

STRANGLEHOLD

John Woo's Epic For PS3, Xbox 360, And PC Unveiled

SEVEN FOR SQUARE ENIX IN 2006
We Explore Kingdom Hearts II And Six Other New Games From The RPG Masters

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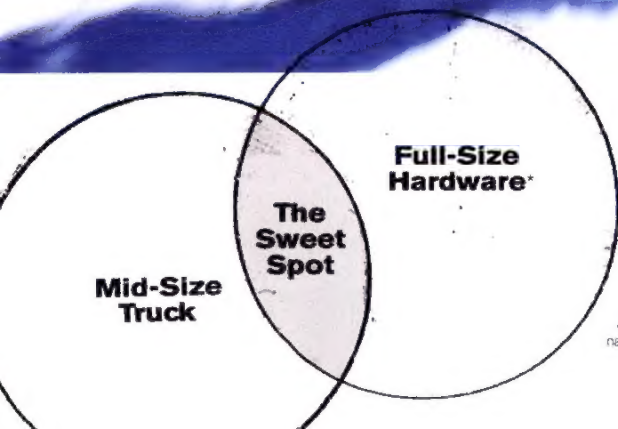


MARCH 2005



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Double Black Diamond



The 265-hp Nissan Frontier



SHIFT_capability

"When you play this game, you're in for some serious hack n' slash" - Game Informer Magazine



U

ntold Legends™ The Warrior's Code™ is next in the Untold Legends series, following the #1-selling RPG PSP (PlayStation(R)Portable) system game of all time, Brotherhood of the Blade™, which launched in 2005. In The Warrior's Code, the realm is one of chaos and oppression as a powerful warlord's strange and horrific minions continue to slaughter and enslave the people. When members of a secret shape-shifter race begin to disappear, suspicions of an insidious plot to exterminate this ancient people lead many to flee into the wilderness for survival. While struggling to evade capture and death, some of these shape-shifter refugees stumble upon a carefully guarded and stunning secret that rekindles hope for freedom and peace to the realm.

N

ow you can have it all in one package, The Warriors Code is the real deal when it comes to an enhanced combat engine with intense hack-n-slash action. This new addition to the series allows you to challenge yourself with a wider variety of quest types, explore more than 45 areas and if that's not enough, now you get to experience 12 massive boss battles featuring interactive lairs and unique new gameplay challenges. The new macro-chat communication system, online lobby and matchmaking system, five playable characters (with enhanced customization) and rich animations will take you over the top. Did we mention, The Warriors Code has more than 40 unique monsters with improved AI too?



*According to the NPD Group as of October 1, 2005



www.untoldlegends.com

Start Your Legacy - March 2006



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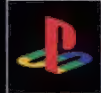
PlayStation Portable



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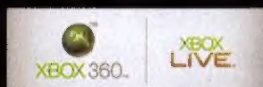
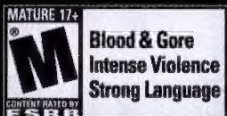


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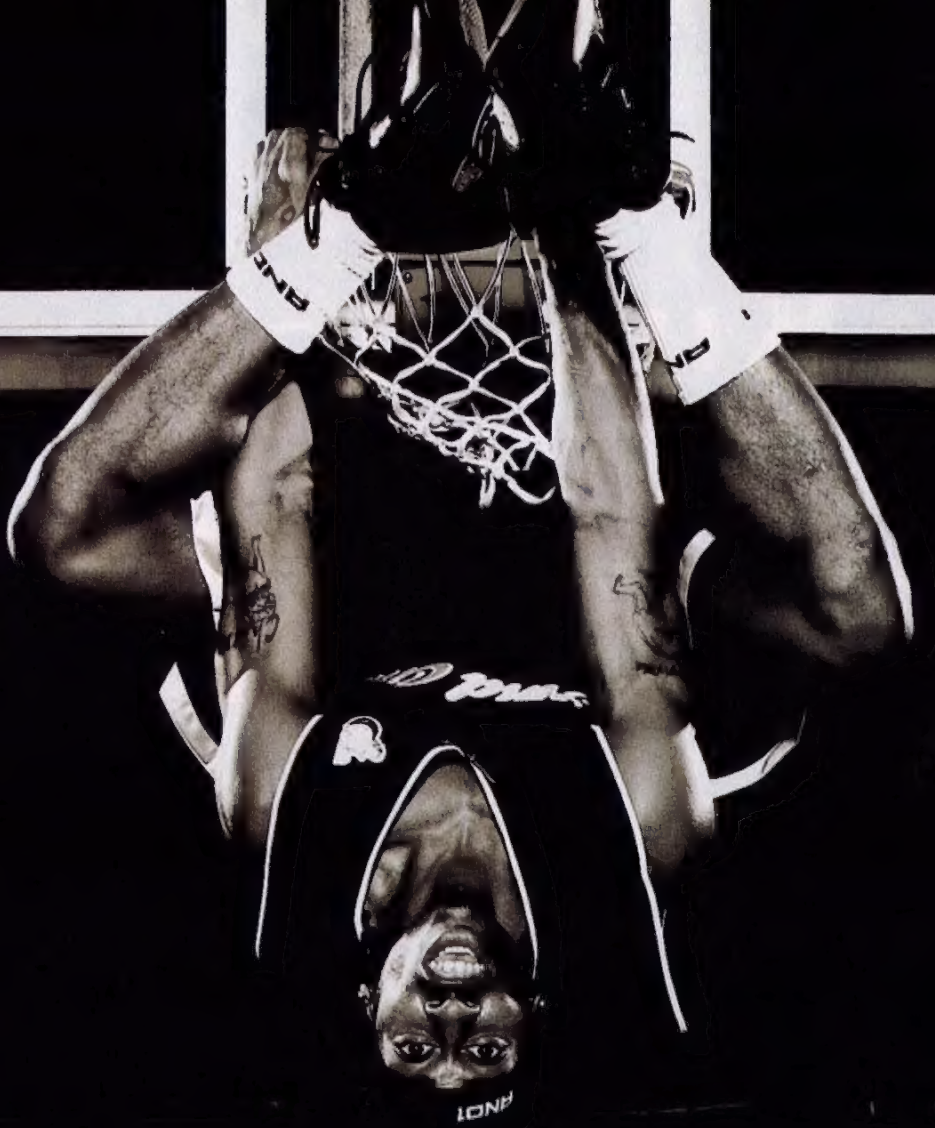
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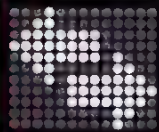
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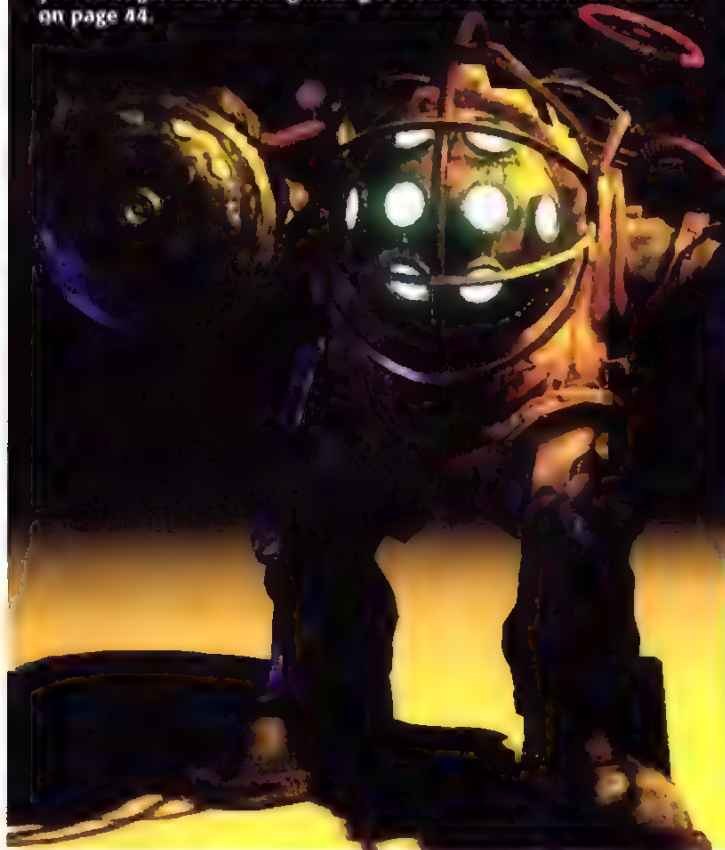
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cover story

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Piece together the war-torn remnants of a forgotten utopia in our exclusive first look at this intellectual first-person adventure from Irrational Games. As a spiritual successor to the developer's legendary System Shock 2, the twisted choices presented in BioShock will keep you on edge. Learn the frightening secrets that lie below the surface on page 44.

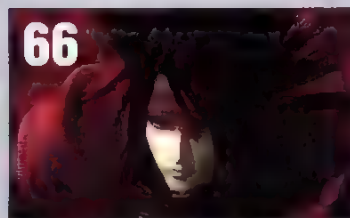


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The talented team at Midway that brought us Psi-Ops is going directly to the source for over-the-top action: John Woo. Game Informer heads out to the developer's studio and gets the exclusive first look at what Mr. Woo has to offer video games.



66 SQUARE ENIX 2006

We tell you about all the Square Enix games that you don't know about, including updates on the Mana series and the new Valkyrie Profile. An extensive hands-on report on the much-anticipated Kingdom Hearts II awaits you as well.

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HEAT BY LUDACR.S SUEDE BY PUMA.



STAFF

People Who Actually Get Paid To Play Video Games



DROPPING KNOWLEDGE FROM MOUNT DEVO

ANDY McNAMARA
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

It seems like every other day I have to endure yet another story on the Internet or in some magazine about video game journalism. This subject is pretty difficult for me to tackle, simply because I feel that any time a piece like this is written, it is more of a self-serving "look at me, I'm a good journalist" type of thing than a realistic look at what is going on in the world.

That said, I'm not going to preach on the subject, as I think most people have the common sense to understand what is right and wrong. I will say that Game Informer (incoming self-serving verbiage) works very hard to get you, the reader, the stories that matter, free of any outside influences or pressures.

The constant chorus of negativity that video game writers are being paid off left and right is perhaps one of the most ludicrous things I have ever heard. Readers and industry pundits constantly point out inconsistencies as the hallmark of being "on the take." I personally look at these things as a simple difference in opinion or, as Devo put it, "Freedom of Choice."

It amazes me that reviewers are only right when the person reading them agrees with the analysis. If not, the chant of "payola" isn't far behind. Every editor on staff here takes every review, news piece, feature, or tiny detail they write very seriously - heck, even stupid joke captions. We argue about them, we challenge each other, but we always ultimately let honesty be our guide.

We have all bought a bad game. It sucks. We have also experienced the wonder of finding a hidden gem, and like yourself, we love telling people about that amazing world people have yet to see.

We aren't perfect. No one is. To use a bad sports analogy, even Hank Aaron struck out sometimes. We will make mistakes. But I can tell you that we take our magazine and your continued readership very seriously, and would never do anything to jeopardize your trust. We tell you what we think is cool. Sometimes you disagree. Freedom of choice. It's what you got.

Cheers,

Andy >> andy@gameinformer.com

Handle: The Game Hombre **Expertise:** RPGs, Action/Platform, Driving, First-Person Shooters **Interests:** Lazy Sunday, Frostshock, Laying The Smack Down, The WoW War Effort **Dislikes:** The Political Machine That Unfairly Singles Out Video Games, Crackpots Who Think That They Have The Right To Push Their Views On Others **Current Favorite Games:** World Of Warcraft, Street Fighter Alpha 3 Max, Fight Night Round 3



Reiner >> reiner@gameinformer.com

Handle: The Raging Gamer **Expertise:** RPGs, Fighting, Action/Platform, Strategy, Sports **Interests:** TV's Dynamic Duo: *The Colbert Report* & *The Daily Show*, *The Desert Fathers* (The Perfect Music For Geometry Wars), Providing Bogus Information In The Office's World Of Warcraft Discussions (Prince Adam's Quest Is Awesome!) **Dislikes:** The Inconsistency Of Xbox Live Achievements, The Forthcoming HD-DVD/Blu-Ray War, Marvel Comics (Destroying Its Universe One Costume At A Time) **Current Favorite Games:** Guitar Hero, Onimusha: Dawn Of Dreams, Grandia III, Shadow Hearts: From The New World



Matt >> matt@gameinformer.com

Handle: The Original Gamer **Expertise:** First-Person Shooters, Action/Platform, Action/Adventure, Action/Sports **Interests:** Kate Bush, The Flesheaters, *Oblivion* By David Foster Wallace, *Knowing Me, Knowing You With Alan Partridge*, Unseasonably Nice Weather, Green Tea **Dislikes:** *Fantastic 4* (Reiner Lied To Me! It Was Awful!), Pepsi (The Cola Wars Will End In Flames), Ovanan Cancer **Current Favorite Games:** Super Princess Peach, Tetris DS, Dexter, Guitar Hero



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Handle: The Game Katana **Expertise:** Sports, Racing, Action/Adventure, Action/Platform **Interests:** David Hasselhoff's "Hot Shot City" - That Track Is Particularly Good, The Devil And Scott Stapp, Going To My First Gopher Hockey Game **Dislikes:** Chuck Norris (Every Feb. 2 Chuck Peeks Outside For My Shadow. When He Sees It, He Goes And Hides In Fear For Another Year), The Entire Manning Football Clan, Lindsay Lohan's Lollipop Head Look **Current Favorite Games:** Guitar Hero, Fight Night Round 3, TOCA Race Driver 3, Star Wars: Empire At War



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Adam >> adam@gameinformer.com

Handle: The Alpha Gamer **Expertise:** RPGs, Strategy, First-Person Shooters, Fighting **Interests:** Ahn'Qiraj Wartime Profiteering, The World Of Warcraft Board Game, Owning A Functional (And Awesome) Cell Phone, Going To Bed Early **Dislikes:** Staying Up Late To Finish An Instance Run, The Minnesota Wild Selling Out Every Game And Being Under The Salary Cap, Having To Sit Through Conversations About TV Shows I Don't Watch **Current Favorite Games:** World Of Warcraft, Star Wars: Empire At War, Mega Man, Maverick Hunter X, Metroid Prime Pinball



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Handle: The Real American Gamer **Expertise:** RPGs, Adventure, Strategy, Platform, Puzzle **Interests:** *FLCL*, The Return Of *Scrubs*, Robb Stark (Bringing The Number Of Characters I Trust To Two), Trying To Convince People That I Spent My Birthday Getting Drunk At An Airport T. G. I. Fridays **Dislikes:** *Hostel*, Scouting The Badlands For Prince Adam (Reiner Won't Give Me His Coordinates!), Comic Book Nerds (Oooh! A Bunch Of Superheroes Are Dying... Again) **Current Favorite Games:** Shadow Hearts: From The New World, Resident Evil 4 (Finally), Grandia III, World Of Warcraft, BioShock



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Handle: The Once And Future Gamer **Expertise:** RPGs, Action/Adventure, Fighting, Platform, First-Person Shooters **Interests:** The Carnage Of *Infinite Crisis*, *Lost* (Never Leave Me Again), *The Colbert Report* (Watch Out For Those Bears!) **Dislikes:** The Baleful Return Of American Idol, Puppies In Adolescence, Anytime There Are No Brownies Nearby **Current Favorite Games:** Guitar Hero, Zuma, Kingdom Hearts II, Castlevania: Dawn Of Sorrow, Jak X Combat Racing, Prince Of Persia: The Two Thrones

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GAMEINFORMER

MARCH 2006
Volume XVI • Number 3 • Issue 155

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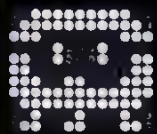
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Candid Photos From The Seedy Underbelly Of The Video Game Industry



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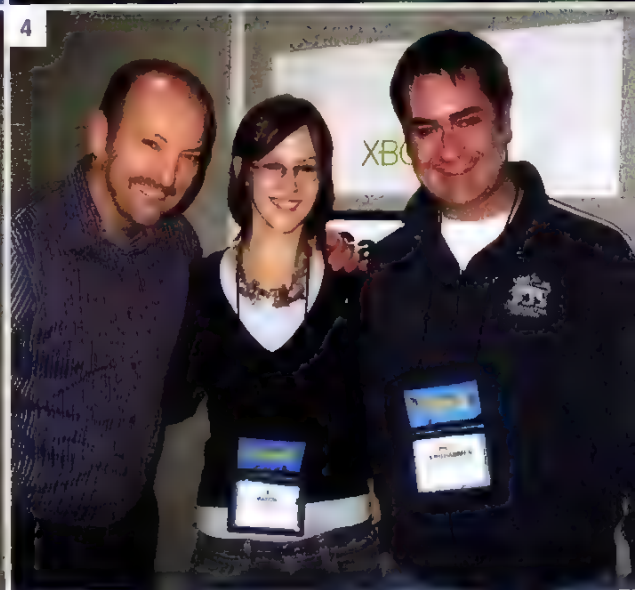
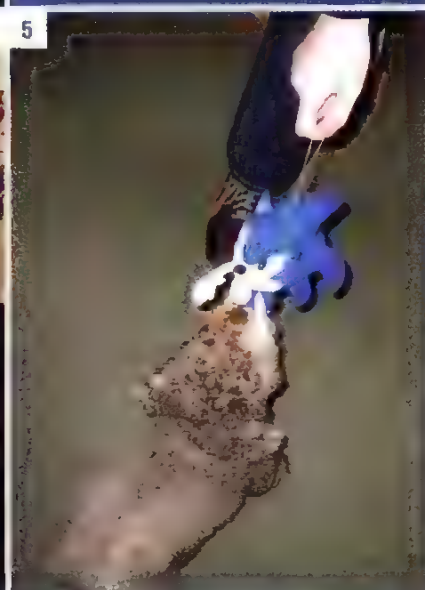
1 Joe and Miller pow-wow with Gonzo Communications' Kirk Green and D3 Publisher's Andy Pan 2 Jeremy threatens Atari's Kyle Peschel and Highwater's Josh Shabtai 3 GI Spy captures the spirits of Bethesda's Charles Habbit and Mad Doc's Parker Davis and Ian Davis. Guess which major sci-fi franchise Mad Doc is working on? (Hint: It's not *Andromeda* starring Kevin Sorbo!) 4 Lisa and Billy hang with Microsoft honcho Peter Moore at the recent Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas 5 Andy's dog, Dutch, expresses his displeasure at the decline of the Sonic the Hedgehog franchise 6 The crew at Irrational Games represents for GI Spy 7 Beginning a new chapter in his life at Nintendo, PR veteran Matt Atwood finds love in the arms of a burly Italian plumber... 8 ...as the pair ride off into the sunset to see a screening of *Brokeback Mountain!*



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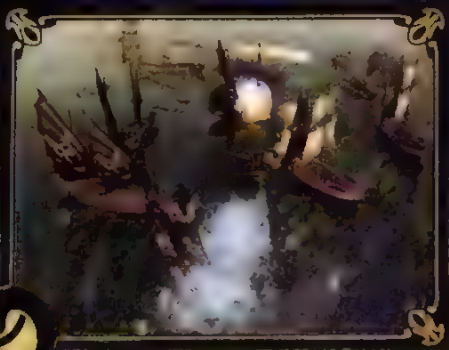
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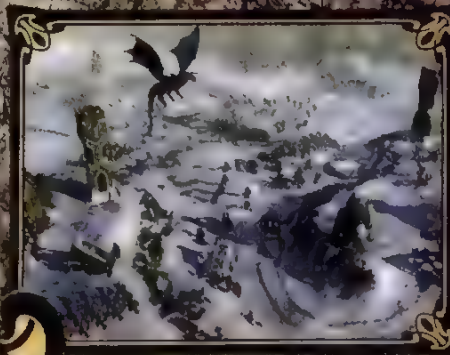
OR THE SHIRE

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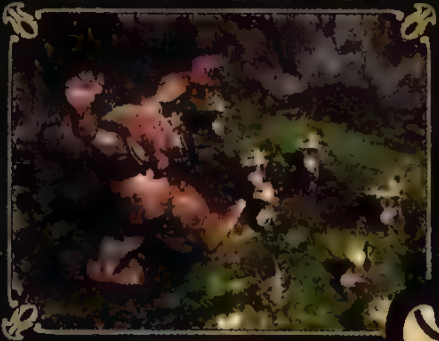
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SHADOWS OF DOUBT

To Matt: I just wanted to personally tell you that you have lost my respect as a game reviewer. You were a fool to give the game Shadow the Hedgehog a rating of 4 in issue 153. If I were standing in front of you right now, I would either punch you in the face or use a chaos emerald to use Chaos Blast and send you to oblivion. That game was the best Sonic game ever created, except for possibly Sonic Heroes. Shame on you, Matt. Shame on you. If I were you, I would go into self-imposed exile.

Anonymous
via aol.com

Allow me to set the record straight about Shadow the Hedgehog. For starters, Shadow does not have a Clint Eastwood rasp — he just sounds like Shadow, and it's not right for you to criticize his voice! The plot does make sense, because it's however you want the game to flow. Don't you dare say that the skating is dumb. My friends and I actually like the skating! I was outraged when you criticized the gun combat. The gun combat is not crappy! The gun combat is fine. You should take more time to master this game and not insult it again. By the way, Charmy is a real bee, not a robot.

Anonymous
Traverse City, MI

I just read your review of Shadow the Hedgehog (issue 153), and almost died when I saw your scores. Matt and Reiner gave it a 4 and a 2? What the hell? I give Shadow a 10 and above. The graphics and songs are way better than Sonic Heroes, and the storyline does make sense and does not suck. You are missing the point of Shadow: you pick his story to see what he becomes in the end. Plus, he looks good with his shotguns and swords. Oh, and Charmy Bee isn't a robot. He's just a regular bee.

Angela Flynn
Londonderry, NH

■ We were surprised to learn that even the most generic and pathetic characters can have a zealous (though misguided) fan following. We call it "The Freddie Prinze Jr. Effect." Based on the rational and level-headed discourse above, we hereby amend our Shadow the Hedgehog review as follows: The sentence that previously read "If you want to be 'mature' and 'edgy,' having a robot bee character named 'Charmy' is probably a bad idea" should now read "If you want to be 'mature' and 'edgy,' having an insipid bee character named 'Charmy' is probably a bad idea." No other changes will be required.

THE GAME BLAME

I am one of the Top 10 disappointments of 2005? You guys have got some damn nerve. The last time I checked, the consumer (me) is the one keeping the console wars alive, and pretty much the reason any game is released at all. I blame you. Yeah, that's right. How dare you review so many games with so many really good scores? How

can you expect us all to get the dough to pick up so many titles? Well, seriously, I don't blame you, but the point is that you shouldn't ever blame the gamers. We may be fickle and hard to please, but if we don't buy those precious little games you're reviewing, then there wouldn't be an industry at all.

Jason Schabert
via yahoo.com



I doubt I'll be the only one to comment on your Top 10 Disappointments of 2005, in which you blame the fans for not supporting the great games that come out.

It is the consumer that determines what games are great by supporting them. If they decide not to buy it, guess what? The game isn't as great as you thought it was. Obviously it was missing something or it would have sold better. Not to mention that 2005 had some really great games all come out at the same time toward the end of the year. When you're buying Age of Empires III, Civ IV, Quake IV, Call of Duty 2, and F.E.A.R. (and that's just for PC) all within a couple of weeks of each other, it sort of empties the pockets and delays other purchases.

You are entitled to your opinion about us, but let me just say I'm disappointed that you would ever let something like that print. I know I always try not to bite the hand that feeds me.

Anthony Daughtry
via gmail.com

■ Success can be a difficult thing to gauge in the gaming industry. Some titles receive critical acclaim but don't achieve high sales, while others can sell a million copies despite abysmal review scores. How many units a particular game sells doesn't necessarily indicate its quality, but that number certainly does influence what kind of games publishers are willing to bring to the market. Unfortunately, that means that some of the clever, quirky games (like Psychonauts, Indigo Prophecy, and Killer 7, to name a few) can get lost in the shuffle. However, you are absolutely right to call us out when we lay the fault solely on you, the consumer. After all, we aren't

CHIN UP

This last Friday I crashed my dad's Infinity G35 Coupe and completely tore out the right headlight. Then yesterday I really screwed up my saxophone audition. Needless to say, I'm bumming pretty bad. Can you help me out?

Devin Quinn
via yahoo.com

■ Sure thing, Devin. There is only one thing in this wide world that can act as a 100-percent effective cure for the blues. Big Boss on a surfboard delivering a pizza. Enjoy.

beyond blame ourselves, and neither is the industry as a whole. Individually, we aren't out there buying every single game that comes out. And, as a gaming publication, perhaps we aren't doing everything we can to maximize exposure of these unique titles. Maybe the publishers aren't giving these games the support they need and deserve. Whatever the cause, these great games just aren't reaching the people that they need to reach, and that's the real disappointment. So, we truly are sorry if you felt like we were sitting on our high horse pointing fingers. We are part of the problem, too. Admitting it is the easy part; finding the way to fix it is a bit trickier.

A KIMPLAINT

You guys seem to be completely unaware of the Kim Possible franchise when deciding what games to review. I've never seen your scores for Team Possible and Kimmunicator, and I double check every issue! I've been a subscriber for years, but if you don't stop yapping about stupid Sam Fisher and Solid Snake, I will cancel my subscription. Long live Team Possible!

Alex Athens
Sammamish, WA

■ We aren't so much unaware of the Kim Possible games as we are ignoring them. We just can't cover each and every game that is released in a given month, so we do our best to focus on the ones that will be the most compelling for our readers. Kim Possible (and any number of other niche-market titles) may have a dedicated audience, but in the gaming world, Sam Fisher and Solid Snake (stupid or not) have a bit more clout and relevance. Furthermore, even if we did review the games starring Kim and her crew, we get the sense that anyone who is devoted enough to end a correspondence with the rallying cry "Long live Team Possible" would probably be dissatisfied and infuriated by any scores that are at odds with his/her personal opinion (read: scores less than 9.5). As it stands right now, you can blissfully enjoy your favorite Disney characters unencumbered by critical scrutiny, and we don't have to play Kim Possible games. Everyone wins!



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THE BURNING QUESTION

In your preview of World of Warcraft's Burning Crusade expansion, you mentioned many of the abilities of the Horde's new race, the Blood Elves. Why didn't you mention anything about the Alliance's new race, the Worgen?

Chad P
via gmail.com

The Alliance expansion race will be the Draenei, FYI. Plus you'll get to fight Arthas.

Daniel Garrick
via yahoo.com

I can't wait to start a cute Pandaren alt when Burning Crusade comes out! Why hasn't Blizzard released any screens of this new addition to the Alliance family?

Cissy Salazar
via hotmail.com

■ **Oh, The Internet, you two-faced scoundrel! One minute you lead us to the promised land of hilarious online videos ("Mr. Pibb + Red Vines = Crazy Delicious"), and the next you mislead legions of gullible MMO addicts by presenting pure hearsay as unassailable truth. Here is a public service announcement for people who think that message boards are the place to go to get insider info straight from the source: your buddy who "totally works for Blizzard and isn't lying" on PopularGamingForum.com does not, in fact, work for Blizzard. While plenty of people have taken various developer comments and speculated on the plausibility of various new races, as of this printing, there has still been no official word from Blizzard identifying the culprit. Believe us, we're as anxious to know as you are, and we'll stuff your WoW-hole full of details as soon as they're available. We're keeping our fingers crossed for Murlocs!**

GI GOES TO THE MOVIES

I just got back from seeing Uwe Boll's *Bloodrayne*, and I hate to say it, but I think he's slowly getting better. He actually assembled a real cast. While the movie isn't going to win any awards, you have to admit that it's not the unbearable trash that was *House of the Dead* and *Alone in the Dark*.

Derrek
via hotmail.com

■ **We will admit nothing of the sort. In fact, Jeremy and Joe took one for the team and went to go see *Bloodrayne* on opening night. Once they regained higher-level brain functions, they seemed to disagree with your "Improved Boll" theory.**

Joe: Well, for once I can say that Uwe Boll has made a unique contribution to filmmaking. He has made Kristanna Loken look about as sexy as a bucket of chum.

Jeremy: I thought she only played a robot in *Terminator 3*!

Joe: She's a cyborg. A vampire cyborg, with a pet Laser Wolf, who teaches calculus to disadvantaged children...wait. Sorry, I got bored thinking about it and started making up my own movie.

Jeremy: Man, if I went to that movie instead, I probably wouldn't have suffered from these horrible convulsions ever since.

Joe: I feel like a chump for not using my out-dated student I.D. for a discount like you did, because every dollar I paid to see it was a dollar too much.

Jeremy: Ah, student discounts. It's the scam that keeps on giving.

ENVELOPE ART

MARCH WINNER!

DALE KNAFFKA

I really enjoyed your article about the new game, and I was inspired to create this artwork. I hope you like it!



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

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TINA BERANEK

"I totally understand why you didn't like Concrete Jungle. C'mere and let me prove it with stabbing"



LORI POWELL

No matter how big your gun or impressive your scowl, you can't be a tough guy if you are certifiably "Cuddly." Sorry, Dexter



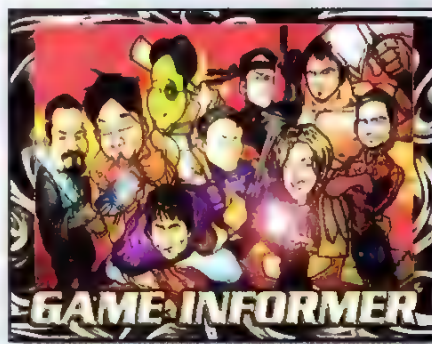
CHARLES BONDA

Kain doesn't care if Krazy Swordz™ are for kids. They make feasting on the innocent fun!



IOSUE CAMPODNICO

So, this isn't a product Raiden could use...



PATRICK O'CONNELL

Accurate down to every detail, especially the one about Andy being the only cross-dressing GI staff member

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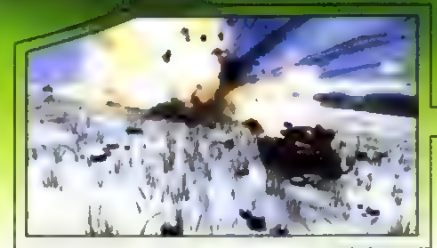
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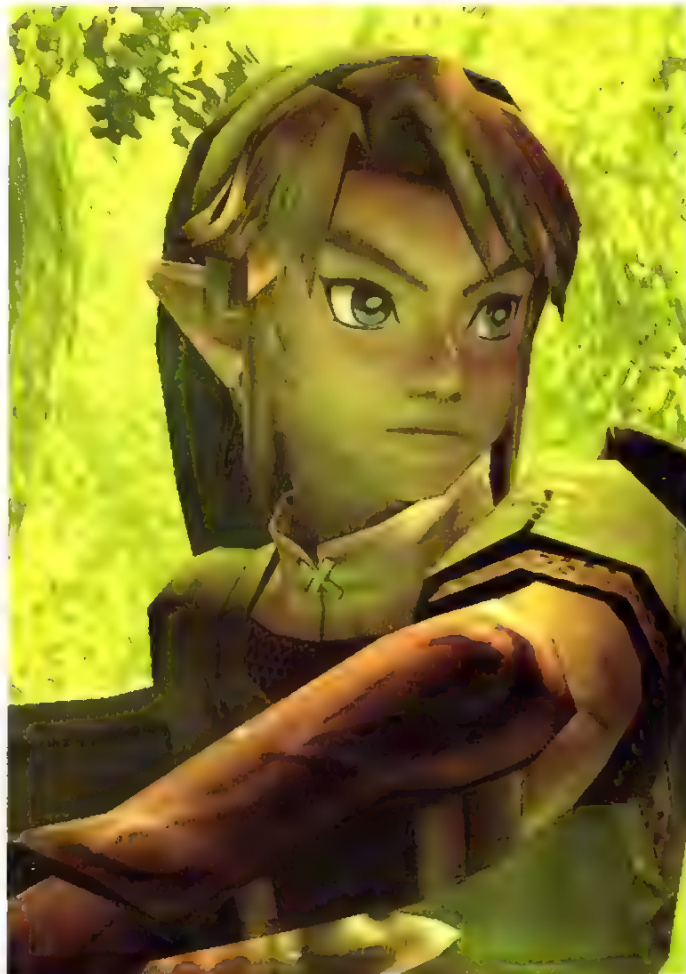


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news

RUMORS OF DEATH GREATLY EXAGGERATED

CURRENT-GEN CONSOLES NOT DEAD

Even with the next generation of gaming dominating the minds of players everywhere, the vast majority of the gaming public is still plugging away on their old systems. In fact, the PlayStation 2 was the best-selling system in December, even in the face of the Xbox 360's November launch. And it's not just Microsoft's problem. When the PlayStation 3 and Revolution appear this year, it's realistic to expect that those systems – like the Xbox 360 – won't have enough launch numbers to be able to cover everyone who wants one. Therefore, in 2007 there are still going to be plenty of gamers who are rocking their old boxes. This year alone we're going to see some of gaming's biggest franchises go toe-to-toe with next-generation's newbies.

Will it be worth it? Well, that depends on which system you own. Each company is taking a different approach to this reconciliation between the new and old. In general, however, current-gen gaming should be attractive to publishers and developers for a couple of reasons. Development costs for a PS2 game, for example, will be cheaper than jumping to PS3, and those titles won't cost as much as a \$59.99 next-gen third-party game. Moreover, we could see future price drops for the current-gen systems that makes picking one of them up simply a good deal. Who wouldn't want a powerful platform with a built-in library of hundreds of titles?

While the home consoles segue into new technology, the handheld market is doing just fine. With no next-generation iterations of the Game Boy Advance, Nintendo DS, or PSP in the near future, handheld owners don't have to worry about support for these systems drying up anytime soon. Besides, with Nintendo's handhelds in particular doing absolutely monster business – even for the ol' GBA – the future is a straight-A grade. Check out our outlooks for the current-gen consoles, as well as some games on the horizon.



THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: TWILIGHT PRINCESS – GC

(NINTENDO) RELEASE: TBA

Despite rumors that this game was heading to the Revolution, Nintendo has stood firm on the GameCube receiving its second Zelda title. The company is silent on its release date, only stating that we won't see it before April. Despite these mysteries, we do know a bit about the game, which transforms Link into a wolf as he prowls the Twilight world and tries to stop it from overtaking Hyrule.



There's not much to look forward to on the GameCube, but Twilight Princess should prove worth the wait



GAMECUBE

GameCube owners haven't had a lot to cheer about recently, and the system as a whole hasn't been supported very well. As for the future, it doesn't look very good. The Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess is the one triple-A title to look forward to, and it's highly unlikely the floodgates are going to open up anytime soon, particularly after the Revolution comes out. The platform supports backwards compatibility with GameCube games, so there's little reason to hold on to your GameCube — even if it does have a handle.

GRADE: **D**



FINAL FANTASY XII – PS2

(SQUARE ENIX) RELEASE: TBA

The Final Fantasy XII demo disc (packaged with Dragon Quest VIII) gave us hands-on time with FF XII's real-time Active battle mode, and we can't be more excited for this RPG to finally come out. Even though an exact date has yet to be set, the release of FF XII is sure to be one of the year's biggest events. Square Enix kicks off its blockbuster year this spring with the release of Kingdom Hearts II. Five other games are slated for 2006 — all for the PS2. For more, turn to page 66.



FAR CRY INSTINCTS: NEXT CHAPTER – XBOX

(UBISOFT) RELEASE – SPRING

Jack Carver's nightmare vacation continues in this sequel to Far Cry Instincts. Although the island paradise setting returns, the tentatively titled Next Chapter features a number of undisclosed new characters, features, and a new storyline.

PLAYSTATION 2

Sony has garnered the largest installed user base by far in the console wars by supporting the PlayStation long after the PS2 came out. Those PSOne owners have carried over to the PS2, and Sony is banking on the possibility that this same strategy will make for a legion of PS3 owners. The company has said that it sees a five-year life for the PS2 after the PS3 comes out, and it is doing its part to support the PS2 for the foreseeable future. Tourist Trophy and a rumored God of War 2 are two high-profile first-party titles that are on the docket, and Sony has hinted to us that there is more on the way. What's a more powerful asset for the PS2, however, is its third-party support. Not only are the vast majority of current-gen titles coming out on the console, but with important partners like Rockstar Games and Square Enix, some of this year's best titles are going to be on the PS2. In fact with Rockstar porting Grand Theft Auto: Liberty City Stories over to the PS2 from the PSP, perhaps we are seeing the opening of a new pipeline of titles from the PSP to the PS2 that other publishers will follow. The future outlook for your PS2 is very good, and we expect to keep ours plugged into our gaming rig for a while.

GRADE: **B+**

XBOX

As opposed to Sony's strategy of constantly growing its current- and even old-generation console fans in order to create a fanbase for the PS3, Microsoft has already cashed in its Xbox chips. The system sold very well during 2004's holiday season, but with the November release of the Xbox 360, Microsoft has left those relatively new Xbox owners for the exciting pastures of the next generation. The company has publicly stated that it won't completely drop the system, but there are no first-party Xbox titles on the horizon. But the future is far from bleak, because here's where Microsoft's third-party alliances will come to the rescue. With major companies like Ubisoft, Activision, and Electronic Arts putting their current-gen titles on the Xbox, there will still be plenty to play on the system. As a bonus, it will be interesting to see if Rockstar continues its practice of Grand Theft Auto hand-me-downs for the Xbox after they've had an exclusive run first on the PS2 — making an Xbox Liberty City Stories an exciting possibility. The only downside of future support for the Xbox is that the platform likely won't see as many exclusives as the PS2.

GRADE: **C**

(Continued on page 26)



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PlayStation 2

(Continued from page 23)

CURRENT GEN CONTINUED

STILL NOT DEAD!



NBA BALLERS: PHENOM – PS2/XBOX (MIDWAY) RELEASE – MARCH

Midway had great success with NBA Ballers last year, and the company is blowing out the franchise with this game featuring two-on-two and one-on-one basketball. As the title states, the storyline of this game charts your rise to the top from an unknown to a NBA superstar through a story mode that takes place on and off the court. Movie deals, your own record label, and even a clothing line are all within reach – provided you've got the skills and savvy to pull it all off.



ERAGON – PS2/XBOX/GC (VIVENDI) RELEASE: FALL

Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers developer Stormfront Studios is back with this adaptation of Christopher Paolini's hit fantasy novel. The game is coming out in conjunction with a movie planned for this December, and the title allows gamers to fly around on Eragon's dragon Saphira as he learns to become one of the legendary dragon riders and avenge the death of his family.



YAKUZA – PS2 (SEGA) RELEASE: FALL

This Sega release is the first Japanese game to deal with the subject of the country's tattooed mafia gang, which is older than Italy's famed La Cosa Nostra. Yakuza contains an engine that Sega built from the ground up to suit the title's emphasis on comboing multiple enemies into submission in the streets of Tokyo. The game features a story penned by award-winning Japanese novelist Hase Seishu and centers around Kazuma Kiryu, a former Yakuza member just out of jail. Kiryu will also have to bribe, gamble, and interrogate his way towards a missing \$100 million.



RAINBOW SIX: CRITICAL HOUR – PS2/XBOX (UBISOFT) RELEASE: MARCH

Retailing for only \$29.99, this title is an homage to the series in that the campaign is composed of seven Rainbow Six levels chosen by fans and technologically revamped for the times. Multiplayer offers 16 levels for play, and the entire game spans the globe, hitting locations in Mexico, Siberia, Venice, and even Idaho – which rhymes with potato.

Here's a list of some other notable confirmed current-gen titles slated to appear in '06

Activision

- X-Men 3 (May) – PS2, Xbox, GC

Atlus

- Steamboat Chronicles (Summer) – PS2

Blizzard

- StarCraft: Ghost (TBA) – PS2, Xbox

Capcom

- Okami (March) – PS2

Eidos

- Hitman: Blood Money (Spring) – PS2, Xbox
- Tomb Raider: Legends (April) – PS2, Xbox

Electronic Arts

- Black (February) – PS2, Xbox
- NFL Head Coach (April) – PS2, Xbox
- The Godfather (March) – PS2, Xbox
- Superman Returns (June) – PS2, Xbox

Namco

- Xenosaga III (TBA) – PS2

Nippon Ichi

- Atelier Iris: Eternal Mana 2 (Spring) – PS2
- Disgaea 2 (Summer) – PS2

Sony

- Rogue Galaxy (TBA) – PS2
- Tourist Trophy (Spring) – PS2

Take 2

- Bully (Fall) – PS2, Xbox
- Grand Theft Auto: Liberty City Stories (TBA) – PS2

Ubisoft

- Splinter Cell: Double Agent (Spring) – PS2, Xbox, GC
- Far Cry Instincts: Next Chapter (Spring) – Xbox

DATA FILE

More News You Can Use

NAMCO/BANDAI OFFICIALLY MERGE

Cementing a business deal that was formally created back in the fall of last year, publisher/developers Namco and Bandai have officially merged to become Namco Bandai Games America in North America.

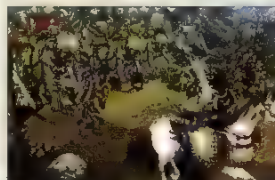
HIGH MOON OVER VIVENDI

After breaking away from Japanese company Sammy in order to become independent, High Moon Studios (Darkwatch) is back under the corporate thumb. The developer has signed on to become a subsidiary of Vivendi Universal – with whom it is working on an upcoming project. Despite this agreement, High Moon will retain its own name and identity.



CIVILIZATIONS AT WAR AGAIN

Rise and Fall: Civilizations at War developer Stainless Studios closed its doors in December, but the PC game is getting a second lease on life, thanks to its publisher Midway. The company has taken the game to its in-house studio in San Diego, which was also facing closure after the disastrous Gauntlet: Seven Sorrows. Civilizations at War is being tweaked and has a new ship date of June.



EA CONVENES LOTR WHITE COUNCIL

In an interview, EA developer Jim Norwood said he is currently working as a software engineer on a game called Lord of the Rings: The White Council. The title will be an RPG, and will perhaps follow in the footsteps of EA's previous LOTR RPG, The Third Age (which released on current-gen systems in 2004). EA has yet to officially announce The White Council at the time we went to press.



WITNESS RELOCATION FOR GODFATHER 360?

The Godfather has been hit with another delay – at least for the Xbox 360 version. Originally supposed to appear before the end of last year, the title is now being pushed to summer, but the current-gen version will be out at the end of the month.



