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REVIEW
PG. 102

ISSUE 165

JANUARY 2007



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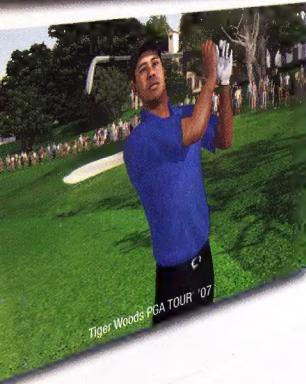




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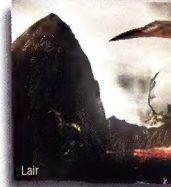
MotorStorm



Resistance: Fall of Man™



Madden NFL '07



Lair



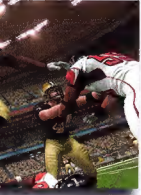
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Genji: Days of the Blade



Call of Duty 3



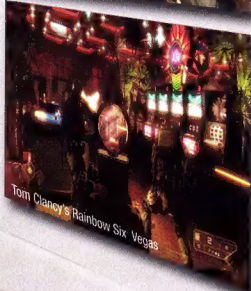
NBA '07



Ridge Racer 7



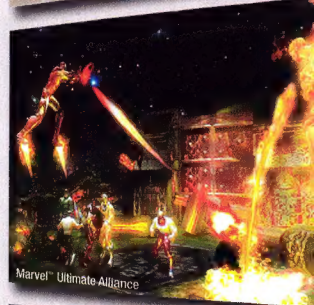
Mobile Suit Gundam: CROSSFIRE



Tom Clancy's Rainbow Six: Vegas



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2006 was a heck of a year in video games. We've seen two console launches, the second generation of Xbox 360 software, and excellent showings for PS2, DS, PSP, and PC. Learn which of 2006's 50 best games you still have to play, and argue with your buddies over the many top 10 lists we included for your amusement and edification.

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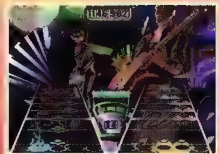
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STAFF

People Who Actually Get Paid To Play Video Games



THE HARDWARE YEAR

ANDY McNAMARA
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

All the cards have been dealt: Sony's PlayStation 3 and Nintendo's Wii have finally joined the Xbox 360 to create perhaps the biggest hardware showdown the video game world has ever seen.

Don't be mistaken: This battle has ramifications far beyond just which system you play games on. Microsoft and Sony are in a battle to deliver the mythical and all-encompassing "black box" that will bring a myriad of media entertainment to your living room. It's just marketed under the guise of a game machine.

Even though Nintendo likes to posture and pose that it is just interested in giving us a game machine, don't be fooled. By connecting the Wii to Nintendo's 24-hour connection, expect Nintendo to try to deliver more than current news and weather. I believe that one day Wii will offer email, movies, and many other services to make it the center of your day-to-day entertainment.

None of these systems are just a static piece of hardware. Each platform manufacturer will be constantly adding new functionality to its systems.

Take Microsoft, for example. It recently announced the ability to download TV shows to the Xbox 360, but with the restrictive hard drive space of the machine, its use will be limited. But the functionality is there, and that's definitely another step towards the all-in-one super machine. Sony is also beginning the assault. PlayStation 3 has a built-in browser, and you can rest assured that in time, Sony will be delivering on-demand downloads of many properties from both its music and movie divisions.

It's all coming, and it's coming from all kinds of directions. This leaves the gamer with many choices, but also a lot of power. The entertainment world of tomorrow is being decided today by us, the gamers. So choose wisely when you make your hardware choice, as you are doing more than buying a simple game machine.

Thankfully, 2007 is the year of the hardware, and all these companies will be putting hundreds of millions of dollars into nudging gamers in one direction or another to influence which system we choose. This means better games for us, and more entertainment and services than ever before.

Bank in your power. It really doesn't get much better than this. If you don't love having three massively rich companies doing everything they can to make sure your days and nights are filled with hour after hour of high quality entertainment, you don't know what you are missing. Enjoy the new systems and the battle that unfolds, as there is a new kind of all media. That is you.

Andy >>> andy@gamemformer.com

Handle: The Game Home **Expertise:** RPGs, Action/Platform, Fighting, First-Person Shooters **Interests:** 30 Rock, Club Jäger, *Battlestar Galactica*, Heroes, Wii, PlayStation 3, And Xbox 360, Leftover Halloween Candy **Dislikes:** The Fact That There Are NEVER Enough Systems to Launch (I Don't Want To Stay Out All Night Or Get Up In The AM To Get My Systems), New Year's Hangovers, Minnesota Sports Teams That Suck, Comcast Taking Over My Time Warner Cable **Current Favorite Games:** Tony Hawk's Pro Skat 2, Gears Of War, Resistance Fall Of Man, The Legend Of Zelda: Twilight Princess, Cutler Hero II, Rainbow Six Vegas, Castlevania: Portrait Of Ruin, World Of Warcraft



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Handle: The Alpha Gamer **Expertise:** RPGs, Strategy, First-Person Shooters, Fighting **Interests:** Minnesota Sports Teams That Actually Come Close To The Salary Cap, Crazy Japanese Baseball Pitches That Might Not Exist, The World Of Warcraft TCG, Modern Office Software **Dislikes:** Learning New Software, Breaking Glassware, Waking Up For No Good Reason At 5 AM (My Cat Being Hungry Is Not A Good Reason) **Current Favorite Games:** World Of Warcraft, Final Fantasy XII, Baldur's Gate II: Shadows Of Amn, Medieval II: Total War, Castlevania, Portrait Of Ruin



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Ben >>> ben@gamemformer.com

Handle: Your Friendly Neighborhood Gamer **Expertise:** Action/Adventure, Action/RPGs, Platform, Survival Horror, First-Person Shooters **Interests:** Working At Home, Mountain Dew, Hurricane Burtos, Cats That Pee Where They Are Supposed To, Getting Fan Boys All Riled Up On The Message Boards **Dislikes:** Receiving Hate Mail From Riled Up Fan Boys, The Cold, Not Having Internet At Home, Not Having Enough Money For Both The Wii And PS3 **Current Favorite Games:** Final Fantasy XII, Call Of Duty 2, Unlaid Legends: Dark Kingdom, Okami, Bull



Bryan >>> bryan@gamemformer.com

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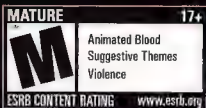
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Candid Photos From The Seedy Underbelly Of The Video Game Industry



1 Andy gets all dolled up with Spike TV's Gordon Bellamy, who, if memory serves, is the first person to ever appear in *GI SpY* wearing a turtl We feel classier already 2 Miller and Bryan practice their gungsling techniques with Eidos's Tali Fischer, Matt Dahlgren, and Jason Botta 3 Reiner and Miller square off against WWE's Shawn Davari and THQ's Jaime Jenson and Cory Ledesma. Not pictured:

Diwan powerbombing Miller through our conference table 4 Reiner, Andy and Bryan have a house party with Sony's Alyssa Casella and Insomniac Games' Ted Price at Andy's palatial estate 5 The Wii's not just good for playing games, it's good for choking people! So proves this snapshot of Miller, Joe, and the Chicken Little Gang: Alex Coward, Michael Viner, and Eric Wein 6 Billy Berghammer finds out what happens to intruders when they try to steal a Wii from Nintendo HQ in Seattle 7 Andy Mac hangs with EA's Amanda Hatton and John Doyle in killer Cali 8 Billy gets funky with Elite Beat Agents and Guitaroo-Man creator Keichi Yano



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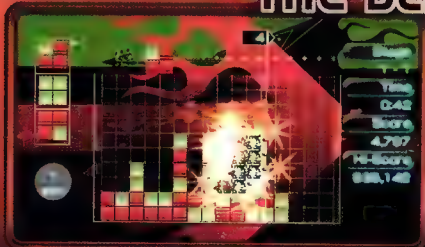
MISSY ELLIOTT

NEW ORDER

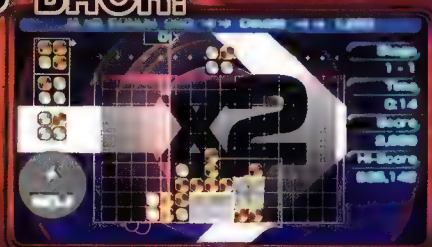
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THE BLISS IS BACK!

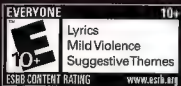


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GI COMMUNITY

Game Informer has a thriving online community, and this is where they can sound off about issues facing the gaming industry today.

THE QUESTION:
Of the games you played in 2006, which one do you think was the most underrated?

Syphan Filter: Dark Mirror is the most underrated game this year. The PSP's medicine lineup has really turned people off from trying this gem of a game.

sanmex

Trace Memory: I picked it up recently to find the puzzles and storyline captivating and challenging. It also contained unique ways of manipulating the DS.

imn115

The Xbox Live Arcade, despite a strong showing, did not receive the respect it deserved. It provided the kind of gameplay that casual gamers love, and the kind of online competition that hardcore gamers enjoy.

Shadow Hearts: From the New World. I don't see you breaking Al Capone out of prison or fighting with a drunk baby cat in Kingdom Hearts II or Final Fantasy XII.

WIMatt

Dreamfall: The Longest Journey. I can guarantee that unlike most games, you will gain a strong emotional bond to your characters. This game contained so much atmosphere that the horrible ending almost had me crying for the developers to re-write it.

God_of_Destruction



I think probably the most underrated game by the community as a whole is Half Life: Episode 1. I think everybody has sort of forgotten about the single-player experience of an FPS.

Chozzy99

Okami. The game is easily the best game in the style of Zelda that isn't Zelda since perhaps Lord of the Rings. It's beautiful.

livercaw



Do you want to make your voice heard? We'll be with your opinion at www.gameinformer.com/forums

EASILY FORGOTTEN

Thank you for your recent debate article about games getting easier. I'm an old-school gamer, from back in the day of Atari's joystick and single orange button. Back then there was no save points or checkpoints; you beat the games in one playthrough or you started back at the beginning. One thing hasn't changed, though: The difficult games are the ones that are remembered, from the original NES Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles to the more recent Xbox Ninja Gaiden. I know getting more fans to jump on a series is important, but it is coming at a cost. Games are becoming easy and forgettable, not the challenging experiences we'll remember for years.

Tornelius Rapp
Greenwood, SC

■ You are right to say that people remember games that challenge them. However, keep in mind that just because a game is difficult doesn't mean that it is good. We've spent hours playing trash on our NES like Back to the Future and Deadly Towers, and even though they are tough games, the gaming industry would be in trouble if it held them up as models. Putting aside the issue of whether or not games are getting too easy, the fact of the matter is that technology affords modern games many more ways to leave an impression on the player. Whether it is through innovative control schemes, stunning art direction, or jaw-dropping cinematics,

designers have far more avenues open to them to craft enduring gaming experiences. Ultimately, to us it seems like a good thing that you can remember the story or clever mechanics as a game's high point rather than its prohibitive difficulty.

OH, BABY

In Reiner's bio in issue 162, he talks about trying to get his friends to name their son Sephiroth. I thought I'd let you know that I plan on naming my first-born child that very same name. I thought that it would be kinda funny.

Ryan Hutton
via hotmail.com

■ If there's one thing children like, it's knowing that they were named on a whim because their parents thought it would be "kinda funny." Then again, you could do worse; you could name your son after a character that isn't even cool, like Awesome Possum. Let's face it, with a name like Sephiroth, he still won't be the most popular kid in school, but at least he'll be the king of the nerds. Unless there's a nerd named Cloud, in which case there will be a slap fight at recess to determine who reigns supreme.

CULT FOLLOWER

I just want to thank you for your "Top 10 Cult Classics" section in Issue 163. As a 26-year old gamer with a full-time job it's very easy for some

lesser-known games to pass me by. I picked up a few of the games on your list, and I'm very pleased that I did. I never would have even looked at these games had it not been for your recommendation. There are a lot of these rare gems out there that no one has played, and it's things like your Top 10 that gives them the exposure they deserve.

Steve Brereton
Detroit, Michigan

■ We're glad we could help, Steve. Not everyone has the time to devote to researching every cool game that releases. Each generation has great games that get overlooked, and we figured that with the next generation of consoles finally upon us, now is the perfect opportunity to look back and see what you might have missed. If you're still hungry for more, check out our feature on page 52. We give you a comprehensive run-down of the best games of 2006, from the most-hyped blockbusters to the surprising underdogs.

IFUTURE

I keep hearing these rumors that there is going to be a new system from a different company to compete with the PS3, Xbox, and Wii. People say that Apple is going to make the iBox. Is this true?

Tom Tackett
via aol.com

■ It isn't true...yet. Apple did recently get some patents with definite gaming applications, but the company hasn't announced any formal plans to enter the console market. What is clear is that Apple, like Microsoft and Sony, wants to be a major part

HALLOWEEN HEROES

I don't know if you have any interest in video game costumes, but this year my daughter and I decided to go as Wanderer and the Colossus. I had been trying to figure out how to make the costumes since beating Shadow of the Colossus, and I thought my daughter and I would make a great pair. We had a lot of fun trick-or-treating on Halloween, even though many people had never heard of Shadow of the Colossus.

Karia & Jesse
via joomla.com

■ The people who can't recognize the brilliance of this costume are probably the same knuckleheads who hand out those gross peanut butter taffy things to unsuspecting trick-or-treaters. Seriously, you have created one of the coolest Halloween costumes we've ever seen. Don't get complacent, though - you might have a bit of competition. Many readers sent us pictures of their gaming-related get-ups this year, like Zach Miller (Pyramid Head) and Adam Rivera (Altair), pictured here. If only video game-based costumes were as common as pirates or sexy cats, the world would be a better place.



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FOR ANYTHING

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JAN '04

MAR '05

SPC MAURICE HENRY,
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U.S. ARMY

of your living room multimedia experience, beginning with its upcoming multifunctional ITV device. If the company does have plans to enter the gaming market, it has some obstacles in its own history to overcome first; just ask any Mac gamer how committed Apple is to bringing the latest titles to its machines. You'll probably only hear a defeated sigh followed by the sounds of the hottest "new" release, Civilization IV.

WII'VE HEARD IT BEFORE

I question Nintendo's wisdom in using the Japanese word "Wii" for their new gaming console. If they adopt Sony's naming convention (just adding a number at the end) and continue to use the Japanese language, they could run into a problem. The Japanese word for the number two is "Ni." That means if they name their next console the "Wii 2," it would be pronounced "Wii Ni." This could create uncontrollable giggling in grade schools throughout the world.

Anthony Hauck
via gmail.com

Interesting observation, Anthony, but you speak as though the name "Wii" isn't already ridiculously open to abuse. Furthermore, your theory has two major holes in it. First, the whole "Hey, Wii could refer to genitalia and/or body functions! Tee hee!" angle is pretty played out at this point. Second, "Wii" isn't actually a Japanese word. The name was essentially manufactured by Nintendo because it is easy to remember and pronounce regardless of one's native language. Now that the initial shock has worn off, it seems that most people are on board with Wii; gamers who would have once snickered at the unconventional name are now ready to confidently stroll up to the counter and say "I need a Wii!" It takes a pretty compelling piece of hardware to make a person do that.

THE SPY WHO WARED ME

I recently learned that Battlefield 2142 forces users to install spyware on their PCs before they can play the game. If you're going to name this Trojan horse your PC Game of the Month, you should inform your readers of this threat. You never know what some disgruntled employee could do with your personal information.

A. Patrick
Dallas, TX

Titles that install harmful software should definitely be a concern to gamers, but how the issue pertains to Battlefield 2142 may have been blown out of proportion. We contacted a representative from EA to get the straight story on the program the game installs. According to EA's statement: "The advertising in Battlefield 2142 does not access any files which are not directly related to the game. It does not capture personal data such as cookies, account login details, or surfing history. The advertising system uses a player's IP address to determine the region of the player, assisting to serve the appropriate ads by region and language." So, you don't really need to worry about a disgruntled employee; the limited information the program gathers wouldn't be of much use to anyone. Of course, whether or not you want in-game ads in the first place is another issue altogether.

ENVELOPE ART

JANUARY WINNER:

ORION ARATA

Think about this: To create to complete this piece, the artist had to sit down and think "How should I draw Mario's chest hair?" Now, that's something to yell out!



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

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

DESMOND HUGHES

The Dark Knight's musculature has been known to reduce students of human anatomy to tears



LIAN HUA

"Oh, Malboro, no one will ever understand the deep and profound connection we share. Or how we...you know..."



ANNEMARIE NICHOLSON

She has purple hair, seems to be sleeping, and carries a sword - just like Grandma!



JEFFREY TRAVERSO
LET ME SHOW YOU MY POKÉMANS

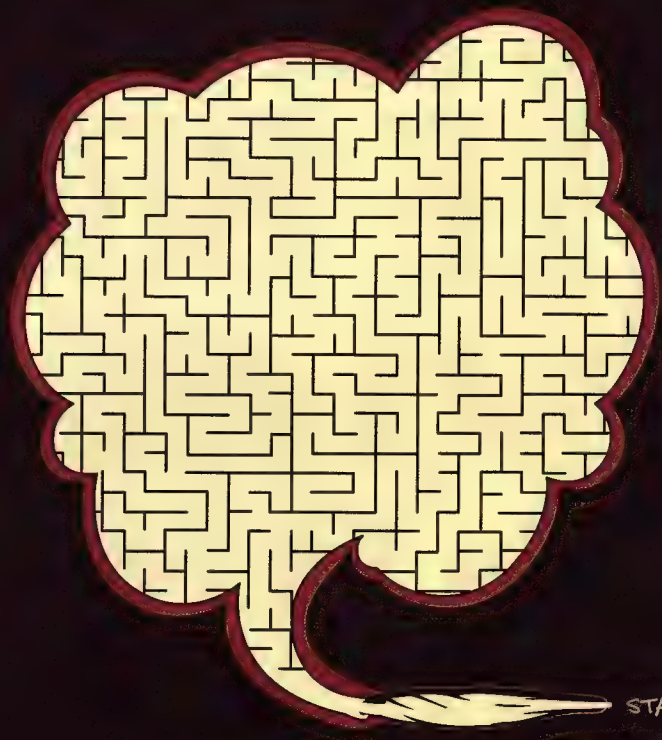


GUS SMITH 3RD

Looks like Kane and Lynch have some competition. Sort of

CORRECTIONS

In our last issue (December 2006, GI #164), the Holiday Buying Guide incorrectly listed the website for the Digital NV Ranger goggles. If you would like to purchase them, visit www.brickhousesecurity.com. We apologize for the oversight.



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HEAVYWEIGHT TITLE BOUT



PS3

★ ★ ★ **VS.** ★ ★ ★

Wii



THE PS3 EXPERIENCE

WE PUT THE PS3 THROUGH ITS PAGES

WHAT YOU GET

No matter which system you choose (see sidebar on pg. 19), the PlayStation 3 is capable of playing CDs, DVDs, and Blu-ray games and movies. It also connects through a broadband connection to the PlayStation Network.

The PlayStation 3 allows gamers to connect any USB device to the system. Wired or wireless keyboards, mice, headsets, or music players can easily sync with the system. And if you have the 60GB unit that offers the other inputs, you can also easily move photos from a digital camera that uses MemoryStick, SD, or CompactFlash and view them on the system.

Setup takes a little bit of extra time, but once you have it up and running the system works well. The store is particularly smooth, letting you easily download demos or purchase other games like *Blast Factor* (which will be joined by many others in the future, all available only as digital downloads à la Xbox Live Arcade).

Since the system doesn't come with a headset, we purchased a Plantronics Explorer 320 Bluetooth headset for use online. It was easy to connect and works well, but the lack of a simple connector on the controller means either a long cable or a hefty investment for a headset. The 320 cost us about \$50, but nicer headsets can range up to \$150.

After numerous delays and much controversy, Sony's PlayStation 3 is finally out. We use the word "out" and not "available", since getting a PlayStation 3 is about as easy as finding your loser friend a significant other. Leading up to its November 17th launch, lines formed up days in advance as the excitement for the PlayStation 3 reached a frenzy that few expected. Consumers were clamoring for their shot at one, but with a limited number of units in the initial shipment, acquiring one was both a challenge and a mark of honor for gamers everywhere who managed to buy the console. Others took the easy way out, heading to eBay where systems were selling for thousands of dollars.

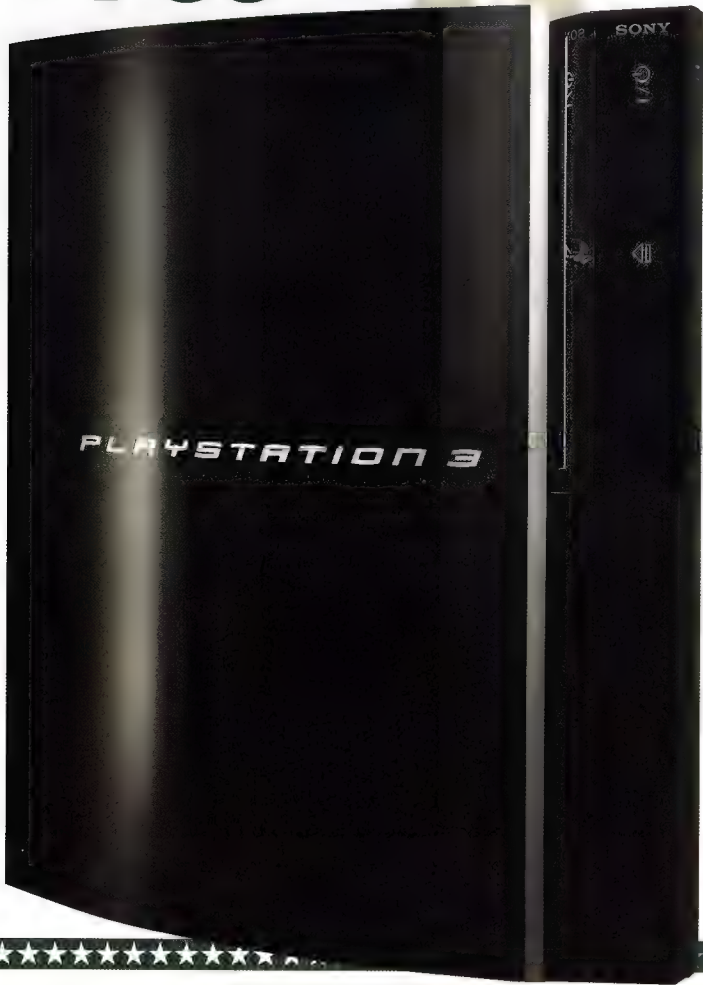
Sony plans to restock units as quickly as possible, but if you are still in the market, we highly recommend a trip to your local game retailer and placing a pre-order.

Game Informer has its units, and now we break down the system to deliver the inside scoop on the industry's most sought after piece of hardware.



GETTING TO KNOW PS3

■ iSuppli, a marketing intelligence service, claims that Sony is taking a considerable loss on each PlayStation 3 sold. Their report states that "Materials and manufacturing costs for the 20GB model exceed the suggested retail price of \$499 by a total of \$306.85. For the 60GB version, costs exceed the \$599 price by \$241.35."



THE TWO SYSTEMS

The PlayStation 3 comes in two different configurations. The 60GB version has built-in Wi-Fi and inputs for MemoryStick, SD, and CompactFlash cards. It is important to note that both versions feature upgradeable hard drives for easy expansion in the future if required.

Each system comes packed with a power cord, composite cables, a USB cable to recharge and connect your controller, and an Ethernet cable. Unfortunately, the unit doesn't come with component or HDMI cables, which means a required extra purchase to play PS3 games in high definition. When compared to the Xbox 360 bundle, the lack of a headset or remote control for the movie player is a disappointment.

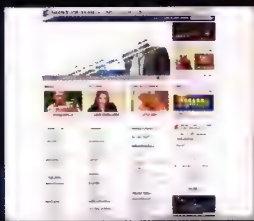
PS3 SYSTEM (60GB HDD): \$599.99

- **Dimensions:** Approximately 325mm (W) x 98mm (H) x 274mm (D)
- **CPU:** Cell Broadband Engine
- **GPU:** nVidia RSX
- **Main Memory:** 256MB XDR Main RAM
- **Embedded VRAM:** 256MB GDDR3 VRAM
- **Hard Drive Disk:** 2.5" Serial ATA (60GB HDD)
- **Main Input/Output:** USB 2.0 (x4), MemoryStick/SD/CompactFlash
- **Ethernet:** 10BASE-T, 100BASE-TX, 1000BASE-T
- **Bluetooth:** 2.0 (EDR), Wireless Controller (up to 7)
- **Wireless Communication:** IEEE 802.11 b/g
- **Screen Size:** 480i, 480p, 720p, 1080i, 1080p
- **HDMI:** HDMI out (x1)
- **Analog:** AV Multi Out (x1)
- **Digital Audio:** Optical (x1)
- **Disc Drive:** Blu-ray/DVD/CD (read-only)

PS3 SYSTEM (20GB HDD): \$499.99

- **Dimensions:** Approximately 325mm (W) x 98mm (H) x 274mm (D)
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- **Screen Size:** 480i, 480p, 720p, 1080i, 1080p
- **HDMI:** HDMI out (x1)
- **Analog:** AV Multi Out (x1)
- **Digital Audio:** Optical (x1)
- **Disc Drive:** Blu-ray/DVD/CD (read-only)





THE WEB BROWSER

The browser is a major addition to the PlayStation 3, but its functionality is suspect. Without a keyboard in place, using the Sixaxis controller to input addresses and navigate the pages is rather clumsy. The PlayStation store also uses the browser, and both move much slower than on an average computer. This option is nice to have in your PlayStation 3, but its minimal functionality makes it something that you will rarely use unless you don't have another way to reach the web.

THE TROUBLE SPOTS

While the PlayStation 3 is backwards compatible and plays a number of PSone and PS2 titles, don't disconnect your PS2 too soon. The system actually has a number of titles (Sony's own estimates place the number in the hundreds) that currently don't work on the PS3. Sony hopes to rectify the problem, but in the meantime the system isn't completely backwards compatible. In some cases, while the system may play these older games, they actually look worse on the PS3 (Final Fantasy XII is an example).

