it can only be considered successful if you have a very forgiving definition of "update."

At their best, the modifications made to the original formula make minor improvements (like the ability to avoid random encounters at the press of a button). On the other hand, the move to 3D creates a host of new problems that aren't handled well at all. The graphics are about on par with late-era PSone games, and the terrible camera angles leave you switching your view constantly with the shoulder buttons (not the right analog stick, for some reason). No voice acting has been added, but the developers were courteous enough to include the laughable "search" feature from later Wild Arms titles. In practice, this means you won't see an ancient castle or a huge city (even if you're standing right on it) until you've been told about it and pressed a button to send out a sonar search pulse.

To its credit, Alter Code F does a great job of staying true to the original story. But even with a few tweaks to the battle system and some new characters to recruit, Wild Arms has sacrificed any old-school appeal it once had. In exchange, it got a generic exterior and outdated mechanics that make it feel like a naive vision of "the future of gaming" circa 1990.—**JOE**

> **Concept:** "The first Wild Arms was pretty good. What can we do to bring it down a few pegs?"
> **Graphics:** Character models are okay, but the environments (especially the whole overworld) look like a butt
> **Sound:** Still awesome. The western-themed soundtrack is easily the highlight of the whole experience
> **Playability:** The controls are an awkward hybrid of current- and last-generation conventions
> **Entertainment:** The tale is still intriguing, but it's just not as enjoyable to play anymore
> **Replay Value:** Low

Second Opinion 6.25

As you play through the excruciatingly slow early hours of this Wild Arms remake, you may think to yourself as I did "Wasn't this more fun the first time around?" Well, the simple answer is yes, for any number of reasons. The awkward camera, unclear objectives, stilted graphics, and high random encounter rate are all problems. But it's the pacing and inability of the story to get off the ground that hurts the game the most. The core of a good RPG is still here. I mean, how bad can it be if there are summoned monsters, right? Well, persistent block and switch puzzles might change your mind. Perhaps my memory of the original fails me. And certainly my expectations were lower in those days. But when it comes right down to it, that early PSone title had me feeling like I was spinning through a sweeping old west fantasy, while this new version relays the sense of being shot at high noon and left in the dusty street.—**MILLER**

■ "Let's see...eight civilians. That's eight points – 16 if they're all headshots."

CURRENT
2 CARS

TARGET
3 CARS

TIME LEFT
2:52.82

KUDOS
175
COMBO x2 (+0)
DRAFTING 1
DRIFT 12

> The blur in these shots isn't low-resolution textures looking icky. Instead, it's speed blur that looks great in-game

> Photo Mode pics can't be shared, but they are pretty

> The cockpit view rules
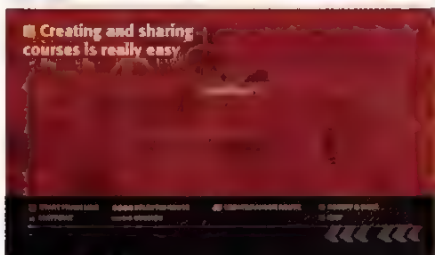
> Creating and sharing courses is really easy

80

XBOX 360

Project Gotham Racing 3

> **STYLE** 1 TO 4-PLAYER RACING (UP TO 8-PLAYER VIA XBOX LIVE) > **PUBLISHER** MICROSOFT GAME STUDIOS
> **DEVELOPER** BIZARRE CREATIONS > **RELEASE** NOVEMBER 22 > **ESRB** E 10+

WALK THE LINE

I've been wrestling with this game. It's good. In fact, what it does is executed with a consistently high level of quality that makes the entire experience nothing short of rock solid. But what Project Gotham Racing 3 does has mostly been seen before, and also executed well by other games.

Most obviously, it's beautiful. The fully-rendered audience members and real-world locations are bright, varied, and make delicious backgrounds to race through. A handful of viewpoints is crowned by a cockpit perspective that shows the individual cars' interiors – something that I hope every racer from here on out steals with the same degree of detail. And then there are the cars themselves. The ride list numbers around 80, and the cheapest, lowest-end vehicle is far more machine than any of us will ever dream to own. Instead of a simulation title's progression through factory-equipped starter cars, PGR 3 wants players to get to the good stuff right away.

Weirdly, this is one of the areas where I think the title falters a bit. In short, the entire game – from its course layout to physics to car list to user-selected difficulty at the start of each race (a great feature, by the way) – attempts to walk a line between modern simulation and arcade racers. As an avid racing game fan, I don't think that it scratches either itch with absolute success, especially after you get a dozen hours into the long single-player experience and there are few new rewards. This exact point is where your personal feelings have to come into play and make this the sole question to ask: Are you so particular about racing that this no man's land is no place for you?

If you think that the world of in-betweens sounds interesting, there are some treats in store. The much-trumpeted online features are impressive. Regular old races are spiced up with user-created tracks, the tool for which really lets gamers loose with few restrictions. The tournaments weren't yet set up for us to try, but if the community involvement is strong, these could be really awesome. Gotham TV is another feature that, at bare minimum, is interesting and I'm glad that Bizarre Creations is trying something new with online. While I thought that this and the scrolling ticker tape of achievements wouldn't be very much of a draw for me, I found the information and experience of watching other races to be really interesting and fun.

While PGR 3 wavers back and forth between schools of thought, it is a solid and fun, if not deep or terribly rewarding, racer – one that ably promotes beauty over brains. While I've been wrestling over how to describe it, players should feel confident in its high-quality execution.—**LISA**

BOTTOM LINE **8.5**

> **Concept:** When your series' second title goes over like a fart in a church, make the third stand out and prove worthy

> **Graphics:** A fully 3D crowd and nicely detailed backgrounds really do make a difference

> **Sound:** The weirdest song list I have ever heard, but I love it

> **Playability:** Consistent controls that differentiate the cars well enough

> **Entertainment:** The highly-scaleable difficulty level makes this accessible to practically anyone

> **Replay Value:** Moderate

Second Opinion **8.5**

After three games, developer Bizarre Creations knows what to do to get that motor oil in your veins pumping. Despite the fact that there isn't much that has really changed about this franchise, the graphics do make a difference in the cockpit mode. When the shadows sweep across your dashboard and the world blurs behind you in your mirrors as you streak through city streets, you'll understand the impact that racing in this view brings. I would have liked more new tracks, and although I understand customization is not the focus of this series, I have been hoping for two iterations now that PGR would get some depth. Gotham TV doesn't do anything for me, but giving you the option to race created courses is cool, and the online features will please those who can use them. This is a solid debut on the system that will serve fans well; I just hope the developers are also looking down the road to ensure the series' continued success.—**KATO**

"I'm, like, totally hip and funky! Grrl power!"
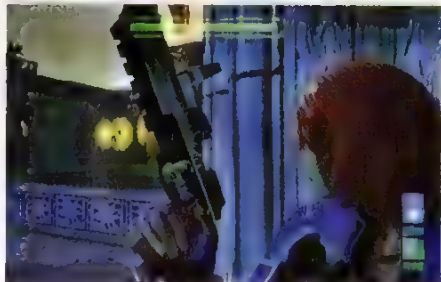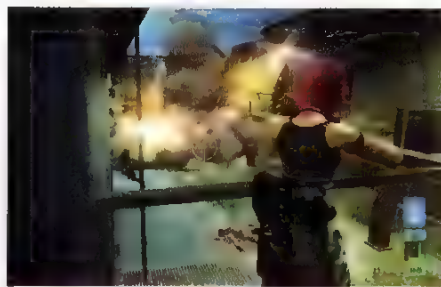
XBOX 360

Perfect Dark Zero

> **STYLE** 1 OR 2-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 32-PLAYER VIA XBOX LIVE OR SYSTEM LINK) > **PUBLISHER** MICROSOFT GAME STUDIOS
> **DEVELOPER** RAREWARE > **RELEASE** NOVEMBER 19 > **ESRB** M

DON'T BELIEVE THE HYPE

Perfect Dark Zero has always been destined for a rocky reception. In development for years by Rare, a company with a great pedigree and problematic recent history for a publisher launching a new system, PDZ is a critical title for both Rare and Microsoft. In the past few years, the bar for first-person shooters has been raised to new heights by games like Halo 2 and Half-Life 2, and the Xbox has established itself as the console of choice for shooter fans. Does Perfect Dark Zero hit this high bar, redeeming Rare and providing Microsoft with the first-party hit it needs for the 360 launch? In a word, no. PDZ solidly fails to meet the benchmark set by recent shooters, emerging as a forgettable, by-the-numbers experience, rather than the milestone it should have been.

To be fair, Perfect Dark Zero is a perfectly passable game. There are a few technical shortcomings here and there, but there's nothing glaringly wrong with it. By virtue of the fact that it's on a new system with better graphics, that will be enough for some people. But there's simply nothing new in the single-player campaign that shooter fans haven't done a million times before. There are no

exciting boss fights, no particularly compelling stages, and definitely none of the "holy crap" moments that made games like Half-Life 2 so memorable. Instead, there is a small selection of generic environments (science fiction-inspired bunkers, a forest, ruins, etc.), and an even smaller handful of enemy types, including a female guard model that looks suspiciously like Joanna Dark. Enemy AI is incredibly inconsistent – sometimes they'll snipe you from afar, and other times they'll stand around with their guns in the air when they have a clear shot at you.

The actual gameplay is a lot slower than most recent shooters, and lacking many modern conventions, such as a radar or more than one checkpoint per level. However, PDZ does feature a nice cover mechanic, as well as an evasive roll (instead of a jump). Fans of the original will like the weapons selection and the focus on multiple objectives per stage, but others will be completely put off by the ridiculous voice work, forgettable story, and downright boring action. However, online play is a lot more interesting. Deathmatches and Dark

"Oh my gosh, I totally have that same gun! Good thing I didn't bring it too, or I would be so embarrassed!"

Ops games (which are more objective-based) are included, as well as co-op. As much as I love co-op conceptually, I found playing the same campaign with a second player just as boring as playing it alone. Deathmatches and Dark Ops games are surprisingly fun, despite bringing little new to the table. With headshots being the most efficient way to take someone down, deathmatches are a bit more skill-based than some other shooters, which is nice. But outside of some mildly amusing multiplayer, PDZ is an enormous disappointment. Perhaps due to its years in development, PDZ just feels antiquated and familiar. Had it released years ago, it would have been a monumental game. But as it stands, it's just more of the same.——**JEREMY**

The environments look nice, but aren't as stunning as those in other 360 titles

The cover mechanic allows you to protect yourself in firefights

■ The QB hits can almost be felt

XBOX 360

Madden NFL 06

> **STYLE** 1 OR 2-PLAYER SPORTS (2-PLAYER VIA XBOX LIVE) > **PUBLISHER** EA SPORTS
> **DEVELOPER** EA TIBURON > **RELEASE** NOVEMBER 22 > **ESRB** E

THE REBUILDING YEAR

Y ou'd expect EA's lauded Madden franchise to offer a lot of weight to an otherwise so-so unveiling of the Xbox 360. Instead, like the other EA Sports titles supporting the launch, it isn't firing on all cylinders. I understand that developer EA Tiburon had to drop features in order to devote more time to developing the new engine in the game, but even from a gameplay standpoint this Madden has a ways to go before it reaches the high standards of the franchise.

Unfortunately, this game didn't just drop some features in a move to next-gen – I could handle a title that eschewed bells and whistles for a foundation of solid gameplay. No, this title has literally gone back in time and reacquired a number of bad habits from its past that year-in-and-year-out work on the franchise had erased from the current-gen games. The interior running game is once again suspect, and collision problems can cause players to morph through each other like ghosts.

Perhaps the most striking area that has taken a step backwards is the animations. They've always been the series' bread and butter, and there are some moments in this Madden that will have you jump out of your seat. You'll see sweet sideline catches, quarterbacks' bodies absorb punishing hits, and running back jukes that will even have you fooled. But this absolute reliance on animations also hurts this game. There is a lack of responsiveness between commands for your running backs and their execution, and some animations will automatically trigger, locking you into certain moves. The game's animation can cause problems with players' change of direction. This makes it tough for a user-controlled player in the secondary to cover receivers, as adjusting to the ball leaves them at a disadvantage because your guys make unexpected moves. That being said, the battles between receivers and the defense are similar to current-gen in that the AI takes away the deep ball more often than not. Unfortunately, the interplay

between the offensive and defensive lines is as problematic as ever.

The game alternates between moments where it feels like the

■ Showing the injuries as they happen is about the best thing about the new presentation. The jumbotrons are disappointing

Madden you know and love, and others where it feels too slow and unresponsive to be the franchise you've grown accustomed to. Even old favorites are different. Hot routes now take twice as long to call at the line of scrimmage, Vision Passing is optional to the point of being non-existent (and you can still get away with throwing outside of it), and Franchise Mode has axed the scouting phase of the Draft.

It may sound like I'm being hard on a series that is still finding its way on new hardware, but at a minimum I wanted this game to give me a reason to stop playing the current-gen version of Madden – but it hasn't. At the same time, I have no doubt that the work that has been put into the player models, stadiums, and getting this game on its feet is going to pay off in spades later on down the road.—**KATO**

> "I wanted this game to give me a reason to stop playing the current-gen version of Madden – but it hasn't."

■ This Madden features more on-field player talk, but you won't hear lines like: "Until you get traded to my locker room, our love will have to remain forbidden"

EVE ONLINE

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MASSIVILY MULTIPLAYER ONLINE SCI-FI GAME
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> The graphics will bring a tear to your eye, but not as much as the gameplay will

> **Concept:** Rare's character-based charm shines brightly, but the gameplay just doesn't have any meat on its bones

> **Graphics:** From the particle effects to the bump-mapped texturing, this is one of the most impressive looking titles for the Xbox 360

> **Sound:** An orchestrated marvel that reminds you of *Peter and the Wolf* one minute, then *The Lord of the Rings* the next

> **Playability:** The controls are finely crafted. The monster forms offer unique attacks and moves. The level designs and puzzles are highly redundant

> **Entertainment:** A 10 to 12-hour quest that has plenty of great and not-so-great moments

> **Replay Value:** Moderately Low

UNLIMITED ENABLED

XBOX 360

Kameo: Elements of Power

> **STYLE** 1 OR 2-PLAYER ACTION > **PUBLISHER** MICROSOFT GAME STUDIOS > **DEVELOPER** RAREWARE > **RELEASE** NOVEMBER 8
> **ESRB** T

STRETCHED BETWEEN GENERATIONS

O nce viewed as a premiere development house that could turn the tides in the console war, Rareware now resembles an athlete that is recovering from numerous knee surgeries. The company is noticeably limping in its efforts. Since joining Microsoft's ranks, Rare has delivered more games for a rival handheld system than it has for the Xbox. The much-maligned Grabbed by the Ghoulies and a port of Conker's Bad Fur Day are the only product that this developer has released for the Xbox. With the arrival of the Xbox 360, Rare has the opportunity to get back on its feet, wipe the slate clean, and start anew. Before this can be done, however, one last skeleton has to removed from the company's closest. That skeleton is Kameo.

After spending nearly five years on the development floor for GameCube, Xbox, and now 360, the finishing touches have finally been applied to Kameo. You wouldn't expect a game that dates back to the infancy of the previous console generation to raise the bar visually, but that's exactly what this game does. Rare's artistic expertise is on display, creating a storybook world that is teeming with life and style. Particle effects are as dense as a Midwestern blizzard. You nearly have to squint when you view the light that reflects off of the extravagant

bump-mapped texturing. Armies don't measure in the dozens or even the hundreds. Like *The Lord of the Rings* films, soldiers, dragons, and giants span as far as the eye can see, numbering in the thousands. Whenever you enter a new area, you can't help but pausing just to spy the beauty that is around you.

Rare was able to elevate the visuals to next-gen quality, but the gameplay is firmly rooted in the past...the distant past. Kameo's ability to transform into different monsters delivers a wealth of exciting gameplay mechanics. They are used very much like the items in Zelda. Where Zelda shines in finding creative ways to tap into the items' abilities, Kameo struggles in delivering new ways to use the monsters. You usually find yourself utilizing their powers to complete the same tasks. If you transform into the plant beast Pummel Weed to duck beneath the crack of a gate, you know you'll do it again at least 50 times before the game concludes. Once you learn how to use the characters, the entire game is an exercise in repeating procedures. Of equal disappointment, the solution to most puzzles usually revolves around Chilla's Ice Spike attacks. The Shadow Troll boss battles are also repeated each time you quest for a new monster, only growing slightly more frustrating and chaotic each time.

That's not to say, however, that the game doesn't have its moments. Major Ruin's dash roll is a well-made mechanic that leads to some thrilling segments. I also really enjoyed using Thermite's mortar attacks to send a handful of enemies twirling through the air within the epic war that is waging across the badlands. All told, the gameplay is sound. It just doesn't challenge players enough.

There really is no slow onion peel to the plot, although Rare certainly hoped there would be one. Once you meet a specific character, you know exactly where this tale is going to end up. After working your way through every video game cliché possible (betrayal in your midst, levels based on elements), the game builds to a huge rip-roaring finale. Sadly, the final boss is the weakest in the game (40 Below's Wrecker attack can tear him to shreds in no time flat). From here it seems as though the game is going to fizzle out and die quietly, but the cinematic that follows this battle is a satisfying and visually stunning way to end the game.

All told, Kameo is a respectable adventure, but it drives players forward with its visual content and not its gameplay.—**REINER**

TWICE THE FUN
As you work your way through the main story, you'll unlock the same areas for co-op play. As disappointing as it is to see that you just can't play through the entire story, having a buddy at your side makes Kameo's gameplay a little bit more entertaining, especially when you need to use two monsters for a puzzle or enemy.

Second Opinion 7

Playing Kameo made me feel a lot like what I imagine Fry must've felt at the beginning of *Futurama*. Here I am in this amazing world filled with sights beyond my imagination, and I'm still stuck doing the same crappy delivery job I did back in the past. Make no mistake – this is one pretty game, filled with gorgeous bump-mapped textures, beautiful lighting, and luminous particle effects. However, Kameo (originally conceived for the GameCube) shows its age in tedious level design, unoriginal boss fights, repetitive objectives, and dull puzzles. The concept of switching between forms is definitely intriguing, but unfortunately none of the creatures (aside from Chilla) have gameplay that is inherently entertaining, and the ways you must switch between them are far too obvious to add any real sense of surprise or discovery. One of the game's worst boss battles is repeated a half dozen times before you're done, growing more annoying each time. Graphically state of the art, Kameo is just an attractive repackaging of the same old platforming clichés.—**MATT**
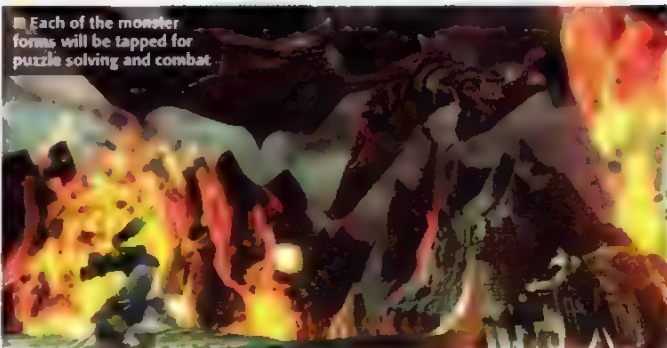
> Each of the monster forms will be tapped for puzzle solving and combat

> Flex is accompanied by some of the best sound effects around. He's the new Jar Jar Binks!
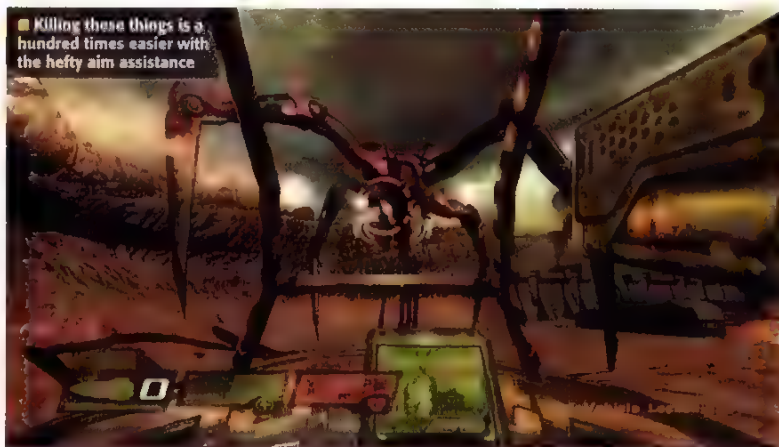
Killing these things is a hundred times easier with the hefty aim assistance

Berserkers are irritating, but far from the strongest foes you'll face

Automatically regenerating shields and armor trivialize the vehicle portions

XBOX 360

Quake 4

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 8-PLAYER VIA XBOX LIVE OR SYSTEM LINK) > **PUBLISHER** ACTIVISION > **DEVELOPER** RAVEN SOFTWARE/ID SOFTWARE > **RELEASE** NOVEMBER 22 > **ESRB** M

Y'ARR, THERE BE A DERELICT PORT AHEAD!