THANKSGIVING REVOLUTION

REVOLUTION'S RELEASE/ DOWNLOAD SERVICE TAKE SHAPE

In an interview with Japanese newspaper *Sankei Shinbun*, Nintendo president Satoru Iwata said that the Revolution console will be out in America by Thanksgiving. "We can't disclose the Revolution's release period yet, but we have no plans to miss out on the year-end sales battle. As for North America, we need to release it by Thanksgiving, or otherwise we won't receive support from the retail industry. So the Revolution will be released prior to that period." Nintendo is expected to reveal more about the Revolution's debut this May at E3.

While the launch particulars of the console are slowly taking shape, Nintendo is also formulating its plans for allowing Revolution owners to play old Nintendo and third-party games on the platform. The company has commissioned a marketing survey to gauge public interest in structure and pricing for the games download service dubbed the Virtual Console. The survey also asked about pricing for the system itself, asking people if they'd buy it within the first 12 months if it were priced at \$199 or \$299.

The survey inquired about three possible options for playing old Nintendo games: buying, rental, and subscription. Some N64 games were listed as high as \$19.99, but most titles for the NES, SNES, and N64 were cheaper. If purchased, titles would be stored on the system's memory. Rentals would be offered for a specific amount of time and an all-you-can-rent option for \$14.99 is another choice listed. Finally, a monthly subscription fee could be paid, after which you could play any game while you continued to pay for your subscription.

Potential List of
Downloadable Titles
For Revolution's Virtual
Console (Taken from
Survey)

NES

- Balloon Fight
- Donkey Kong
- Donkey Kong Jr.
- Dr. Mario
- Duck Hunt
- Excitebike
- Hogan's Alley
- Ice Climber
- Ice Hockey
- Kid Icarus
- Legend of Zelda, The
- Metroid
- Pro Wrestling
- Punch-Out!!
- R.C. Pro-Am
- Super Mario Bros.
- Super Mario Bros. 2
- Super Mario Bros. 3
- Tennis
- Tetris
- Urban Champion
- Zelda II: The
Adventure of Link

SNES

- Battle Clash
- Donkey Kong
Country 2
- Earthbound
- F-Zero
- Illusion of Gaia
- Killer Instinct
- Kirby's Avalanche
- Legend of Zelda: A
Link to the Past, The
- Pilotwings
- Star Fox
- Super Mario Kart
- Super Mario World
- Super Metroid
- Yoshi's Island

N64

- 1080° Snowboarding
- Blast Corps
- Bomberman 64
- Cruis'n USA
- GoldenEye 007
- Mario Golf 64
- Mario Party 3
- Mario Tennis
- Ogre Battle 64
- Paper Mario
- Pilot Wings 64
- Pokémon Snap
- Sin and Punishment
- Star Fox 64
- Super Mario 64
- Wave Race 64
- Yoshi's Story
- Unspecified Legend of
Zelda game

LOOSE TALK

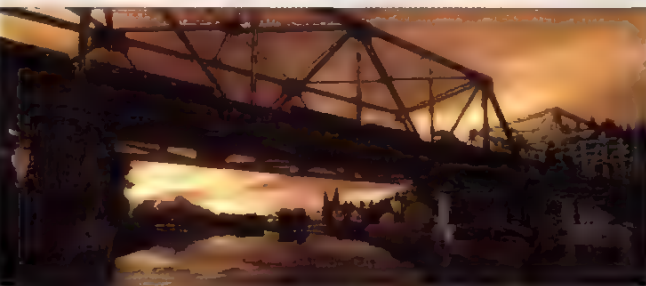
Hot Gaming Gossip

Score: 9,199
Coins: 188

■ Publishers want to offer up Xbox Live Arcade games as demos for full-fledged Xbox 360 games

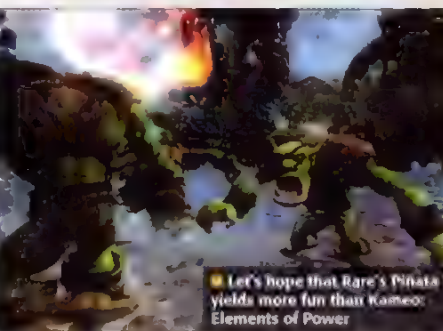
ARCADE DEMOS
360 TITLES

With more and more games appearing on Xbox Live Arcade, some companies are planning on making titles for it that are more than one-off hits. Instead, some publishers want to offer titles (perhaps for a cost) that will function as demos for full games that will later appear on the Xbox 360 - even though the gameplay in Arcade will be different than it would be in the full-fledged 360 version.



MICROSOFT KEEPS A WAKE ALIVE?

Remedy's insomniac adventure tale *Alan Wake* is set for the Xbox 360, PS3, and PC, but is currently without a publisher. Loose Talk has heard that this may soon change, with Activision, Microsoft, and Ubisoft looking hard at putting the game out. Despite this competition, we're hearing that Microsoft has the inside track at landing the title.



RARE PROJECT BUSTS LIKE A PIÑATA

Loose Talk has learned that Rare's next Xbox 360 project is codenamed *Viva Piñata*. Although details on the game are scarce at this point, it will be released in conjunction with a cartoon show on television, and Microsoft has trademarked the licensing for everything from sham-poops to trading cards.

FINAL FANTASY XIII?

With *Final Fantasy XIII* not even out yet, it makes us giddy to hear that Square Enix is already working on *Final Fantasy XIII*. Although we don't know what platform it will appear on just yet, Loose Talk has heard that the game will revolve around the number 13 in all aspects. Sounds like a sinister cloud hangs over this new *Final Fantasy*, but we can't wait to see what bad luck befalls us when this game comes out.

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

NAME THAT GAME

Test Your Sight

Before *Commandos* or *Urban Warriors*, this game was a top-down military action title of note. Appearing in the arcades courtesy of Taito and on the Atan 2600 and Colecovision, this game let you jump into abandoned tanks and lob grenades at enemy placements. The tanks came in two varieties: some were small and quick with a machine gun turret, while the others were slow, shell-firing machines. This title also allowed a friend to hop on and help you storm the enemy fortress.

(Answer on page 32)



■ Mock-up screens of Revolution's Virtual Console interface from a recent survey



BLAZE



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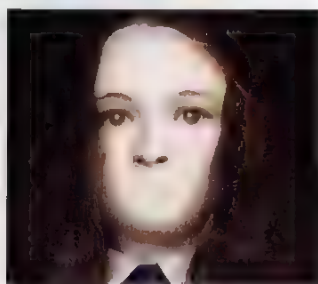
THE GOOD, THE BAD, THE UGLY

When You Want Your News Categorized With A Sarcastic Editorial Spin



GOOD

We know that the only reason you haven't played Sega's Condemned yet is that you're still working up the courage to face its host of frghts. Or maybe it's because you can't get your hands on an Xbox 360. Well, now Sega is making it even easier for you to play the game with a PC release scheduled for this spring.



GOOD

Cue the fog machines! Konami's Silent Hill series keeps us up at nights, and we're glad to see the film adaptation of the freakshow has been given a release date of April 21. The movie stars Sean Bean, as he and his wife try to find answers for their daughter's mysterious illness in the forsaken town of Silent Hill.

UGLY

Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger's California law to restrict the sale of rental of "violent video games" to those under 18 has been barred from taking effect, and will likely be labeled unconstitutional by a judge. The Video Software Dealers Association and the Entertainment Software Association filed a lawsuit against the law, which was set to start on January 1. Says Bo Andersen, President of the VSDA: "It is indeed unfortunate that the state of California has wasted precious taxpayer dollars in pursuing this legislation, when the outcome is so predictable."



GOOD

Sony has given first confirmation of a batch of PlayStation 3 titles from its Japanese internal studios - although no release dates have been attached. Genji 2, Angel Rings (RPG), Monster Carnival (action/RPG), Hot Shots Golf, Gran Turismo, and The Eye of Judgement have all been officially confirmed for the system.



BAD

Top Gun producer Jerry Bruckheimer may do a movie adaptation of Prince of Persia. He has other projects he is working on at the moment, and in an interview with ComingSoon.net he said he is "considering" a film version of the Ubisoft franchise.

NEWS

HALO 3 DELAYED? GATES ON HALO 3/HD-DVD

Last year, Microsoft head honcho Bill Gates threw down the gauntlet at Sony by declaring that Halo 3 for the Xbox 360 would come out day and date with the release of Sony's PlayStation 3. At the Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas, however, Gates recanted his stance, admitting "we don't even know when that will come out. It's up to the team when they want to ship that, and they're going to take their time to make that a super great product."

To our eyes, Gates proclamation always did seem a little hasty, given that Bungie is also working on non-Halo product, and doesn't seem in a rush to get the third iteration of the blockbuster sequel to shelves anytime soon.

When he wasn't buzz-killing Halo 3 for a world of gamers, Gates was on hand to reveal that Microsoft is planning to release an HD-DVD accessory drive for the Xbox 360. No release date or price details were given, however. The drive would allow the platform to play HD-DVDs, but would not be used for gaming. Microsoft says it has no plans to offer an Xbox 360 with a built-in HD-DVD drive.



"We don't even know when [Halo 3] will come out."

NEWS

ALL-TIME HIGH INDUSTRY BETTER THAN EVER



Star Wars titles snapped up three places in the 2005 top ten console and handheld games sales chart.

Industry analysts were wringing their hands all year, disappointed that video game sales were not doing well as companies like mega-publisher Electronic Arts and retailer GameStop [Game Informer's parent company] downgraded their fiscal forecasts. But NPD has released its sales numbers for last year, and things weren't as bleak as predicted. In fact, thanks to a late surge, 2005 was a record-setting year with retailers selling \$10.5 billion in hardware, software, and accessories (not including PC titles) - a six percent increase over 2004.

Due to the shortages of Xbox 360s, as well as a lack of a triple-A title such as a new Halo or Grand Theft Auto, some predicted that the holiday season would be a failure. But a headstart leading into November, fantastic handheld sales, and strong software showings by LucasArts and EA helped things immensely. Although the Xbox 360 only sold an estimated 600,000 units due to shortages, the system did help the industry reach its historic sales numbers. Not only was the Xbox 360 with the hard drive retailing for \$400, but each gamer picked up an astonishing average of more than four titles with each Xbox 360 - with third-party games retailing for \$59.99.

Speaking of hardware, handhelds were a strong industry force in 2005, accounting for sales of \$1.4 billion - a 42 percent increase over last year. Despite Sony's introduction of the PSP and the success of the Nintendo DS, Nintendo's old faithful, the Game Boy Advance, accounted for 52 percent of portable software sales.

The Best-Selling Console and Handheld Games of 2005:

- 1 Madden NFL 06 - PS2 (Electronic Arts)
- 2 Pokémon Emerald - GBA (Nintendo)
- 3 Gran Turismo 4 - PS2 (SCEA)
- 4 Madden NFL 06 - Xbox (Electronic Arts)
- 5 NCAA Football 06 - PS2 (Electronic Arts)
- 6 Star Wars: Battlefront II - PS2 (LucasArts)
- 7 MVP Baseball 2005 - PS2 (Electronic Arts)
- 8 Star Wars Episode III: Revenge of the Sith - PS2 (LucasArts)
- 9 NBA Live 06 - PS2 (Electronic Arts)
- 10 LEGO Star Wars - PS2 (Eidos)

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TOP FIVES

Favorites From Industry Pros And GI Readers

DEVELOPER

BRIAN SULLIVAN
President, Iron Lore
Studios (Titan Quest)



- 1 WarCraft II – PC
- 2 Age of Empires – PC
- 3 Diablo II – PC
- 4 Half-Life – PC
- 5 Command HQ – PC

READER

ORRY WRIGHT-LARSON
Kent, WA



- 1 Guitar Hero – PS2
- 2 Magna Carta: Tears of Blood – PS2
- 3 Resident Evil 4 – PS2
- 4 Final Fantasy XI – PC
- 5 Dragon Quest VIII: Journey of the Cursed King – PS2

Send Top Fives and a photo of yourself to:

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(attach digital picture)

TOP TEN

Lists...Everybody Loves Lists...

Top 10 Overlooked Gadgets from CES

- 10 OmletoSapien – The omelet-making robotic personal assistant
- 9 TrendyDevice – It doesn't do anything, but boy howdy, is it ever small and sleek!
- 8 WBViVo – Special edition TiVo that only records *Charmed* and *One Tree Hill*. Not *Reba*, though. Even the WBViVo has standards
- 7 iPod Vapor – Invisible, undetectable, and carries the Apple brand name. \$600
- 6 3DOn-the-Go – Portable version of the beloved 3DO console, allowing you to play *Rise of the Robots* and *Gex* anywhere
- 5 Hotdogfier – Humidifier and hot-dog boiler in one!
- 4 LectroSocks – Socks with downloadable ringtones
- 3 Cyborg Cobras – They still have venom! Run!
- 2 TechnoChaps – The very latest in posterior-revealing technology
- 1 The Bill Gates Robotic Companion – With kung-fu grip!

Name That Game Answer: FrontLine

ORCHESTRA OVERDRIVE

SYMPHONY SERIES BRINGS GAME MUSIC TO LIFE



The *Dear Friends: Music From Final Fantasy* symphony tour was a huge success, bringing musical pieces from the vaunted RPG series to life with orchestras and choirs. Now the creative team behind *Dear Friends* is returning with *PLAY! A Video Game Symphony*. Once again bringing some of the most recognizable aural moments in video games to life, *PLAY!* features an orchestra and soloists playing selections from titles like *Final Fantasy*, *Metal Gear Solid*, *Shenmue*, and *World of Warcraft*, for a total of around 20 games. The scores will be accompanied by memorable scenes from the games shown on large screens in the venue. The concert tour starts in North America and will continue around the world.

The producers behind the event not only have an appreciation for video games, but are actually personal friends with some of the composers involved in the project. Thus, *PLAY!* will feature lots of exclusive arrangements of the featured compositions, and *Final Fantasy*'s legendary Nobuo Uematsu has even agreed to pen the opening fanfare exclusively for the tour.

Other venues, dates, and games to be featured are still being formalized, so check back in these pages for more on *PLAY!* as it is announced.

Initial dates and venues for *PLAY! A Video Game Symphony*. Please check your local listings for more info.

Rosemount Theatre Chicago, IL
May 27, 2006 8:00 p.m.
Chicagoland Pops and chorus

Mann Centre Philadelphia, PA
July 27, 2006 8:00 p.m.
Mann Centre Orchestra and chorus

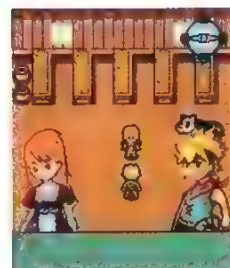
Wolf Trap Vienna, VA
August 4, 2006 8:00 p.m.
National Symphony Orchestra and chorus

games

THE COMING SHROUD
GAME UTILIZES GPS INTEGRATION

Mobile phone gaming is expanding every day – just look at last month's \$680 million deal between EA and Jamdat for proof. Your World Games is giving you a game to get your hands on with *The Shroud*, an RPG that uses GPS integration as players take part in The International Farmers League and attempt to stop monsters emerging from a netherworld known as The Shroud into our world.

Gamers take the role of Taro, who will do everything from harvest crops to fighting monsters, fishing, partaking in quests, solving puzzles, and mining for gems. Using the obvious mobile advantage of cell phones, the game also contains optional location-based gameplay where you can visit real-life places for challenges as part of the International Farmers League. Here you'll compete with other players for special items and scores. *The Shroud* will be available this spring.





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REAL TONES

Jamster Top 10

- 1. **Unpredictable** - Jamie Foxx real7182
- 2. **Sexy Party** - D4L real7183
- 3. **Adrenaline** - Juvenile real7184
- 4. **Shake** - Ying Yang Twins real7185
- 5. **Nasty Girl** - Maroon 5 I.G. real7186
- 6. **Yo** - Chris Brown real7187
- 7. **Here We Go** - Tina Turner real7188
- 8. **Get You Can't Do** - Usher real7189

Aloney Alike

- Real Tones** real
- Wife Is Catlin** real7203
 - Pimp In Distress** real7204
 - Time Is Money** real7205
 - Pimp Apparatus** real7206
 - Ho On Line 1, 2, 3, 4 & 6** real7207
 - Pick Up Ya Phone** real7208

GAMES

MotoGP URT2 Speed through & around 3D environments and objects. GAME1160	Miami Vice GAME1161	JOHNNY CRASH GAME1162	WORMS GAME1163	3D Pool GAME1164
PLATOON GAME1165	ROBOCOP GAME1166	DESTROY ALL... GAME1167	SPY HUNTER GAME1168	

HOT REAL TONES

- Temperature** - Sean Paul real7190
- Fresh Azimtz** - Bow Wow real7191
- Gasolina** - Daddy Yankee real7192
- Stay Fly** - Three 6 Mafia real7193
- Flossin'** - Mike Jones real7194
- Ride Wit Me** - T.I. real7195
- Badd** - Ying Yang Twins real7196
- Run It** - Chris Brown real7197
- I'm Sprung** - T-Pain real7198
- Presidential** - Youngbloodz real7199
- Back In Black** - AC/DC real7200
- Slow Wind** - R. Kelly real7201
- Yeah!** - Usher real7202

COLOR WALLPAPERS

If I weren't so busy, I'd date myself. pic2755

pic2756

pic2757 **pic2758** **pic2759** **pic2760**

pic2761 **pic2762** **pic2763** **pic2764**

SOFTWARE

Mobile Probe Light app1160

Strobe Light - You'll be the life of the party with the wicked mobile strobe light! app1161

SoundFX Board - Annoying Sound Generator! app1162

Dr. Love 2 - New Partner, Love, Sex? Dr. Love reveals the future of every partnership... app1163

Mobile Watch - The Mobile clock with multiple fun-filled designs! app1164

Fortune Cookies - Enjoy a new fortune cookie everyday without the calories and mess of Chinese take-out! app1165

RINGTONES

- Jamster Top 10** poly
- 1. **Unpredictable** - Jamie Foxx poly8553
 - 2. **Sexy Party** - D4L poly8554
 - 3. **Adrenaline** - Juvenile
 - 4. **Candy Sho**
 - 5. **Yo** - Chris Brown
 - 6. **Here We Go** - Tina Turner
 - 7. **Get You Can't Do** - Usher
 - 8. **Yeah!** - Usher
 - 9. **Temperature** - Sean Paul
 - 10. **Fresh Azimtz** - Bow Wow

pic2765 **pic2766** **pic2767** **pic2768** **pic2769** **pic2770**

SWAT HAPPENS **pic2771** **pic2772** **pic2773** **pic2774** **pic2775** **pic2776**

pic2777 **pic2778** **pic2779** **pic2780** **pic2781** **pic2782**

pic2783 **pic2784** **pic2785** **pic2786** **pic2787** **pic2788**

pic2789 **pic2790** **pic2791** **pic2792** **pic2793** **pic2794**

FUN SOUNDS

- Anybody In There** fun6295
- Bleep Generic** fun6296
- BlingBling - Textmessage** fun6297
- Drunk Tarzan** fun6298
- Napoleon Dynamite* - You Have A Plan** fun6299
- Mail Mail Mail** fun6300
- Old Telephone Ringing 05** fun6301
- Offensive Language** fun6302
- Police Horn** fun6303
- Press Little Button** fun6304
- The Crazy Frog - Motor** fun6305
- Too Drunk To Ring** fun6306
- I Have A Phone Call** fun6307

SCREENSAVERS

move2675 **move2676** **move2677** **move2678** **move2679** **move2680** **move2681** **move2682** **move2683**

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SIEMENS A56, SONY ERICSSON T226, SOUND FX: LG G4015, MOTOROLA V180, NOKIA 3100, SAMSUNG X426
SIEMENS A56, CPE2, SONY ERICSSON T226, COLOR WALLPAPERS: LG G4015, MOTOROLA V180, NOKIA 3100
SAMSUNG X426, SIEMENS C61, SONY ERICSSON T226, SCREENSAVERS: LG G4015, MOTOROLA V180, NOKIA 3100, SAMSUNG X426, SIEMENS C61, SONY ERICSSON T226 - for more handset information visit www.jamster.com

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CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

1991 Grad School Days

Fullerton receives her Master of Fine Arts from the prestigious School of Cinema-Television at USC, where she was a finalist for the Jack Nicholson Screenwriting Scholarship

1993 The Big Apple

Heading east, Fullerton works for the interactive film company, Interfilm, working on the company's cinematic games, including Ride For Your Life, starring Batman's Adam West. While in New York, she also begins teaching game design at the School of Visual Arts

1995 New Horizons



Moving to R/GA Interactive, Fullerton begins her career making online games for casual gamers. She helps create some very successful titles, including Jeopardy! and Wheel of Fortune Online for Sony and NetWits for the MSN network

1998 The Start-Up



Fullerton co-founds a new company back in Los Angeles, Spiderdance, Inc. The company specializes in interactive television games, and makes successful projects like History IQ for the History Channel and webRIOT for MTV

1999 Back To School

Getting back into teaching, Fullerton returns to her alma mater to teach game design classes at the School of Cinema-Television

2001 A New Home



USC School of Cinema-Television celebrates the opening of its newest facility, the Robert Zemedus Center for the Digital Arts, which houses the school's interactive media and video game programs

2004 The Next Level

The school's game program gets a tremendous boost when Electronic Arts makes a multi-million dollar grant to the school to create a new masters program and a new state of the art facility called the EA Game Innovation Lab, where students can play, create, and test their games

TRACY FULLERTON

ASSISTANT PROFESSOR/CO-DIRECTOR EA GAME INNOVATION LAB, UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA

>> USC's School of Cinema-Television is one of the nation's most respected film schools, and thanks to a large grant from Electronic Arts, the department now has a state-of-the-art video game program. We talked with USC professor Tracy Fullerton, who helps teach would-be developers the rules of the game. <<

How did you become, for lack of a better term, a "video game professor?"

I'd been working professionally since 1991, and in about '94 or '95, around the time we started working for Microsoft, I taught some really early game design classes in New York, at the School of Visual Arts. I really had to think about how you teach game design. That's a real problem – how do you teach it? Because it's a very complicated thing, and there are so many moving parts. I came to this conclusion that the best way to teach beginning game design is to take the technology away and to talk about games in a much more down to Earth way. So, what came out of that was a style of teaching game design that involved paper prototyping and playtesting. It's teaching the process, not the technology.

What types of classes do you teach in the game program at USC?

I teach mostly the core game design classes. I have also taught game studies, which is more of a historical and theoretical approach, but my focus is on game design.

At a school like USC, a vast majority of the programs and majors have been established for many years. How did you go about crafting a new curriculum and a new program? Have you maintained elements of a traditional liberal arts education?

The undergraduate major, which is slightly different from the graduate program, is part of the liberal arts program. You take a full course of the breadth of requirements that a well-educated person should take. This is not a technology-based effort; we're not training people on tools. We're training them to be critical thinkers and creative people, and in order to really function as a creative person you have to have a breadth of knowledge. Especially in games – they are simulations of the real world; you need to understand things about the real world. If you want to make an amazing online world, you really should understand something about economics or sociology or even psychology.

How does a typical student progress through the program?

We borrow from the established program in the

is at Slamdance [this year], has become sort of a phenomenon. It's had over 300,000 downloads. It's gotten blogged about all over the world. It's at www.thatcloudgame.com. It's been on G4, they called it "phenomenal" and everybody's really excited.

You mentioned that you really don't focus on technology. Does that mean you don't have a programming or coding track?

The School of Engineering will have a track that's focused more on technology. We've been working really closely with them, because we feel pretty strongly that even the technologists need to be creative. In today's world, you can't just be a super-coder, you have to work with creative people. That's the heart of what we're doing. We call it the "playcentric" method, which is essentially putting all design and technology at the service of the player's experience.

How are your graduates doing in terms of job placement?

They're 100 percent. It's a small program... A ton of them, actually, have gone to Electronic Arts, for

*...We're not training people on tools.
We're training them to be critical thinkers
and creative people.*

Are there different majors or focuses for students within the program?

It's more focuses than majors. We have people that tend towards one thing or another, but we don't institutionalize it, because we want to create those bridges between the specialties.

That's interesting, because at big companies like Electronic Arts, game development is more and more compartmentalized. Do you think it's important that everyone learns some of the basics of game design before they specialize?

I think it's imperative, really. I think one of the biggest problems is that you get into a specialty, and are focused so strongly on your aspect of the game, that you lose sight of the game as a whole. You lose sight of what's making it onto the screen and what's making it into the player's experience. So, that is one of the things we focus on. Not to say that everyone is a designer; that's not what we'd say at all. But, everyone learns how their craft can service the design. Also, how you can speak to people in the other specialties. One of the biggest things for me is that people learn to communicate and respect and work together and get those core collaborative skills.

film school. And when I say that, it's not that it's the same classes, but the film school has a very famous production cycle. You come in; everyone's very cocky and excited and they think they can do everything themselves. So, they let you. In the first semester you make five films, or in our case, five games by yourself, essentially. You do everything, and you're basically dead by the end of the semester. Then you say, "Oh, if I only had some help." So, the intermediate classes partner you up, and you make digital projects at that stage. You have to learn to collaborate and talk to another person about your ideas. Then, at the advanced level, there are much larger teams and it's more competitive. The advanced classes are done in collaboration with the School of Engineering. So, now you're working with people that are engineers and you have to learn to communicate with those folks

Do you eventually show off the finished projects to the industry?

Yeah, one of the advanced projects is going to be at Slamdance. We just got accepted to the Independent Games Festival. We had one in the IGF last year, the student showcase. So, we're pretty proud of those projects. In fact, Cloud, the one that

obvious reasons. Some of them have started their own little companies, none of whom you've heard of yet, but hopefully you will. We had a whole group go over to Vivendi; we've had some folks work for Atari. A bunch of them work for the Academy of Interactive Arts and Sciences. Some of them are going into game journalism; some have gone over to G4.

What would you advise a kid in high school that wants to go into your program or into games to do to cultivate some of the necessary skills?

I would encourage them to make games. I know that sounds silly, but you can make a game. There are game engines out there. As part of the application process, we take a creative reel. I would encourage them not just to make the "same old, same old." They don't need to make a great, huge mod of a game. Make an innovative little casual game, that's of the scope that one or two people can do on their own. The most important thing is to get people to play your game, because that's when you'll really start learning. You'll have the pain when they don't understand, and the moment when they actually cheer and are really committed to winning. That's a great feeling.

■ Their education and USC's groundbreaking game program are intent on creating a new generation of creative game designers.

THE VIDEO GAME PROFESSOR



SET UP, LOCKED UP.

New York City, 1978. You were the fastest wheelman on the street. You were a legend. You were money. Until they set you up and sent you down. Twenty eight years inside for someone else's crime. Now you're getting out. Guess what? You got a new job..

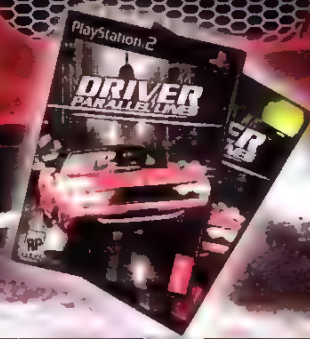
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PlayStation 2



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XPS 600 RENEGADE

Due out this spring, the limited edition XPS 600 Renegade promises to be one of the most expensive consumer PCs ever, and has the mass-market friendly computer company treading into waters previously charted only by warranty-voiding overclocking aficionados. We've listed the known specs here. More specifics (like cost) are promised in the next few months.

- Intel Pentium Extreme Edition dual-core processor over-clocked to 4.26 GHz
- Two pairs of NVIDIA GeForce 7800 graphics cards with quad scalable link interface technology
- Up to 2GB 667 MHz DDR2 memory
- Minimum 150GB hard drives at 10,000 RPM to 500GB drives at 7,200 RPM
- Windows XP Professional Service Pack 2
- Custom painted chassis done by Mike Lavallee of Killer Paint



Manufacturer: Dell
Website: www.dell.com
List Price: TBA

etc

OFFICIAL KATAMARI DAMACY SHIRTS

Manufacturer: Panic
Website: www.panic.com/goods
List Price: \$24.95



These are more than mere t-shirts. As the single officially licensed piece of Katamari Damacy merchandise in the world (besides the Japan-only soundtracks), this line designed by Keita Takahashi and Ryo Kimura is a downright crucial token of your fandom. The seven designs were each developed with the idea that embarrassing clothes shouldn't be a prerequisite to wearing gaming pride on your chest. They're printed on American Apparel stock; available in the US, Canada, Japan, and Korea; and worth every penny.

etc

I AM 8-BIT AND CONFESSIONS OF THE GAME DOCTOR



Manufacturer: Chronicle Books (8-Bit), Rolenta Press (Game Doctor)
Website: www.chroniclebooks.com (8-Bit)
www.rolentapress.com (Game Doctor)
List Price: \$22.95 (8-Bit), \$21.00 (Game Doctor)



A coffee table book for the geeky at heart, the *I Am 8-Bit* collection (to be released in the middle of March) bundles together the pieces shown at last May's 8-Bit art show. *Confessions of the Game Doctor* is a must-read collection of early gaming stories, juggling bawdy and insightful anecdotes from the industry's first journalist, Bill Kunkel (co-founder of *Electronic Games* magazine)

etc

VIEWTIFUL JOE VOLUME ONE DVD AND UMD

Manufacturer: Geneon Entertainment
Website: www.geneonanimation.com
List Price: \$19.98

The *Viewtiful Joe* cartoon is a hit in its own right, and now the show is being transferred to DVD and UMD. The disc only runs 65 minutes, but includes the opening and closing theme songs in both Japanese and English, along with a bonus track and pack-in extras like a collectible card and Joe sticker.



etc

WORLD OF WARCRAFT THE BOARD GAME

Hitting the scales at 10 solid pounds of board game action, Fantasy Flight Games' *World of Warcraft* does an amazing job of translating the online experience to detailed miniatures and an elaborate card system. Most of the video game's systems are represented in detailed enough of a fashion to make veterans smile, but are also easy enough for new inductees to make their name in the massive world and put up a good fight.

Manufacturer: Fantasy Flight Games
Website: www.fantasyflightgames.com
List Price: \$79.95



toys

HALO FIGURES – SERIES 5

We don't have a new game, but licensee Joyride is still pumping out action figures to flesh out the Halo universe. Series five just hit store shelves for the holidays and series six is on the way. Shown here is the Steel Spartan, whose accessories include a CTF flag, shotgun, and Magnum pistol. Series five also includes the Arbiter, a SpecOps Elite figure, and the Spectre vehicle.

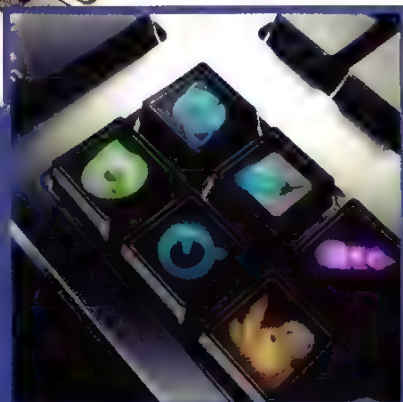


Manufacturer: Joyride
Website: www.joyridestudios.com
List Price: \$14.95

peripherals

OPTIMUS OLED KEYBOARD

Manufacturer: Art Lebedev Studio
Website: www.artlebedev.com
List Price: TBA



■ Pre-rendered concept images shown



Originally announced as a concept awaiting patents last July, we've been following this asskicking keyboard closely, dreaming of it gracing our desks. Each of the keys is a programmable OLED screen – meaning that switching from shortcut layouts for video editing, Quake, English, or Russian are each just a button-press away. Oh, and if it comes out as planned, you can assign letters or pictures to each of the screens for easier identification. The website lists a date in February for availability, but no price or retail partners, so we're crossing our fingers for a real (and affordable) release just around the corner.

■■■■ DRIVER ALERT ■■■■
STEADY RAIN OF MISSILES WITH
SCATTERED CONCRETE AND GLASS
NEXT FIVE MILES.



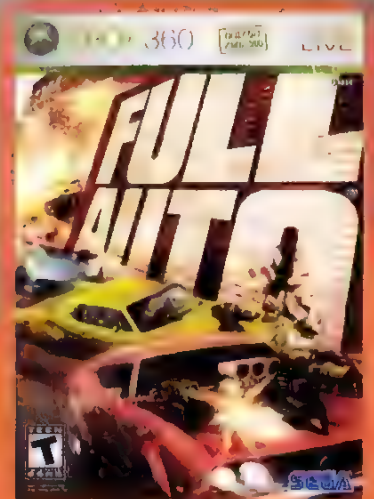
Violence

SEGA

ONLY ON
XBOX 360

XBOX 360

LIVE



WIDESCREEN HD'S FIREPOWER

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A MODIFIED DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENT GAME DEVELOPMENT



BY JON GOLDMAN, CEO,
FOUNDATION 9 ENTERTAINMENT



Independent developers hold these truths to be self-evident: All talent should have an equal opportunity to express itself, that we've got the inalienable right to some financial upside for the tremendous value we help create, and that we all have the right to pursue our own visions of liberty and happiness. (The game industry is hard, but we will assume for the time being that the right to live is not yet in jeopardy!)

Now, if you think this is some sort of lead-in to an angry screed against publishers by a disgruntled developer, it's not. Things are hitting on all cylinders at Foundation 9 Entertainment, so there's no disgruntlement here. On the contrary, our hypothesis is that if we can invest more in our business, whether infrastructure, technology, or shaping our original IP initiatives, we lighten the risk for publishers and thereby "earn" better deals.

Sound a little too happy by half? Well, given that game developers specialize in creating alternate realities that millions of consumers all over the world literally buy into to the tune of over \$10 billion per year, we should have the skills to create alternate scenarios for our businesses that allow us to attract great talent, create the kind of games that talent dreams of, continue to help publishers on their critical projects and, finally, elevate the financial returns for our side of the business. Otherwise, we should find other jobs. Nobody should start a company or continue to run one with the goal of either pooping along or whining about pooping along.

THE FUNDAMENTAL PROBLEM FOR PUBLISHERS

The video game industry is getting more complicated and more expensive. This is no surprise to anyone, but the magnitude of this challenge is stunning.

There are more viable platforms than ever before – next-gen, current-gen, handheld, mobile, online, toys, etc. Anywhere that LCD screens, computing power and memory show up together, there is an opportunity for interactive entertainment. It costs a lot of money to support so many platforms, particularly on next-gen, where development costs have sky-rock-

eted and the installed base is immature. Meanwhile, licenses are more expensive than ever too.

These factors will necessarily squeeze development budgets and therefore profitability and creative opportunities. Before you know it, what developers thought of as inalienable rights are pretty quickly alienated.

We can complain about these financial trends. We can hope to play only at the premium end of the spectrum. Or we can adapt. Option one is pointless. But either of the other two is a success strategy in and of itself.

Foundation 9 chose to adapt by actively deciding to create a portfolio of opportunities – premium and value; work-for-hire and original IP; diversity of platforms – literally every one, from 360 and PS3 to handheld, online, mobile, you name it. We built this capability through friendly mergers and acquisition to get the result we wanted quickly.

Pursuing dedicated, stable, long-term partnerships with other creative teams both in the U.S. and overseas is critical for developers to survive in this harsh landscape. Improving accounting and project monitoring systems enable you to complete projects more efficiently and monitor them along the way. Controlling your business provides predictability to publicly traded publishing partners that in turn need to provide predictability to the financial markets.

Meanwhile, on the creative and dreamier side of things, we need to re-conceptualize ourselves as more than just a game developer, but as content creators that can cross media boundaries. Games don't exist in a vacuum; they are part of a wider lifestyle that includes movies, TV, comics, collectibles, apparel, etc. If we don't consider this full picture, we don't give our games the best shot of coming to life.

Rather than just make that a mission statement, Foundation 9 has taken tangible steps to participate in related industries. We have made a significant minority investment in Hollywood management and production company, Circle of Confusion (most famous for managing the Wachowski brothers), to make sure we don't just talk about "access" to Hollywood players: Writers, directors, and studios are

When we, as developers, spend money early on shaping a concept, or getting involved in a license, publishers don't have to.

now our clients and partners in ongoing film and television opportunities.

With our internal IP, Death Jr., we not only led the game development, we also took charge of commercializing the IP in comic books, action figures, t-shirts, body jewelry, and film opportunities. We just signed a deal recently for Halloween costumes for this year. How many developers get to do that? It's not just good business, it's fun business and very motivating for the teams, a factor that spills over into all of our other projects. In fact, the steps we took in fleshing out the entire creative universe (not just the game) for Death Jr. has helped ensure that it will continue as a viable game franchise into the future.

This all costs money, and in return we expect to receive better deal economics when we invest in an opportunity early. And so far, publishers seem to agree. When we, as developers, spend money early on shaping a concept, or getting involved in a license, publishers don't have to. We're mitigating risk for them and helping solve a couple fundamental problems – financial risk and creative risk. Over time, we hope that a reallocation of risk like this will allow developers to spend more on development and enable publishers to spend more on marketing, which should expand the overall market.

In the utopian world hinted at earlier, developers strike better deals because they bring more to the table, not because they happen to win a bout in an ongoing antagonism with publishers. They expand their capabilities by specializing, reducing costs, and partnering; apply resources to fleshing out game and business ideas more fully and thereby retaining more ownership and upside in their work. And, finally, they filter these efforts through the prism of solving fundamental problems for distribution partners, whether game publisher, online service, media giant, or toy company. When this happens, we make great games and great money.

Self-evident truths? Yes. But like all things that we call "self-evident," they have been right in front of our face all along ■■■■

The views and opinions expressed on this page are strictly those of the author and not necessarily those of Game Informer Magazine or its staff

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Untold Legends: Warriors Code

NEW RELEASES

- Blazing Angels: Squadrons of WWII – Xbox, 360
- Dragon Ball Advance: Adventures – GBA
- Ghost Recon: Advanced Warfighter – 360
- Keepsake – PC
- Major League Baseball 2K6 – PS2, Xbox, PSP
- Odama – GC
- Pokémon Trozei – DS
- Pursuit Force – PSP

Corporal Odawa

07

One Year Later starts today, marking the beginning of what is expected to be the biggest shakeup in the history of comic books. After a cataclysmic event in *Infinite Crisis*, the entire DC universe is jumping ahead one year. The events of the missing year will be chronicled in the weekly series *52*. Yes, we said weekly.



01



Astonisha Story

NEW RELEASES

- Astonisha Story – PSP
- Battlefield 2: Modern Combat – 360
- Burnout Revenge – 360
- CSI 3: Dimensions of Murder – PS
- Driver: Parallel Lines – PS2, Xbox
- Far Cry Instincts: Predator – 360
- Far Cry: Next Chapter – Xbox
- From Russia With Love – PS2

14

Top 100 **THE SCARFACE** *THE BEGINNING* is a prequel to *Scar of a Woman*. What we really want to see, however, is a prequel to *Scar of a Woman*. Hoo-ha!



THE SCARFACE THE BEGINNING

08



River King: A Wonderful Journey

GAME DEVELOPERS CONFERENCE 2006 (20-24)

The focus of this year's conference is next-gen development. Some of the biggest names in the industry will be on hand to share their knowledge and advice. As always, this should be one of the most interesting events of the year for games.

20

NEW RELEASES

- Capcom Classics Collection: Remixed – PSP
- Dance Factory – PS2
- Desperados 2: Cooper's Revenge – PC
- Driver: Parallel Lines – PS2, Xbox
- The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion – 360, PC
- Field Commander – PSP
- Full Spectrum Warrior: Ten Hammers – PS2, Xbox, PC

21

Top 100 **THE GURU** is a prequel to *Scar of a Woman*. What we really want to see, however, is a prequel to *Scar of a Woman*. Hoo-ha!



The Guru

23



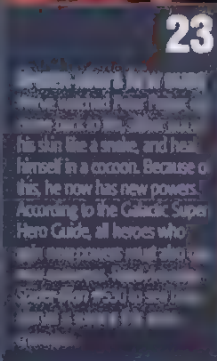
Metal Gear Acid 2

NEW RELEASES

- Daxter – PSP
- Def Jam Fight for NY: The Takeover – PSP
- Ghost Recon: Advanced Warfighter – PS2, Xbox
- Harvest Moon: Magic Melody – GC
- Metal Gear Acid 2 – PSP
- Metal Saga – PS2

28

Top 100 **SLAY ALIVE** is a prequel to *Scar of a Woman*. What we really want to see, however, is a prequel to *Scar of a Woman*. Hoo-ha!



Slay Alive

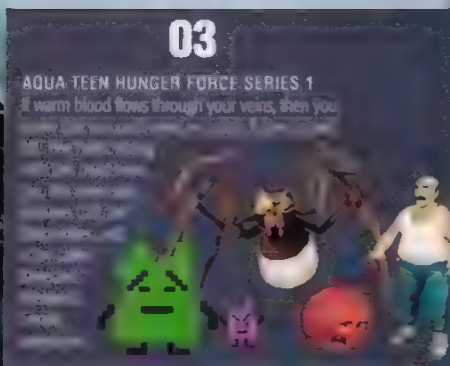
24

Top 100 **NBA BALLERS: PHENOM** is a prequel to *Scar of a Woman*. What we really want to see, however, is a prequel to *Scar of a Woman*. Hoo-ha!