Another major issue for the PlayStation 3 is that the system currently does not scale its signal to match older HDTV sets that support 1080i, but not 720p. In these cases, the machine defaults to 480p, which is a major concern for people who own older HDTV sets (the games look washed out since they are intended to be displayed in the higher resolutions). This problem could be fixed in future firmware updates to the system, but Sony was unable to give us confirmation of such a solution as of press time.

This issue also affects the PlayStation 3's 1080p output, which currently only functions at 60 hertz. In layman's terms, this means that if your TV supports 1080p, but only at 24 or 30 hertz, you will be unable to play the PlayStation 3 in 1080p. Checking compatibility with your TV before you purchase a PlayStation 3 is paramount, as a high-quality display is crucial to the experience. Movie buffs, who prefer that movies run at 24 hertz (which is closer to the true 24 frames a second that film cameras use), may find this to be disappointing to their movie watching experience, but this issue is invisible to most people's naked eye.

The final concern we have with the PlayStation 3 is its use of Bluetooth for the wireless controllers. While we experienced many hours of trouble-free play, there are times when the controller loses connection with the PlayStation 3 and the player loses control (like running into a wall without being able to turn). Whether this is a result of outside interference, rushed software, or an intrinsic failing in the Bluetooth standard is unclear. Either way, this is a concern that must be addressed if the PlayStation 3 hopes to claim the crown of the number one hardware this generation.



THE BLU-RAY MOVIE EXPERIENCE

The Blu-ray player is fantastic on the PlayStation 3, and the interface when using the Sixaxis controller as a remote is workable. A true remote would be better, but the Sixaxis gets the job done. If you have a high-definition TV, the Blu-ray movies look and sound remarkably better than current DVD movies. However, without a clear winner in the next-generation movie race between Blu-ray and Toshiba's HD-DVD, it is unknown which — if either — of these formats will become a standard on the level of VHS or DVD. If HD-DVD were to win out in the long run, the Blu-ray capabilities of the PS3 would be like having a Betamax player built into your Sega Genesis. It would be nice, but you wouldn't use it all that much.





PROS

1 CELL

The powerful Cell processor's multi-core design should provide developers with unparalleled power once they figure out how to utilize the chipset's complex architecture.

2 UNIVERSAL LOGIN

Universal login makes playing games online easier than ever.

3 BLU-RAY

As a Blu-ray movie player, the PS3 delivers next-generation movies as well as games.

4 FREE ONLINE

While the PS3 may not have as much functionality as Microsoft's Xbox Live, it does offer free online gaming.

5 CROSS MEDIA BAR

The crossbar interface is easy to use (especially for those familiar with the PSP) and offers the ability to download music, photos, videos, browse the web, or purchase games or game demos through the PlayStation online store.

6 SIXAXIS

The Sixaxis controller offers unique gameplay mechanics with its motion-sensing capabilities.



CONS

1 THE OS

The PlayStation operating system and Network isn't nearly as robust as Microsoft's Xbox Live in its current state.

2 RANDOM DISCONNECTS

Bluetooth wireless for headset and controllers is currently spotty. Controller connection problems are a reality and it's not pretty.

3 PRICE

While it's a cheap Blu-ray movie player, it is one of the most expensive consoles in video game history (and an HDMI cable and input on your TV is required for 1080p movie playback).

4 SCALING

Since the PS3 can't currently scale video images to fit your TV, it requires gamers to have either a 1080p TV that accepts a 60 hertz signal, or a TV that supports images natively at 720p. Even though your TV may say HD on it, it may not be compatible. If it doesn't, games will only display in 480p.

5 NO HEADSET PACKED-IN

Since no headset is currently packed in, gamers must purchase a number of peripherals to get the full use of their system. Bluetooth headsets range from \$50 to \$150 if you want to go wireless, and cables and remote controllers add up quick.

6 RUMBLE

The lack of rumble and a headset input on the Sixaxis controller is a disappointment.

★★★★★ TOP 5 PS3 GAMES ★★★★★



Call of Duty 3



Fight Night Round 3



Marvel: Ultimate Alliance



Resistance: Fall of Man



Ridge Racer 7

CONCLUSION: GRADE: B

The PlayStation 3 is a very powerful system, but all this power comes at a price. The user interface and operating system simply aren't up to par with Xbox 360's powerful Xbox Live service, but multiplayer gaming is free, so it's not a bad tradeoff. On the bright side, Sony has the ability to improve its feature set in the future via updated software to make the system easier to use. The bigger concern for the PlayStation 3 is the Bluetooth interface for the controllers. Numerous times during use we had moments where the controller disconnected, which is extremely frustrating. At press time Sony hasn't addressed what it will do about these issues in the future, but this problem, among some of the others for the system, could be fixed in future updates to the operating system.

Outside the minor glitches, the PlayStation 3 runs well. It's quiet, and shows a lot of potential once Sony fixes its Network and integrates it into the system. Currently, you can download music, but you can't listen to it while you play. Plus, the system can't multitask and let you play a game or watch a movie while it downloads. To be fair, the Xbox 360 didn't have these abilities at launch, but it does put the PlayStation 3's functionality at a disadvantage in the short term. The PlayStation 3 will, in time, have some of the most powerful gaming software available, and the operating system is passable for the time being. However, if Sony doesn't address the issues with its operating system, it could find itself behind the times. For now, our score reflects the current PS3 unit and its functionality as it stands, and doesn't take into account its massive upside for spectacular games in the future. If this system gets the games it is capable of, and fixes its operating system, it could be easily the best overall system on the market.



EDITOR REACTIONS



There's no doubt that the PS3 is a heck of a machine. From a feature list standpoint, it is unrivaled in its capability to serve as your entertainment center's hub. However, the gameplay that we've seen so far has been exactly what I feared. Titles like Call of Duty 3 and Genji: Days of the Blade feature design and gameplay that would easily fit on the last generation of consoles, and the motion-sensing abilities of the Sixaxis controller have been used so far only as gimmicks. Barring the system's undisputed graphical prowess, there's nothing directly related to gaming on PS3 that we haven't seen before. To its credit, the existence of motion-sensing does give it a higher creative ceiling than the 360, though we've yet to see anyone take advantage of it.

The true strength of the system, in my mind, is PS3's expanded multimedia and networking power. Microsoft's Xbox and 360 both have killed Sony's machines in this arena to date, and giving users access to the kind of experience that Xbox Live offers is key. Blu-ray playback may not be a big deal right now given the relatively low penetration rate of HDTVs, but in five years it will undoubtedly be huge. Centralizing music and video downloads and playback into one convenient location is also a massive convenience for consumers. As broadband becomes a way of life for more people, the PlayStation 3 will be the perfect device to take advantage of it — provided Sony cleans up some of the niggling interface problems. How badly the high price tag cripples the system's momentum is the only question that remains, and we won't know the answer to that until at least this time next year. —ADAM



Tech specs, new-fangled movie-playing devices, and online strategies don't amount to jack if a system doesn't have the games to back them up. That's my problem with the PS3 right now; it is an astounding and capable piece of hardware that is actually a bargain considering what it can do — but it just doesn't have any launch titles that fire me up. I know Resistance: Fall of Man is awesome, and I'm sure there are plenty of people who can't wait to play it, but I'm not one of them. In the first half of 2007 there are definitely some cool-looking titles scheduled, like Heavenly Sword and Lair, but I don't know yet if they will be enough to inspire gamers to buy a brand new console. That doesn't mean I think Sony is doomed — quite the opposite, in fact. Despite what appears to be an early drought, I'm more excited for the PS3's long-term prospects than any other system in history. The two Final Fantasy X-2s, Metal Gear Solid 4, Devil May Cry 4, White Knight, and Heavy Rain all look like the kinds of games I live for. But when will I get to play them? It'll be at least a year before they're on the market. Buying the PS3 early is a way to show your support for Sony's latest endeavor, if only so they can bring you awesome games in the future. However, for some gamers, the PS3 might just be a fancy-pants movie player for about nine months (and who wants to watch Broken Arrow, anyway?). Regardless of what happens in the coming months, one thing is certain: When faced with the opportunity to control Solid Snake and Dante again, you won't be able to pry the Sixaxis from my hands with the jaws of life. —JOE

NINTENDO LAUNCHES

A GUIDE TO WHAT YOU
CAN EXPECT FROM
NINTENDO'S LATEST
CONSOLE

It's been a long time coming, but Nintendo's gameplay revolution has begun. With the Wii on store shelves across the country, the devoted and curious alike are beginning to explore what the company hopes will be the next great advancement in the video game industry. The pre-ordered units have been sold, eBayed, and sold again. As the years of hype leading up to this moment dissipate, we can finally take a good look at the Wii and give our initial verdict on the system. Is it everything Nintendo promised it would be? Is it destined to follow the DS to success or the GameCube to failure? What games should you buy? Does the controller work like Nintendo said it would? In the following pages, we hope to answer all these questions and more.

As you can imagine, we were pretty excited to tear our final Wii hardware out of its box and get down to business. Although we had expressed concern that the hardware looked a bit plain and utilitarian compared to the Xbox 360 and PS3, the final unit is an attractive piece of equipment. Its shiny white finish and clean lines are a large improvement over the gimmicky GameCube, and suggest favorable comparisons to Apple's hugely successful iPod (a resemblance that is likely no accident). Basic functions like powering up and inserting discs work well, and seem to indicate that — like most Nintendo hardware — Wii is a well-engineered and durable console.

However, there is one minor issue we have with the industrial design. The Wii stand, which allows you to place it upright, does not do a great job of supporting the top-heavy unit. Apparently, after discovering the Wii's propensity to tip in the stand, Nintendo created a quick and cheap solution: a clear plastic disc that attaches to the bottom of the stand, which provides a much larger base. While it serves its purpose, it looks a bit chintzy — which is probably why Nintendo hasn't publicized this small attachment. Either way, you'll probably want to use it, as the Wii looks much better standing up than on its side, which can make it look more like a detachable hard drive than a game console.

Once we got it out of the box, we were pleased to discover that — despite its unique motion-sensing functionality — the Wii is remarkably easy to set up. After plugging in the AC adapter (yes, the Wii does have a power brick, but it's much smaller than the Xbox 360's), simply attach the sensor bar to its jack in the back and set it either on top of or directly underneath your television screen. It's important to make sure it's centered, but other than that there's remarkably little tweaking required. Then, pop the batteries into your Wii remote and use the sync buttons under the battery cover and on the unit to recognize the remote (this must be repeated to add more remotes for multiplayer). There are sensitivity settings, but we found that the sensor recognized the Wii remote very well out of the box.

Overall, it's a very typical Nintendo console; it's solidly made, the controller and the nunchuk attachment have an excellent feel, and there's even a clip to hold the hand strap so you won't pull the nunchuk out by mistake. The only real flaw we've discovered so far is the speaker included in the Wii remote. Frankly, it sounds temble, like a speaker from one of those "talking" birthday cards or a child's toy laser pistol. Still, given how much new ground Nintendo is breaking with the Wii's design, the fact that this relatively minor complaint is the most serious only points to just how good a job the company did in designing the system.

GETTING TO KNOW Wii



THE WII

THE VIRTUAL CONSOLE

One of the system's biggest draws is the ability to download and purchase classic titles. Here's a complete list of the games Nintendo says will be available by the end of December. Pricing for games is as follows: NES titles are 500 Wii points (\$5), SNES titles are 600 Wii points (\$6), N64 titles are 1000 Wii points (\$10), Sega Genesis titles are 800 Wii points (\$8), and TurboGrafx titles are 600 Wii points (\$6).

NES 500 points

- Mario Bros.
- Donkey Kong
- Donkey Kong Jr.
- Ice Hockey
- Pinball
- Soccer
- Tennis
- Urban Champion
- Wario's Woods
- Baseball
- Solomon's Key

TURBOGRAFX16 600 points

- Bonk's Adventure
- Super Star Soldier
- Victory
- Bomberman '93
- Dungeon Explorer

SNES 600 points

- F-Zero
- SimCity

GENESIS 800 points

- Sonic the Hedgehog
- Altered Beast
- Golden Axe
- Columns
- Ecco the Dolphin
- Gunstar Heroes
- Space Harrier II
- Toe Jam & Earl
- Ristar
- Dr. Robotnik's Mean Bean Machine

N64 1000 points

- Super Mario 64



■ The sensor bar can be set at the bottom or on top of the screen, but we found it preferable on top



WHAT'S IN THE WII BOX

The Wii may be remarkable for the fact that it comes with a game, packed in, but what it does and doesn't give you is pretty standard for a system launch. If you're looking for an extra controller, you're going to have to buy it separately. An additional Wii remote and nunchuk combined will run you \$60, and the Wii Classic controller for Virtual Console games is \$19.99. The platform's manual says that some Virtual Console titles "may require" the classic controller, but it is not specific. At the time of press, Nintendo's official site said a GameCube controller could be used on Nintendo games; third party ones were undetermined. If you want component or S-Video cables, you must buy them yourself.

The Wii comes with 512MB of built-in memory, which is formatted into over 2,000 blocks. The Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess takes up only one block, so you shouldn't be hurting for space even if you download some Virtual Console games. If you feel you need more space, you can insert an SD memory card. We found 1GB cards for as little as \$14.99 online. However, any GameCube saves you have must be put on a separate GameCube memory card (not provided). We plugged in a USB drive into one of the slots in the back of the Wii, but the system didn't read the drive.

Your Wii Comes With:

- Wii Remote Controller (batteries included)
- Nunchuk Controller
- Wii Console Stand
- Sensor Bar
- AC Adapter
- Composite AV Cables
- Wii Sports



Wii CHANNELS

The Wii's functionality, both on- and offline, is navigated through a series of "channels" which allow you to access content off a disc, memory card, flash memory, or the Internet. Not all of the channels will be available at launch. The Photo, Shop, and Mii channels are available initially, while the Forecast and News channels will be available on December 20th and January 27th, respectively.

DISC CHANNEL

This simple channel allows you to access what-ever game is in your drive, whether it's a new Wii title or a GameCube classic.

PHOTO CHANNEL

Looking at photos or videos from an SD card on your Wii is easy. Just slip it in the front slot (make sure you have an adapter if you're using a mini or microSD card) and your Wii can access up to 1,000 shots. You can arrange slideshows that can also be set to music. Manipulating photos was very easy using simple controls to add color doodles to any shot. Any changes you make to your photos will only be saved, however, if they are uploaded to the Wii Message Board. From the Message Board photos can either be viewed on your Wii or sent to a registered Wii friend. There is also a puzzle game you can play which will take any photo and split it in up to 48 pieces that you then have to assemble.

Mii CHANNEL

This channel lets you build a cute doppelganger of yourself through a simple set of menus. The characters are like those used in Wii Sports, and are compatible with the packed-in title. Your Mii is saved to your remote, allowing you to use it when you bring your controller to a friend's house. You can also trade Mii's with your friends online.

FORECAST CHANNEL

Although Nintendo hopes you'll be spending all your time indoors, the Wii gives you a heads-up on the weather with the Forecast Channel. Content will be updated constantly through WiiConnect24, and can be accessed through a 3D map of the globe. Weather information is provided by the respected service Weathernews.

NEWS CHANNEL

Operating with a global map similar to the Forecast Channel, and updated 24 hours a day, the News Channel will keep Wii gamers connected with the latest in current events. Content will be provided by Associated Press, the world's largest news service, and can be sorted by topic and region.

Wii SHOP CHANNEL

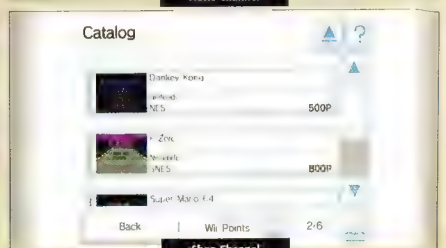
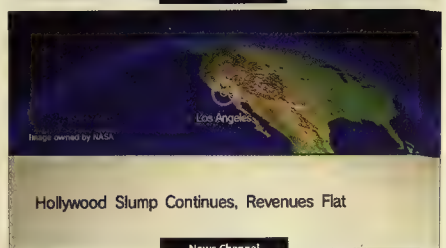
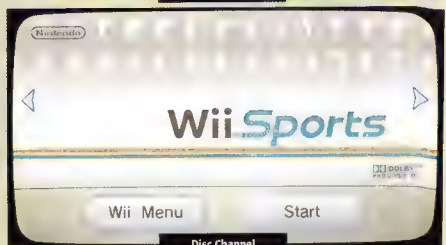
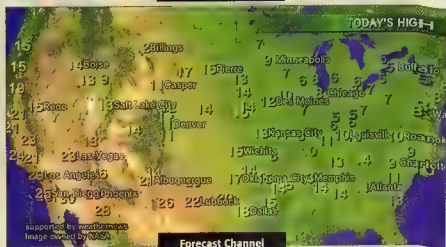
Here's where you go to get your fill of classic games for Wii's Virtual Console. By December 30, several classic 8- and 16-bit titles will be available for purchase. Our only complaint with this awesome service is the fact that the games are not priced in dollars but "Wii points" — a fictional currency that must be purchased from Nintendo.

Wii MESSAGE BOARD

Nintendo envisions this more as old-fashioned Post-it notes than as forums where dudes argue about obscure anime and submit Sonic the Hedgehog erotic fanfics. Basically, you can leave messages for other members of your family on the calendar-based message board or use WiiConnect24 to trade photos and text messages with friends in other places. Nintendo will also use the service to update you on new maps or items available for certain titles on the Shop Channel.

INTERNET CHANNEL

The Wii lets you surf the Internet from your couch, via the Opera browser available at the Wii Shop Channel. Early adopters will get Opera as a free download to the Wii's flash memory. However, in July, Nintendo will begin charging an unspecified number of Wii points for the application.





★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ **TOP 5 Wii GAMES** ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★



Excite Truck



The Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess



Rayman Raving Rabbids



Red Steel



Trauma Center: Second Opinion



PROS

1 EASE OF USE

Despite the next-gen controller, the Wii is remarkably easy to set up, taking only a few minutes

2 THE WII REMOTE

While we're not sold on how all the launch game use it, there's no doubt that it works well and offers some very interesting gameplay possibilities, even in traditional games like Zelda

3 THE VIRTUAL CONSOLE

By the end of the year, there will be a ton of all-time classics available for download. This is an excellent way for Nintendo to leverage its stellar back catalogue

4 ZELDA

Although it's largely because of how long the game was delayed, Nintendo is once again launching with a true classic for the ages

5 ONLINE

Though multiplayer isn't ready, it is encouraging that the company is finally taking a serious approach to the Internet

6 THE SD CARD SLOT

It's a small detail, but it's nice to see Nintendo giving owners some multimedia possibilities

7 WII SPORTS PACK-IN

We thought packed-in games had gone the way of the dinosaur, so it's nice that Nintendo is giving people something to play right out of the box

CONCLUSION

GRADE: A-

It goes without saying that the greatest factor in any system's success – a consistent supply of quality games – is also the area in which Nintendo has struggled in the past. However, right now, the Wii appears to be a nicely designed, attractive system that puts a unique twist on traditional 3D gaming. It also has the Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess, a game that might be the greatest launch title of all time – certainly the best since Microsoft's Halo. While the console's relative lack of graphical power might become a concern as the years go by, right now the novelty of the Wii controller more than makes up for any visual deficit. It's also encouraging to see Nintendo have at least some online functionality available at launch, even if we'll have to wait for multiplayer. Until then, we'll be wagging our remotes and playing classics on the Virtual Console. We imagine that gamers around the world will be doing the same.



CONS

1 GRAPHICS

Even at launch, there's a pretty big disparity between the visuals of the Wii and PS3 and 360. We expect these differences will only grow larger as time moves on

2 NO DVD PLAYBACK

At this late date, it seems silly that Nintendo didn't include this in the hardware

3 NO HARD DRIVE

While there's a decent amount of flash memory and the SD slot, we're getting used to our systems having a hard drive. It will be interesting to see if this limits developers down the road

4 Wi-Fi ONLY

For a company that wants to make online gaming accessible, it's odd that Nintendo doesn't allow for easy, plug-and-play broadband connections to the Wii. Will this limit online usage in the U.S.?

5 GIMMICKY GAMES

Although the launch lineup has some meat to it, a fair number of early Wii titles appear to be a bit shallow and rely solely on the novelty of the motion-sensing controller

6 THE WII REMOTE SPEAKER

Neat idea, but the sound quality on the remote's speaker is just horrendous and cheap-sounding

7 NO BATTERY LIFE WARNING

When your remote's batteries give out, you'll get a generic connection failure warning, with no indication that you need to replace the batteries

EDITOR REACTIONS



I've been pretty critical of Nintendo as a home console manufacturer over the past years, but somewhere along the line Wii made me a believer. For all Nintendo's talk of being different from Sony and Microsoft, the GameCUBE was just another home console, with poor third-party support and no real online initiative. With the Wii, the company is putting its money where its mouth is, and is really attempting to broaden our definition of what a console can be. My initial experiences with the system have been very positive – that crazy controller really does work.

Even better, Nintendo finally seems to be serious about online. Although I'm disappointed by the lack of multiplayer at launch, the Virtual Console is extremely exciting, and I expect it to be wildly popular with fans of old-school gaming. Third-party support seems to be coming along as well, with a host of companies lining up to create games really tailored for the system. That being said, the launch lineup is filled with too many titles that are more novel than actually good, which is probably my biggest concern about Wii in the long term. Still, I doubted the DS would succeed, and am very happy to report that I was dead wrong. With a lower price and at least one classic game (Zelda) already in its library, I think this dark horse might give the frontrunners a real challenge this generation.—**MATT**



When Nintendo launched the DS, I was quick to poke fun at its less than impressive graphics and handful of games that were nothing more than parlor tricks. A year later, the DS is my favorite handheld and the games have really come into their own.

The tale of the Nintendo Wii is certainly similar, but I'm not sure that the two follow the same story arc. The Nintendo DS works because it's predominantly on 2D graphics, while the Wii has to support a number of 3D games, which we all know aren't quite as timeless. So in the short term, I see a lot of success for the Wii, since it offers a different experience than the other consoles on the market. Zelda is simply amazing, and really shows off the Wii remote and nunchuk capabilities. However, many of the other launch games aren't quite as original, and I fear that many third-party titles will continue down this path of mediocrity. The Wii's graphic capabilities (which I would put on par with the original Xbox) will, in my opinion, hurt the system in the long run. The success of the system ultimately rests squarely on Nintendo's ability to continue to deliver innovative games that are outstanding, regardless of graphics in a video game climate where, whether you like it or not, visuals are extremely important.

The system setup is easy and very user-friendly, but the sensor bar isn't as perfect as I would have liked. If you place the sensor bar on the bottom of the TV, things like your propped-up feet or other objects will annoyingly interfere with the signal. Avoid this one hiccup and you'll thoroughly enjoy the Wii controller, save the occasional case of tennis elbow.—**ANDY**

FABLE 2 TELLS A NEW TALE

GAME MAKES WIDOWS & BABIES

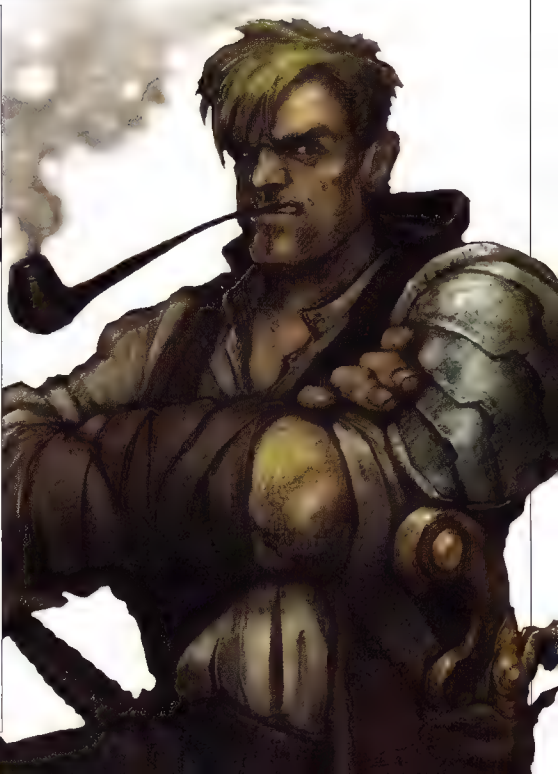


Exclusive 360 title Fable 2 was only tantalizingly available in suggestive movie form at the last E3. But recently, developer Lionhead released some teaser art from the game, and details about the title are creeping out.

Fable 2 will feature deeper family experiences and expanded city areas. Now all your hard work at wooing a mate will pay off, since you can produce offspring if you so choose. Not only will your son or daughter physically look like you and your spouse, but they'll also grow up during the course of a game.

The first Fable allowed you to own property, but in Fable 2 your influence over the towns themselves will be farther reaching. For instance, your actions could help a town prosper or wither. Trading with a nascent settlement could help it on its way to growth, while killing all in sight could make it a ghost town lost to time.

Of course, as a Peter Molyneux game, there are many more ideas in store for Fable 2. We characteristically suspect some of Molyneux's grand concepts will be cut from the finished product and many more added. Regardless, we expect grand adventures from Fable 2.



XBOX LIVE GOES TO THE MOVIES

MICROSOFT SURVEYS COST

As Xbox Live gathers more steam and both Sony and Nintendo invite the public into their new online worlds, each platform's online strategy is clearly more than just playing games online. At a pre-launch event for PS3, Sony's Phil Harrison told Game Informer that downloadable movies for the system were on the way. Well, Microsoft beat its competitor to the punch. Microsoft has announced that it will offer over 1,000 hours of TV and movie content via Xbox Live, with the initial batch appearing before the end of the year.

The company has deals with CBS, MTV, Paramount, TBS, Warner Bros., and more. The content is available in standard and high definition, but it will require that your Xbox 360 has a hard drive. Everything from *Superman Returns* to *Ultimate Fighting Championship* and *Chappelle's Show* will be available. TV shows will remain on your hard drive, but unlimited viewing of movies would be possible only in the first 24 hours. After that, you will have to re-pay to watch the movie. HD movies will weigh in at about four to five GB, while a two-hour SD movie will average 1.6 GB. Given that the 360 hard drive contains only 13 GB of useable space out of the box, if Microsoft wants gamers to embrace these downloads, it is imperative that it releases the oft-mentioned larger hard drive.