On paper, Quake 4 on the Xbox 360 is an exact port of the recently-released PC version. In practice, it's readily apparent that the game was designed from the ground up for the precision of mouse-and-keyboard control, and the 360 edition really suffers for it. Both online and off, Quake 4 on 360 is a clear step down from the PC version – which is especially disheartening when compared to fantastic launch titles like Call of Duty 2. You do get to shoot stuff, lots of stuff, but it's all old hat to anyone who has played a first-person shooter in the last decade or so.

By now, we've seen what the 360 can do. Sure, superstar tech guys will come up with new ways to squeeze extra juice out of the hardware in the coming years, but even launch titles like Call of Duty 2 and Kameo give a pretty good idea what the face of 360 gaming will look like. Unfortunately, Quake 4, while a fine-looking game, looks markedly worse than those titles and fails to maintain a constant framerate in the process. Normally a couple of dropped frames here and there don't mar the experience of a game too much, but in the fast-paced world of Quake 4's multiplayer (the only real reason to purchase it in the first place), stuttering action onscreen can and frequently does mean the difference between victory and defeat. Anybody who has played any entry in the Quake series online knows just how frenetic a match can be, and it's just frustrating with anything less than a solid 60 frames per second.

Surprisingly, the already-average single-player campaign suffers in the conversion to console as well. Less so because of the aforementioned framerate issues, but more because of the aim assistance. It's freaking huge – to a large extent, you can kind of aim in the general direction of the bad guys and your shots will find the mark. You can turn it off, but then it becomes impossible to hit anything. There's just no happy medium. And let's not even talk about how badly it trivializes the track-shooting levels that require such precision in the PC version.

Quake 4 isn't a horrid game on the 360 by any means. It's just that the one thing that made the PC release great – the outstanding old-school online play – isn't nearly as good on the console. It still offers fairly robust multiplayer over Live and an average offline campaign, but the game simply fails to do anything particularly well. There are certainly worse ways to satisfy a thirst for alien blood, but the magic is gone from this port.—**ADAM**

Second Opinion 7.75

Like the schoolyard bully that used to push me – I mean other kids; I was cool – into the mud, Quake 4 throws the concepts of creativity and originality to the ground and expresses itself solely through gratuitous violence. If non-stop action is what you like in an FPS, then I would recommend Quake 4 without hesitation. The weapons are cool, controls are tight, levels are well-designed, and the graphics are good, but not on par with some of the other 360 games, like Call of Duty 2. The boss fights are also a highlight, and the vehicular segments break up the standard corridor-based action well. But there is simply nothing here that hasn't been done before – it's a fragfest and nothing else. Even multiplayer is a pretty standard affair. If you're looking for a deeper experience, I'd go elsewhere, but if you simply want to revel in a glorious orgy of violence, then you can't go wrong with Quake 4.—**JEREMY**

Fighting these things on foot is a terrible, terrible idea

■ Nothing can stop Reiner from getting a Hot Pocket

■ It's only a matter of time before your peaceful drive is interrupted by sirens

XBOX 360

Need For Speed: Most Wanted

> **STYLE** 1 OR 2-PLAYER RACING (UP TO 4-PLAYER VIA XBOX LIVE) > **PUBLISHER** ELECTRONIC ARTS > **DEVELOPER** EA CANADA > **RELEASE** NOVEMBER 22 > **ESRB** T

TURBO CHARGED

If you had a chance to read my review of the current-generation versions of Most Wanted last issue, you already know what I think of the game. But for those that missed it, I'll recap. One of my major problems with Underground 2 was the fact that while there was an open world to cruise around in, there wasn't really any reason to drive from one side of the city to the other. There were, of course, the races that you had to drive across the city to reach, but doing so was more like work than play. Most Wanted addresses these problems head-on, with the addition of simple menus that take you straight to any of the myriad races, and a relentless police force that has only one goal in mind, and that's taking you down. Not only does this give the player a reason to drive around the world, it gives the game a personality over and above how many modifications you can put on your tricked out ride.

The police chases are intense. As you use a vehicle repeatedly, the car becomes hot and, in time, instantly sparks heat from the police. So it forces the player to change vehicles from time to time, or to do as I did, and use the same car over and over to ramp up the intensity. Each chase starts off simple enough, with the cops trying to crash you into submission, but as the chases escalate, mayhem ensues. Giant SUVs try to smash your vehicle head on, the cruisers coordinate to box you in, helicopters join the fray to watch you from above, and a whole mess of roadblocks appear around every corner.

I found myself endlessly creating bigger and bigger chases that went from one side of the city to the other and back again. So on Xbox 360 or the previous platforms, Most Wanted delivers some outrageous driving experiences that shouldn't be missed.

So why buy the Xbox 360 version over the others? Not only does it have crisper graphics, it simply has more of everything. More police to chase you, more variety in the vehicles, more lighting and particle effects (including a day and night cycle) – the list goes on and on about the graphical upgrades. I will say, however, most of these upgrades take a keen eye to pick out, so while I feel the Xbox 360 version is most certainly the best, it's not really all that different of a game overall.—**ANDY**

■ Turbo Teen rules!

■ "After we're done here on Makeout Point, we're driving to the sun"

XBOX 360

NBA 2K6

> **STYLE** 1 TO 4-PLAYER SPORTS (UP TO 8-PLAYER VIA XBOX LIVE) > **PUBLISHER** 2K SPORTS > **DEVELOPER** VISUAL CONCEPTS
> **RELEASE** NOVEMBER 22 > **ESRB** E

■ In this gameplay shot, notice the light and player reflections – as well as the texturing – in the paint

THE UNCONTESTED JUMPER

While EA Sports decided to start from scratch and go bare bones with its first Xbox 360 basketball title, 2K Sports and developer Visual Concepts took the other fork in the road. This game has all the features of the current-gen version, but it also has the same engine, and is more or less the same title. Of course, if you haven't gotten this year's edition yet or are simply looking for sweet graphics, then buying this game is a no-brainer.

Using the controller's twin analog sticks for everything from dunks and crossovers to pulling off fade-away jumpers, is very easy to do and natural-feeling. Defensively, steals are a little wild and over-aggressive, so this game has yet to solve that age-old problem of balancing offense and defense. But, I guess that's just the way the NBA is – it's all about scoring. Off the court the game gives you a handful with team chemistry considerations and drills through which you can improve your players. The latter is almost like a merging of the Association and 24/7 modes. 24/7

mode is also here in its entirety.

Although this game is definitely the best basketball game to get, in my mind both it and video game basketball in general need more work to become rock solid. Triggering low post moves is frustrating, as there is a fine line between running automatic animations and the unpredictable nature of not knowing whether you're gonna get a dunk or lay-up when you get to the basket – which happens despite the freedom inherent in this game's IsoMotion moves.

This title, unlike the other sports launch games for the system, really is able to sell itself via its graphics. With cloth physics for jerseys and impressive sweat detail and musculature, it's very eye-opening. Unlike football, for instance, you are able to detect all of this gorgeous detail on each player at all times. And when you've got guys battling it out in the paint (which is casting true-to-life real-time reflections) and the crowd's getting into it, this is a next-gen game that really does blur the line between playing the game on a TV and watching the real thing.—**KATO**

BOTTOM LINE 8.5

> **Concept:** Offer up a game that keeps the feature set of the current-gen version and gives you 360-ized graphics

> **Graphics:** The player models are sweet, but their faces are a little stiff

> **Sound:** The commentary is great and the soundtrack keeps 24/7 rolling

> **Playability:** The stick moves feel nice, but triggering actions in the low post is annoying

> **Entertainment:** Definitely the basketball game to get for your new system

> **Replay Value:** Moderately High

Second Opinion 8.75

There are 53 facial muscles on the human head. The player models in NBA 2K6 utilize 42 of them. Capturing a level of realism that can fool the eye, 2K Sports' high-flying hoopster slams down on the Xbox 360 with a visual authority. I found myself viewing replays in slow motion just to watch the cloth physics ripple and flow. Most of the enhancements in this port are of the graphical sort, but 2K has also addressed a few of the problems that I had with the current-gen versions. The shot stick has been tweaked considerably, no longer allowing dunks to clang off of the bottom of the rim. IsoMotion moves are also easier to use. NBA 2K6 already nabbed my vote for best-playing basketball game of the year, now it snatches my vote for the most impressive 360 sports title as well.—**REINER**

■ Check out the jersey sway on LeBron and the subtle sweat effect on the forearm of T.J. Ford

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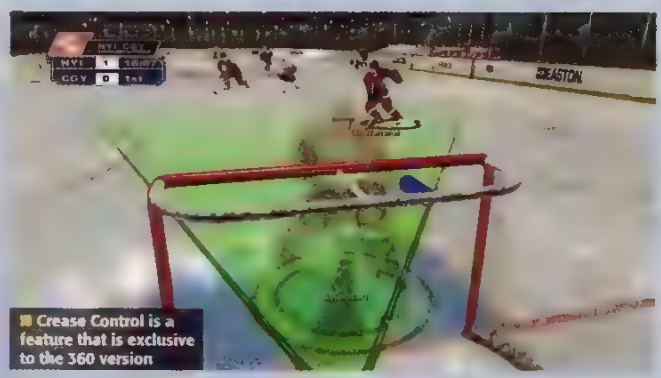
■ Crease Control is a feature that is exclusive to the 360 version

XBOX 360

NHL 2K6

> **STYLE** 1 TO 4-PLAYER SPORTS (UP TO 10-PLAYER VIA XBOX LIVE) > **PUBLISHER** 2K SPORTS
> **DEVELOPER** KUSH GAMES > **RELEASE** NOVEMBER 18 > **ESRB** E10+

LIFE IN THE CREASE

Of all the sports titles that have been ported over for Xbox 360's launch, NHL 2K6 is easily the ugly duckling. Rather than vesting its development efforts to capture the highest level of visual realism possible, Kush Games has instead strapped on its pads to enhance the action on the ice. It doesn't deliver flashy next-generation graphics, but it certainly delivers next-gen gameplay.

The most significant new feature is actually something that I've wanted to see in a hockey game ever since I played NHL Hockey on my Sega Genesis. Through a new gameplay mechanic dubbed Crease Control, players now have the opportunity to don the extravagantly painted mask and lumbering stick of the goalie. Do you have what it takes to stop a screaming 105mph slapshot? You'll soon find out, as this mode captures the skill and determination that is required to play this position.

Your first priority as goalie is to find the puck. If you don't know where it is, your vision cone is colored red, meaning that you have little chance of stopping a shot. If you follow the puck with your goalie's eyes, your vision cone turns green, creating a good chance for a save. When a shot is fired at the net, you'll then have to line up a cursor with the shot location. If you can get there in time (you gotta move quickly), you'll usually make the save. Sometimes, however, you may need to tap the right analog stick to perform a desperation dive. I would have liked to have a little more control over the movement of the goalie (like being able to cheat on one-timers), but this new gameplay mechanic works quite well, allowing players to experience the entire game of hockey for the first time.

In addition to this outstanding new feature, Kush has tightened up the gameplay (such as tweaking the realism of the player movement). It may not have the pretty face of other Xbox 360 games, but when's the last time you saw a hockey player that had all of his teeth? The gameplay is all that really matters.—**REINER**

BOTTOM LINE 8.5

> **Concept:** Steers away from being a graphically enhanced port in favor of innovating and bringing to life the goalie position

> **Graphics:** Similar to the current-gen efforts. New net physics, fully rendered stadiums and crowds, and a higher level of realism in ice degrading and glass reflections

> **Sound:** You can't go wrong with Canadian commentators

> **Playability:** Wildly amusing goalie controls and improved player movements

> **Entertainment:** All of the features from the current gen game are included. Kush even updated the rosters

> **Replay Value:** High

Second Opinion 8

I tip my hat to 2K Sports for doing what no one else would with their 360 port of a current-gen game – it added a whole new feature that elevates the title. Controlling your goalie (in quasi-first-person) with Crease Control is a blast, and gives you that frantic feeling as you track the puck and flop around making spectacular saves. It needs some work, but it's a much-needed breath of fresh air for the sport. The rest of the game is largely unchanged, which means that players will have trouble detecting the puck, the game goes through some funky stick handling animations, and also possesses dubious AI in general (what do the AI sliders really do?!). Hopefully, Crease Control is the start of this franchise striving to become a triple-A property.—**KATO**

■ Belfour would stop more shots if he quit trying to shake everyone's hand

Another generation of drifting

XBOX 360

Ridge Racer 6

> **STYLE** 1 OR 2-PLAYER RACING (UP TO 14-PLAYER VIA ONLINE) > **PUBLISHER** NAMCO > **DEVELOPER** NAMCO
> **RELEASE** NOVEMBER 22 > **ESRB** E

THE PEOPLE'S LAUNCH GAME

Crazy drifting, lots of fast cars, and an unapologetic love of the arcade feel are each trademarks of the Ridge Racer franchise and things that the series' fans truly appreciate. Rest assured that these features are each provided in abundance. Is there more? Not really, at least nothing too innovative. The bigger question then, is does that matter?

My guess is that the graphical tweaks and subtle AI improvements are going to be enough for the series' major fans to be happy with their purchase. From a feature standpoint, the online multiplayer is predictable. Up to 14 players can race the game's mix of familiar courses using the full stable of cars (which number around 130). Additionally, head-to-head races and a worldwide leaderboard make for a nice online experience. Online is a good addition and Xbox Live's feature set makes the experience an easy way to get started. Having real humans to race against makes up for the

game's degree of catch-up AI, which is a pet peeve of mine, and the simple style allows for lots of competitive chatter amongst racers. Neither of these bonuses can be attributed to the game itself, though, and are more a product of other people adding value to a decent foundation laid by the basic title.

Additional features include the nitrous system, which is aped from the PSP entry and ties into the game's new World Explorer mode. This menu system works players through the high number of races with speed, efficiency, and style. It also encourages players to finish the full track list without using nitrous by tagging those races that you won with the speed boost.

For fans, just go ahead and add this title to your 360 collection – you'll love it as a solid and full-featured entry to the series. For those who have fallen off of the wagon, I can't say that this able, but very traditional entry will change your mind about the series.—**LISA**

BOTTOM LINE 7.5

> **Concept:** So, um, it's Ridge Racer, but prettier

> **Graphics:** Nice and clean car models. The same can be said of the environments, but they're really barren

> **Sound:** Annoying announcer guy is a crucial part of the RR experience, but I do truly hate him

> **Playability:** Drifting works as always and opponent AI is a little better

> **Entertainment:** Arcade reminiscing has never felt so natural

> **Replay Value:** Moderate

Second Opinion 7.75

Good old Ridge Racer. It's hard not imagine this series as Matthew McConaughey's character Wooderson in *Dazed and Confused*, still cruising for chicks on the old main drag while its classmates have moved on to college. Like Wooderson, Ridge Racer still has its looks. I was particularly impressed with the level of environmental detail in the outdoor levels. It still knows how to show you a good time as well, the powersliding mechanic remains addictive, and the addition of Nitros (also on the PSP game), an improved career mode, and online multiplayer are almost groundbreaking in the static world of Ridge Racer. Still, the lack of car damage, depth, and real collision physics continue to make this feel like nothing more than a prettier version of PSone-era racing. Ridge Racer: I keep getting older; it stays the same age.—**MATT**

"Who's got the best on-time record now, airplane?"

XBOX 360

Tiger Woods PGA Tour 06

> **STYLE** 1 TO 4-PLAYER SPORTS (UP TO 4-PLAYER VIA XBOX LIVE) > **PUBLISHER** EA SPORTS
> **DEVELOPER** EA REDWOOD SHORES > **RELEASE** NOVEMBER 22 > **ESRB** E

Characters models are much more detailed, which you'll especially notice while creating your own golfer in the Game Face mode

A MORE REFINED ROUND

With the exception of Sony's more fantasy-oriented Hot Shots Golf series and the ultra-popular Golden Tee arcade machines, EA Sports and Tiger Woods pretty much have the sport on lock-down. Over the years, this partnership has resulted in many strides forward for virtual golf. Before Tiger Woods, the thought that a golf game would have a deep character creation option or a comprehensive career experience that rivaled Madden was unheard of. And, don't forget about the analog swing, which was the first real innovation since the classic three-click mechanics that had dominated for years.

After all these accomplishments, Tiger Woods 06 for Xbox 360 seems to be in a bit of a holding pattern, intent on refining the experience of its current-gen cousins, while bringing most (if not quite all) of the copious content along for the ride. As always, the core gameplay is very refined, keeping the intuitive-yet-challenging mechanics and even adding some new shot-shaping functions for advanced players. While it doesn't have

all the items present in the current-gen games, there seem to be more than enough unlockables. The other notable absence is the legendary players and the Rivals mode, but honestly, I think that the new and improved My Career mode more than makes up for that. All the events and challenges are now more coherently woven into the overall structure of the game, and I'll take that over any weird time-travel conceit in the Xbox, GameCube, and PS2 versions. A more major omission is Tiger Proofing, which gave a great deal of course customization and made multiplayer more interesting.

Of course, given that this is a 360 game, I supposed I'm obligated to mention the graphics, which look very nice and detailed, give or take a few stiff animations. You'll especially notice the facial features and grass textures to be much improved. Honestly, this is like a lot of EA Sports' next-gen products – it's a fine game and a nice addition to any 360 library, but probably not worth upgrading to if you already own the current-gen edition of Tiger 06.—**MATT**

BOTTOM LINE 8.5

> **Concept:** Give Tiger and the gang a next-gen facelift, keep the bad golf clothes

> **Graphics:** Facial detail and texture quality is improved, but it's not exactly Gears of War with Big Berthas, either

> **Sound:** I really like the wry commentary, and the music is nice and not too intrusive

> **Playability:** The analog swing mechanics can be enthralling and sometimes frustrating – just like real golf. The shot shaping functions are a nice addition

> **Entertainment:** Hey, if you're going to get a 360 to hit the digital links, this is your game. For current-gen owners, it's probably not worth owning both

> **Replay Value:** High

Second Opinion 8.25

Everyone's got a favorite club in their bag, and Tiger for the 360 feels like an old friend. There are no great surprises with this title, just a nice day out on the greens. I'm a big fan of this year's switch to an all-analog format, as it attempts to capture that feel of spending an afternoon trying to find that elusive perfect swing – and when you're in the zone, you know it. One unexpected change for this 360 edition is the streamlined Career mode, which is greatly welcomed, although I wish that the old format of buying equipment and clothes from the weekly sale shop was still there (now you just unlock that stuff instead). Unless you're not a fan of analog swinging, I don't know that you can go wrong with this title. It's solid in all the right places.—**KATO**
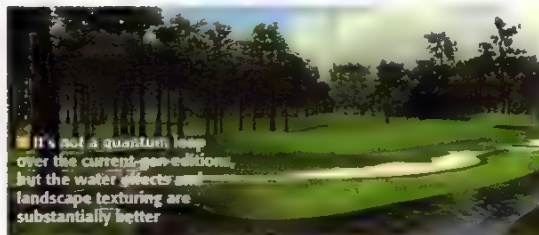
It's not a quantum leap over the current-gen edition, but the water effects and landscape texturing are substantially better

GAMECUBE

Dance Dance Revolution Mario Mix

> **STYLE** 1 OR 2-PLAYER ACTION > **PUBLISHER** KONAMI > **DEVELOPER** KONAMI > **RELEASE** OCTOBER 25 > **ESRB** E

EHHH, MARIOCARENA

■ Mario's shroom abuse continues

■ How far these little turtles have come

■ Dancing meets Whack-A-Mole, and the world will never be the same

■ This screen sums up the entire story. Seriously

Uh no!
Someone stole the Music Keys!

There are seventeen kinds of stupid in the world, and this game has eleven of them, at least by my count. As near as I can tell, Mario Mix was designed to take an inherently repetitive series and combine it with an endlessly reiterative character to find out how derivative they can become when combined. If this was the goal, let me tell you, some awards need to be handed out.

While the general formula from the DDR franchise is in place here, everything feels a step or two down in quality, whether it's the challenge, the visual flair, or the music itself. There's a free dance mode, a versus option, and even a story mode. On its toughest difficulty, this tale of the power of dancing shouldn't take more than an hour or two to complete, even for beginners. The Music Keys have been stolen, and for some reason chaos will ensue unless our suspendered hero shakes his mildly overweight posterior in time with the tunes. It totally makes sense, in that overly contrived, ridiculous sort of way. There are some simplistic minigames that fill in space between levels, and some of the dance offs have special conditions to meet. However, ultimately, you're really just playing an intro to DDR games.

You may be tempted to sample this tasteless treat of a game because you love Mario music, and you think it'd be fun to dance to it. You would be wrong. The musical content is as watered down and empty as the rest of the experience. Memorable game tunes and classical music riffs are perverted by the worst kind of Europop sensibilities. Finally, watching our hero dance is downright painful. I actually felt like I should turn my head away to spare Mario the shame of being seen in such awkward, stilted choreography. As a Mario fan, you should do the same, and try to pretend that Mario never made this disastrous misstep into shaking his groove thang.—**MILLER**

■ Divine Fury is a devastating new spell

■ Dude, do not eat the chili!