NBA Ballers: Phenom

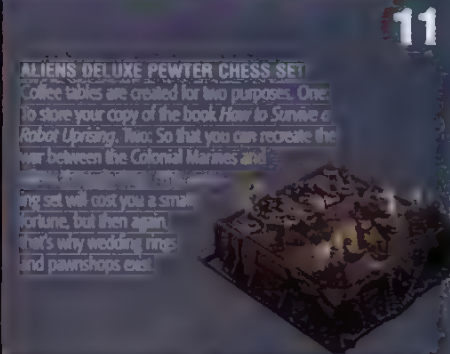
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AQUA TEEN HUNGER FORCE SERIES 1

If warm blood flows through your veins, then you

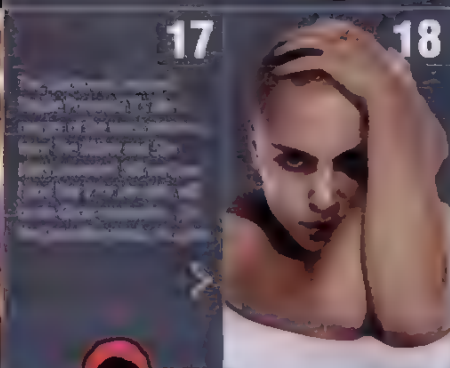
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ALIENS DELUXE PEWTER CHESS SET

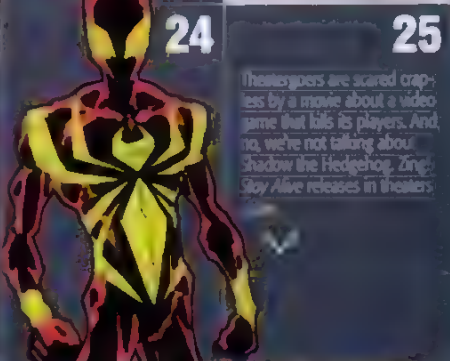
Coffee tables are created for two purposes. One: to store your copy of the book *How to Survive a Robot Uprising, Two*. So that you can recreate the war between the Colonial Marines and the

11



17

18



thinkers are scared crapless by a movie about a video game that kills its players. And, no, we're not talking about *Shadow the Hedgehog*. Zing! *Slay Alive* releases in theaters.

24

25



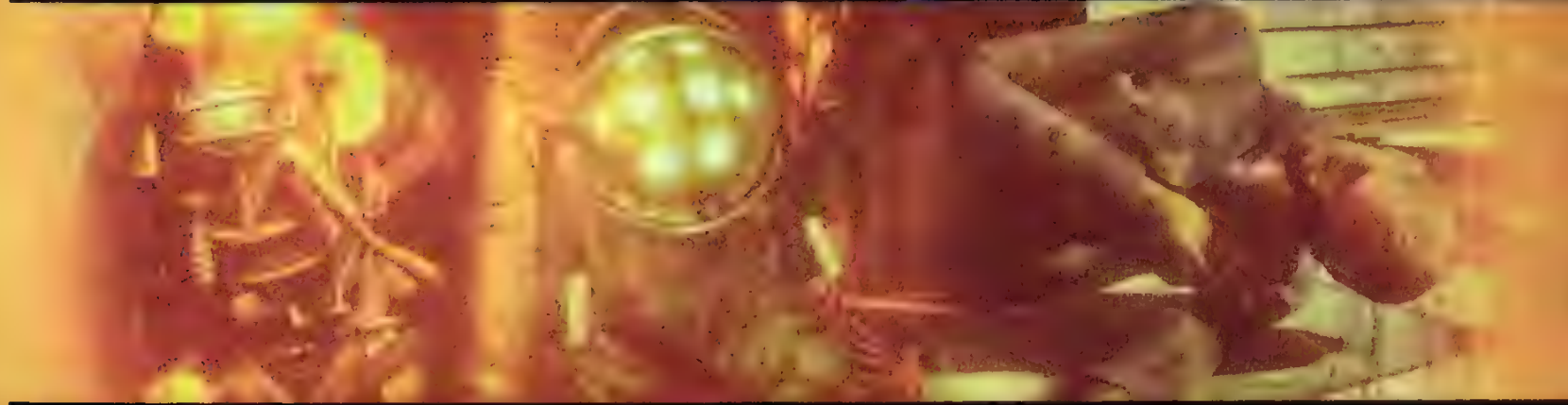
Slay Alive

UNLIMITED ENABLED

XBOX 360 | PC
> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION/ADVENTURE
> PUBLISHER 2K GAMES
> DEVELOPER IRRATIONAL GAMES
> RELEASE 2007

“Every man builds his world in his own image. He has the power to choose, but no power to escape the necessity of choice.”

—Ayn Rand, *Atlas Shrugged*



As you huddle in the shadow of a crumbling statue of Atlas, you hear only two sounds. One is the slow trickle of the ocean seeping through the walls and rilling as it gradually reclaims the underwater city. The other is the unmistakable mechanical footsteps of a Protector. As you peer out from cover, you see the robotic golem lumber through the ornate door, one massive hand gripping a chain gun, and the other holding the hand of a small girl — 12 years old at the most. As the pair enters the room, the child breaks off from her companion and kneels beside one of the mutated corpses littering the floor. Dressed in a ragged dress and covered in scratches, the girl takes out a syringe and plunges it into the lifeless body, extracting a precious genetic fluid from the fallen warrior. After a few moments, she removes the crude instrument and brings it to her lips, and you take out your gun. As she drinks, your finger hesitates on the trigger as you contemplate the choice in front of you: Yes, by spilling the blood of this girl, your own life may be saved — but is it even worth saving when it comes at the expense of your humanity? If you murder a child in cold blood, would you be any different from the disfigured remnants of men at your feet? Sure you would. You'd be breathing, and assuming you survive the Protector's inevitable onslaught, you'd have a better chance of keeping it that way. So, what are you waiting for?



BIO SHOCK

There is a vast array of games that tout player choice among their key features, yet few of them can be said to make players face tough decisions. Choosing to shoot down a helicopter with a bazooka instead of a sniper rifle is certainly entertaining, but we rarely see virtual environments that accommodate and adapt to an expanded range of possibilities. The very concept poses an interesting challenge to developers: How do you craft a game that not only allows for multiple approaches to every situation, but also one that gives the players' decisions a resonance within the world? The answer conceived by Irrational Games is BioShock.

There was a time when phrases like "emergent gameplay" and "open world" weren't even part of the gaming lexicon. When you beat level 1-1, you proceeded to level 1-2; you expected no say in the matter. Even though the release of *Grand Theft Auto III* in 2001 is credited with transforming this approach in the gaming

mainstream, there are several developers who had been experimenting with these concepts long before Rockstar's definitive title, and Irrational Games was among the first.

Recently in the spotlight for the critically-acclaimed PC titles *SWAT 4* and *Freedom Force vs. The Third Reich*, Irrational has a tradition of creating highly respected games, as does its staff. Irrational's president (and BioShock's creative director) Ken Levine was at Looking Glass Studios when it produced the first *System Shock*, as well the stealth/action innovator *Thief*. In 1999, Irrational released the cult classic *System Shock 2*, a follow-up to the defunct developer Looking Glass Studios' original *System Shock*. As a first-person hybrid of the action, adventure, and RPG genres, *System Shock 2* featured complex (and sometimes daunting) mechanics set against a chilling and compelling sci-fi backdrop, with the core gameplay centered on player choice and custom-

ization. As a spiritual successor to the *System Shock* series, BioShock adopts these themes and enhances them, taking the necessary steps forward to evolve the genre as it makes the transition to the next generation.

"We have beautiful graphics - a lot of next-gen games have beautiful graphics. The next generation is really about choice, and emergence, and continuous experience. It's not about individual levels," Ken Levine tells us. "In the same way GTA first brought the notion to the consoles, the next generation is about expanding that and making it richer."

Irrational's strategy for this evolution is comprised of several components, and the team sees immersing players in the world and its fiction as the first step in making them care about their choices. As such, BioShock's hooks are guaranteed to grab you early and never let go.

The game opens in the early 1960s as you find yourself flailing underwater,

(continued on page 97)



(continued from page 95)

floating in the ocean as debris falls from above. Bobbing to the surface, you are surrounded by bodies and the wreckage of an airplane. There is no opening cutscene chronicling the circumstances of the apparent crash, leaving you to improvise on the spot. "Did you wake up this morning to a cutscene telling you how you got to where you are in your life? No, you just got up and brushed your teeth," jokes Levine.

With survival as your immediate goal, you scan the horizon for signs of land, and you notice something conspicuously out of place. In the middle of the ocean, leagues from civilization, is a single lighthouse jutting up from the water. Swimming closer to investigate, you reach the mysterious structure and scale the stairs inside only to find another oddity: a bathosphere occupied by a dead body. With nowhere to go but down, you remove the unfortunate passenger and climb into the diving apparatus, descending into the unknown below.

As you near the ocean floor, you see the lights and structures of an entire city rising to meet you. When the bathosphere finally stops, you step out into a crumbling world that seems trapped in time. The once-elegant decor has been ravaged by age and combat, as well as the water pouring steadily through the cracks in the glass walls. Welcome to Rapture.

Though it is currently a ruined shadow of its former self, Rapture was once a veritable utopia, though not in classical sense. It was not a place where everyone held hands and pranced around

in circles; it was an elite intellectual paradise.

"I've always been interested in Ayn Rand and her crazy utopian view of this extreme capitalism, and what that could bring about if it were focused — celebration of the individual versus society," explains Levine. This exaltation of mankind goes so far as to defy the gods by building an entire civilization underwater. "Their attitude, no matter what the challenge, is 'we can beat it.' And they almost do."

Devised by a Soviet expatriate named Andrew Ryan in 1946, Rapture was intended to provide an opportunity for the best and brightest in the world — artists, scientists, athletes — to excel on their own extraordinary merits rather than having their energy diverted to the huddled masses. Of course, as the community's founder, Ryan had a definite financial advantage over the other inhabitants, but something happened that threw Rapture's balanced economy into disastrous territory.

Two scientists researching the bottom-dwelling creatures of the ocean made a revolutionary discovery: a sea slug. This unique species of slug is special though, because for every cell it consumes and destroys, it secretes a fluid containing raw stem cells. In just a short time this substance, dubbed Adam, became the dominant currency of Rapture. "You want to be smarter? Faster? Not die from the cancer in your body?" asks Levine. "Adam is the solution." With its ability to heal injuries and grant improved physical and mental performance, things like food and money were pushed to the

(continued on page 99)

■ Just because this particular Protector isn't equipped with guns doesn't mean that it won't be a deadly foe



■ The idealistic surroundings and grim reality are constantly at odds



■ The war between Ryan and Forbaine has left Rapture filled with ruins useful in combat



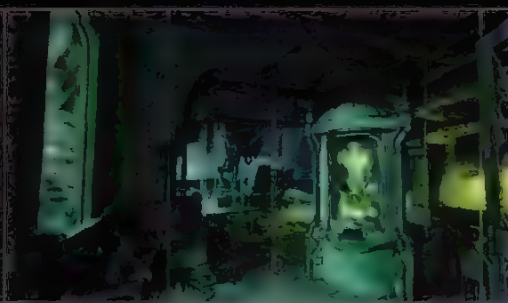
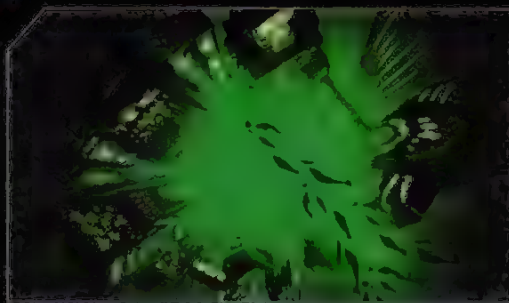
■ If the fighting doesn't destroy Ryan's utopia, the ocean will



The next generation is really about choice, and emergence, and continuous experience. It's not about individual levels.



■ Rooms like these are where citizens would genetically alter themselves, sometimes beyond recognition, in order to survive



(continued from page 97)

periphery. The only problem was that Andrew Ryan didn't control Adam — a young opportunist named Fontaine did. A full-scale genetic arms race broke out in Rapture between its two most powerful men, with this valuable resource at the center.

Jump forward to the game's opening scenes. Years have passed since the war, and Rapture is no longer what it used to be, and neither are its citizens. The utopian vision, as well as the human one, has fallen apart. "You learn that Ryan has won the war against Fontaine, but at the cost not only of this beautiful utopia, but also the humanity of everyone in it," Levine says. In the chaos of the combat, soldiers and civilians alike discovered another use for Adam: self-modification. Integrating technology into themselves and enhancing their abilities beyond natural boundaries, becoming a genetic abomination was the only way to stay strong enough to withstand the escalating violence.

As you explore Rapture, these are the creatures you will encounter as friends and foes.

They may have once been pinnacles of mankind's achievements, but now they are barely shells of their former selves. "They had to give up their humanity, and they're aware of that," describes Levine. "Some of them wear masks over their faces

because they know how they look, but they had to do it to survive." Desperate and downtrodden as they may be, the doomed residents of Rapture actually provide many of dynamic opportunities for players to exercise choice in BioShock. This is due to an intricate system of NPC behavior that the team is calling the "AI ecology."

In nature, animal interactions are governed by some basic rules, but it all essentially boils down to hunter versus hunted. Some species are aggressive, some are passive, and some use tricks to deter would-be predators. Irrational has taken these concepts found in natural ecology and applied them to BioShock's entire population. "That's what makes BioShock different from a game like Doom, where you see monsters ahead of you, then step over an invisible trigger, and they charge you," insists Levine. "There's only so much you can do with an AI that only knows how to take cover and flank. We want to build a relationship between AIs." This relationship is heavily dependent on how the environment is populated and the various creatures' roles within that world. For instance, some of your primary foes in BioShock are called Aggressors, deformed soldiers in Ryan's genetically modified army. These tormented beings patrol the corridors, attacking the player as well as the scattered remnants of Fontaine's forces. Irrate and brutal as Aggressors may be, they will generally ignore the one thing keeping Rapture alive: the Gatherers.

During the war, all natural sources of Adam were

destroyed. Unfortunately, people's biology had become so dependent on it by that point that they couldn't live without it. Ryan found an unsettling solution, however. The only way to obtain a viable supply of Adam was by extracting it from the bodies of the dead and processing it into a reusable form. To accomplish this, Ryan modified children to become Gatherers — living Adam containers who must locate and drink the substance on corpses so their bodies can transmute it into a harvestable form.

If Gatherers are full of Adam, and Adam is the most valuable thing in Rapture, it may seem surprising that these children are able to survive the harsh, unforgiving halls of the former utopia. The main reason why Aggressors, and essentially everything else, avoid interfering with the Gatherers' duty is that each one is accompanied by a Protector. Mute, loyal, and equipped with high-end weaponry, the Protectors are the most dangerous foes in Rapture. Lead designer Paul Hellquist observes: "Once you mess with them, you find out why no one messes with them."

Of course, that isn't to say that you can't choose to kill a Gatherer. It requires a certain investment of resources (the ensuing Protector battle will cost health and ammo), but the financial rewards are immense. Then again, it isn't like you would be shooting holes in a slobbering demon wielding a rocket launcher. Gatherers are unarmed non-combatants, and they don't bother you if you don't bother them. "Too often in games, there is violence without



■ All of the screens on these pages are taken from the Xbox 360 build, which will hit shelves slightly before the PC version

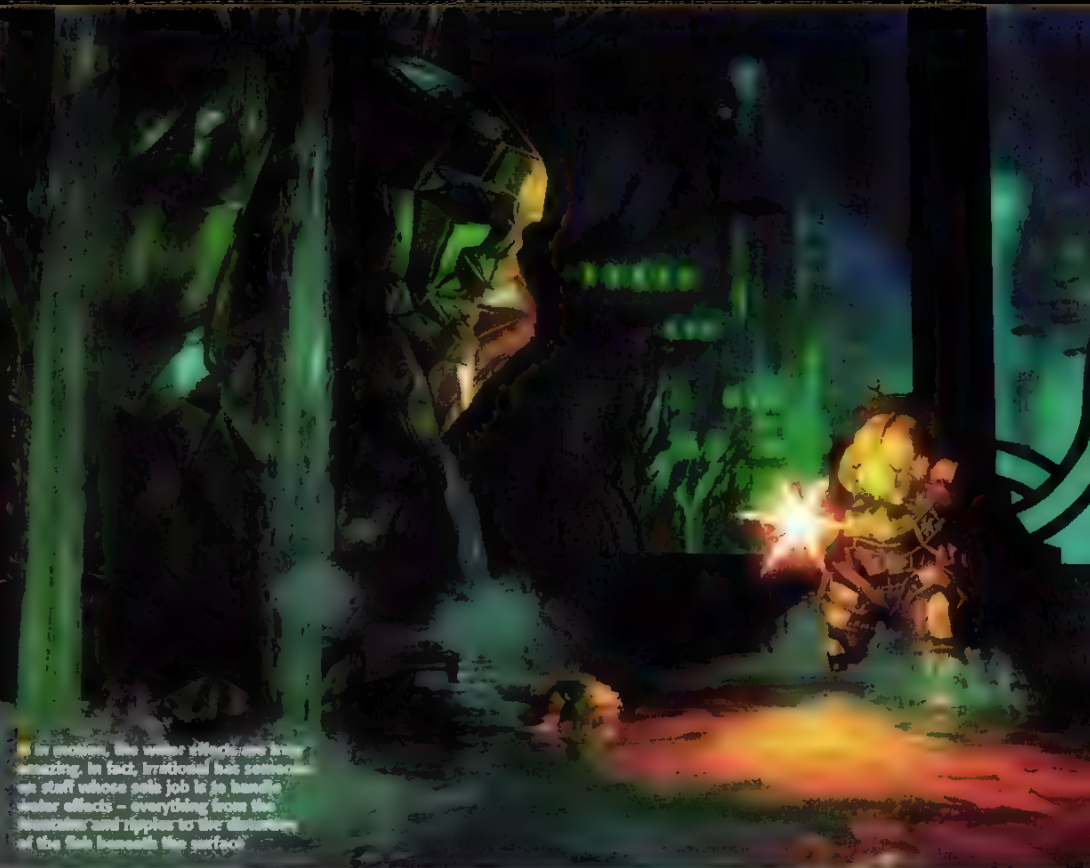


■ It's just not a place without vodka.

CHECHNYA VODKA



■ Some of the mechanical devices will seem very familiar to fans of the Myst series.



■ In motion, the water effects are truly amazing. In fact, Irrational has some of its staff whose sole job is to handle similar effects – everything from the 'Nostalgia' and 'Tippler' to the 'flowing' of the fish beneath the surface.

repercussion. We want to hit players in the gut with this," admits Levine. "The immediate gameplay repercussion is the fact that you have to face off with a Protector. But then there are the sort of in-your-stomach repercussions, where you think 'Ugh...do I really want to do this?' We don't make a judgment on that. We're creating a world for you to be in. What you do is up to you, and you have to live with your choices."

Complicating the moral situation even more is that fact that you won't necessarily have to fight the Protector; there are ways to get off scot-free by manipulating the web of Rapture's relationships. "The core of the gameplay is your ability to impact this world," Levine reveals. "There are ways to use the Aggressors to fight the Protectors, and vice versa." These unique abilities are unlocked by the player undergoing the same kind of mutations that the residents had to endure. By spending Adam, you can obtain personal upgrades called Plasmids which can grant you various advantages in the world around you. "There's a wide range, from really out-there things to stat-based skills you've seen before," explains Hellquist. "But you won't open a menu and say, 'Oh, look, my agility is at 22!' You'll notice it in the gameplay. 'Wow, I'm running faster now that I've got this Plasmid.'"

While some of these upgrades may be statistic-based, the majority of them actually give you new ways to use your weapons and abilities, enhancing the ways to can interact with the world around you. Mind Pull gives you telekinetic powers, allowing you to psionically manipulate the hundreds of objects lying around Rapture at will; Inanimate Instinct gives your weapons limited sentience, which in turn gives your ammunition heat-seeking capabilities; and Brilliant Inventor takes advantage of BioShock's crafting system by allowing you to create entirely new weapons and items.

Plasmids can also expand your options for steering the Al ecology in your favor. As previously mentioned, Aggressors

are conditioned to avoid confronting Gatherers. With the ability Gatherer Cry, you can fool everything in the area into thinking you are one of the young harvesters, ensuring your safety. Even better, if there is a Protector nearby, Gatherer Cry will make it believe that you are its diminutive ward, causing it defend you to the death.

These upgrades represent another instance where your choices will drastically alter your experience with BioShock. If more traditional FPS action is your style, you'll still find a deep and engaging adventure by specializing in the Weaponry tree, though Hellquist cautions that "there are lots of ways you can manipulate the world that weapons guys will just have to blast through." For example, players focusing solely in weapons will have to take up a modified pistol or grenade launcher if they want to blast a Gatherer and survive the Protector's fury. But if you choose another path, you may find yourself with the Aggressor Irritant ability, which makes your enemy hostile toward the next thing it sees. If you strategically use this on Aggressors, you can get them to launch an extremely unwise assault on a passing Gatherer, understandably upsetting the Protector. As those two are engaged in combat, you are left with an opportunity to take a consequence-free shot at the Gatherer (assuming you can do that and still sleep at night), loot the body, and escape before the Protector realizes it's been had.

Taking advantage of Rapture's citizens isn't limited to living foes, either. By progressing down the Engineering tree, you gain hacking skills as well as a handy power called Security Beacon. Scattered throughout the wreckage of Rapture are many security cameras, used by Ryan to identify hostile intruders and mobilize security drones (flying outboard motors with mounted guns). Naturally, these cameras are placed in sensitive areas that often have additional sentries posted. By using Security Beacon on an Aggressor, the camera loses the ability to perceive it as an ally and proceeds to send in the drones. As the Aggressor





The Walls Are Talking

When trying to formulate a cohesive visual motif for BioShock, the artistic team used the Art Deco movement as inspiration. When Rapture was supposedly constructed in 1946, Art Deco was one of the more forward-thinking styles of the era, making use of marble, wood, and stainless steel. The goal is to have the architecture itself convey a sense of idealism and reality clashing, and to illustrate the losing battle between the man-made structure and the endless water surrounding it. Or, as Levine succinctly puts it: "The ocean doesn't want an Art Deco utopia in it. The ocean wants to be the ocean."

is being attacked from above, you have a good chance of slipping by undetected in the commotion. "Games just don't let you mess with them anymore," laments Hellquist. "We're giving you the ability to get in there and muck up the works."

The first concern that comes to mind with such an involved skill system is upgrade remorse. Most gamers have felt the crushing humiliation of spending all of their points on a new shiny power, only to have a newer, shinier power become available moments later. "Once you allow modification, you never find something better than what you're already working on," laughs Hellquist. Irrational is ensuring this in BioShock with the implementation of Plasmid machines. These single-use stations are set up all over Rapture, giving players a chance to try out different skill builds. Because they are one-shot opportunities, it allows you to play around without worrying about endless optimization. "This isn't a tweaky-numbers-statting. When you go the Plasmid machines, you can basically rebuild your loadout from scratch. There's no lost investment," Levine assures us. If you don't like your psionic powers, you can ditch every ability in the tree and start over with Engineering, or mix and match a little from every category. It's still focused on player choice, but allows you some flexibility if you end up regretting your choices down the road.

Since any given encounter in the game can play out in a multitude of ways, one has to wonder how the development team can exercise control over the player's actions. The short and simple answer is that the team doesn't expect to control the player. Of course, Irrational knows approximately where you



The character will be quite so fighting when you've manipulated them into killing Agassiz to buy yourself a little time.



■ Don't expect the Gatherers to hang around for the firefights. If you miss your chance to kill them, they can escape through an intricate series of tunnels throughout the complex.

should be on the resource curve at any given time, but the goal is not to deliver a linear, regulated experience. "We want to make a game where a walkthrough is useless. That's where games need to go," Levine insists. "I'd much rather play a game where I can say 'Oh, I had this experience,' and someone else can say 'I did that part in a totally different way.' It's about thinking of different opportunities for every play style, and making it interesting for each of them."

But at what point does this freedom cease to be liberating and become daunting? It's easy to think that the many systems and mechanics in *BioShock* could quickly become too complicated for their own good. After all, by Levine's own admission, they got a bit carried away with *System Shock 2*. "System Shock 2 was too hard...too pointy-headed, basically. We said, 'Here's all the complexity of the game right in the first scene. Suck it up.'" While this approach still gathered a remarkably devoted following for that title, Irrational has developed an innovative guided training tool to ensure that *BioShock* is as accessible as it is complex.

The core concept of the guided training is simple: Assume the players are reasonably intelligent, and catch them when they fall. Backing this up is a system that aims to accomplish the impossible task of shipping the developers along with the game. Essentially, *BioShock* watches you play like a friend looking over your shoulder. If you're using armor piercing bullets on an Aggressor, you won't do much damage compared

to anti-personnel ammo. In this case, the game might offer a helpful reminder on how the different ammunition function. If you understand how the ammo works and use it effectively, you might never hear a peep on the subject. Of course, if you'd rather brave it alone, you can turn off the guided training entirely. The main purpose is simply not to leave players to muddle through the mechanics alone, while not intruding on the experience for those who pick it up quickly.

"Here's what I hate," Levine elaborates. "You start up a game, and the first thing you hear is, 'Alright, Marine! We're gonna teach you how to walk!' And you're like, 'Aw, F---, man. I know how to walk.' We will assume that the player is competent from the start, and then we'll watch. If they aren't competent, we'll give a little help. And if they're really incompetent... 'Alright, Marine!'"

Even with the guided training, the game won't hold your hand through every nook and cranny. "*BioShock* has mysteries, and we're not going to spell them all out for you," confesses Levine. "We trust the player to be smarter than that." In fact, it is this faith in the player's abilities that promises to set *BioShock* apart, though that statement doesn't reflect well on the industry as a whole. Whether you have a Gatherer in your sights or are deciding which faction to trust, Irrational is trusting the players to pick up the clues and unravel the context of the world of Rapture.

This more subtle approach to storytelling will be familiar to fans of *System Shock 2*, but perhaps not with the console gaming mainstream. "It's not about big cutscenes that explain everything. It's about piecing together what happened," Levine tells us. You will find letters and personnel files relating to various characters, and when you encounter them later in the game, you won't be clubbed over the head with "This is the character we were talking about before! Remember? Eh?" It is a slow onion peel, gradually revealing more of the Rapture's backstory, its decline, and what keeps it operational. This is accomplished through communications, imagery, and combat. If you aren't paying attention to the clues, you may have a difficult time escaping the doomed paradise with your life.

With its twisted premise and so many ways in which it immerses you in the world of Rapture, we can't help but admit that we were quite impressed with *BioShock*. Apparently, others are having similar experiences; shortly after we were first shown the game, it was announced that Take 2 Interactive, the parent company of Rockstar and Firaxis, had purchased Irrational Games – a testament to the talent behind *BioShock* and its amazing potential to redefine the notion of empowering the player.

For the moment, only Xbox 360 and PC owners will be able to enjoy this freedom as they explore Irrational's compelling and poignant world. When we

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**We're giving
you the ability
to get in there
and muck up
the works.**

asked about PS3, however, the team skirted the issue in a way that sounded suspiciously like they hadn't received official approval from Sony of America, though they did express an interest in working with the upcoming console. While the forecast looks promising for the PS3, BioShock is still about year away. Right now, the team is primarily focused simply on building the immersive and visceral experience that will bring the forgotten paradise of Rapture to life.

Weaving together the mysteries of a ruined civilization and the intricacies of choice, the team at Irrational definitely has the experience and track record to back up its claim to take player-driven gameplay to the next level with BioShock. The setting, for all of its philosophical overtones, exists to create a context for your actions, allowing you to witness how your decisions are impacting the fractured society and its people. "At the end of the day, we're going for this emotional experience," clarifies Levine. "It comes through in the visuals, the music, and the sound. It's a lost world, and it feels vaguely nostalgic and sad. Everyone in Rapture could have been great if things had worked out." Be that as it may, your job isn't to rectify the tragedy brought on by Andrew Ryan's hubris. The ideals that gave rise to Rapture were not of pity, nor of charity. Your main concern, using weapons, the environment, and your wits, is to escape. If you need to kill those who failed at their chance to achieve greatness on your way to that goal, that may just be the price that needs to be paid. ■■■



Another Kind of In-Game Advertising

In addition to towering statues glorifying the triumph of the human spirit, you will also notice monuments to rampant commercialism as you explore Rapture. Adorning the walls, you will see advertisements for numerous products and services, from cigarettes to funeral homes, in both high-end and budget varieties. Though they appear to embody the idealistic design sensibilities of the 1950s, the not-so-veiled satirical tone in these examples makes it clear that the posters will be a steady source of amusement as you explore the world.

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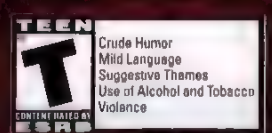
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PlayStation 2



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XBOX 360 | PLAYSTATION 3 | PC

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION (MULTIPLAYER TBD)

> **PUBLISHER** MIDWAY > **DEVELOPER** MIDWAY

> **RELEASE** FALL

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JOHN WOO'S

STRANGLEHOLD

HARD BOILED

The world of video games owes a debt to John Woo.

Even gamers who have never seen one of his movies have felt his influence. How many times in recent memory have players walked into a smoky room with a gun in each hand, only to find themselves beset on all sides by well-armed thugs? Of course, the hero always comes out on top, thanks to some acrobatic moves, and perhaps even some carnage-accentuating slow motion. Intricate two-handed gunplay, close-quarters firefights, clever use of the environment, and, of course, slow-motion shots of the action are all highlights of a sub-genre of Hong Kong action movies called "heroic violence," of which John Woo is the

most famous practitioner. Also characterized by dark glasses, white birds, themes of honor and brotherhood, and a balletic grace to the action sequences, the heroic violence movement has its root in Woo's first Hong Kong hit, *A Better Tomorrow*. Starring a hardworking Chinese television actor named Yun-Fat Chow, the film was a hit in its native country, and led to the continued collaboration between the actor and director. Three years later, the pair produced perhaps the best-known heroic violence epic, *The Killer*, the most internationally successful Hong Kong film since Bruce Lee's *Enter the Dragon*. For his final Hong Kong film before entering the world of Hollywood, Woo once again teamed up with his favorite leading man, now going by the westernized name Chow Yun Fat.

The result was *Hard Boiled*, a film that influenced the look and flow of action scenes in both movies and video games forever. Quentin Tarantino and the Wachowski brothers have both cited Woo and his films as influences, as have games like *Max Payne* and *F.E.A.R.* Having already made a mark in the video game world, it makes sense that action master John Woo would find himself directly involved with the creation of a game. That game is *Stranglehold*.

■ Chow Yun Fat is reprising his role as Inspector Tequila in *Stranglehold*, and is lending both his voice and likeness



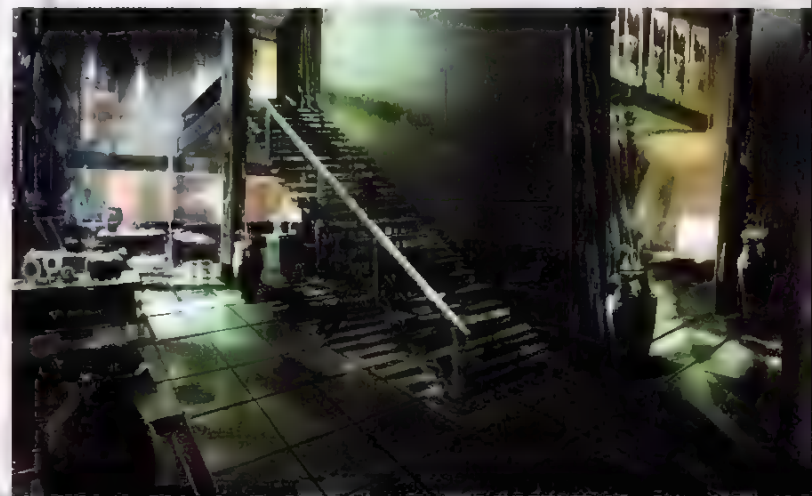
Developed by the talented Psi-Ops team at Midway, *Stranglehold* continues the story of Inspector Tequila, Chow Yun Fat's character from *Hard Boiled*. A member of the Hong Kong police force, Tequila finds himself in a delicate situation when he's approached by members of the Dragon Claw gang, Hong Kong's dominant underworld power. The granddaughter of Dragon Claw ruler Mr. Wong has been kidnapped by the up-and-coming Golden Kane gang, and they are trying to use her as leverage to upset the balance of power. It just so happens that Mr. Wong's granddaughter is also Tequila's ex-wife, who had been sent to Chicago for protection. Somehow, the Golden Kane found her, drawing Tequila into the conflict between the two Triad gangs. Forced to

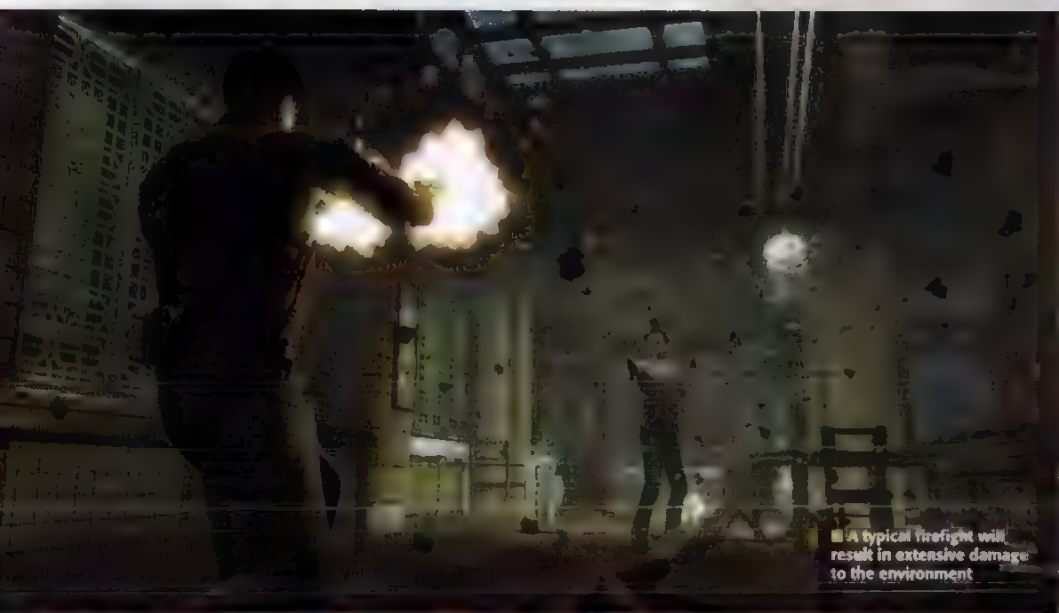
walk the line between his duty as a cop and his obligation to protect a woman he loves, Inspector Tequila must venture deep into the heart of China's underworld.

John Woo himself is involved with the development of the game, primarily its story – which will take many twists and turns – and the art direction. Woo is quite excited about revisiting the Tequila character and his world. Not only will *Stranglehold* continue the story of *Hard Boiled*, but Tequila's cinematic adventures will continue as well. "I am developing a sequel to the film but I will not direct it," says Woo. "The continued interest in this story is very gratifying – it's like connecting with an old friend. In fact, exploring the story today opens up new story possibilities and, whether that is through film or through a game, it allows me more flexibility in explor-

ing that world. In the movie *Hard Boiled*, the character of Tequila is fixed. The story is the same every time you watch it. A video game allows the player to become the director. They can create their own scenes and add their own dimension and action to the character. Each time they play it can be a little different."

Chow Yun Fat is lending both his likeness and voice to the project, although his in-game character looks younger than the actor does today, to reflect the short period of time between *Hard Boiled* and *Stranglehold*. The first thing that viewers will notice in *Stranglehold* is the incredible detail in the visuals. Midway has chosen to utilize Epic's powerful Unreal Engine 3 for *Stranglehold*, and the results speak for themselves. The character models are amongst the most realistic yet of





In the movie *Hard Boiled*, the character of Tequila is fixed.

The story is the same every time you watch it. A video game allows the player to become the director. They can create their own scenes and add their own dimension and action to the character. Each time they play it can be a little different.

— John Woo

the early next generation of gaming, taking full advantage of the graphical horsepower behind its engine. Chow Yun Fat's character model is distinctly recognizable, and the various other characters look similarly realistic. Their skin is particularly impressive, lacking the plastic-like sheen seen in several early Xbox 360 titles. Also scheduled for PS3 and PC, Midway promises that the characters will look equally beautiful on all three systems.

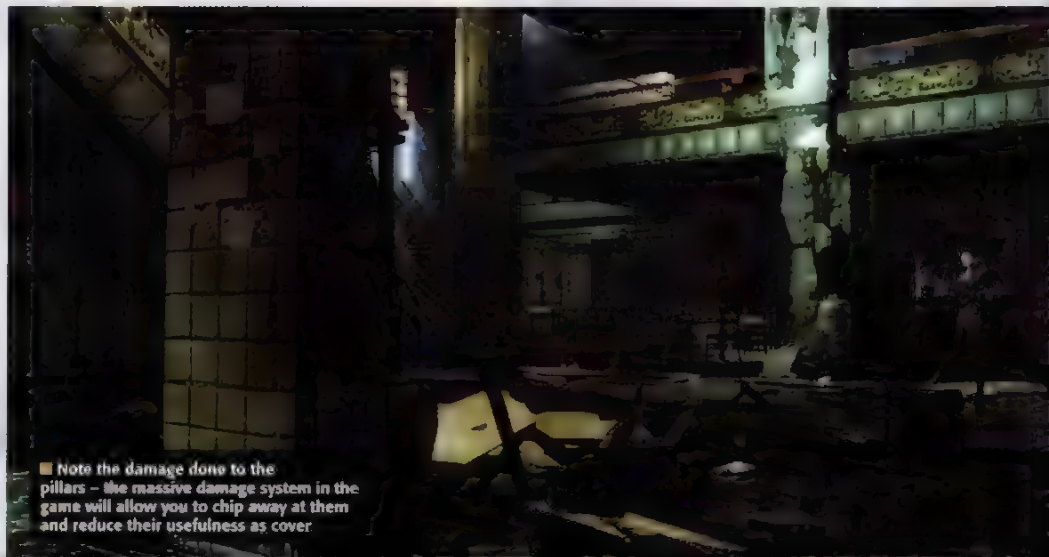
Of course, it takes more than character models to make a game look great, and *Stranglehold*'s environments are just as stunning. Like Woo's films, each area is packed with tiny details to add to the mood. For example, one stage takes place in a multi-level Hong Kong teahouse. The restaurant features all the objects you would expect, such as tables and chairs, but it's the little things that complete the illusion. Tabletops are littered with bottles and plates of food, lanterns hang from the ceiling, pictures adorn the walls, and potted plants dot the room. The attention to detail in this area is what makes it look like something straight out of Woo's movies, and as any fan of his knows, these crowded locales only stay in their original state for a short time. Once guns come out, the destruction begins.

Stranglehold's biggest feature is what the team calls "massive destruction," or Massive D. Heroic violence films

are filled with objects getting blown to pieces, and thus *Stranglehold* can be no different. Over the course of a shootout, nearly everything in an area will be blown to bits. In the teahouse, tables splinter, bottles shatter, food flies off plates, and light streams through bullet holes in windows. Individual tiles can be shot off walls and floors, and bullets leave craters in brick. Dust fills the air as things

get destroyed, stuffing flies out of punctured seat cushions, and wood breaks apart into slivers. After a gunfight is over, the damage remains, leaving behind piles of rubble for the player to wade through.

After witnessing a demo of how fully destructible *Stranglehold*'s environments are, we have no doubt that
(Continued on page 61)





■ Just like a typical John Woo movie, most of the firefights involve grabbing a gun in each hand and causing chaos

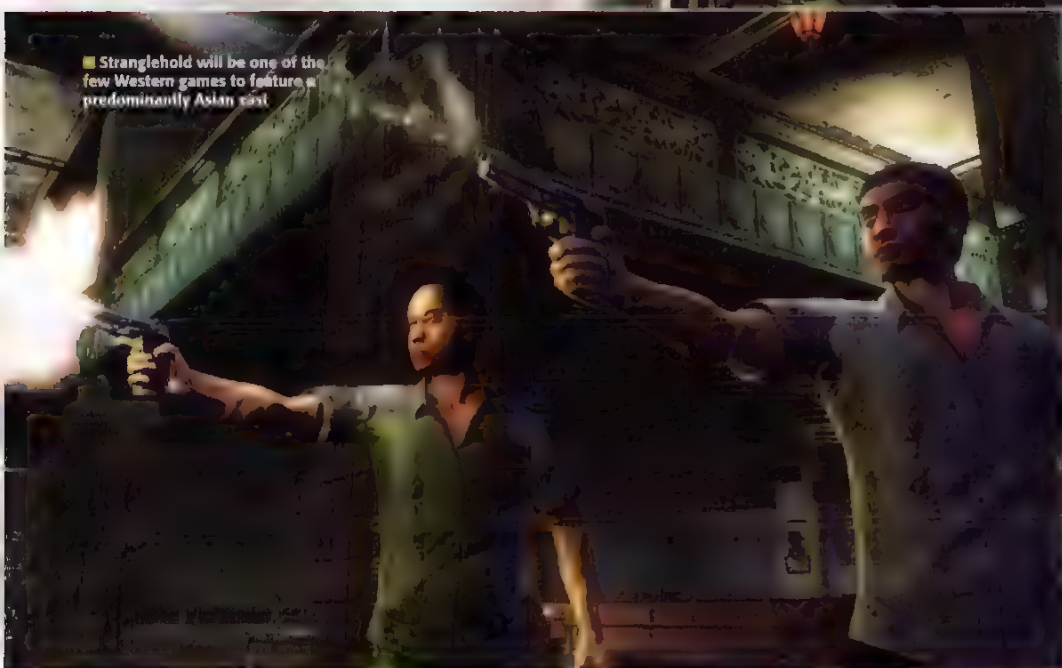


■ Stylish attacks, like shooting while diving, will earn the player points that can be used to upgrade Tequila

Chow Yun Fat Selected Filmography

Along with Bruce Lee and Jackie Chan, Chow Yun Fat is one of the most recognized actors Hong Kong has ever produced. Despite being best-known for his action roles, Fat is actually an award-winning actor in China who has also starred in wide variety of films, including comedies and romances. What follows is a list of some of his most prominent films.

<i>Bulletproof Monk</i> (2003)	<i>Once a Thief</i> (1991)
<i>Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon</i> (2000)	<i>God of Gamblers</i> (1989)
<i>Anna and the King</i> (1999)	<i>A Better Tomorrow III</i> (1989)
<i>The Corruptor</i> (1999)	<i>The Killer</i> (1989)
<i>The Replacement Killers</i> (1998)	<i>A Better Tomorrow II</i> (1987)
<i>God of Gamblers 2</i> (1994)	<i>City on Fire</i> (1987)
<i>Hard Boiled</i> (1992)	<i>A Better Tomorrow</i> (1986)



■ Stranglehold will be one of the few Western games to feature a predominantly Asian cast.