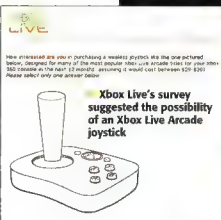
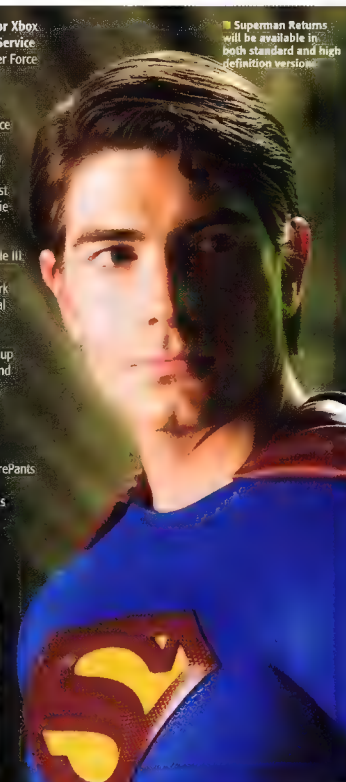
Although at the time of this writing Microsoft has yet to announce prices for these shows and movies, it has sent out a survey to select Xbox Live members inquiring if they'd be okay with paying \$1.99 for downloaded shows and \$3.99 for rented movies. Other ideas for downloads were offered by the survey, including \$9.99 songs (accessible in game), a streaming music service for \$14.99 a month (with a library of over two million songs), and a \$5.99 subscription to internet radio stations. Although a Microsoft spokesperson told us to print that there was no option to permanently download movies, the survey did ask respondents what they thought of being able to do so for \$19.99.

The survey also floated test balloons regarding some new peripherals such as a new 360 controller with "slightly improved d-pad performance", rubber grips, backlit buttons, and a new color for between \$59

Launch Content for Xbox Live's Download Service

- Aqua Teen Hunger Force
- Avatar: The Last Airbender
- Batman Forever
- Breaking Bonaduce
- Carpoolocalypse
- Chappelle's Show
- CSI
- Hogan Knows Best
- Jackass: The Movie
- Jericho
- The Matrix
- Mission Impossible III
- Nacho Libre
- Nicktoons Network Animation Festival
- Numb3rs
- Pimp My Ride
- NASCAR Nextel Cup Series Race Replay
- Raising the Roofs
- The Real World
- Robot Chicken
- Slyland
- South Park
- Spangobob SquarePants
- Star Trek (1966)
- Superman Returns
- Ultimate Fighting Championship

Superman Returns will be available in both standard and high definition versions.



Now interested in Xbox Live? Purchasing a media product like the one pictured above, available for just \$1.99 per episode, lets you stream live for your Xbox 360. Available in the Xbox Live Marketplace. See xbox.com for more details. Please refer to our website for more information.

and \$69. Another controller (illustration shown) would be specifically designed for Xbox Live Arcade. Also suggested in the survey is a possible mini keyboard device (\$19-\$29) that would plug into your controller to enable text messaging.

Finally, this Xbox Live survey inquired about interest in a potential web browser as a future feature for the online service. Currently, both Sony's PS3 and Nintendo's Wii offer web browsers.

DATA FILE

More News You Can Use

UNIVERSAL CRACKS WHIP ON CASTLEVANIA

Universal Pictures wasn't so bullish on the Halo movie, but it is apparently more optimistic about director Paul W. Anderson's *Castlevania* movie. The studio recently okayed a \$50 million investment in the project, which Anderson (who wrote the initial script himself) has jokingly subtitled *Dracula Begins*.



JOWOOD NABS DREAMCATCHER

Jowood Productions' *Gothic 3* is a quirky Canadian publisher DreamCatcher (Painkiller). The German company plans to use DreamCatcher as its North American presence, and to keep the company's titles and offices in Toronto intact.



LANNING BACK ON ATTACK

Lorne Lanning and Oddworld Inhabitants are returning to video games with a project named *Citizen Gear*, which will also be a CG animated movie that chronicles a near future where global corporations rule.



NAMCO KEEPS ROLLING ON PS3

After Namco Bandai bragged that *Ridge Racer 7* (shown) and *Mobile Suit Gundam: Crossfire* did well at the Japanese launch of the PlayStation 3, the company is moving forward with Tekken 6 and three other vague projects: a new RPG, a new shooter, and a sports title.



C&C FOR 360

Xbox 360 owners can rejoice. EA is bringing *Command & Conquer 3: Tiberium Wars* — formerly a PC-only game — to Microsoft's console. EA is no stranger to these kinds of conversions: *The Lord of the Rings: The Battle for Middle-earth II* was brought to the 360 with some success. *Tiberium Wars* will appear on the platform sometime in 2007.



games

HALO 3 BETA SPRINGS UP

SEASON SEES OTHER SURPRISES

Microsoft is giving Halo fans everywhere an early glimpse at Halo 3 when it opens up a public beta for the multiplayer mode over Xbox Live this spring. Also whetting the whistle was a commercial for Halo 3 shown during a Monday Night Football game on ESPN. The company also announced that it will release new multiplayer maps for Halo 2 this spring. Unlike previous maps, however, these will only be available via download on Xbox Live, and they will only play on a 360.



BUILDING THE

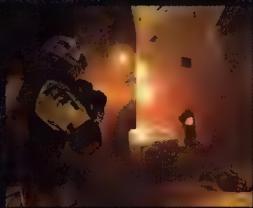
PERFECT

Ever since id Software sparked the first-person shooter phenomenon back in the early '90s with *Wolfenstein 3D* and *Doom*, the genre has been a staple of the games industry. At its heart, FPS gameplay hasn't changed in years and gamers across the globe would agree with us when we say we wouldn't want it to. From the complex missions of *GoldenEye* to the frantic multiplayer combat of *Counter-Strike*, advancements in technology and game design have brought the first-person shooter to new levels of immersion far beyond its simplistic roots. To capture the best of the best the genre has to offer, Game Informer attempts to create the world's greatest FPS from the pieces of the its landmark titles.

TACTICS

Battlefield 2

Many games have tried to capture the essence of squad-based tactics in a single-player game, but sadly they all still feature some idiot who walks out and gets shot in the head for no reason, or a team that simply can't get from point A to point B without the player's helping hand. This is why we like *Battlefield 2*'s amazing tactical encounters – which can only be delivered through the power of multiplayer and the game's extensive teamwork-focused structure. We want to harness the tactics of that shirtless guy in *Hackensack* whose clan systematically tears your team to shreds each night.



STORY

Half-Life 2

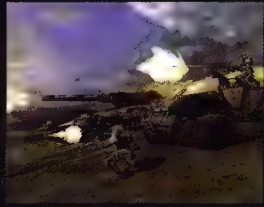
No developer in the world incorporates story into a first-person shooter better than Valve, and there is no better example of that than *Half-Life 2*. From the mysterious G-Man to the love interest Alyx Vance, the team at Valve tells a tale that keeps the player guessing and twists coming at every turn. This isn't just a video game, this is interactive storytelling the way it was meant to be.



GAMEPLAY

Halo

What? No *Doom*? We know these are the words running through your head, and it would be hard for even us to argue your points. Any game on this page could easily take this crown, but *Halo* is a game that does it all. It has the frantic close-quarters action of *Doom*, the large-scale war of *Call of Duty*, and everything in between.



SOUND

Call of Duty

Ting! We are all quite familiar with the sound of an empty clip as it ejects from *Call of Duty*'s signature M1 Garand. There is something to that sound that brings a tingle to the back of your neck. Or perhaps it's the enveloping soundtrack of war that whizzes through your headphones or rocks your 5.1 Dolby Digital socks off as *Call of Duty* seamlessly goes from the all-too-real sounds of battle to a quiet classical movement as you ponder the price of war. That's what we're talking about.



ARSENAL

Resistance: Fall of Man

Any game nowadays is expected to at least meet the standards set by *Doom*'s shotgun or *Halo*'s sniper rifle, but *Insomniac's Resistance: Fall of Man* brings not only variety but a level of inventiveness that is rarely found in the predictable arsenal of most first-person shooter games. We want *Half-Life 2*'s gravity gun as well.



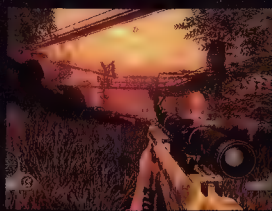
FPS

THE GAME WE ALL WANT TO PLAY



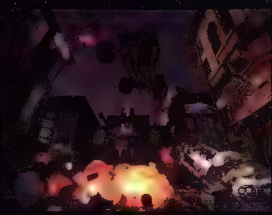
AI Far Cry

There is nothing quite like the feeling of being hunted. Your palms sweat as the enemy approaches. A single sound and the game's frighteningly canny NPCs begin their never-ending search for you and your destruction. No game does artificial intelligence better than Far Cry, and it would be the main ingredient of our FPS monster.



MULTIPLAYER Unreal Tournament 2K4

The multiplayer experience is cornerstone of the first-person shooter. Be it deathmatch or capture the flag, nothing makes a better game than quality multiplayer options and matching. We can't deny the up-close and personal touch of Counter-Strike or the amazing battles of Battlefield, but no game has more well-designed maps or gameplay modes than the beloved Unreal Tournament 2K4.



CO-OP Rainbow Six Vegas

We wanted to put Gears of War into this spot, as it is one of the best co-op games ever, but since its third-person design put it out of the running, we took the next best thing: Rainbow Six Vegas. It features all of the components a great co-op game should have, minus a few story elements. Otherwise, it is flawless entertainment for you and your gaming buddies to experience through the series of tubes known as the Internet.



GRAPHICS Crysis

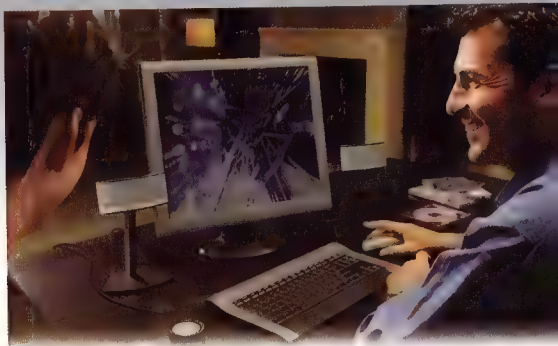
It may still be a ways off from release, but without a doubt the visual punch of Crytek's highly anticipated new title, Crysis, takes the crown for the most gorgeous first-person shooter we have ever seen. From lush, vibrant forests to the cold steel of huge aircraft carriers, Crysis delivers the most outstanding visuals in the genre.



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THE GOOD, THE BAD, THE UGLY

When You Want Your News Categorized With A Sarcastic Editorial Spin



UGLY

Somehow, some way, Uwe Boll has gotten the go ahead for a BloodRayne movie sequel. We suspect that Mr. Boll has actually sold his soul to the devil to finance this latest movie. However, say what you will about Lucifer, even he knows a bad deal when he sees one.



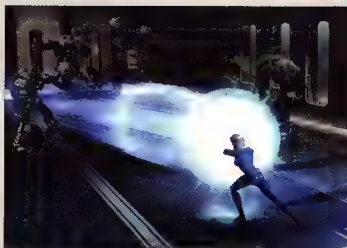
UGLY

The PlayStation 3 launch came up short a few games. Bethesda's Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion (shown) got pushed into the first quarter of 2007, interestingly similar to the treatment it got at the Xbox 360's launch. It's not all bad news, however, as other developments will actually spare gamers some pain. Sonic won't come out until the spring, and EA has mercifully cancelled the PS3 version of its NBA Live 07 title.



UGLY

News out of Japan is that Dead or Alive creator Tomonobu Itagaki has been slapped with a sexual harassment suit. The female Tecmo employee who brought about the charges also claims that the company didn't address her multiple complaints against Itagaki stretching back to 2005. Tecmo of America would not comment on the matter. There are sexual harassment laws in Japan? We never thought they'd get around to it.



GOOD

No amount of super hero powers could save Activision's Fantastic Four title from being crappy, but perhaps a rescue is on the way. Marvel has awarded the Fantastic Four license to 2K Games, who is scheduled to produce a game for release in conjunction with the next Fantastic Four movie in 2007. Despite Activision's loss, perhaps this is a win-win for everyone. Activision can concentrate on its Spider-Man and X-Men franchises, while we'll get an opportunity to see if 2K can inject some fun into the Richards clan.



GOOD

Gizmodo founder and Swedish gangster Stefan Eriksson has been sentenced to three and a half years in jail in California for embezzlement and drunk driving. Eriksson was initially arrested after he crashed a rare Ferrari Enzo that didn't even belong to him. Where's a Dietrich when you need one?



BAD

Entertainment Software Association president Doug Lowenstein recently gave the industry a stern talking to, saying "one of the worst things that we got going for us is that we're called videogames." Lowenstein feels the term prevents people from taking the industry seriously. Well, we don't want people to take us too seriously, otherwise they're liable to think that games influence kids' behavior in bad ways.



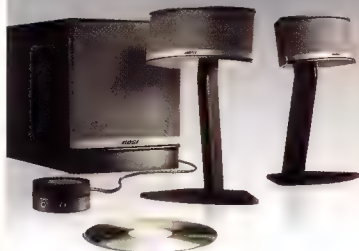
GOOD

For anyone who still hasn't bought the Grand Theft Auto games, Rockstar is making it even easier to turn to a life of crime with Grand Theft Auto: The Trilogy. This bundle is now available, and fittingly offers GTA 3, GTA: Vice City, and GTA: San Andreas.

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BOSE
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the top 10 licenses that should be games

Far be it for us to add to the already massive list of games culled from popular movies, books, and other stories. But some concepts out there are just no-brainers, that haven't yet been tapped. Check out why we think that these franchises deserve games. If you're not a nerd, you may as well turn the page right now.

Firefly

So what if the series only lasted a little over a dozen episodes, and *Serenity* has come and gone? *Firefly* was one of the best things to happen to sci-fi since, well, ever! We're envisioning a huge multi-part epic where we learn more about the characters in each self-contained chapter. Hand-to-hand combat with River, RPG conversations between Mal and Inara, western-style shoot-outs with Jayne – there's more than enough room for great storytelling and gameplay. Publishers, why don't you do a poll to find the correlation between gamers and *Firefly* fans? I think you might be pleasantly surprised.



Roller Derby Girls

How has this not happened yet? Let's see what's in the formula: Hot girls in skumpy outfits racing around at high speeds and slamming into each other, while occasionally engaging in wild cat-fights. We say again: how has this not happened yet?



A Song of Ice and Fire

The gritty fantasy world of George R.R. Martin's imagination might very well make for one of the coolest role-playing games ever. Picture an episodic monthly release, with each installment detailing an extended stretch of time for one of the many narrator characters from the novels. The way you'd know you've won is if all your favorite characters actually die.

Homer's Odyssey

Getting the rights to this sucker couldn't be that hard, could it? The writer's almost 3,000 years old! Homer's story of a man desperately struggling to find his way home after the Trojan War has all the makings of a great fantasy action epic. A complex and flawed main character, more sirens and Cyclops than you can shake a stick into the eye of, and a final conflict that is one of the most gruesome bloodbaths ever – talk about hack n' slash.



Preacher

One of the most violent and remarkable graphic novels ever put to ink has endless possibilities for great gameplay. Jesse Custer's quest to find and ultimately kill God might raise some eyebrows in certain communities, but man, do you have some cool characters to play with. Tulip the kick-ass girlfriend. The tragic yet loveable Aseface. It'd be worth it just to get to wander around as drunken Irish vampire Cassidy. And how awesome would it be if there were an unlockable Saint of All Killers mode?



The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

If you're going to do a Western, why not go with the granddaddy? With Clint Eastwood leading the charge as the Man With No Name, Sergio Leone's famous spaghetti western sports iconic music, buried gold, and a climax with the most famous Mexican standoff in history. If you wanted some more material, you could always tap the earlier two films in the loosely related trilogy. For feeling like a badass, what could be better than this?



Quantum Leap

Imagine a first person adventure game along the lines of Deus Ex. You'd leap into a new life, and spend the first few minutes just trying to figure out who the hell you are. Then you'd have any number of insane activities you'd be forced to learn on the fly, just like Sam did in the show. AI could give in-game advice and nudge you in the right direction, but ultimately you'd have to find your own path to set history right and leap to your next life. Best of all, you'd have a pause screen menu labeled: "Why Haven't I Leaped Yet?"

Ninja Scroll

Holy gruesome death scenes! Have we got some boss fights for you! From the crazy horned dude to the blind swordsman to that creepy girl with her questionably hidden snake – they're all great fodder for Jubei and his wayward blade. This is one of the most intense and well-made anime films out there, and there's no reason we shouldn't get to play it out with a controller in our hands.



Ender's Game

Proving that little kids can be twice as manipulative as any adult, Orson Scott Card's masterpiece would have some great opportunities for cool strategic play. From the strange zero-G sport that the kids train in to the massive space battle simulations, there are all sorts of chances to see if you can command as brilliantly as Ender.



General Mills vs. Kellogg's Deathmatch

We're imagining a world where Snap, Crackle, and Pop cooperate to take down Tix the Rabbit with some well-placed Rice Krispie explosions as a final lesson to teach him that the cereal is for kids, damnit! And would Tony the Tiger still feel GRRREAT after a few rounds with Count Chocula? And watch out for Lucky the Leprechaun's right hook. Man, that guy can box. So what if the two companies involved would never agree to anything even remotely like this? This could totally revitalize the fighting genre.



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LOOSE TALK

Hot Gaming Gossip

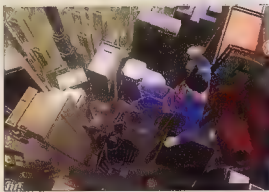
PS3'S EUROPEAN VACATION

Many of our gamer friends across the Atlantic in Europe were disappointed when Sony announced that the PlayStation 3 wouldn't debut over there until March 2007. Now the company is waffling on that date. One week it is saying that March is just a target, and the next it's saying everything's on track. It doesn't take a Call processor to figure out that European gamers may get shafted on a moving launch date, receive low supplies, or both.



TIBERON TAKES ON MORE

There was a time when EA's Tiburon was thought of only as a studio that made football games. Since then, the developer has taken on NASCAR and even branched out further with the recent Superman title. More additions are in store, as Loose Talk has heard that the developer is set to take charge of an existing, high-profile franchise in the EA stable.



SAY CHEESE!

At the most recent of Sony's press conferences, the company has shown clips of a mysterious game called Afrika. Most of the footage consisted of animals lounging around in the sun. Loose Talk has heard that the gameplay revolves around a photographer who is trying to get his shots into National Geographic. You may even be able to snap photos from a hot air balloon.



NEXT ZELDA COMING SOON?

Most gamers are still making their way through Twilight Princess, yet our sources tell us that the next installment in this series has been deep in development for around a year. It's highly unlikely that Nintendo would release two Zelda games a year apart, but don't be surprised if this game comes sooner than you think.



TWO PRINCES

With all the hubbub about Assassin's Creed, it would be easy to forget about Ubisoft's original wall-climber. Nonetheless, rumor has it that a new Prince of Persia game is coming alone nicely. If this is true, it sounds like we'll be playing as a different character. Hopefully, this one comes with 50% less brooding.

NAME THAT GAME

Test Your Sight

There are always casualties in war, but there are also some heroes as well. This month's game may not have stayed aloft for very long, but it certainly wasn't bad. Think Ubisoft's dedication to WWII flight titles doesn't go beyond Blazing Angels? You're wrong. This PS2, Xbox, and PC game was co-published by Ubisoft and developed by IR Gurus Interactive. It brought as much military immersion as a Call of Duty game, for example, but only in the air above WWII's Pacific theater.



(Answer on page 38)

THE IN-GAME AD GAME
NIELSEN MEDIA TO TRACK GAMES

Nielsen Media Research's Jeff Herrmann



In-game advertising is a hot topic among gamers these days, and we're not the only ones taking notice. The interest of mainstream ad execs has also been piqued, and as of mid-2007 Nielsen Media Research will be offering companies hard data on the subject with its GamePlay Metrics rating service for video games.

Nielsen's initiative will show advertisers, publishers, and developers independent data to aid in the buying and selling of in-game advertising as well as tracking gamers' interests in other media such as TV and the Internet. GamePlay Metrics will tap existing Nielsen panels, and Nielsen technology will allow them to track and accumulate data. The company currently taps its TV sample of 10,000 households for info on video games.

Game Informer talked to Jeff Herrmann, vice president of Nielsen wireless and interactive services, who reassured us that although Nielsen's involvement in gaming might lend some weight to the legitimacy of in-game advertising, he and his company were very aware of the ground they were treading. "Of course, the advertising content is going to be contextually relevant, and everyone is very cognizant of the respect they have to pay to the gaming crowd. Everyone I've talked to in the industry is very, very conscious of the fact to maintain a level of integrity when pursuing advertising. The advertising will be appropriate."

"[The] qualitative aspect we've been doing for a number of years on behalf of the industry," explained Herrmann, "but this is very much a quantitative approach, where as you have a TV rating, this is simply telling the advertiser, 'Here's how many, here's what they played, and here's when they played it.'"

Herrmann also sees a bright future to seeing advertising in games, one that helps developers. "Fundamentally, this will provide better games for gamers — even for games that are not advertising supported. Because if there's an additional revenue stream flowing through the publishers and developers, if they can benefit from advertising, that gives them more creative opportunity and more creative license to not just develop games they know are going to sell."

Of course, if you're not in favor of in-game advertising, you could always hope ratings are bad. This would be the surest way to squelch the ads in their tracks.

PLAYER 1:

Got the latest tips & tricks
at the AT&T blue room.

PLAYER 2:

Got vaporized
by Player 1.

AT&T
blue room.

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The new  at&t



THE ART OF NEXT-GEN STAR WARS GREG KNIGHT

SENIOR CONCEPT ARTIST, LUCASARTS

It may be sad that we won't be seeing any new Star Wars movies in the future, but with George Lucas wrapping up his saga, LucasArts is now free to explore the mysterious gulf between the two trilogies – a process that begins with this next-gen Star Wars game. We talked with Greg Knight about the early conceptual design for this exciting new chapter in the beloved franchise, and learned of the challenges involved with creating art for a licensed product.

Is your team being afforded some latitude in expanding the concept of what a Jedi or Sith can do?

Most of the work shown here was from an all-out exploration Amy Beth Christenson and I did early in preproduction of Force powers that we'd never seen before. Some ideas were new – you'll learn about those soon enough – and some ideas were expanding on existing ideas like Force push. The key to getting the latitude to explore Force powers within our game was to visualize the potential coolness of unleashing everything the Force could do. I would start off an idea by asking, "What would make Mace Windu say, 'Damn!'" It's been an interesting thing to explore.

How have you been able to inject your original sense of character design into such an established universe as the post-Episode III Star Wars mythology?

To remain consistent with the Star Wars aesthetic, you must use the established vocabulary of styles in your vision. But if you dive deep into the character's motivations, you can still put out a very unique character.

As an example, I was designing a mask for an evil character. In the simplest terms, a mask is just a way to hide your face. But it can also be a metaphor for the person underneath. In this case, I was looking at caged animals, torture devices, and expressionist paintings to give the impression that, although the character chose to wear this mask, he was trapped inside.

What's the overall art aesthetic you're shooting for in this game? How is it set apart from all the other big Star Wars games?

I believe that the aesthetic of the game should be anchored in the story and character we play. The main character in this game has a perspective that we've never seen in Star Wars, and this strongly affected the palette and mood. We also used some incredible technology such as NaturalMotion's *euphoria* and Poxelux's *Digital Molecular Matter*, which you see in the image where the character is using Force push on a stormtrooper and smashing him through some columns.

What feedback or involvement are you getting from Lucasfilm about the look and style of the new game?

In all of the Star Wars games I've worked on in the past, we've always tried to give the player an authentic experience within the Star Wars universe. But we were also careful to not get in the way of the story George Lucas was trying to tell. Now that he has completed the movies, we have been allowed to come in and build on the original story and aesthetic. We want to give the player a chance to interact with characters and moments in a way that we've never been able to do before.

When tasked with creating concept art for Darth Vader, is it hard to work with such an established character?

A couple things I have found about drawing Darth Vader are that he has an incredible presence and that he's going to win, no matter whom he's fighting.

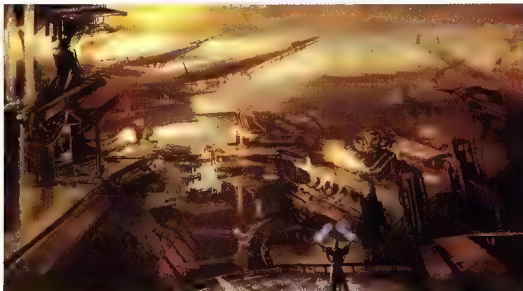
Are you handed ideas that the team wants expressed in artistic form?

I believe that a successful project is greater

than the sum of its parts. As a concept artist, I find inspiration through collaboration and talking with everyone on the team. Some of the best ideas I've put to paper have come from conversations with AI programmers and 3D modelers. Concept art is a great tool for quickly visualizing ideas within a group. Once we've worked through an idea and nailed down the final drawing, then the game leads can use it for reference.

What kind of approval process is involved in creating a character that is going to be inserted into the Star Wars canon?

The game designers would approach the artists about a new character. They might have reference for what they are thinking, but it is still up to the concept artist to explore that character with a focus on attitude. We'll meet with designers and leads with some options and decide on which direction to take. Then I may break out my creativity again for silhouette and costume variations. Once this is approved by our team, then a final drawing is sent up to Lucas Licensing for their approval.