XBOX

Fable: The Lost Chapters

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ROLE-PLAYING GAME > **PUBLISHER** MICROSOFT GAME STUDIOS > **DEVELOPER** LIONHEAD STUDIOS > **RELEASE** OCTOBER 18
> **ESRB** M

ONE MORE TIME!

I'm not going to lie to you – I was evil when I played the first Fable. Really evil. The malevolent sorcerer Piemaster was the scourge of Albion and its people. However, in order to experience as much fresh content as possible, I created a virtuous hero for my playthrough of Lost Chapters. I got to experience a more honorable (and wussy) side of the events, but I was disappointed to find that my new alignment was the main source of novelty; Lost Chapters has little to offer anyone already familiar with the intricacies of the game's first incarnation.

Apart from the tying up of a few loose ends in the main story (Lady Grey finally gets her comeuppance), nothing too compelling happens until you complete the original ending. At that point, there are about two hours of additional adventures, which is pretty hefty considering that many fans were upset by Fable's short duration. Even so, I would rather have seen more additions throughout – like expanded quests and new customization options beyond a few new tattoos and beards – than extra hoops to jump through at the tail end.

Of course, none of that really matters if you haven't played the game before. If you fall into that camp, Lost Chapters on Xbox is definitely the version to dive into. The controls feel far better than the PC release, and even though the loading is as problematic as before, Fable is still one of the defining role-playing adventures of this generation. And even more so if you go evil.——**JOE**

BOTTOM LINE 8.75

> **Concept:** Fable, for real this time

> **Graphics:** More bloom than the annual arboretum FlowerFest

> **Sound:** Same as before, with funny voiceovers and an epic soundtrack

> **Playability:** The targeting system is still finicky and stubborn, but the controls beat out the PC counterpart

> **Entertainment:** Heroic quests and hilarious misdeeds keep the fun coming from the beginning to the (now prolonged) end

> **Replay Value:** High

Second Opinion 8.25

Not enough has changed in the Lost Chapters for me to lavish the same praise I did on the original, but those few additional hours of content here certainly make this the version to play if you haven't yet tried Fable. I'm still amazed by the immersion and excitement of crafting the life of my character, and this definitive "special edition" of the game sits firmly in my list of the best RPGs of this generation. From the stirring score to the fairy tale visuals, the choice between good and evil has rarely felt so powerful.——**MILLER**

■ Snow Trolls are actually one of the easier enemies you'll meet in the Northern Wastes

XBOX

Call of Cthulhu: Dark Corners of the Earth

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION > **PUBLISHER** 2K GAMES
> **DEVELOPER** BETHESDA SOFTWORKS > **RELEASE** OCTOBER 24 > **ESRB** M

NOISOME, FETID TERROR

Survival horror, as a whole, walks a fine line between tension and boredom. Unfortunately, I found Call of Cthulhu: Dark Corners of the Earth to be so far on the "boredom" side of the divider that it would have to get on a bus and transfer twice just to get back within eyeshot of the line. Although it's not broken in any way, Call of Cthulhu is dreary and lacking direction – less a survival horror game than an adventure in testing the limits of your attention span.

To be fair, this game really never had a chance. The Cthulhu Mythos (based on the writings of H.P. Lovecraft, August Derlith, and several writers to follow) has a devoted fanbase that will readily reject anything that doesn't live up to their expectations. Their numbers are small enough that the Cthulhu name doesn't hold a lot of sway with the gaming public. For some Cthulhu fans, this game will offer everything they want: a focus on creepy cults, locations from Lovecraft's writings, insanity, a decent atmosphere, and nasty monsters. But for far more gamers (like me), it's simply a dull, plodding affair with little innovation and graphics so ugly that it can actually be physically painful to play.

There are a few interesting ideas at play here, but they've all been done with greater success in other games – the sanity system is ripped straight from Eternal Darkness. The action is slow and unresponsive, and there is very little direction spurring you through its grainy, muddy-looking world. There is a lot of terror to be had in this game, but it's mostly due to how spectacularly this game fails to do anything fun.——**JEREMY**
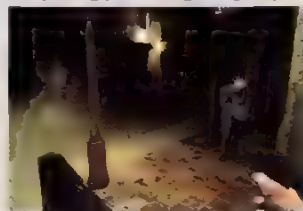
BOTTOM LINE 6

> **Concept:** A survival horror game steeped in the traditions the "Cthulhu Mythos," inspired by the writings of H.P. Lovecraft

> **Graphics:** Don't worry, no one rubbed crap on the inside of your TV set. It just looks that way

> **Sound:** Some of the ambience is creepy, but much of the voice work is so garbled you'd swear the actors had marbles in their mouths

> **Playability:** I haven't encountered something this sluggish and directionless since that dude in high school who just wouldn't get off the couch

> **Entertainment:** It's been said that laying eyes on Cthulhu will drive you mad. Same here

> **Replay Value:** Low

Second Opinion 6.5

It's true that Call of Cthulhu could very well be worse. In fact, based on the first bit, this game is mighty bad. But trudging through some seriously boring introductory levels leads to better, scarier situations where your fast-paced responses are the key to success. Don't take that as an overwhelmingly positive statement, though, as the graphics, level design, and intense frustration are real hurdles that a game this derivative just shouldn't have.——**LISA**

XBOX

Doom 3: Resurrection of Evil

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 4-PLAYER VIA XBOX LIVE OR SYSTEM LINK) > **PUBLISHER** ACTIVISION > **DEVELOPER** ID SOFTWARE/NERVE
> **RELEASE** OCTOBER 11 > **ESRB** M

DOOM REDUX

People, it seems, are pretty willing to step into Hell. I guess that explains the surprise success of Ashton Kutcher's movies. Well, going to Hell can actually be fun, as evidenced by Doom 3 and its expansion, Resurrection of Evil. Having now played through both the Xbox version of Doom 3 and RoE, I can safely say that if you liked Hell the first time, you're definitely going to want to head back. In fact, I think that I enjoyed Resurrection of Evil a little more than the original Doom 3.

At its core, RoE is pretty much more Doom 3 – it's a dark, foreboding shooter with some creepy enemies and minimal plot. The infamous flashlight is now strapped to a pistol, so you're never totally unarmed. But the most notable additions are the Grabber gun, which can throw objects (including fireballs) and the Artifact, which can slow time among other demonic powers. Coupled with some traditional boss fights, these new items actually amount to a significant change from the original game, although it takes a few hours of gameplay to realize it.

RoE is really focused on the Grabber, and practically forces you to have it in your virtual hands. This irked me at first, but after I got used to its mechanics it became no big deal. Later in the game (which is actually a decent length), it strikes a better balance of weapon usage, as you'll be slowing time with the Artifact, quickly switching to the shotgun to take out close enemies, then grabbing the plasma rifle to take out foes in the distance. It's definitely a fun, frantic shooter with some cool twists and a great mood. The multiplayer isn't much to speak of, but does offer some classic deathmatching. In short, if you liked the Xbox version of Doom 3, then you'll definitely want to head back to Hell for another visit.——**JEREMY**

BOTTOM LINE 8.5

> **Concept:** Doom 3's first expansion pack makes the leap to the Xbox

> **Graphics:** Pushes the Xbox to its limits, but the action can look a bit fuzzy at a distance

> **Sound:** Just how it should be: creepy, atmospheric, and unsettling

> **Playability:** Exactly the same as the last Xbox release, although the new weapons add a bit of depth

> **Entertainment:** If you liked visiting Hell the first time around, you simply must go back. It's lovely this time of year

> **Replay Value:** Moderately High

Second Opinion 8.25

This is just like the earlier Doom 3 Xbox release – scary, gorgeous, and some might argue a little soulless (no pun intended). Most of the mechanics are fairly transparent, making it much more of a run and gun than any sort of survival horror title, but that's okay by me. The creepiness is all consuming, the demons are enjoyably perverse, and the action is intense the whole way through. There's nothing new here, but more Doom 3 is always a good thing.——**LISA**

■ Improving the land is the key to a healthy civilization

■ Due to the fantastic interface, you'll rarely have to leave this view

PC

Sid Meier's Civilization IV

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER STRATEGY (UP TO 12-PLAYER VIA INTERNET OR LAN) > **PUBLISHER** 2K GAMES > **DEVELOPER** FIRAXIS GAMES > **RELEASE** OCTOBER 25 > **ESRB** E 10+

ONE WORLD GOVERNMENT

Ever since its inception in 1991, Sid Meier's Civilization has been the strategy franchise that everything else has to compare to. Putting the fate of an entire civilization in the hands of the player, from the Stone Age to the near future, turned out to be a great idea — especially when backed by Firaxis' incredibly tight design. Several iterations on the gameplay later, we have Civilization IV. And a brighter day has dawned for strategy fans.

This is the kind of sequel that fans hope for. Though this title retains the core feeling and design that define the franchise, the list of improvements and streamlined features could fill a fair-sized novel. Chief among them, however, is the absolutely brilliant interface. Civ IV achieves the Holy Grail of game design in this department: hidden but accessible depth, easily visible vital information, and simple menu-free control. The practical effects of this are that veteran Civ fans will be able to quickly get to all the low-level decision-making they need to make sure their empire is running at absolute peak efficiency, while newer players will be able to

easily jump in and start playing without being overwhelmed by minutiae. Considering that players have control over everything from commercial treaties and wealth allocation to scientific research and global wars, this is an impressive feat.

The new features in this sequel blend in perfectly with the core Civilization gameplay. The most important one is the Civics system. Rather than having your empire's traits determined solely on one political axis (Are you democratic, communistic, or despotic?), players can now customize their culture on five different levels (Religion, Economy, Law, etc.) much like in Sid Meier's Alpha Centauri. In Civ IV as well as its predecessors, these choices have a huge impact of how your people work, trade, and react to your foreign and domestic policies. The added level of control that the Civics system gives you is an incredibly useful tool for managing your civilization. The rest of the new features are great additions, but not nearly as groundbreaking as Civics. Primarily, they give certain less war-like styles of play a greater breadth of options in pursuing non-aggressive diplomatic and economic goals — which is fantastic

if you're not into the whole "conquer everything" mentality.

For all that my inner Civilization dork is completely thrilled with everything Firaxis has done with Civilization IV, some niggling concerns remain. Due to the balance between attack-oriented and defensive units, it's still incredibly difficult to prosecute an offensive war before the advent of gunpowder. It's also still possible to get hosed by the random distribution of necessary strategic resources like oil and aluminum. However, I really can't think of a better strategy title for genre enthusiasts and newcomers alike. Even if conquering the world from the dawn of civilization to the space race isn't your thing, you can play through a number of smaller pre-made scenarios, like Alexander's war against the Persians or the American Revolution. And thanks to the fact that the game is built from the ground up to be extensively and easily modded, owning Civilization IV is just going to get better and better as the huge Civilization community digs in and starts coming up with new things to do with the engine.—**ADAM**

■ The different AI leaders actually have distinct personalities

■ Being able to pull the camera in close is cool, if not particularly efficient

BOTTOM LINE **9.5**

> **Concept:** Mold your wandering Stone Age tribe into a world-dominating empire

> **Graphics:** Better than Civilizations past, but the true genius of the game is under the hood

> **Sound:** A shockingly fantastic epoch-appropriate soundtrack provides a great backdrop for your imperial machinations

> **Playability:** Never has a title this deep had such an elegant interface

> **Entertainment:** It's rare for a genre to have one game so clearly be the king of the hill

> **Replay Value:** High

Second Opinion **9.25**

There's an idea that has somehow developed out there that turn-based strategy needs to be complicated and difficult. Civilization IV scoffs at that notion and establishes itself as one of the smartest and most accessible games in years. There's a precarious but perfectly executed balance between giving long time, hardcore players all the options they expect, and giving beginners an easy step up throughout. A rousing score of excellent classical music and the dulcet tones of Leonard Nimoy narrating some of history's greatest proverbs give an air of sophistication and intelligence to the passage of time. The abstractions used to illustrate the developments of technology works great most of the time, even if it's a little odd that my archers can take down a machine gun squad from time to time. Overall, the sense of wonder and power as the centuries turn is tangible. If you've yet to try the turn-based strategy scene, this is the time to start, and this is the game to do it with.—**MILLER**

The new members of The Village People have met with mixed response

The Mastermind class lets you control ninjas. Ninjas!

Ah, if only more sidewalks had caltrops the world would be a more interesting place

BOTTOM LINE **8.75**

> **Concept:** Escape into supervillainy with one of the strongest MMO's on the market, joining thousands who already love the first game

> **Graphics:** Evocative and dark visuals, but they're beginning to show their age

> **Sound:** Proof positive that music can make you feel evil

> **Playability:** Like its predecessor, a simple to use interface is one of the best available for online games

> **Entertainment:** Indulge in your dark side. This is a great change of pace

> **Replay Value:** High

PC

City of Villains

> **STYLE** MASSIVELY MULTIPLAYER ONLINE ROLE-PLAYING GAME > **PUBLISHER** NCSOFT > **DEVELOPER** CRYPTIC STUDIOS
> **RELEASE** OCTOBER 31 > **ESRB** T

THE OTHER SIDE OF THE COIN

Not an expansion to the fantastic City of Heroes, City of Villains is instead a fully independent title working in tandem with the first game. So, even if you never got funky with your heroic self, don't be scared away from this new title. You ought to be able to "Mwa ha ha" with the best of them. A number of additions flesh out the experience for both games, not the least of which is the player versus player system now available between heroes and villains, as well as the base or lair building options. In the MMO world right now, there is a clear choice available to anyone who is even remotely into high fantasy gaming. But if knights and dragons aren't your thing, City of Villains (and its accompanying game) remains a fantastic alternative choice — and one that offers several features that even Blizzard's mammoth epic can't compete with.

In the same way that City of Heroes presented a world of heroic ideals, pristine statues, and bright colors, City of Villains offers the same quality on the opposite end of the spectrum. The Rogue Isles are a dismal and bleak home to the worst dregs of society. The great success of the game is how this seedy underworld's setting still feels lively and engrossing. Instead of saving hostages and halting crimes, your villain is tasked with kidnapping victims and robbing banks. It's an interesting change of pace, even if it really still comes down to the same style of gameplay as before. As you increase in infamy, you'll gain the attention of the big movers and shakers in this competitive town, and as your corruption goes deeper, you'll take on ever more complicated missions in your life of crime.

The amazing character creation system from City of Heroes returns, albeit with even more options and tweaks available to players. This is by far the most extensive character customization available in any MMO I've encountered, at least in the appearance of your villain, assuring that you'll look completely different than just about everybody else you're playing with. Thankfully, the excellent battle and skill upgrade systems have remained intact in City of Villains. You're constantly adjusting your super powers, gaining new ones, and using pick ups to boost your capabilities. From the moment you log in for the first time, it's hard not to like your character, since all the powers are so fun and exciting to use.

Unfortunately, being tied to the original game also means that the technology doesn't look as great as it might have. City of Heroes was a fine looking game at release. City of Villains, meanwhile, shows the age of the original product. It's by no means ugly, but the couple of years that have passed are

The character variety remains one of the coolest parts of this superhero franchise

definitely apparent. The other problem inherent to ties with the first game is that, other than the tone of the characters, nothing dramatic has changed about the way you play the game. The payoff, of course, is that the two games together are now an impressive collection that includes some exciting PvP possibilities, and the new game offers a sense of balance to that universe that the first game alone lacked. It's a trade-off I'm willing to live with, and City of Villains' unique vibe makes it a worthwhile contender in the increasingly crowded space of the MMO world.—**MILLER**

Second Opinion **7.75**

When City of Heroes came out, it was a great alternative to more traditional MMORPGs. No focus on loot or grinding, and an impressive array of powers – even for freshly created characters – made the game a welcome change of pace from the glacial progression of most titles in the genre. City of Villains shares these qualities, but also suffers from a few problems that City of Heroes didn't have to contend with. First, the concept isn't exactly new any more. Second, the "new" generation of MMORPGs (namely World of Warcraft and EverQuest II) are well established now, and make breaking into the genre harder than ever. Frankly, the engine used in City of Heroes/Villains just feels old at this point. Old, decrepit, and more than a little ugly. Villains isn't helped by its failure to capture a similarly enjoyable campy atmosphere, despite the subject matter. On the other hand, the game falls well short of outright sucking, so if you must be a villain, you'll surely get your money's worth.—**ADAM**

GAME BOY ADVANCE

Final Fantasy IV Advance

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ROLE-PLAYING GAME > **PUBLISHER** NINTENDO > **DEVELOPER** SQUARE ENIX
> **RELEASE** DECEMBER 12 > **ESRB** E10+

RETURN OF THE SPOONY BARD

Final Fantasy IV (FF II for SNES here in the States) was one of the defining RPGs of its generation, and is regularly cited as a favorite game by fans even today. There was and continues to be a very good reason for that. This is an absolutely phenomenal example of old-school gaming at its height – a stirring story, challenging battle mechanic, and powerful score all set the game apart. So how does it hold up against the test of time? Remarkably well, actually – so long as you're willing to go without some of the conveniences and shortcuts of more recent RPGs.

At the heart of any good RPG is the story, and shining through the primitive sprites of Final Fantasy IV comes one of the best. Themes of redemption, love, betrayal, and heroism weave in and out of the narrative to create one of the most memorable tales that has graced video game screens. This central strength of the game might be even more pronounced in this version than the original, due to some judicious dialogue tweaking and improvement. The battle system feels like an old reliable car; there's still nothing wrong with it, even if some design improvements have occurred in more recent models. Whether you like

it or not, the overly common random encounters throughout the game remain firmly in place. Perhaps the years have dimmed how frustrating it can be to walk only one step after a battle before another engulfs you. You will be reminded, and only some of you will like it. While we're talking about the battles, it should be mentioned that a noticeable slowdown is sadly apparent when too much action is occurring on screen. It's by no means a deal breaker, but still something to be aware of and is really one of the only reasons you might not want this version over the original.

On the bright side, beyond improved graphics and music, there's also some new content. A new large-scale dungeon is present, as is a bestiary, a soundtrack player, and a few new story sequences that help explain the addition of switchable party members. All in all, a good port of a fantastic game should give old players a reason to relive the magic, and newer gamers the chance to get in on the secret.—**MILLER**

BOTTOM LINE 8.75

> **Concept:** Return to one of the greatest old-school RPGs and add a couple of new twists

> **Graphics:** Better than the original, but not in any sort of dramatic way

> **Sound:** Once again, some enhanced music, but it's still really about the fond memories

> **Playability:** It may be an old favorite, but new fans shouldn't have a problem jumping right in

> **Entertainment:** A definitive genre entry that must be played by RPG faithful, but there's no major reason why this version should be your only option

> **Replay Value:** Moderately High

Second Opinion 8.5

Of the 8- and 16-bit entries in this series, Final Fantasy IV is my favorite. I love the plot twists, the battle system, and the fact that practically everyone you recruit "dies" somewhere along the way. For the most part, FF IV Advance masterfully preserves all these elements. My only complaint is that the game can't keep up in battle, lagging noticeably whenever your party exceeds three members. If you haven't played the PSone version included in Final Fantasy Chronicles, you'll thrill at the expanded combat commands and new dialogue. However, if you've already played that re-release, even the new dungeons aren't enough to warrant another purchase.—**JOE**

PSP

The Lord of the Rings: Tactics

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER STRATEGY (2-PLAYER VIA AD HOC) > **PUBLISHER** ELECTRONIC ARTS
> **DEVELOPER** AMAZE ENTERTAINMENT > **RELEASE** NOVEMBER 8 > **ESRB** T
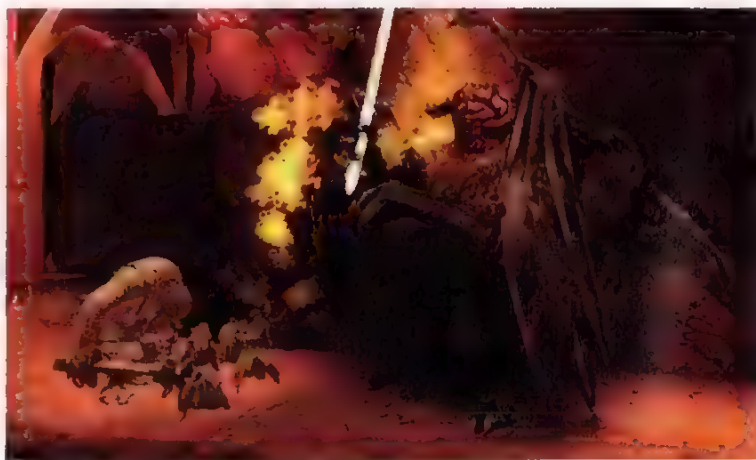
LIKE PICKETT'S CHARGE

EA has proven to be a wise tactician in expanding the use of The Lord of the Rings license away from action titles, whether that means the Battle for Middle-earth series or the console RPG The Third Age. Unfortunately, it has made a grave strategic error in handing this game to developer Amaze, who was responsible for Samurai Jack – a game that made little kids cry. Lacking the foundation of gameplay to offer the kind of choices that strategy fans have grown accustomed to, LOTR: Tactics is a disappointment.