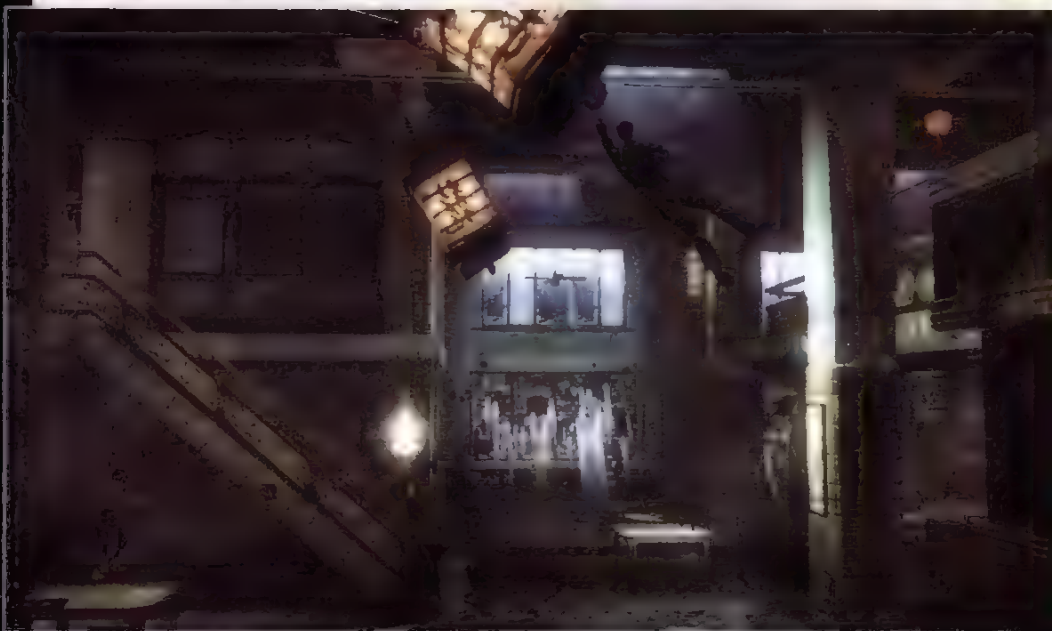


players will spend time blowing things up just for the heck of it. As much fun as it is to cause random chaos, there's more to the game's massive destruction than simply emulating the look of a John Woo movie. It actually figures into the gameplay. If the player is taking cover behind a pillar, the enemies' rounds will chip away at it until it's no longer a suitable hiding place. You can kick up tables for cover, but they'll break into several pieces after a few rounds, forcing you to look for a new safe zone. You can use the destructible environments against your enemies, as well. Some objects, like large neon signs, can be shot off of walls, causing them to crush the enemies underneath. Perhaps the most impressive example, though, is one of the levels that we were shown during our visit.

Stranglehold will feature a variety of areas based on authentic Hong Kong locations, including a rickety shantytown composed of homemade structures of scrap wood and metal. With such delicate building materials, the team is striving to make this level one of the highlights of the game's Massive D system. Not only will the gunfights in this level cause whole walls to collapse, but you'll even be able to blast floors out from under your enemies, watch entire structures collapse, and even crash through a floor to a lower level. By switching up the types of environments the player blasts his way through, the team hopes to prevent the player from feeling like they keep doing more of the same. Other levels include a flotilla, in which the player will hop from boat to boat fighting enemies, an opulent restaurant, a seaside hangar that's absolutely crowded with catwalks and storage crates, and an outdoor market filled with civilians.

Shredding these diverse and intricately detailed environments will certainly be fun, but shards of flying debris are only part of the style of heroic violence films. Woo's movies are also characterized by the graceful, over-the-top acrobatics of their heroes. To achieve this end, players will be able to make Inspector Tequila interact with the

■ Interacting with the environment is key to surviving firefights. In this sequence, Tequila takes out his foes while swinging from a chandelier



environment with the press of a context-sensitive action button. He'll be able to run up banisters or slide down them, run across railings with the grace of a cat, swing from chandeliers and other hanging objects, and more. Of course, he can transition from one action to another seamlessly. For example, the player can make Tequila slide down a railing and jump onto a restaurant cart and ride it across the floor, spraying bullets the entire time. Other actions will be performed automatically. For example, if you run up to a table, Tequila will slide across it, so the player won't have to worry about navigating around obstacles during heated firefights. Although Tequila will execute these moves automatically, the player is still in control of his guns, so there will never be a break in the action.

The impact of these context-sensitive actions will be further accentuated by the game's use of slow motion, another technique popularized by Woo. The player can trigger slo-mo at any point to slow down the action and line up an accurate shot, but it has a little more depth in *Stranglehold* than games like *Max Payne*. Not only does using slo-mo help you get an edge on your foes, but you also earn style points for doing so. As John Woo's movies are all about the beauty of action, you earn more points based on how cool you look. More style points are awarded (and you actually do more damage) if you shoot foes while interacting with the environment. If your targeting reticle hits an enemy while you're interacting with an environmental object, the game automatically goes into slow motion. By rewarding the player with style points for using slo-mo and environmental interactions, the *Stranglehold* team hopes to teach players the importance of using the game's unique features.

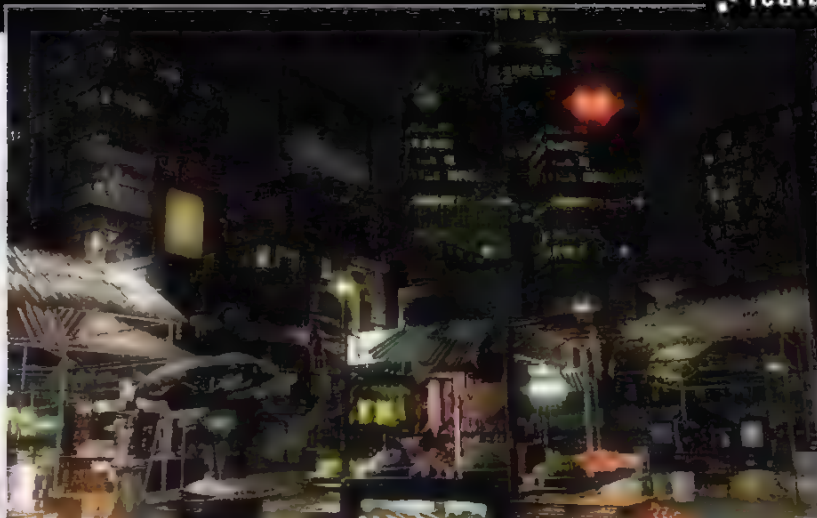
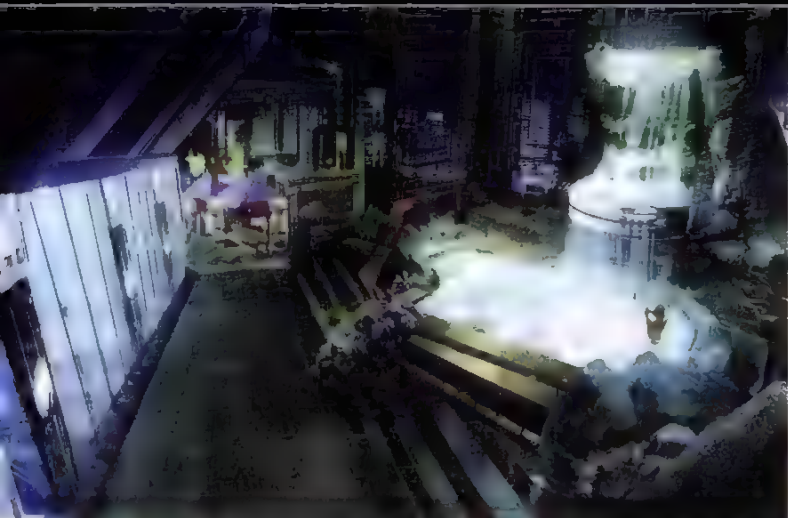
The style points earned by using slo-mo and interactions can be redeemed for upgrades, primarily special moves. These moves will also be representative of the fancy action tricks Woo uses in his movies. For example, one special move will be a spin attack, in which Tequila quickly rotates with his arms straight out, spraying bullets in every direction. Other Woo standbys will appear in the game in the form of minigames, such as Mexican standoffs, in which three people are all holding guns to another's head, so no one person can shoot without being shot themselves.

All of the various elements that the *Stranglehold* team has drawn from Woo's movies are very appealing to the director himself. He sees the freedom of a game as

John Woo Selected Filmography

Not only have John Woo's films been hugely influential on video games, he has been linked to upcoming game adaptations like *Spy Hunter* and *Metroid*. With *Face/Off*, he became the first Asian director to direct a Hollywood hit. Below are a few of his most notable films.

<i>Paycheck</i> (2003)	<i>Hard Boiled</i> (1992)
<i>The Hire: Hostage</i> (2002)	<i>Once a Thief</i> (1991)
<i>Windtalkers</i> (2002)	<i>Bullet in the Head</i> (1990)
<i>Mission: Impossible II</i> (2000)	<i>The Killer</i> (1989)
<i>Face/Off</i> (1997)	<i>A Better Tomorrow II</i> (1987)
<i>Broken Arrow</i> (1996)	<i>A Better Tomorrow</i> (1986)
<i>Hard Target</i> (1993)	



something that lets the player step into the role of the director and create their own unique action scenes in his style. "Being able to visualize choreography without limitations from actors or from CG film budgets is liberating," says Woo. "My son has always been good at video games. By bringing my ideas to this medium I feel like I am able to have a greater connection with the younger generations. They can take my idea and create their own adventure from it."

Obviously, *Stranglehold* features a huge emphasis on gunplay, but that won't be the only style of action in the game. Vehicles are being included as well, including cars, four-wheelers, boats, and smaller rides like mopeds. Some stages will give you an option of how

to use the vehicles, rather than forcing you to ride your way through a level. You may start out by commandeering a boat, only to jump out halfway through to hop on a four-wheeler. Or you can just choose to run through it on foot. Of course, these vehicle-orientated stages will feature the same emphasis on destruction. Cars can be blown up, boats can be sunk, and everything in the environments around them can be as well.

Any game with so much destruction at its core is obviously ripe for multiplayer, and naturally *Stranglehold* will include this feature. The details on multiplayer are still being figured out, but deathmatches will definitely be included, using constrained versions of the campaign mode levels. The team is also toying with the idea of

adding a co-op mode, although this may not make it into the final game. Considering that brotherhood is a common theme of Woo's films, a two-player mode seems like a natural extension of the game.

It's obvious that the team at Midway has done their homework and found a way to both emulate John Woo's movies and create a compelling game in its own right. According to Woo himself, having seen *Hard Boiled* (which is currently out of print on DVD in the U.S.) is not a prerequisite to enjoying *Stranglehold*. "Like in a good film sequel," Woo says, "knowing the first installment will enhance your understanding and appreciation, but should in no way inhibit your enjoyment if this is your first introduction to the world." ■ ■ ■





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Square Enix 2006

New Directions

Square Enix has long had a loyal constituency of followers eager to devour anything the primarily RPG-based company is willing to offer them. That fanbase is in for some major treats in the coming year, as one franchise after another is spinning off into exciting and sometimes strange new arenas. While we've had plenty of opportunity to cover the sought-after Final Fantasy XII, we were lucky enough this month to get the scoop on several other titles from the publishing giant that we hadn't even heard of yet. Delve in and learn why there's more than one game to look forward to from the leaders in role-playing excitement.

Valkyrie Profile 2: Silmeria

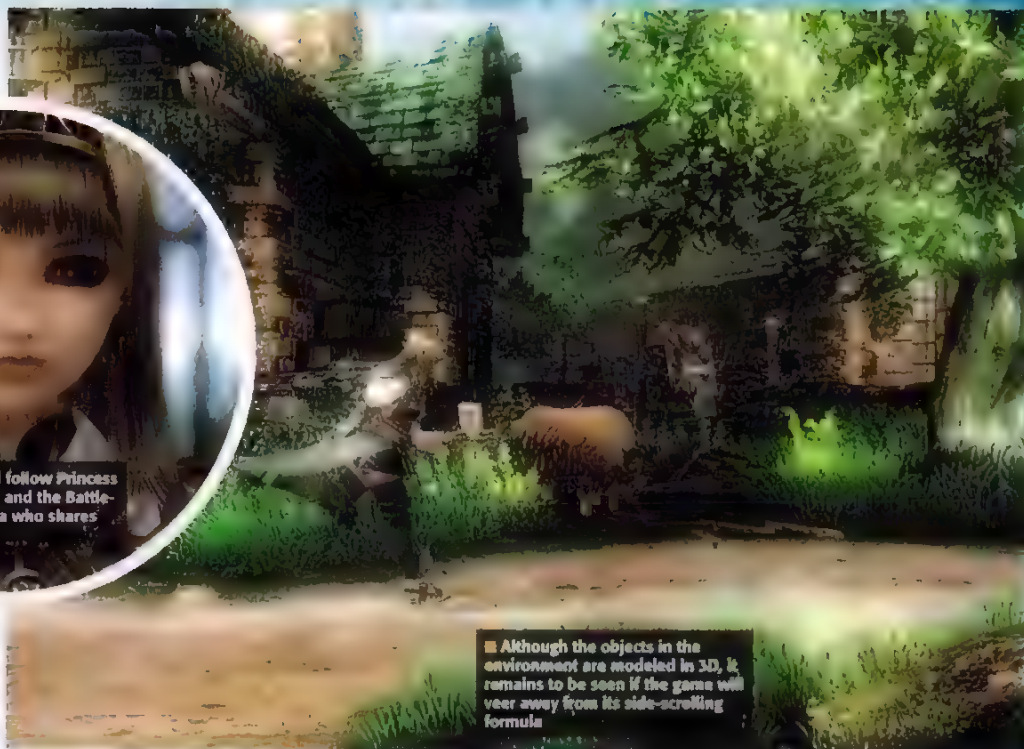
PLAYSTATION 2

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

While the PSP is seeing a remake of the original myth-based game, the PlayStation 2 is receiving a grand new adventure in the Valkyrie Profile epic. Set hundreds of years prior to the first game, the prequel is set in the lost city of Dipan. Battle-Maiden Silmeria once served Odin, until she disobeyed him and her soul was forcibly transferred to a human – the princess of Dipan, Alisha. Unexpectedly, Silmeria awakens within the princess and the two begin to speak. With two souls residing and talking together in one body, it's not surprising when Alisha's father begins to question his daughter's sanity. Alisha is banished to an ancient castle to live her days in solitude. Meanwhile, Odin learns of the Battle-Maiden's wakefulness and sends one of his godly emissaries to deal with the problem. While the setup sounds pretty sweet, we're also excited to hear more about the new battle system. Players will be able to cast "photons" to bind enemies and then instantaneously switch places on the battlefield with them. The combat system has been built from the ground up to mix tactical decision-making with fast-paced action. That, along with the stellar new 3D graphics, hopefully has the potential to attract a wider audience to this unique role-playing experience.



■ The story will follow Princess Alisha of Dipan and the Battle-Maiden Silmeria who shares her soul



■ Although the objects in the environment are modeled in 3D, it remains to be seen if the game will veer away from its side-scrolling formula



■ Tri-Ace is tapping into a new lighting system that will capture the translucent effect that accompanies the soft ambiance of night and blurring of lights



■ Once again, each character is assigned to a specific button. And once again, the multi-character combos lead to enemies falling in the hardest of ways

Valkyrie Profile: Lenneth

PSP

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

For those RPG enthusiasts who missed the Norse longboat the first time around, the classic PSone game Valkyrie Profile is headed to the PSP this year, complete with some suitable upgrades for the new system. Crisper graphics on the wider 16:9 LCD display should make the newly created CG movies breathtaking. The story of the first game is pretty much totally intact, detailing the journey of the war

goddess Lenneth Valkyrie amid the backdrop of Scandinavian mythology. A wealth of customizable characters, item generation capabilities, and a unique combo-driven battle system are all reasons to give the game a try. However, your main reason may be just to have a refresher course before jumping into the series' brand new entry that's headed to the PS2.



アイシクル・エッジ

■ Unfortunately, no new dungeons will appear in this version of the game



■ New CG cutscenes are used to flesh out pivotal points in the plot. Tri-Ace is also adding a sequence that leads up to the PS2 game, Silmeria



Secret of Mana 4

(working title)

PLAYSTATION 2

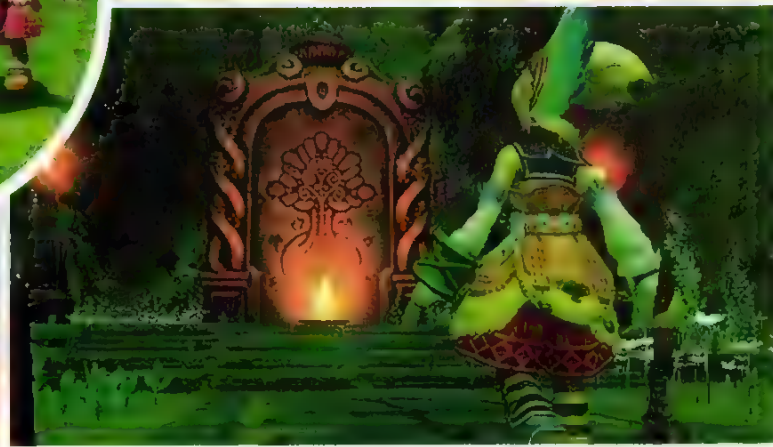
- > **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ROLE-PLAYING GAME (MULTIPLAYER TBD)
- > **PUBLISHER** SQUARE ENIX
- > **DEVELOPER** SQUARE ENIX
- > **RELEASE** TBD

The Mana series is finally set for an honest-to-goodness home console sequel, and the PS2 is just the machine to deliver the goods. The biggest news on this long-awaited continuation of the franchise is its use of the Havok engine within the action-based RPG framework. Returning producer Koichi Ishii was originally planning to wait and deliver his new vision on the PS3, but apparently has been so impressed with some of the late-generation projects on the PS2 that he wants to bring Mana to the more familiar platform. The storybook graphics are returning, but it's yet to be seen how the new options afforded by Havok physics will tweak gameplay.

Storywise, we'll be returning to the root legend of the whole series and learning its origin — how that first boy obtained the Sword of Mana, and the true birth of the Goddess of Mana. Players will control Eldy, an apparently orphaned boy raised by the village elder. The village, built around the Great Tree, is also home to Eldy's childhood friend Ritzia, who is now the maiden priestess of the massive tree. And just in case

you were concerned about that last slot in your traditional RPG stable being filled, Ritzia has a cute pet rabbit named Pukku, who we're told is slightly mischievous. Who knew?

Regardless, we're more than willing to put up with RPG stereotypes if the gameplay has the same addictive quality of earlier titles. The MONO concept is the biggest new idea on that front. MONO are apparently anything in the environment that players can utilize to defeat their foes. Rather than simple hack and slash gameplay, players will be able to manipulate trees, rocks, grass, flowing water, and all sorts of other objects in the environment to overcome their adversaries. The development team has remained mum on whether there are any multiplayer components to the PS2 title, but we were excited to learn that Children of Mana, a new DS installment in the franchise, will include up to four player cooperative play. We're intrigued about both titles, but we'll have to wait until there's more to see than these gorgeous screens before we'll have anything else to pass on.



Dirge of Cerberus

PLAYSTATION 2

- > **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION (MULTIPLAYER TBD)
- > **PUBLISHER** SQUARE ENIX
- > **DEVELOPER** SQUARE ENIX
- > **RELEASE** SUMMER/FALL

Fancy new screens aren't enough to tell us how much has really changed since we got a look at this Final Fantasy VII spin-off earlier this year. At that point, we were impressed by the visuals and straight-up cool factor of playing as Vincent Valentine in a mixed first- and third-person shooter. We'd even heard that there were plans for some

innovative online multiplayer functionality. Simultaneously, some hands-on time with the title revealed a pretty iffy control scheme that we're hoping has seen some dramatic tweaks in recent months. Cross your fingers that we'll be seeing a release by the middle of 2006.

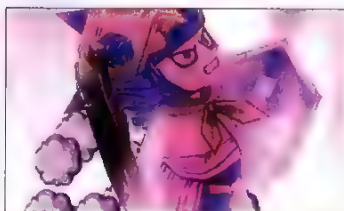


Young Yangus and the Dungeons of Mystery

(working title)

PLAYSTATION 2

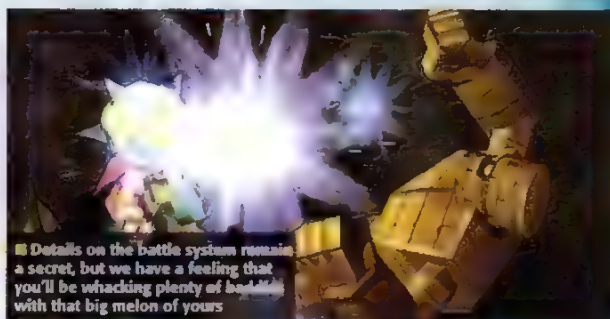
- > **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ROLE-PLAYING GAME
- > **PUBLISHER** SQUARE ENIX
- > **DEVELOPER** LEVEL 5
- > **RELEASE** TBD



Players of the epic Dragon Quest VIII won't have any trouble recalling the ex-bandit Yangus and his hilarious Cockney-infused speech. Square Enix has decided that the strange character is primed for his own spinoff adventure, albeit in an unexpected direction. Exploring the childhood of the wacky nut hat-wearing Yangus, the new game reveals his backstory in what looks to be a pretty amusing take on the Dragon Quest universe. Young Yangus' father is the leader of a notorious band of thieves, and Yangus has no greater wish than to become a burglar equal to his dad's reputation. Story details remain scarce (and relatively ridiculous), but apparently a stolen pot leads Yangus on a journey to a strange land where he gets kidnapped by some zany-looking monsters. Beyond that it all gets a little hazy. Even so, it looks like we'll get to find out what the deal is between Yangus and his erstwhile love interest, Red. On the technology side, the coolest aspect of the game appears to be that all of the extensive cartoon style cut scenes will be done using pre-rendered CG. This combination of cinematic styles looks pretty amazing, as these screens attest. We'll see if Young Yangus can live up to the Dragon Quest legacy when the game releases, but your guess is as good as ours when that might occur, so plan on a lengthy wait.



■ Yangus has had his giant nut hat since he was a wee lad, but when did he get the scar on the left side of his face in Dragon Quest VIII? Dum dum dum!!!



■ Details on the battle system remain a secret, but we have a feeling that you'll be whacking plenty of badniks with that big melon of yours



■ Players of Dragon Quest VIII might recognize this feisty girl. Throughout the course of this game, we'll see how this relationship blossomed

Final Fantasy XI 360 Final Fantasy XI: Treasures of Aht Urgan

XBOX 360 | PLAYSTATION 2 | PC

- > **STYLE** MASSIVELY MULTIPLAYER ONLINE ROLE-PLAYING GAME
- > **PUBLISHER** SQUARE ENIX
- > **DEVELOPER** SQUARE ENIX
- > **RELEASE** APRIL

■ The empire of Aht Urgan can be found between the Gugu Blue and the countries of the Far East

MMO enthusiasts have some exciting things coming their way from Square in the next several months. While release dates haven't been finalized, it looks like both the Xbox 360 version of FF XI and the new PC/PS2 expansion should be headed to American shores late this spring. Even though the 360 version boasts new high-definition capabilities, you will still be able to play with all of the players who have already jumped in on the PlayStation 2 and PC, thanks to the game's unique cross-platform support. Content from the new Aht Urgan region is definitely pretty exciting, and along with two new jobs, might be enough to rein back in some players who have since moved on to other MMO pastures. The exotic blue mage job is a sort of fighter-mage combo. In close combat they'll use deadly curved blades to slice their foes, while distance attacks will be governed by magic that you've mastered from previous enemies. Meanwhile, the newly announced Corsair job class are descendants of the pirates that once sailed the seas of the Near East. These roguish swashbucklers will utilize a multi-barrelled revolver called the Hexagun to demolish monsters, and they'll bring some complex luck-based skills to the field of battle to aid in a fight. The Empire of Aht Urgan offers a brand new landmass to explore, which we can only hope will be enough to keep FF fanatics busy until the long-awaited twelfth game finally arrives on U.S. shores.



■ The Corsair job blends firepower with luck

Kingdom Hearts II

PLAYSTATION 2

- > **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION/RPG
- > **PUBLISHER** SQUARE ENIX
- > **DEVELOPER** SQUARE ENIX
- > **RELEASE** MARCH 30

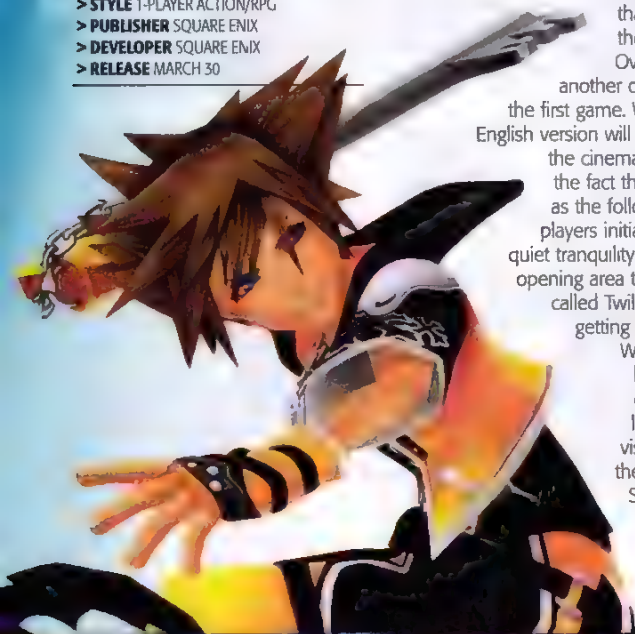
This month, we got to dive in and enjoy the full version of the long-awaited Kingdom Hearts II -- sort of. As it turns out, the vast adventure is already on store shelves across the pond in Japan, and so the game we played was in an entirely different language. That didn't stop us from exploring the hour upon hour of the epic, and even without completely understanding the complex story, our anticipation for the English release has only multiplied.

The game begins with a stunning CG movie that primarily exhibits crucial moments from the first console game and the GBA release. Overlaid on top of the gorgeous graphics is another of Hikaru Utada's lyrical songs, just like in the first game. We can only assume that once again an English version will be recorded for the U.S. release. When the cinematic dissolves away, we were first struck by the fact that we weren't in control of Sora. Instead, as the following minutes detail, the young boy that players initially control is named Roxas. Unlike the quiet tranquility of Destiny Islands in the first game, the opening area this time is a bustling center of commerce called Twilight Town. As the game opens, Roxas is getting together with his friends at their hideout.

What follows is six days in the life of this new hero character as he journeys about the city completing odd jobs, fights arena challenges, and continually lapses into strange visions of unfamiliar events. For the player, these moments are a recap of the story of Sora and his friends so far. We wouldn't dare spoil what follows after these opening hours of gameplay, but it shouldn't surprise anyone very much to learn that Sora shows back up awfully soon.

As we played, we recognized a number of profound tweaks to the way gameplay functions. While the first Kingdom Hearts had breathtaking story and visuals, a frustrating camera and occasionally repetitive action marred the excitement. Almost immediately, Kingdom Hearts II reveals the ways in which it has addressed these issues. The camera is panned further back, giving players a wider view of the action and the enemies that are nearby. Additionally, camera controls are now mapped to the right analog stick instead of the shoulder buttons -- a change that helps keep you in control. Battles have become more observation based, encouraging players to watch the movements of enemies carefully and constantly adjust positioning in response. The addition of context-sensitive moves mapped to the triangle button make for some stunning moments of action. In particular, this tool is brought into play during boss battles, where a timed press of the button can sometimes begin an elaborate interactive cut-scene of special dodges and attacks. We also encountered special Drive transformations, which allowed Sora to build up the ability to change into an ultra-powerful form for brief bursts of activity. Together, these features make combat way more enjoyable, and everything has a sweeping cinematic flair.

In our extensive play of the early part of the game, it was clear that we'd only just scratched the surface of the massive tale. Early indications seem to imply that it may take up to 60 hours to finish out the story. Despite the childlike Disney visuals, the plot is clearly of a much darker tone than before, and we've already encountered both new characters and plenty of returning friends. The much larger environments are filled with amazing visual representations of the best of Disney. The massive lineup of worlds has us entranced, including scenes from such varied sources as *Pirates of the Caribbean*, *Steamboat Willie*, and even the newly-revealed world of *Tron*. It's been a long wait, but now that a U.S. release is imminent, Kingdom Hearts II has soared to the top of our list of sure-to-be blockbusters for 2006. ■■■



■ Yep, that's right. The world of *Tron* makes for yet another remarkable destination to explore

■ Sora looks more grown up, and the darker story reflects his new look



■ Finally, Santa gets a gift for himself

■ The Lion King's Pride Land is but one of several brand-new locations for the game

■ Even as a lion, Sora needs to learn how to comb his hair



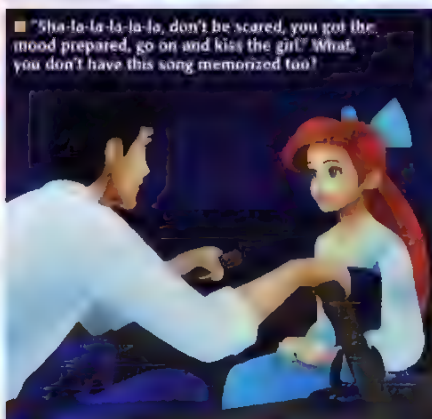
■ You'll play as Roxas (the blonde kid in the middle) for the first several hours of the game



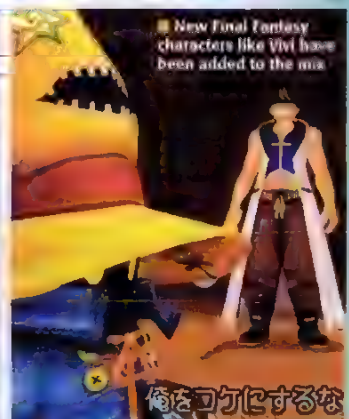
■ Sora's friends will go through all sorts of changes during the dozens of hours of the game



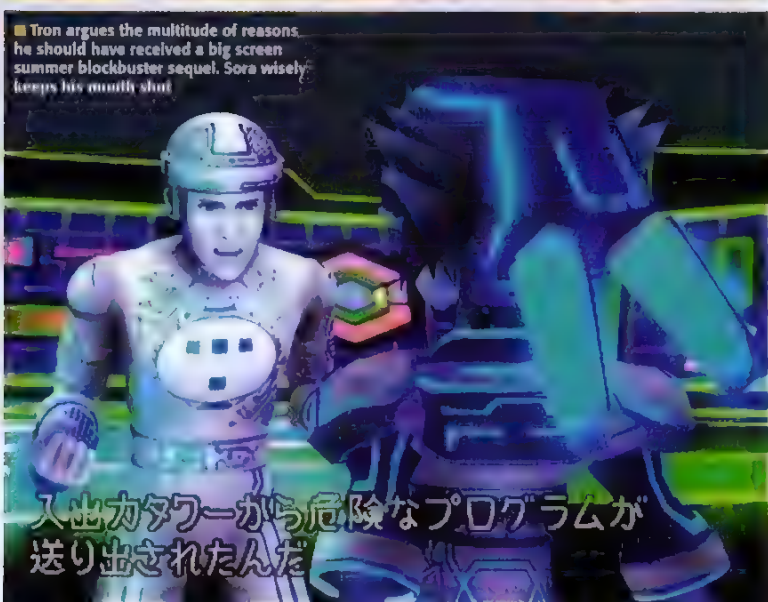
■ You can learn a lot about yourself depending on who you find hottest in this picture; if it's Goofy, call a psychologist



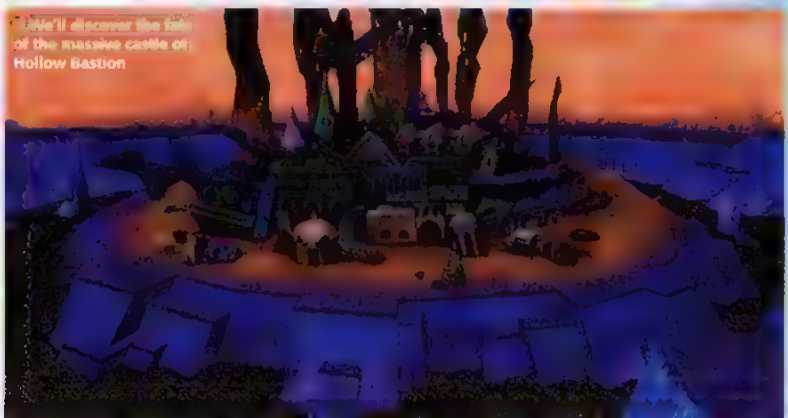
■ "Sha-la-la-la-la, don't be scared, you got the mood prepared, go on and kiss the girl!" What, you don't have this song memorized too?



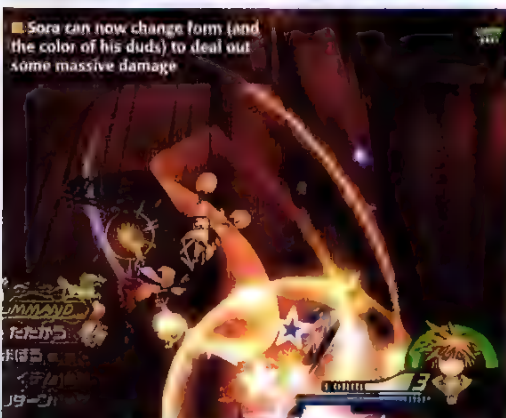
■ New Final Fantasy characters like Vivi have been added to the mix



■ Tron argues the multitude of reasons he should have received a big screen summer blockbuster sequel. Sora wisely keeps his mouth shut



■ You'll discover the tale of the massive castle of Hollow Bastion



■ Sora can now change form (and the color of his duds) to deal out some massive damage



■ Sora auditions for the new Mentos commercial



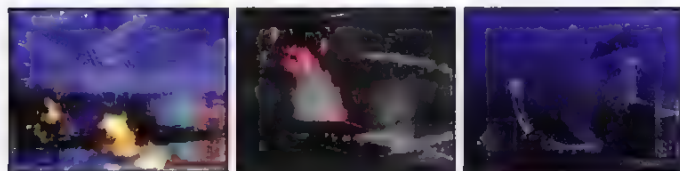
■ The new Gummi ship combat works much like a classic rail shooter - now you can actually look forward to this part of the game



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MARCH 2006



PlayStation 2

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DYNASTY WARRIORS 5

Empires

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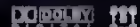


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PlayStation 2





PREVIEWS

A Glimpse Into The Future Of Gaming



■ "Back! Back I say! The Scott Stapp concert is sold out!"



■ At Zombie Tech, you too can get a certificate in Brain Eating, Bodily Dismemberment, Flesh Rending, and Court Stenography

UNLIMITED ENABLED

XBOX 360

Dead Rising

> STYLE | PLAYER ACTION (MULTIPLAYER TBA) > PUBLISHER | CAPCOM > DEVELOPER | CAPCOM > RELEASE | SUMMER

THE DEAD WALK

Now that the launch of the Xbox 360 has come and gone, gamers are starting to look forward to the next wave of titles for the system. One of the more prominent Japanese releases is Capcom's *Dead Rising*, which pits the player against hordes of the undead. As big zombie fans, we spoke with the game's producer Yutaka Haruki to see how the game is shambling along.

"I wish I could say the game is already finished and the whole team comes to work and watches zombie flicks every day," says Haruki. "But we are actually about 70 percent complete at the moment, so we're pretty far along, to the point where you can actually play it and have a lot of fun. Right now we are working on tuning up the game, and the team is having fun putting in stuff that reflects their own twisted sense of humor. This will definitely be a game about zombie mania, by zombie maniacs, for zombie maniacs." Indeed, *Dead Rising* may be the first game to truly capture one of the aspects undead aficionados expect from zombie movies: endless hordes of the

walking dead. "We are aiming to get 1,000 zombies on the screen at once, but no one knows for sure how many we've got, because it would be too hard to count them all," says Haruki. "Before, one brave staff member tried to count them, but he himself became zombified in the process!"

Of course, with so many zombies overrunning everything, finding weapons will be key to survival. Thanks to the game's mall setting, there will be plenty of ways to defend yourself. However, don't expect to see a huge arsenal of high-tech guns. "There are hardly any actual 'weapons' per se, since the game takes place in an ordinary mall. What makes the game interesting is that you can use anything you can lay your hands on as a weapon," explains Haruki. "You will see the standard zombie movie-type chainsaw, along with plenty of lawn trimmers, bats, hammers, garbage cans, benches, chairs, hangers, frying pans, shower heads, and more. Who would have guessed the mall could be such a horrific place, with so many things that can be turned into weapons? So everything you can use in the game is



■ "Ram! I told the zombie that Romero's movies suck!"

pretty weird and wild. The 'best' weapon will depend on the player's tastes. Some people will think that the hedge trimmer is the best item, since it allows you to cut zombies' heads off. Others might think that the beach parasol is the best item because you will be able to mow down a huge crowd of zombies, knocking them out of your way. The point is that you can find and use anything you want inside the shopping mall. Although, I have to warn you that there will be no 'adult' shop to pillage."

Haruki clearly has a sense of humor about the game, which is a great indicator of the tone of *Dead Rising*. Players should expect a zombie game that has a distinctly different mood than the *Resident Evil* games,

although we'd be surprised if there weren't a few references to Capcom's flagship horror title. After all, malls have video game stores. But Haruki gave us a word of caution when we asked him about this. "Almost everything takes place inside the mall," he answered. "This will let players experience the thrill of trying to survive in an enclosed area. You may be able to make it out of the mall, but if you run away you may not be able to solve the mystery or get to the best conclusion of the game. And, of course, if you spend all your time playing video games in the game shop in the mall, you'll have a hard time getting to the bottom of things." ■ ■ ■



■ "I'll probably be fine."



■ Some missions require you to help out others who are trapped in the mall



■ As you can see, Capcom is focusing on getting as many zombies onscreen as possible



■ Nothing kills zombies faster than stuffed bears



■ After happy hour got out of control again, the restaurant decided to change it's policy to "No Shoes, No Shirt, No Pulse, No Service"



■ There are easier ways to see if a pan is truly non-stick



One angry customer was all it took for Zany Uncle Roger's Riverboat Tour Company to rethink its no-refunds policy.

XBOX 360

Far Cry Instincts: Predator

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 16-PLAYER VIA XBOX LIVE) > **PUBLISHER** UBISOFT
 > **DEVELOPER** UBISOFT MONTREAL > **RELEASE** MARCH

BACK TO THE JUNGLE

Recently, Ubisoft made a surprise announcement and revealed that it would be releasing a new version of the lush, jungle-based shooter Far Cry Instincts for the Xbox 360 this March. Eager to find out more about what this new version has in store for gamers, we spoke with the title's producer Bertrand Helias. What we learned was a pleasant surprise, as this title, Far Cry Instincts: Predator, is far more than a prettier version of the original Xbox release.

Not only will Predator include the entire Instincts title with a host of improvements, it will also feature an entirely new campaign, tentatively referred to as Far Cry Instincts: Next Chapter (Next Chapter will also be released separately for the Xbox – see below). "Expect improvements in all aspects of gameplay," says Helias. Not only have the long load times

been optimized, but the 360 version has double the framerate of the original, a draw distance of two kilometers, and new features in every aspect of the gameplay. Main character Jack Carver's animalistic abilities have been improved and expanded, for starters. "He now has the Feral Climbing ability, which allows him to climb on some surfaces," says Helias. "We also tweaked some abilities like the Feral Attack. Now players can perform an attack from underwater. The Feral Jump is also improved – Jack is now allowed to jump and reach higher places." Helias also promised increased online stability for multiplayer, as well as a new online game type called "Seek and Secure," although he declined to elaborate on this mode's details. Both modes will also feature a new weapon – the deadly pipebomb.

One of Instincts' more unique features, the map editor, will

also see a host of improvements. "We wanted to raise the level of our map editor," says Helias. "So we added a lot of new elements like a Forest template and three new vehicles. We gave more depth to the map editor tools with new brushes like 'tunnel brushes,' zip lines, and more." It's clear that these gameplay improvements mean that Predator is not the usual visually-enhanced port – although the game definitely will look great. Helias stated that Predator will increase the immersion of the game by using all the latest graphical tools, like improved shaders and HD support. Of course, you can just take a look at these screens to see that Predator is a gorgeous game. With such striking visuals and an arsenal of gameplay tweaks, Far Cry fans may want to revisit the Instincts world a second time, and if you haven't played it yet, Predator is the perfect opportunity to do so. ■■■



The Next Chapter

Far Cry fans who haven't jumped to next-gen yet still have something to look forward to, as a new Xbox Far Cry title is also coming in March. Far Cry Instincts: Next Chapter will feature many of the same improvements as Predator, as well as an Import mode, which allows you to play on maps you created in the original Instincts.





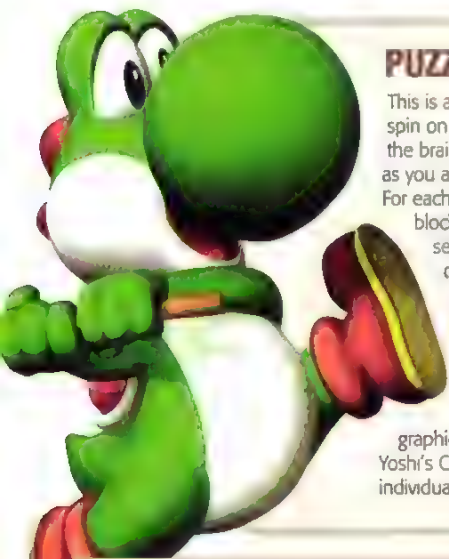
NINTENDO DS

Tetris DS

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER PUZZLE (UP TO 10-PLAYER VIA WIRELESS, OR UP TO 4-PLAYER VIA NINTENDO WI-FI)
 > **PUBLISHER** NINTENDO > **DEVELOPER** N.NINTENDO/ELORG > **RELEASE** MARCH 20

THE SIX FACES OF TETRIS

There's no question that Tetris is one of the greatest games of all time. Its simple yet addictive puzzle gameplay is as timeless as chess and has endured for two decades, making appearances on virtually every gaming device ever made. That being said, it's not often that a new Tetris title makes us sit up and take notice, as most of the new versions of the game that come to market are little more than slight repackagings of the same old formula. Thankfully, Tetris DS represents perhaps the most varied and best version of the game ever, featuring a wealth of new gameplay modes and single-cartridge wireless play. Read on as we break down the new faces of a classic.