TOP FIVES

Favorites From Industry Pros And GI Readers

DEVELOPER

JOHN TAM
Producer, RedOctane
(Guitar Hero II)



READER

MAURICIO J. ESCALANTE
Hawthorne, CA



- | | |
|--|--|
| 1 Street Fighter 3: Third Strike – Arcade | 1 Disgaea 2: Cursed Memories – PS2 |
| 2 Quake – PC | 2 Final Fantasy XII – PS2 |
| 3 Super Bomberman – SNES | 3 God of War – PS2 |
| 4 Mario Kart: Double Dash!! – GC | 4 Kingdom Hearts II – PS2 |
| 5 The Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask – N64 | 5 Capcom Vs. SNK Pro – Dreamcast (JPN) |

Send Top Fives and a photo of yourself to:

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724 N 1st St 4th Fl
Minneapolis, MN 55401-9022
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(attach digital picture)

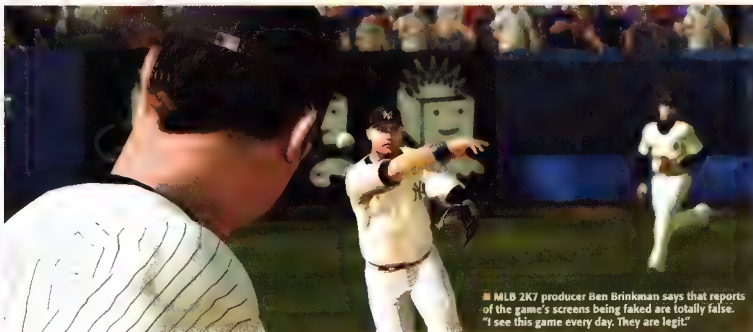
TOP TEN

Lists...Everybody Loves Lists...

Top Ten New Year's Gaming Resolutions

- Put your pants back on
- Send angry letters to Game Informer regarding your differing opinion on the quality of various Sega games (we know you'll do this one!)
- Finally cancel the subscription to that MMO you don't play anymore. Pff! The Matrix Online? Is that even active anymore?
- Stop dressing up as Rikku. Especially if you're a dude
- Go see every Uwe Boll movie on opening night. Also, buy all your games from Burger King. These things will make you a better, more resilient person
- Stop making jokes about the name Wii. Yeah, yeah. A penis. We get it
- Start a pool among your buddies: How long until your PS3 says "Disc Read Error"
- Camp outside the game store for the midnight Duke Nukem Forever release. Bwa ha ha!
- Get your picketing signs ready early in anticipation of the GTA IV protests
- Play games for 72 hours straight without sleeping (this will unlock your life's Hard mode)

Name That Game Answer: Heroes of the Pacific



■ MLB 2K7 producer Ben Brinkman says that reports of the game's screens being faked are totally false. "I see this game every day. They are legit!"

Now that 2K Sports has the third-party exclusive on Major League Baseball, it's making use of the license with a new title called The Bigs. The game is heading to next-gen systems, the PS2, and the PSP sometime in the summer, and promises over-the-top baseball action including power-ups and crazy animations for your favorite ball players. We can only hope that the game lets Kenny Rogers get his freak on like we know he wants to.

In other 2K Sports news, developer Kush Games is also readying MLB 2K7 for a perfunctory spring release. We talked to producer Ben Brinkman, who told us that the team is working to fix the many problems that fouled up last year's game. "We need to address gameplay and make it more interactive, realistic, and fun," admitted Brinkman. He also added that the team is aware the AI needs reworking, and says that steps are being taken to improve this area of the game. "In the past it's been pretty easy to trick the AI, but our goal is to make it next to impossible."



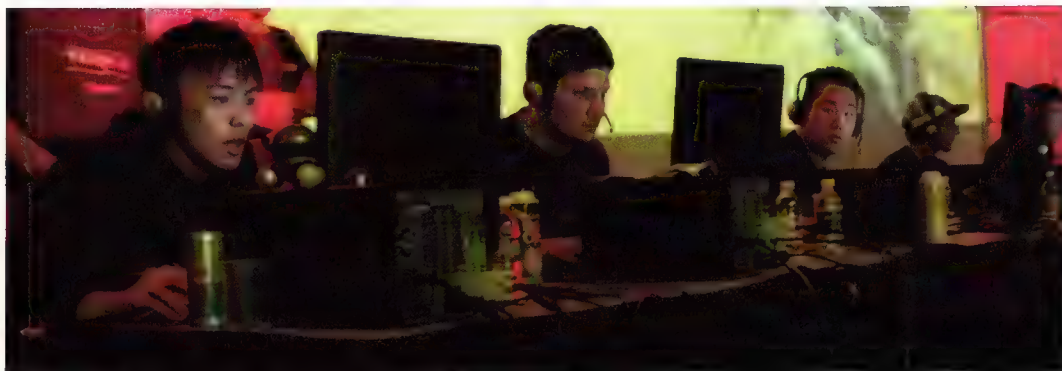
■ MLB 2K7



FRAGGING ON THE VERGE

CAN PRO GAMING BREAK THROUGH TO THE MAINSTREAM?

>> While the words "professional gaming" might draw little more than a blank stare from the majority of Americans, there is little doubt that the phenomenon of "e-sports" is one of the fastest growing competitive movements in recent history. Each and every day in this country and around the world, thousands of contestants are matching up either at organized tournaments or online to play video games for real-world cash and prizes. Some of the most talented, like famed champion Jonathan "FatalIty" Wendell, have managed to achieve the ultimate dream of kids everywhere: ditching the day job and earning a healthy salary from doing nothing but playing video games. <<





In many ways, professional gaming has already succeeded well beyond the hopes of its most ardent proponents. Now, the developing e-sport finds itself at a crossroads. Over the next year, most of the major players in the professional sports market will make a push towards the mainstream, including regular televised coverage of events and sponsorship deals with major tech, automotive, and lifestyle brands. Is pro gaming ready for prime time? Over the next few pages, we talk with the leaders in the field to find out.

HUMBLE BEGINNINGS, HUGE GROWTH

"For the first time, I felt like I was experiencing what would be the future. I was really, truly experiencing something that was outside of myself," recalls Angel Munoz, president and founder of the Cyberathlete Professional League, when asked about his first time playing Doom, id Software's iconic first-person shooter. In the years that followed, Munoz became a pioneer in professional gaming, quitting his job at a successful investment banking firm to start the video game website Adrenaline Vault. A few years later, he founded the CPL as a way of formalizing the already flourishing LAN party scene.

"People were having LAN parties, but they were disorganized," comments Munoz. "It was more for bragging rights. I really think CPL was the first organization to bring corpo-

rate sponsorships and standard rules to reinvent the way things were done to present it more as a sport."

Early CPL tournaments were small affairs, with the first event drawing only 300 people, including both spectators and competitors. "People look back and say, 'They only had 300 people.' Three hundred people at a LAN party in '97 was a big deal," observes Munoz. "So, we were encouraged from day one.... The buzz started right there at that one event. From there, it escalated. A lot more companies got involved, a lot more people started participating."

Today, CPL events may have as many as 1,000 competitors being watched by more than twice as many spectators. CPL events take place in numerous countries around the world, including the U.S., Singapore, South Korea, Brazil, Australia, and China. Over the course of a season, the league will hand out over \$1 million in cash and prizes. All this activity has not gone unnoticed by companies like AMD, ATI, and Pizza Hut, all of which have signed corporate sponsorship deals for the CPL.



■ CPL founder Angel Munoz

NEW PLAYERS

In recent years, other professional gaming organizations have formed, each seeking to add a different dimension and focus to the growing sport. Some of the notables include the Global Gaming League, Major League Gaming, and perhaps the largest on a worldwide basis, the Korea-based World Cyber Games.

As opposed to the American-style sports league format that has inspired many prominent pro gaming organizations, the World Cyber Games drew its inspiration from a much older sporting tradition — the Olympics.

"The format is Olympian in its scope — at least the spirit is Olympian — but we're obviously annual as opposed to every four years," says Michael Artz, general manager of the World Cyber Games U.S. division. "I think that's the spiritual model in terms of how the brand deal is positioned and the whole idea of global harmony through gaming."

The WCG currently operates in 70 different countries worldwide, with total partici-

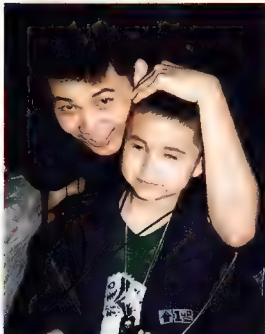
pants in live events and online tournaments numbering a jaw-dropping 250,000 people. Each country holds a series of regionals and national finals in which players earn spots on the national team that competes at the World Cyber Games Grand Final. The Grand Final event, much like the Olympics, moves to a different host city every year. It was held in Monza, Italy this past year.

The CPL and World Cyber Games largely focus on PC games — especially the wildly popular team FPS Counter-Strike. Another organization, Major League Gaming, distinguishes itself as the only console-only league, placing a special emphasis on Bungie's ultra-successful Halo series. MLG president and COO Matthew Bromberg also emphasizes that the MLG is structured more like traditional sports leagues than the CPL or WCG. "It's a league," comments Bromberg. "It's seven cities and professional players are signed to the league and make money as pros. We have an ongoing pro circuit and there are rules and we have a players' association. These other guys are great, they're just not leagues."

Much like traditional sports, MLG recently made headlines for big money contracts when it signed a deal with the country's top Halo 2 team, Final Boss (lead by Tom "tsquared" Taylor), to a \$1.25 million dollar deal, the richest offer ever signed in professional gaming.

(Continued on page 42)





(Continued from page 41)

THE PUSH TOWARDS THE MAINSTREAM

As professional gaming continues to make inroads among dedicated gamers and set attendance records with each passing season, many of the leagues are beginning to look towards ways of bringing the sport into the mainstream. As is usual, a big part of this push will include efforts to broadcast both lifestyle and live events on national television.

Recently, satellite television provider DirecTV and the CPL announced plans to begin programming that features both CPL events and gamer personalities. A pilot episode aired in October, and Munoz confirmed that, in 2007, he expects CPL broadcasts to be a part of regular DirecTV programming.

Although DirecTV has a fairly limited audience at present time, Munoz feels the partnership could lead to bigger things in the future. "DirecTV only has a base of about 15 million anyway in the U.S.," he states. "But one of the things is that people need to remember about DirecTV is that they are owned by News Corp, which owns Fox and Fox Sports. They also own IGN and MySpace.

The idea is that this will sort of leak out from there and get carried by some of their other properties. That's why I think there's a true potential between the relationship between CPL and News Corp."

For its part, Major League Gaming has recently begun what is probably the most high-profile pro gaming television deal in the relatively short history of the sport. After kicking off in November, the USA network has agreed to run a series of seven one-hour MLG programs during the holiday season. Matthew Bromberg feels that this deal will be instrumental in putting MLG on the map for a new audience. "We had a number of conversations with a number of different networks — broadcast and cable," he said. "It was a long process, but ultimately we felt like the folks at USA understood this the best. They had a lot of experience with World Wrestling Entertainment and were really interested in getting behind it promotionally... and USA Network is the largest cable network in America. They are in 90

million homes, which is a pretty big deal."

Despite some coverage on the small network HDNet last year, World Cyber Games has yet to announce plans for regular U.S. television broadcasts. However, Michael Arzt did confirm that negotiations are underway.

"Absolutely. Television is going to be a very big part of our future, and has to be," Arzt states. "We are talking to a number of prospective partners, all of whom are major global media players, because obviously we're interested in a global position."

Although nothing concrete has yet to be announced, the WCCG does have a tremendous track record of success in other territories, especially in Korea, where following professional gaming is a national pastime on a scale not yet imagined in the U.S.

"In Korea, you'll get 50,000 people going to an event to watch two guys square off in a video game," observes Arzt. "You've got three networks, two of them being the one and two networks for 12- to 34-year-olds,

that are 24 hour gaming networks. Imagine ESPN, but all video games instead of real sports nonstop, with an occasional stoppage for SportsCenter-type programming. It's absolutely, legitimately part of the fabric of entertainment."

WILL IT WORK?

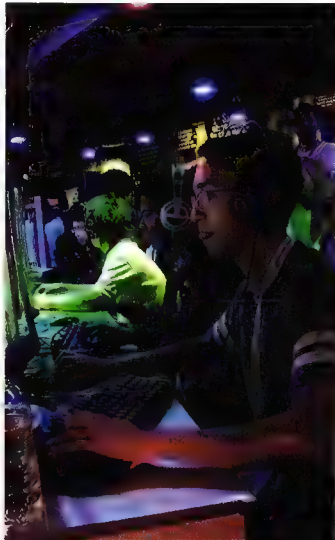
It's clear that pro gaming will be attempting to break through to a more mass audience in the U.S., the question remains: Will the American audience, a good part of which still doesn't fully embrace the gaming lifestyle, be drawn to this new form of competitive sports?

In answering this question, Arzt draws a parallel between the current situation of professional gaming and the history of other popular "alternative" sports.

"Ten years ago, where were the X Games? It was this tiny, little novelty thing," Arzt comments. "Now, they get covered live like real sports. There's a lot of attention on those guys.... There is a huge base of people playing PC and console games online. Now, it's just a matter of educating the American consumer that you can play this thing and turn it



■ MLG's Matthew Bromberg



into a vocation if you're good enough. Even if you're not looking to turn it into a vocation, you can still train to play in a tournament."

MLC's Matthew Bromberg feels that it's ultimately a matter of finding the right way to package. "I've always believed that, if millions of people can watch other people play poker, if millions of people can watch people making left turns around a track at high speed [they can watch pro gaming]," he says. "There are certain things that you don't intuitively think of as making good television that turn out to make great television when handled the right way.

He also stresses the importance of providing compelling personalities and human-interest angles for the casual audience. "Some folks can watch video gameplay live and understand it intuitively," Bromberg observes. "Some people are going to need a little more. It's not unlike a sport that people don't frequently watch in the Olympics – take curling for example. In order to make curling interesting, people need to learn something about these athletes and who they are. You mix that with 'Let me explain a little bit about what curling is and how it works'... if you get that mix right, it's fun and interesting."

While the leagues are confident they can hit upon the right formula, others are more skeptical. Geoff Keighley, a veteran game journalist and host of Spike TV's *Game Head*, has a decidedly mixed reaction to the pro gaming broadcasts he's seen thus far.

"The reason I'm somewhat skeptical on whether this will become real, mainstream television is that the real gameplay is hard to present in a compelling way on television" Keighley says, "I think these games are fun to play when you're actually in control of them, but to watch them from afar, I find the action is far too fast-paced. It's very hard to understand who's which character and what they're doing. I play a lot of Halo, but I watch a Halo match on TV and while you appreciate these guys are having fun playing, but I'm not having fun watching. I think what works on television are the people and personalities and the profiles of the real, competitive gamers. But the actual competition – which should be the culmination of everything – is not very compelling to watch, bordering on boring."

Angel Munoz disagrees, citing the generation of under-30 gamers that have grown up with an intuitive understanding of gaming as the real core of its viewing audience. "Over

the years, we've invested a lot of time in promoting to the younger generation, like my son for example. He's nine years old, and was born in a world where there was something called professional video games. There's no distinction in his mind – it's all competition and he loves to go watch the best at computer gaming just as he likes to go watch the best at any sport," he claims. "Now, as a nine-year-old organization, we have people that participated in our events when they were 19 years old, that now are 28 and 29 and have families – that's our market. DirecTV agrees with us, that this market that I address has been consuming traditional media at lower levels than previous generations anyway, and they would like to bring that generation back to television."

Whatever the outcome of pro gaming's adventures in television, it's clear that this new form of sports will continue to thrive whether or not it's embraced by the mainstream. All of the leagues we spoke with reported impressive year-on-year growth in participation and attendance, a trend that should continue to grow as a new generation of game consoles draw more and more players into online multiplayer gaming. Also,

it's important to note that as webcasting and mobile video services for cell phones continue to gain more traction in the U.S., television itself will likely grow less important as time goes on. Munoz, who envisions a future where there are arenas in several major cities dedicated solely to gaming competition, feels that the Internet, which helped foster the pro gaming community in its early days, is the place where it will ultimately thrive as a spectator sport.

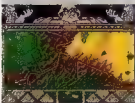
"As important as people think television is," he suggests, "we're big believers in technology and think that this is going to be the sport of the Internet. That will be where people go to watch our events in larger numbers than they watch it on television. We have our own online viewing solution we're going to be coming out with. I think as that becomes perfected, you can feel you're in the game. I want you to be able to go into a game in your home and feel that you understand the strategy that Fatal 1ty is using in the game. That is really the launching platform to take it to the next level!" ■■■

CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

Advanced Placement

While attending Guelph University in Toronto, Dyack and some friends make a PC title called Cyber Empires, which is released by EA in Europe

In Business



After incorporating his nascent company, called Silicon Knights, Dyack and co. create a D&D PC title named Fantasy Empires

Continued Success

Silicon Knights continues its success in the PC market with the critically acclaimed online multiplayer title Dark Legions

Making a Break



The booming console market gives Silicon Knights the chance to break out of its niche PC success with the release of the popular action/adventure title Blood Omen: Legacy of Kain. This highly praised title spawns a long-running series, although Silicon Knights will not work on it again

The Return



After creating and scrapping a version of the game for the Nintendo 64, Silicon Knights returns to prominence when the eternally delayed Eternal Darkness: Sanity's Requiem is released for the GameCube, providing the system with a much-needed adult-oriented game

The Remake

Continuing SK's partnership with Nintendo, Dyack gets to work with one of his idols, Koanami's Hideo Kojima, on Metal Gear Solid: The Twin Snakes, a remake of the classic PSone game

A New Chapter



After parting with Nintendo, Silicon Knights partners with another console maker, signing a deal to create a trilogy for Xbox 360 called Too Human, a game that was originally conceived for the PSone

DENIS DYACK

PRESIDENT, SILICON KNIGHTS

>> Denis Dyack, one of gaming's most outspoken game creators, and his studio Silicon Knights have earned a reputation for being one of the most creative and forward-looking developers in the business. We recently spoke to Denis about the upcoming Xbox 360 title Too Human and his views on game development. <<

Silicon Knights was a second-party developer for Nintendo for a long time. What did you learn during that time and why did you ultimately split?

We learned a lot. I think that the Japanese culture in game design is very different from that in North America. They have really worked from a craft basis. They iterated and iterated until they got things right. That is one of the things we adopted and one of the many things we learned. Working with Kojima-san and working with Miyamoto-san, there are just a ton of things [to learn] – the work ethic, the structure, the commitment to quality. Those were things that I think, for a while, exclusively came out of Japan. Things are beginning to change now where development in the West is much stronger now and I would argue that we are seeing equally strong titles. But if you go back ten years, it was never that way. The reason for the split was, [although] we got along really well, you can see the direction that

started prototyping some tech for the GameCube which eventually went into Eternal Darkness. We've always been excited about it, but more than anything it's just been about timing.

You've said in interviews that letting the player control the camera hampers your ability to be creative in storytelling or framing scenes. Can you talk a little bit about your philosophy in regards to camera?

I think that, when we transitioned from 2D games to 3D games, we introduced camera control to the player and it added a layer of complexity. I think we lost a lot of casual gamers. When you play something like Splinter Cell, you get really frustrated because you can't control the camera while you are trying to kill someone. We found that, if we control the camera for the player, it actually makes the game more accessible. If you look at Hollywood, there is a language of film; so we combined that

Are you happy about the changes being made to E3? Was preparing for the showing throwing off your development schedule?

I don't think there is any developer in the industry that said spending time on a demo for E3 was worthwhile. It was just very bad for development. I'm not even sure if there are any publishers that liked it. Let me put it from this perspective... How many movies do you see before they are finally edited and their special effects are done? What I would love to see in the future – my personal goal would be to – is to not show you guys anything until it's done. So when E3 went away I was really happy. I miss the show, I miss talking to everyone, but at the same time, the amount of time that we lost trying to get that demo out that was – quite frankly – not an indication of anything. I remember when Starcraft was pulled from the show floor, but it certainly didn't affect it by the time that that game came out.

In the end, I would rather be known for delays than bad games.

Silicon Knights is going – big budget, high production-value titles. Nintendo is going the direction of Wii where they are looking at smaller games, and it's just not as much of a fit.

Now you are partnered with Microsoft, and they keep trying in Japan. Do you think that a Western company can ever really crack that market?

I think it is going to be really tough, quite frankly. There is a pretty big cultural divide on what people want in Japan and what people in the West want. And by West I mean Europe as well. I think that everyone from the West has a problem making a product for Japan. That has been the case since the industry has been around. Very few projects have been successful in both North America and Japan, especially games that come out of North America.

Your main focus right now is Too Human. This project dates back to the original PlayStation. Why did it take so long to see the light of day?

A lot of people think that it has been under development for a really long time, but it really hasn't. We've been changing what games we've been focusing on. When we went from PlayStation to being an exclusive developer for Nintendo, we stopped development. We moved it to the GameCube, and we

language of good cinematography so you feel like you should not have to control the camera. Eternal Darkness was actually a game where you could never control the camera. We want to take it to the next step and we are going to keep working on it. Our philosophy is one of accessibility. We are creating interactive entertainment and it's got to be fluid and dynamic. But at the same time, I've often thought that playing a video game like the old Tomb Raiders, where you are looking over the character's shoulder for 14 hours, can be incredibly boring.

Too Human had a pretty good buzz, but the perception coming out of E3 was that the game looked a little disappointing. Do you regret showing it at E3 in that state?

Uh... [laughs]...yeah. I think so. I think that E3 has changed so much. The industry is starting to mature and I think that we are starting to move away from something that is 100 percent enthusiast press where they see something and they are happy. Now, people are becoming very cynical when they see things, and that is good. We had some problems with the camera and it had a really bad frame rate at E3 – there is no question. We didn't anticipate the negative reaction to that. We had also pulled out all the story for the game. At the end of the day, it just wasn't a good time to show.

One thing that you guys have a reputation for is delaying games. Do you think that's fair?

Do I think that it is fair that people say we delay games? I don't know. I don't think we delay games any longer than anyone else. It's just happen to be someone who seems to get highlighted for that I would rather delay a game to make sure it is good – no matter what. In the end, I would rather be known for delays than bad games.

Another thing that you have going into the future is your deal with Sega. Can you talk about what game you are developing for Sega?

No. [Laughs] Personally, I wish I could; I'm really excited about it. We will be making announcements in the future and when the time is right. I can't wait to hear some of the reactions.

Are you exclusively developing for 360 or your deal with Sega includes other systems?

We're actively working on other platforms.

Does that include Wii?

It's just say all platforms, you're best to not exclude anybody.

THE SILICON KNIGHT

■ Silicon Knight's Denis Dyack is working on his most ambitious project to date, the *Too Human* trilogy for Xbox 360.

tech

X-540 5.1 DIGITAL SPEAKERS

Manufacturer: Logitech
Website: www.logitech.com
List Price: \$99.99

Immerse yourself in every bullet-soaked inch of sound that pumps out of Logitech's X-540 speakers. These speakers use FDD2™ (Frequency Directed Dual Driver) technology to produce a uniform sound across your living room. You can also choose to use the "matrix mode," which automatically creates 5.1 surround sound from common 2-channel stereo sources.



SPECIFICATIONS

TOTAL RMS POWER: 70 WATTS RMS

- Satellites: 45 watts RMS (2 x 7.4W front, 15.4W centre, 2 x 7.4W rear)
- Subwoofer: 25 watts RMS
- Total peak power: 140 watts
- Frequency response: 40 Hz – 20 kHz

DRIVERS:

- Satellites: (2) 2" drivers per satellite
- Subwoofer: 5.25" ported driver

SPEAKER DIMENSIONS (H X W X D)

- Satellites: 8.4" x 3.2" x 5"
- Center channel: 7.8" x 4.75" x 3.75"
- Subwoofer: 11.25" x 6.5" x 9.75"



etc.

MARVEL HEROES COMIC BOOK CREATOR

Manufacturer: Planetwide Interactive Entertainment
Website: www.planetwidegames.com
List Price: \$29.95

Haven't you always wanted to make your own Hulk vs. Thor battles? Want to reenact Spider-man's classic battle against the Green Goblin on the Brooklyn Bridge, only this time change the outcome? Well, now you can. Comic Book Creator features more than 300 pieces of authentic Marvel artwork and 100 different layout design templates. Create your own comics with some of Marvel's best characters, including Spider-man, Captain America, Hulk, the X-Men, the Avengers, the Fantastic Four, Daredevil, and Ghost Rider. Did we say Ghost Rider was one of Marvel's best characters? We meant to list Captain America twice.



etc.

WORLD OF WARCRAFT THE BOARD GAME: SHADOW OF WAR EXPANSION

Manufacturer: Fantasy Flight Games
Website: www.fantasyflightgames.com
List Price: \$24.95

You will need the original World of Warcraft board game to use this expansion. But if you already have the original, then you'll probably want Shadow of War so you can get even more out of the game. This set contains new rules, new options, and new ways to customize the gameplay. The expansion includes ten new talents and ten new powers for all nine playable classes, new Blue Quests that focus on the independent blue monsters, destiny cards that unfold a sweeping epic adventure across Azeroth, and nearly 200 new item cards.

gadgets

SMACKTALK

Manufacturer: Digital Innovations
Website: www.digitalinnovations.com
List Price: \$29.99

Man, we hate annoying smack talkers, but Digital Innovations new SmackTalk sounds like it might be kind of cool. Easily attachable to the Xbox 360, this device has five flash memory buttons that you can record sound from any of your CDs, DVDs, or MP3s. The possibilities sound exciting, but we're not looking forward to hearing more Ace Ventura quotes. You bastards know who you are.

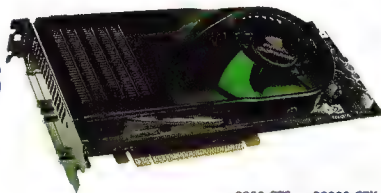


tech

NVIDIA GEFORCE 8800 GTX AND GTS VIDEO CARDS

Manufacturer: NVIDIA
Website: www.nvidia.com
List Price: \$449 (GTS)
\$599 (GTX)

NVIDIA's new flagship card, the GeForce 8800 GTX, is the eighth generation of Nvidia's GeForce graphics cards. It is also the world's first DirectX 10 card. At the heart of these cards sits the G80, a GPU that represents a complete shift in NVIDIA's architecture. We know how you tech guys like your specs, so here you go.

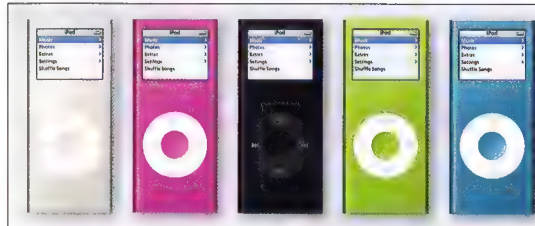


	8800 GTS	88000 GTX
• GPU	G80	G80
• Transistors	681 M	681 M
• GPU Process size	90 nm	90 nm
• Shader Model	4.0	4.0
• Pixel Shaders & Vertex Pipes	96	128
• ROPs	20	24
• Memory Interface	320 bit	384 bit
• Memory Size	640 MB	768 MB
• Memory Type	GDDR3	GDDR3
• Core Clock	500MHz	575MHz
• Memory Clock	800MHz	900MHz
• Shader Clock	1200MHz	1350MHz

etc.