Most grid-based strategy titles use movement to elicit tactical decisions from the player on the battlefield chessboard. Instead, this game mires the player in movement and combat systems that restrict your imagination. Although it's natural that you get locked into a fight with adjacent enemies, the combat system is fairly slow-going, meaning that executing some sort of strategic vision on the board is next to impossible when you're

spending so much time slugging it out in turn after turn of combat. Combine this with the often poor unit placement (which is done for you) on maps which contain too many natural choke points, and about the only strategy I could muster was having my units close enough together to have them all gang up on one unit at a time. Ideas I had of getting damage rewards for attacks from behind, for example, are ignored in a basic combat system that doesn't go much beyond terrain bonuses.

Needless to say, EA has blessed this game with great production values, including everything from loops of Howard Shore's Oscar-winning score to movie clips. Unfortunately, when it comes to combat – even in the multiplayer ad hoc sessions – my excitement quickly evaporated when I was faced with minimal investment options in my characters and the prospect of having to hunker down and endure the grind of this shallow tactics title.—**KATO**

Tactics doesn't work any better when used as a line dancing instructional video

BOTTOM LINE 6.75

> **Concept:** Less like the One Ring that binds all strategy games, and more like a Cracker Jack prize

> **Graphics:** Although some of the spell effects are a little limited, the graphics are pretty good

> **Sound:** Features the movies' score and enough sound effects to make this an effective portion of the game

> **Playability:** Player movement – a key component to any grid-based strategy title – is too restricted

> **Entertainment:** If this game didn't get in its own way so much, it would be a lot more fun than it is

> **Replay Value:** Moderate

Second Opinion 6.25

Anyone who has seen The Lord of the Rings films (or read Tolkien's hackneyed novelizations) knows that Aragorn can mow down Uruk-hai like nobody's business, and that Lurtz owns Boromir. As such, commanding these heroes in battle should be a thrilling experience, but thanks to its unbalanced and constricting tactical gameplay, LOTR Tactics is about as much fun as tongue-kissing the Nazgûl. The movement of your army, from the lowliest peon to the Lord of Barad-dûr, is crippled by the Zone of Control system that prevents any constructive strategy, and the advancement of your heroes is largely useless since you never know when you'll be allowed to use them next. Sure, it looks better than most tactics games – but then again, most tactics games also manage to be fun.—**JOE**

PSP
Tokobot

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION > **PUBLISHER** TECMO > **DEVELOPER** TECMO > **RELEASE** DECEMBER 6 > **ESRB** E

TINY ROBOT IN MY HAND

t pleases me to no end that the PSP has begun to receive quirky and intelligent titles like Tokobot. Though not without its frustrations, at the end of the day the game is a great addition to the PSP library, if for no other reason than it offers something you simply aren't going to get from a lot of other games right now: a surprise.

As a general rule of thumb, transforming robots are cool. Don't argue with me now, I know what I'm talking about. Plus, if you disagree with the above statement, you're probably reading the wrong magazine anyway. Regardless, Tokobot offers that particular variety of coolness in spades. Your trailing group of acquiescent little robo-friends is constantly gaining new ways to join together with each other. Many of these formations simply allow for spins and throws as they hold hands in a particular formation. Others are full-fledged new forms, where for a time your companions form together into some contraption or another. The samurai sword wielding form is a particular favorite, but you also see a crane, a cannon, and even a train that lets you speed through some mine cart-style levels. It's all pretty straightforward, and few of the puzzles will have you really

struggling, but the frequent new ideas within the game make for a good time.

I was disappointed to find a couple of very basic gameplay flaws that mar the fun of the game. The most noticeable are the poorly placed continue points. If you die on a tricky fight, you're often forced to reload a good distance back to trudge through a bunch of repetitive platform puzzles for no discernible reason. Another problem is the fact that several of your transformations use up collectible parts, and these run out way too quickly, which can leave you in a lurch at a crucial moment. Those times almost necessitate a total level restart, and since when has that been any fun? Finally, the whole game's pace is a little bit slow – I wouldn't mind if our little hero could take some running lessons and speed his butt up from time to time.

Even with these relatively minor complaints, I found Tokobot to be strongly reminiscent in tone to my favorite old-school platform games, with simple and fun characters and a no-nonsense approach to gameplay. I'd love to see some kinks ironed out, and even a major console release wouldn't be a bad idea for this burgeoning new franchise.—**MILLER**

BOTTOM LINE **8.25**

> **Concept:** Guide a troupe of miniature robots through puzzles, combat, and an array of transformations

> **Graphics:** Bright inviting visuals look great on the PSP

> **Sound:** A surprisingly fun soundtrack had me bopping my head up and down in an appropriately stupid way

> **Playability:** More frustrating than I expected, but controls are well mapped and intuitive

> **Entertainment:** A novel concept and a style all its own make this a PSP offering you should definitely check out

> **Replay Value:** Moderate

Second Opinion 7.75

Anyone who doesn't instantly fall in love with the cute little Tokobot characters obviously has a heart made of campfire ash and Yanni records. However, as cute and cuddly as this game is, the actual gameplay isn't as lovable. There are tons of really creative ideas at play here, but the pacing is a little slow, the camera is slightly problematic, and the game does a poor job of directing you to your next objective. But I'm willing to overlook these flaws, as Tokobot is exactly what the PSP needs: an original title with a lot of personality built specifically for the system. Plus, there's room to improve with the sequel!—**JEREMY**

Puzzles are simple but almost always clever

PSP
SOCOM U.S. Navy SEALs: Fireteam Bravo

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 16-PLAYER VIA INFRASTRUCTURE OR AD HOC)
> **PUBLISHER** SONY COMPUTER ENTERTAINMENT AMERICA > **DEVELOPER** ZIPPER INTERACTIVE
> **RELEASE** NOVEMBER 8 > **ESRB** M

IS THAT A SEAL IN YOUR POCKET?

've said it a billion times, and I'll say it again: Single-player is broken and boring in this as in all SOCOM games. Some people like it despite its glaring, hideous flaws, and more power to them; however, that doesn't change the fact that it's objectively terrible with its wretched AI and bland objectives. But, once again, the online multiplayer is the entire point of SOCOM, and Fireteam Bravo is no different.

Like its console counterpart, this release gets by solely on the fact that it's the only game in town. Right now, there's simply no other way to frag online on PSP, and for that reason alone this serves a purpose. The community features – rankings, stat tracking, clan support, etc. – are nice, and getting connected and into a game is very easy, but the gameplay still can't get past some basic control flaws.

The wretchedly imprecise analog nub on the PSP prevents any sort of precision in aiming and movement. To combat this, a Metroid Prime-esque lock-on feature was implemented, and while it works better than other PSP shooters, it also removes much of the skill from combat. The fact that the camera automatically aligns itself to whatever plane you're standing on – meaning that every time you move onto a hill or anything your view jumps around – is incredibly frustrating.

So, just to reiterate: Don't buy this for the single-player campaign. It's awful. The only reasonable use for Fireteam Bravo is to go online and shoot other players on the PSP. But, since the experience is a good decade or more behind what you can get on the Xbox, 360, or PC, consider carefully before dropping your dollars on this —**ADAM**

BOTTOM LINE **7**

> **Concept:** Fit SOCOM onto the PSP with mixed results

> **Graphics:** Character models are nice-looking and detailed, but the environments are drab and dull

> **Sound:** The inclusion of voicechat for online play is the only thing worth mentioning here

> **Playability:** This hacked-up adaptation of Metroid Prime controls just ends up being a mess

> **Entertainment:** Online multiplayer shootouts on the PSP are cool by default, and this manages to just meet that minimum bar

> **Replay Value:** Moderate

Second Opinion 7.75

I found playing through Fireteam Bravo's campaign mode about as exciting as watching a slug race, as it features all the shortcomings that you'd expect from a shooter on PSP. The lock-on feature simply kills any challenge, and the fact that all your enemies came to the battlefield on the short bus doesn't help. Fortunately, multiplayer is a little livelier. Although there is still no skill required, the battles are fast-paced and chaotic, with a surprisingly stable online environment. I wasn't a big fan of SOCOM 3, and Fireteam Bravo is a pretty similar experience. But considering how well this handheld version emulates its console brother, I can safely say that Fireteam Bravo is going to be a no-brainer for fans —**JEREMY**

PSP

Kingdom of Paradise

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION/RPG (2-PLAYER VIA AD HOC)
> **PUBLISHER** SONY COMPUTER ENTERTAINMENT > **DEVELOPER** CLIMAX
ENTERTAINMENT > **RELEASE** NOVEMBER 15 > **ESRB** T

DOES THIS MAKE ME LOOK FAT?

Forcing people to wear clothes that don't fit them just results in an awkward experience for everyone involved. With some fun gameplay and an engaging battle system, Kingdom of Paradise might have been a great action game. Instead, it tries to shimmy and squeeze into a too-tight action/RPG outfit that dilutes its strong points with exploration that extends a story so weak it couldn't even hold the most generic hack n' slash together.

Much of your time is spent walking to places you don't care about, and you care even less what happens once you get there. Fortunately, along the way you are frequently ambushed and forced to fight, which is where Kingdom of Paradise truly shines. Mixing magic, skills, and customizable combo strings, every second that you are slashing through hordes of faceless warriors is a second well spent. Collecting new moves is oddly addictive, and the sheer number of possible combos keeps you looking forward to the next battle.

Even with steady excitement in the action department, Kingdom of Paradise just can't sustain itself long enough to crest over average. Like a pair of pants that make your butt look big, the tedious exploration and flimsy story just highlight too many unflattering curves to make the adventure truly worthwhile.—**JOE**

BOTTOM LINE **6.75**

> **Concept:** Too much RPG, not enough action

> **Graphics:** Flashy spell effects and great close-up models for [illegible]

> **Sound:** A lot of voice acting, but its quality is suspect I winced every time anyone opened their fat mouth

> **Playability:** Buttons do different things when they are held versus pressed, but you get the hang of it quickly

> **Entertainment:** It's fun when you're fighting, and agonizing when you aren't. The game doesn't provide enough direction to keep you from wanting to punch it

> **Replay Value:** Moderate

Second Opinion 6.25

At no point during the paper-thin plot of Kingdom of Paradise did I become engaged in the story or setting. With a combat system that is too slow and clunky to be exciting, and RPG elements that were too convoluted or uninteresting to draw my attention, the only thing to distract me was the occasional pretty background or scripted dialogue event. But even these began to smack of repetition after a while. Simplistic button masher or RPG-lite? You decide, but either way, this one wasn't for me.—**MILLER**

■ You have an AI companion for many fights, but she's essentially useless

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PSP

UNLIMITED ENABLED

Infected

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 8-PLAYER VIA INFRASTRUCTURE OR AD
HOC) > **PUBLISHER** MAJESCO > **DEVELOPER** PLANET MOON STUDIOS
> **RELEASE** NOVEMBER 15 > **ESRB** M

PSP'S KILLER VIRUS

A zombie is a zombie, and there's no time to discriminate when chopping and shooting everything in your sight. Infected isn't a complicated game, but it makes great use of what it's got to make itself more than your standard splatter-fest.

Not only do you have to kill zombies twice (you weaken them with a regular weapon, and then blow them up with your bio-gun), but since you don't get health packs for single kills, the game is all about chaining them so you can include as many enemies as possible in one big bang. It does a great job of rewarding your carnage and spurring you on. Its only combat hiccups are that switching targets and bringing up your map are both assigned to the same button, and the game has a hard time handling close-quarters fights.

As absorbingly mindless as all this sounds, Infected also does an excellent job in other areas to give the game that little extra something. It's rife with humor, and the online play does an excellent job of using its core mechanics to keep even boring deathmatches fresh. Also, being able to infect people with your avatar virus and check its progress online is brilliant.

Christmas is supposed to be a festive time, so why not paint the town red?—**KATO**

BOTTOM LINE **8.25**

> **Concept:** Anyone who tells you zombies have feelings is a liar. Kill all in sight with extreme prejudice!

> **Graphics:** No shade of red was spared. Chunks fly, and the environments aren't half bad either

> **Sound:** The generic anger-over-guitars soundtrack is boring, but it fits the carnage

> **Playability:** Double-mapping the change target button with the map button was a huge mistake

> **Entertainment:** A simple premise that is maximized very well for your slicing and dicing pleasure

> **Replay Value:** Moderately High

Second Opinion 8.5

Hats off to Planet Moon Studios. Not only has it created one of the best action games for the PSP yet, it's done it with style and humor. The combo system is the perfect way to tackle shooting on the system, the cutscenes and voiceovers between missions are hilarious, and the multiplayer is some of the best on the system. I didn't put this game down until I had blasted through the entire campaign, and I'll definitely be putting in my time online, spreading my virus to the world. Infected has quickly become one of my favorite new games for PSP.—**JEREMY**
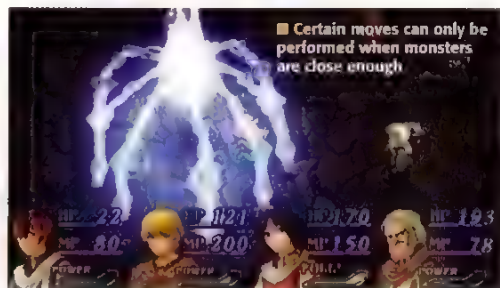
PSP

The Legend of Heroes

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ROLE-PLAYING GAME > **PUBLISHER** BANDAI
> **DEVELOPER** FALCOM > **RELEASE** NOVEMBER 15 > **ESRB** T

STORY OF PROTAGONISTS

Seemingly unrelated metaphor, reference to game in question -- witty remark that ties the two together. That's one possible way to begin a game review. However, simply plugging components into a template doesn't inspire the most exciting results, and eventually just ends up boring everyone with predictability and lack of creativity. For example, The Legend of Heroes.

This title tries to bring old-school RPG charm to the PSP with a paint-by-numbers story and bare-bones approach to combat. The events follow a young orphan named Avin and his childhood friend Mile (who has a total boy-crush on Avin) as they set out on some ambiguous journey. Eventually they hope to find Avin's sister, but they pursue that goal with the hazy determination of a four-year old who wants to be an astronaut samurai someday.

The Legend of Heroes had potential to capture classic RPG allure, but instead it just feels dated. The game isn't unplayable, but the generic battles (complete with a pointless proximity system) and tired story will just grate on your nerves. I can't see the point in playing a boring retro-wannabe when there are plenty of good games that are *actually retro* and don't use "old-school" as an excuse for lack of originality.—**JOE**

BOTTOM LINE **6**

> **Concept:** Heroes and their legend collide with mediocrity!

> **Graphics:** The lens flare, though overused, adds a nice effect to the otherwise basic environments

> **Sound:** No voice acting and a gas station bargain bin soundtrack

> **Playability:** If you use the d-pad instead of the nub, you should be okay. Also, interacting with objects and NPCs is way too touchy

> **Entertainment:** It's distracting, but I wouldn't go so far as to call it fun

> **Replay Value:** Moderately Low

Second Opinion 6.25

From the characters to the story, this RPG elicits no feelings other than déjà vu, and does that only in a perversely laughable, dull way. The sad thing is that the game's graphics, exploration, and menus are presented beautifully, but the title as a whole still manages to be the dreck that gives RPGs a bad name. I'd love to recommend another RPG besides the charming PoPoLoCrois to other PSP gamers like myself who are looking for a good handheld genre title, but I just can't do it in good conscience with Heroes.—**LISA**

■ The art is cool, but most of the characters themselves fall under the "moron" category

Bernard
You fools.
Do you think a monster cart carrying three people can run faster than mine?

HANDHELD QUICKIES

Snowboard Kids DS

BOTTOM LINE 6

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION/SPORTS (UP TO 4-PLAYER VIA WIRELESS) > PUBLISHER ATLUS > DEVELOPER ATLUS
> RELEASE NOVEMBER 22 > ESRB E

NINTENDO DS

Snowboard Kids was a bit of a cult classic on the Nintendo 64, so I guess it's natural it would make an appearance as a DS title. This all-new game adds some wireless multiplayer and keeps the usual power-up laden snowboarding action of the series, but all it really manages to accomplish is showing us how far action/sports has progressed as a genre since the mid-'90s. Although it moves fairly fast and smooth for the DS, so much of the action feels stiff and archaic. Also, although I love power-ups in kart racing, here they serve only to frustrate – it's annoying to be on the verge of a huge jump, ready to trick out, only to get knocked on your ass. I do really like the unique way the game uses the touch screen for special moves, but that doesn't make up for the general sense of mediocrity that pervades Snowboard Kids.—**MATT**

Zoo Tycoon DS

BOTTOM LINE 6

> STYLE 1-PLAYER STRATEGY > PUBLISHER THQ > DEVELOPER ALTRON > RELEASE OCTOBER 11 > ESRB E

NINTENDO DS
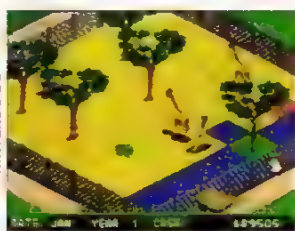
Color me abominable if you wish, but the voices inside my head insisted that I place a giraffe in my lion cage. As it turns out, the game won't let players combine two different types of animals in the same habitat. My dreams of "Pet A Wild And Starved Cheetah Day" also fell apart as animals cannot freely roam around your zoo. As you can see, many of the standout qualities from the PC version are not featured in this game. Similar to throwing a polar bear a chicken nugget, the content that is offered in this DS port is not nearly enough to sate the appetites of gamers. The touch screen certainly makes park design a breeze, but no matter how much work you put into your zoo, it ends up being about as much fun as giving an elephant a suppository.—**REINER**

Sonic Rush

BOTTOM LINE 7

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION (2-PLAYER VIA WIRELESS) > PUBLISHER SEGA > DEVELOPER SONIC TEAM
> RELEASE NOVEMBER 15 > ESRB E

NINTENDO DS
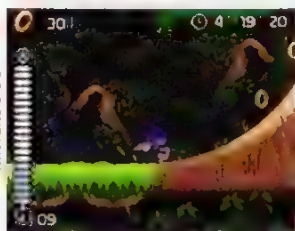
These days it seems that to be considered a successful Sonic game, all a title needs to do is not be a writhing abomination of broken controls and stagnant gameplay. In that sense, I guess Sonic Rush is a success. As either Sonic or Blaze the Cat, you play through seven zones (but in a different order for each character. Is that supposed to add replay value?), careen off of bumpers, and generally zip all over the place in classic form. The fact that the game is on the DS barely comes into the equation; the verticality of the two screens is pointless since you're usually barreling forward (not upward), and the touch screen is hardly used at all. The great level deigns provide frantic fun, but despite my many fond memories of Sonic, it's difficult to heap praise on a game that makes me feel like I'm still playing the Sega Genesis. Then again, for Sonic fans, that's a dream come true.—**JOE**

Star Wars: Battlefront II

BOTTOM LINE 7

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 4-PLAYER VIA AD HOC) > PUBLISHER LUCASARTS > DEVELOPER PANDEMIC
> RELEASE NOVEMBER 1 > ESRB T

PSP
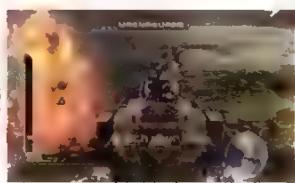
Battlefront II for the PSP boasts a lot of ways to control your Star Wars experience, whether it be co-op battles over ad hoc wireless, the chance to down Gungans as Boba Fett, or control Jedi over a variety of maps. Ironically, the one thing that taints the experience is the controls. Although it gives you four ways to configure them, none of the options made me feel really comfortable. And for an action game like this, if you don't like the controls, you aren't gonna get your kills. This Battlefront II doesn't have the driving story of the console version, but it does give you the predominant experience – including the not super-fun space battles. There is a certain charm to this game, but it's basically a big Jedi mind trick.—**KATO**

Need For Speed: Most Wanted 5-1-0

BOTTOM LINE 7.25

> STYLE 1-PLAYER RACING (2-PLAYER VIA INFRASTRUCTURE OR UP TO 4-PLAYER VIA AD HOC)
> PUBLISHER ELECTRONIC ARTS > DEVELOPER EA CANADA > RELEASE NOVEMBER 22 > ESRB T

PSP
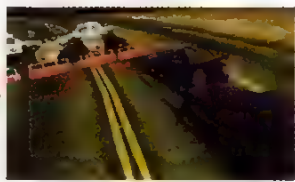
Racing is a staple of any handheld's offerings. The PSP has been well-supported in that regard, and Most Wanted's PSP entry doesn't do anything to rise above the already excellent competition, and does a few things to make it fall below. While the sense of speed is portrayed admirably and the car customization strikes a great balance between depth and fun, the cop pursuits that make the console version so unique and compelling are just non-events at best and aggravating at worst in this edition. Many races have you driving alone once you take the lead with only text to keep you apprised of the other racers' misadventures. It just fails to capture the urgency of the console versions to a degree that I wish they'd left the cop angle out entirely.—**LISA**

GAME BOY ADVANCE

Dr. Mario and Puzzle League

> STYLE 1 OR 2-PLAYER PUZZLE > PUBLISHER NINTENDO
> DEVELOPER NINTENDO > RELEASE DECEMBER 5 > ESRB E

UNFAIR TO FANS

I'm not quite sick of Nintendo's incessant re-releases of my favorite games. In fact, I liked the trend until this budget-friendly, but feature-lacking, double pack. Dr. Mario and Puzzle League is an unfair release to fans of these classic mindbenders. Less than a year ago the good doctor's game hit shelves with wireless multiplayer support and, I don't mean to speak for everyone, but Puzzle League could have never come back to retail and I would have been okay with that.