PUZZLE MODE

This is a slower-paced and less hectic spin on Tetris, one that will require all the brainpower you have, especially as you advance to harder difficulties. For each puzzle, you'll see a set of up of blocks on the upper screen, and a selection of a few Tetris pieces on the bottom. By using each piece only once, you have to clear all the blocks. While this sounds easy, it's not, and is just another way that Tetris DS changes the way you think about the game. With graphics based on the SNES title Yoshi's Cookie, this mode features 200 individual puzzles.

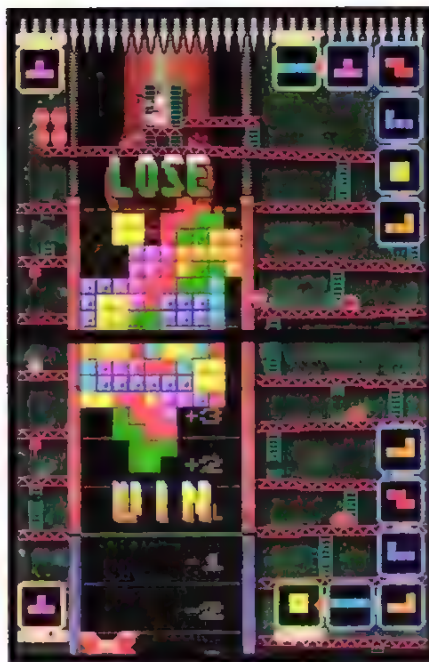
STANDARD AND MULTIPLAYER MODES

Of course, the original Tetris is also included, although this time you do get a little eye candy in the form of the top screen, which will show Mario traversing levels from the original NES trilogy based on your progress. This, alongside, Mission and Push, is one of three modes that can be played over Wi-Fi, which thankfully allows players to use just one cartridge through DS Download Play.



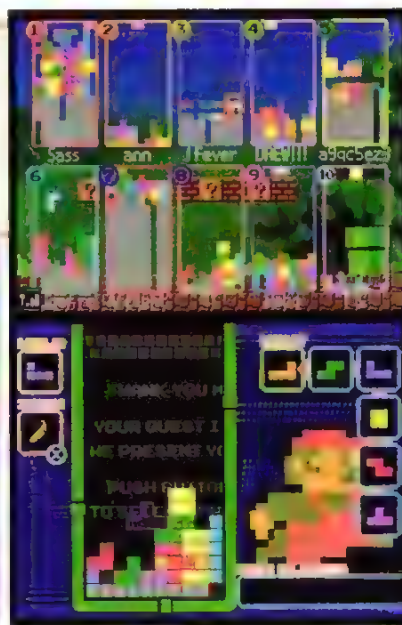
MISSION MODE

This game, which uses graphics and icons from the Zelda series, is just that: using the falling pieces to complete certain set objectives. For example, you might have to clear two lines using a square piece, or clear four lines at one time. Fairly simple, yet challenging.



TOUCH MODE

This mode is the most tailored to the DS, since it uses the touch screen as the only control. An inspired takeoff on old-fashioned "slide puzzles," this mode has players use the stylus to slide a tower of pieces to form lines, until a cage of balloons at the top reaches the bottom. You can also rotate the pieces by tapping twice left to right or vice versa. Touch mode require a brand of strategy all its own, and also features Touch Puzzle mode, which is similar to the preset templates of the standard Puzzle Mode.



PUSH MODE

Using a graphical look inspired by the original Donkey Kong, Push mode is sort of akin to a rugby scrum that must be settled with brains instead of brawn. On a vertical playfield with markers resembling a football field, by completing lines quickly you gradually push the mass of blocks back towards your opponent's "danger line" (or end zone). It's quite addictive, and adds a nice competitive wrinkle to the familiar Tetris gameplay.



CATCH MODE

Sure to be a hit with fans, Catch mode borrows its motif from Metroid as well as a little inspiration from ancient arcade top-down shooters like 1942. You start with one block that is scrolling up a vertical background, dodging familiar Metroid enemies. As stray pieces float down, you must rotate your block and attach them to create 4 by 4 blocks or larger, at which point you can detonate your pieces, laying waste to any enemies and blocks in its path. A very cool and original spin on Tetris.

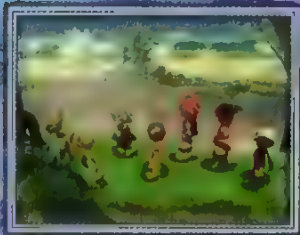
TALES OF LEGENDIA™

The battle for an ancient relic begins with the hunt for the "Merines"...

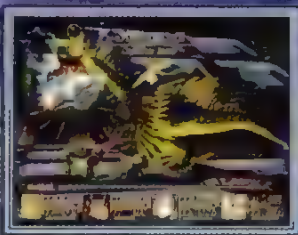
Adrift on an endless, raging ocean, Senel Coolidge and his sister Shirley find themselves drawn ashore a mysterious ship. Known as the Legacy, it is an ancient relic that conceals countless dangers including those who lie in wait for Shirley.

To save his sister, Senel and his party uncover the deepest secrets of a legendary ship, and in the process, discover the ties that bind them all.

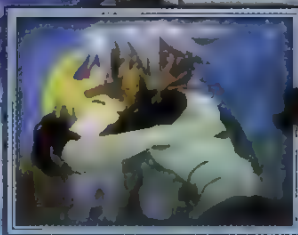
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A new cast of endearing characters in a stunning 3D setting.



Fast-paced real-time battles. Throw massive enemies for the first time.



Over 70 hours of gameplay in a stirring tale of love and heroism.

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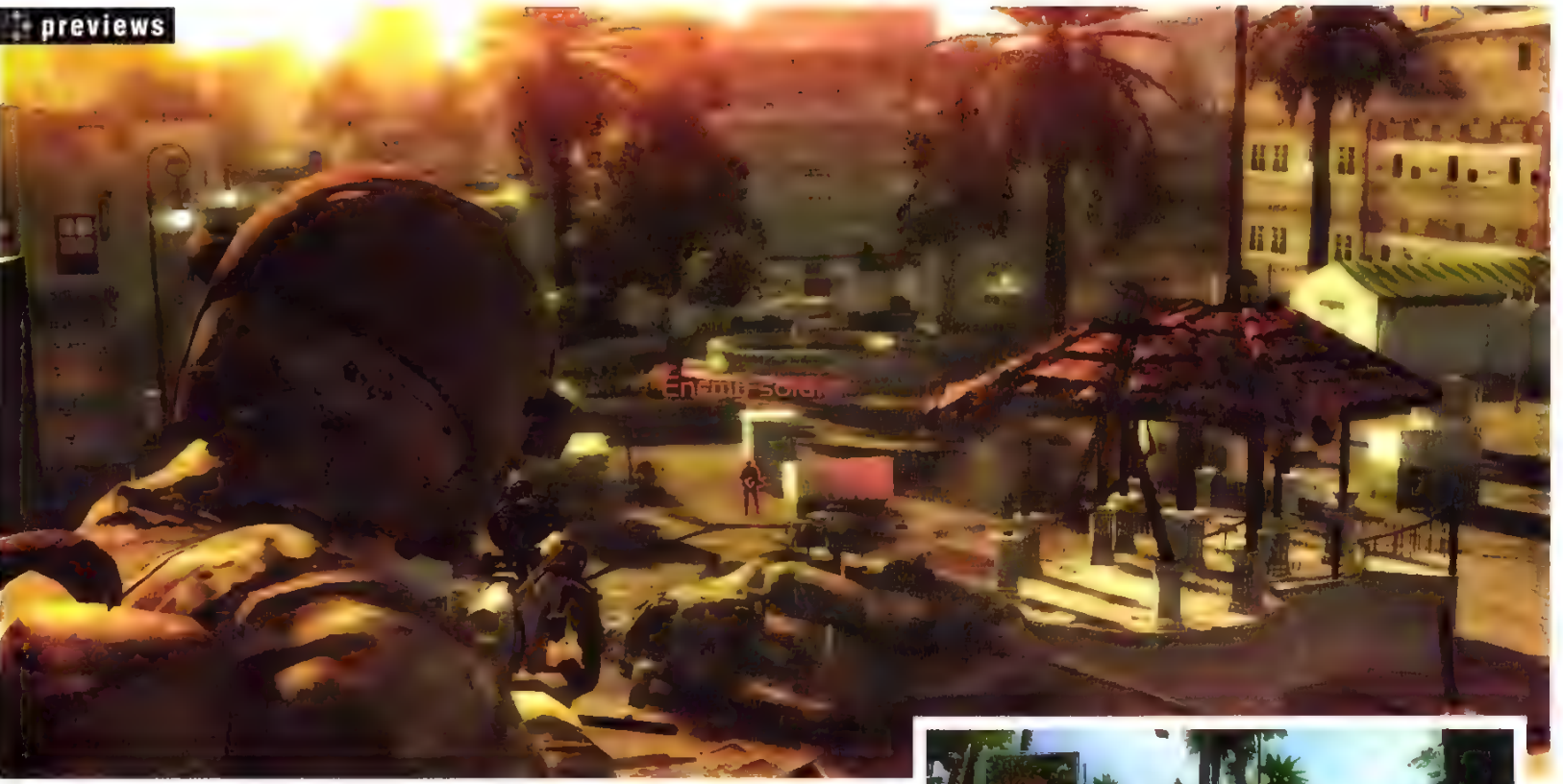
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PlayStation 2



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XBOX 360

Ghost Recon: Advanced Warfighter

> STYLE 1 TO 4-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 16-PLAYER VIA XBOX LIVE OR SYSTEM LINK) > PUBLISHER UBISOFT
> DEVELOPER UBISOFT/RED STORM > RELEASE MARCH 7

WAITING FOR THE GO ORDER

Since its exciting debut at E3 in 2005, Ubisoft's Ghost Recon was one 360 launch game that we were very curious about. It showed great potential, particularly in the possibilities to move away from some of the bad habits the current-gen iterations kept exhibiting. Of course, the game never made its initial November release, and only now has it come across our desk in playable form. After having run through an early build of the game – in both its campaign and multiplayer forms – it's clear that fans of the series will be excited about some of the new elements infused into the Ghost Recon franchise, while also thankful that it was not rushed to stores prematurely.

The move to Mexico City is doing the game a world of good. The city's architecture of open plazas and urban density make for endless strategic possibilities. Even though Ubisoft told us that the high-resolution textures had yet to be plugged into our build of the game, it still looked pretty sweet. Our favorite aspect was the dynamic lighting that affects your vision as you move from under the shadowy cover of a doorway, for example, into the bright sun of the

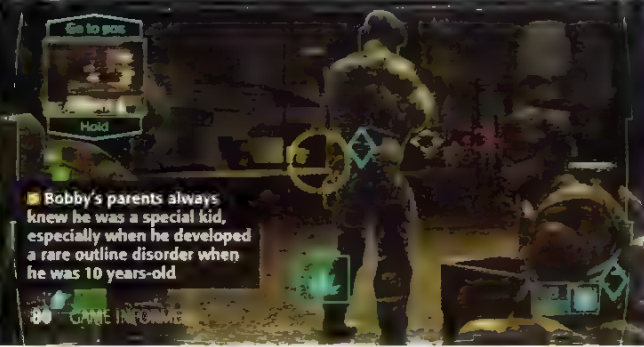
open air. The few seconds your eyes need to adjust can be all it takes for an enemy sniper to seize the moment and try to skip a bullet off your head. The game makes good use of the environments, whether it's asking you to pick off rooftop targets aboard a helicopter or use your squad to ambush an armored personnel carrier in the middle of the streets: it definitely feels more natural and realistic than many of the dry, linear environments of previous Ghost Recon.

Set in the near future, Advanced Warfighter leaves some cutting-edge tools at your disposal. The realtime picture-in-picture Cross-Com shows the status of your squadmates, and your targeting reticle helps place them in the battlefield. It also imparts other information when pointed at objects, such as how much health an enemy has left or by indicating objects or locations important to your mission. One very useful helper sometimes at your disposal is commandable UAV drones (which appears in your Cross Com) that you can send ahead to scan areas for intel. Be careful, though, as enemies can shoot it out of the sky and leave you in the dark. In one co-op multiplayer session we played, the opposing force's UAV unit scoped out our team's position and registered our location to the enemy. If we would have seen it first, we could have blown it out of the sky. Instead, we had to scatter and come up with a new strategy. Both the UAV and your squad can also be controlled on the game's 3D virtual map, accessed by pushing the back button



Advanced Warfighter's multiplayer portion is filled with options that can easily be used to tailor a session to players' preferences. Co-op territory missions charge you with holding zones of land, with optional AI helicopters that can be turned on to aid the side who holds the most zones. Maps show a range of terrain, some more intimate and others showcasing a vertical aspect that makes surprise strikes more likely. There are four unique co-op campaign missions, and Ubisoft told us of one that was large enough that it usually took around 45 minutes to finish.

As much as this build of the title showed the exciting directions the series wants to go in, we're glad that the game was delayed, as it clearly isn't ready for release in the state it is in. The speed and smoothness of the targeting reticule needs to be improved, and we were disappointed to see that the squad AI was troublesome. Among our concerns, this latter fact is one we're particularly keen on seeing resolved, as it has been a traditional problem for the franchise. This spring, we will find out if it's been worth the wait. ■ ■ ■

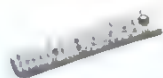




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Jump in.



Sci-fi doesn't necessarily mean outer space.

Supreme Commander

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION (MULTIPLAYER TBA) > PUBLISHER THQ > DEVELOPER GAS POWERED GAMES
> RELEASE TBA

LARGE AND IN CHARGE

After becoming known for creating the Dungeon Siege franchise, Gas Powered Games is striking off into uncharted territory with the forthcoming Supreme Commander. Led by the company's CEO and creative director Chris Taylor's real-time strategy experience (Taylor played a key role in creating the acclaimed 1997 RTS Total Annihilation), Supreme Commander is attempting to re-examine the genre and provide players with a new way to get their conquer on. Based on Game Informer's interview with Taylor himself, we can't help but hop onto this sci-fi epic's enthusiasm train with him.

The single most defining feature of Supreme Commander is simply the scale of the game's massive RTS conflicts, and not just in that "three alien races battling for dominance over the world" kind of way. "My

goal was to create the biggest 'theatre of war' experience that the technology would allow," states Taylor. "This meant allowing the player to zoom in or out (and when zooming out, I mean all the way out to see the entire map), depending on the situation, and allowing them full control over every single unit, at any time, at any zoom level." This will clearly change the way that players conduct wars; imagine being able to not have to split your attention between the main view and a mini-map to get an idea of how things are progressing. Ideally, it should work as a natural extension of the kind of RTS we know and love. In Taylor's words, "There isn't a concept of different levels, it's completely fluid and changes from moment to moment."

On the more technical side of things, Supreme Commander forgoes the more traditional "rock-paper-scissors" style of bal-

ancing for a more organic, real-world model. "We set a fair cost, based on capability and not on an arbitrary set of game rules," says Taylor. "This balance approach allows us to create a lot of asymmetry in the game design because we aren't stuck with a circular ecosystem with little flexibility." A lot of what makes this practical is the full spatial modeling of every single attack in the game. Rather than having a die roll system, where the computer generates a number that decides whether a given strike hits its target, everything from lasers to ballistic missiles is fully mapped in three-dimensional space, and natural collision determines accuracy and damage done. This sort of approach has long been a pipe dream for the RTS genre, but the ever-increasing power of PCs is actually making it possible.

Enormous units in this title are exponentially larger than your typical RTS's biggest troops



With Supreme Commander's willingness to break the established rules of the genre in some ways, innovate in others, and Gas Powered Games' reputation for putting out solid titles, we couldn't be more eager to see how the final product shakes out. Hopefully, a delay-free couple of months are in store for the game, and we'll get to see the full version soon. ■ ■ ■

The zoom functionality goes far beyond anything we've seen before



Maps will be able to be seriously huge

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with New Features and a Lower Price!

Devil May Cry[®] 3

DANTE'S AWAKENING *Special Edition*

"AN ACTION GAME THAT POSITIVELY
EXUDES COOLNESS

4.5 out of 5"

- GamePro

"IT HAS THE REASON TO SKIP SCHOOL,
THE REASON TO CALL IN SICK TO WORK,
AND THE REASON TO RECONSIDER THAT FRIDAY
NIGHT DATE... IN OTHER WORDS, IT'S THE
REASON YOU BOUGHT A PLAYSTATION 2...

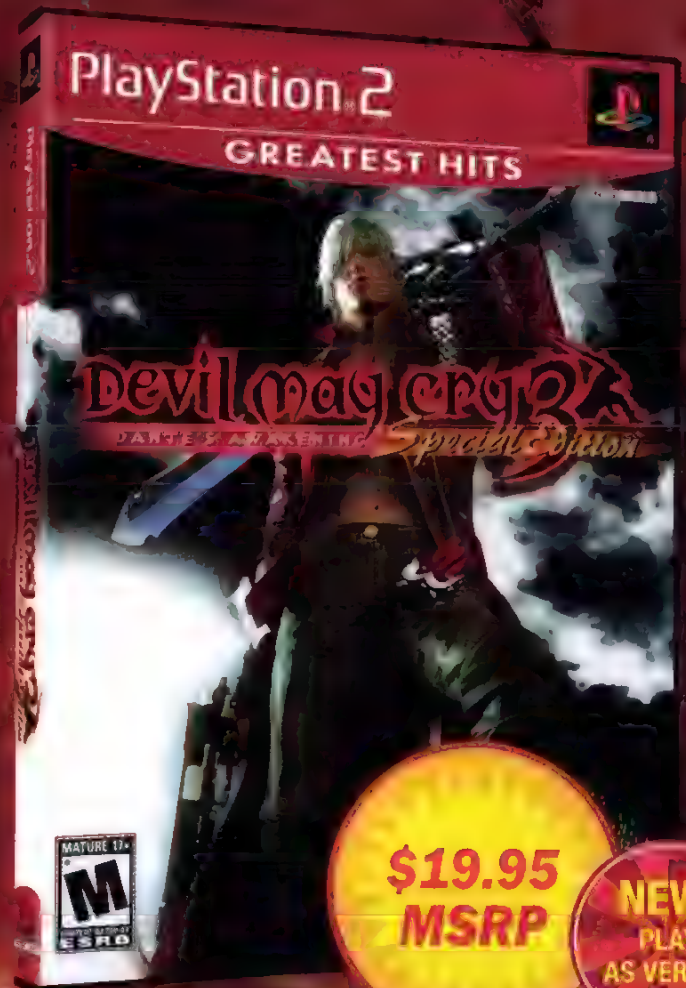
9.6 out of 10"

- IGN.com

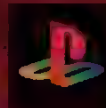
"RELENTLESSLY ENTERTAINING

9 out of 10"

- Game Informer



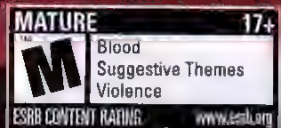
PlayStation.2



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It's a little-known fact that we here at Game Informer have the power to control time itself. That's how we've managed to get our hands on TimeShift, the upcoming time-bending shooter from Atari. Okay, so we can't really visit the future, but we were able to manipulate the flow of time in the game, thanks to a little playtest of the 360 and PC versions of the title. And while you've probably played a game with some degree of time control powers before, you haven't seen one that approached it this way.

TimeShift arms the player with three distinct powers: slow time, stop time, and time reversal. Although slow time and stop time have appeared in many games, they are used to full effect in TimeShift. In a game like Max Payne you could waltz into a room, start shooting, and trigger Bullet Time if you got into trouble, but that's not really an option in TimeShift. Your time powers don't just give you a little edge, they're your main weapon, so if you're not using them constantly, you're dead meat. Hordes of intelligent enemies will surround you in

some areas and attack viciously, so running and gunning is simply not an option. As a result, our experience with the game was a much slower, more strategic experience than many shooters. We slowed time to run past turrets, stopped time to grab the guns out of enemies' hands, and reversed time to send an oncoming missile back to its launcher. In a typical fight, we stopped time, dispatched the closest foes, hopped behind cover and waited for our powers to recharge, stopped time again to take out the next group of enemies, and repeated as necessary. We also used our time powers in non-combat ways, such as halting time to walk through fire unscathed and slowing time to make it through a gate before its force field activated. Time reversal is also totally different than Prince of Persia's rewind feature or Full Auto's Unwreck. It affects your surroundings, but not your character, so you'll still be moving forward in time while your enemies move in reverse.

Our playtest of TimeShift has us excited that the game is using its time contro-



powers in a new way, one that will force players to adjust the way they play first-person shooters. While its slower pace may turn off some players, we're happy to see a different approach to the overcrowded genre. That's not to say that TimeShift doesn't have some obstacles to overcome. The slow time ability seems to take a back

seat to the more useful stop time ability, and the demo we played was ridiculously difficult (although Atari has stated that it is still tweaking this aspect). Despite the work left to be done, TimeShift seems to be shaping up into a thankfully fresh take on the FPS genre. ■■■



■ By using your time powers, you can get the drop on your foes and turn them into human fireballs.



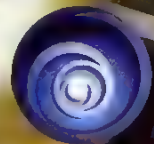
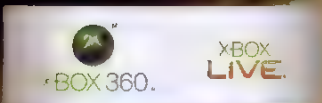
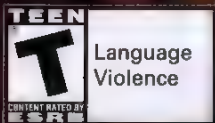
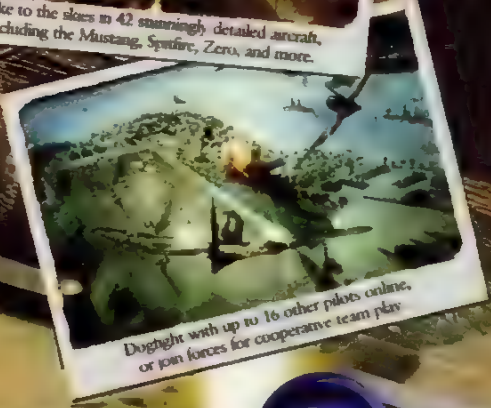
■ No FPS is complete without ridiculously large guns.

THEY FLEW LIKE EAGLES.
THEY FOUGHT LIKE LIONS.

BLAZING ANGELS

★★★ SQUADRONS OF WWII ★★★

Dawn breaks over the skies of war torn Europe. Bandits at twelve o'clock high! It's time to take command, lead your squadron of Blazing Angels into combat, and send the enemy fighters down in flames!





■ It may not look quite this good, but in our tests the game ran perfectly acceptably on mid-range machines



■ The new Wärforged race is original, awesome, and totally made of metal

PC

Dungeons & Dragons Online: Stormreach

> STYLE MASSIVELY MULTIPLAYER ONLINE ROLE-PLAYING GAME > PUBLISHER ATARI > DEVELOPER TURBINE > RELEASE FEBRUARY 28

A CYBER TABLE

Instead of merely trusting in the fanboy worship that this storied license grants, veteran MMORPG developer Turbine is trying some new and interesting ideas with *Dungeons & Dragons Online*. Catering much more toward the small-group, quest-oriented style of play that the tabletop game is famous for, rather than the “grind up to the level cap and then kill bosses for loot” paradigm of traditional MMORPGs, *D&D Online* is a unique experience. After playing quite a bit of the beta, it became apparent that *D&D Online*’s innovative structure, while definitely not for everybody, has some distinct advantages.

Because players only gain experience by completing instanced (private to your group) quests, and success in any heroic adventure requires a group of people playing together, *D&D Online* is very much a social game. Fortunately, a robust group-finding tool is included for those not lucky enough to have a regular crew to roll with, so hooking up with like-minded folks to

party with isn’t too much hassle. However, the lack of a non-instanced world to meet people in will likely make it difficult for true communities to form on any given server. Likewise, the lack of player-driven item crafting prevents the kind of living economy that you’ll see in *EverQuest II* or *World of Warcraft* from existing. Honestly, this is much more of a small-group game (think *Phantasy Star Online* or *Neverwinter Nights*) with limited massively-multiplayer features – and, of course, a subscription fee. But *D&D Online* does several things that may make that service charge more than worth it to some players.

Since the quests that players go on are off-limits to anyone not in your group, the developers have been able to play to the strengths of the *D&D* franchise to create some truly cool atmospheres and unique challenges that you won’t see in any other MMORPG. Non-combat skills like Listen and Search play a large role in opening up new ways to defeat challenges, which helps a lot

to break players’ roles out of the traditional MMORPG model. While a Rogue or Ranger won’t be as effective in a straight-up brawl, their diverse skillsets make them an asset of a different kind. Along with the hojillion ways to build a hero thanks to the 3.5 Edition *D&D* ruleset, there is a lot of game here to explore.

This title sidesteps a lot of the common frustrations of the genre, but those same design decisions lead to a different set of

problems. Since *D&D Online* is so different than what you might expect out of an MMORPG, a good long look at what you enjoy about online games might be in order. Provided the bugs and broken bits of the beta get fixed between now and launch, though, plenty of gamers will likely find exactly what they’re looking for in *D&D Online* when it goes live at the end of February. ■ ■ ■

The action-oriented nature of *D&D Online* (you can physically dodge spells and attacks for instance) leads to some confusion on the control end of things, since nothing works quite like you’d expect it to in either an MMORPG or a third-person action title, especially since most gamers are used to using a gamepad for directly-controlled combat. In this case, the Xbox 360 controller came to the rescue. After downloading the free software from Microsoft and plugging the 360 pad into a USB port, all that stood in our way was configuring the buttons properly. And even that wasn’t tough – most functions were automatically bound in ways that made perfect sense. Frankly, *D&D Online* almost feels more natural with a gamepad than with mouse-and-keyboard control.



■ You'll have to equip blunt weapons to be effective against skeletons, unlike these chumps



■ Trolls are much grosser in D&D than other fantasy worlds

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UNLIMITED ENABLED

PLAYSTATION 2

Suikoden V

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ROLE-PLAYING GAME > PUBLISHER KONAMI > DEVELOPER KONAMI > RELEASE SPRING

A DECADE OF RECRUITING

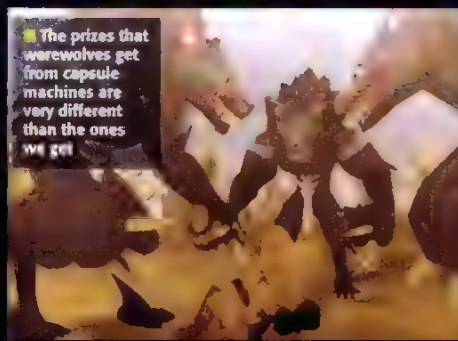
In celebration of Suikoden's 10th anniversary, the quest to band together the 108 Stars of Destiny will unfold through what Konami is claiming to be the longest story to ever grace the series. When the matriarch of Farlena fails in her duty to keep peace, she is forced to unleash the power of the Sun Rune to extinguish a potential uprising. Though it served the purpose, the power of the Sun Rune begins to take its toll on the land in other ways. Why have the riverbeds gone dry? This story will unfold through the eyes of Farlena's prince, who players will get to name. Through branching plot points and multiple endings, what happens next in this battle-torn land is determined mostly by the actions of the player.



Of the 108 characters that can be assembled, roughly 60 of them will have a hand in combat. The remainder will once again provide services at your keep. Some of the characters that you stumble across are actually familiar faces from the series' past. Viki, who has made an appearance in all four previous installments (much like Final Fantasy's Cid), will once again attend to your teleportation needs. Additionally, we'll see the continuation of the story for two of Suikoden II's characters, Killey and Lorelai.

Combat is once again a multi-headed beast. In addition to the standard six-man battles, players will also have a hand in huge skirmishes with hundreds of troops on both sides. Suikoden's combat has always been explosive, but it's never been terribly complex. In this entry, the Tactical Formation System allows players to tap into 20 different strategic arrangements in battle. Extensive character customization is also a part of the picture thanks to new skill and weapon customization systems.

From the little that we've seen thus far, Suikoden V hasn't necessarily made visual leaps forward, but the gameplay that is offered is stretching into areas that are brimming with exciting possibilities. Konami hasn't set an official release date yet, but the game is expected to street sometime this spring exclusively on PlayStation 2. ■■■■



PC

The Chronicles of Spellborn

> STYLE MASSIVELY MULTIPLAYER ONLINE ROLE-PLAYING GAME > PUBLISHER TBA > DEVELOPER SPELLBORN INTERNATIONAL > RELEASE SUMMER

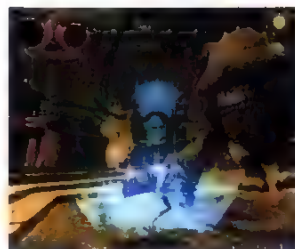
OPENING NEW WORLDS

The established titles in the MMORPG scene are well-known and successful, but nonetheless leave some people out in the cold. This coming year should see a number of innovative games hit the market to fulfill alternate online needs, and The Chronicles of Spellborn looks to be one of those interesting options. Unique skill and combat systems are a draw in and of themselves, but Spellborn's concept of letting players open up new worlds through their own actions is clearly its most exciting facet.

Central to Spellborn's progression are Ancestral Quests. Once your faction's playerbase completes

a certain number of these epic adventures, a new zone will open up for all five factions to contend with each other over — with your crew getting a head start, since you opened it first. These player-versus-player areas contain resources that your group needs to further their efforts, and maintaining control of them will confer an advantage to the owner. In addition, heroic deeds and accomplishments will result in status symbols like monuments and statues of yourself being placed in the world. No forum arguments about which guild is the most elite — it's all right there in the game world.

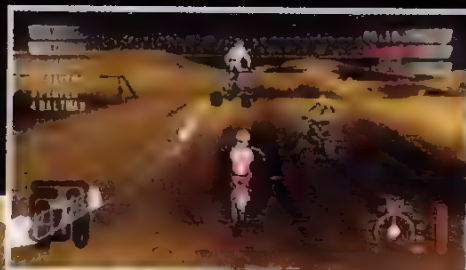
This dynamic interaction with your surroundings, as well as Spellborn's non-traditional skilldeck system (similar to Guild Wars, you'll pre-select skills for battle, but with an additional "chaining" mechanic that allows for some interesting tactics), make Spellborn sound rather intriguing. Online gamers bored with current offerings or with an itch for something new would do well to keep tabs on this title. ■■■■





DO NOT TRY THIS AT HOME.

To those parties attempting to recreate the stunts contained in the new MX vs. ATV: On The Edge we offer this message: DON'T. While that seems fairly obvious to most, you'd be surprised how many people will contemplate emulating its dangerous intensity, vis-à-vis the realistic head-to-head racing experience. Ergo, THQ and Rainbow Studios put forth the following caveats to all parties: Do not attempt to make a golf cart do 70 mph, nor launch a sand rail over a moving plane. Moreover, do not undertake the recreation of any and all stunts from MX vs. ATV: On The Edge in order to replicate its realistic rag-doll physics. The insane stunts and fierce racing is intended for the sole intent and purpose of an intense gaming experience, not for the discovery of clever ways to inflict bodily harm. Case in point, THQ and Rainbow Studios offer this photo as reference of the projected outcome of ignoring this warning. Honestly, what was this guy thinking? Said driver wasn't anywhere close to successfully completing the jump, nor is the other side of the canyon he was attempting to reach even in the aforementioned photo. In summation, MX vs. ATV: On The Edge is not real, don't attempt to make it real.



Choose any vehicle and
unleash it in 4 player
Wireless Ad-Hoc.



New ATV models, redesigned monster
trucks and new pimped out 4x4 golf karts.



Rugged new outdoor environments.



Mild Lyrics





■ Dexter's spray gun can function as a jetpack for brief periods of time, making for some interesting platforming

PSP

Daxter

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION/PLATFORM > **PUBLISHER** SONY COMPUTER ENTERTAINMENT AMERICA
> **DEVELOPER** READY AT DAWN STUDIOS > **RELEASE** MARCH

SECOND BANANA TURNS TOP DOG

It's no secret that we've always preferred the goofy antics of Dexter to the goatee'd angst of his partner Jak. Finally, Dexter is ready to take center stage as the protagonist of his very own self-titled solo adventure, set to release in March for PSP. Although this is the first J&D game not developed by Naughty Dog, longtime fans needn't worry — this is still a family affair. Rookie studio Ready At Dawn is actually comprised of a number of key members of the original Jak team, allowing Naughty Dog to trust that the franchise will be in good hands.

Based on a recent playable build of the game, it appears that Ready At Dawn is well on its way to both mastering the PSP hardware and crafting an engaging platformer. The game takes place in the period between the original Jak and Dexter and Jak II, following Dexter's quest to find and free his imprisoned partner. Alone in Haven City, Dexter realizes he needs some help and funds if he's to succeed, so he takes a job as an exterminator, helping to rid the metropolis of a nasty metalbug infestation. Graphically, this is one of the better PSP games we've seen to date, with visuals that rival the last two console Jak titles (and even cleverly disguises any loading in the same way).

Based on the few hours that we played, the game looks to be somewhat more of a traditional platformer than Jak II or 3, but one that definitely raises the bar in terms of

breadth and variety for PSP titles. Although it starts out with some well-done, if fairly standard, platforming, the levels continue to grow in both scope and ambition. Dexter's main armaments are an electric flyswatter (used for crushing odious metalbugs) and a bug sprayer (which temporarily stuns your quarry, setting them up for the big splat). However, you soon begin to earn upgrades, like a pressure boost that allows you to use the sprayer as a temporary rocket boost, as well as new organic uses like a flame thrower to cut through cobwebs. As in the Jak series, you'll also have access to a variety of hover vehicles, which lead to some thrilling chase sequences. Adding even more interest are Dexter's "dreams," brief minigames that happen when you go to bed at night. In these fantasies, Dexter envisions himself as a variety of heroes, including one hilarious button-pressing contest that emulates *The Matrix Reloaded's* "burly brawl."

So far, so good. While there were still some serious technical glitches (like skipping during cutscenes and some frame lag in open areas), this looks to be one of the most promising PSP titles so far — Dexter sports definitely one of the best camera systems we've seen to date on the system. With any luck, Dexter should be capable of delivering the epic experience of its console predecessors to the handheld market. ■■■

■ If you have a source of fire nearby, you can light your sprayer and use it as a flamethrower



PLAYSTATION 2

Ace Combat Zero: The Belkan War

1 OR 2-PLAYER ACTION (MULTIPLAYER TBA) > PUBLISHER NAMCO > DEVELOPER NAMCO

BY NOBUSHI

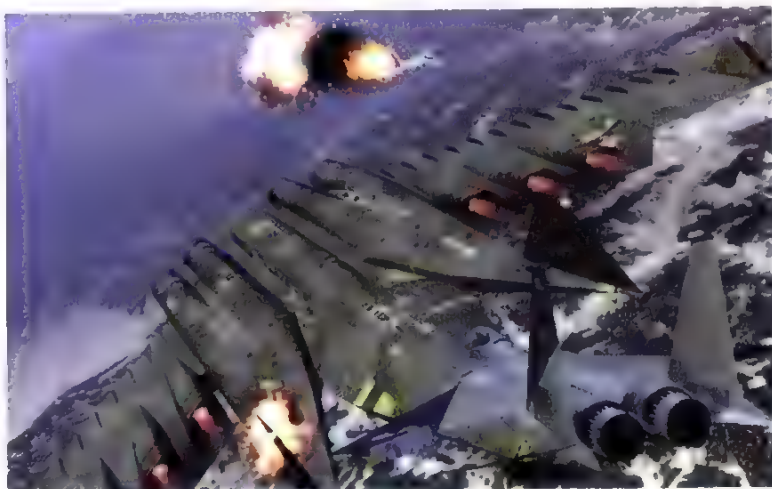
We were lucky enough this month to get to play a few early levels of the latest Ace Combat entry. We came away surprised how remarkably similar the gameplay feels to the last entry. That's not necessarily a bad thing. Ace Combat 5 included some of the most engaging flight sim combat we've seen in a game. If the new title manages to continue that tradition we'll be more than pleased, but we're eager to see if the game has any major innovations to offer.

One potential place to look for those steps forward seems to be the artificial intelligence of rival pilots. As we looped and turned through the air, the radar display indicated how these smarter enemy pilots would effectively maneuver into the best position to engage our craft. There's also a more discernable gap between the skills of novice and experienced foes when you engage them in a dogfight. In addition, we were pleased to see that one of our favorite features from the franchise continues to evolve — the voice communication in the game is engaging and reactive to real time

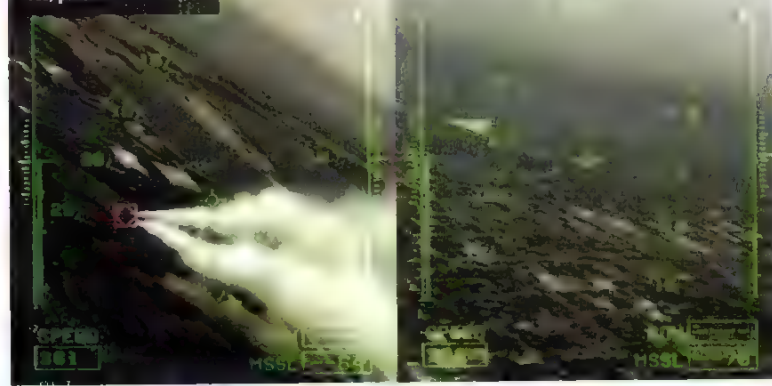
actions within an unfolding level. If a fight is going poorly, you'll hear your wingmate's concern over the comm. Smoothly finish off a majority of your foes quickly, and comments will pour in about how well the mission is going.

We also got a deeper glimpse into the tone of the new story. As a mercenary hired by the small country of Ustio, you'll hear the ambivalence in the voices of your foes as they scoff at your dishonorable role as a merc for the other side. Despite their dislike, they'll grudgingly offer respect as you progress through missions and your small team tears through squadron after squadron of their pilots.

From stunning cinematic replays to its nail biting combat, Ace Combat Zero appears poised to deliver on the intensity that has been a hallmark of the series. The added bonus of two player versus battles only sweetens the deal. At this point, only an in-depth look into more of the levels and story will tell us if there is enough new content to keep the public's attention. ■■■



■ Two-player Dogfights? Yes, please



i play. i win. i gloat. i kick back. i catch a movie.
i hear some tunes. all thanks to one little card.

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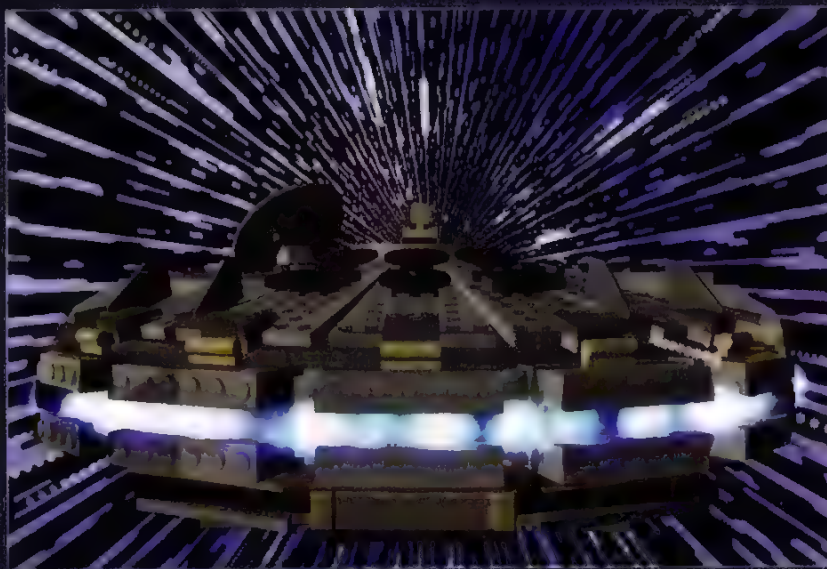
Mini Previews With Big Pictures



PLAYSTATION 2 | XBOX | GAMECUBE | PC | PSP | NINTENDO DS | GAME BOY ADVANCE

LEGO Star Wars: The Original Trilogy

The prequel-based LEGO Star Wars game clearly proved that plastic smiling-faced toys can deliver more inspiring and believable performances than actual actors (and you thought we didn't have any Jake Lloyd jokes left). This fall, developer Traveller's Tales and publishing partner LucasArts are applying a hilarious coat of plastic to the beloved original trilogy. In addition to capturing the classic moments of all three films, Traveller's Tales is exploring new avenues with the building block aspect. Players will actually be able to construct their very own vehicles. The customization also expands to the characters you play as, such as allowing for new abilities to be gained. Now, if only there was a LEGO piece that would make the Ewoks cool.





PLAYSTATION 2

Beatmania

We'll never forgive Paul Oakenfold for selling out and cheapening rave culture with his cookie-cutter "fratrance" music. Just kidding! We don't care about rave culture! Also, we've never heard Paul Oakenfold! Still, we'll show that dude a thing or two on Beatmania, Konami's long-awaited home release of the popular arcade unit. With a custom controller that features seven key buttons and a simulated turntable, you'll scratch, beat, pound, and whack your way to heaven over a bevy of hyped-up dance, reggae, and techno tunes. The onscreen interface will be familiar to anyone that's played a Konami rhythm game, but the challenging gameplay will prove difficult even for those who have mastered the recent hit *Guitar Hero*. It takes a steady hand to master the wheels of steel; find out if you have the goods this March.



PSP

Mega Man Powered Up

Killer robots built to defend humanity from evil are pretty cool, we guess, but they're missing a certain something. Capcom may have finally found the final piece of the puzzle with this remake of the original *Mega Man* title. You see, Mega Man (and playable pals Guts Man and Cut Man) are cuter than cute. We're talking kittens in coffee mugs cute. They're downright adorable, and the PSP's lovely screen makes it all the better. Down at a basic level, this may be a pretty straight update of *Mega Man* with a couple of new characters and goofy play modes, but that's missing the point. Who needs puppies when a robot can be just as cuddly and still fire huge laser beams from its arm?



PSP

Splinter Cell Essentials

Who doesn't enjoy some nice recreational lurking from time to time? We certainly do, which is why we're so excited about *Splinter Cell Essentials* for the PSP, coming in March from Ubisoft. Sam Fisher's first adventure for the handheld will allow us to take our expert creeping skills on the road and experience a new adventure built from scratch for the PSP. While the game takes place after the events of *Double Agent*, it is actually the story of Sam's origin, as it will detail his time in the Navy SEALs. Players will also relive some of the über-spy's most memorable moments in flashback stages using some of the missions from the console games. Every single gadget from the series will be usable, and the game will also support the series' popular brand of multiplayer via Wi-Fi.