GHOST RECON LOGO SHIRTS

Manufacturer: Stylin Online
Website: www.stylinonline.com **List Price:** \$18.00
Stylinonline has a great selection of merchandise for all kinds of intellectual properties ranging from Marvel comics characters to *Goodfellas*. These Ghost Recon T-shirts are officially licensed by the Tom Clancy brand. The shirts are made with a combined cotton and poly blend giving them a super soft feel. Since they come in several different sizes, you should be able to find one that fits you.



tech

IPOD NANO

Manufacturer: Apple **Website:** www.apple.com/ipodnano/ **List Price:** \$149.99
The new iPods are (about a quarter of an inch) thinner, sexier, and come in five colors and these different drive sizes: 2GB, 4GB, and 8GB. With a brighter screen and up to 24 hours of battery life, your pictures should look about as good as your music sounds. We're sorry to tell you all this because we know you just bought the last iPod model, but then again so does Apple.

peripherals

NYKO WIRELESS PS2 ZERO CONTROLLER

Manufacturer: Nyko
Website: www.nyko.com
List Price: \$49.99

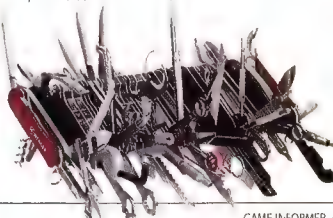
We know that there are other wireless controllers out there, but the Zero from Nyko comes with a rechargeable NiMH battery that provides 25 hours of play time, backlit LED analog face buttons, and wireless chip with a range of up to 30ft.



etc.

GIANT SWISS ARMY KNIFE VERSION 1.0

Manufacturer: Wenger
Website: www.wengema.com **List Price:** \$1,200
Now this is a knife! Not happy to settle for less, Wenger has taken the average Swiss Army formula and crammed 85 tools into it. After all, who doesn't want a nail file, corkscrew, bike chain rivet setter, laser pointer, cupped cigar cutter, compass, fish scaler, can opener, golf divot repair tool, tire tread gauge, two key rings, and seven blades (just to mention a few) all in one easy-to-find place? Weighing in at two pounds and 11 ounces, this bad boy measures a lengthy 8.75 inches. Come on, just look at this thing. It's completely ridiculous. We still want one, of course.



THE CHALLENGES OF STAYING INDEPENDENT



BY ROBERT WALSH,
CEO, KROME STUDIOS



Can independent developers survive? In a time of skyrocketing budgets, huge development teams, and the ever-increasing technical requirements of next-gen platforms, it's a legitimate question. More challenges than ever before are facing developers, and some studios will find them insurmountable. But there are also more avenues available for developers to find a way to succeed and thrive. So it's not just a question of whether Indies can survive; it's more a question of how they can succeed.

First, let's talk about why independent developers matter. As gamers, we need indie developers because they create new and original experiences. Grand Theft Auto started as a PC game from an indie. So did Call of Duty and many other popular games including Krome's very own *TY the Tasmanian Tiger* franchise. The environment and culture of an independent studio allows it more freedom to take chances and create new and interesting games. Independents have more, well, independence — they are answerable to themselves rather than shareholders and a board of directors. Also, being independent allows studios the opportunity to work with more than just one company, i.e. publisher, which can be beneficial for numerous reasons.

For game artists, programmers, designers, et al., independents are the last oasis of the original non-corporate garage culture of game creation. At Krome, we have nearly 300 staff, but we work hard to keep indie culture alive. We believe strongly that making games shouldn't feel like working for IBM, but that's what it feels like when you walk through the doors of many larger publishers.

Finally, independent studios can typically move more quickly, prototyping and testing new concepts faster than a mega-publisher can craft a proposal to get a new franchise green-lit. This combination of agility and creative freedom can result in unique, forward-thinking, and entertaining games that are extremely difficult to create under the risk-averse

development model of major publishers.

This cuts both ways, of course. Some developers may be only able to work on one game at a time. If that game flops it could bring the studio down. Ebbs and flows in work and cash flow can create financial stress. And development on next-gen consoles has been more challenging than everyone thought, compounding the risks that developers must face.

Despite these hurdles, opportunities abound on next-gen. Downloadable games and episodic content provide new development models that favor independents. And with development complexity on next-gen comes more diversity since three distinctly different platforms require not only unique content but different development methods and technologies. This creates an entirely different playing field than the last generation.

While I certainly don't have all the solutions, here are a few suggestions for how developers can not only survive, but also thrive. These have worked for us here at Krome Studios, so hopefully they will prove helpful for others. First, know your limitations. This sounds easy, but it's hard for all of us to recognize our strengths and weaknesses. If you're an awesome driving game studio, jumping into a first-person shooter may not be the best course of action. You can't be all things to all people, and while every team wants new challenges, try to build on your strengths — to create something new, develop a fresh twist on what you already can execute.

A corollary to this is creating your own niche. Three distinct platforms means there are gaps to be filled. Racing specialist. An expert in porting from 360 to PS3. Great at developing Wii games. These are all niches in which a strong developer can prosper.

Next, control your IP. This doesn't mean owning your IP outright, it means making sure that you participate fully in the marketing and publishing decisions that affect your games. An analogy here is the relationship between music artists and record labels.

As gamers,

we need

indie

developers

because

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original

experiences.

In the old days, musicians wanted to get signed to a fat recording deal. Once they did so, they found that money had been exchanged for a loss of creative control, leading many modern artists to create and pay for their own albums to retain a greater say in their careers. The tradeoff may mean you have a smaller development budget — but in exchange you can control your franchises more closely.

Fourth, don't put all your eggs in one basket. Just because you can only create one title at a time doesn't mean you can't do art outsourcing simultaneously or license middleware based on your technology to create additional revenue streams that can sustain you during lean times. With development costs increasing, few companies can afford to create everything from scratch so there's a market for your expertise.

Last but not least, and maybe most importantly, develop strong processes and systems. It's not glamorous, but project management, tracking metrics, and the like are critical to getting your games done on schedule and on budget with high quality. We have spent a number of years and resources developing an internal project system, which has been invaluable in our ability to deliver on time — and also for controlling the rising costs of next-gen development. You need talented staff, but also good management. At the end of the day, fewer indie studios may survive, but for those who do make it the rewards will be sweeter. Now, more than ever, opportunities are there for developers who play — and make — the game right.

Long live the independent developer! ■■■■

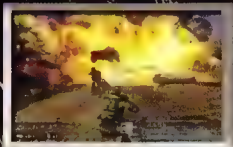
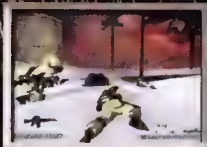
Robert Walsh is CEO and co-founder of Krome Studios. Mr. Walsh has been responsible for negotiating deals with major international publishers such as Ubisoft, Disney Interactive, Maitel, Vivendi, THQ, and Electronic Arts. He leads Australia's largest game development company and oversees a talented team of game creators. As CEO, Robert has successfully shipped over 19 SKUs in four years and was awarded the Career Achievement award at the 2003 Australian Game Developers Conference.

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.



THE FIGHT CONTINUES...

SOCOM
U.S. NAVY SEALs
COMBINED ASSAULT



Drug Reference
Violence

sun

mon

tue

wed

thur

fri

sat

American Idol



02

NEW RELEASES

- F-24: Stealth Fighter - DS
- Karaoke Revolution: American Idol - PS2
- Lumines Plus - PS2
- Snakes on a Plane - DVD
- Ultimate Brain Games - DS



Snakes on a Plane

04

REPUBLIC COMMANDÓ SCENE PACK

We still don't know whether or not LucasArts will bring back the Republic Commandó crew for a sequel, but with this toy set you can check your own adventures. In our tale, Scaroh and Carindan are onmesolving buddies on Endor. Sev also mates with a Jawa.



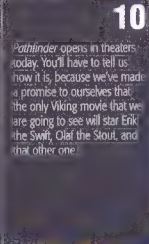
Arthur and the Invisibles



09

NEW RELEASES

- Arthur and the Invisibles - PS2, PSP, DS, Wii
- Crank - DVD
- SpongeBob SquarePants: Season 4 Vol. 2 - DVD
- Winky Club: Join the Club - PSP



Pathfinder

Pathfinder opens in theaters today. You'll have to tell us how it is, because we've made a promise to ourselves that the only Viking movie that we are going to see will star Erik the Swift, Olaf the Stout, and that other one.

12

LOST PLANET

Capcom's Lost Planet: Condition is hitting store shelves today. To celebrate this frozen epic, go to your local ski resort and warn everyone you see about the imminent, alien invasion. If they don't listen, you must use force. A snowball to the groin never hurt anyone.



Lost Planet: Extreme Condition

14

24: SEASON 6
Jack Bauer's life of hell continues today, kicking off a two-night, four-hour premiere. This season is set 20 months after the conclusion of season five, which is coincidentally the same length of time it will take most gamers to find a PlayStation 3.



16

NEW RELEASES

- Battlestations: Midway - 360
- College Hoops 2K7 - PS2
- Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney Justice for All - DS
- Wario Ware: Smooth Moves - Wii



College Hoops 2K7

21



The *Invincible Iron Man* animated movie rockets onto store shelves today. If you enjoyed the *Ultimate Avengers* films, this action-packed and finely animated origin story should be right up your alley.

22



UNCLE SAM & THE FREEDOM FIGHTERS

Do you want a side of politics with your comics? Unfraid to dive into the most controversial issues in today's political climate, Uncle Sam and the Freedom Fighters is a complex social commentary with some good old-fashioned ass kicking. It's worth it.

24

Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney Justice for All 11/16



27

GOLDSBORO GAMING EXPO

Held at Wayne Community College in Goldsboro, NC, this gaming expo may not get a lot of attention, but it certainly has a ton to offer. In addition to dozens of gaming tournaments, you'll hear from a number of interesting speakers.

28

BEN REEVES DAY
Have you ever woken up in the morning feeling sad and incomplete? That's because you're not Ben. This recent addition to our staff demands that he can hold his breath underwater for 3 minutes and can bench press over 70 dudes. His greatest accomplishment in life is beating Halo 2 while consuming an entire canister of powdered hot cocoa.



31

Remember XIII, that stylish first-person shooter that you never played? Well guess what? You can now neglect to read the comic book too! This exciting espionage-filled story stretches across 144 pages, and features some amazing art. Best of all, though, the main character doesn't sound like David Duchovny.

january



...SO FREEDOM CAN.

We're tasked with commanding the most feared fighting force on the planet. With 4-player co-op campaigns that reward teamwork, new weapons and an intense relentless enemy that's smarter than ever before, you'll be challenged to the fullest at every turn. The battle awakens, the mission is clear. Now the only question is: have you got what it takes to stand alongside the best of the best?

www.us.playstation.com

www.socomgame.com



SOCOM
U.S. NAVY SEALS
COMBINED ASSAULT

ZIPPER
INTERACTIVE



PlayStation 2

BE IN YOUR WORLD.
PLAY IN OURS!

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THE
TOP 50
GAMES
OF 2006

Every year gives us reason to be glad that we're gamers, and 2006 was more exciting than most. No matter what systems you own, or what kind of games you love, the past 12 months gave you plenty of reasons to shut yourself off from the outside world and play your life away.

With Microsoft's Xbox 360 in full swing, we finally got a host of titles that fully made use of the system's vaunted power. To be honest, Bethesda's brilliant *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* would have been enough to keep us busy for most of the year. But that would have meant skipping such excellent games as *Dead Rising*, *Ghost Recon Advanced Warfighter*, and *Gears of War*.

The handheld scene was more active than it's been in years. Nintendo continued to gain momentum with the DS, bringing some unique new concepts like *Brain Age* alongside blue-chip properties like *New Super Mario Bros.* and *Yoshi's Island 2*. Although the PSP suffered from a good bit of sub-par product, games like *Syphon Filter: Dark Mirror* and *Daxter* proved that it can be a great home for original content.

For those not ready to make the jump onto the new systems, PlayStation 2 proved why it's still the world's most dominant console. Even in its old age, the PS2 was blessed with an extraordinary amount of quality titles, including *Final Fantasy XII*, *Bully*, and *Guitar Hero II*, the stellar sequel to last year's breakout success story.

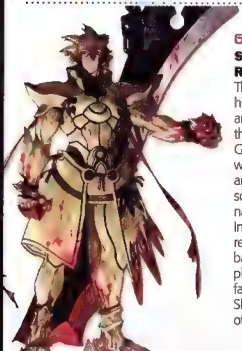
If all this wasn't enough, we got to end the year with not one but two console launches in the span of a week. Not surprisingly, Nintendo's most treasured series, *The Legend of Zelda*, delivered perhaps the greatest launch title in history with *Twilight Princess*. While Sony relied more on third parties for its killer launch titles, it did prove it could match Halo blow-for-blow with the brilliant shooter *Resistance: Fall of Man*.

That's quite a year. Over the next pages, we'll give you our picks for the best games of 2006, as well as hand out some special awards to the companies, games, and characters that did excellent (and not-so-excellent) work this year. In the process, we hope we can spark some debate, and maybe remind you of a few sleeper hits that slipped under your radar. It's been a wild ride, and all signs point to 2007 being even more eventful. We can't wait.



Ape Escape 3

System: PlayStation 2 **Release Date:** January 17
Ape Escape has never received much attention from the mainstream, but gamers know and love it as one of the most accomplished and humorous platformers in PS2 history. Building on an already solid foundation, Ape Escape 3 greatly expanded the scope of gameplay with a series of humorous "morph" forms that give you new abilities. Even better, it gave us one of the year's most pleasant surprises: the excellent "Mesal Gear Solid" — a Solid Snake-inspired minigame that was made with the help of Konami. Hey, even a guy as serious about games as Kojima can't resist these monkeys' smelly charms!



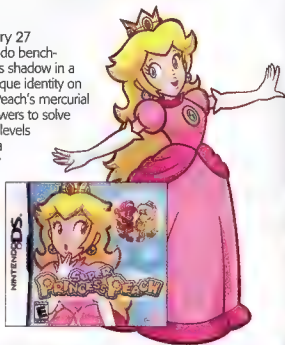
Grandia III

System: PlayStation 2 **Release:** February 14
The spirited boy and his duty-driven griffind aren't exactly new to the gaming scene, but Grandia III takes these well-known characters and turns them into something extraordinary — if only in combat. In a pioneering blend of real-time and turn-based battles, Grandia III has players keeping an eye on distance, timing, and other factors to deal maximum damage. We only wish that Sky Captain Schmidt were the main character instead of a supporting role. That guy rules.



Super Princess Peach

System: Nintendo DS **Release:** February 27
In this stellar DS side-scroller, longtime Nintendo benchmark Princess Peach stepped out of Mario's shadow in a 16-bit flavored title and stamped her own unique identity on the classic platforming formula. Tapping into Peach's mercurial emotions, you're able to utilize her special powers to solve puzzles and traverse the excellently designed levels by simple taps on the DS's touch screen. It's a mechanic that works well, and we hope other developers will take note. While it can be easy to a fault, there's no doubt that Super Princess Peach is an engaging experience.



Black

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox **Release:** February 28
Sure, this game might have been a disappointment to some, but it was still a thrill to play. Not only is it significant for being a competent shooter for the PlayStation 2, a system that has seen remarkably few, but Criterion's shooter has some of the most visceral gun action in any FPS to date. These weapons are loud, smoky, and when you hit the trigger you know you are going to make a hole (probably a big one). And that is just how it should be.



ESRB Breakdown

E	4
E	7
M	16
T	23



Onimusha: Dawn of Dreams
System: PlayStation 2
Release Date: March 7
 Before some of you skip right past this entry saying, "I haven't played any of the other Onimusha games," take solace in the fact that the Dawn of Dreams storyline requires no previous experience with the series. What you get is a samurai game that gets it right among a sea of failed imitators (cough, Genji). The multitude of playable characters provides both combat depth and enhanced replayability, and the beefy 20-hour completion time isn't common in this genre.



Ghost Recon Advanced Warfighter
System: Xbox 360
Release Date: March 7
 Squad-based shooters usually take more flak than the Luftwaffe, but this is one title in the sub-genre that excels. Not only are your AI comrades smart, but this near-future tactical shooter gives you some neat toys like the UAV recon unit. Also refreshing for the genre is that much of it takes place in the sunny streets of Mexico City, multiplying many of the strategic decisions you need to make to stay alive.



Shadow Hearts: From the New World
System: PlayStation 2
Release Date: March 7
 Questing for some legendary sword is no 10 years ago. The new hotness in RPGs is breaking historical figures (like Al Capone) out of prison with assistance from a fat vampire/fairy and a talking kung-fu cat. From the New World is a bit off the wall, but it is perfect for role-playing fans who enjoy some zaniness mixed in with their turn-based combat. "Who cares if the Great Crystal has gone dark? I need to make a sword out of a cactus, people!"



Dexter
System: PSP
Release Date: March 14
 We're not going to front: We love Naughty Dog's furry little ottsel Dexter with all our hearts. He's hands-down one of the funniest characters in the business, and we were thrilled to see him finally get a chance to shine on his own without that gloomy goateed Jak bringing him down. Thankfully, rookie developer Ready at Dawn created in Dexter a title that can stand beside some of the best 3D platformers on home consoles. Most memorable were Dexter's delusional "dream sequence" minigames, in which the lil' fella got to play out scenes based on such classic films as *The Matrix*, *Brokeheart*, and *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers*.



Syphon Filter: Dark Mirror
System: PSP
Release Date: March 14
 Syphon Filter, a stalwart franchise for Sony, has been in decline recently. It made a nice comeback on the PSP with the excellent, all-original Dark Mirror. In a year that had far too few standouts for the PSP, this game provided neglected fans with the series' trademark mix of tense stealth and high-caliber gunplay. It's also noteworthy for proving that third-person gun targeting can be done right on the PSP, despite its lack of a second analog. To top things off, the stellar single-player mode was enhanced by a great multiplayer component. We can only hope Sony will see fit to let Syphon Filter carry this momentum onto the PS3.

THE ELDER SCROLLS IV: OBLIVION

System: Xbox 360, PC **Release:** March 20

Oblivion is a gorgeous, ambitious game that gives new meaning to the phrase "player-directed gameplay." You can spend hours helping citizens, working your way through the guilds, or just wandering through the countryside of Tamriel. The game has even continued to grow since release, with some excellent expanded content available for download (for a small fee). If you want a game that helped define the first year of the Xbox 360 while setting the bar for next-gen RPGs, Oblivion is it.

Top 10 Heroes of 2006



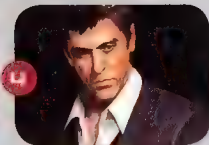
1 Link
[The Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess]
 Can there be any doubt that Link should take top honors in the hero department this year? Standing up against insurmountable odds, facing the dangers no one else will face, Link never fails to impress. With Twilight Princess, Link's adventures are through a darker and more unpredictable world. As it turns out, it doesn't matter how bad things get. If Link has a sharp sword at his side, a shield on his arm, and a fairy at his shoulder, Hyrule couldn't be in better hands.



2 Basch
[Final Fantasy XIII]
 When everyone else in the party is unsure what to do, Basch is the man who steps up and gets it done. As the very definition of the loyal knight, Basch doesn't care what people say about him, so long as he knows that he's done his duty. There may be other characters some might say are more important, but no one stands strong like Basch.



3 Captain America
[Marvel: Ultimate Alliance]
 For those of you more aware of mega-stars like Spider-Man and Wolverine, it may come as a shock that Cap kicks just as much ass in Marvel: Ultimate Alliance. Flinging his shield across rooms, Steve Rogers punches his way through Doom Bots like they're going out of style. Now that's patriotism.



4 Tony Montana
[Scarface]
 You may be asking yourself how a drug-dealing crime kingpin made our heroes list? We wondered the same thing, right up until Tony and his gang showed up at the office and "convinced" us he belonged here. Cussing up a storm, nothing can stop Tony's wild rush to the top in his second lease on life. Man, that dude has some balls.



5 The Doctor
[Brain Age: Train Your Brain in Minutes a Day!]
 Most of our list winners this year get their hero on by whacking bad guys. The Doctor (Ryuji Kawashima) in Brain Age gets his hero medal for making you less stupid. Yeah, we mean you. Before the Doctor came along to quiz you on arithmetic and colors, you were out there walking into dumb-pops all day. Man, were you lumps. Of course, after the Doctor's intervention, we know that you're still hitting those some lumps. It's just that now you can add up how many you've stumbled into since you woke up this morning.

Tetris DS**System:** Nintendo DS**Release Date:** March 21

Tetris is universally considered one of the greatest games ever made, and has succeeded on nearly every system released. That said, there have been few changes to the tried-and-true formula over the years. Thankfully, when Nintendo brought the venerable franchise to the DS, it took the time and effort to expand on the classic, block-based gameplay with a host of new modes. This experiment succeeded in creating a title that maintained all the things we love about Tetris while giving the somewhat stale puzzlers a fresh new attitude. It's still one of the best ways to kill a long plane flight, and the excellent multiplayer means that it's fun with friends as well.

**Tomb Raider: Legend****System:** Xbox 360, PlayStation 2, PC**Release Date:** April 11

We think Crystal Dynamics deserves props for making Lara a respectable woman again. It took a tired and overworked series and infused it with new life. But even if it weren't a Tomb Raider title, this game still would have made our list. With fun level exploration, Prince of Persia-style gameplay, gorgeous current-gen graphics, and a respectable plot, how could it not?

Brain Age: Train Your Brain in Minutes a Day!**System:** Nintendo DS**Release Date:** April 18

Learning really can be fun. Leave it to Nintendo, a company so skilled in the art of game development that it could likely make an entertaining game about a ham sandwich, to get us addicted to improving our mental acuity. Brain Age cleverly uses the DS's touch screen controls to test users' wits with a series of simple-yet-addictive minigames that are designed to improve reasoning, math, and memory skills. Although the main game is excellent in its own right, the included Sudoku mode introduced thousands of new converts to the popular numerical crossword-style puzzles.

**KINGDOM HEARTS II****System:** PlayStation 2 **Release:** March 28

We had our doubts about a Disney/Final Fantasy RPG when we first heard about the original Kingdom Hearts, but we weren't going to make that mistake a second time. We eagerly awaited this sequel, and Square Enix didn't disappoint. Dual wielding key-blades and fighting off literally thousands of Heartless are still among some of our fondest memories of the year.

**Monthly breakdown**

January	1
February	5
March	8
April	2
May	3
June	1
July	1
August	4
September	3
October	8
November	12
December	2

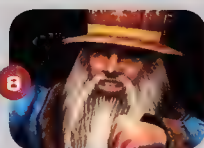
(Release counts are calculated using the first appearance of a game on any platform.)

**Amaterasu****[Okami]**

The game describes her as the origin of all that is good and mother to us all, so just on the off chance that the game is right, we figure she should get a healthy nod for her heroics. As a wolf in Okami, Amaterasu makes flowers bloom where she passes and brings light and life back to a world that has lost both. She also puts up with that hilarious title punk issue, and consequently deserves any praise we heap on her.

**Lara Croft****[Tomb Raider: Legend]**

Never let it be said that we're not willing to give somebody a second chance. With proper diet, a steady exercise regimen, and a new developer guiding her path, Lara weasels her way back into our hearts by flipping and shooting her way through her latest legendary adventure. No longer tied to a square, grid-based world, Lara is free to exhibit her talents in a gorgeous, open game world. She also has an unlockable bikini costume, and we're pretty alright with that.

**Tom Bombadil****[The Lord of the Rings: The Battle For Middle-earth II]**

Anybody can charge into battle with a scream on their lips and their blade held high. It's a real man who can skip and dance his way into a squad of cave trolls while singing rhyming songs. Tom Bombadil's unconventional killing style might be a little strange, but no one's going to argue with his results. Sing on, Tom. Sing on.

**Rocket****[Dragon Quest Heroes: Rocket Slime]**

Long time Dragon Quest fans may balk at adopting the role of an enemy they've so consistently squashed. Not one to accept such prejudice, Rocket offers just as much fun as any of those boring human heroes that used to beat up his kind. When all the other slimes are goop-napped, Rocket, ahem, rockets into action to save them. He's totally stretchy; he can drive a tank, and most importantly he's blue. Never underestimate the heroic importance of being the color blue.

**The King****[Sneak King]**

So what if this game sold at Burger King for only four bucks? Playing as the King is hilarious! What's more heroic than delivering hash browns and cheeseburgers to hungry workers before they faint? We're not entirely sure why the King needs to sneak up on his subjects to deliver them food, but you don't question the King. While we won't vouch for the quality of the rest of the game, look for this hero to climb the ranks in upcoming years. We're never wrong about this sort of thing.



Rise of Nations: Rise of Legends

System: PC
Release: May 9
A fantastic dynamic campaign map and a whimsical steam-punk setting push Rise of Legends over the top. The series has always been great, but breaking free of the constraints of realism allows Rise of Legends to fly high with excellent unit design, interesting factions, and the tight RTS gameplay that compares well to the best of the genre. Crank up the visual settings for a real treat when you take out buildings.



Half-Life 2: Episode One

System: PC
Release: May 31
Sure, this game was short, but it was a great deal at \$20. However, Episode One isn't on our list because it's a great bargain; it's included on the list because it is an awesome rollercoaster ride out of City 17. Plus, Valve does a wonderful job at showing Alyx's emotionally charged reactions. For the first time in a long while, we actually have an emotional investment in our AI companion. And we still think that Dog kicks ass.



Titan Quest

System: PC
Release: June 27
"So I'm a Diablo clone, wannafightaboutit?" No, Titan Quest, we don't. Your skillful execution of the level/loot grind is the best we've seen in years, and we're still not sick of it. Especially considering how pretty you render your fanciful ancient world, and how open-ended your character development system is. We won't be done with you for a long time, Titan Quest. Your immense amounts of content drive us to be the most powerful heroes we can be.