The Dr. Mario included here is, admittedly, different than the aforementioned classic series version. Whereas that release lets you play two players with one cart over wireless, this one makes you use a link cable. Oh yeah, and the N64's Flash mode, in which your only required task is to off the blinking viruses, is also along for the ride.

Puzzle League is a similarly old release. Originally brought stateside as Tetris Attack and then modified slightly to become Pokémon Puzzle League, this game has players lining up like blocks as new pieces are pushed up from the bottom. Sure, it's fun, but man, it's ugly.

And yet, it's not like either of these games aren't a good time. They're both classic and well-done puzzle titles, ripe with hours of increasingly difficult strategy to master. But, there is absolutely no reason for this double-pack to exist. Tetris Attack is readily available in a compatible format through multiple outlets and Dr. Mario has a handful of better versions already on shelves.—**LISA**

BOTTOM LINE 7.5

> **Concept:** Port two lovable, classic puzzlers in an entirely half-assed way

> **Graphics:** These are old puzzle games with practically non-existent updates, proving the idiom that you get what you pay for

> **Sound:** The Fever track on Dr. Mario still makes me very happy, but that's just nostalgia talking

> **Playability:** A minute to learn, a lifetime to master

> **Entertainment:** If there weren't such a better version of Dr. Mario available, I'd be recommending this much more forcefully

> **Replay Value:** Moderate

Second Opinion 9

These are perhaps two of my all-time favorite puzzle games. In fact, both these games would make my own personal 100 greatest games of all time list. They are that good, and that timeless. Nintendo apparently agrees with me, as they are repackaged here for the umpteenth time. While neither game is all that great to look at, both offer hours upon hours of entertainment. I'll have to disagree with Lisa on Puzzle League. It rocks, and getting it without annoying Pokémon involved is a bonus in my book.—**ANDY**
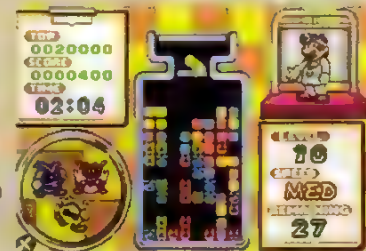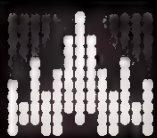
CHARTS

TOP 20

Listings Based Upon NPD Data For October 2005 Based On Units Sold

1 SOCOM 3: U.S. NAVY SEALS (PS2)

You know what jokes never get old? The ones about SEALs being actual seals. You know, balancing balls on their noses, clapping their fins like big, dumb...clapping things. We wish we were clever enough to make cracks like that. Solid gold.

2 NBA LIVE 06 (PS2)

Second place? That's just not good enough, NBA Live. If you want to take the number one spot, you need to take Teen Wolf off the bench. Thanks to a loophole in the league rules that doesn't explicitly prohibit man-wolves from playing ball, you could have Teen Wolf out there scoring like crazy. Plus, that guy can *totally* bite through a beer can!

3 MADDEN NFL 06 (PS2)

If the NBA gets Teen Wolf, then the NFL should get the Gill Man from *Creature from the Black Lagoon*. Of course, that would mean that several games each season would need to be played underwater. There you go, EA – a new feature for next year!

4 GRAND THEFT AUTO: LIBERTY CITY STORIES (PSP)

We never thought that the vast cities of Grand Theft Auto could be made portable, but now that the impossible has happened, we wonder what other "impossibilities" will be made realities? Socks woven from pure disappointment? Mountain goats as chauffeurs? Potatoes that mash people? The mind boggles.

5 DRAGON BALL Z: BUDOKAI TENKAICHI (PS2)
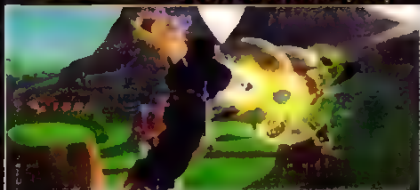
How to go Super Saiyan: The most important part of any Super Saiyan is pointless shouting and yellow hair. Since this is the dream of every Dragon Ball Z fan, you could do a great service by getting into a yelling match with them before smooshing bananas into their hair. They'll thank you for it.

Rank	Title	L. Mo.	System	Score	Release	Price
1	SOCOM 3: U.S. Navy SEALs	N/A	PS2	7.75	10-05	$49
2	NBA Live 06	2	PS2	7.5	09.05	$49
3	Madden NFL 06	1	PS2	9	08.05	$47
4	Grand Theft Auto: Liberty City Stories	N/A	PSP	9.25	10-05	$50
5	Dragon Ball Z: Budokai Tenkaichi	N/A	PS2	N/A	10-05	$49
6	Pokémon XD: Gale of Darkness	N/A	GC	5.75	09-05	$48
7	FIFA Soccer 06	N/A	PS2	8	10-05	$49
8	Sly 3: Honor Among Thieves	N/A	PS2	7.25	09-05	$39
9	The Warriors	N/A	PS2	8.25	10-05	$49
10	Shadow of the Colossus	N/A	PS2	8.75	10-05	$39
11	Tony Hawk's American Wasteland	N/A	PS2	8.25	10-05	$48
12	Soul Calibur III	N/A	PS2	9	10-05	$49
13	Far Cry Instincts	N/A	XBOX	8.75	09-05	$47
14	Castlevania: Dawn of Sorrow	N/A	DS	9.25	10-05	$35
15	NBA Live 06	11	XBOX	7.5	09-05	$49
16	Blitz: The League	N/A	PS2	7.75	10-05	$39
17	Tiger Woods PGA Tour 06	7	PS2	8.25	09-05	$49
18	Ultimate Spider-Man	N/A	PS2	8	09-05	$47
19	Madden NFL 06	4	XBOX	9	08-05	$47
20	Mortal Kombat: Shaolin Monks	N/A	PS2	8.5	09-05	$48

Source: The NPD Group/NPD Funworld®/TRSTS® • David Riley 516-625-2277

TOP 10 JAPAN

Rank	Title	System
1	Mario Party 7	GC
2	Shinobido Imashime	PS2
3	Daredemo Asobi Taizen	DS
4	Daito Giken Pachislot Simulator	PS2
5	NBA Live 06	PS2
6	DS Training for Adults: Work Your Brain	DS
7	Tamagotchi No PuchiPuchi Omisecchi	DS
8	Yawaraka Atamajuku	DS
9	Beatdown: Fists of Vengeance	PS2
10	Super Princess Peach	DS
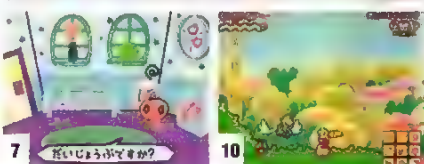
TOP 10 GI

Rank	Title	L. Mo.	System
1	Prince of Persia: The Two Thrones	N/A	Multi
2	Sid Meier's Civilization IV	N/A	PC
3	Call of Duty	1	Multi
4	True Crime: New York City	N/A	Multi
5	NBA 2K6	N/A	360
6	Grand Theft Auto: Liberty City Stories	2	PSP
7	Need for Speed: Most Wanted	N/A	360
8	Peter Jackson's King Kong	N/A	Multi
9	Final Fantasy IV Advance	N/A	GBA
10	Castlevania: Dawn of Sorrow	4	DS
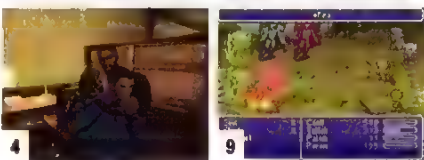
The Staff's Favorite Picks

TOP 10 PC

Rank	Title	L. Mo.	Price
1	Star Wars Battlefront II	N/A	$48
2	Sid Meier's Civilization IV	N/A	$49
3	Age of Empires III	N/A	$49
4	Call of Duty 2	N/A	$49
5	City of Villains	N/A	$48
6	The Sims 2 Nightlife	1	$32
7	The Sims 2	8	$40
8	World of Warcraft	2	$49
9	Civilization IV: Special Edition	N/A	$49
10	Call of Duty 2: Special Edition	N/A	$59

Based On Monthly Units Sold

XBOX 360

Title	Score	Date
Amped 3	8.5	Dec-05
Call of Duty 2	9.75	Dec-05
Condemned: Criminal Origins	8.75	Dec-05

Call of Duty 2 – Xbox 360 – Dec-05 — 9.75

Title	Score	Date
FIFA 06	8.25	Dec-05
Gun	8.75	Dec-05
NBA Live 06	6.75	Dec-05
Tony Hawk's American Wasteland	8.25	Dec-05

PLAYSTATION 2

Title	Score	Date
187 Ride or Die	6.5	Oct-05
Arc the Lad: End of Darkness	5.5	Jul-05
Area 51	8.5	May-05
Armored Core: Nine Breaker	6	Sep-05
Atelier Iris: Eternal Mana	8.25	Jun-05
Batman Begins	7.25	Aug-05
Battlefield 2: Modern Combat	7.5	Nov-05
Beatdown: Fists of Vengeance	5	Sep-05
Big Mutha Truckers 2: Truck Me Harder!	6.75	Oct-05
Blitz: The League	7.75	Nov-05
Brothers in Arms: Road to Hill 30	8.5	Apr-05
Burnout Revenge	9.25	Oct-05
Capcom Classic Collection	8.5	Nov-05
Castlevania: Curse of Darkness	7.5	Nov-05
Charlie and the Chocolate Factory	4.5	Sep-05
Chicken Little	7	Nov-05
Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe, The	6.5	Dec-05
Cold Fear	6.75	May-05
Cold Winter	8.25	Jun-05
Colosseum: Road to Freedom	7.25	Jul-05
Conflict: Global Terror	6.75	Nov-05
Constantine	6.5	Apr-05
Dance Dance Revolution Extreme 2	7.5	Nov-05
Darkwatch	8.5	Sep-05
Dead to Rights 2: Hell to Pay	5	Apr-05
Delta Force: Black Hawk Down	6.75	Oct-05
Destroy All Humans	8	Jul-05
Devil Kings	6.5	Nov-05
Dragon Ball Z: Sagas	5	Jun-05
Dragon Quest VIII: Journey of the Cursed King	8.75	Dec-05
Drive to Survive	7	May-05
Dynasty Warriors 5	7	May-05
Dynasty Warriors 5 Xtreme Legends	6.75	Dec-05
Enthusia: Professional Racing	8	Jun-05
Evil Dead: Regeneration	6	Nov-05
EyeToy: Kinetic	8	Nov-05
EyeToy: Operation Spy	6	Sep-05
EyeToy: Play 2	8.5	Sep-05
Fantastic Four	6.5	Sep-05
Fatal Frame III: The Tormented	7.75	Dec-05
FIFA Soccer 06	8	Oct-05
FIFA Street	6.5	Apr-05
FlatOut	6.5	Aug-05
Flipnic: Ultimate Pinball	6	Jul-05
From Russia With Love	7.75	Dec-05
Fullmetal Alchemist 2: Curse of the Crimson Elixir	6	Jul-05
Genji: Dawn of the Samurai	8.5	Oct-05
God of War	10	Apr-05
Graffiti Kingdom	6	Sep-05
Gretzky NHL '06	7	Nov-05
Guitar Hero	8.5	Dec-05
Gun	8.75	Dec-05
Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire	6.5	Dec-05
Haunting Ground	4.75	May-05
Heroes of the Pacific	8.75	Oct-05
Incredible Hulk: Ultimate Destruction, The	8.25	Sep-05
Indigo Prophecy	8.25	Oct-05
Jak X: Combat Racing	7.75	Nov-05
Juiced	7.5	Jul-05
Karaoke Revolution Party	8.5	Sep-05
Killer 7	7.5	Sep-05
L.A. Rush	6.25	Dec-05
Legend of Kay	6.5	Oct-05
LEGO Star Wars	7.5	May-05
Madagascar	7	Aug-05
Madden NFL 06	9	Sep-05
Magna Carta: Tears of Blood	8.25	Dec-05
Makai Kingdom: Chronicles of the Sacred Tome	8	Aug-05
Marvel Nemesis: Rise of the Imperfects	7	Nov-05
Matrix: Path of Neo, The	7.25	Dec-05
Medal of Honor: European Assault	7.75	Jul-05
Metal Slug 4 & 5	8	Aug-05
Midnight Club 3: DUB Edition	9.5	May-05
Midway Arcade Treasures 3	8.25	Oct-05
MLB 2006	8.25	Apr-05
Mobile Suit Gundam: Gundam vs. Zeta Gundam	6	Aug-05
Mortal Kombat: Shaolin Monks	8	Nov-05
MX vs. ATV Unleashed	8	Apr-05
Namco Museum: 50th Anniversary Arcade Collection	8	Oct-05
NARC	4.5	May-05
NASCAR 06: Total Team Control	8.25	Nov-05
NBA 2K6	8.5	Nov-05
NCAA Football 06	8.5	Aug-05
NCAA March Madness 2006	7	Nov-05
Need for Speed: Most Wanted	8.5	Dec-05
NHL 06	7	Sep-05
Nightmare Before Christmas: Oogie's Revenge, The	5	Nov-05
Obscure	6	Jun-05
Outlaw Tennis	6.5	Sep-05
Playboy: The Mansion	6.5	Apr-05
Predator: Concrete Jungle	2.75	Jun-05
Project Snowblind	8.25	Apr-05
Psychonauts	8.5	Aug-05
Radiata Stories	9.25	Oct-05
Rainbow Six: Lockdown	7.5	Nov-05
Ratchet: Deadlocked	9	Nov-05
Red Ninja: End of Honor	3.75	May-05
Resident Evil 4	10	Mar-05
Resident Evil Outbreak File #2	7.5	May-05
Rise of the Kasai	7	May-05
Romance of the Three Kingdoms X	7.5	Jul-05
Romancing SaGa	5	Apr-05
RPG Maker 3	6.5	Aug-05
Samurai Western	6	
Sega Classics Collection	6.5	
Shadow of the Colossus	8.75	Oct-05
Shin Megami Tensei: Digital Devil Saga	7	Apr-05
Shin Megami Tensei: Digital Devil Saga 2	6.25	Nov-05
Sims 2, The	7.75	Nov-05
S.L.A.I.	5.5	
Sly 3: Honor Among Thieves	7.25	Oct-05
Sniper Elite	7.5	Nov-05
SOCOM 3: U.S. Navy SEALs	7.75	Nov-05
Soul Calibur III	9	Dec-05
Spartan: Total Warrior	7.75	Oct-05
Splinter Cell: Chaos Theory	9.25	May-05
SSX On Tour	8	Nov-05
Star Wars: Battlefront II	8.5	Dec-05
Star Wars Episode III: Revenge of the Sith	5.75	Jul-05
Stella Deus: The Gate of Eternity	7.5	May-05
Stolen	6.5	Jun-05
Suffering: Ties That Bind, The	8.5	Oct-05
Suikoden Tactics	6.75	Dec-05
Super Monkey Ball Deluxe	8	Apr-05
Tak: The Great Juju Challenge	7	Oct-05
Tekken 5	8.75	Apr-05
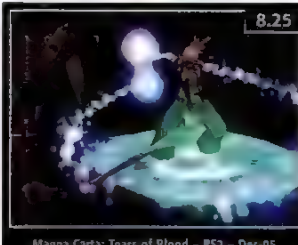
Magna Carta: Tears of Blood – PS2 – Dec-05 — 8.25

Title	Score	Date
Tiger Woods PGA Tour 06	8.25	Nov-05
TimeSplitters Future Perfect	9	Apr-05
Tony Hawk's American Wasteland	8.25	Nov-05
Top Spin	8.75	Nov-05
Trapt	6.75	Oct-05
Ultimate Spider-Man	8	Oct-05
Urban Reign	6.5	
Wallace & Gromit: Curse of the Were-Rabbit	7	Nov-05
Warriors, The	8.25	Nov-05
We Love Katamari	8.5	Oct-05
Without Warning	6.5	Nov-05
World Tour Soccer 2006	6	Apr-05
Worms: Forts Under Siege	5.75	Apr-05
WWE Smackdown Vs. Raw 2006	8.75	Nov-05
X-Men Legends II: Rise of Apocalypse	9	Nov-05

GAMECUBE

Title	Score	Date
Batman Begins	7.25	Aug-05
Battalion Wars	5.5	Nov-05
Charlie and the Chocolate Factory	4.5	Sep-05
Chicken Little	7	Nov-05
Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe, The	6.5	Dec-05
Donkey Kong Jungle Beat	7.5	Apr-05
Dragon Ball Z: Sagas	5	Jun-05
Fantastic Four	6.5	Sep-05
FIFA Soccer 06	8	Oct-05
FIFA Street	6.5	Apr-05
Fire Emblem: Path of Radiance	9	Nov-05
From Russia With Love	7.75	Dec-05
Geist	6	Sep-05
Gun	8.75	Dec-05
Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire	6.5	Dec-05
Harvest Moon: Another Wonderful Life	7.75	Oct-05
Incredible Hulk: Ultimate Destruction, The	8.25	Sep-05
Karaoke Revolution Party	8.5	Sep-05
Killer 7	7.5	Jul-05
Madagascar	7	Aug-05
Madden NFL 06	9	Sep-05
Mario Party 7	5	Apr-05
Mario Superstar Baseball	7	Aug-05
Marvel Nemesis: Rise of the Imperfects	7	Nov-05
Midway Arcade Treasures 3	8.25	Oct-05
Mortal Kombat: Deception	8.5	Apr-05
Namco Museum: 50th Anniversary Arcade Collection	8	Oct-05
NBA Live 06	7.5	Nov-05
Need for Speed: Most Wanted	8.5	Dec-05
NHL 06	7	Sep-05
Pokémon XD: Gale of Darkness	5.75	Nov-05
Rainbow Six: Lockdown	7.5	Nov-05
Sims 2, The	7.75	Nov-05
Spartan: Total Warrior	7.75	Oct-05
Star Fox Assault	7	Apr-05
Star Wars: Battlefront II	8.5	Dec-05
Super Mario Strikers	6.75	Dec-05
Tiger Woods PGA Tour 06	8.25	Nov-05
TimeSplitters Future Perfect	9	Apr-05
Tony Hawk's American Wasteland	8.25	Dec-05
Ultimate Spider-Man	8	Oct-05

Super Mario Strikers – GC – Dec-05 — 6.75

Title	Score	Date
Viewtiful Joe: Red Hot Rumble	7	Dec-05
Wallace & Gromit: Curse of the Were-Rabbit	7	Nov-05
WWE Day of Reckoning 2	7.25	Nov-05
X-Men Legends II: Rise of Apocalypse	9	Nov-05