UNLIMITED ENABLED

PLAYSTATION 2 | XBOX | GAMECUBE

The Da Vinci Code

Take 2 Interactive snagged the rights to *The Da Vinci Code* a few months ago. Given that the film seems virtually guaranteed to be a massive blockbuster, it seems like a wise investment. However, an equal amount of wisdom went into the decision to hire The Collective, a company that's done solid work on licensed games using the Buffy the Vampire Slayer and Indiana Jones properties. Even more intriguing is the revelation that Take 2 has hired adventure game veteran Charles Cecil (creator of the Broken Sword series) to aid The Collective in the development process, presumably helping to craft the type of ingenious puzzles that helped make *The Da Vinci Code* such a worldwide smash. Whether or not the film and game will be a controversial as the novel remains to be seen, but we doubt this title will be popping up on Pope Benedict's Amazon wish list any time soon (he's more into *Dragon Ball Z* anyway). Look for this to hit stores in May, in conjunction with the theatrical release of the film.



REVIEWS

We Play The Crap So You Don't Have To

MULTI



25 To Life

PSE



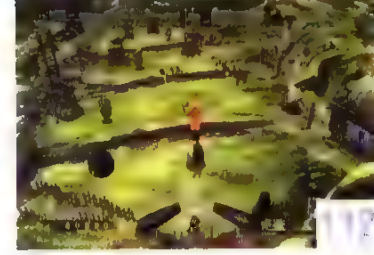
Onimusha: Dawn of Dreams

XBOX 360



Dead or Alive 4

GC



Odama



FIGHT NIGHT ROUND 3

In real life we may throw punches like wet noodles, but when we step into Fight Night's ring we are kings. Featuring blows that jar the senses, Round 3 is one of the few Xbox 360 titles with graphics that take gamers to a whole new level as your head snaps back and you wince at the punishment. Anchored by tight all-analog gameplay, Fight Night Round 3 brings the brutality of the sport into your home in both looks and feel. We suggest you keep a cup of raw eggs beside your TV for between rounds just to keep up.

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

THE SCORING SYSTEM

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

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

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

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

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

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

> **Replay Value**

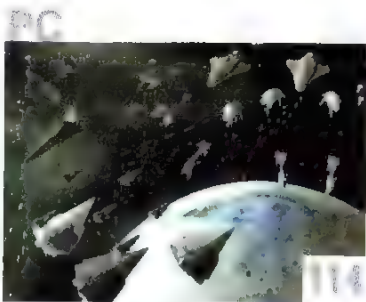
High - You'll still be popping this game in five years from now.

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

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

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

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



Star Wars: Empire at War



Street Fighter Alpha 3 Max



Star Wars: Empire at War

Giving the Battle of Endor a run for its money, Empire at War puts you in command of immense conflicts in everyone's favorite heroic sci-fi universe -- and lets you set up some of your own. Whether you're re-writing galactic history or playing out the events of Star Wars canon, the gloriously cinematic battles of Empire at War are an experience unto themselves.

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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.

	Content suitable for persons ages 3 and older.		Content suitable for persons 17 ages and older.
	Content suitable for persons ages 6 and older.		Content suitable only for adults.
	Content suitable for persons ages 10 and older.		Product is awaiting final rating.
	Content suitable for persons ages 13 and older.		

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

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

480p – Progressive scanning, this option (“p”=progressive), creates a picture signal with double the scan lines of a conventional interlaced picture, 480i (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.

blow – 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.

frame rate – The frames of animation used to create the illusion of movement.

friend – 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 Baklur'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.

Steven Seagal – The next Chuck Noms. Did you know he filmed Under Siege: Dark Territory with a broken spine?

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.

IT AINT WHERE YOU FROM

STAFF



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WHERE YOU AT



"Where You At?"



BOTTOM LINE 9



XBOX 360 | PLAYSTATION 2 | XBOX

Fight Night Round 3

> **STYLE** 1 OR 2-PLAYER SPORTS (2-PLAYER VIA XBOX LIVE OR PS2 ONLINE) > **PUBLISHER** EA SPORTS
> **DEVELOPER** EA CHICAGO > **RELEASE** FEBRUARY 14 > **ESRB** T

LORDS OF THE RING

Fight Night Round 3 represents a second attempt by EA to bring sports into the next-generation. Initial launch games such as Madden NFL 06 disappointed, as features were dropped and gameplay was a step back from the current-gen. Round 3 certainly doesn't shirk in the gameplay department one bit, as it has everything that Round 2 offered and more. The title is hands-down a must-have for the system, but serves more as a rock-solid foundation for a next-generation franchise rather than a total revelation.

The visual component of this game should not be underestimated. Round 2 was a satisfyingly brutal title to play, but when you see the deformity-causing carnage you inflict on your opponent in Round 3, it feels like you're stepping into the ring for the first time. If there ever was a time when great graphics truly immersed a player into the game, then this is it. From the telltale swollen eye to the sweat-laden bodies of the fighters, I got so focused on this game that between rounds I would take a breather and shake my shoulders loose from the exhaustion of a round that was either

excitingly tense or just plain painful.

Even though you can gauge how well you're doing by the look of your fighter, the trick of this game is that it's not just what you see. Round 3 does a good job of measuring fatigue on your fighter as punches become weaker and parries harder to pull off. This often leads you to regroup and either concentrate on your gameplan or change your tactics. It is also excellent at tracking the momentum of a fight. It's exciting that you can tell your opponent is wearing down, and exhilarating when you taste the blood in the water. But if you're too greedy, you can feel the tables turn as a flurry of sloppy punches on your part sparks a resurgence in your foe until you retire to your corner to contemplate the squandered opportunity.

Round 3 moves a little slower than Round 2 (even on Xbox), but it seems it might be due to the larger boxer models which, given the great amount of detail on them, I'm more than willing to accept. Regardless, it still feels like the Fight Night you've always loved, only this time you get a new

KO punch and an occasional first-person minigame. The one criticism I have here is that even though the game feels great, the transitions between the animations could be a little smoother.

As big of a splash as this game is going to make (some will undoubtedly be impressed enough by it to buy a boxing game for perhaps the first time), the one area that continues to fail to impress me is the career mode, which returns almost unchanged. Despite this fact, every gamer is going to want to test their mettle with this game and dare to step into the ring, stare down their opponent, and tread the canvas like a champion.—**KATO**

The edge
When All Games Aren't Created Equal
As important as the graphics are to the Xbox 360, the current-gen editions don't suffer as much as you might think. In fact, you'll still want to take your damage cues from the boxer models and turn off the HUD altogether.

> **Concept:** Fight Night steps into the next-gen ring, but is in many ways the same as last year

> **Graphics:** Seeing the rippling of brutalized flesh in slow motion never gets old

> **Sound:** Pay attention to the breathing of you and your opponent as the match continues for audio clues. Also, the soundtrack is sweet

> **Playability:** Triggering and playing the first-person minigame during fights takes some getting used to

> **Entertainment:** Pummeling guys into sacks of swollen fluid is always fun. I'll step into the ring any time

> **Replay Value:** Moderately high

Second Opinion 9.25

Fight Night: Round 2 succeeded in giving the game a career mode worthy of the original's groundbreaking all-analog gameplay. Now, at least on the Xbox 360, the graphics are the aspect of the game taking the quantum leap. Honestly, this is probably the best-looking 360 title, with the possible exception of Call of Duty 2. While some might argue that it's mere eye candy, the graphics and new cinematic presentation really do put you into the action like never before. As good as the current-gen versions are, it's really hard to go back once you've seen this on 360. At first, the gameplay seems a bit slower, but as you build your stats and ranking, it picks up considerably. However, career mode and gameplay have received only slight tweaks, remaining largely the same as last year's, and the commentary is stilted and repetitive. It might not revolutionize the series, but it's a great game packed with content and incredible visuals, and one of my favorite 360 games to date.—**MATT**



■ When you land the new flash KO punch, you'll enter this first-person mode. In this shot, you'd be wearing the blue gloves



■ The new Philly Shell defense gives you quick counter-jabs

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PLAYSTATION 2 | XBOX

25 to Life

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 16-PLAYER VIA PS2 ONLINE, XBOX LIVE, OR LAN) > **PUBLISHER** EIDOS > **DEVELOPER** AVALANCHE SOFTWARE/RITUAL ENTERTAINMENT > **RELEASE** JANUARY 17 > **ESRB** M

I'M SICK OF SHOOTING PEOPLE!

Seriously. I mean, I like capping fools as much as the next G on the streets, but games like 50 Cent: Bulletproof and 25 to Life are quickly proving that hackneyed "street" themed dialogue and poor gameplay make for a marriage as bad as Britney and K-Fed's.

Given that the game is primarily billed as an online experience, the single-player campaign varies from mediocre to bad, and never once really achieves any sense of excitement. The levels are extremely linear, as are the mission goals. Basically, you'll be placed in some sort of area of the city, the game throws a bunch of armed goons at you, and you'll have to gun them down. You know the drill: extremely linear level designs that stitch together corridors, open areas, and dull objectives with all the refinement and subtlety of a drunken quilling circle. The gameplay is a butchered take on the by-now-overdone Max Payne-style first-person/third-person point-and-shoot mechanics. Throw in a few gimmicks that would have been impressive four years ago, like multiple playable characters and the ability to take human shields, and *voilà!* You've got a freshly baked crapcake! Yes, it's got online, this is true, and we all know that misery loves company. —**MATT**

BOTTOM LINE 5.75

> **Concept:** The would-be "Urban SOCOM" finally arrives, looking tired and ragged

> **Graphics:** I don't know. I'm just jaded from my shiny new 360, but this looks really bad

> **Sound:** This has a lot of great rap songs on it, but so do two dozen classic rap compilation CDs that cost forty dollars less than 25 to Life

> **Playability:** Character movement feels sluggish, as does the targeting

> **Entertainment:** Sure, it's online, but multiplayer never makes up for fundamentally flawed gameplay

> **Replay Value:** Low

Second Opinion 5.75

It's not like the third-person shooting genre is new or particularly short of games right now, and 25 to Life's bare minimum level of competency just doesn't cut it. This isn't broke, exactly, but it could use some fixing. Everything just barely manages to work, but there's nothing interesting or compelling to be found anywhere. Unless you count the decent soundtrack, but I'd rather buy those songs off of iTunes and listen to them while doing something fun. —**ADAM**



PLAYSTATION 2 | XBOX

Final Fight: Streetwise

> **STYLE** 1 OR 2-PLAYER ACTION > **PUBLISHER** CAPCOM > **DEVELOPER** CAPCOM > **RELEASE** FEBRUARY 14 > **ESRB** M

MAKE IT STOP

I am honestly offended by Final Fight: Streetwise. Not because I hold some sort of dreamy nostalgia for the original 16-bit Double Dragon clone, but because it upsets me that somebody thinks that people are stupid enough to pay real money for this garbage. This title is so incredibly flawed on every level that I'm astounded that it's even being released commercially.

Forget, for a moment, about the clumsy attempt at portraying "urban" culture via gratuitous swearing and a couple licensed hip-hop tracks. Ignore, if you will, the banal story that is based solely around urban stereotypes. The basic brawler-style gameplay is so broken that these are merely trifling concerns. Enemies with AI so buggy that they don't move while you slaughter their friends are a frequent occurrence. Nearly every attack combo locks you into an animation so lengthy that it's nigh impossible to react to a changing situation. And the boss fights are some of the most ill-conceived, monotonous, and frustrating events I've ever had the misfortune of playing.

Outside of the occasional thrill of blowing some fool away with a shotgun or breaking a baseball bat over someone's head, there are no redeeming qualities to Final Fight: Streetwise. Please, make the right choice and stay as far away from this pile of excrement as you possibly can. —**ADAM**

BOTTOM LINE 4

> **Concept:** Make a minimum-effort attempt to cash in one last time on an aging property that some gamers might still have a fondness for

> **Graphics:** How can something so ugly still have constant slowdown?

> **Sound:** The licensed tracks are one of the only highlights of the entire package

> **Playability:** Being constantly locked into an attack animation leads to endless frustration

> **Entertainment:** The only reason to play this game is if someone pays you to do it

> **Replay Value:** Low

Second Opinion 5.5

If you're the first one to step up when someone says "taste this, it's terrible," then you may get a perverse kick out of Final Fight: Streetwise. Crappy graphics, a moronic story, and barely passable gameplay have combined here into a maelstrom of tragedy, making for a game so bad it's somewhat endearing. I found myself compelled to stick with Streetwise until its pitiful end, if only to see what laughable twists it took next. Considering that it features both an arcade mode and the original game, I can see some people getting the same "it's so-bad-it's kinda-good" thrill as I did. —**JEREMY**



The game actually sinks so low as to have you kick dogs. Clasey



PLAYSTATION 2 | XBOX

TOCA Race Driver 3

> **STYLE** 1 OR 2-PLAYER RACING (UP TO 8-PLAYER VIA PS2 ONLINE OR UP TO 12-PLAYER VIA XBOX LIVE) > **PUBLISHER** CODEMASTERS > **DEVELOPER** CODEMASTERS > **RELEASE** FEBRUARY 24 > **ESRB** T

ROADS GIRDLE THE GLOBE

The last TOCA shot itself in the foot instead of putting the pedal to the metal by restricting players with a linear career structure. Luckily for us, Codemasters has rectified the situation in this newest TOCA.

The game features 32 tiers of racing, with almost every one containing three different types of racing circuits to choose from. Instead of the linear path of TOCA 2, there are always choices before you, and you can freely scroll through the tiers to revisit anything you've missed. Despite the freedom of it all, the game does a good job of pacing. When you step up to the Formula One cars, qualifying and knowing the track become pretty important. Still, the game's default difficulty and physics are geared more towards the average gamer, so if you aren't being challenged, you can step up to the simulation settings.

Augmenting the openness of the World Tour mode is a Pro Circuit mode that concentrates more on each type of racing, offering more depth to your experience if all you want to do is race classic cars, for instance. The one area where I feel this game misses is in its storytelling. Despite this missed opportunity, TOCA 3 contains more racing than you can shake a checkered flag at. —**KATO**

BOTTOM LINE 8.25

> **Concept:** TOCA 3 does what the second one didn't, and opens up worlds of racing

> **Graphics:** The cars have some nice reflection effects on the hoods and roofs, but otherwise it's fairly standard

> **Sound:** There are some nice funky, acid jazz tunes in between races

> **Playability:** The various cars you drive feel different enough to make things interesting

> **Entertainment:** Codemasters has racing chops, and the quantity and quality of this game aren't mutually exclusive

> **Replay Value:** Moderately High

Second Opinion 8

It's nice to find a racing game with this great a balance between hardcore and casual demographics. TOCA Race Driver 3's split between the new Pro Career and World Tour modes makes it easy to dig into a specific race type (Pro Career) or take the fast-tracked World Tour option that shuffles players through a wide range of race types with a more casual default setup. Solid physics, nice menu design, and serviceable graphics round out the package nicely. —**LISA**



In the center of your racing HUD, there is a center of gravity meter similar to, but not as effective as, Enthusia's

The game actually sinks so low as to have you kick dogs. Clasey





24

THE GAME



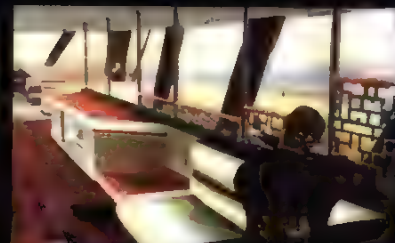
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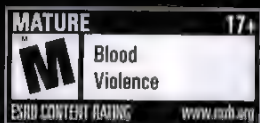
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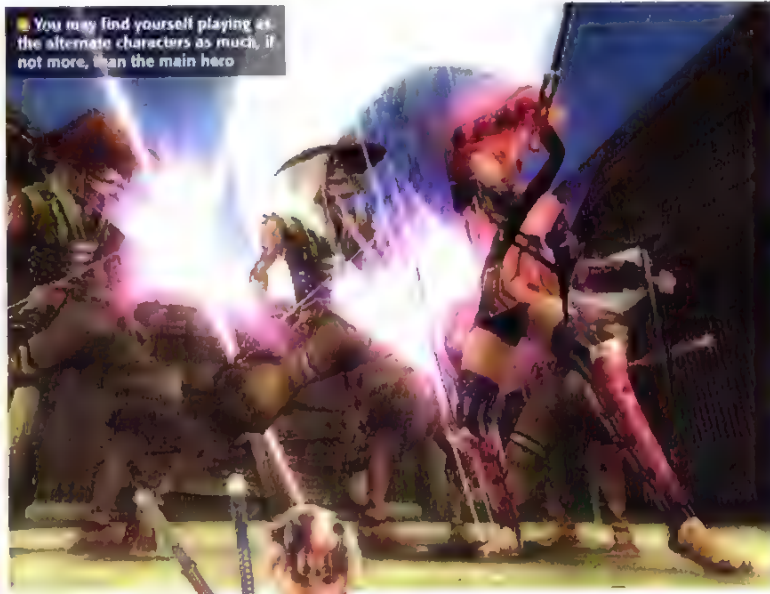
IMAGINE



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■ This is the first boss battle, and it happens about five seconds into the game.



■ You may find yourself playing as the alternate characters as much, if not more, than the main hero.

PLAYSTATION 2

Onimusha: Dawn of Dreams

> STYLE 1 OR 2-PLAYER ACTION > PUBLISHER CAPCOM > DEVELOPER CAPCOM > RELEASE MARCH 14 > ESRB M

WICKED

I think I'm trying too hard. After writing versions of this review that make Dawn of Dreams analogous to a formerly awkward teen's coming out party and maybe even tossing in a Meat Loaf reference, the only real truth is that the game can be summarized simply and effectively. It's wicked fun. Dawn of Dreams serves up platefuls of expertly balanced RPG and action gameplay. There are legions of enemies to slice and hack through with either blind flailing or skillful manipulation of the combat system—a true asset that lets both casual and hardcore types leave feeling fulfilled. The fast-paced storytelling that cuts the fat while leaving in all the history, intrigue, and mysticism you'd expect from a demonic survival horror tale set in ancient Japan wraps up the new features and technology in such a way that they all seem terribly natural. In fact, the package is so complete that you might forget how much is new, since it all just feels so right.

One of these new features for the series is a player-controlled camera and, to go along with that, areas that are more elaborate, larger in scale, and

offer more fantastic variety than earlier Onimusha games. Another addition, extra playable characters, opens up the environments even more—the very first levels have areas accessible only to party members you'll meet a dozen hours later. Smartly, revisiting is both fun and worthwhile.

One of Dawn of Dreams' greatest achievements is a perfect balance between RPG and action conventions. The item catalog is immense, but easy to understand. The upgrade system is capped in different areas, so you can't mess up your character by loading all of your points into combat while ignoring defense, for example. You rarely have too little money or too many options. It's practically idiot-proof, but still requires thoughtful decision-making.

The combat system displays a similar degree of friendly depth. Each of the characters controls in essentially the same way, although they all have different weapons and skills. With on-the-fly switching and code-enabled cooperative play, the



hack n' slash action is frenzied and nonstop. Dawn of Dreams seems to have a particularly flexible system so that those who want more depth and strategy can comfortably play with those just looking to cut up some Genma.

As a whole, Dawn of Dreams is a truly skillful entry in the series. It's a great fresh start with new characters, gameplay, and ideas. While almost all of these are executed with subtle ease (a dowdy main villain being the main lackluster feature), the Onimusha series hasn't broken truly new ground in a long while. Sure, this is still more of the same, but it's amazingly good fun, and that's what's really important.—LISA

BOTTOM LINE **9**

> **Concept:** Restart the franchise with new characters, new technology, and a new point of view

> **Graphics:** A great-looking PS2 title with a bunch of enemies onscreen and flashy touches throughout

> **Sound:** The score and voice acting manage to be really solid without being extraordinary

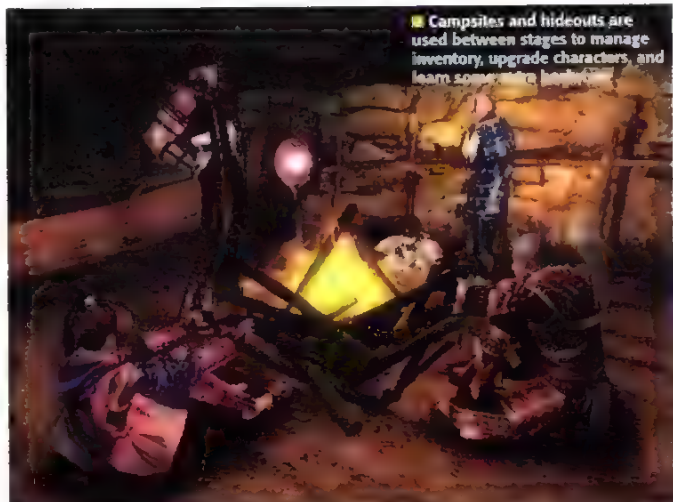
> **Playability:** Easy to pick up but with onion-like layers of complexity, this Onimusha encourages players to experiment and let loose

> **Entertainment:** An exceptional balance of action, RPG elements, storytelling, and broad adventure

> **Replay Value:** High

Second Opinion **9**

Razor-sharp hack n' slash with a flair for the dramatic, Dawn of Dreams builds upon the series' rock-solid foundation by infusing variety and depth into the Genma slaughter. The addition of character switching transforms what used to be a game of combo repetition into an experience that is laden with invigorating variety. Each of the characters differs greatly in combat performance, leading to a wealth of battle tactics. The splatting of demon entrails is a joyous affair, and items can be used to enhance and alter your extraordinary band of warriors. Unfortunately, the story does little to establish the new antagonist as a serious threat. All I saw was a clown that deserved a major ass-kicking. I guess this is fitting since this game can best be summarized as a celebration of kicking ass.—REINER



■ Campsites and hideouts are used between stages to manage inventory, upgrade characters, and learn some extra history.



■ Each of the playable characters can absorb souls, and one of the party commands directs them to do so.

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THE ARMIES

Do you crush bases under the feet of AT-ATs and risk losing a few? Or do you call down ships from space and bomb them back to the Stone Age?

THE ELEMENTS

Do you wait until after the ice storm and lose the element of surprise? Or do you take advantage of low visibility and attack when they least expect it?

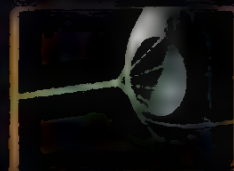
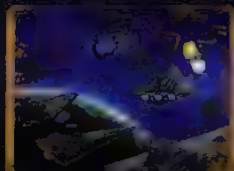
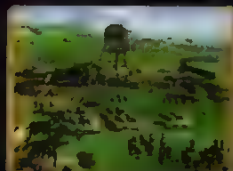
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Game experience may change during online play.



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PLAYSTATION 2

Tales of Legendia

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ROLE-PLAYING GAME > **PUBLISHER** NAMCO
> **DEVELOPER** NAMCO > **RELEASE** FEBRUARY 7 > **ESRB** T



NOT THEIR BEST EFFORT

For the first several hours, the new Tales game managed to have me pretty enthralled. The story was on track to have that combination of epic and amusing that is a hallmark of the series, and the simplistic battle system seemed to have a lot of potential. Unfortunately, that potential is never realized, and button mashing through the overly frequent battles becomes a never-ending chore. I love the tone of the Tales games, but this one fails to have the gameplay to stand with its forebears.

My initial attraction to the game stemmed from an immediate fondness for the characters and setting. There's just enough tweaking of the traditional RPG formula to give the game its own identity. The main character, Senel, is particularly amusing for his general attitude of aloof dismissal of anyone and anything that doesn't match his current needs and aims. While the story moves along fairly predictable lines, I nonetheless felt that enjoyable urge to continue pushing on. The battle system, meanwhile, manages to curtail that enjoyment at every turn. At first I thought the 2D fighting mechanic was going to be fleshed out. But it never really does, and the whole title suffers for it.

The other dilemma involves the constant pauses for character dialogue. Within reason, these exchanges can make an RPG great. In these heavy and boring doses, it kills the momentum and halts the story flow. With that said, I still love the anime-inspired world, the often silly characters, and the remarkable half of the soundtrack that isn't Japanese synth jazz. It's a decent journey, but I felt like I was along for the ride instead of in the driver's seat.—**MILLER**



BOTTOM LINE 7.25

- > **Concept:** An anime-inspired RPG with a pared down fighting game battle mechanic
- > **Graphics:** Interesting environments, but why do the character models look so blocky?
- > **Sound:** A strange mix of gorgeous symphonic melodies and odious elevator jazz
- > **Playability:** Simple – in fact, a little too much so
- > **Entertainment:** The story better be enough to draw you in, because the battles sure won't
- > **Replay Value:** Moderately Low

Second Opinion 7

Anime-inspired RPGs don't have to be generic and unimaginative, but you wouldn't know it from playing Tales of Legendia. It borrows from many annoying anime clichés, and nearly every aspect of the game is several steps behind 2004's Tales of Symphonia. Reverting to a 2D battlefield, the straightforward combat rapidly loses its charm when it doesn't really expand or give you many ways to utilize your skills. When you aren't fighting, you're staring at pretty environments populated by primitive and awkward character models, it's like watching the Beverly Hillsbills try to mingle at some high-society gala. Poor Jethro, outclassed at every turn. Apart from the "up yours" attitude of the protagonist, Senel, Tales of Legendia just doesn't offer anything surprising or dynamic – it just drifts along with purely functional characters, combat, and story.—**JOE**

PLAYSTATION 2

Grandia III

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ROLE-PLAYING GAME > **PUBLISHER** SQUARE ENIX > **DEVELOPER** GAME ARTS > **RELEASE** FEBRUARY 15 > **ESRB** T



FLIGHT OF FANTASY

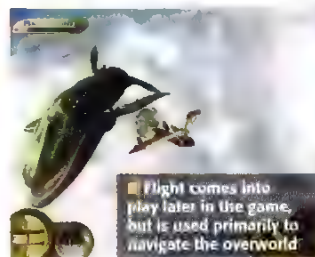
Grandia III is a game of grand escapism. Sharing many qualities with the silver screen masterworks of Hayao Miyazaki, this tale compounds human spirit into a colorful yet highly troubled world. For an adventurous youth named Yuki, building an airplane similar to the ones he saw his hero Sky Captain Schmidt fly proposed a means to an end, a way to escape his mundane life in the village. Taking to the skies, however, only complicates matters. As his ship spirals toward a fiery grave, Yuki's fate becomes tied to the fate of the world.

As players learn of a great evil that is corrupting the land, Yuki is also learning about himself. It's self-discovery amid chaos, brought to life through a page-turner of a plot. A page-turner that allows the player to connect so heavily with the characters that he or she may want to fast-forward through a cataclysmic event just to see if Yuki and the lovely Alfina hook up.

With blips of linear hold-your-hand gameplay surrounded by masses of story, this game often wants to be

a movie – which isn't necessarily a bad thing given how fantastic this tale is. The controller in your hands will definitely grow cold at times, but there's still plenty of great gameplay to be had. The senes' swift and deft combat remains largely unchanged, but offers larger depth in the combo maneuvers that the party can link together. Chaining together an attack that involves every member in your party delivers monumental thrills. Most of the battles, even a standard dungeon encounter, are extremely lengthy and challenging, which may be a turn off to casual players. Others, like myself, will enjoy that your combat skills are constantly put to the test, not just for boss battles. The only major flaw in this game's design is the miniscule number of monster types that traffic each zone.

Grandia III's beauty never ceases to amaze, but above all, this game just grips you with its winsome storytelling. There are plenty of great stories in role-playing games, but few have as much personality as Grandia III.—**REINER**



BOTTOM LINE 8.75

- > **Concept:** Story-intensive and breathtaking, this finely polished RPG makes you feel right at home with a plot that unfolds with the clarity and intrigue of a great novel
- > **Graphics:** Environments are sparsely detailed, yet spell effects and character animations are top notch
- > **Sound:** Worst intro song ever! Seriously! Great voice acting, though
- > **Playability:** Quite linear and shallow in character development. Combat, however, is as fierce as a dragon, offering great depth and incredible speed
- > **Entertainment:** Linear and moderate in length, this RPG's main draw is the story
- > **Replay Value:** Moderate

Second Opinion 8.25

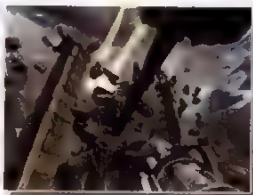
As you witness Grandia III's outstanding moments, like the murder of a god or the creation of a Verse Sphere, it's easy to immerse yourself in the lush visuals, clever characters, and the developing story of this intriguing adventure. When this cinematic revelry wears off, however, Grandia's inconsistencies start to make some noise. The battle system only really works well under particular circumstances, but when those factors align, you can string together immensely satisfying and punishing combos. If they don't, you're in for a tedious battle. Still, you can be frustrated by Grandia III one minute, and the next you could swear that it's pure genius. This game is easy to love in fair weather, and worth sticking with through the occasionally cloudy skies.—**JOE**

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XBOX LIVE



RATING PENDING

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ESRB



UNLIMITED ENABLED

PLAYSTATION 2

Shadow Hearts: From The New World

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ROLE-PLAYING GAME > **PUBLISHER** XSEED GAMES > **DEVELOPER** NAUTILUS/ARUZE
> **RELEASE** MARCH 7 > **ESRB** T

OUT WITH THE OLD, IN WITH THE NEW

As soon as I saw Johnny Garland, I was sure I knew what was coming. I thought that a 16-year-old Sora/Tidus knock-off would undoubtedly take the tried-and-true approach to world-saving: you know, rescuing the girl and collecting shiny crystals on an idyllic crusade for justice or something. I was wrong. I'm not sure when exactly I realized that Shadow Hearts: From The New World is anything but ordinary, but it was probably when I was busting Al Capone out of Alcatraz prison with the assistance of a talking cat who knows Drunken Master Kung-fu.

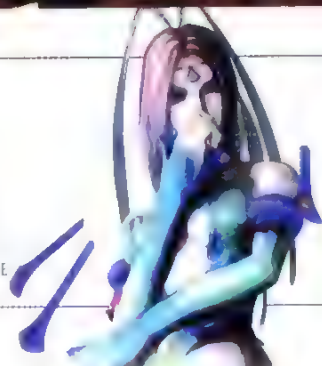
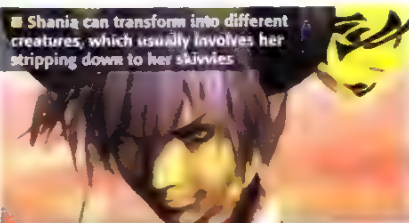
Even though this scenario sounds pretty outlandish, I wouldn't go so far as to call From The New World "zany." The shift in tone from the darkness

that pervaded previous Shadow Hearts titles can be jarring, but since it's more of a spin-off than a true sequel, the new angle seems oddly appropriate. It can be hilarious and wacky at times, but it does an admirable job at keeping the more serious themes of the series alive — no small task when one of your allies is Frank, the eastern European ninja with a bioluminescent lure poking out from his forehead like an anglerfish.

While the unique characters and story are truly bizarre, many aspects of the battle system will feel comfortably familiar. Borrowing from classics like Xenosaga and Final Fantasy X (while still using Shadow Hearts' own trademark Judgment Ring), From The New World merges an array of strategic and skill-based options into a complex and highly addictive machine that plays like an All-Star Team of RPG combat mechanics. Magic, skills, combos, and timing-based attacks are all present with more customization than you could hope for, including a cool

option to set up three separate battle teams and switch between them as the situation warrants.

Of course, there's more to life than fighting and random nonsense (unless you're a character in Dragonball Z! Aw, snap!), and the elements that fill in those gaps for Shadow Hearts aren't as solid as the rest of the game. The story takes a pretty long time to kick into high gear, leaving your desire to witness the inevitable weirdness as the main thing driving you forward for the first several hours. During that time you'll also do some backtracking through the linear environments, since you'll need to talk to a guy in area A (who wouldn't talk to you when you first passed by) in order to open a door in area D. This kind of progression is annoying when it pops up, which is probably once every couple of hours. Thankfully, you'll spend a majority of your time immersed in the stellar combat or drinking in the often surreal moments that define Shadow Hearts: From The New World as one of the most inventive and entertaining RPGs in years. —JOE



BOTTOM LINE 8.75

> **Concept:** A pseudo-historical story set in 1929 that gradually evolves into a carnival of quirkiness and combat.

> **Graphics:** Great character designs and jaw-dropping CG scenes, though the environments are rather plain.

> **Sound:** A few standout tracks, but mostly some mildly irritating looping tunes.

> **Playability:** Simply put, one of the best and most engaging RPG battle systems ever assembled.

> **Entertainment:** Full of laughs and befuddled stares, but it may be too off-killer for some gamers.

> **Replay Value:** Moderately High

Second Opinion 8.75

From The New World weaves combat complexity with sheer dementia to create an adventure that is analogous to swimming with great white sharks as nitrous oxide is being pumped through your body. It's overwhelming and exhilarating, yet sodden with big laughs. I can't really put my finger on whether the plot is insanely artistic or just flat-out insane. Either way, this is a story that will leave you scratching your head and demanding more. The madness also applies to the company that you keep. Did you ever think you would get the opportunity to beat the snot out of a dragon with a cactus wielded by a ninja named Frank? While it would seem that this game's offbeat style is the main draw, the most satisfaction comes from combat. Layer upon layer of strategy has been added to the skill-based Judgement Ring, which in turn, makes each battle a mouth-watering affair. The story may be a little strange for some people, but this RPG stands head and shoulders above most in the gameplay it delivers. —REINER

PS2 QUICKIES

PLAYSTATION 2

MS Saga: A New Dawn

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ROLE-PLAYING GAME
> **PUBLISHER** BANDAI
> **DEVELOPER** BEC
> **RELEASE** FEBRUARY 21 > **ESRB** T



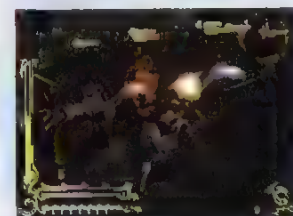
BOTTOM LINE 7.75

After being routinely abused like a rented mule and whipped in the eyes with countless bad Gundam titles, MS Saga finally delivers a fun experience to gamers. MS Saga's battle system resembles Xenosaga, and does a good job of requiring a modicum of RPG strategy and giving you a variety of buffs/debuffs and attacks. I loved the mobile suit customization options, but felt the game world itself was boring and underwhelming — you'll never think you're in a Square Enix game. Fan or not, you also won't think this is the typical shoddy Gundam game. —KATO

PLAYSTATION 2

Drakengard 2

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION
> **PUBLISHER** UBISOFT/SQUARE ENIX
> **DEVELOPER** CAVIA
> **RELEASE** FEBRUARY 15 > **ESRB** M



BOTTOM LINE 7.25

From a gameplay standpoint, this is probably more aptly called "Drakengard 1.5" rather than a full sequel, but the improvements make the series' tantalizing mix of big action and dragon airtights much more playable than the first. Little touches like being able to switch between characters without limitation (during ground battles) is nice and the wheel-based inventory system is restrictive enough to require some player strategy, which counteracts the really easy lock-on-heavy dragon controls. —LISA



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BOTTOM LINE 9

> **Concept:** Breaks free from its defensive-based heritage to explore a wider range of combat strategies and succeeds in doing so

> **Graphics:** This series has always been one step ahead of the competition visually—lighting, water, and effects are particularly impressive, but what's up with the dinosaurs?

> **Sound:** Great ambient environment sounds (especially for surround sound), subtitled voices (except for the Spartan), and even more Aerosmith (Lgh)

> **Playability:** Faster, not as counter-intensive, and ripe with amazing combos, environmental strategies, and throws. The last boss may be the cheapest boss to date

> **Entertainment:** The single player experience is largely unchanged, but it breaks amazing new ground online

> **Replay Value:** High

XBOX 360

Dead or Alive 4

> **STYLE** 1 TO 4-PLAYER FIGHTING (UP TO 16-PLAYER VIA XBOX LIVE) > **PUBLISHER** TECMO > **DEVELOPER** TEAM NINJA
> **RELEASE** DECEMBER 30 > **ESRB** M

STRIKING A BALANCE

When Dead or Alive debuted in arcades on Sega's Model 2 hardware in 1996, it immediately became a lone wolf, defying the offensive-driven trends of the fighting genre with a focus on defensive countering. Through the years, this series has grown into a more complete fighter, combining grace and barbarity to forge a bout that unfolds like a brutal ballet, but never once has it wavered from the innovative stance that put it on the map. As magnificent as this series' combos have become, the best offense is still a great defense.

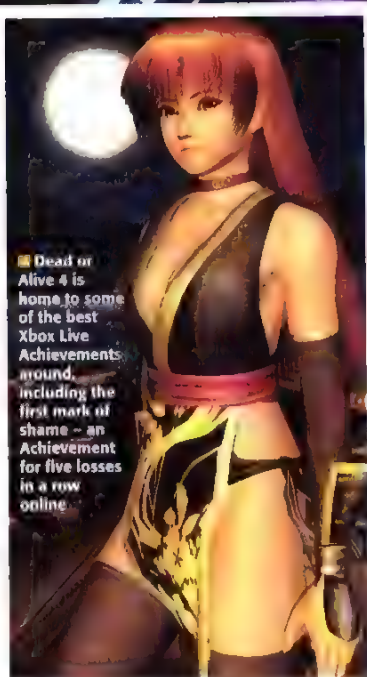
In Dead or Alive 4, those who approach a fight with the notion to counter are in for a rude and highly bruised awakening. The speed of combat has quickened and the window for countering attacks has shrunk dramatically, making it extremely difficult to turn the tides of a fight through a reversal. What once was a battle of counter maneuvers has now become a game of precision. The series' identity is beginning to change, but only for the better. It is now striking a greater balance between offensive and defensive strategies. It began as a game with a gimmick. Now it stands as one of the most fully featured fighters on the market.

Just making one step in the wrong direction can either spell immediate disaster or open your eyes

to a new window of opportunity. Your greatest weapons are now reading the flow of the battle like a general and playing off of your opponent's tendencies, like a "tell" in poker. It strikes the perfect balance between skill and intelligence on the battlefield.

Sometimes your greatest offense may be around you. By enhancing the level of interactivity found in the environments, baiting your foe is more important than ever. If you study the terrain, very rarely will you find yourself standing stationary. You can leap over a waist-high object like a fence or median and clock your adversary with a swift kick. Tie in a devastating bounce combo and you could conceivably juggle your opponent across a field and smash them into a wall for big damage. A nicely timed combo can even end with your adversary landing directly in front of a speeding car.

Strides have also been made to enhance the online experience. Flashing back to the heyday of arcades where players would place a quarter on the machine to signal the order they would fight in, the winner stays and the next person in line gives them a run for their money. It's a thing of beauty, really. Moreover, the online battles actually hold great meaning—much more than simple bragging rights. Your winning percentage grants you a grade (SS being the highest and F- the lowest). Victories



Second Opinion 8

There's no denying that DOA 4 is an excellently crafted game, but that doesn't mean I always had fun playing it. The DOA series has been called both the most strategic fighter around and a frantic button masher. In the case of DOA 4, both parties are at least partially right. DOA 4 does indeed sport a deep, strategic combat system, but due to its nearly-ridiculous speed, Dead or Alive neophytes are going to be reduced to maniacally pounding on buttons. The window for countering moves is atomically small, making defense more about predicting your opponent's moves than reaction speed. It doesn't help that the enemy AI is frighteningly aggressive, and the last boss may be one of the cheapest game characters ever. But once you pick up the tricky feel of the game, DOA 4 is an incredibly polished fighter with a lot of fun online extras and a classic arcade vibe. I experienced my share of lag issues and dropped matches in my time online, but the extras and Achievements that can be unlocked on Live are worth the minor irritations. —JEREMY

and winning streaks also reward players with cash that can be used to purchase items. Losing takes money away. Through all of these elements, the online component absolutely nails the true sense of competition—the thrill and spoils of victory and the gloom and embarrassment of losing.

When you are not putting your pride on the line, there are plenty of amazing unlockables to dig up. The ending videos are so racy, over-the-top, and campy that they could almost be used to create a new genre in cinema. Once you see one ending, the thought "I have to finish it with every character" immediately enters your head. Upon achieving this goal, you'll reach the greatest unlockable of them all—a character named Spartan-458. She hides behind the same armor as Halo's Master Chief, yet proves to be a well-rounded character that offers a wicked blend of speed and power, plus one amazing attack that involves a sticky grenade.

Dead or Alive 4 is intense, flashy, and quite simply awesome. The incredible craftsmanship that went into this title makes it the pinnacle in the series and another fantastic Xbox Live application. —REINER



Winner, Best RPG of E3

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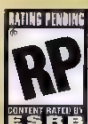
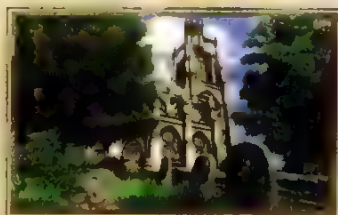
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Cue the "Dukes of Hazard" theme

BOTTOM LINE 7.5

> Concept: Strap a gun to your car and hit the race track – it's as simple as that

> Graphics: The amount of destruction that can happen onscreen is truly impressive, although the overall look isn't as sharp as other next-gen racers

> Sound: You'll want to use your 360's custom soundtrack feature on this one. Generic techno and metal only

> Playability: It's hard to find the right balance of chaos and precision required, due mainly to some loose, floaty car physics

> Entertainment: There's no denying the appeal of combat racing, but Full Auto's flaws keep its giddy thrills in check

> Replay Value: Moderately High

Second Opinion 7.25

Full Auto is a showpiece of destructibility. Muscle cars are outfitted with the firepower of tanks; buildings crumble with the ease of a house of cards; mangled metal, that once resembled a sleek speedster scorches the sky black before violently dying on the asphalt. Glorious devastation reigns supreme over almost every object in the environment. Chaos of this degree usually signals teary-eyed bliss for gamers, but in this case it simply gives an average game a little flash. Through the complete omission of vehicle weight and physics, racing feels strange and otherworldly – almost like you should be controlling a hovercraft. Plenty of gameplay modes are offered, but the differences between them are minimal at best. Sadly, online is the only venue where I actually felt the thrill of competition. This next-gen racer had the makings of an explosive release, but ended up being a fairly insignificant puff of smoke. —REINER

UNLIMITED ENABLED
XBOX 360

Full Auto

> **STYLE** 1 OR 2-PLAYER RACING (UP TO 8-PLAYER VIA XBOX LIVE OR SYSTEM LINK) > **PUBLISHER** SEGA > **DEVELOPER** PSEUDO INTERACTIVE > **RELEASE** FEBRUARY 14 > **ESRB** T

CRASH AND BURN

There are certain combinations that just sound brilliant the moment you hear them. Peter Jackson and King Kong. Chocolate and peanut butter. Frank Miller and Jim Lee. Car racing and guns. The concept of Full Auto's unique blend of Burnout-style racing with Twisted Metal-esque vehicular combat sounds like a match made in heaven, and I was ridiculously excited to delve into the chaos. What I quickly discovered is that while Full Auto is indeed a good bit of fun, it is also plagued with enough problems that I feel the finished product doesn't reach the true potential of its concept.