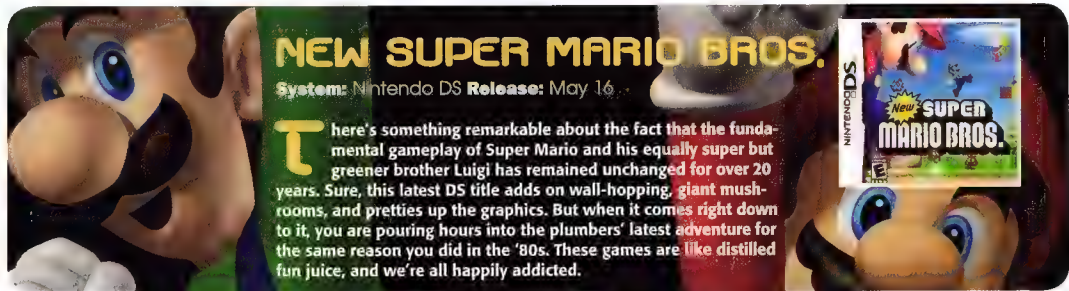
The Lord of the Rings: The Battle for Middle-earth II

System: Xbox 360, PC
Release: July 5 (360), February 28 (PC)
Abandoning the over-done newb-friendliness of the first game, BFME II gives RTS players some real meat to dig into. As if solid, entertaining gameplay wasn't enough, playing this is the closest you can possibly get to Tolkien's world; very few games capture the feeling of their subject matter as accurately as BFME II does. Considering the awesome nature of LOTR, that's quite a feat.



Prey

System: Xbox 360, PC
Release: July 10
It's you versus an alien menace. They have superior technology, greater numbers, and the vast knowledge of the galaxy. You have a wrench. The outlook is grim, but Prey guides players on a quest to even the odds through atmospheric corridors on an alien ship. Using strange weapons to plow through enemies that appear out of nowhere (thanks to a cool use of portals), Prey draws you in with otherworldly gunplay and exploration and doesn't let go



NEW SUPER MARIO BROS.
System: Nintendo DS **Release:** May 16

There's something remarkable about the fact that the fundamental gameplay of Super Mario and his equally super but greener brother Luigi has remained unchanged for over 20 years. Sure, this latest DS title adds on wall-hopping, giant mushrooms, and pretties up the graphics. But when it comes right down to it, you are pouring hours into the plumbers' latest adventure for the same reason you did in the '80s. These games are like distilled fun juice, and we're all happily addicted.

Top 10 Villains of 2006



Judge Magisters

[Final Fantasy XII]
Led by the ruthless Gabranth, these warriors exude strength and confidence. They are imposing and politically savvy leaders, but they are most effective at settling conflicts with weapons. You don't get to be one of five elite commanders of an imperial army by being a wuss.



Zant

[The Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess]
Capturing the same terrifying menace as a Sith lord, this mysterious masked figure moves in the shadows and hides his true potential. When he finally puts it on display, players learn with dismay that Zant has more power in one hand than Link has in his entire body. After seeing what this character can do, you'll wonder why Canon was ever scary.



Dracula

[Castlevania: Portrait of Ruin]
We're probably not spoiling anything by revealing that you fight Dracula at the end of Castlevania. The Prince of Darkness has never been a cakewalk, but when you find out what you're up against at the end of Portrait of Ruin, those other confrontations will look like assignments for your Sissy Boss Battles 101 class.



Gary

[Bully]
The main character of Bully, Jimmy, isn't exactly a good guy — but his nemesis Gary represents everything that is wrong with Bullwark Academy. He's condescending and manipulative, with an oily personality that can make your lip curl. But do you hate him because he's a sleaze or because he's better at getting his way than you are?



LEGO Darth Vader

[LEGO Star Wars II]
No longer limited by a PG rating, LEGO Darth Vader can use the Force to tear bodies into shreds and hack anyone to pieces with his lightsaber. Of course, since LEGO people don't bleed (and most of them have a permanent smile emblazoned on their heads), the effect isn't quite as sinister as we had hoped.



DEAD RISING

System: Xbox 360 Release: August 8

Nothing brightens up a summer like hanging out inside with hundreds of bloodthirsty zombies. *Dead Rising* is one of those great games that showed up at a time of year we wish more publishers would release big titles. This strange mix of action, photography, horror, comedy, and good old-fashioned decapitation will pull you in with its unique premise and grisly gameplay. Frank may be a doofus, but he sure knows how to keep us playing for 72 not-so-realhours.



Xenosaga Episode III: Also Sprach Zarathustra

System: PlayStation 2
Release: August 29

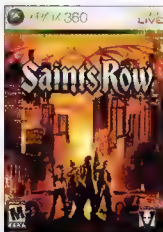
Researchers at Xenosaga University recently conducted a study, unearthing the following indisputable facts. Fact #1: The *Xenosaga* games have more biblical and philosophical mumbo-jumbo than other series on the market. Fact #2: Episode III has even more of that than the first two. Fact #3: This final entry corrects almost all of the faults that brought the last one down, with beautiful graphics and a battle system that is fun. Fact #4: KOS-MOS could destroy you.



Disgaea 2: Cursed Memories

System: PlayStation 2
Release: August 29

Streamlined depth is the name of *Disgaea 2*'s game. If helping a diverse cast of brilliantly realized characters achieve their goals through awesome strategy/RPG combat isn't enough for you, *Disgaea 2* has literally hundreds of hours worth of sidequests to dig into. No game makes pop-culture entering a party of characters as endlessly entertaining as this does, much less deliver a compelling and humorous story alongside.



Saints Row

System: Xbox 360
Release: August 29

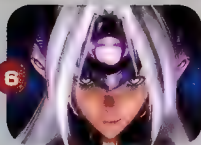
THQ and Volition make absolutely no effort to hide the inspiration for this 'tuggin' sandbox title, but when it tips off *Grand Theft Auto* so well, the Rockstar faithful have little to complain about. Great mission variety (insurance fraud, anyone?), next-gen graphics and physics, tight FPS-style targeting, an easy-to-read GPS mapping system, instant mission restarts, and online multiplayer all make *Stillwater* a city worth visiting.



Company of Heroes

System: PC

Release: September 11
Outstanding depth and realism come at no added cost in this WWII RTS. Somehow, everything from cover mechanics to offscreen bombardment is easily accessible in *Company of Heroes*. Developer Relic's golden touch is evident both in the impossibly high level of polish and the amazing engine that *CoH* runs on. The future of RTS is now, and this is your ticket to endless hours of strategic fun.



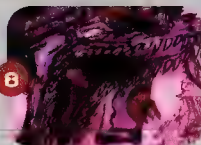
T-elos (Xenosaga Episode III)

Ever since the first *Xenosaga*, we knew that the only thing in the universe that could defeat KOS-MOS is another KOS-MOS. That's where T-elos comes in. A more powerful and refined battle machine than her blue-haired predecessor, the fights between these two female androids are among the coolest in the whole realm of science fiction.



General RAAM (Bears of War)

There are foes you love to hate, and then there are foes you truly fear. RAAM is the latter, considering that every time you see him, it's to watch him slaughter one of your comrades. Brutal and merciless, he likes looking into the eyes of his victims before they die... preferably as he holds them over his head impaled on a sword.



Orochi (Okami)

The true form of this legendary eight-headed dragon is a sight to behold, and a cool fight to boot. After going to the trouble of learning the Celestial Brush techniques to confront Orochi's eight terrifying visages, what turns out to be this boss' biggest weakness? Boaze. Some people just lose their keys when they're drunk, but Orochi loses his chance to plunge the world into darkness.



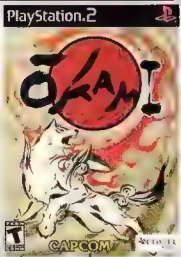
Clannfeora (The Elder Scrolls III: Oblivion)

Anyone who has stumbled into an Oblivion gate knows the most terrifying sound in this whole game: the distant squeal of the clanfear. The second you hear it, you know that you're only moments away from being mauld to death by a waist-high, damage-resistant nightmare.



The Rabbits (Razman: Raving Rabbits)

As far as villains go, you can get a lot more evil than the Rabbits. The most distastefully thing they like to do is dance to disco. However, there aren't any bad guys as hilarious as these stupid, ugly monsters. They're manic, violent, crazy, and just as interested in hitting each other as hitting you. They also really enjoy plungers. Hell, who doesn't?



OKAMI

System: PlayStation 2
Release: September 19

Although developer Clover was disbanded by year's end, the respected studio went out on a high note, delivering *Okami*, a gorgeous, poignant adventure that rivals the best of the *Zelda* series. Using an art style deeply influenced by classic Japanese painting and innovative gameplay that cleverly utilizes charcoal brush techniques, *Okami* is destined to be a cult classic for the ages. The game delivers a deep and affecting story with a message of harmony and respect for nature that is a breath of fresh air in the increasingly macho world of games.



Game Breakdown By System

PlayStation 2	19
Xbox 360	16
PC	15
PlayStation 3	6
Xbox	6
Nintendo DS	6
PSP	4
Wii	3
GameCube	0

Wakkyrie Profile 2: Silmeria

System: PlayStation 2
Release: September 26

Apart from the obvious appeal of hot metal-clad warrior goddesses, this long-awaited sequel has other features to attract gamers: The 2D dungeon exploration incorporates brain-bending puzzles to solve, and the 3D battles require thoughtful movement and strategic timing to gain every advantage. Some interesting heroes and vicious villains (Hrist still owns) round out an unconventional but intriguing RPG that is definitely worth your time.



Scarface: The World Is Yours

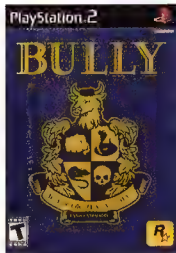
System: PlayStation 2, Xbox
Release Date: October 6

Scarface delivers all the high-testosterone, profane thrills that you would expect from a game starring the one-and-only Tony Montana. Rockstar's Grand Theft Auto series is the jump-off point for a grand adventure that imagines what would have happened if Tony had lived at the end of the film. With a nice set of features and an engaging empire-building aspect, this is one GTA-inspired game that manages to create an identity all its own.

Bully

System: PlayStation 2
Release Date: October 17

No one can accuse Rockstar Games of not believing in their products. To release *Bully*, the company had to stare down the national media, anti-game crusader Jack Thompson, and the U.S. Federal Court system. The game itself is another triumph for one of the industry's most provocative and creative publishers. Rather than the grim, violent fantasy that was predicted by its critics, *Bully* is a lighthearted, bittersweet look at the school experience, filled with variety, humor, and heart. Featuring a memorable cast of characters, *Bully* is social satire at its best.



Top 10 Dorks of 2006



1

T.H.

(Driver: Parallel Lines)

We don't really need to explain why this guy is our dork of the year, do we? Just look at him! Believe it or not, once he opens his mouth, he gets even lazier. Calling this guy a tool isn't enough; he's an entire tool shed, including those stupid lawn gnomes and flamingos in the back—which he would probably wear.

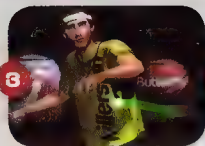


2

Ethan Waber

(Phantasy Star Universe)

We'd like to call a moratorium on all hoverboard-riding protagonists. It hasn't worked since *Back to the Future II*, and Ethan Waber is the perfect example why. Heck, where do you even start with this dope? The vacant expression? The fashion sense? His tiny hamster brain? We'll choose D, all of the above.



3

Luc

(Table Tennis)

You can stop celebrating, your smarmy ponytail-wearing bastard. You won at table tennis, not chess. Our friend Marty wins at table tennis. He also swears lows paper clips. So, you and Marty are on the same level. Congratulations, dilweed.



4

Sora

(Kingdom Hearts II)

"OMG Sora u teh best! Him and Riku and Kairi i gonna get married!" Save it. It doesn't matter if you kill thousands of Heartless, duck-wield keyblades, or fight alongside Auron. If you sing "Under The Sea" in full mermaid gear, you are one of the biggest dorks of the year. Period.



5

Fake Michael Corleone

(The Godfather)

All Pato as Michael Corleone is cool. Random Character Model #446 in the patrol role is weak beyond words. One time, Fake Michael Corleone, Fake Carlo, and Fake Sepico were at a restaurant eating cannoli. Then, Fake Michael Corleone said he needed to use the bathroom, but he really just bolted and left the other dudes with the check. True story.

Splinter Cell: Double Agent

System: Xbox 360
Release: October 17

Though Double Agent appears on all current-gen consoles, PC, and Wii, the Xbox 360 version is the definitive one (we'll see how the PS3 port turns out in 2007). Sam Fisher trades his night crawling for sunlight sneaking this time around in an effort to infiltrate John Brown's Army. Maintaining the trust of both the JBA and NSA is the main challenge here, and can result in multiple endings. But it's the addicting online multiplayer that'll keep you coming back for more.



Dark Messiah of Might & Magic

System: PC
Release: October 24

Most games use enemies as obstacles that players must overcome. In Dark Messiah, enemies are more like rewards, since each group of goblins, mages, or orcs provides endless opportunities for entertainment. Impaling them on spikes, frying them with magic, or skewering them from the shadows makes every encounter intensely satisfying and grisly. Few games can actually make players so excited to start fights.

Marvel: Ultimate Alliance

Systems: PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, PC
Release: October 24 (Xbox 360, PC), November 19 (PlayStation 3)

You know you have something special on your hands when you find yourself saying, "Boy, I really like Thor." Marvel: Ultimate Alliance is the definitive superhero game. It's all about spandex-wearing do-gooders beating the tar out of evil. Whether you are fighting Galactus or simply punching a wall, this game is mindless entertainment at its best. It also does justice to the comics, something video games have struggled with since their inception.



FINAL FANTASY XIII

System: PlayStation 2
Release: October 31

Games like this are exactly why the Final Fantasy series has been so successful for so long. Final Fantasy XIII redefines the formulas of the past and takes the role-playing genre to new levels of depth and interaction. Strong characters, political intrigue, and an engrossing battle system give the game a more universal appeal than previous entries. You don't need to be an RPG nerd to appreciate the good things here. You just need to like awesome games.



Tommy (Dreuz)

He may be good with a gun, but Tommy is dumber than a bag of bags. It's one thing to say that you don't believe in Native American mysticism, but it's another when you've been killed and magically resurrected several times through its power, all while aboard a spaceship. Pay attention, blockhead!



Frank the Ninja (Shadow Hearts: From the New World)

This is a guaranteed way to become a dork: First, find a bus stop where buses no longer run, and lament how lonely the bus stop sign must be. Remove the sign, affix it to a sword hilt, and use it as a weapon. Then, stomp some dooly-looking angler fish doo-hickey on your forehead. Hey, it worked for Frank!



Goat Boy (Onimusha: Dawn of Dreams)

Preschool must have been hard for of goat boy, having to sleep next to lambs and ducks at nap time. Oh, we're assuming he went to preschool at a petting zoo. "Cuz, you know, he's got those horns... and they, um, they make him look like a goat. A goat with a sword. Seriously, this guy sucks.



The Mailman (The Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess)

It's great to have a job you love, but the mailman goes too far. Someone this excited about delivering letters just can't be cool. He does warn you not to get in the way because he's so fast and might run you down (which is awesome), but he's just too intense. Settle down, man.



Chibi Robo (Chibi Robo)

We have a word for people who bend over backwards to make life easier for others, and that word is "sucks." Hey, Chibi Robot Compute this equation: willing tin can + performing mental chores + from Japan = Fun game. Error! Error!

Top 10 Moments of 2006



1 THE CLASH OF STEEL

(THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: TWILIGHT PRINCESS)

The mastermind behind this riveting tale doesn't rely on magic or any cheap fighting tactics. He's intent on gutting you with a sword. What unfolds is one of the most action-packed and lengthy swordfights in any game. Your arms will be aching with satisfaction.

2 "HABOOOM!" (Ghost Recon: Advanced Warfighter)

After a harrowing battle, your teammates give you the all clear. As you work your way unopposed toward what seems to be the end of the mission, the building directly in front of you explodes, showering debris and smoke everywhere. For most gamers, this surprise moment lead to many controllers being thrown, and many manly voices turning girly. It is an amazing spectacle to say the least.

3 Setting the Stage (Final Fantasy XII)

Square Enix has a knack for getting gamers excited. The opening cinematic of Final Fantasy XII showcases a Lord of the Rings-scale ground battle, an aerial assault similar to Star Wars, and a plot that you just want to jump into.

4 Shooting Through Walls (Resistance: Fall of Man)

In Resistance: Fall of Man, Insomniac Games has crafted some of the finest weapons to date. The standard armament in this high-powered arsenal is the Augur, a weapon that can shoot through walls. Taking out enemies that seek cover is hysterical, and it's an amazing sight to see the Augur's blast pass through a surface.

5 Taking Back the Planet With a Friend (Gears of War)

Mankind is all but wiped out, and millions of gun-toting creatures want you dead. It's a terrible situation to be in, but as long as you have a friend at your side, everything is going to be all right. Gears of War's cooperative play never gets old. Playing the game with a buddy is easily one of the best moments of the year.

6 The Mascot Misison (Bully)

Jocks love one thing: football. To make this pea-brained bunch submit to your Machiavellian will, you don the disguise of their beloved mascot and make a mockery of their sacred game. You tinkle in their sports drinks, put glue on the bench, and rearrange the scoreboard letters so they read "Jocks Play With Their Balls." You may be offended if you wear a varsity jacket, but for a bunch of nerds like us, we found this mission to be a real side-splitter.

7 Oblivion Epiphany (The Elder Scrolls III: Oblivion)

After investing countless hours into this game, there comes a moment where you realize that you haven't even started the main quest, and all of your time has been spent on side jobs. This is the only time that we'll justify someone saying "whoa" in the same voice as Keanu Reeves.

8 Disemboweling at the Mall (Dead Rising)

What's more fun than watching a zombie fall down a flight of stairs? Pushing them down the stairs! Humiliating and brutalizing zombies in Dead Rising's colorful mall never seems to get old, especially when you can chop them up with a lawnmower, rip out their intestines with your bare hands, and watch their brains trickle out through a showerhead.

9 Don't Fear the Reaper (Prey)

If aliens ever abduct us, we hope that they have the courtesy of turning it into an unforgettable event... and we're not talking about the probing. Prey's abduction sequence is a moment that we'll cherish forever. Beams of serene green light dance through the sky, cars, cows, and arcade machines take flight, and then a jukebox belts out Blue Oyster Cult's "Don't Fear the Reaper" as we are sucked into the ship. Brilliant.

10 Free Bird (Guitar Hero II)

At some point in your life, you probably yelled "play Free Bird" at a concert, but now you'll see why bands never play it. Just the mention of it prompts multiple warnings from the game to make sure that you are truly ready to attempt playing it. Conquer its insane riffs and you'll be freed from this pathetic planet to live with aliens as a guitar god.



Lumines II

System: PSP
Release: November 2
 If you never want to read the words "puzzle game" and "Hollaback Girl" in the same sentence, you should turn back now. Lumines II expands on the solid puzzle gameplay of the original while adding more recognizable songs like Gwen Stefani's "Hollaback Girl" and Beck's "Black Tambourine." Even with the videos for these songs playing in the background, the block-dropping insanity continues as it ever did, and there are tons of new skins, modes, and other ways to enjoy Q Entertainment's definitive handheld puzzler.



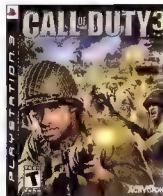
Neverwinter Nights 2

System: PC
Release: October 31
 Faithfully translating Dungeons & Dragons into a video game has long been the holy grail of legions of nerds, and NWN 2 comes closer than anyone could reasonably expect. An intriguing story, a cast of characters complete with their own personalities and motivations, and hardcore D&D rules-nerdery make this a great RPG out of the box. Once the mod community starts running full-speed with the powerful toolset, NWN 2 will truly be a game for the ages.



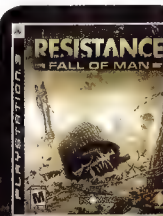
Need for Speed Carbon

System: PlayStation 3, Xbox 360
Release: October 31 (Xbox 360), November 17 (PS3)
 What do you do when street racing is passé? You make the thrills bigger than ever. Taking to the winding, vertical canyons propels this series to new heights and pushes you and your car to their limits as driving on the edge becomes the only way to win. Add in some exclusive multiplayer modes and a city map full of challenges, and you might have to check your living room for skid marks.



Call of Duty 3

System: PlayStation 3, Xbox 360
Release: November 7
 Activision's latest ode to WWII isn't a huge step forward from Call of Duty 2, but that's not to say it doesn't offer a gratifying Nazi-hunting experience. The single-player campaign, which follows the liberation of France, offers warfare so intense you'll need a post-traumatic stress counselor when you're done. The star of the game, however, is the much-improved multiplayer.



RESISTANCE: FALL OF MAN

System: PlayStation 3
Release: November 17

Insomniac Games has largely made a name for itself by combining adorable woodland creatures with inventive weapons of mass destruction. When you remove the huggable element, we see that Insomniac is capable of creating intense first-person epics that stand up there with the Halos and Call of Duties of the world. Resistance's single-player campaign has some teeth, but the game really tears into you with its amazing multiplayer.

Top 10 Disappointments of 2006

1 THE PS3 LAUNCH

When people are getting shot and robbed at your console's launch, you know you should have spread the love a little better. The PS3 kickoff wasn't just marred by too few systems; backwards compatibility issues and a lack of scaling also put a dent in the debut. With Xbox 360 (and Xbox Live) already on the ground, and the cheaper price of the Wii, Sony would do well to get as many PS3s in stores as possible.

2 MICROSOFT BLOWS ITS LEAD

Microsoft gets a whole year to itself before its competitors start to make a game of it, and what happens? It squanders it with the delay of several high-profile games. In this holiday season, when it could have carpet-bombed the market with exclusive titles, we only get one good one — *Gears of War*. *Crackdown*, *Mass Effect*, *Forza Motorsport 2*, *BioShock*, and more have yet to see the light of day. If only it had released *Halo 3* day-and-date with the PS3 like Bill Gates had threatened.

3 NO ONLINE Wii GAMES FOR LAUNCH

In this day when online play is an absolute must, Nintendo's previous lack of commitment to an online strategy has caught up to it. Not only are there no games at launch for the Wii that play online, the system's own weather and news channels weren't ready to go out of the box. We hope that this isn't a sign of things to come.

4 THE LACK OF A UNIFIED HD MOVIE FORMAT

We want to take *Bluray* and *HD-DVD* by the hair, clunk their heads together, and scream, "Sort it out, you knuckleheads!" If there's one thing that consumers love more than a lack of systems at launch, it's a good format war. Which HD movie format has the Lord of the Rings? Which one has more studios behind it? Which side wants to screw you out of the least money? Such is the meaning of life now that we have to decide between *Bluray* and *HD-DVD*. Don't ask us.

5 THE HALO MOVIE GOES MIA

Gamers were disappointed when *Grandma's Boy* had fewer laughs than *Million Dollar Baby*, and yet they were even more disappointed when Peter Jackson declared that the *Halo* movie was being indefinitely postponed. The studios say that they're looking for funding. Jeze, lift up Jackson's mattress, the guy's gotta have a billion or two hidden under there. *Halo* fans will have to wait to see their hero Master Chief on the big screen. Let's all pray that Microsoft doesn't demand a simultaneous release of *Halo 3* and the movie.

6 THE PSP'S LACK OF PROGRESS

People love their PSPs, but there are just never enough good games to play on the damn thing. For every sweet *Grand Theft Auto* title, there are a billion other games that don't know what to do with its ill-conceived single analog stick design — including Sony's own first-party titles! Also, it's never a good sign when the proprietary format you made bombs and movie studios stop backing it. Especially when you're the folks who pushed both *Beetamax* and the *MiniDisc*.

7 OLIVER CLOSSES

Capcom opens *Clover Studio* to make awesome games. It does giving gamers hits like *Viewtiful Joe* and *Okami*. Capcom closes *Clover* and sends development brains like Atsushi Inaba and Shinya Mikami packing. Too bad Capcom wasn't actually committed to sweet games, otherwise it would have had *Clover* continue to do what it was already doing best. *Mega Man* re-release anyone?

8 WHAT THE HELL HAPPENED TO SONIC TEAM?

There was a time when seeing "Sonic Team" on a game meant gold, but now it's worth less than a used bus ticket. The developer has been on a *Sonic* the Hedgehog death spiral that is spinning so fast it actually gives other sub-par Sega products a reason to be cheerful for a change. The last time these guys made a meaningful game, we were talking about the Y2K epidemic (the year, not the yeast infection).

9 VIDEO GAME SCORPE-SORTING

The only thing more desperate than a politician is a politician in an election year. The mid-terms brought out all the video games-an-bad doomseers quicker than Mark Foley at a Cub Scout tent pitching contest. Anti-game legislation was rolled out in states all across the land, and self-righteous bilge was celebrated from sea to shining sea. Luckily, they were all unconstitutional, so we can all go back to fighting real crime on Dateline's To Catch a Predator series.

10 THE DEATH OF E3

Most of you never went to E3, so you'll never miss the fact that the show environment is a horrible place to showcase games: the long lines, the miles of useless crap, the disorganization, and the fanboys that constate your every step. But yeah, it is better to have loved and lost (especially when jammed in a line front-to-back with a sweaty guy wearing a "Sarnus, Will You Marry Me?" t-shirt) than to never have loved at all.

GEARS OF WAR

System: Xbox 360.

Release: November 7

A brilliant cover mechanic, combined with some of the most visceral combat in gaming, catapults *Gears of War*'s gameplay into the stratosphere. The tactical action is even better with real people taking over for the AI, and *Gears* comes through on that front as well. Silky-smooth co-op play over Xbox Live, as well as fantastic variations on deathmatching for competitive play, make sure that *Gears* won't give up its spot in your 360's drive easily.



PlayStation 2



Guitar Hero II

System: PlayStation 2

Release: November 7

Guitar Hero had you thinking you were way cooler than you really were. And that's just fine. Its sequel does the same thing, but adds one of your buddies into the illusion. And that's hilarious. With its co-op thrashing, *Guitar Hero II* has probably resulted in more broken living room lamps than any game in history, as wannabe rockers jumped around the room in their best Slash impressions. Well, we've got some sad news for you. Until you've rocked out in the desert with the wind blowing back your overy-long curly hair, you're no Slash. At least you have the dozens of songs and multiple difficulties of this amazing music game to console you.