XBOX

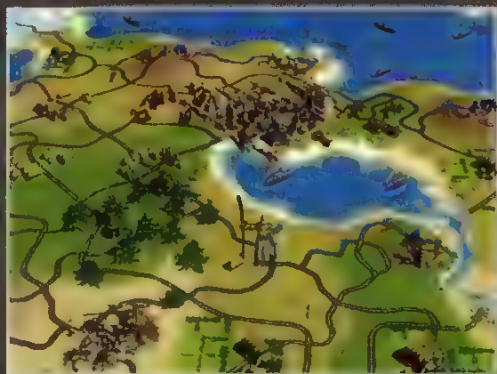| Title	Score	Date
187 Ride or Die	6.5	Oct-05
Advent Rising	7.75	Jul-05
Area 51	8.5	May-05
Batman Begins	7.25	Aug-05
Battlefield 2: Modern Combat	7.5	Dec-05
Beatdown: Fists of Vengeance	5	Sep-05
Big Mutha Truckers 2: Truck Me Harder!	6.75	Oct-05
Blitz: The League	7.75	Nov-05
Brothers in Arms: Earned in Blood	8	Nov-05
Brothers in Arms: Road to Hill 30	8.5	May-05
Burnout Revenge	9.25	Oct-05
Capcom Classic Collection	8.5	Nov-05
Castlevania: Curse of Darkness	7.5	Nov-05
Charlie and the Chocolate Factory	4.5	Sep-05
Chicken Little	7	Nov-05
Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe, The	6.5	Dec-05
Close Combat: First to Fight	6	May-05
Cold Fear	6.75	May-05
Cold War	6	Dec-05
Combat - Task Force 121	4	Jun-05
Conflict: Global Terror	6.75	Nov-05
Conker: Live and Reloaded	8	Aug-05
Constantine	6.5	Apr-05
Darkwatch	8.5	Sep-05
Dead to Rights 2: Hell to Pay	5	Jun-05
Delta Force: Black Hawk Down	6.75	Oct-05
Destroy All Humans	8	Jul-05
Doom 3	9.25	Apr-05
Dragon Ball Z: Sagas	5	Jun-05
Drive to Survive	7	May-05
Dynasty Warriors 5	7	Oct-05
Evil Dead: Regeneration	6	Nov-05
Fantastic Four	6.5	Sep-05
Far Cry Instincts	8.75	Nov-05
FIFA Soccer 06	8	Oct-05
FIFA Street	6.5	Apr-05
FlatOut	6.5	Aug-05
From Russia With Love	7.75	Dec-05
Forza Motorsport	8.5	Jun-05
Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas	9.75	Aug-05
Gun	8.75	Dec-05
Half-Life 2	7.25	Dec-05
Halo 2: Multiplayer Map Pack	9.25	Sep-05
Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire	6.5	Dec-05
Heroes of the Pacific	8.75	Oct-05
Incredible Hulk: Ultimate Destruction, The	8.25	Sep-05
Indigo Prophecy	8.25	Oct-05
Iron Phoenix	4	Jun-05
Jade Empire	9.5	May-05
Juiced	7.5	Jul-05
Karaoke Revolution Party	8.5	Sep-05
Kingdom Under Fire: Heroes	7.5	Oct-05
King of Fighters: Maximum Impact Maniax	5.75	Aug-05
L.A. Rush	6.25	Dec-05
LEGO Star Wars	7.5	May-05
Madagascar	7	Aug-05
Madden NFL 06	9	Sep-05
Marvel Nemesis: Rise of the Imperfects	7	Oct-05
Matrix: Path of Neo, The	7.25	Dec-05
Medal of Honor: European Assault	7.75	Jul-05
Metal Slug 4&5	8	Aug-05
Midnight Club 3: DUB Edition	9.5	May-05
Midway Arcade Treasures 3	8.25	Oct-05
Mortal Kombat: Shaolin Monks	8.5	Nov-05
MX vs. ATV Unleashed	8	Apr-05
Myst IV: Revelation	4.5	Jun-05
Namco Museum: 50th Anniversary Arcade Collection	8	Oct-05
NARC	4.5	May-05
NASCAR 06: Total Team Control	8.25	Nov-05
NBA 2K6	8.5	Nov-05
NBA Live 06	7.5	Nov-05
NCAA Football 06	8.5	Aug-05
NCAA March Madness 2006	7	Nov-05
Need for Speed: Most Wanted	8.5	Dec-05
NHL 06	7	Sep-05
NHL 2K6	8	Sep-05
Nightmare Before Christmas: Oogie's Revenge, The	5	Nov-05
Ninja Gaiden Black	9.5	Oct-05
Obscure	6	Jun-05
Outlaw Tennis	6.5	Sep-05
Pariah	8.5	Jun-05
Playboy: The Mansion	6.5	Apr-05
Predator: Concrete Jungle	2.75	Jun-05
Project Snowblind	8.25	Apr-05
Psychonauts	8.75	May-05
Rainbow Six: Lockdown	8.5	Nov-05
Raze's Hell	6	Apr-05
Red Ninja: End of Honor	3.75	May-05
Scrapland	6.5	Apr-05
Serious Sam II	7.75	Nov-05
Sid Meier's Pirates!	8.25	Aug-05
Sims 2, The	7.75	Nov-05
Sniper Elite	7.5	Nov-05
Spartan: Total Warrior	7.75	Oct-05
Spikeout: Battle Street	6.25	Jun-05
Splinter Cell: Chaos Theory	9.75	May-05
SSX On Tour	8	Nov-05
Star Wars: Battlefront II	8.5	Dec-05
Star Wars Episode III: Revenge of the Sith	5.75	Jul-05
Still Life	5.5	May-05
Stolen	6.5	Jun-05
Stubbs the Zombie in "Rebel Without a Pulse"	8	Dec-05
Suffering: Ties That Bind, The	8.5	Nov-05
Super Monkey Ball Deluxe	8	Apr-05
Tak: The Great Juju Challenge	7	Oct-05
Tecmo Classic Arcade	7	Nov-05
Tiger Woods PGA Tour 06	8.25	Nov-05
TimeSplitters Future Perfect	9	Apr-05
Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon 2: Summit Strike	8	Oct-05
Tony Hawk's American Wasteland	8.25	Dec-05
Top Gear RPM Tuning	5	Apr-05
Ultimate Spider-Man	8	Nov-05
Unreal Championship 2: The Liandri Conflict	9.25	Apr-05
Wallace & Gromit: Curse of the Were-Rabbit	7	Nov-05
Warriors, The	8.25	Nov-05
Without Warning	6.5	Nov-05
Worms: Forts Under Siege	5.75	Apr-05
WWE Wrestlemania 21	5.75	Jun-05
X-Men Legends II: Rise of Apocalypse	9	Nov-05

PC

Title	Score	Date
Act of War - Direct Action	8.25	Apr-05
Age of Empires III	8.25	Dec-05
Battlefield 2	9.25	Aug-05
Black & White 2	8.5	Nov-05
Call of Duty 2	9.75	Dec-05
Codename: Panzers – Phase 2	8	Sep-05

Fable: The Lost Chapters – PC – Oct-05 — 9

Title	Score	Date
Cold War	6	Dec-05
Combat – Task Force 121	4	Jun-05
Doom 3: Resurrection of Evil	9	Oct-05
Dungeon Lords	4	Jul-05
Dungeon Siege II	8	Oct-05
Dungeons & Dragons: Dragonshard	8	Nov-05
Empire Earth II	7.5	May-05
Fable: The Lost Chapters	9	Nov-05
F.E.A.R.	8	Nov-05
Freedom Force vs. The Third Reich	8.25	May-05
Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas	9.75	Aug-05
Guild Wars	8.75	Jul-05
Indigo Prophecy	8.25	Oct-05
Movies, The	8.75	Dec-05
Myst V: End of Ages	7.75	Oct-05
Pariah	8.5	Jun-05
Playboy: The Mansion	6.5	Apr-05
Quake IV	8.75	Nov-05
RollerCoaster Tycoon 3: Soaked!	7	Aug-05
Serious Sam II	7.75	Nov-05
Sims 2 Nightlife, The	7	Nov-05
Sims 2 University, The	9	Sep-05
Splinter Cell: Chaos Theory	9.75	Apr-05
Stronghold 2	6.75	Jun-05
SWAT 4	8.25	May-05
Trackmania Sunrise	7.25	Jul-05
Warhammer 40,000: Dawn of War - Winter Assault	8	Oct-05

NINTENDO DS

Title	Score	Date
Advance Wars: Dual Strike	9.25	Sep-05
Animal Crossing: Wild World	8.75	Dec-05
Atari Retro Classics	8	May-05
Bomberman	8	Nov-05
Castlevania: Dawn of Sorrow	9.25	Nov-05
Dig Dug: Digging Strike	6	
GoldenEye: Rogue Agent	6.75	Apr-05
Kirby: Canvas Curse	8.5	Aug-05
Lost in Blue	7	Oct-05
Lunar: Dragon Song	4.75	Nov-05
Madden NFL 06	5	Nov-05
Mario & Luigi: Partners in Time	8.25	Dec-05
Mario Kart DS	8.5	Dec-05
Megaman Battle Network 5: Double Team	7.75	Nov-05
Meteos	8	Aug-05
Metroid Prime Pinball	8	Nov-05
Nanostray	8	Sep-05
Nintendogs	8	Sep-05
Pac 'N Roll	6	Sep-05
Pac-Pix	7.75	Jun-05
Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney	7.75	Oct-05
Pokémon Dash	5.5	May-05
Polarium	8.25	Jun-05
Rayman DS	6	May-05
Star Wars Episode III: Revenge of the Sith	4	Jul-05
Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles 3: Mutant Nightmare	4	Nov-05
Trace Memory	7.5	Nov-05
Trauma Center: Under the Knife	8.25	Nov-05
Viewtiful Joe Double Trouble!	7.5	Dec-05
WarioWare Touched!	8.25	Apr-05
Yoshi Touch & Go	7.5	May-05
Zoo Keeper	7	Apr-05

PSP

Title	Score	Date
Ape Escape: On the Loose	6.5	Jun-05
Archer Maclean's Mercury	6.75	May-05
Armored Core: Formula Front Special Edition	3.75	Nov-05
ATV Offroad Fury: Blazin' Trails	6.5	Jun-05
Coded Arms	6.75	Aug-05
Con, The	8	Nov-05
Darkstalkers Chronicle: The Chaos Tower	8	May-05
Death Jr.	7	Sep-05
Dynasty Warriors	6	May-05
FIFA Soccer	8.25	May-05
FIFA Soccer 06	7.5	Nov-05
FlatOut	6.5	Aug-05
Frantix	6.75	Oct-05
Ghost in the Shell: Stand Alone Complex	5.5	Dec-05
Grand Theft Auto: Liberty City Stories	9.25	Dec-05
Gretzky NHL	6	May-05
Gripshift	8.25	Aug-05
Hot Shots Golf: Open Tee	9	Jul-05
Lumines	9	May-05
Madden NFL 06	8.5	Nov-05
Marvel Nemesis: Rise of the Imperfects	6.5	Nov-05
MediEvil Resurrection	7.75	Oct-05
Metal Gear Acid	8.25	May-05
Midnight Club 3: DUB Edition	8	Aug-05
MLB	8	Jun-05
MVP Baseball	7	Jul-05
NBA	6.25	May-05
NBA 06	6.5	Dec-05
NBA Street Showdown	7	Jul-05
Need for Speed: Underground Rivals	8	May-05
NFL Street 2: Unleashed	7	May-05
PoPoLoCrois	8.5	Oct-05
Rengoku: The Tower of Purgatory	5	Jun-05
Ridge Racer	7.5	May-05
Smart Bomb	6	Jun-05
Spider-Man 2	7.25	May-05
SSX On Tour	7.75	Nov-05
Tiger Woods PGA Tour	8	May-05
Tiger Woods PGA Tour 06	7.5	Nov-05
Tony Hawk's Underground 2 Remix	9.25	May-05
Twisted Metal: Head-On	8.75	May-05
Untold Legends: Brotherhood of the Blade	7.75	May-05
Virtua Tennis: World Tour	8.5	Nov-05
Wipeout Pure	8.75	May-05
World Tour Soccer	6.25	May-05
X-Men Legends II: Rise of Apocalypse	9	Dec-05

GAME BOY ADVANCE

Title	Score	Date
DK: King of Swing	7.75	Nov-05
Donkey Kong Country 3	8.5	Nov-05
Dynasty Warriors Advance	7	Sep-05
Fire Emblem: The Sacred Stones	9	Jul-05
Gunstar Super Heroes	8.75	Nov-05
Mario Tennis: Power Tour	7.75	Nov-05
Mega Man Battle Network: Team Colonel/Team Protoman	7	Aug-05

DK: King of Swing – GBA – Nov-05 — 7.75

Title	Score	Date
Mega Man Zero 4	8	Nov-05
Pac-Man Pinball Advance	7	May-05
Pokémon Emerald	7.75	Jul-05
Rebelstar: Tactical Command	9	Oct-05
Riviera: The Promised Land	8.25	Aug-05
Sigma Star Saga	8.5	Aug-05
Super Army War	7	
WarioWare Twisted!	7.75	Aug-05
Yoshi Topsy-Turvy	8	Aug-05
Zooo	7	

Sid Meier's Civilization IV

PC

The Master Strategists Speak

By QA Manager Tim McCracken and Tester James Copestake

BUILDING WONDERS

Know what Wonders you want and tech accordingly. It's likely other players will be building the same Wonders, so you cannot delay too long in starting them. Strategic resources like marble and stone coupled with the Industrious leader trait offer an amazing wonder building bonus. Great Engineers can be used to instantly finish many Wonders, so save them for key moments.

PLAN YOUR UNIT STRATEGY

Have a rough idea of what units you can make given your resources. If there are no military resources such as iron, horses, or copper nearby, you should plan accordingly. Longbowmen have no resource requirement and offer good defense against all the metal units. Gunpowder units do not require saltpeter as they did in Civ III, so they can help balance out opponents who have the resources. Also note that using the units' "rock paper scissors" differences and promotions can provide an advantage when used correctly. For instance, you should build Spearmen to counter an opponent who is using horses, or you can give your units the Shock promotion (25 percent bonus vs. melee units) if your opponent is coming at you with Swordsmen.
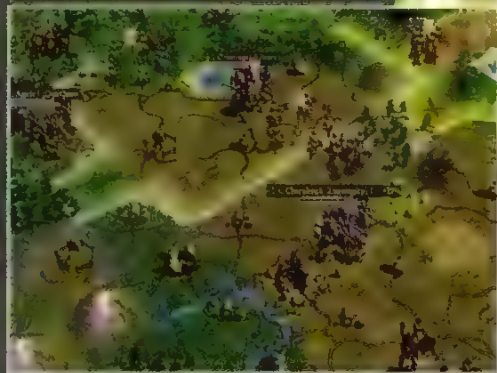
KNOW YOUR NEIGHBORS

There are many advanced techniques that allow you to gauge your neighbor's progress throughout the game. One is to watch their score; early on there will be major jumps as they build cities and Wonders. Dependant on difficulty level, the score increases differently, but it is obvious when they complete something. Also watch the demographics. While they may have more troops, they may be doing poorly financing that army. If you have Napoleon or Montezuma on your border, expect them to attack. Preparing a good, solid defense in those border towns is essential and can save a lot of time rebuilding later.

GREAT PEOPLE

Using Great People for a Golden Age can be a waste if your cities are not setup properly. Their Great Works can offer a better overall gain if used accordingly. For example, using a great prophet to build the Holy Building if you have a religion offers a gold-per-turn bonus per city with your religion. This bonus helps to keep your city network economically viable as much if not all of the city tax is already paid for through simply spreading your religion, which also generates culture.

BARBARIAN SPAWNING

Barbarians spawn in fog covered areas, so you have two possible ways of dealing with them or using them to your advantage. Placing sentries on hills and at cutoff points prevents them from spawning near your more vulnerable infrastructure. You can easily limit their appearance rate in this manner, but you may want to try something else – something a bit more proactive. Try leaving fog shrouded areas early and then send your units "questing" (like an RPG) into these areas to gain some quick experience points and promotions. You will probably want to start planting cities to expose the fog once the AI starts to spread closer to these areas.

DEFENSIVE STRATEGIES

Forts can be placed at cutoff points (areas where the land narrows in a strategically advantageous manner) to create almost impenetrable outposts. Stack units and choose your promotions carefully. The Medic promotion is a staple of a stack of units, but only one unit needs this promotion to affect the whole stack! Be wary of the effect of siege weapons on your stack. It's a very viable strategy for someone or the AI to essentially sacrifice one or two bombardment units in order to render an entire stack ineffective. When faced with a large number of these units, move to a blockade approach and keep your units separate until the threat is handled.

EARLY GAME

Many people refer to games like Civ as "4X" games because they encourage you to Explore, Expand, Exploit, and Exterminate. In the early game, it is highly unlikely you will get the chance to exterminate anyone, so let's concentrate on the first three. A good early build order is as follows: warrior (for defense), worker (to "exploit" the terrain around your city), warrior (for an escort), and a settler (for expansion). Lather rinse, repeat. Keep the first defender home unless you can exploit a close goody hut. Use the escort unit as a scout until the settler is ready and then have them meet in a safe location to travel to your next city. Often, you will have Archery by the time you get to the second unit so go ahead and make an Archer. They are not much more expensive, but they pack a much bigger wallop and make great city defenders. Know your map and plan out how many cities, and roughly where they will be, early on and make liberal use of the in-game help for city locations. An old tester trick from back in the Civ II days is to save the game on your first turn and then explore freely for 20 or 30 turns to get an idea of what your world is like. After that, load up the save and play the knowledge gained from your "covert intelligence."

CIVICS AND RELIGION

Know which civics will be useful and don't forget to switch! However, avoid anarchy at key times, such as when researching a tech that will allow new units. Just because something is new doesn't necessarily mean it is better for your current situation. Always choose to see the big picture so you can analyze the effects of your change before you make a mistake. It is often tough to found the early religions like Buddhism or Hinduism, especially on higher difficulty levels, so it's often best to let those technologies go and trade for them later. Instead, establish a certain level of defense first by making sure you can make advanced early units up to and including catapults before making a beeline for Judaism and Christianity. If you miss those, you can try for Islam, Confucianism, or Taoism. Of course, this presumes you like to establish yourself culturally. If not, feel free to ignore all of these techs.
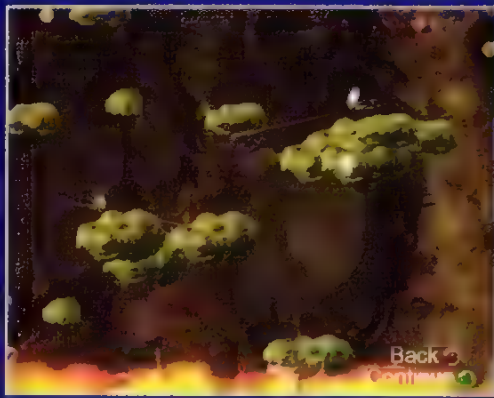
Live Arcade Spotlight
Wik: The Fable of Souls

In the Secret Access spirit of delving into the harder to find hidden gems of gaming, we took a look at the brand new, redesigned Xbox Live Arcade's launch lineup to see what stood out. What we found was Reflexive Entertainment's Wik: The Fable of Souls. The game tells the sad story of Wik, a strange forest creature who has tragically lost his family. Traveling through the forest, he and his unusual pet Slotham gather up some odd new additions to the woods – cute little grubs that hide a dark and dangerous secret. With his insanely long tongue, you swing and jump Wik about the beautiful backgrounds to collect the grubs and spit them to Slotham for storage, even while insects and scorpions endanger your success. Stage by stage, the story advances and the challenges get harder. With haunting music and a quirky style familiar to Oddworld lovers, Wik exhibits charm and challenge and tops out our list of recommendations from the surprisingly fun new service.

Attention All Cheaters!

Cheat codes, by their very nature, are in many cases buggier than Virginia in August. So, unless you don't mind re-doing those 70 hours you put into the latest game, do yourself a favor and back up your save before using any codes.

On a lighter note, you can send your codes to secretaccess@gameinformer.com for a chance to be featured here and win a very special prize!

MULTI-SYTEM

Tony Hawk's American Wasteland
> XBOX 360, PLAYSTATION 2, XBOX, GAMECUBE, PSP

Enter the following codes at the cheat menu:

Unlock Jason Ellis – sirius-DJ
Unlock Mat Hofman – the_condor

"GI Droid"
(location unknown – last seen shopping out of people's grocery carts at the A&P)

Star Wars Battlefront II
> PLAYSTATION 2, XBOX, PSP

Invulnerability – Pause the game, and input Up (x3), Left, Down (x3), Left, Up (x3), Left, Right. The code will stay active until you turn off the game.