Full Auto features a wide variety of vehicle and race types, as well as several different weapon sets. But what almost every race boils down to is shooting your opponents while burning through a track as quickly as possible. This is a little more complicated than it sounds. The enemy drivers are very aggressive, crack shots with their weapons, and speed demons. To take them down, you've got to constantly be firing your guns, and while you can aim some of them, luck is as much of a factor in hitting them as skill. Although the different classes of

vehicles feel distinct, none of them feel quite right, thanks to physics that make you feel disconnected from the road. The cars feel loose, touchy, and slightly alien. As a result, precision driving is the key to winning races – the barest touch of a wall will send you barrel-rolling out of control. Fortunately, Full Auto's unique Unwreck feature helps with both botched turns and messy combat. By holding down a button, you can rewind time to correct a mistake. Thanks to the odd balance between the chaos of combat and the picky car physics, Unwreck is practically essential to winning races.

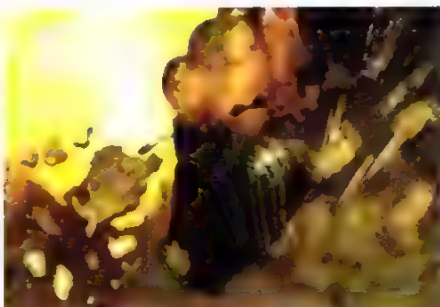
"The highlight of Full Auto is the large-scale destructibility of the environments."

The highlight of Full Auto is the large-scale destructibility of the environments. Practically everything you see on screen can be destroyed, sending shards of debris flying realistically. Building facades crumble, phone lines snap, and fences buckle. The devastation is visually impressive, and manages to elicit a powerful emotional response (cackling with sadistic glee, mostly) in the early races. But after a while, the technical marvel of the damage starts to fade, and frustrations over

the shortcomings of the actual gameplay replace it. There are a lot of cool ideas at play in Full Auto, and the races can be giddily enjoyable, especially online, but overall it doesn't quite reach the heights that a weapons-based racer could. Still, if the idea of racing around, blasting at anything that moves sounds like fun to you, then there are probably some thrills to be had for you in this game. —JEREMY



You know what they say about guys who drive cars with big guns...



With that, the fried corpse of Super Dave Osborn retired from the daredevil business

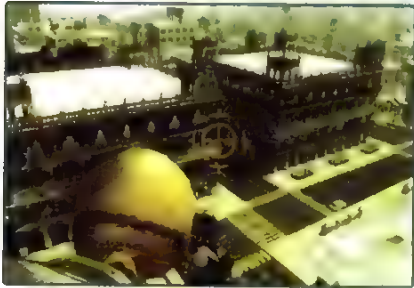
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Language
Violence

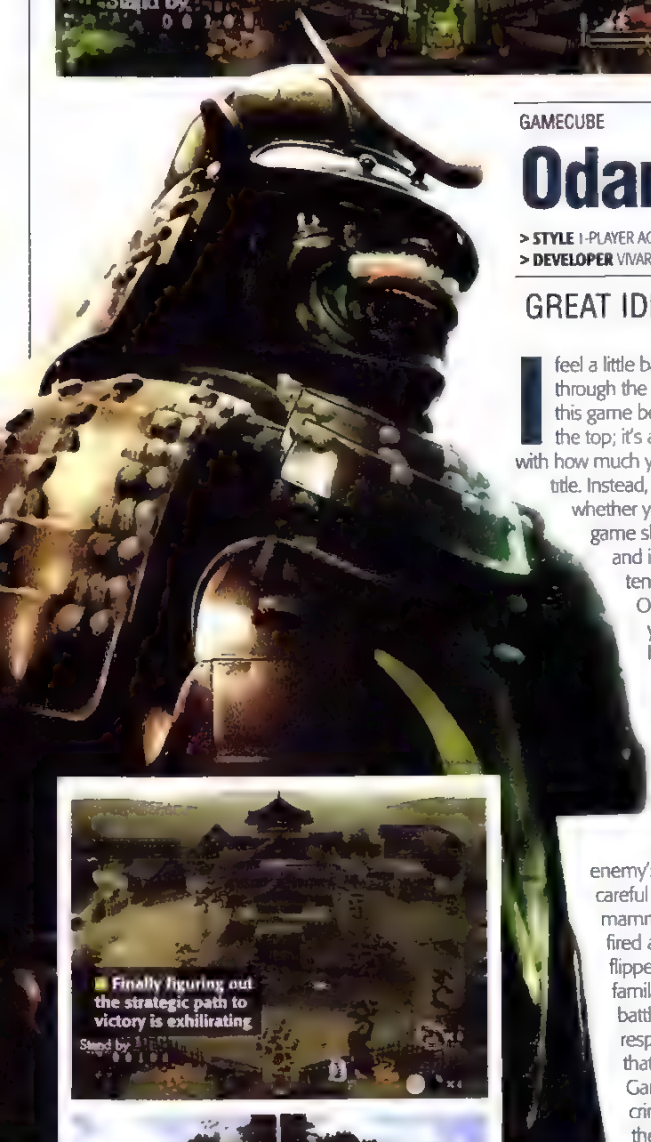
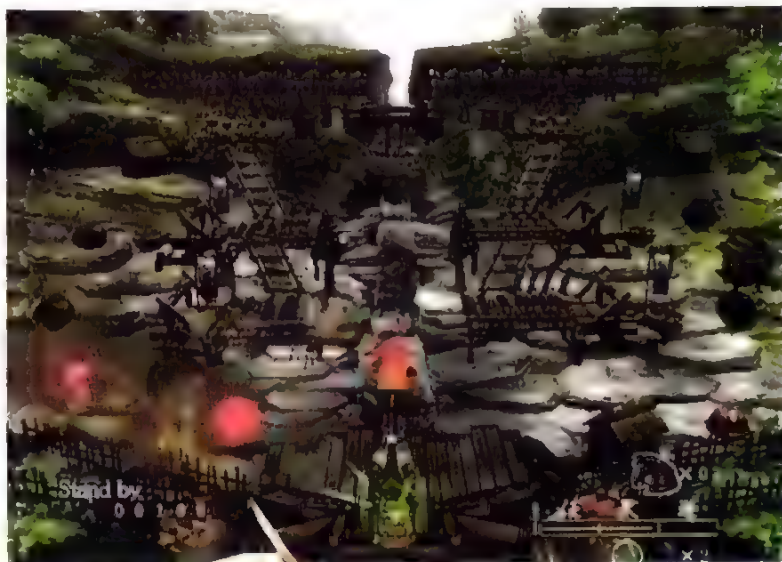


LIVE



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GAMECUBE

Odama

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION/STRATEGY > **PUBLISHER** NINTENDO
> **DEVELOPER** VIVARIUM > **RELEASE** MAY* > **ESRB** E10+

GREAT IDEA, POOR IMPLEMENTATION

I feel a little bad for those of you who cruise through the magazine and skip reading about this game because of the big "7" slapped across the top; it's a number that has very little to do with how much you will or won't enjoy this particular title. Instead, the primary motivating factor for whether you should check out this unusual game should be your interest in new ideas and innovation in a game. If those factors tend to drive your game purchases, *Odama* should zoom to the top of your list, despite its average score. If high quality production values and fun gameplay are greater concerns in your mind, it would be hard for me to offer a more stern warning to stay away.

Casting the player as the young general Yamanouchi Kagetora, *Odama* has you out to avenge your father and strike down your enemy's armies through clever strategy and careful planning. To do so, you'll utilize a mammoth ball that can be conveniently fired across the battlefield by a set of flippers at the base of the board. Sound familiar? Your armies will surge forth to do battle at your command, and will even respond to a variety of voice commands that you order through the included GameCube mic, even as the non-discriminate metal ball of death crushes them as easily as it does your foes. On any given board, your goal is to help your troops navigate the Ninten Bell

(no, I'm not kidding) across the expanse and through a gate at the far end. Completing this task ends the level and moves you on with all the troops you manage to squeeze through the gate with your bell. In the process, you'll be expected to put your *Odama* to good use by crushing enemy fortifications, hitting switches to dam up rivers, and knocking giant enemy

generals to the ground so that your tiny troops can swarm his prone form. For all its weirdness, it's a dynamic that could be immensely fun. Between issuing orders to keep your troops alive, managing the pinball elements, and concocting a reasonable victory strategy, you're constantly struggling to stay on top of the action. Unfortunately, that same action rapidly becomes overwhelmingly frustrating.

It pains me to disparage a title that is so clearly trying to do something interesting and different amid the glut of sequels and me-too titles that have hit the market recently. Nonetheless, the execution of *Odama* fails on a very basic level. Even on the surface, it's not hard to find fault within the first few seconds of playing the game; smearing butter on your TV in any other game would produce a similar level of clarity to what we see in the visuals of *Odama*. While English subtitles at least make the military storyline intelligible, it's about the only attempt that has been made at any localization of the title. And don't get me started on how often we hear the same jarring sound effects repeated. Even so, if the gameplay worked well, I'd be more than willing to ignore all of that — no such luck.

An endless and too rapid respawn of enemy troops means that on some boards it feels impossibly difficult to progress. Other levels have been improperly balanced so that completion occurs in a matter of minutes. While any pinball game should have an element of randomness, there are times in *Odama* when an accidental ball bounce floods a river and sweeps your entire army away in one fell swoop. Things just don't always work the way that they should.

Despite my complaints, I'll be the first to applaud the game for its excellent microphone usage and clever tweak of the pinball concept. For a lot of you, those features alone will be worth the price of admission. For everyone else, this is just going to be another missed opportunity for Nintendo to convince you to try something a little different. —MILLER

BOTTOM LINE 7

> **Concept:** Combine pinball with military strategy in one of the most unique and innovative games in recent memory

> **Graphics:** Simply awful — dull lifeless colors and featureless characters deaden the visuals

> **Sound:** Repetitive drums and battle noises further dampen enjoyment

> **Playability:** A steep learning curve means you'll spend your first hour cursing into the mic rather than issuing useful orders — at which point it all starts to make sense

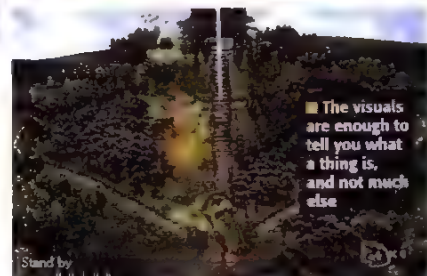
> **Entertainment:** Strangely appealing innovations are actually a lot of fun — too bad so much about the game is frustrating and repetitive

> **Replay Value:** Moderate

Second Opinion 6

What if the phrase "WMD" actually meant "giant magic pinball?" For one, they'd probably be easier to find. No disrespect is intended with that comment, it's actually the concept of this game, making *Odama* one of the strangest titles in recent memory. Bowling over hordes of troops with a huge pinball strangely sounds like a lot of fun, but in practice, it's far more frustrating than that. You're constantly battling against another army, a time limit, and the unpredictability of pinball controls. On top of this, you need to be fairly hands-on with your troops or failure is certain. I applaud that Nintendo was actually able to make a pinball game have some strategic depth, but it really feels like *Odama* is working overtime to make you fail its missions. And replaying the same stages over and over again is rarely fun, no matter how unique a game is. —JEREMY

*Shortly before this issue went to press, Nintendo announced plans to delay *Odama* until early May. However, this review is based on the final product that will ship to retail.



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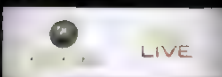
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The scope of the battles quickly gets out of control



Star Wars: Empire at War

STYLE: 1-PLAYER STRATEGY (UP TO 8-PLAYER VIA INTERNET) OR RTS
 PUBLISHER: LUCASARTS > DEVELOPER: PETROGLYPH
 RELEASE: FEBRUARY 16 > ESRB: T

MORE POWERFUL THAN YOU CAN POSSIBLY IMAGINE

It's not every day that a licensed game actually makes its source material cooler, especially when you're talking about Star Wars. *Empire at War* does an absolutely fantastic job of highlighting the majesty and grandeur of the Imperial Fleet warping into position around a rebellious planet, showcasing the awesome power of Lord Vader as he single-handedly wipes out a Rebel ground force, and recreating the sinking feeling of having your staggeringly expensive Star Destroyers go down under an uncountable swarm of X-wings. This game will make the hearts of Star Wars fanatics sing with glee at the life it brings to Lucas' universe — though the hardcore RTS crowd won't spend much time here before going back to other, more polished titles.

The story-driven Empire and Rebellion campaigns, as well as the more free-form Galactic Conquest mode, really bring out the difference between the Alliance and the Empire on the board game-like Galactic Map. As the economically and militarily powerful Empire, you'll be forced to constantly waste resources rebuilding after lightning-quick raids and maintaining standing garrisons on every

planet you control to cope with the Rebels' mobility. The Alliance, on the other hand, has to stay on the move and one step ahead of Vader and his cronies — there's no hope, until the very end of the game, of standing up to the concentrated power of the Empire. However, your skill as a tactician is also a major factor as it all comes down to slugging out the battles RTS-style when forces clash.

For how much I love seeing the awesome power



The Emperor is as awesome as you could hope

of an Imperial-class cruiser or a daring Y-wing bombing run played out in living color, the nuts-and-bolts of gameplay in *Empire at War* leaves a fair bit to be desired. Pathfinding bugs out on a semi-regular basis, ending up with me cursing at the lone tank that decided to go wandering off into the enemy base. The AI for your opponents is at times baffling — more than once, in the process of tearing a ragtag Rebel fleet to shreds with my Star Destroyers, I noticed several squadrons of X-wings and a few Corellian Corvettes hanging out back at the corner of the map, even though they could have conceivably turned the tide of battle had they engaged. Victory tastes a bit hollow when the enemy is being led with all of the skill and grace of Joey Harrington in the two-minute drill.

However, when everything is working properly, the skirmishes can be the kind of epic conflicts that Star Wars fans have always wanted out of a video game. Provided you're willing to slog through some rough spots, there are moments of brilliance in *Empire at War* that simply haven't been rivaled by another game on the market today. —ADAM



The Galactic Map, like the rest of the game, is two-dimensional



Use of the Expanded Universe content is mostly well-done

BOTTOM LINE 8.25

> Concept: Fight the conflict between Empire and Rebellion between Episodes III and IV

> Graphics: Everything is a dead lock for Star Wars authenticity, but the slowdown even on a powerful system can be a drag

> Sound: The scream of TIEs cutting through the pounding of turbolasers is a thing of beauty

> Playability: Armies are surprisingly clunky to control, and poor pathfinding will cost you an occasional unit

> Entertainment: There aren't a whole lot of better ways to get your Star Wars on, but some rough edges prevent this from being a classic RTS

> Replay Value: Moderately High

Second Opinion 8.5

The tyrannical rule of the Empire and the fight for survival of the Rebellion are perfectly depicted in this game. Whether you are crushing planets or liberating them, both factions offer different yet equally enjoyable styles of play. A fleet of Star Destroyers can make short work of a space station, yet a spirited swarm of X-wings can defeat almost anything. Paying close attention to the strengths of the Star Wars license, familiar characters like Darth Vader and Commander Ackbar are constantly in use. Vader can pulverize tanks with his mind. Ackbar enhances the performance of your fleet. Where *Empire at War* finds new ways to breathe life into the Star Wars universe, it also stumbles in its gameplay execution. Bothersome pathfinding and AI issues abound. As frustrating as it is to watch one of your vessels veer off course, the grand scale of the battles and high level of Star Wars dorkdom that are included are impossible to deny. —REINER



PSP

Street Fighter Alpha 3 Max

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER FIGHTING (2-PLAYER VIA AD-HOC) > **PUBLISHER** CAPCOM
> **DEVELOPER** CAPCOM R&D 1 > **RELEASE** FEBRUARY 7 > **ESRB** T

PORTABLE PUNCHING POWERHOUSE

Normally when I hear the words “fighting game” and “handheld,” I instantly sigh and come to grips with the fact that the next couple days of work are going to be arduous. Thankfully, the PSP and Capcom have changed all that. Street Fighter Alpha 3 Max is truly a great port of a classic 2D fighter. As you would guess, it looks gorgeous on the PSP’s hi-res screen, but I was also pleasantly surprised to find that the load times are disguised well, so the game is pretty much seamless after the initial boot.

Street Fighter Alpha 3 Max features a plethora of game modes, including the always-entertaining World Tour single-player adventure that lets you build up a character as you tackle various challenges. There are also a ton of fighters (over 30), including four new combatants over the original arcade release: Yun, Maki, Eagle, and Ingrid.

All told, it’s basically a perfect arcade port that will please Street Fighter fans. While there is no internet play, you can take on another player via ad hoc with little to no lag as long as you sit in close proximity. There may be nothing revolutionary here, but putting an arcade classic in the palm of your hand is never something to scoff at, especially when you consider the less-than-glowing history of handheld fighters. —ANDY

BOTTOM LINE 7.75

> **Concept:** Take the arcade classic, throw in a bunch of expected modes, a dash of different characters and viola!

> **Graphics:** Still one of the best 2D fighters around

> **Sound:** It’s in Q Sound Need I say more?

> **Playability:** The PSP’s d-pad and analog stick can be a tad unreliable, but they are certainly sufficient.

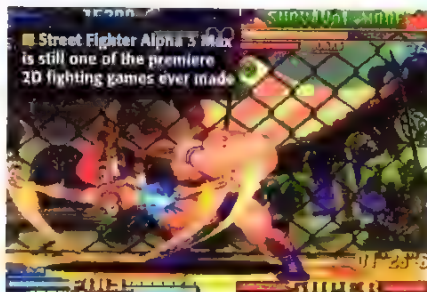
> **Entertainment:** Street Fighter fans will love the luxury of playing on the go on the PSP’s crisp screen

> **Replay Value:** High



Second Opinion 7.25

I realize that the hardcore Street Fighter crowd is going to freak out over any sub-9 score, but I can’t fathom why anyone who isn’t already part of that demographic is going to get into this game. Yes, it’s a great conversion of Street Fighter Alpha 3, and works quite well on the PSP, but how many times does this title have to be remade? The gaming universe has moved on, and it’s awfully tough to go back. The rules of the game have become so arcane with attack priority, frames, and crazy combos that 2D fighters just aren’t pick-up-and-play at all. Fans will be well served here, but it seems like Capcom is content to preach to the choir. —ADAM



NINTENDO DS

Resident Evil: Deadly Silence

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION (2 TO 4-PLAYER VIA WIRELESS) > **PUBLISHER** CAPCOM > **DEVELOPER** CAPCOM
> **RELEASE** FEBRUARY 14 > **ESRB** M



BOTTOM LINE 7.75

COLLECTOR'S EDITION

For me, this is a lot like running to the store, picking up a copy of *The Complete Jem* cartoons on DVD, racing home, popping in the first disc, and soaking up the glow of good old times back in the day. Does that mean that *Jem* stands today as high quality entertainment; that I feel that its inherent quality earns a spot in the time capsule of human history? Hell no. But it’s important to me in the same way that the first Resident Evil game was, despite its flaws.

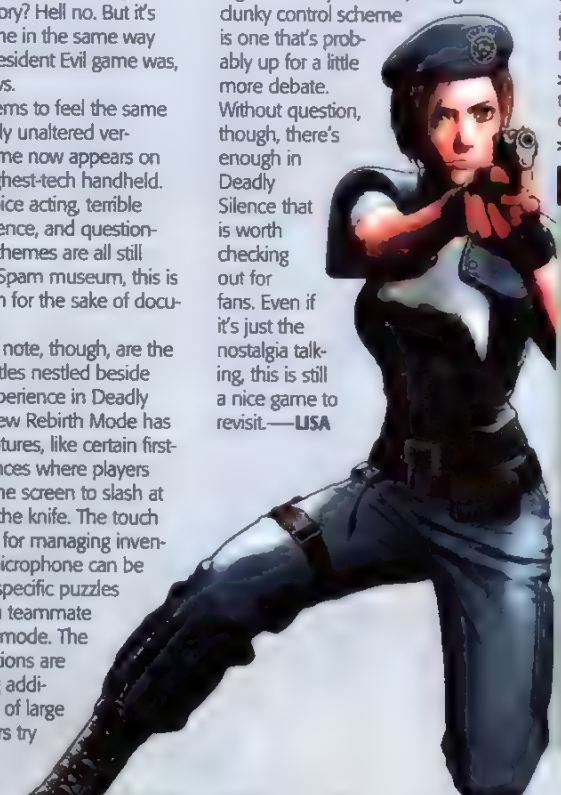
Capcom seems to feel the same way, as a nearly unaltered version of the game now appears on Nintendo’s highest-tech handheld. The cheesy voice acting, terrible opening sequence, and questionable control schemes are all still intact — like a Spam museum, this is documentation for the sake of documentation.

Of particular note, though, are the bells and whistles nestled beside the original experience in *Deadly Silence*. The new Rebirth Mode has DS-specific features, like certain first-person sequences where players swipe across the screen to slash at enemies with the knife. The touch screen is used for managing inventory and the microphone can be used to solve specific puzzles or resuscitate a teammate in cooperative mode. The multiplayer options are also interesting additions. A couple of large maps let players try

to survive the course together (with a shared lifebar) or do some interesting head-to-head game types.

While a 180-degree turn and permanently mapped knife button are nice additions, as a fan this edition is almost most worthwhile for what has been kept, even if it’s unnecessary. The door opening animations are a good example of this, though the dunky control scheme is one that’s probably up for a little more debate.

Without question, though, there’s enough in *Deadly Silence* that is worth checking out for fans. Even if it’s just the nostalgia talking, this is still a nice game to revisit. —LISA



> **Concept:** Celebrate a decade of Biohazards with this handheld re-release of the first entry

> **Graphics:** It’s almost pixel to pixel accurate, at least as I remember it, and that’s both good and bad

> **Sound:** All the cheesy voiceovers are included and that will forever make me happy

> **Playability:** This control scheme went away a long time ago, and there are good reasons for that, but the DS additions are nice and work well

> **Entertainment:** As nostalgia, this is one of the best things ever. As a new game? Um...

> **Replay Value:** Moderate

Second Opinion 8.25

The original Resident Evil has risen from the dead yet again, but I for one won’t be shooting it in the skull. Although some of the thrill of the game has been diminished by playing both the original and the GameCUBE remake, the new features in the DS release add a little new life. I love having the map available on the top screen, the new touch screen features are pretty sweet, and the multiplayer mode is even cooler. I enjoyed taking a third trip back to the zombie-infested mansion in Raccoon City, although this nostalgic title has dredged up some unpleasant memories as well. The tank style control scheme sucks even more on the tiny DS screen. —JEREMY



GAME BOY ADVANCE

Tales of Phantasia

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ROLE-PLAYING GAME > PUBLISHER NINTENDO > DEVELOPER NAMCO
> RELEASE MARCH 6 > ESRB E10+

RPGRAMPA

Historically speaking, Tales of Phantasia is an important title. When it first released for the Super Famicom, its real-time combat blazed a new trail for RPGs and kicked off the entire Tales series. Unfortunately, being good and being important don't always go hand in hand, and Tales of Phantasia hobbles through the motions like an ailing old geezer insisting he's as healthy as he ever was. It's hard to deny that this game is full of old-school appeal, but it just doesn't have the nostalgia factor to back it up. The story is an interesting take on the "young orphan avenging his destroyed village" theme, but it's the combat system that ultimately puts the game's considerable age on display. Battles happen in real time on a single 2D plane, but your characters move with the speed and responsiveness of something that would be politically incorrect to describe here in detail.

Other recent ports, like Final Fantasy IV Advance,

have had mildly chuggy battle systems that don't mar the overall experience, but Phantasia just can't pull it off. I can deal with some sluggish battles when I'm just selecting things on a menu, but not when I'm directly controlling the action. Plus, these problems just compound when the targeting and auto-movement seems designed to hold you back from doing too much too fast. Don't run away from the enemies, dingus! Go for the jugular!

While Tales of Phantasia may not shine with the glory that it did in its prime, there are still parts of the game that are worth checking out. Many of the visuals and effects will make you remember the days when Mode 7 was king, and diehard Tales fans will be happy to see familiar hallmarks of the series like cooking, titles, and combining skills. It can be fun if you decide you want it to be, but even its status as a classic can't hide the fact that Tales of Phantasia could totally get a senior discount at the movie theater without even being carded. —JOE

BOTTOM LINE 7.25

> **Concept:** The game that launched a thousand sequels finally hits the U.S.

> **Graphics:** Stylized sprites, nifty effects, and colorful environments take you back to 1995.

> **Sound:** Oddly synthesized voice clips announcing special attacks were probably cool once, but they're just unsettling now.

> **Playability:** Battles are frequent and slow moving, and there are definitely a few too many menus to wade through.

> **Entertainment:** Solid fun, but there are better ways to satisfy your old-school cravings.

> **Replay Value:** Moderate

Second Opinion 7.75

I've been known to get dorky over some old-school Eastern RPGs, and this is the best kind never released in the U.S. before, and outstanding for its day. But man, this game was made 11 years ago. Combat is chuggy and unresponsive, navigating menus is cumbersome, and the dialogue is stilted as only an adolescent power fantasy can be. Leveling up, combining skills into whirling vortexes of death, and saving the world is still entertaining, though. And especially compared to the (lack of) recent offerings on GBA, this is definitely a solid pickup for history buffs and RPG nerds alike. —ADAM



NINTENDO DS

Age of Empires: The Age of Kings

> STYLE 1 TO 4-PLAYER STRATEGY > PUBLISHER MAJESCO > DEVELOPER ENSEMBLE STUDIOS
> RELEASE FEBRUARY 1 > ESRB E10+



AGED EMPIRES

BOTTOM LINE 8

You can't stop time; it's inevitable. Age of Empires: The Age of Kings rolls along in a similarly dependable fashion. Although it is not real-time based like its PC brother (instead opting for tums), anyone who's played an empire builder/resource gathering title will know what they are getting here. Unfortunately, the game doesn't make very good use of the handheld's touch screen, as choosing units (or even distinguishing them, for that matter) isn't an easy affair.

The Age of Kings holds to the tried and true rock, paper, scissors combat formula, and this is what ultimately causes this game to slide into a comfortable and predictable pace. There aren't too many surprises, and there were times where I wanted status effects or something outside of the basic combat structure to come into play and spice things up. Of course, each hero's powers give you an extra edge, but it's not like in Advance Wars: Dual Strike,

for example, where you get CO tag attacks or dual-screen battles. Age of Kings does have its empire building, where you sweat your villagers into earning enough resources to research technologies and progress to the next age. You best be on top of this, otherwise you're gonna show up to a gunfight with a bow and arrow. Although this feature of the game is certainly a shining point, in some ways it restricts the title's strategy, since racing to acquire the most evolved unit types is simply the best way to proceed. The game's focus on combat is good for the handheld, but it does put this extra onus on resource gathering, which can get old if that's not your thing. Luckily, The Age of Kings does provide some missions that don't involve resources whatsoever.

With strategy series out there like Advance Wars, which expand upon your average strategy game with sexy results, a title like The Age of Kings comes off as an old monarch, and not the new generation. —KATO

> **Concept:** Take each dynasty leader through a handful of missions, avail yourself of their specific hero powers, and coordinate strategy and general empire building.

> **Graphics:** When the screen fills up with units, there isn't near enough detail to tell things apart.

> **Sound:** The era-specific music is nice.

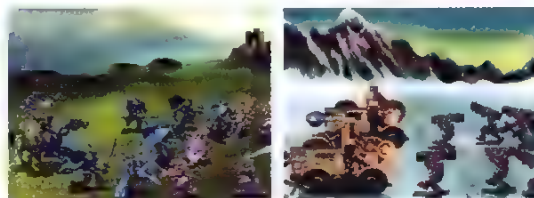
> **Playability:** Using the touch screen to select units can frustrate.

> **Entertainment:** Age of Kings doesn't foray into new territory, nor does it make resource gathering any more exciting.

> **Replay Value:** Moderately High

Second Opinion 7

I'm all for turn-based strategy, especially on portable systems. Age of Empires on DS, however, comes up lacking in both the depth and the balance that the genre requires. Far from being broken, this title simply doesn't have enough meat to it to be truly engaging. A mere handful of unit types are all that are available for use, which makes war a fairly staid affair. Resource management is also largely too easy, due to both a simplistic implementation and an over-abundance on most maps. Though Age of Empires is competent in every regard, there's nothing here to get excited about — even if you're a huge nerd for the PC series. —ADAM



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HANDHELD QUICKIES

PSP

Winning Eleven 9

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER SPORTS (2-PLAYER VIA AD-HOC) > **PUBLISHER** KONAMI
> **DEVELOPER** KONAMI
> **RELEASE** FEBRUARY 7 > **ESRB** E



BOTTOM LINE
7.5

A soccer player with one foot wouldn't be much of a force, and a Winning Eleven game with only one analog stick isn't much of one either. If you choose to use the PSP's sole stick for movement, which I highly recommend, the game doesn't allow you to perform manual passes—robbing you of the chance to creatively play the ball into space. In general, the PSP's analog nub isn't exact enough, which can make for some bad passes and shots off target. Even with these flaws, this is still a better portable soccer title than FIFA, but it doesn't replicate the feel and capabilities of the console version and is a shadow of the series' greatness.—**KATO**

NINTENDO DS

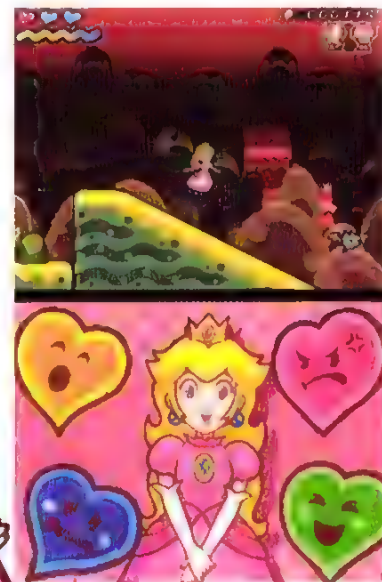
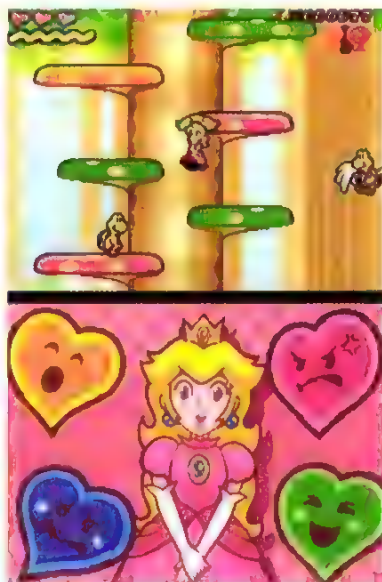
Pokémon Trozei

> **STYLE** 1 OR 2-PLAYER PUZZLE
> **PUBLISHER** NINTENDO
> **DEVELOPER** GENIUS SONORITY
> **RELEASE** MARCH 6 > **ESRB** E



BOTTOM LINE
8.25

This is one wily little puzzler, both charming and challenging enough that even those nauseated by the thought of Pokémon should really pick it up anyway. With an art style most reminiscent of 1950s illustrations, the monster heads really pop off the screen and the large field of play is traversed with easy stylus swipes. Essentially, you'll stack up four like characters to make a Trozei, which then can set off board-wide chain reactions, but the ability to move pieces from the bottom to the top or wrap around the sides makes it a wide-reaching puzzler that even the most hardcore will be taken by.—**LISA**



NINTENDO DS

Super Princess Peach

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION/PLATFORM > **PUBLISHER** NINTENDO > **DEVELOPER** NINTENDO > **RELEASE** FEBRUARY 27 > **ESRB** E

THE NEXT GREAT MARIO PEACH PLATFORMER

It's been years since Nintendo's given its fans a new, original Mario side-scrolling platformer, which seems odd considering that his 8- and 16-bit adventures are among the most successful and praised games of all time. This is all the more reason to laud the arrival of Super Princess Peach, a great Mario platformer in all but name.

While she's traditionally been either a hostage or a benchwarmer in the Mario universe, here Peach takes center stage in a full-blown, original platformer that will be instantly addictive to fans of games like Super Mario Bros. 3 or Super Mario World. In a funny nod to past titles, this time around it's Mario that's been captured by Bowser's minions and it is up to Peach to set things right. Armed with a talking umbrella, Peach goes beyond the traditional Mario moveset by using this implement to hit enemies, shoot projectiles, and even traverse water, thanks to numerous power-ups available for purchase. What's more, she also taps in to her tempestuous emotions to access special "Vibe" abilities, accessed by icons on the touch screen, like Rage (a fire attack), Joy (a cyclone that allows her to fly for brief periods), Gloom (which

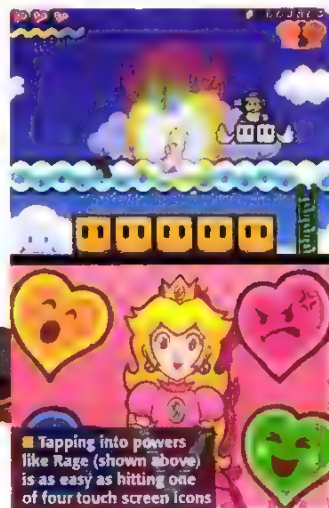
unleashes Peach's tears to put out fire, solve puzzles, and run quickly), and Calm (which regains health).

You'll quickly learn that tapping into these powers at critical moments is crucial to success; this is definitely one of the best ways I've seen a traditional control scheme augmented with the touch screen. There are also some brief minigames that appear both in the menu options and before boss battles that make more use of the stylus.

The levels themselves are exactly what you'd hope for: fun, varied, and full of traditional Mario enemies like Goombas, Koopa, chain chomps, and Hammer Bros. Of course, like any great Nintendo platformer, there are numerous hidden extras to find, like the three Toads trapped in hidden areas on each level, puzzle pieces, and some surprisingly fun

minigames. The game perfectly balances challenge, exploration, and flat-out action in a manner that truly befits the term "intelligent design."

Nobody does this better than Nintendo, and it's good to see it delivering the goods in this manner, with fine-tuned gameplay that not only succeeds in giving us the game that lives up to the storied Mario legacy, but also manages to add some interesting new twists to the tradition. My only small complaint is that it's not as challenging as its forebears, and holds your hand a bit too much (it basically tells you the secret to each boss before the battle begins), especially considering its relative brevity. But, if that means that more people experience more of this great game, that's a good thing.—**MATT**



Tapping into powers like Rage (shown above) is as easy as hitting one of four touch screen icons

BOTTOM LINE
8.75

> **Concept:** An amazing side-scrolling platformer in the classic Nintendo style

> **Graphics:** Its look recalls the glory days of the SNES, but with some amazing effects and a new level of detail that the DS can provide

> **Sound:** Sounds at once new and familiar will warm the hearts of old-school Nintendo fans

> **Playability:** The core mechanics are excellent, tried-and-true platforming, and Peach's special abilities add some new wrinkles to the formula

> **Entertainment:** While not especially challenging, it's an ingratiating and well-done addition to the DS library

> **Replay Value:** Moderately High



Second Opinion **9.25**

My gut has been proven wrong: It's not the first time, and probably not the last, but my insides screamed that the oft-kidnapped princess in charge of her own rescue mission armed with a talking parasol would spell miserable doom. I, and I say this with glee, was totally wrong. This is one of the mostly giddily well-conceived side-scrolling platformers in years. Peach's skills are creatively used; the DS hardware offers distinct advantages, and the replay value is actually pretty high. These levels are creative enough that you'll want to run them again and the repercussions for dying are so minimal that bold exploration is encouraged in a way that I haven't seen since Super Mario Bros. 3. While it's short and not hard, Peach is also not without its genius.—**LISA**

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UNLIMITED ENABLED

PSP

Exit

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION/PUZZLE > PUBLISHER UBISOFT > DEVELOPER TAITO > RELEASE FEBRUARY 14 > ESRB E

RESCUE ME

With a goofy story about a professional rescuer, vibrant comic-inspired visuals, classic Prince of Persia-style controls, and cleverly designed puzzle stages, Exit is definitely a unique PSP title that carves out its own distinct place in the system's software lineup. As much as I'd love to give this title a thumbs up for anyone who craves puzzler gameplay, a few issues hold Exit back from achieving its potential. Although Exit is primarily a puzzle game, the action side of things sputters due to sluggish controls and an overly complicated control scheme.

In Exit, players are charged with leading victims safely out of various hazard-laden puzzles, avoiding fires, electrical floors, water, and the like. Basically, you must figure out the route to get your charges out and how to get them there safely. But things are more complicated than they look. Exit actually

uses every single button on the PSP (including both the d-pad and analog nub), which makes gameplay somewhat slow and clunky (there are two separate "use" keys for example, one for environmental objects and one for equipped objects). But more critically, the action controls feel sluggish and unresponsive. The timing for running jumps feels way off, and you'll probably blow some puzzles several times as you fall to your death.

Despite the control issues, Exit has a lot to offer. While extended play can get a little frustrating, picking up this game for a few minutes at a time can be a deeply satisfying experience. The animation is simply stellar, the graphics are bright and eye-catching, and the music is fun. Exit isn't a perfect experience, but if you can get the feel of the controls, it does offer some smart puzzles and a unique presentation. —JEREMY

BOTTOM LINE 7.25

> **Concept:** Some people are too lazy to save themselves, so it's up to you to lead them out of peril-laden puzzle areas

> **Graphics:** The funky pop art style is bright and eye-catching, and the animation is awesome. The visuals are easily the high point of the game

> **Sound:** Like the graphics, the music is upbeat, funky, and appealing

> **Playability:** The low point of the game. Controls feel sluggish and unresponsive, as well as a bit convoluted

> **Entertainment:** Control issues aside, Exit is a decent pick up and play puzzle experience

> **Replay Value:** Moderate

Second Opinion 7.25

With a film noir satire vibe (think *The Cheap Detective*) and wily puzzles, Exit was sitting on the brink of being my new PSP obsession. But then I died doing a running jump. A lot. Shoddy controls are the sole downfall of this otherwise well-made and clever action/puzzle title. The response times are, to be generous, pokey. The root of this issue is that I was dying because the controls were sluggish, not because I wasn't smart enough to figure out the puzzles — unquestionably one solid definition of "cheap." Still, the rest of the game is designed well enough that I could see picking it up for a level or two once in a while, and in that way, has its redeeming values. —LISA



PSP

Mega Man: Maverick Hunter X

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION > PUBLISHER CAPCOM > DEVELOPER CAPCOM > RELEASE JANUARY 17 > ESRB E 10+



XCEEDING XPECTATIONS

This update of Mega Man X for the SNES, like every other Mega Man game in recent memory (new or old), has its ups and downs. Fortunately, Maverick Hunter X flies high a lot more often than it falls into the spike trap of doom, and comes out as a solid, enjoyable 2D action title. Most importantly, the soul of the SNES title has been preserved. All of the tight, fast action of the original game is present in this effort. It's just as entertaining to go around powering up X and defeating evil robots as it was 13 years ago. Even if you've beaten the original to death as I have, it's worth another go since all of the upgrade pieces have been relocated throughout the tweaked levels.

The new graphics engine is slick. Modeling everything in 3D while keeping the gameplay on a single plane has resulted in a beautiful, colorful world full of eye candy. Revel all you like in the remembered glory of the 16-bit era, but this title really

shows what current hardware can do to spice up an old genre. The remixed music is a treat as well; the PSP's sound capabilities far outstrip the SNES's, and the difference in quality is remarkable.

As with all re-releases, however, all of the fond memories in the world can't totally make up for antiquated game design. As the industry has matured, so have the concepts that define the games — in most cases for the better. Some things that we take for granted today, like balanced boss fights and freedom from the imitation of cheap deaths, weren't always standard. In this way, no amount of cool new graphics can keep Maverick Hunter X from suffering in comparison to newer titles.

Regardless, Mega Man X was a great experience back in the day, and this faithful reinterpretation with a sleek new look is nothing to complain about. It's well worth getting into whether you're defeating Sigma for the first time or the fiftieth. —ADAM

BOTTOM LINE 8

> **Concept:** Rework the first Mega Man X title to take advantage of the PSP's lovely display

> **Graphics:** Gorgeous 3D models, animations, and effects make this side-scroller shine

> **Sound:** Remastered music recalls the pucky tunes of the original, while jazzing them up for a new generation of gamers

> **Playability:** Death by missing a dash-jump is a bit more frequent than I'd like, but everything else is tight as can be

> **Entertainment:** A shiny new coat of paint isn't enough to hide the sometimes-clunky design of a decade ago, but this adventure stands tall in the PSP library

> **Replay Value:** Moderate

Second Opinion 8.25

It's shaping up to be a good year for Mega Man fans. Purists are undoubtedly already flocking to the mammoth Mega Man X collection that recently showed up. Those who are more willing for a few changes to the original should instead try this phenomenal remake of the first X game. Beyond some flashy visuals, you also have a lengthy anime movie prologue that sets up the whole universe of the game, while the character unlocked upon game completion offers an entirely new challenge. There's some slowdown that mars the game from time to time, but it's the only noticeable flaw in an otherwise impressive restart for the franchise. —MILLER





SAMURAI STYLE

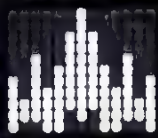
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What's your style? Try them all with 19 warriors dressed to kill, enhanced strategy,
all-new scenarios, and multiplayer challenges for up to 4 players.

March 8 2006

swpsp.com





CHARTS

An In-Depth Listing Of The Best Selling Games

TOP 20

Listings Based Upon NPD Data For December 2005 Based On Units Sold

1 MADDEN NFL 06 (PS2)



With the amount of money that EA has earned from the Madden series, it could afford to build its own continent. Called EAsia, it would never have to worry about being invaded. After all, it has armies of football players at its disposal. Plus dwarves that drive racecars. EAsia is a strange place.