XBOX 360



Tony Hawk's Project 8

System: PlayStation 3,

Xbox 360

Release: November 7

(Xbox 360), November 17

(PS3)

Developer Neversoft Entertainment has once again reinvented this franchise with an entirely new career mode, improved graphics and animation, and yet another new move for players to master. The player's journey to become one of eight top elite skaters, or the Project 8, is guided by *My Name Is Earl* star Jason Lee, who is a professional skater himself. The path to skating fame and glory isn't easy, but if you are good enough, maybe you could get your own show on NBC — heck, it seems like they will give one to anybody.

XBOX 360



Medieval II: Total War

System: PC

Release: November 14

Epic dashes between thousands of beautifully animated, individually detailed troops are just the beginning of *Medieval II*'s depth. Managing diplomacy, conquest, and economic viability for a continent-spanning empire will keep the most adept strategist enthralled for months. Alternatively, skimming over the details allows you to get to the parts of the game you love — the choice is yours, and you win either way.

Top 10

Publisher of 2006

1 NINTENDO

(LAST YEAR: 5)

What does it take to be number one? How about having a wicked amount of support for your handhelds: New Super Mario Bros., Super Princess Peach, Yoshi's Island DS, Tetris DS, and Final Fantasy V Advance just to name a few. Then there is that whole matter of releasing not only one of the best launch titles, but possibly the greatest game ever. Thanks, Nintendo.

Top 10

Developer of 2006

1 NINTENDO

Nintendo's ability to single-handedly support a hardware platform is legendary, and 2006 was no exception. Creating the Game of the Year in Zelda just solidifies Nintendo's place as the best developer of the year.



2 Ubisoft (Last Year: 2)

This year is bookended by two of Ubisoft's best games: *GRAY* and *Rainbow Six Vegas*. It released some of the better Wii launch titles, like *Rayman Raving Rabbids* and *Red Steel*. It also showed the PC some love with *Dark Messiah of Might & Magic*.

3 EA (Last Year: 1)

EA may have stumbled a little this year, but came on, being number three isn't bad. We got some great games like *Need for Speed: Carbon*, *Fight Night Round 3*, and *Tiger Woods PGA Tour 07*.

4 THQ (Last Year: N/A)

THQ publishes a lot of stuff, though not all of it is memorable. Still, with *Saints Row*, *WWE Smackdown! vs. Raw 2007*, *Titan Quest*, and *Cars* (a kids' game that's actually respectable), it's easy to see why this publisher made the list.

5 Activision (Last Year: 2)

Activision had another killer year cranking out the sequels we love: *Tony Hawk's Project 8*, *Marvel: Ultimate Alliance*, and *Call of Duty 3*. It also bought the company that owns *Guitar Hero*, and that certainly wasn't stupid.

6 Square Enix (Last Year: 10)

The RPG giant certainly didn't hold anything back this year. With its breadth of titles ranging from epics like *Final Fantasy XII* and *Kingdom Hearts II* to fun little titles like *Dragon Quest Heroes: Rocket Slime* and two *Yokaiya Profile* games, we barely had time to play all its games.

7 Capcom (Last Year: 9)

Capcom brightened our summer with *Dead Rising*, and it also kept us excited for the visually stunning *Clover* masterpiece *Okami*. Capcom also kept us playing on the go with *Mega Man* and some anthology games, not to mention its sweet special edition release of one of 2005's best games, *Devil May Cry 3*.

8 2K Games (Last Year: N/A)

2K doesn't want us to have friends. That's why it released the life-stealing epic *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* (some of us are still playing this one). It also put out the unique FPS *Prey* and a couple of good games from Sid Meier, including a great *Civilization* collection.

9 Namco (Last Year: N/A)

Namco had a lot of games this year, but *Castlevania: Portrait of Ruin* is by far our favorite. This was also a good year for Snake fans, with two PSP *Metal Gear* games and the *Substance* re-release.

10 Rockstar Games (Last Year: 8)

One of the things we love about Rockstar is that it is consistent in not putting out bad games. Even in a year without a triple-A title, it managed to make the list with games like *Bully*, *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City Stories*, and a solid port of *Grand Theft Auto: Liberty City Stories*.

2 Square Enix

Renovating old titles may be a big part of Square Enix's game plan, but original content like *Final Fantasy XII* and *Kingdom Hearts II* push the company way past most of the competition.

SQUARE ENIX



3 Relic Entertainment

Non-stop triple-A quality year in and year out is Relic's modus operandi, and this marked the company's best year yet with *Company of Heroes* and *Warhammer 40,000: Dawn of War - Dark Crusade*.



4 Ubisoft Montreal

Sure, different studios have helped create *GRAY* and *Rainbow Six Vegas*, but Ubisoft's Montreal studio is still the mega-publisher's flagship developer. Nearly everything Montreal touches turns to gold.

UBISOFT

5 Epic Games

Gears of War is absolutely fantastic, but creating, maintaining, and supporting *Unreal Engine 3* is Epic's true genius. UE 3 may not be the de facto next-gen standard yet, but it's getting close.



6 Bethesda Softworks

Pushing the role-playing genre's boundaries with *Oblivion*, tackling the *Star Trek* franchise, and continuing to create engaging downloadable content make Bethesda one of our favorite companies in the industry.

7 Clover Studios

Sadly gone now, Clover Studios nonetheless contributed a ton of quality to gaming in 2006. Any developer that gives us anything on the order of *Okami* is welcome here. You'll be missed, Clover.

8 Incominco Games

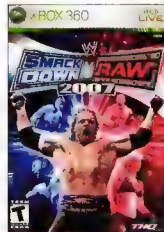
Continuing its tradition of creating some of the best games in the business, *Resistance: Fall of Man* is the jewel in Incominco's 2006 crown. That the game is for brand-new, unique hardware at launch only makes it more impressive.

9 Harmonix

Improving on the greatness of *Guitar Hero* is no small task, but Harmonix did more than we could have asked for with *Guitar Hero II*. Not to mention the fact that the game somehow makes "Carry On My Wayward Son" cool.

10 Blizzard Entertainment

Blizzard didn't even release a game this year, but maintaining and growing *World of Warcraft* is a Herculean task worthy of making this list. Keeping those seven million subscribers entertained is a truly amazing feat.



WWE SmackDown! vs. Raw 2007

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox 360

Release: November 14
The wrestling in this series has always been pretty good, but what we like about this entry is how it ratchets up the brutality. We love smashing people's heads into chairs, grating their faces along the ground, smashing their heads into TVs, strangling them with speaker wire, smashing their heads into car trunks (well, we think you have a sense for how we play). Seriously, the brutality in this game is almost as rewarding as watching the Fatalities from *Mortal Kombat*, and that is why this is on our list.



Yoshi's Island DS

System: Nintendo DS

Release: November 15

Just by taking a look at this title, you can probably tell that portable games had a good year, but we would be remiss if we didn't also list this game. Nintendo added four new babies, all of whom live up the classic side-scrolling gameplay by providing Yoshi with character-specific powers. Fans of the old SNES game were not disappointed with this sequel.



Rainbow Six Vegas

System: Xbox 360

Release: November 22

Sick of fighting all your battles against terror in warehouses, ports, and embassies? So are we. By exchanging these tired locales for the glitz and glamour of Vegas, the *Rainbow Six* franchise leaped to triple-A title status. The game features the best cover system ever implemented in an FPS, and the four-player co-op is so good it should become a standard feature for all shooters moving forward.



Rayman Raving Rabbids

System: Wii

Release: November 19

At what point in the life of a game developer do you step into an early concept meeting for your new Wii launch game and announce: "Okay, we're going to make a game about manically evil bunnies?" This is a question only Michel Ancel could answer. While he's at it, maybe he could tell us what it takes to release a polished, fun game for a brand new system that also happens to be one of the funniest experiences you can have with a controller in your hands. Rayman's collection of minigames had us rolling, and gives gamers a taste of what varied activities the Wii will offer as more games start coming our way next year. Plus, it had lots and lots of bunnies.



THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: TWILIGHT PRINCESS

System: Wii
Release: November 19

When Twilight Princess first made its debut at 2004's Electronic Entertainment Expo, you would have thought that the Beatles had entered the building from the reaction that it received. People were jumping out of their seats. People were pumping their fists into the air. And some people even broke down into tears at the very sight of Link riding across the plains of Hyrule on his trusty steed Epona. While this reaction may seem a bit much for a game, you have to immerse yourself into one of these adventures to truly understand the power that comes with the journey. There really is nothing else like it. With Twilight Princess, Nintendo has sculpted the finest Zelda yet. Its dungeons are the most creative. Its story is the most moving. And thanks to the Wii, its action is the most exciting. This is what gamers live for. When the voting began for Game of the Year, the decision was unanimous. And when the voting for Greatest Game of All Time begins, don't be surprised if this game stands tall with the best in history.

GAME INFORMER
★ ★ OF THE ★ ★
YEAR
2006



Castlevania: Portrait of Ruin

System: Nintendo DS
Release: December 5

Leveling up and getting loot is fun. Doing so in a tightly tuned side-scrolling action game with a great setting and a cool story is one of the best experiences in gaming. Portrait of Ruin is all this and more. The bosses are as sweet as ever, the weapons are varied, and using both of your heroes to overcome the many challenges of Dracula's castle is a hell of a good time. Just don't come crying to us when the final boss whups your butt 20 times in a row.



Fight Night Round 3

System: PlayStation 3, Xbox 360
Release: December 12 (PlayStation 3), February 21 (360)
This game teaches us that it really is better to be a nerd than a pro athlete, because getting punched in the face looks like it hurts. Here the term "next-gen" isn't just a word, it's a state of being, as the physical pounding your boxer takes hits home with every punch. The PS3 version's use of first-person in the Get in the Ring mode takes this to a new level, and the game's tight analog gameplay makes Fight Night Round 3 an undisputed heavyweight champion.

METAL GEAR SOLID: PORTABLE OPS

System: PSP
Release: December 19

Konami won't let us print our full report on Big Boss' next mission until our February issue – but we have been playing the review build like crazy. The game combines unmistakable Metal Gear Solid story and action, all within the series' official canon; this is no card-based offshoot. Add addictive collection and multiplayer components, and MGS: PO becomes one of the most irresistible games available for the PSP.



Top 10 Worst Games of 2006

1 TAO'S ADVENTURE: CURSE OF THE DEMON SEAL

(NINTENDO DS)

This year saw the DS overcome gimmicky touch-screen titles and branch out with compelling, entertaining games. Apparently, Tao's Adventure didn't get that memo. Obsolete in all regards and fun in none, this dialogue-scrolling simulator is pretty spectacular in the sheer number of ways it fails – like someone who manages to crap their own pants in multiple places... somehow.



2 Pokémon Mystery Dungeon (Nintendo DS)

We got your letters about this one, and we want to set the record straight. Just because you're controlling an actual Pokémon instead of some idiot in a baseball cap does not automatically make this game good. Mystery Dungeon is fraught with terrible design choices at every turn, and if you don't recognize that now, you will when you're older – like 10 or 11.

3 Bomberman Rot Zero (Hbox 980)

Look, the only reason anyone likes Bomberman is because it's inherently fun to blow up your friends. When that's removed, you just get grotesque mockery of the franchise, otherwise known as Bomberman: Act Zero. This game forces players to turn to Xbox Live for multiplayer, and shoehorns in an "edgy" Robo-Bomberman that looks a corporate mascot for Mountain Dew circa 1995. "Whoa! Neon is radical! To the max!"

4 Spy Hunter: Nowhere to Run (PlayStation 2, Hbox)

Some say the Spy Hunter movie was cancelled because of John Woo, but we think it was because of this awful game. Because so much in this heap went wrong, it's actually easier to say what this game does right: nothing. On the plus side, it does have the Rock wearing aviator sunglasses and a pommo mustache... but even that is only a good thing for a very particular crowd.

5 Mobile Suit Gundam: Crossfire (PlayStation 2)

If you start up Crossfire, you might think that you've stumbled across a secret tutorial on how not to make video games. As you slog through the boring missions and gunfights, just imagine Alan Thicke (he voices training videos, right?) saying stuff like "Games don't like looking at ugly environments. Remember your textures," and "Unclear level objectives can make players frustrated and angry. Avoid them." If only more developers listened to Alan Thicke.

6 Commandos Strike Force (PlayStation 2, Hbox, PC)

Remember Commandos? After this, you'll wish you didn't. Not only does this game dig up an old property, but it does so with shoddy tools. Controls, level design, and especially graphics fall face-first in the mud in front of you, like corpses blocking your path to what could have been an average instead of terrible WWII FPS.

7 Final Fight: Streetwise (PlayStation 2, Hbox)

Streetwise succeeds at capturing urban reality, providing that "urban reality" is just a bunch of hackneyed stereotypes and swearing. Here's a fun bit of trivia: Streetwise was so bad that Capcom actually shut down the developer, its U.S. development house Production Studio 8. Unlike the other terrible games on this list, at least Streetwise had an impact on the industry!

8 Jaws Unleashed (PlayStation 2, Hbox)

Here's a quick lesson in marine biology. Sharks, especially bloodthirsty ones, are avid collectors. They are especially fond of keyboards, and will even go so far as to jump onto dry land to obtain them. This is just one of many things we can learn about underwater life from video games. Next week we'll discuss how Cheep-Cheeps are capable of flight, and why they attack plumbers.

9 Super Monkey Ball Adventure (PlayStation 2, GameCube)

Part of the fun of Monkey Ball is the unpredictable controls, and Super Monkey Ball Adventure takes that to the next level, occasionally depriving you of control altogether! In the action/platforming world, that doesn't really work. There's also a story for some reason, because apparently someone cares what these stupid monkeys do when they aren't competing in minigames.

10 25 to Life (PlayStation 2, Hbox)

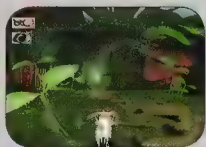
Surprise! When all of a game's development efforts are focused on generating controversy instead of good mechanics, the game is bad. Faltering in the gameplay along with its self-awful gittiness, it's fun to point and laugh at how inept 25 to Life is at everything it attempts. It reminds us of a daredevil who grandstands about leaping a gorge, then hops on a Huffy.

Top 10 Editors' Picks



Andy

- 1 World of Warcraft (PC)
- 2 Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess (Wii)
- 3 Gears of War (Xbox 360)/Resistance: Fall of Man (PS3) (Tie)



- 4 Okami (PS2)
- 5 The Elder Scrolls III: Oblivion (Xbox 360)
- 6 Rainbow Six: Vegas (Xbox 360)
- 7 Ghost Recon Advanced Warfighter (Xbox 360)
- 8 Castlevania: Portrait of Ruin (DS)
- 9 New Super Mario Bros. (DS)



Reiner

- 1 The Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess (Wii)
- 2 Final Fantasy XIII (PS2)
- 3 The Elder Scrolls III: Oblivion (Xbox 360)
- 4 Rainbow Six: Vegas (Xbox 360)
- 5 Resistance: Fall of Man (PS3)
- 6 Okami (PS2)
- 7 Kingdom Hearts II (PS2)
- 8 Gears of War (Xbox 360)
- 9 Marvel: Ultimate Alliance (PS3/Xbox 360)



- 10 Guitar Hero II (PS2)



Matt

- 1 Okami (PS2)
- 2 Guitar Hero II (PS2)
- 3 Fight Night Round 3 (PS3/Xbox 360)



- 4 New Super Mario Bros. (Nintendo DS)
- 5 Gears of War (Xbox 360)
- 6 Ape Escape 3 (PS2)
- 7 Bully (PS2)
- 8 Tony Hawk's Project 8 (PS3/Xbox 360)
- 9 Daxter (PSP)
- 10 Tetris DS (Nintendo DS)



Hato

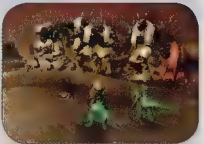
- 1 Final Fantasy XIII (PS2)



- 2 Gitaroo Man Lives! (PSP)
- 3 Guitar Hero II (PS2)
- 4 Tony Hawk's Project 8 (PS3/Xbox 360)
- 5 Metal Gear Solid: Portable Ops (PSP)
- 6 Winning Eleven 9 (PS2/Xbox)
- 7 Fight Night Round 3 (PS3/Xbox 360)
- 8 Need for Speed Carbon (PS3/Xbox 360)
- 9 The Elder Scrolls III: Oblivion (Xbox 360)
- 10 Madden NFL 07 (PS2)



Adam



- 1 World of Warcraft (PC)
- 2 Final Fantasy XIII (PS2)
- 3 Company of Heroes (PC)
- 4 Rise of Nations: Rise of Legends (PC)
- 5 Dark Messiah of Might & Magic (PC)
- 6 The Elder Scrolls III: Oblivion (Xbox 360/PC)
- 7 New Super Mario Bros. (DS)
- 8 Gears of War (Xbox 360)
- 9 Castlevania: Portrait of Ruin (DS)
- 10 Neverwinter Nights 2 (PC)





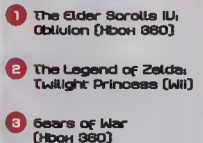
Joe



- 1 Final Fantasy XIII (PS2)
- 2 The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion (Xbox 360)
- 3 Shadow Hearts: From the New World (PS2)
- 4 Metal Gear Solid: Portable Ops (PSP)
- 5 Hidenaga Episode III: Aka Sprach Zarathustra (PS2)
- 6 Dark Messiah of Might & Magic (PC)
- 7 Devil May Cry 3: Special Edition (PS2)
- 8 Valkyrie Profile 2: Silmeria (PS2)
- 9 Lumines II (PSP)
- 10 Bully (PS2)



Miller



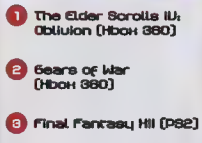
- 1 The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion (Xbox 360)
- 2 The Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess (Wii)
- 3 Gears of War (Xbox 360)
- 4 Okami (PS2)
- 5 Dead Rising (Xbox 360)
- 6 Guitar Hero II (PS2)



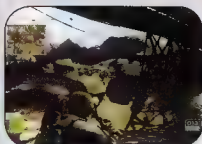
- 7 Tomb Raider: Legend (Xbox 360)
- 8 Lumines II (PSP)
- 9 New Super Mario Bros. (DS)
- 10 Final Fantasy XIII (PS2)



Bertz



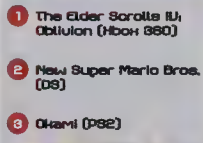
- 1 The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion (Xbox 360)
- 2 Gears of War (Xbox 360)
- 3 Final Fantasy XIII (PS2)
- 4 Rainbow Six: Vegas (Xbox 360)
- 5 The Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess (Wii)



- 6 Ghost Recon Advanced Warfighter (Xbox 360)
- 7 New Super Mario Bros. (DS)
- 8 Company of Heroes (PC)
- 9 Brain Age: Train Your Brain in Minutes a Day (DS)
- 10 Bully (PS2)



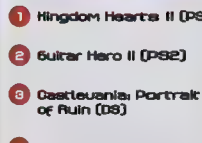
Ben



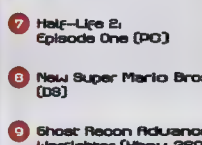
- 1 The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion (Xbox 360)
- 2 New Super Mario Bros. (DS)
- 3 Okami (PS2)
- 4 Half-Life 2: Episode One (PC)
- 5 Final Fantasy XIII (PS2)
- 6 Kingdom Hearts II (PS2)
- 7 Tomb Raider: Legend (Xbox 360)
- 8 Bully (PS2)
- 9 Metal Gear Solid 3: Subsistence (PS2)
- 10 Guitar Hero II (PS2)



Brian



- 1 Kingdom Hearts II (PS2)
- 2 Guitar Hero II (PS2)
- 3 Castlevania: Portrait of Ruin (DS)
- 4 Metal Gear Solid: Portable Ops (PSP)
- 5 Okami (PS2)
- 6 Fight Night Round 3 (Xbox 360)
- 7 Half-Life 2: Episode One (PC)
- 8 New Super Mario Bros. (DS)
- 9 Ghost Recon Advanced Warfighter (Xbox 360)
- 10 Dragon Quest Heroes: Rocket Slime (DS)



- 10 Dragon Quest Heroes: Rocket Slime (DS)





PREVIEWS

A Glimpse Into The Future Of Gaming

PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360 | PLAYSTATION 2 | XBOX | PC

Medal of Honor Airborne

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION (MULTIPLAYER TBA) > PUBLISHER ELECTRONIC ARTS
> DEVELOPER EALA > RELEASE TBA 2007

PARA-SHOOT YOUR WAY TO VICTORY

■ Twenty points if you can hock a loogie on that Jerry to the right

In a recent trip to LA, Game Informer had a chance to get a good look at how the new Medal of Honor Airborne is shaping up. We're happy to say that it's looking good so far. Developer EALA feels that as good as the other WWII shooters like Call of Duty and Brother's in Arms are, they continue to receive criticism in one area of gameplay: linearity. Taking strides to change how WWII shooters play, EA has focused the next MoH game on the heroic adventures of two soldiers, reenacting the historical Airborne operations across Africa, Italy, Germany, and the Alps.

The new AI system has been developed to incorporate something called the Affordance engine. In Airborne your enemies are programmed to be constantly aware of the terrain around them, and they will make a push for certain areas based on their tactical strength. In the build we saw, this seemed to work pretty well; the battlefield was a fluid place where enemies were constantly fighting for better ground. Rooftop action adds an interesting dynamic to this, as you can run over the side of a building and participate in a different firefight taking place on another part of the level, or stalk your opponents by running and jumping to another roof.

All we know about multiplayer thus far is that it will be very deathmatch-focused and support at least seven maps and up to 15 players. Airborne drops will also play a large role in online skirmishes. Just imagine shooting your buddies out of the sky before they even have a chance to fire back. Man, we can't wait to do that! ■ ■ ■

WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE?

Wondering which game to buy to get the full MoH experience? Well, you might have to buy more than one copy, because every adaptation seems to be a little different. Both the PC and Xbox 360 versions will follow the same story, but their online components will reportedly be different. The PS3 will have certain features tailor-made for its hardware. For example, the airdrop that begins each mission will utilize the motion-sensing capabilities of the Sixaxis controller. Finally, the PS2 and Xbox versions will be entirely different games under the Airborne name. EA has a different team working on these titles to create new levels that hold true to the theme of their next-gen counterparts.

■ In one rather embarrassing moment, Johnson realized that he had, in fact, not been standing in line for the bathroom





FURTHER STUDY

Since all of Airborne's missions are based on real WWII operations, we dusted off the history books to bone up on these historical battles so we know what we're up against when we're deployed next year. Chances are you've been here before:

OPERATION HUSKY

July 10, 1943

This Allied invasion of Sicily was a major amphibious and airborne mission that kick-started the Italian Campaign.

OPERATION AVALANCHE

September 13, 1943

A day after the Italians withdrew from the war, American and British troops moved to take the Port of Naples from the Germans.

OPERATION NEPTUNE

June 6, 1944

Neptune was the landing phase of Operation Overlord, the largest saaborne invasion in history. This battle started the Allied Invasion of Normandy.

OPERATION MARKET GARDEN

September 17, 1944

Market Garden was the failed Allied attempt by airborne and armored forces to secure several strategic bridges in the Netherlands. This was the last major German victory of the Western Campaign.

OPERATION VARSITY

March 24, 1945

This Allied mission, aimed at gaining a foothold in western Germany, was the single largest airborne drop in military history. West Point uses this operation as an example of how to conduct an airborne invasion.



Devil May Cry 4

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

NERO'S INFERNO

Since debuting on the cover of our October issue, *Devil May Cry 4* has quickly become one of the most anticipated titles of 2007. After recovering from the revelation that Nero would be replacing Dante in the starring role, fans began speculating about what other new directions the series will be taking. Unfortunately, those answers aren't coming quite yet. Looking at the awesome screens on these two pages, it is far clearer how *Devil May Cry 4* will be carrying on the traditions of its predecessors.

The team at Capcom wants to build on the successful aspects of *Devil May Cry 3*. For instance, the combat in this series has always been fast and combo-oriented, but *DMC 4* will feature a way to gauge your proficiency beyond the letter grades. The meter to the left of Nero's life bar is modeled after a speedometer, and will impact the way players use Nero's sword, the *Red Queen*.

Nero doesn't only share Dante's affinity for fancy blades; he also tends to get mixed up with strange women. The new leading lady is named Kyrie, who stands beside

Nero in the scene where Dante breaks into the temple of the Order of the Sword to massacre its members. The role Kyrie plays in the events remains a mystery, though it will undoubtedly unravel as the story progresses.

Also unknown is the team's plans for the Devil Trigger mode, which opened up a new array of powers in previous games. Because Nero isn't one of the sons of Sparda, *DMC 4* may have to explore new ways to incorporate this demonic transformation. In the demo at TGS, the button that usually initiates Devil Trigger gave Nero a burst of speed, but that may not be the case throughout the whole game. After all, Dante didn't gain his Devil Trigger ability in *DMC 3* until completing several missions.

Given that the series has focused on Dante and Vergil up to this point, it is strange that the significance of the two brothers in *DMC 4* is still up in the air. Thankfully, we don't need to know exactly how Sparda's offspring figure in to predict that *Devil May Cry* will provide its trademark mix of stylish flair and overblown action when it finally hits. ■■■



■ Shooting old men in the head? That's our Dante!





■ The arm develops more powers later, but can only be used to grab and throw enemies at first



■ Kyrie is shown wearing regal attire, but her exact role is still uncertain



■ Though his personality is more reserved, Nero still enjoys a good fight



刺激があるから人生は楽しい

■ Do these guys even stand a chance? The answer, of course, is "no"



刺激があるから人生は楽しい

■ Nero wears a sling at first, since he is trying to conceal his demonic arm



PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360

Army of Two

> **STYLE** 1 OR 2-PLAYER ACTION (2-PLAYER VIA XBOX LIVE OR PS3 ONLINE) > **PUBLISHER** ELECTRONIC
ARTS > **DEVELOPER** EA MONTREAL > **RELEASE** MARCH 2007

WELL, THREE IS A CROWD

EA's new buddy action game seems to be building up some steam. We had a chance to check out some new gameplay footage and it has gotten us excited to play the game ourselves. In Army of Two, you and a buddy can play as two private military contractors (read: mercenaries). The gameplay is built from the ground up with cooperation in mind.