PSP

Grand Theft Auto: Liberty City Stories

The following codes should be entered during gameplay, without pausing:

Bobble Head Characters – Down (x3), O (x2), X, L, R
Destroy All Cars – L (x2), Left, L (x2), Right, X, □
Faster Gameplay – R (x2), L, R (x2), L, Down, X
Full Armor – L, R, O, L, R, X, L, R
Full Health – L, R, X, L, R, □, L, R
Get $250,000 – L, R, △, L, R, O, L, R
Increase Wanted Level – L, R, □, L, R, △, L, R
Low Car Traction – L, Up, Left, R, △, O, Down, X
Never Get Wanted Level – L (x2), △, R (x2), X, □, O
Pedestrians Follow – Down (x3), △ (x2), O, L, R
Pedestrians Have Weapons – R (x2), L, R (x2), L, Right, O
Pedestrians Riot – L (x2), R, L (x2), R, Left, □
Slower Gameplay – R, △, X, R, □, O, Left, Right
Spawn Rhino – L (x2), Left, L (x2), Right, △, O
Spawn Trashmaster – △, O, Down, △, O, Up, L (x2)
Weapon Set 1 – Up, □ (x2), Down, Left, □ (x2), Right
Weapon Set 2 – Up, O (x2), Down, Left, O (x2), Right
Weapon Set 3 – Up, X (x2), Down, Left, X (x2), Right
Weather Clear – Up, Down, O, Up, Down, □, L, R
Weather Foggy – Up, Down, △, Up, Down, X, L, R
Weather Overcast – Up, Down, X, Up, Down, △, L, R
Weather Rainy – Up, Down, □, Up, Down, O, L, R
Weather Sunny – L (x2), O, R (x2), □, △, X

Code of the Month
X-Men Legends II: Rise of Apocalypse

Mutants need all the help they can get. Between crazed superfoes, giant sentinel robots, and more characters in the lineup than any comic writer seems to know what to do with, they've got a lot to deal with. Lucky for them (and you), these cheat codes should lighten the burden and offer some serious homo-superior smackdown juice. Have fun, you crazy gene freaks!
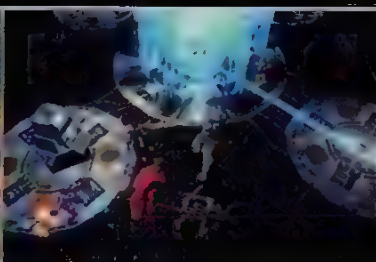
The following codes must be entered in the Team Management menu:
All Characters At Highest Level – Up, Down, Up, Down, Left, Up, Left, Right, Start
All Powers – Left, Right, Left, Right, Down, Up, Start
All Skins – Down, Up, Left, Right, Up (x2), Start
All Unlockable Heroes – Right, Left (x2), Right, Up (x3), Start

The following codes must be entered while playing the game, without pausing:
God Mode (No Health or Energy Loss) – Down, Up, Down, Up, Right, Down, Right, Left, Start
Super Speed – Up (x3), Down, Up, Down, Start
Touch of Death (Massive Melee Damage) – Left (x2), Right, Left, Right, Up, Start
Xtreme Tokens Always Full – Left, Down, Right, Down, Up (x2), Down, Up, Start

The following code must be entered while at the shop menu:
Extra Tech Bits – Up (x3), Down, Right (x2), Start

The following code must be entered while in the Danger Room menu:
All Courses Unlocked – Right (x2), Left (x2), Up, Down, Up, Down, Start

Eric Benetez
San Antonio, TX

Mod World

BATTLEFIELD 2
**21st Century Warfare**
http://www.21cwmod.com
http://www.21centurywarfare.com

With the bold tagline, "The Way BF2 Was Meant To Be Played," the 21st Century Warfare team takes no prisoners when it comes to their goals. Though this mod isn't the most groundbreaking redesign of a game ever, it is comprised of a number of small tweaks ranging from adding ordnance options for certain vehicles to improved helicopter physics. Download the mod itself (requires Battlefield 2 patch 1.0.3 as of this writing) at the first URL above. The scope of the changes is quite extensive, but that's not even the best part.
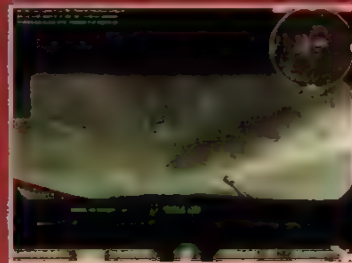
At the second URL listed, you can register for and follow the huge tournament that the team runs. As of press time, it hadn't started yet, but the organizers are boasting over 600 players registered with the capacity to support double that number. Players are seperated into divisions with a military rank system and chain of command set up, which hopefully will engender the kind of teamwork that makes BF 2 such a potentially fantastic game.
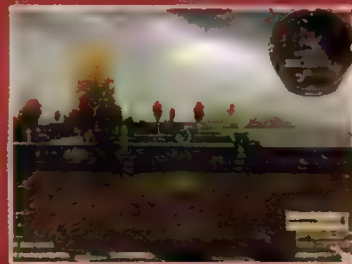
http://www.totalbf2.com
For even more Battlefield 2 mod craziness check out this website. It functions as a sort of clearinghouse for all kinds of BF 2 mod development. Get all the updates and latest news about mods in the works at one little site.

Call of Duty 2

Survive the War

By Game Designers Todd Alderman and Steve Fukuda, and Associate Producer Nathaniel McClure

SINGLE-PLAYER GAMEPLAY TIPS

Use Cover – In every battle environment, you will find objects and structures to keep you out of sight and out of the path of whizzing bullets. Crouch and crawl behind solid cover as much as possible. Whether it's in the snowy streets of Stalingrad or the sun-baked deserts of Tunisia, look for crates, broken buildings, and destroyed vehicles to duck away from enemy fire. Plus, utilize your smoke grenades to create portable concealment. It's not outright cover but will definitely aid your assault against the enemy.

Stay Mobile – Think you found a good spot for cover? That may change in a matter of seconds. Although pausing to regroup, assess threats, reload weapons, or replenish health is always necessary, don't stay in one location for too long. Especially on the higher difficulty settings, the enemy uses increasingly intelligent suppression techniques to keep you pinned down and cornered.

Weapon Slots – Keep an eye out for dropped weapons. As you progress through a mission, be aware that the weapon you have now may not be the best weapon to use when you round a corner. Your enemies and allies will drop a large variety of firepower, and you have the capability of holding two weapons. So, cycle to the weapon you would like to switch, stand over the discarded weapon you would like to pick up, and then press the Use key (X button) to switch the weapons. Now you can pack the power of two sub-machine guns or a rifle and machine gun.

Stance – Be mindful of your stance at all times. Soldiers that walk tall on the battlefield often find themselves coming home in a box. Crouching and lying prone keeps your profile low, making you harder to see, and more importantly, harder to hit. Secondly, in a crouched or prone position it is easier to target enemies. Press B to crouch and hold B for a second to go prone.

Heads up – Pay attention to your on-screen indicators. When you hear the clink of a nearby grenade, look to the grenade indicator in the center of your screen to tell you which way it is. Arrows will appear pointing in the direction of the nearby grenade. Get away from it as quickly as possible. Also, your compass can be your best friend. If you ever find yourself lost, look to your compass, which shows stars or letters indicating the direction of objectives. The compass also keeps track of your squadmates and last known position of your enemies. Your mates will appear as green triangles while the sound from enemy fire will appear as red dots. Be warned, as the location of

enemies will only appear when they fire their weapon.

Aim Down Sight – You can fire madly from the hip, but as any trained soldier will tell you, raising your gun up and aiming down the sight of the weapon is much more accurate and deadly. Use the increased accuracy of Aim Down Sight (ADS) to pick off enemies from greater distances, and save your ammo to spray bullets from the hip in close quarters battles, in which accuracy matters a bit less. Holding down the left trigger on the 360 controller enables ADS.

Concentrate When Sniping – The sniper rifle is by far the best long-range weapon to use in a battle. To be a truly lethal sniper, hold your breath by pressing and holding the right thumb stick while aiming down the scope. This will allow you to hold your breath, steady your scope, and with a little practice, drop your target every time. Remember, you can only hold your breath for a short time.

Mantle Ability – Players can maintain cover when advancing upon enemy positions with the ability to mantle over obstacles. When you approach some waist-high barriers, an arrow will appear on your screen indicating for you to hit the Jump button (A button). This will enable you to automatically hurdle over the obstacle in front of you, without providing too large of a target.

MULTIPLAYER GAMEPLAY TIPS

Weapon Selection – Choose your weapon wisely. Yes, you may love the Thompson or Kar98 Sniper rifle, but if your entire team has the same weapon, it may become a disadvantage.

Find out what weapons your teammates are using and select complimentary weapons. If your buddy has a sniper rifle, choose a smaller close-quarters weapon to guard the sniping location. That way your ally can stay confidently scoped, picking off enemies while knowing that you have the quick firepower to ward off any enemies encroaching on your position. Or, if most of your allies are using smaller close-range weapons like the Thompson or MP40, select a heavy assault rifle like the BAR or MP44 so you can hang back and lay down heavy fire to cover their advance.

Packing Heat – The default weapon loadout in multiplayer is the weapon you selected and a pistol, but just like single-player, you can swap any weapon you want with a weapon on the ground. Utilizing both weapon slots effectively will allow you to laugh hysterically when, in a battle after you and your enemy empty your clips trying to take each other out, they pull out their pistol trying to finish you off and you switch to a fully loaded assault rifle.

Grenades and Smoke – Always utilize your 'nades. Not only are frag grenades a great way to flush out an enemy, they are also a great way to distract your enemy. When rushing an objective, throw a grenade or two at the other objective to draw the enemy towards the action. Not only can smoke grenades cover an alley or objective for your advance, but they can also be used to temporarily shut down a key defensive position. Instead of dropping the canister in an open area, lob one into a window to smoke up a room with a mounted gun or sniper. This will not only blind the enemy but it also tends to flush them out into the open. Running low on grenades? Run over the bodies of your fallen allies and enemies to pick up unused ones.

Key MP Indicators – As in single player, your on-screen indicators are key to staying alive. Use the compass to your advantage. Friendly soldiers will show up as green arrows, while enemy fire will be a red dot. As in single player, the enemy will only appear on the compass when they discharge their weapon. It's very important to remember that you will show up as a red dot on your enemy's compass and reveal your position if you fire your weapon, so choose your shots wisely.

If all else fails, CHARGE – Say you find yourself face to face with an enemy player. You both shoot wildly in desperation trying to eliminate each other, but neither of you goes down. While the other player is reloading, charge at him and use the melee attack on your weapon to whack the lousy brute with the butt of your gun.

Dragon Quest VIII

Mastering the Monster Arena
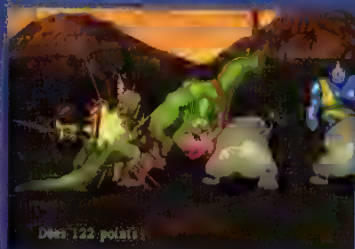
One of the most interesting and challenging aspects of Dragon Quest VIII is the punishing Monster Arena. We've put together a guide for creating the best teams you can take with you into battle in these tough fights. Keep in mind that your infamous monsters gain strength as you do, and that can have a tremendous effect on the outcome of the fight. When you're out putting together a team of battlers, try these combinations for an added kick. Note that each team member has a name for when you find them, as well as a second name for once they are in your group. Deathmoves and Team Bonuses are only mentioned if applicable to that team.

WEAPON TEAMS

The Angry Archers
Deathmove: Harrowing Arrow
Team Bonus: Team Max HP +15
Potential Team Members: Shortshooter (Fletch), Sharpshooter (Archer), Poisonous Sniper (Sagittari)

The Blade Runners
Deathmove: Triple Swords
Potential Team Members: Old Soldier (Bones), Fantom of Chopera (Capers), Attack Bot Mk II (Cybot), King of Dumbira (Dumbking), Raging Rooster (Foul Fowl), Bone Racer (Jockey), Hollow Knight (Lonely Joe), Killer Director (Nohi), Roboster Mk I (Roborg), Man-at-Arms (Skeledoid), One Knight Stand (Slimehopper)

Club Club
Deathmove: Mindbreaker
Potential Team Members: Big Blue Bully (Arges), Gigantes Guardsman (Brontes), Abominable Ape (Klub Kong), Troll Patroller (Pa Troll), Man-at-Arms (Skeledoid), Squiggly Squiggler (Squiggles), Gigantes Gangster (Steropes)

The Hackers
Deathmove: Typhoeus' Maul
Potential Team Members: Bushwhacker (Bush-W.), Axoraptor (Hackzilla), Hooded Hacker (Hoodwink), Man-at-Arms (Skeledoid)

The Javelinas
Deathmove: Jolly Jousters
Potential Team Members: Occult Rider (Deadnoble), Octavius Maximus (Octurion), Wild Spearman (Orcus)
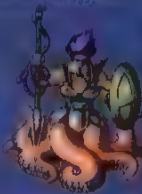
THEMED TEAMS

The Drack Pack
Deathmove: Fat Drack
Team Bonus: Team Agility +30
Potential Team Members: Pain in the Neck (Sippy), All Day Sucker (Slurpy), Shadow Conductor (Sugi)

The Dynamic Duo
Deathmove: Sapper Slapper
Team Bonuses: Team Attack +15
Potential Team Members: Ochre Ogre (Orrid),

Muscly Mohawker (Spike)

The Fatal Attraction
Deathmove: Love Typhoon
Potential Team Members: Fertiliser (Faunus), Femme Fatale (Hazel), One Knight Stand (Slimehopper)

Happy Together
Potential Team Members: Jewel Juggler (Jewelbag), Bundle of Joy (Trick Bag)

The Legends
Deathmove: Big Bang
Potential Team Members: Slime Creator (Hori), Killer Director (Nohi), Shadow Conductor (Sugi), Slime Designer (Tori)

My Three Golems
Deathmove: The Golemator
Potential Team Members: Bricklayer (Brickman), Goldbricker (Goldman), Stonemason (Stoneman)

The Nightriders
Deathmove: Riders' Carnival
Potential Team Members: Occult Rider (Deadnoble), Bone Racer (Jockey), One Knight Stand (Slimehopper)

The Psyche Wards
Deathmove: Tension Boost
Potential Team Members: Al Gee (Big Al), Femme Fatale (Hazel), Jewel Juggler (Jewelbag), Bundle of Joy (Trick Bag)

Team Goodnight
Deathmove: Dirge
Potential Team Members: Fantom of Chopera (Capers), Hooded Hacker (Hoodwink), Nightstalker (Nightwing)

The Treasure Hunters
Deathmove: Good as Gold
Team Bonus: Fight Extra Turn (only when the third member is of the material family)
Potential Team Members: Goldbricker (Goldman), Jewel Juggler (Jewelbag)

Triple Trouble
Deathmove: Stream Killer Attack
Potential Team Members: Attack Bot Mk II (Cybot), Killer Director (Nohi), Roboster Mk I (Roborg)

Valentine's Day
Team Bonus: Team Agility +15, Team Max HP +15 (when third member is a humanoid)
Potential Team Members: Puppet Pugilist (Dolldrums), Punchin' Judy (Moppet)

Two Eyes
Deathmove: Sapper Slapper
Team Bonus: Fight Extra Turn (When third member is a demon)
Potential Team Members: Gigantes Guardsman (Brontes), Gigantes Gangster (Steropes)

SLIME TEAMS

The King and Us
Deathmove: Maximaster
Team Bonus: Team Max HP x2
Potential Team Members: Angel of Curing (Curer), Family Doctor (Healer), Heavy Metal (Hev)

Mega Metal Maniacs
Deathmove: Magic Burst
Team Bonus: Team Max HP x2 (When third member

is a slime)
Potential Team Members: Heavy Metal (Hev), Metal Babble (Metabble)

The Metal Mob
Deathmove: Multi Masher
Team Bonus: Team Max HP x2
Potential Team Members: Heavy Metal (Hev), Metal Babble (Metabble), Quick Silver (Metaly)

Full Metal Power
Deathmove: Magic Burst
Team Bonus: Team Max HP x2 (When third member is a slime)
Potential Team Members: Heavy Metal (Hev), Quick Silver (Metaly)

Slime Therapy
Deathmove: Multiheal
Team Bonus: Team Max HP x2 (When third member is a slime)
Potential Team Members: Angel of Curing (Curer), Family Doctor (Healer), Quick Silver (Metaly)

Slime Time
Deathmove: Slime Spank
Team Bonus: Team Max HPx2
Potential Team Members: Quick Silver (Metaly), Gloopy Groupie (Slime Shady), Slimy Smiley (Smiles), Slime Designer (Tori)

Metal Power
Deathmove: Magic Burst
Team Bonus: Team Max HP x2 (When third member is a slime)
Potential Team Members: Metal Babble (Metabble), Quick Silver (Metal Slime)

The Slime Squad
Deathmove: Supersize Slimey
Team Bonus: Team Max HP x2
Potential Team Members: Gloopy Groupie (Slime Shady), Slimy Smiley (Smiles), Slime Designer (Tori)

Trauma Centre
Deathmove: Omniheal
Team Bonus: Team Max HP x2
Potential Team Members: Angel of Curing (Curer), Family Doctor (Healer), Quick Silver (Metaly)

Wizards o' Z
Deathmove: Zingslinger
Team Bonus: Team Max HP x2
Potential Team Members: Angel of Curing (Curer), Family Doctor (Healer), Metal Babble (Metabble)

FAMILY TEAMS

The Aqua Marines
Team Bonus: Team Defense +30
Potential Team Members: Al Gee (Big Al), Colossal Clione (Clio), Octavius Maximus (Octurion), Little Mopper (Robster), Squiggly Squiggler (Squiggles)

Clank and Spank
Deathmove: Metal Panic
Potential Team Members: Attack Bot Mk II (Cybot), Automaton Aviator (Mechabubo), Killer Director (Nohi), Roboster Mk I (Roborg)

The Avian Attackers
Team Bonus: Team Agility +30
Potential Team Members: Raging Rooster (Foul Fowl), Gryphon General (Gryphus), Pain in the

Neck (Sippy), All Day Sucker (Slurpy), Shadow Conductor (Sugi)

Materialistic
Team Bonus: Fight Extra Turn
Potential Team Members: Bricklayer (Brickman), Goldbricker (Goldman), Jewel Juggler (Jewelbag), Hollow Knight (Lonely Joe), Man-eater Chest (Snap Case), Stonemason (Stoneman), Crazed Colussus (Talos), Bundle of Joy (Trick Bag)

Demented Elements
Deathmove: Elemental Storm
Potential Team Members: Cold Fire (Blizag Jr.), Living Flame (Flameman), Big Blizzard (Jack Frost), Living Torch (Torchman)

The Drag Racers
Team Bonus: Team Attack +30
Potential Team Members: Jumbo Dilophosaur (Frillsaur), Axoraptor (Hackzilla), Potty Dragon (Potbelly)

Far From Heaven
Team Bonus: Fight Extra Turn
Potential Team Members: Arch-archdemon (Archfiend), Big Blue Bully (Arges), Gigantes Guardsman (Brontes), Femme Fatale (Hazel), Bone Racer (Jockey), Nightstalker (Nightwing), Troll Patroller (Pa Troll), Pelvic Thruster (Salsa), Gigantes Gangster (Steropes)

Just Beastly
Team Bonus: Team Attack +15
Potential Team Members: Loopy Lupus (Bladewolf), Buffalo Bill (Cowboy), Mole Major (Doug), Death Tabby (Fat Cat), Abominable Ape (Klub Kong), Wild Spearman (Orcus), Ochre Ogre (Orrid), Muscly Mohawker (Spike), Greater Sabrecat (Spot)

Not Quite Human
Team Bonus: Team Max HP +15
Potential Team Members: Sharpshooter (Archer), Bushwhacker (Bush-W.), Puppet Pugilist (Dolldrums), King of Dumbira (Dumbking), Shortshooter (Fletch), Hooded Hacker (Hoowink), Mullet Mallet (McHammer), Punchin' Judy (Moppet), Poisonous Sniper (Sagittari), Terror Talons (Seasaw)

Slime Power
Team Bonus: Team Max HP x2
Potential Team Members: Angel of Curing (Curer), Family Doctor (Healer), Heavy Metal (Hev), Slime Creator (Hori), Metal Babble (Metabble), Quick Silver (Metaly), Gloopy Groupie (Slime Shady), One Knight Stand (Slimehopper), Slimy Smiley (Smiles), Slime Designer (Tori)

The Zombebops
Team Bonus: Team Max HP +30
Potential Team Members: Wight Highpriest (Bishop), Old Soldier (Bones), Fantom of Chopera (Capers), Occult Rider (Deadnoble), Old-School Drooler (Hork), Headless Flailsman (Mornstar), Man-at-Arms (Skeledoid)
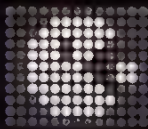
GI ALL STARS

The Year in Review is a time-honored way
up of the events from January to December,
and we at Game Informer have been doing
it for a long time. It seems like it's appro-
priate, then, to reflect on our past and
share the games that have rocked our
boat each year by revisiting these annual
award winners. What follows is a recap
of our Best of the Year award honorees.

1993
March/April 1994
Issue 15

GAME OF THE YEAR:

MORTAL KOMBAT
(Acclaim)

Chosen mostly for its place in history, 1993 was highlighted by the sales and
controversy generated by this long-running franchise. Mortal Kombat has
continued to remain in the hearts of gamers, earning awards even to this
day. Other games that were highlighted in this awards roundup included
Disney's Aladdin for Best Graphics and Haunting Starring Polterguy by EA
for Best Concept.

1994
February 1995 – Issue 22

With the bounty of viable platforms available in
this year, we decided to ditch highlighting one
over the rest and instead offered a great game
for each system. Besides a bevy of genre and
technology-specific awards, one was also given
out for best accessory: the X-Band Modem by
Catapult, which was available for the Super
Nintendo and Sega Genesis systems. Too bad
that online thing didn't catch on.

- **Jaguar** – Alien Vs. Predator (Atari)
- **3DO** – Road Rash (Electronic Arts)
- **Sega CD** – Vay (Working Designs)
- **Game Gear** – Shining Force (Sega)

- **Super Nintendo** – Donkey Kong Country (Nintendo)
- **Genesis** – Earthworm Jim (Playmates)
- **Game Boy** – Donkey Kong (Nintendo)
- **Arcade** – Cruisin' USA (Midway/Nintendo)

■ X-Band Modem

■ Alien Vs. Predator

1995

February 1996 – Issue 34

Continuing to hand out awards per platform, this list's most notable entry is the Jaguar title, Cannon Fodder, which won by default. No other significant games were released for the system during 1995, and the honorable mentions had to be pulled from the previous year's release list.