2 STAR WARS: BATTLEFRONT II (PS2)



Despite the success of the Battlefront series, not all Star Wars games have been hits. Case in point: Star Wars: The Battle Against Dirt, in which you play a stormtrooper assigned the hapless job of cleaning Lord Vader's apartment before he gets back from work. Man, that guy is a slob. He leaves armored cybernetic underwear all over the place.

3 NEED FOR SPEED: MOST WANTED (PS2)



This game is the story of a Marine on Death Row who is recruited into a secret government organization, only to subsequently be framed for the assassination of the First Lady. Oh wait, that's the movie *Most Wanted* with Keenan Ivory Wayans and John Voight. Man, that's a good flick. It has a Wayans in it -- what could go wrong?

4 WWE SMACKDOWN! VS. RAW 2006 (PS2)



You know what would help the WWE games sell even more than they already do? A gift certificate inside for Mean Gene's Burgers! Think about it.

5 CALL OF DUTY 2: BIG RED ONE (PS2)

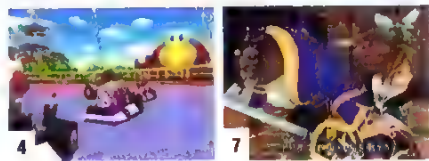


We were quite disappointed to discover that the "Big Red One" of the title does not refer to Clifford, the Big Red Dog. Someday, perhaps, we'll see this beloved children's book character taking on the Nazi war machine.

Rank	Title	L. Mo.	System	Score	Release	Price
1	Madden NFL 06	4	PS2	9	8-05	\$46
2	Star Wars: Battlefront II	2	PS2	8.5	11-05	\$48
3	Need For Speed: Most Wanted	18	PS2	8.5	11-05	\$46
4	WWE Smackdown! VS Raw 2006	6	PS2	8.75	11-05	\$49
5	Call of Duty 2: Big Red One	11	PS2	7.25	11-05	\$48
6	Mario Kart DS	5	DS	8.5	11-05	\$34
7	Tony Hawk's American Wasteland	9	PS2	8.25	10-05	\$45
8	Peter Jackson's King Kong	N/A	PS2	8.5	10-05	\$40
9	Grand Theft Auto: Liberty City Stories	7	PSP	9.25	10-05	\$48
10	50 Cent: Bulletproof	12	PS2	6.25	11-05	\$50
11	Mario Party 7	10	GC	5	11-05	\$49
12	NBA Live 06	15	PS2	7.5	09-05	\$43
13	Star Wars: Battlefront II	1	XBOX	8.5	11-05	\$48
14	Super Mario Strikers	N/A	GC	6.75	12-05	\$49
15	Madden NFL 06	N/A	PSP	9	09-05	\$46
16	Prince of Persia: The Two Thrones	N/A	PS2	9	12-05	\$45
17	Mario & Luigi: Partners In Time	N/A	DS	8.25	12-05	\$34
18	Call of Duty 2	3	360	9.75	11-05	\$58
19	Animal Crossing: Wild World	N/A	DS	8.75	12-05	\$35
20	Madden NFL 06	N/A	XBOX	9	08-05	\$46

TOP 10 JAPAN

Rank	Title	System
1	DS Training for Adults: Work Your Brain 2	DS
2	Animal Crossing: Wild World	DS
3	DS Training for Adults: Work Your Brain	DS
4	Mario Kart DS	DS
5	Gunparade Orchestra	PS2
6	Monster Hunter Portable	PSP
7	Kingdom Hearts II	PS2
8	Mario & Luigi: Partners In Time	DS
9	Yawaraka Atamajuku	DS
10	Tamagotchi No PuchiPuchi Omiseccchi	DS



TOP 10 GI

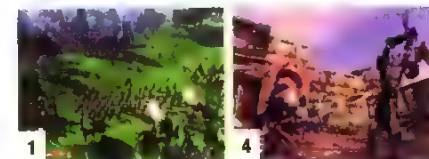
Rank	Title	L. Mo.	System
1	Fight Night Round 3	N/A	Multi
2	Onimusha: Dawn of Dreams	N/A	PS2
3	Super Princess Peach	N/A	DS
4	Dead or Alive 4	N/A	360
5	Devil May Cry 3: Special Edition	1	PS2
6	Shadow Hearts: From the New World	N/A	PS2
7	Prince of Persia: The Two Thrones	5	Multi
8	Grandia III	N/A	PS2
9	Star Wars: Empire at War	N/A	PC
10	Ape Escape 3	4	PS2



The Staff's Favorite Picks

TOP 10 PC

Rank	Title	L. Mo.	Price
1	Age of Empires III	6	\$49
2	Call of Duty 2	N/A	\$49
3	Civilization IV	7	\$49
4	World of Warcraft	2	\$31
5	The Sims 2	10	\$37
6	The Sims 2: Nightlife	5	\$26
7	The Movies	N/A	\$48
8	Battlefield 2	N/A	\$48
9	RollerCoaster Tycoon 3	N/A	\$26
10	The Sims 2 Holiday Edition	4	\$33



Based On Monthly Units Sold



Fight Night Round 3

Fighting The Good Fight



By Executive Producer Kudo Tsunoda, EA Chicago

FULL IMPACT OF IMPACT PUNCHES

Impact Punches are the most powerful and damaging punches in Fight Night Round 3. While they are the most damaging, they are also the hardest to land and dangerous to throw. Impact Punches are easy to defend and leave you open to being counter punched when missed. Impact Punches also take a lot of energy to use. If you are throwing a lot of Impact Punches, and they are not landing, you are going to get tired quickly and grow weaker as the fight progresses. Try and set up your Impact Punches. Throw them after parries. Use them when your opponent least expects it. Land a high percentage of Impact Punches and you will win the fight. Use them at the wrong time and you will end up on the canvas.

THE ADRENALINE BOOST

While the Haymaker is harder to land in this year's game, it also gives you an extra boost. When you land a Haymaker you will get a quick adrenaline boost that gives you maximum energy for a short burst so you can follow up your Haymaker with a quick flurry of punches. With the adrenaline boost, your punches will be faster and more powerful. If you can string a quick combo of shots together right after landing a Haymaker you can put some serious hurt on your opponent and try to take him out.

THINK DEFENSE FIRST

There is nothing more sweet in boxing than a devastating KO. Many people when playing Fight Night want to punch non-stop until their opponent is knocked senseless. But this strategy will only work if the punches are landing. Defense is a big part of not only avoiding getting hit, but setting up your counter punches. Bob and weave when not throwing punches to make your opponent miss and then land a hook or uppercut counter punch. Parry your opponent's punches and leave him open for a big Haymaker. Counter punches do twice the damage of regular punches when they land. Plus, if you can make your opponent miss, you will tire them out quickly, giving you a big edge in the later rounds.

THE CLINCH

No matter how good you are at defense, you are going to get hurt and close to being KO'd

at some point in your Fight Night career. The time right when a boxer is hurt and about to go down is called the KO Moment. If you are in the KO Moment, grab on to your opponent using the Clinch. This will get you some much-needed rest time giving you back both health and energy. The catch is that a Clinch can be hard to do, as you are wide open for getting punched and knocked down. Try and set your opponent up for a Clinch - making it harder for you to be hit. Run away from the other boxer, making them chase you. Then, just before they are in punch range, quickly step forward and grab on. Or parry your opponent's punch, putting them off balance and making it easier to get a Clinch. If you are the attacking boxer, use a block to prevent a clinch and then hit your opponent before they can try to Clinch again.

REVERSE KO MOMENT

The clinch is the safest way to get out of the KO Moment, but still leaves you hurt and your opponent on the offensive. If you are good at blocking, try to parry your opponent and then counter with a Haymaker. If you are able to land a Haymaker counter punch, it can reverse the KO Moment - instantly draining their health and putting you on the offensive. This is extremely risky to do. If you do not pull it off, it leaves you open to get knocked down. But doing it successfully means you can move in and take your opponent out!

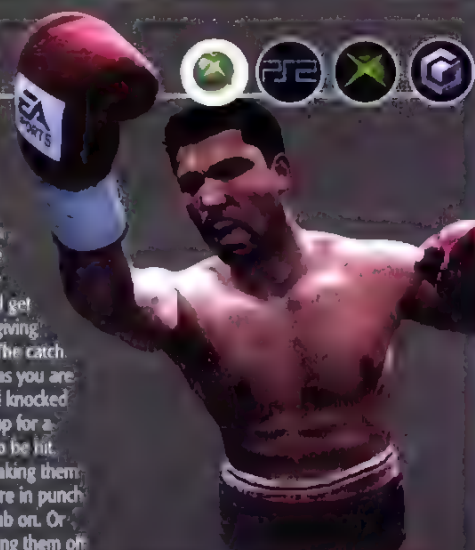


THE COMBO STICK

Fight Night Round 3 features the ability to throw blistering fast combos using the analog stick. To throw a regular right hook on the analog stick, you move the stick to the right (3 o'clock) and rotate it upwards (12 o'clock). If you want to throw fast hook combos, move the analog stick to the right (3 o'clock), rotate it 180 degrees counter clockwise (9 o'clock) and then rotate it back 180 degrees clockwise (3 o'clock). You can then rotate the stick back and forth between 3 o'clock and 9 o'clock to throw fast hooks. As long as each punch is landing, your punch speeds will be super fast. If any punch misses or is blocked, your combo string is over.

MULTIPLE KNOCKDOWNS MEANS MORE KO'S

How hard it is to get up from a knockdown depends on the power of the punch, how many



times you have been knocked down in the fight, your boxer's heart rating, and how many times you get hit on the way down. But one of the biggest factors is how many times you have been knocked down within a single round. The second knockdown of a round is much harder to get up from than the first. The third knockdown in a round is almost impossible to get up from. So, if you have knocked a guy down once during a round, get really aggressive and move in for the kill. Even if you expend a lot of energy or take a lot of damage in the process, getting multiple knockdowns in a single round will lead to a lot of wins by KO!

CHEATERS NEVER WIN - YEAH RIGHT!

There are several "dirty" tactics you can use to get multiple knockdowns in the same round. These only work against a human opponent, as they are more of a mental tactic than an in game tactic. After you get your first knockdown of a round, use the EA Super Punch replay to really piss the other person off. If you are the person who knocked the other player down, you can rewind and replay the knockdown as many times as you want to really rub it in. This is super annoying and often leads to the guy getting up off the canvas throwing a lot of punches trying to knock you out. This will leave them open to counter punches and subsequent knockdowns. It is also a good idea to use taunts and illegal blows after a KO, as it rubs salt in the wound and makes people fight completely out of control!

STOP GAP PUNCHING

The reason boxers don't throw non-stop punches during fights is that it leaves them open to being punched. Stop Gap Punching means throwing a short, quick punch like a straight to beat your opponent to the punch when they are throwing a big powerful shot. This not only gives you the chance to land the punch, but lots of times your punch will change the trajectory of the other boxer's fist, making them miss you with their punch. This is especially useful to counter Impact Punches.

Mod World

THE INDEPENDENT GAMES FESTIVAL Mod Finalists Announced

<http://www.igf.com>

Last month we reported on the IGF's finalists for original games, but the news just came out that the finalists in the mod competition have been announced. And believe us, these are some quality mods. In four categories - mods for Doom 3, Neverwinter Nights, Half-Life 2, and Unreal Tournament 2004 - 17 games have been nominated.



Some of these titles we've covered before. Dyslopia and Eclipse, both for Half-Life 2, are being justly recognized for their scope and innovation. Others, like Last Man Standing (which pits Doom 3 players against waves of swarming enemies), are on the docket for executing an idea with precision and craft. Still others, including Dodgeball: Source and HamsterBash, are so far from their source material that it's almost unrecognizable - but they're a blast in their own right, and a testament to creativity.

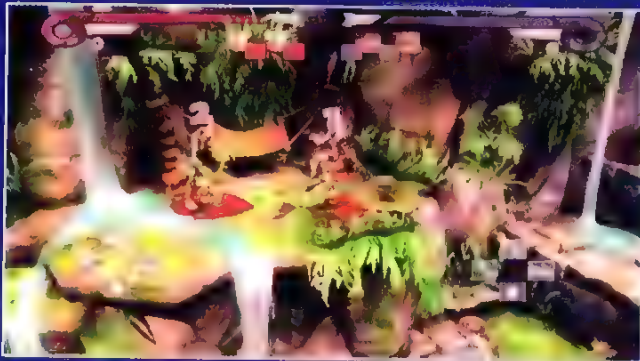


If you own any of the above retail titles and want to get a little more bang for your buck, you owe it to yourself to check out some of these fantastic add-ons. Even if you're just a student of game design or enthusiast of the medium, there are so many interesting ideas on display here that it's well worth a little time to investigate.



Live Arcade Spotlight

Hoopworld



New titles continue to emerge for discerning Xbox 360 players on the XBLA service, and we recently got wind of one particularly exciting offering that should be available for download this spring. Netherlands-based Streamline Studios has crafted an alarmingly fun little diversion called Hoopworld, a 3-on-3 basketball game in the loosest use of the term. While making shots and dunks are certainly a big part of the title, the main focus seems to be on crafting complex passing and jumping combos between your players before hammering the ball home on one of the ridiculously strange courts. Kicking and sliding into your opponents is certainly not out of place, lending the game more a feeling of a versus beat 'em up than a sports simulation. Double jumps and wall runs give players a tremendous sense of free range and movement throughout the rapidfire three-minute matches. The simple but frantic pace has us eager to play more. Keep an eye out on Marketplace for this one.

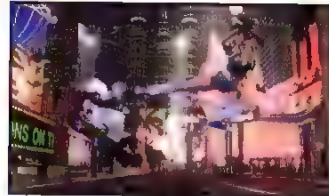


Attention All Cheaters!

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!

XBOX 360



Dead or Alive 4

There are a number of characters to be unlocked in Team Ninja's lightning-fast fighter, but we thought we'd save you some time and fill you in on the paths to opening up your new combatants.

- Unlock Ein** – Beat Story Mode with Hitomi
- Unlock Gen Fu** – Beat Story Mode with Eliot
- Unlock Helena** – Beat Story Mode with All 16 Characters
- Unlock Leon** – Beat Story Mode with Zack
- Unlock Nicole (Spartan 458)** – Beat Story Mode with Helena
- Unlock Tengu** – Beat Time Attack with Every Character (Including Other Unlockable Characters)

PLAYSTATION 2

Ape Escape 3

At the main title screen, hold down all four shoulder buttons to enter the Password screen. From there, enter the following:

- Dark Master is On The Loose** – blackout
- Shimmy is On The Loose** – 2nd man

"GI Droid"

(location unknown – last seen bowling in everyone else's lane but his own.)

XBOX



Half-Life 2

Enter these codes during gameplay without pausing

- Refill Ammo** – Y, B, A, X, White, Y, X, A, B, White
- Refill Health** – Up (x2), Down (x2), Left, Right, Left, Right, B, A
- Unlock All Chapters** – Left (x4), Black, Right (x4), White

Code of the Month

Need For Speed: Most Wanted



Don't you hate it when you're getting chased by those darn cops, you hit a spike strip, your car slows down and you totally get busted? Yeah. That's your fault. We can't help you. But maybe these cheat codes will cheer you up. Head straight to the main title screen (where it tells you to press start) to enter the code. You should get a confirmation upon completion.

Burger King Challenge – Up, Down, Up, Down, Left, Right, Left, Right

Castrol Ford GT – Left, Right, Left, Right, Up, Down, Up, Down
Extra Marker – Up (x2), Down (x2), Left, Right, Up, Down

Dave Callens
Atlanta, GA



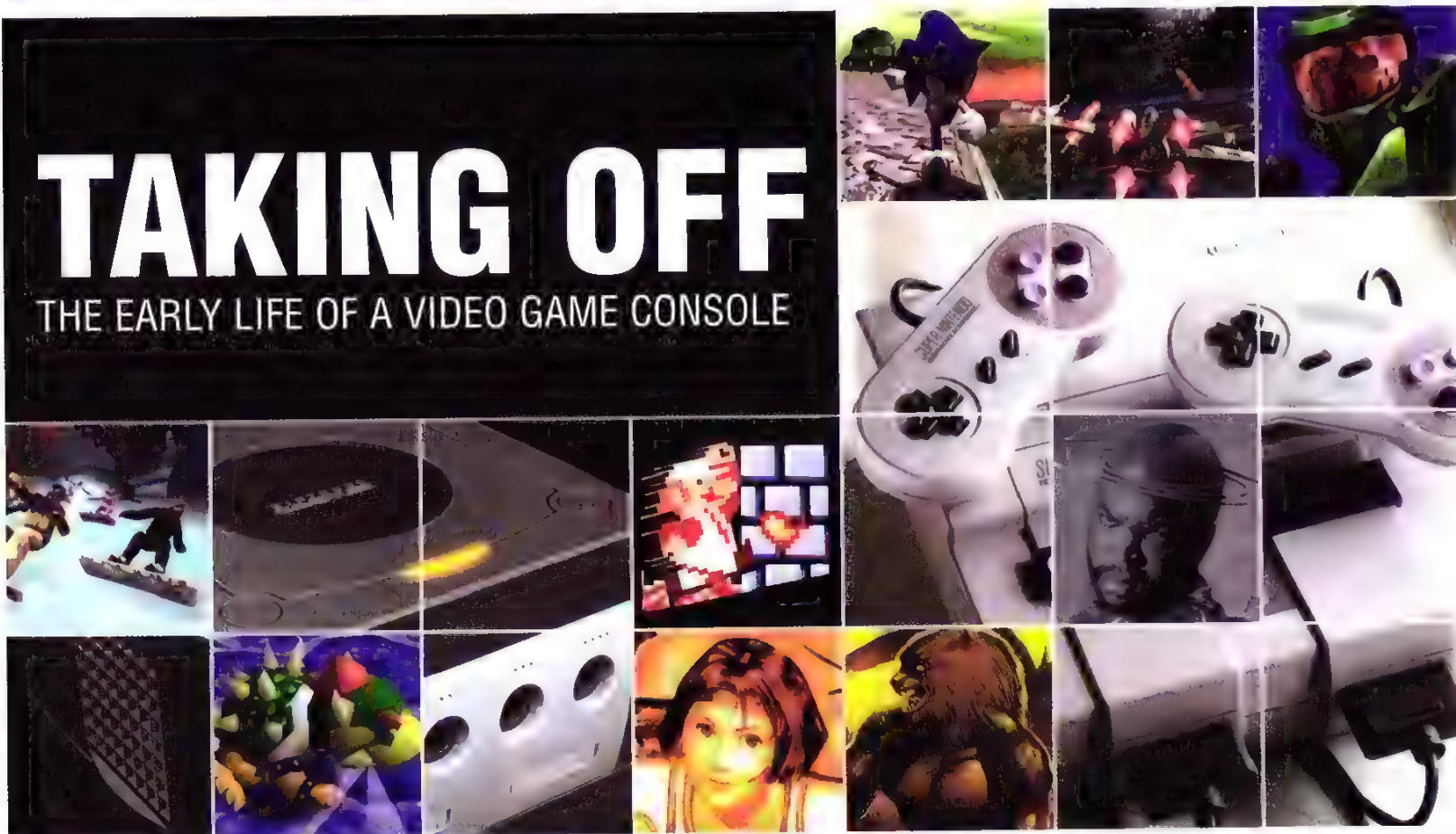
You can talk the talk.
Can you walk the walk?
Here's a chance to prove it.
Please geek responsibly.

- | | |
|-------------------|-----------------------|
| GAME DESIGN | COMPUTER FORENSICS |
| DIGITAL ANIMATION | NETWORK SECURITY |
| ARTIFICIAL LIFE | SOFTWARE ENGINEERING |
| DIGITAL VIDEO | TECHNOLOGY MANAGEMENT |
| WEB DESIGN | GAME PROGRAMMING |

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TAKING OFF

THE EARLY LIFE OF A VIDEO GAME CONSOLE



Every few years, the gaming world holds its collective breath as a new console enters the marketplace. Tremendous weight has been placed on the importance of those exciting first days, when it seems everyone has an iron-clad opinion on the entire life and importance of the system. It always seems to come back to the games on the shelf and the power of the system that first day the console is available. But how important are those launch games? Can they really foretell success or doom for a system? Is it better to have one great game or several good games? And does the most powerful system always win out? We weren't sure we'd find any answers, but we delved into the long history of evidence to see what we could discover. While we've opted not to include every home system ever conceived, what we found about some of the most important ones may surprise you.

Early Days of Early Consoles

The early 1970s saw the first boom of interest in arcade machine popularity. The potential for home electronic versions of these smash hit entertainment devices was inevitable. In those beginning years the concept of a launch lineup was an entirely alien one. The Atari VCS was originally designed to be a home computing system that would play games directly loaded onto a ROM slot of the motherboard. With plans to include very specific games like Pong and Tank for the console, Atari's designers thought that the games could all be included with the sale of the console. While most of the original design for the VCS would remain, this was one idea that was wisely left out. While home versions of Pong had been

a smash hit for Atari in 1975, other lesser-known companies were already moving in the direction of a cartridge-based approach. In fact, 1976 had seen the introduction of the Channel F system, the very first dedicated cartridge console. It was clear that the Atari VCS (later renamed the 2600) would need to have that same wider flexibility to gain true market dominance. And that's exactly what it did.

The holiday season of 1977 was not a particularly successful one for most game makers, with the very notable exception of Atari. The company's new system sold well those first few months, and it's hard not to offer at least some of the credit to the nondescript cartridges that were available for purchase with the system. Sporting simple titles and basically no art on the cartridges themselves, Atari had nine different games available for new players to try. In retrospect, the collection

feels entirely underwhelming. While games like Combat and Air-Sea Battle were exciting offerings, it's hard to get jazzed up about a lineup that includes the title Basic Math. Nonetheless, American audiences didn't seem to mind. As the system moved into 1978, a slow boom began. It was at this point that games like Outlaw and Breakout revealed the wisdom of a cartridge-based approach, bringing players back to stores for new gaming ordeals to challenge

them. If the quality of launch is based solely on how well the system did, anyone would have to conclude that Atari's start was an unqualified success. Beyond being the primary spawn point for the entire home gaming industry, estimates of how many of the Atari consoles sold tend to hover around 30 million. But even then, the equation for a successful system seemed to be far more complicated than that first day of sales.



■ Duck Hunt (NES)



■ Super Mario Bros. (NES)

Back From the Dead

Many experts blame the rapid spread of third-party publishers for the disastrous crash of the industry that followed in 1983. So many companies were making games for the Atari that the consumers couldn't keep up. Most were ready to sound a death knell for the industry almost before it began. Enter Nintendo. In those first couple of years after the effective end of the industry, the Japanese company was one of the only entities that thought gaming yet had life. After a successful launch of the Famicom in Japan, a redesign produced the more American-friendly Nintendo Entertainment System. Styled to look more like a product that would fit comfortably beside your VCR and stereo, the NES was nonetheless met with vast skepticism by American retailers. To overcome this, Nintendo brilliantly and riskily offered to buy back all unsold inventory. Today, launches are in trouble when the numbers being spoken about aren't in the hundreds of thousands. The NES initially released in 1985 with only 50,000 units, all sold in New York City. Imagine such a thing today. Talk about an eBay goldmine.

By February of 1986, the whole nation could go out and pick up a NES, and they did so in droves. What was the attraction? Certainly some credit has to go to Super Mario Bros., the first "killer app" for a system, even if the term might not have yet been in use. Companies down the road would desperately hunt for that same magic — the game that could sell a system. Mario wasn't the only game available on those first days. The low cost pack included controllers and a copy of Mario for under \$200, but a jump into the mid-\$200s added in a light gun, Duck Hunt, Gyromite, and R.O.B., the nifty little robot that everyone remembers and almost no one ever used. At the time, a controversial decision by Nintendo also established the way in which other companies could make games for the system. A strict policy



■ Alex Kidd in Miracle World (Sega Master System)

of third-party development enforcement was immediately put into place. Thus that initial launch and the games that came in the years that followed would be carefully policed so that a repeat of the 1983 disaster could be avoided. The NES almost single-handedly revived the ailing industry, but how much credit goes to that initial launch? Was it the

system, or a single game about a plumber that kept gaming alive? If nothing else, Nintendo proved that taking big risks could lead to big rewards — no one can argue with the success they saw in those early years.

Meanwhile, a rival company called Sega was doing its best to compete with the suddenly massive might of Nintendo. The Sega Mark III was already on sale in Japan. With the NES launching in America, it made sense to continue the competition across the Pacific. However, the renamed Master System lacked any particularly memorable titles in those earliest days. The launch of the system had critics hailing the largely superior graphics and capabilities of the Master System over the NES. But where were the games? Even Alex Kidd, Sega's mascot at the time, is often left unremembered despite his release alongside the Master System. Many of Sega's early failures were due to a monopoly that Nintendo had set up for third party publishers.

In addition to monitoring what outside publishers released, Nintendo also had these companies sign contracts agreeing not to develop for other consoles. Sega ended

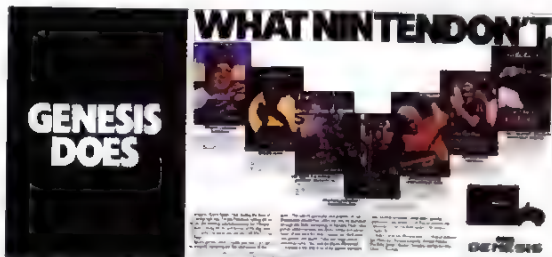
up with only a few partners willing to shun Nintendo, and it was sometimes because Nintendo simply wouldn't have them. It's little wonder that most estimates place Nintendo with a 90 percent market share throughout the period. While few hard-and-fast rules emerge out of looking at the early days of a console, the Master System revealed one thing; whether you have a lot of games, or just a few great games, something better catch the public's attention.



■ Sega Master System

The War Heats Up

Sega had slightly better luck in 1989, when they released the Genesis. Early games like Altered Beast, Afterburner II, Space Harrier II, and Golden Axe may have all been arcade ports, but they were all games that people wanted to play at home. Those early months saw Sega marketing themselves as a more "grown up" alternative to the Nintendo, with all the arcade games you loved available in the privacy of your home. With relatively twice the power of either the Master System or the NES, Genesis was an easy choice for the forward-minded gamer when they stepped into a store. It also didn't hurt that an add-on called the Power Base Converter made



the system immediately backwards compatible with games from the Master System. With a relatively mediocre group of initial new games, the Genesis nonetheless immediately offered Sega a fighting chance in the console war. The recipe for success seemed to be strong consistent support for the system from day one.

Nintendo punched back in 1991 with the SNES. Packaging its roughly \$200 dollar 16-bit system with the

wildly popular Super Mario World, avid gamers could also pick up F-Zero and Pilotwings to start their collections. It was a worthy competitor to the already released Genesis, and the strong lineups for both systems meant that it took some time for Nintendo to move back into a clear first place.

While it should be clear at this point that launch quality has a shaky correlation with overall console success, it's difficult not to blame the launch of the Sega Saturn for sinking the system before it even got started. Excitement about Sony's entry into the home console

market convinced Sega executives in 1995 to release their new system several months before anyone expected in order to get a head start on the competition. As it turns out, surprising both the media and the public with a basically unannounced system release is a bad idea. While notable for the launch's inclusion of Virtua Fighter, the early life of the system was an unqualified disaster, and foretold dark times for the company.

ONE OF THE TOP FIVE GAME DESIGN SCHOOLS

— Electronic Gaming Monthly



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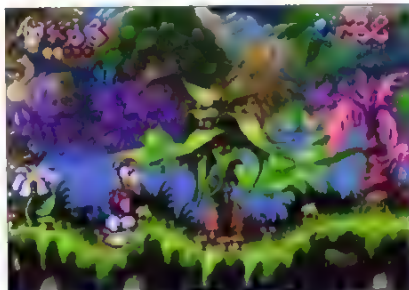
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If Saturn crashed and burned, Sony's PlayStation took off and soared only a few months later. The wide variety of available titles early on brought in the crowds. Ridge Racer, Battle Arena Toshinden, Rayman, Twisted Metal, and Warhawk are just a sampling of the broad selection that greeted the first PlayStation purchasers. If you wanted to make a case for a broad launch lineup ensuring the success of a console, the PlayStation would be a good place to start. It also didn't hurt that the 32-bit processing power of the system allowed for whole new arenas of gameplay. Even so, few of those initial games were critical successes, and it would be some time before



■ Rayman (PSone)

Next Gen?

Jump ahead to 1999. Was the Sega Dreamcast the beginning of the next generation, or the end of the last one? A glut of lukewarm add-ons for the Saturn had muddied Sega's waters. Regardless, the company had at least learned from previous mistakes regarding launch games. Soul Calibur, Mortal Kombat Gold, Sonic Adventure, NFL 2K, Power Stone, Hydro Thunder, and House of the Dead 2 were just some of the titles that graced shelves in the beginning. The Dreamcast also released with tech specs that blew away what was then the dominant Sony PlayStation. In addition, Sega's final home console made a valiant foray into online gaming, even going so far as to attempt a centralized dedicated ISP called SegaNet. Exciting launch, impressive specs, and online gaming all weren't enough to keep the system alive for more than a few short years. The Dreamcast firmly established that even with some great games and a worthwhile piece of hardware, one thing could kill a system outright: bad timing.

If video killed the radio star, then the PS2 killed the Dreamcast. A year after the Dreamcast's launch, Sony's second home console completely overwhelmed the market from the start. It sported a long list of launch games that included such notables as Dead or Alive 2: Hardcore, SSX, Fantavision, Smuggler's Run, Kessen, Evergrace, Silent Scope, Madden NFL 2001, and TimeSplitters. While there were a lot of games, many were ports, and many others simply weren't particularly good. The public seemed okay with that, however, and the PlayStation 2's meteoric rise began immediately.

One year later, and two consoles were already on gamers' plates. Microsoft's first Xbox was to go head-to-head with Nintendo's GameCube. With Sega effectively out of the picture, both companies were playing catch up to Sony from the start. For its part, Microsoft had a goodly number of games, but only one for the history books — Halo would come to define the Xbox. Beyond that, only Oddworld: Munch's Oddysee, Project Gotham Racing, and Dead or Alive 3 stood out from the crowd, regardless of quality. The Xbox also boasted the most impressive technology yet available for game fans. Not the least of these advances was the birth of Xbox Live, a service that continues to build steam even now as the proliferation of online gaming continues. Meanwhile, the GameCube launch definitely threw some popular games to their fans — a new Rogue Squadron game, Super Monkey Ball, and Luigi's Mansion all held their own. But, for the first time, there was no true Mario game at launch. Whose idea was that, anyway? Both Microsoft and Nintendo have fought an uphill battle ever since.

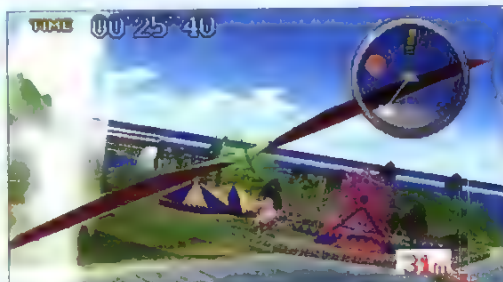
So what does any of this tell us about how a console is going to perform based on its launch, or even a couple of months in? It's debatable, certainly. But when it comes right down to it, the answer appears to be no. Too many variables confound the equation. Everyone gets excited about the most powerful system, but there doesn't seem to be any indication that such a thing makes the difference. People

the Playstation would see its first truly breakout hit.

Say what you will about the problems of the N64 — the system had a great beginning. Fantastic sales in that first holiday season of 1996 were driven by a massive hype machine — and that was in spite of having only two titles available at launch. Pilotwings 64 certainly had its fans, but it was Super Mario 64 that created a frenzy. Here was indisputable evidence that a

system didn't necessarily need lots of games for a great launch, just the right games. Crisp 64-bit graphics looked great for the system, but the decision to continue with a cartridge approach over discs must still haunt its creators.

love it when there are lots of great games at launch, but sometimes consoles sell even when there are only a few. Ultimately, it seems nearly impossible to know exactly what works at such an early stage. Maybe someone has it all figured out. There are three companies out there right now who would do just about anything to meet them.



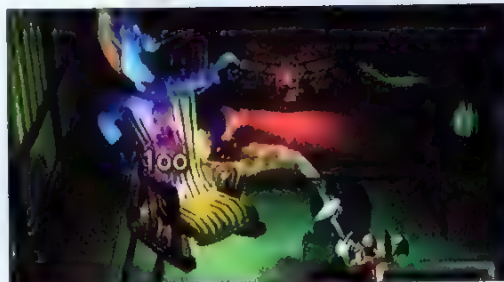
■ Pilotwings (Nintendo 64)



■ Soul Calibur (Dreamcast)



■ Microsoft Xbox



■ Luigi's Mansion (GameCube)

GREATEST GAME OF ALL TIME

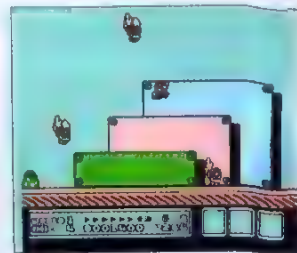
By Zachary Miller



SUPER MARIO BROS. 3

> FORMAT NES
> PUBLISHER NINTENDO

The pinnacle of video game achievements, for me anyway, is Super Mario Bros. 3. Filled to the brim with platforming magic and secrets galore, no platformer before or since has captured my attention with the zeal that this NES classic does. In a strange turn of events, Mario is not out to rescue the Princess (initially), but instead save the seven kings of the Mushroom Kingdom, who have been turned into hideous creatures by Bowser's Koopalings. Mario traverses the usual menagerie of environments including lava pits, desert sands, lush marine forests, and frigid ice worlds. There's even a maze-like pipe world where the overhead map is as much a



head-scratcher as the individual stages are. For the first time in the series, Mario has an inventory that can be accessed from the world map. You find new items in Toad Shops or by defeating specific enemies like Hammer or Fire Bros. There's never been more variety in the items of a Mario game. In addition to the usual fire flower and super mushroom, Mario can imitate a menagerie of wildlife including a raccoon, a frog, a hammer brother, and my personal favorite — a wind-up sock.

The platforming elements are fantastic. Sometimes there's action both above and below ground, and you must traverse both sides of the soil to successfully get through a stage. Many stages take place in complicated pipe mazes, while others offer forced scrolling for a real sense of urgency. While it's true that many stages can be completed in just a few minutes (if that), to do so would be to ignore all the precious secrets stashed away in every area. You'll miss that secret door in the clouds if you just dash to the finish line. Do you know how to get the legendary third Warp Whistle? Did you know there's a hidden island area on the map of the third level? Oh yes, secrets abound in this Mushroom Kingdom, and every time I play the game, I find something new. The sheer amount of variety in level design, enemy design, and ways to get around (fly, run, ride, wind-up sock) is absolutely staggering. And that, dear readers, is what makes a great platformer. Equal parts fine craftsmanship and magic, Super Mario Bros. 3 is the greatest video game of all time.

THIS MONTH IN GAMING HISTORY

March of 1978 saw Nintendo release their first true arcade game, starting the company off in a direction that would eventually completely define it around the world. The game was called Computer Othello, and it was little more than a simple approximation of the board game designed as a two player cocktail table game. While few remember the novel arcade entry, it was a hallmark of things to come.

Nintendo



SEGA SATURN

CORPSE KILLER: GRAVEYARD EDITION

> STYLE 1 OR 2-PLAYER ACTION > PUBLISHER ACCLAIM > DEVELOPER DIGITAL PICTURES > RELEASE 1994

When the title of a game is an oxymoron, it probably doesn't bode well for the final product. Corpse Killer is a prime example of the "Stupid Title, Stupid Game" rule. Although the Graveyard Edition is supposedly an enhanced version of the original game for Sega CD and 3DO, it takes more than a few new power-ups and enemies to save this lame shooter. Part of the short-lived FMV game craze of the early 1990s (which includes infamously crappy games like Night Trap and Sewer Shark), Corpse Killer is a collection of track-based shooting segments with digitized enemies, interspersed with hammy, cheaply-shot videos about an evil doctor and his zombie horde. With a cartoonish Rastafarian tour guide, maniacal scientist, and some truly horrible zombies, the story segments are so bad they're great. It's too bad you have to muddle through some bland, repetitive, and ugly gameplay to see them.



PSONE

R/C STUNT COPTER

> STYLE 1 OR 2-PLAYER ACTION > PUBLISHER TITUS > DEVELOPER SHINY ENTERTAINMENT > RELEASE 1999

Before Shiny Entertainment made mincemeat out of the Matrix license, the company made one of the oddest and most challenging games in the original PlayStation library. Shiny claimed that R/C Stunt Copter was not a game at all, rather a "software toy." In essence, the title aimed to be an ultra-realistic recreation of flying real R/C copters for those not able to afford the expensive hobby.



While its intentions might have been noble, Shiny was perhaps too successful in its goal of recreating the notoriously finicky controls of real-life helicopters. Trust us, even the most skilled gamer will spend an hour struggling to get through the initial levels of the game. The all-analog control scheme was certainly novel for its day, but it's overly sensitive and plagued by poor camera. Even worse is R/C Stunt Copter's announcer, a smarmy gadfly that mocks your every failure. It's definitely an interesting curio, and worth checking out if you really want a challenge to your gaming skills. However, most will find that R/C Stunt Copter's career mode (which feels more like an extended training mode) to be more trouble than it's worth.



PSONE

RHAPSODY: A MUSICAL ADVENTURE

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ROLE PLAYING GAME > PUBLISHER ATLUS USA > DEVELOPER NIPPON ICHI > RELEASE 2000

Fans of the phenomenal strategy offerings of Nippon Ichi might be surprised that this awkwardly saccharine title came from the same source, but a few minutes with the grid-based battle system immediately reveal links to those more complex strategic offerings. As a horn-playing country girl who can talk to puppets, Comet's musical journey is filled with some of the most sickly sweet tunes you will ever come across. If you push past the urge to heave during the sung English translations of Japanese Disney-imitation pop, you should be able to laugh yourself silly both at the game and the fact that you're actually playing it. For all that, the game is actually pretty decent. Amusing dialogue, charmingly simple characters, and collectible monsters all flesh out the title, even if backtracking through areas plagues the experience. Silly and cute? Yes. Able to compete with the glut of newer classic-style RPGs? Afraid not.



VIDEO GAME TRIVIA

With the holiday rush done, we've hit the part of the year where we play the waiting game. There are a few stand-out titles trickling onto store shelves, but most of the high-profile games are either behind us or in front of us, which might leave you with some time to kill. Answer the questions below to find out what activities you'll be engaged in as you patiently wait for the new games that will define 2006.

1 MECC's educational Number Munchers was a killer app on the Apple IIe back in the day, and it came complete with killer monsters. What were the creatures that chased the Muncher from square to square?

- A. Tribbles
- B. Troggles
- C. Trubbles
- D. Huggles

Level: 2	Multiples of 4										
15	19	4	15	6							
28			22	3	16						
4											
13	25		17	28	32						
18	5	26	24	10	20						
Score: 1150											Lives: 2

2 Wouldn't it be awesome if Lucasarts made a next-gen sequel to Gladius?

- A. Yes
- B. No



3 No, there still hasn't been a sequel to Nights into Dreams, but there was a two-level expansion disc released. What was it called?

- A. Air Nights
- B. Nights into Dreams Plus
- C. Nights into Dawn
- D. Christmas Nights

4 Corporate mascots had their chance to be compelling video game protagonists, and they failed miserably. Which of the following "characters" never starred in a 2D platformer?

- A. Chester Cheetah
- B. Cool Spot
- C. The Noid
- D. The Keebler Elves

5 Other than George Washington, which famous American leader can be selected at the outset of Civilization IV?

- A. Franklin D. Roosevelt
- B. Abraham Lincoln
- C. James K. Polk
- D. John Connor



6 It would be awesome if the SAT tested gaming knowledge instead of math and language skills. Finish the following association: Brutes are to the Covenant as Mutalisks are to the

- A. Zerg
- B. Overmind
- C. Protoss
- D. Glaive Worms

7 When a handheld zapper just isn't enough, you need to go to the arcade to play with the big guns. Which of these arcade shooters never came equipped with a gun peripheral?

- A. L.A. Machineguns
- B. Operation Wolf
- C. Revolution X
- D. Rohga Armor force

8 True or False: Battle Chess allowed you to control your pieces during their fights over contested squares.

- A. True
- B. False



9 Which of the these descriptions best fits the Purple Clan from Indigo Prophecy?

- A. High-profile politicians
- B. Ancient Aztec zealots
- C. Artificial Intelligence born from the Internet
- D. <shrug> The last part of that game made no sense

10 This pigeon-infused duel is one of the most intense moments in Capcom's surreal Killer 7. What's the name of the assassin dressed in white?

- A. Harmon Smith
- B. Rex Hapthorne
- C. Curtis Blackburn
- D. Bizarro Johnny Cash



BREAKDOWN

33% of the Game Informer staff believe Kurt Russel is "the man." The same people apparently also believe that "the man" means "staring in stupid sea-themed comedies" (See: *Captain Ron*, *Overboard*)

100,000 The number of users in the Snowcrash-esque MMO Second Life. Incidentally, 98,431 of them have pretty lame first lives, so it's probably for the best

100% of Hideo Kojima's blog goes right over our heads

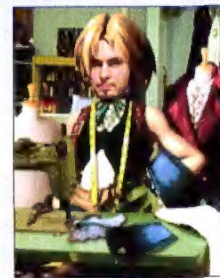
1 new category has been added to the prestigious sci-fi Hugo Awards: interactive video game awards

90% of the Xbox 360's launch line-up can't top Geometry Wars: Retro Evolved on Xbox Live Arcade

★ Trivia Score & Rank ★



0-1
Go slumming in the budget bin



2-3
Finish sewing that Zidane outfit



4-5
Other games?



6-7
Crank call Johnny Cage



8-9
Write saucy Kameo fan-fiction



10
Carve a 100-pound butter Miyamoto



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DAWN OF DREAMS



BREATHTAKING OPEN ENDED ENVIRONMENTS TO EXPLORE



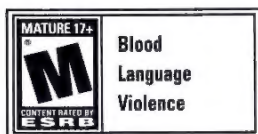
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