- **Jaguar** – Cannon Fodder (Sensible Software)
- **PlayStation** – Ridge Racer (Namco)
- **Saturn** – Virtua Fighter 2 (Sega)
- **3DO** – Gex (Crystal Dynamics)
- **Sega CD** – Eternal Champions Challenge From the Dark Side (Sega)
- **Game Gear** – Super Return of the Jedi (THQ)
- **Super Nintendo** – Donkey Kong Country 2: Diddy's Kong Quest (Nintendo)
- **Genesis** – Vectorman (Sega)
- **Game Boy** – Galaga/Galaxian (Nintendo)
- **Worst Game of the Year:** Rise of the Robots (Acclaim)
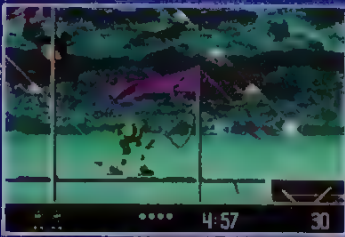
■ Vectorman
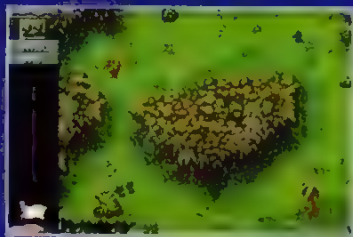
■ Cannon Fodder

1996

February 1997 – Issue 46

GAME OF THE YEAR:

SUPER MARIO 64
(Nintendo)

In a year that established two major new franchises and forced the old guard to evolve or die, some major trends were born that still hold strong to this day. Mario's transition to 3D made headlines, but Resident Evil and Tomb Raider's debuts in '96 have proven to be nearly as important.
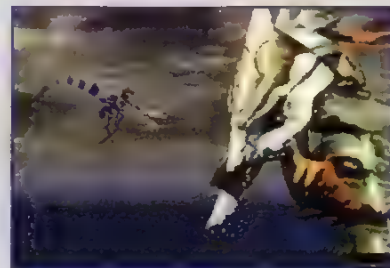
■ Panzer Dragoon 2 Zwei

- **Nintendo 64** – Super Mario 64 (Nintendo)
- **PlayStation** – Resident Evil (Capcom)
- **Saturn** – Panzer Dragoon 2 Zwei (Sega)
- **Game Gear** – Virtua Fighter Animation (Sega)
- **Super Nintendo** – Super Mario RPG (Nintendo)
- **Genesis** – Vectorman 2 (Sega)
- **Game Boy** – Tetris Attack (Nintendo)
- **PC** – Command & Conquer: Red Alert (Westwood)
- **Arcade** – Virtua Fighter 3 (Sega)
- **Worst Game of the Year:** Time Killers (Black Pearl Software)
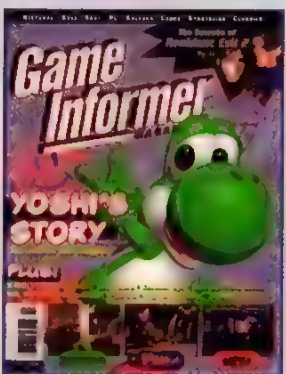
1997

February 1998 – Issue 58

GAME OF THE YEAR:

FINAL FANTASY VII
(Square Soft/Sony)

Is there even a contest when Final Fantasy VII is involved? The magazine was even so bold as to ruin the biggest moment in the game, which had just come out in August. Other notable highlights of the year included the debut of the Oddworld franchise and its lovable loser, Abe.

■ Final Fantasy VII

- **Nintendo 64** – Star Fox 64 (Nintendo)
- **PlayStation** – Final Fantasy VII (Square Soft/Sony)
- **Saturn** – Fighters Mega Mix (TrueMotion/Sega)
- **PC** – Quake II (id/Activision)
- **Arcade** – Blitz (Midway)
- **Worst Game of the Year:** Chronicles of the Sword (Psygnosis)
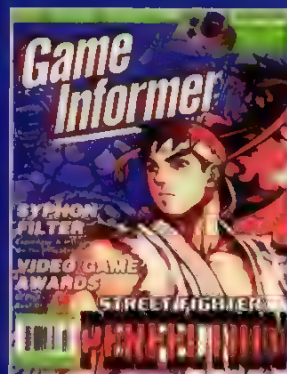
1998

February 1999 – Issue 70

Clearly the Zelda franchise has stayed at the top of gamers' lists, but the strangest part of this year's roundup was the virtual shutout of Metal Gear Solid. While the Psycho Mantis fight won the Best Moment award and Snake took Best Hero, the game itself earned nothing more than an honorable mention.

- **Nintendo 64** – The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time (Nintendo)
- **PlayStation** – Resident Evil 2 (Capcom)
- **Saturn** – Panzer Dragoon Saga (Team Andromeda/Sega)
- **Game Boy** – Pokémon (Game Freak/Nintendo)
- **PC** – Half-Life (Valve/Sierra)
- **Arcade** – Marvel Vs. Capcom (Capcom)

■ Pokémon
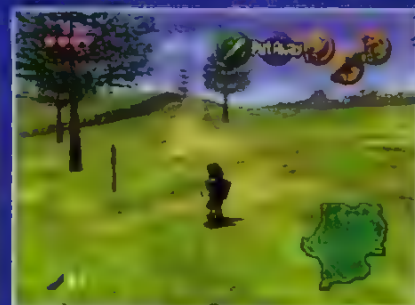
■ The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time

1999

February 2000 – Issue 82

This was a singular year in that each console got a great title and, in many cases, a franchise that continues to live on. The Dreamcast's launch ushered in the next generation and EverQuest started a mainstream switch to online gaming.

- **Dreamcast** – NFL 2K (Visual Concepts/ Sega)
- **Nintendo 64** – Star Wars Episode One: Racer (LucasArts)
- **PlayStation** – Tony Hawk's Pro Skater (Neversoft/Activision)
- **Handheld** – Super Mario Bros. DX (Nintendo)
- **Arcade** – Ferrari F355 Challenge (Sega)
- **PC** – EverQuest (989 Studios)
- **Worst Game of the Year:** Superman 64 (Titus)

2000

February 2001 Issue 93

The PlayStation 2's launch late in the year meant that the system had little available to rock editors' socks, but the console did manage to make its presence known. EA was the most successful supporter of the hardware in this first year, and pumped out a Madden entry whose influence is still being felt with each console launch.

Worst Game of the Year: Shrek: Fairy Tale Freakdown (TDK Mediactive)

1. Tony Hawk's Pro Skater 2	PSone/Dreamcast	Activision
2. The Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask	Nintendo 64	Nintendo
3. Chrono Cross	PSone	Square Soft
4. Madden NFL 2001	PlayStation 2	EA Sports
5. Final Fantasy IX	PSone	Square Soft
6. Resident Evil Code: Veronica	Dreamcast	Capcom
7. SSX	PlayStation 2	Electronic Arts
8. WWF No Mercy	Nintendo 64	THQ
9. Command & Conquer: Red Alert 2	PC	Electronic Arts
10. Front Mission 3	PSone	Square Soft

2001

February 2002 Issue 105

A truly legendary year in gaming history, 2001 saw the introduction of amazing new franchises like Halo and Devil May Cry, and some welcome follow-ups to the popular Tony Hawk and Twisted Metal series. In the gathering momentum of the PS2, Grand Theft Auto and Metal Gear Solid made new appearances with revolutionary gameplay that continues to shape the games we love.

1. Metal Gear Solid 2	PlayStation 2	Konami
2. Grand Theft Auto III	PlayStation 2	Rockstar
3. Tony Hawk's Pro Skater 3	PlayStation 2/ GameCube	Activision
4. Gran Turismo 3: A-Spec	PlayStation 2	Sony
5. Twisted Metal Black	PlayStation 2	Sony
6. Max Payne	PC	Gathering of Developers/ 3D Realms
7. Devil May Cry	PlayStation 2	Capcom
8. The Legend of Zelda: Oracle of Ages	Game Boy Color	Nintendo
9. Halo	Xbox	Microsoft
10. Star Wars Rogue Leader	GameCube	Lucas Arts

**Worst Game of the Year:** Batman Beyond: Return of the Joker (Kemco)

GREATEST GAME OF ALL TIME
By Sam Niles

METROID ZERO MISSION AND METROID FUSION

> **FORMAT** GAME BOY ADVANCE > **PUBLISHER** NINTENDO

I have a tiebreaker for the greatest game of all time. Both are from the same franchise and are on the same system: Metroid Zero Mission and Metroid Fusion. These two titles are adventures of the coolest protagonist ever – Samus Aran, a female intergalactic bounty hunter that has battled many ferocious enemies. My absolute favorite of her foes is Ridley, a flying reptilian beast and king of the space pirates. While you will battle Ridley and his space pirate minions in both titles, don't expect to encounter a lot of flying creatures. His space pirates do not bear wings and are different in every way. The plot for Fusion is absolutely fantastic. During a mission on planet SR-388, Samus merges with an organism simply known as X. Near death, Samus is sent to headquarters to deal with the virus in her suit. The suit was to be surgically removed, that is until someone found a cure known as the Metroid Vaccine, which saved her life. As scientists were studying some aliens on a station, they unfortunately learned that the virus infected the aliens, and then they all became infected. One of the viruses was the one that infected Samus. A weakened Samus must destroy the X on the station. Now here's the catch: The X can take form of their prey. So, as you probably guessed, the X takes the form of the hunter at full power. Whenever it is in sight, you must use stealth to hide from the clone, because it has all of your moves and is more powerful. The plot

■ Metroid Zero Mission

■ Metroid Fusion

for Zero Mission is that Samus must just plain destroy the Mother Brain (with some twists). Each game has something that the other doesn't. Zero Mission has better graphics (while both are gorgeous) and slightly better gameplay, while Fusion has better plot and sound, making you happy with either title. However, don't consider yourself a gamer if you don't have these entries. You need both to be a truly full-fledged gamer. So get your big butt off the couch and run to the store to pick up these titles. You will be the happiest person alive.

THIS MONTH IN GAMING HISTORY

After eight months of l33t undercover investigative work, the FBI announced a series of raids on homes and businesses across the continental U.S. in January of 1997 The crime? Pirating software from Sega and Sony, among other non-gaming software companies. Largely focused on pirate-friendly Bulletin Board Services (BBSs), Operation Cyber Strike was carried out by the bureau's recently established International Computer Crime Squad that was, at the time, based in San Francisco. The Entertainment Software Association today estimates that worldwide piracy costs the U.S. entertainment software industry billions of dollars each year.

GAME BOY COLOR
GODZILLA: THE SERIES

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION > **PUBLISHER** CRAVE ENTERTAINMENT > **DEVELOPER** CRAWFISH INTERACTIVE
> **RELEASE** 1999

Many Godzilla fans consider the American movie to be the low point in the King of Monsters' career. Clearly, they haven't played this game. Based on the cartoon, that was in turn based on the American film, Godzilla is a good guy in this game, and you play as him – sorta. You don't actually control his movement, merely his attacks – you've played more complicated games on a digital watch. Basically, the game consists of waiting for an enemy to appear, and then hitting the A button. If the actual gameplay itself wasn't bad enough, the dialogue between cutscenes is like an icepick in the eye, as a bunch of hip Gen-X cartoons blather about "the G-Man" being "radical." Impossibly tedious while offering a mere two hours of gameplay and featuring a grinding sound of Godzilla's footsteps that will steadily erode your sanity until you ache for the sweet release of death, this game should not be played by anyone. We're professionals, and even our brief time with this abomination will necessitate six months in video game quarantine.
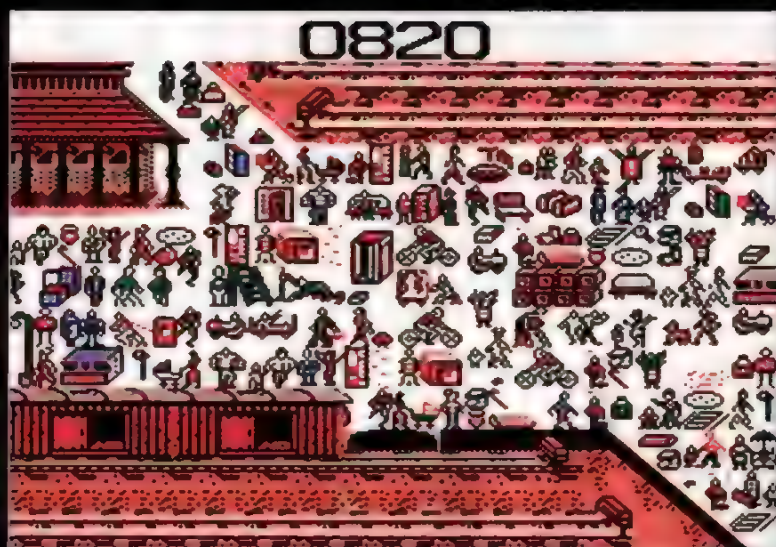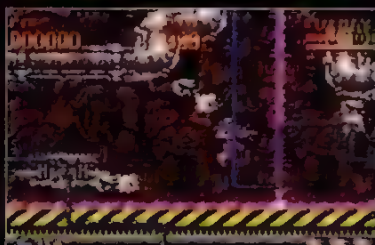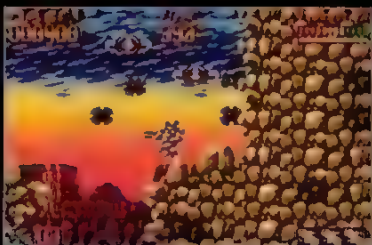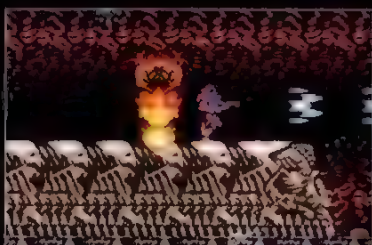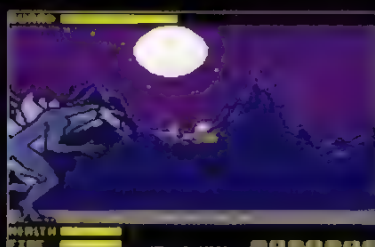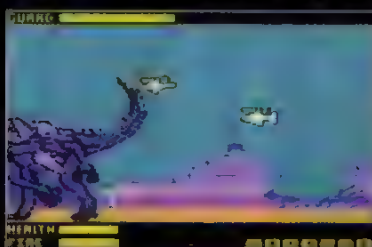
NES
WHERE'S WALDO

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER PUZZLE > **PUBLISHER** THQ > **DEVELOPER** BETHESDA SOFTWORKS > **RELEASE** 1991

Long before it had gamers salivating at the mere mention of The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion, Bethesda Softworks was responsible for one of the most appalling affronts to entertainment ever to hit the NES. Where's Waldo is modeled after the book craze of the late '80s and early '90s that had youngsters poring over pages to find some goober in a stripey sweater. However, the key factor in the books' success – actually being able to find Waldo – is absurdly absent from the digital incarnation. Just take a look at that screenshot. Can you tell which one of those 8-bit pixilated dump heaps is supposed to be Waldo? If you answered yes, you're lying. This game is a biblical plague that poisons everything it touches with non-existent gamplay and terrible graphics. Don't cut it any slack because it's supposed to be an "educational" game; the only thing Where's Waldo will teach anyone is how to stop loving.
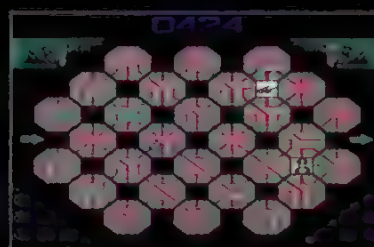
SUPER NINTENDO
SUPER TURRICAN

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION > **PUBLISHER** SEIKA CORPORATION > **DEVELOPER** FACTOR 5 > **RELEASE** 1993

This was one of the early efforts from Factor 5, the team that would later bring us the phenomenal Rogue Squadron series. Unlike that Star Wars sim, the Turrican series had more in common with Contra and Mega Man than it did with any X-Wings. It's unfortunate that so few people recall this action-packed affair, since it pulled some fun ideas from a number of sources to emerge as an excellent sidescrolling shooter. With an uncanny similarity to Contra, you'll pick up one of a few weapon types, including a familiar spread fire gun. Levels are well designed, with many secret areas, hidden one-ups, and multi-tiered environments. Lots of movement and enemies onscreen without any profound slowdown keeps the pace up, as does the martial musical background score. There's even a duck button that drops you into a rolling ball à la Metroid. Super Turrican is not really quite as good as any of the games it tries to emulate, but it's close, and has the added bonus that, unlike those others, you've probably never played this one before.

VIDEO GAME TRIVIA

The holidays are upon us once again, and the Xbox 360 is guaranteed to be one of the hottest items of the season. In fact, since many parents will be desperately trying to get their hands on this must-have system, this is the perfect time to cobble together a shoddy imitation of a real next-gen console and try to sell it to gullible suckers who don't know any better. Answer these questions to find out how convincing a knock-off you're able to construct.

1 Finally settling the "Toad: boy or girl" debate, Toad's female counterpart first appeared in Mario Kart: Double Dash. What is the name of this feminine fungus?
- **A.** Toadina
- **B.** Toadette
- **C.** Toaderalla
- **D.** Toadally a Girl

2 With the release of Aeon Flux, you're probably thinking about your other favorite MTV cartoons. Remember The Maxx? That ruled. Did they ever make a game starring that thing?
- **A.** Yes, it was awesome.
- **B.** Yes, it was terrible.
- **C.** No, get a life.
- **D.** Is that parsley or lettuce?

3 Video game marketing is not usually spearheaded by teenage boys, despite what some game names might have you believe. Which of these hilarious titles never actually existed?
- **A.** Iggy's Reckin' Balls
- **B.** S.A.G. Commander
- **C.** Wild Woody
- **D.** Fur Fighters

4 Porntipsguzzardo. It may sound dirty, but it's actually a cheat code that will grant you a hefty chunk of money in which one of these games?
- **A.** Sim City 2000
- **B.** Warcraft
- **C.** Myth: The Fallen Lords
- **D.** Playboy: The Mansion

5 The Dragon's Lair hero faced some terrifying foes and died many grisly deaths, but he kept coming back for more. Maybe that's why they called him Dirk the...
- **A.** Daring
- **B.** Diggler
- **C.** Daunted
- **D.** Diligent

6 Okay, Maverick. If you can correctly determine which flight game this screen is taken from, you will be awarded a Ph.D in Airplanes.
- **A.** Ace Combat 4: Shattered Skies
- **B.** Crimson Skies: High Road to Revenge
- **C.** Lethal Thunder
- **D.** Lethal Skies II

7 Fawful has become one of the most quotable video game characters in history, due in no small part to his tenuous grasp of English. Which of the following phrases does he NOT utter in Mario & Luigi: Superstar Saga?
- **A.** "The mustard of your doom!"
- **B.** "HOTNESS! It is the overheat!"
- **C.** "A championship of rudeness!"
- **D.** "I have fury!"

8 If there's one thing better than watching players get injured on the field, it's watching an ambulance run them over. Which of the following years was the last that saw a Madden game feature the ambulance?
- **A.** 1999
- **B.** 2000
- **C.** 2001
- **D.** 2002

9 Guitar Hero developer Harmonix is best known for its music and rhythm games, but the company also made a console game that wasn't all about gettin' down and funky. What was it?
- **A.** The Simpsons Skateboarding
- **B.** Toe Jam & Earl III
- **C.** Mister Mosquito
- **D.** EyeToy: AntiGrav

10 Not all NES peripherals gave us the control we were hoping for, but you haven't played Marble Madness until you've played it with this bad boy. What was this controller called?
- **A.** Quickshot Trackball
- **B.** Rolling Thunder Trackball
- **C.** G-Force Trackball
- **D.** [ball-related throwaway answer omitted]

BREAKDOWN

130 the average number of cumulative years played on Halo 2 on a single day

75% of teens participating in a recent survey claimed that their interest in gaming is declining, with 78 percent saying that they play games less they did than last year

1.9% of the previews in this issue contain hidden messages. You just have to decipher the pattern…

80% of the 360 games Reiner tried to buy pre-launch were display boxes

100% of Mages in WoW, upon learning the Blood Elves' racial ability, underwent a threefold increase in whininess

★ Trivia Score & Rank ★

SOME ASSEMBLY REQUIRED

xBOX 360

0-1
Pile of plywood

2-3
"Xbox 360"

Val-U-Mart Nonamo PlayGamer 20XX

XCARDBOARD BOX

4-5
Val-U-Mart PlayGamer 20XX

6-7
XCardboardbox

8-9
3 GameCubes taped together

10
Xbox 360
Core System

Video Game Trivia Answers: 1. B 2. C 3. B 4. A 5. A 6. D 7. C 8. B 9. D 10. A

DIDN'T WANT TO
BE A FOLLOWER

BECAME A SOLDIER

AUG '04

FEB '05

SSG VICTOR HENDRICKS,
SQUAD LEADER 31B, MILITARY POLICE

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