There are several ways to help each other: dragging your buddy to cover when he is wounded, performing CPR on him when he is dying, or exchanging ammo with him whenever he empties his clip into some guy and runs out. We also noticed that you and your buddy can work together to alter the environment. In one scene, both protagonists worked together to flip over a large cement frame and then used it for cover. In several situations, both mercenaries took up defensive positions with their backs against one another. We don't know yet how easy it will be to perform some of these maneuvers or how useful they will be, but it looks like EA is really trying to add some interesting dynamics to evolve the two-player co-op formula.

Vehicles also play a role in the game. We saw both protagonists, Salem and Rios, boarding a hovercraft. One man drove while the other manned the machine gun. Both characters have a diverse move set; they were both fairly adept at moving acrobatically across the battlefield, jumping over objects then hitting the ground with a roll. We even noticed that it is possible to point your gun around your cover and fire without risking the rest of your personage, similar to GRAW.

It should also be noted that you can play this game in single-player mode

with an AI controlled partner. You will never be playing the lone gunman in this game. This is Army of Two after all. You can issue commands to your AI buddy through the microphone, but interestingly enough, he doesn't have to obey them. If he thinks you are sending him on an errand that is a little too reckless, he'll let you know. EA is hoping you'll care about your partner and want to keep him protected and useful whether there is a person at the end of that second controller or not.

We like all of the little interactions that happen throughout the game between the two main characters. It's the nice little touches like this that make us eager to try Army of Two out with some of our friends when the game ships later this March. ■■■■



■ Run out of ammo in the middle of a firefight? Maybe your buddy can loss you some



■ So far we have seen Jeeps, hovercrafts, and tank carriers. No word yet on whether or not you can fly the bird (and we mean the copier)



■ Here you can see how you can work together to create your own cover



PLAYSTATION 2

Tomb Raider Anniversary

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

THE POWER OF NOSTALGIA

Over the years, Lara Croft lost her mystique. Between the movies, comics, and endless reiterative game sequels, the excitement of her explorations began to fade. It wasn't always so. Ten years ago, the idea of this buxom adventurer investigating forgotten burial mounds had a magic all its own, and that magic was recaptured with last year's *Tomb Raider: Legend*. Crystal Dynamics hopes to keep this momentum going with a remake of the first game, *Tomb Raider Anniversary*.

With *Anniversary* being its seventh PS2 game, this studio is well versed in what the console has to offer. The new *Tomb Raider* looks truly phenomenal, even several months away from its spring release. The game is being made exclusively for Sony's second console, in part so that the team can focus on the best possible product on a single system. An approximation of high dynamic range lighting and some intense texture work on both characters and environments result in a world that looks the way your mind imagined those old levels to be, rather than the way they actually are if you go back and play the PSone original.

The levels themselves are a combination of actual passages from the first game and wholly redesigned sections put in place to take advantage of new gameplay abilities. Many of these emerged in *Legend*, where developers finally got rid of the grid-based movement and added physics-based puzzles and objects. Players will also use new tools like the grapple, another addition from *Legend*. The levels that emerge are a strange mix of new puzzles and familiar locations, with less combat than in *Legend* and a return to the exploration focus that the original idea.

This month, we got to see the remake of one of our favorite levels from the first game—the Peruvian waterfall with its cog-driven machinery puzzle. In the old game, you might recall the wall-mounted cogs you had to place in order to stop the flow of water. Now, that same machinery stands dozens of feet tall, with huge moving parts and interconnected platforms. In contrast to last year's game, your path is much less linear, offering players the freedom to explore more freely. We saw one spot where you could clamber along a cliff wall, grapple across to the far ledge, or circle around through a small cave. Like the original level, Lara fought wolves near the waterfall's base as she flipped about with her twin pistols. Later, she emerged into the hidden valley and was assaulted by a pack of ravenous raptors. Finally, as the demo wound to a close, the last shot we saw was of Lara's shocked expression as a giant T-Rex foot came into view.

While no one is saying anything concrete, we see a hidden agenda behind the choice to bring *Anniversary* only to the PS2. With last year's game ending on a complete cliff-hanger, we wouldn't be at all surprised to hear *Tomb Raider Legend 2* announced for next-gen consoles sometime soon. Meanwhile, franchise fans have a lot to look forward to in this nostalgic take on Lara's beginnings. Combining the best of the new and the old, *Anniversary* may remind gamers why they started playing *Tomb Raider* in the first place. ■ ■ ■



■ All the familiar enemies from the original game make a return



■ Lara's new character model is purported to have even more detail than the Legend version.



■ Remember the old swan dive waterfall? It looks a little better these days.



■ The grapple returns from Tomb Raider Legend, offering Lara some cool new ways to get around her environment



XBOX 360

Crackdown

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION (2-PLAYER VIA XBOX LIVE) > PUBLISHER MICROSOFT GAME STUDIO
> DEVELOPER REAL TIME WORLDS > RELEASE SPRING

CO-OP ONE-ON-ONE

With mere months remaining before it hits shelves, there aren't many new revelations or surprise features to unveil about Crackdown. This super-charged, open-world adventure is finally entering the home stretch, and all that's really left to know is how it plays. To address that question, Microsoft and developer Real Time Worlds stopped by the office to give us a taste of Crackdown's much anticipated co-op mode. When we stopped killing each other long enough to work together, it was a blast.

Apart from scaling the difficulty to accommodate another player, co-op is essentially identical to single-player. The bosses of the three gangs are in the same locations — the difference is that you and your partner can utilize tactics that wouldn't be available if you were playing alone. In one instance our target was hiding on a ship, which we approached by scaling cranes around the pier. Coordinating the attack via headset, one of us jumped down to the ship to get the enemies' attention while the other picked them off from a distance, clearing a path straight to the head honcho.

How the two players choose to develop their skills will also affect the possibilities. If you have high explosives and your buddy has high agility, you could throw grenades at a stronghold's front gate while your partner scales the compound and attacks from above. Since the players aren't

required to maintain a certain proximity to each other, you will literally have the entire world to use in planning your attack.

The flip side is that this teamwork-based approach could have some...unexpected consequences. The co-op is Crackdown's only form of multiplayer, which leaves you with only one option if you're in the mood for deathmatch: Take out your buddy.

Before we actually descended on our target at the pier described earlier, there were a good 20 minutes of kicking each other into the ocean, dropping grenades on spawn points, and firing bazookas from behind — all carried out in the midst of enemy assaults. This wasn't your typical jerkwad teamkilling; the skills and environment in Crackdown seem tailored to accommodate the occasional friendly competition between the big hits.

In addition to the multiplayer, other elements have recently seen some fine-tuning. The distinct comic book-inspired visuals look better than ever, and the targeting system allows you to target specific parts of your enemy's body with just a flick of the right analog stick. With the exception of some unremarkable melee combat, everything in Crackdown — from weapons to extraordinary super powers — is coming together in a way that promises to deliver whether you're playing alone or "cooperating" with a friend. ■ ■ ■



■ A high explosives skill will make your grenades much more effective (and impressive)



■ At the game's outset, you'll choose a character model that will evolve along with your skills



■ They aren't as strong as your agent, but the Agency's police force will occasionally lend a hand



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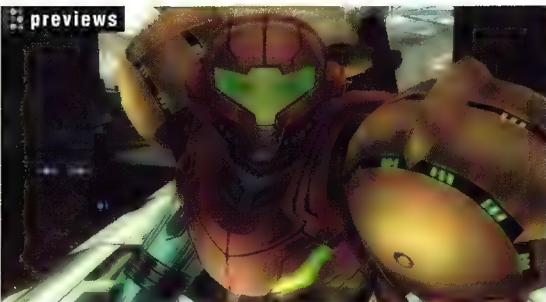
HAVING WAY TOO MANY OPTIONS TO CHOOSE FROM.



PRODUCTS RANGE FROM
EVERYONE TO MATURE
E-M
CONTENT RATED BY
ESRB

Jump in.

 XBOX 360.



Wii

Metroid Prime 3: Corruption

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION/ADVENTURE (MULTIPLAYER TBA) > **PUBLISHER** NINTENDO
 > **DEVELOPER** RETRO STUDIOS > **RELEASE** TBA

ADDING DRAMA

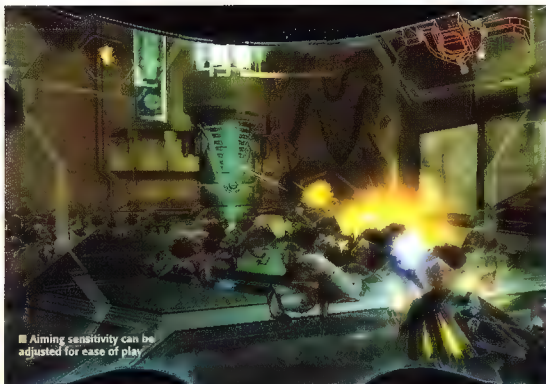
While no one here is going to complain about the greatness of any of the Metroid games, there probably aren't too many people who will defend the storylines as highlights. Retro Studios is trying to change that formula at least a little with Corruption, which ups the ante with a bigger and more complex plot to further draw in players.

Corruption is set six months after the close of Prime 2. The central computer of the Galactic Federation has been corrupted by some sort of virus, and the space pirates are the prime suspects. As the Federation begins to gather bounty hunters (including Samus) together to address the problem, the space pirates strike, and chaos ensues. Soon it becomes apparent that Dark Samus, presumed dead, is behind the attack. Samus' evil alter ego begins to seed planets with contaminated phazon (presumably the root of the computer problem) and our favorite armored heroine must pursue

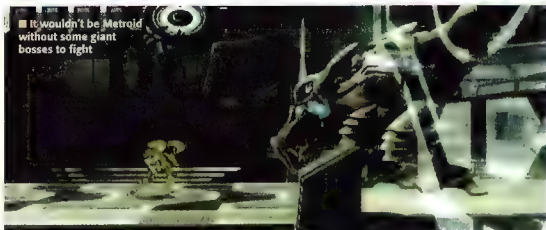
and cleanse the various infected sites.

Nintendo continues to refine the controls introduced at E3. Recently added sensitivity options are something we hope other developers will begin to include in other

Wii games. In the case of Corruption, the options allow you to adjust how fast the onscreen cursor moves in reaction to your twitching hand. By finding your ideal setting, you'll aim with more precision and turn at the speed that feels best. We're also excited about some of the unique hand movements incorporated into the game, like pulling out and turning a huge locked gate mechanism or whipping out an energy beam to yank a door off its hinges. Corruption takes full advantage of the first-person perspective to make you part of the action. There's also a new hyper mode in which



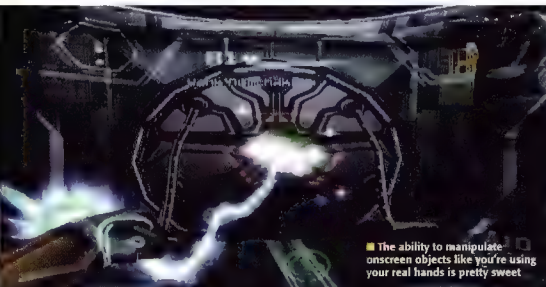
■ Aiming sensitivity can be adjusted for ease of play



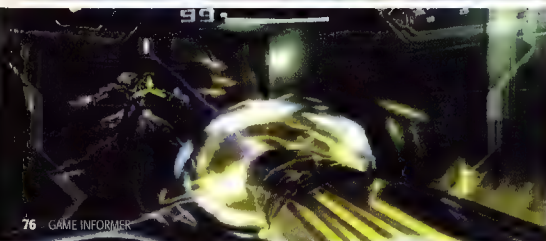
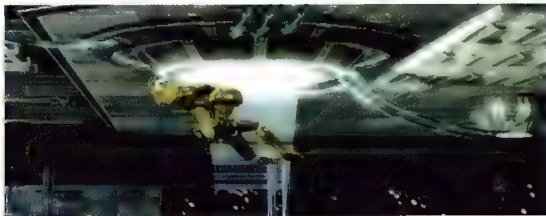
■ It wouldn't be Metroid without some giant bosses to fight

Samus can fill up her phazon supply to a certain point to push her into a heightened period of speed and power. Push the phazon limit too far and it will overload her armor and you'll be seeing a game over screen. Finally, word is that at long last Samus' ship will be used during gameplay. Intingued?

Any questions look like they'll have to wait a little while. Originally planned as a launch game, Metroid Prime 3 has disappeared from the holiday lineup and has no currently announced release date. We'll keep an eye out and let you know details as they emerge. ■ ■ ■



■ The ability to manipulate onscreen objects like you're using your real hands is pretty sweet



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PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360

Cipher Complex

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 16-PLAYER VIA XBOX LIVE OR PS3 NETWORK) > PUBLISHER

> DEVELOPER EDGE OF REALITY > RELEASE TBA

DEVELOPING A COMPLEX

Developer Edge of Reality may not be a household name, but that isn't stopping it from trying to make big games. The company opened in 1998 working on N64 ports for games like *Spiderman* and the *Tony Hawk* series. Given its success, Edge of Reality has been able to remain an independent developer. Currently, it is hoping to revolutionize the

stealth action genre with the next-gen game *Cipher Complex*.

The game begins when U.S. surveillance satellites pick up unusual activity aboard a decommissioned Soviet missile defense station just east of Siberia. When U.S. diplomatic inquiries to the Russian government fail, the Defense Threat Reduction Agency is given the go-ahead for operation BLACKOUT,

■ As you can see, Cipher is stonger than your average bear



a small, plausibly deniable recon mission. The U.S. deploys John Sullivan, code-name Cipher, one of the world's leading experts in hand-to-hand combat.

In *Cipher Complex*, you essentially get to play as a super soldier. With a combat mechanic that uses adrenaline-powered fighting moves, Sullivan will be able to move faster than the enemies that surround him. In fact, he will move so fast that the players' foes will seem to stand still. In the blink of an eye you can

unleash devastating attacks with your combat knife, sending foes soaring across the room before they can even respond.

Calling their game an aggressive infiltration game, Edge of Reality says that the 20-plus levels will feature more high-intensity sneaking and combat than most stealth games. The developer thinks it's time that the military stealth genre got a high-energy – maybe even brutal – makeover. That sounds right up our alley. ■ ■ ■





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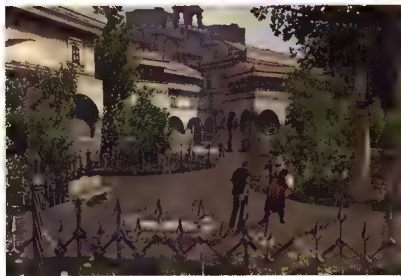


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XBOX 360 | PC

Two Worlds

> STYLE 3-PLAYER ROLE-PLAYING GAME (3-PLAYER VIA XBOX LIVE OR PC ONLINE) > PUBLISHER SOUTHPEAK INTERACTIVE > DEVELOPER REALITY PUMP STUDIOS > RELEASE MARCH

THE POTENTIAL TO SHINE



By now many of you have probably sampled just about all there is to do in Oblivion. If you are ready to sink your teeth into another 100-hour epic, Polish developer Reality Pump Studios is hoping to pull you into its world. Make that two worlds.

The fantasy land that Reality Pump has created has a rich history. Thousands of years ago the god of war, Aziraal, was slain. For centuries his burial grounds have remained unknown to all. However, a recent dwarven mining expedition uncovered a hidden temple to an unnamed god, and secrets to Aziraal's tomb could lie inside. The fractured civilizations of the land are quickly ignited by war, completely blind to the true danger. As one of the few people to unlock Aziraal's tomb, it is up to you to seize this ancient power and either save the world or destroy it.

Two Worlds will be compared to Oblivion in many ways, and rightly so, but there are also areas where Reality Pump is attempting to improve on the formula. One such aspect is how players' actions will shape the world. In Two Worlds, you will leave footprints in the ground that can be tracked and will only fill in so much depending on how much it snows. The grass will also burn and the earth will char whenever there is a heated battle. Basically, you will be able to tell when and where a battle took place.

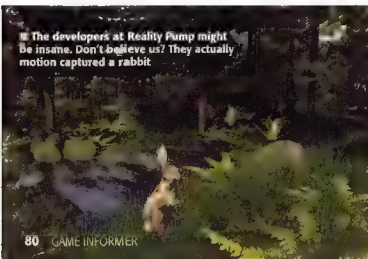
Another example of how you can affect the game story-wise has to do with unlocking abilities. Necromancy is in



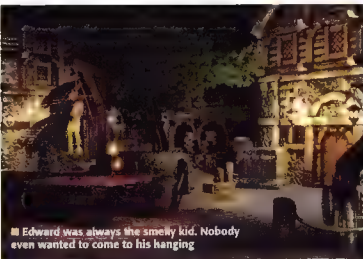
the game, but it isn't available at the very beginning. You can choose to go on the quest and activate the power to raise the dead, but then that magic will also be available to anyone in the world. You can play through the whole game and never fight an undead enemy or someone who processes that dark power, but if you want to use the arts yourself, you have to remember that they will be available to your enemies as well.

Surprisingly, in the single-player game there will be no create-a-character. Every player will control the same hero. Initially, this sounds disappointing, but it has helped the developer retain the fiction of the universe. In multiplayer,

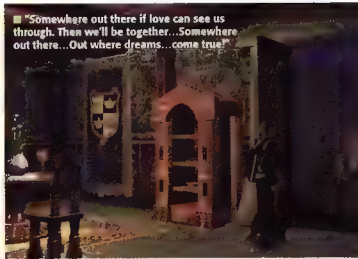
however, players will be able to create whatever character they want, then go online and form parties of eight to complete exclusive online campaigns. Players who go online can also stamp their name on the game's history. Two Worlds' magic system involves using and combining cards to "cook" new spells. If you are the first one to come up with a certain combination, you can name your spell whatever you want, say Trogdor's Fireball. Anyone who then uses that combination will see that it is already named Trogdor's Fireball. With such a deep attention to detail, this might be just the game we need to keep us warm during those cool March evenings. ■ ■ ■



■ The developers at Reality Pump might be insane. Don't believe us? They actually motion captured a rabbit.



■ Edward was always the sneaky kid. Nobody even wanted to come to his hanging.



■ "Somewhere out there if love can see us through. Then we'll be together... Somewhere out there... Out where dreams... come true"

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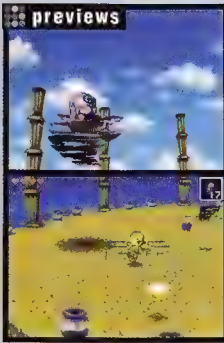
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NINTENDO DS

The Legend of Zelda: Phantom Hourglass

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION/RPG (2-PLAYER VIA WIRELESS) > **PUBLISHER** NINTENDO
> **DEVELOPER** NINTENDO > **RELEASE** OCTOBER 15 > **ESRB** E

THERE IS ANOTHER ZELDA

It shouldn't surprise anyone that Nintendo has gone dark on talking about Phantom Hourglass. When people think of Zelda right now, Nintendo wants them to think of Twilight Princess. Nonetheless, if you recall, the Big N has another Zelda title in process for the DS that continues the look and style of the whimsical Wind Waker.

The last time we saw Phantom Hourglass, we were surprised that the entire game was using the touch screen almost to the exclusion of traditional controls. It remains to be seen whether that control option will be the only way to control Link, or if a d-pad and button alternative will make its first appearance at some point in the future. As for the touch screen approach, what we played showed off a robust system of actions that emulate Link's normal movset quite well.

Like in The Wind Waker, traveling the oceans will be a major part of the game. This time, rather than directing your ship manually, you'll call up a map and set a course for your destination. Once set, the ship will travel the prescribed route as you fight monsters along the way, using your ship's cannon to take down attackers. When on land, Link moves toward wherever you aim the stylus, running and jumping from point to point until he arrives at your chosen location. Other actions are equally intuitive, like drawing a circle around Link to perform a spin attack, or double-tapping a foe to throw an object its way. Once we found our way into a dungeon, we got to try out the cool boomerang functionality, which involves tracing a path with

the stylus for the route you want it to travel, then letting it fly off in those directions.

Nintendo is also planning to include some two-player options. One player will play as Link as the second player controls the monsters in pursuit of him. Link will have to collect a certain number of special force gems to win.



Beyond getting used to the touch screen approach, Link's upcoming DS title feels very familiar, filled with many of the classic Zelda conventions that gamers love. If we were betting men, we'd say that you could expect to hear more about Phantom Hourglass a few months after the Twilight Princess finishes its dance in the spotlight. Until then, we thought you could use a quick reminder that cel-shaded Link isn't dead. ■ ■ ■

PC

Vanguard: Saga of Heroes

> **STYLE** MASSIVELY MULTIPLAYER ONLINE ROLE-PLAYING GAME > **PUBLISHER** SONY ONLINE ENTERTAINMENT/SIGIL GAMES
> **DEVELOPER** SIGIL GAMES ONLINE > **RELEASE** SPRING 2007



■ That dungeon up on the cliff isn't for show — you'll eventually have to go up there to face even fiercer foes.

LEVELED UP

We have to confess, we haven't exactly been riding the hype train for Vanguard. Previous showings of the game haven't exactly been impressive, to say the least. However, after sitting down with developer Sigil Games Online for an extended viewing of the beta, we are happily changing our tune. Vanguard has come a long way, and looks like it could be exactly what a lot of MMO players are looking for when it finally goes live next spring.

Rather than ignore the 800-lb. gonnin in the room, Sigil gladly compared Vanguard to World of Warcraft. "We want to show players, at level one, something cooler than anything you'll see at level 60 in WoW," states president Jeff Butler. "Yeah, right," you're thinking. So were we, until we gazed down from the 1,000-foot-plus cliff and saw a gleaming city built around the delta of a massive river roughly two kilometers distant, with player-created and controlled ships gliding across the bay. Most impressively, everything that we saw — and we saw plenty more that rivaled this initial vista — can be explored via Vanguard's

target, and each of the 15 classes performs their role in a unique way. Monks, for instance, are one of the game's dedicated healing classes, but their healing powers are dependant on going up and hitting enemies to release their power. For example, your defensive target will determine who gets the healing. Offensive and defensive chain combos only add to the depth. Every class has its own mechanic, which should lead to a far more involved style of fighting than traditional "cast frostbolt until dead" methods.

With Sigil's development philosophy of creating content at a ratio of 20 percent solo, 20 percent raid, and 60 percent small group, Vanguard should have something for everyone. Rather than bore you with a list of Vanguard's many features, we'll simply leave you with this thought: If the level of polish that we saw is consistent throughout the game, this will be an ideal stepping stone for gamers who got their start in WoW and want to move on to something a little deeper and more complex. That's high praise indeed. ■ ■ ■

flying mounts, which aren't restricted to any given zone. Everything in the world is right there for you to play around in once you've earned the right. And the world of Vanguard is enormous beyond words.

The combat system, from what we've seen, takes fantasy MMO combat to the next level. Players have both an offensive and a defensive



■ This isn't even the most impressive flying mount we've seen. Seriously.

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PLAYSTATION 3

Bladestorm: The Hundred Years War

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION/STRATEGY (MULTIPLAYER TBA) > PUBLISHER KOEI > DEVELOPER KOEI > RELEASE 2007

DIFFERENT CENTURY, DIFFERENT CONTINENT

We've been complaining for a while about Koei's insistence on not changing the tired formula behind Dynasty Warriors. While that franchise still doesn't appear to have any dramatic alterations planned, at least Koei is working on another tactical-action title that goes in some new directions.

Set during the historical 14th century conflict later called the Hundred Years War, Bladestorm casts players in the role of a rogue mercenary commander. You and your troops fight in the endless battles that took place between French and English armies as they clashed over the issue of who would succeed to the French throne. Your role as a mercenary opens up the mission structure somewhat, letting players choose which side of the fight in which to take up arms.

With the power of the PS3 backing them up, Koei is aiming for some massive character counts onscreen. Between 600 and 1,000 troops will each be acting indepen-

dently as you set and give commands. Koei has likened the action to a mix of Dynasty Warriors and Kessen. As one of around 10 playable commander characters, you won't take direct part in the fight. Instead, you'll order your troops into battle by group and their own AI will determine their individual actions.

Game progression responds to your capabilities as a commander. Reliably control your men and win battles with fewer casualties, and you'll attract better soldiers into your fold. In addition, keep your troops alive and they'll become better fighters with experience. It also appears that a point-driven distribution system will allow you to upgrade units as you see fit.

While an initial look at the graphical quality of Bladestorm doesn't necessarily inspire confidence, it's refreshing to see Koei trying something a little different with their familiar large-scale battle model. We should get to see how the war turns out sometime next year. ■■■■



XBOX 360

Bullet Witch

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION > PUBLISHER ATARI > DEVELOPER CAVIA > RELEASE SPRING 2007 > ESRB E

A HAPPY VISION OF THE FUTURE



Bullet Witch opens with a cinematic describing the fall of the human race. A huge earthquake strikes the western United States in the near future, a larger war breaks out in the Middle East, and a pandemic virus sweeps the globe. To top it all off, demons show up to finish the job. Cheery stuff. On the bright side, there's a girl with a giant gun-broom to help save the world from destruction.

Having not seen much of this popular Japanese game until now, we were surprised by its polished gameplay and pretty graphics. Main character Alicia packs equal amounts of sex appeal and kick-assitude, using both melee attacks and flurries of bullets to drop the undead demons that have swarmed onto Earth of 2013. While her huge gun-rod weapon certainly deals out plenty of punishment, it's her access to spells that sets her apart in the third-

person action scene. One spell acts like a tremendous Star Wars Force push, letting her hurl trucks, trash dumpsters, and just about anything else at her enemies. Other massively powerful spells like her lightning strike can take out just about everything on screen. We played one section early in the game where a well-placed lightning spell completely detonated a gas station, and it seemed as if the entire screen exploded into fragments.

Despite the small installed base of Xbox 360s in Japan, Bullet Witch garnered a good bit of attention when it released across the Pacific. The English localization is well on its way, and what we saw this month definitely put the game on our radar. It might be worth keeping an eye on this one if you're into causing massive destruction in your games. ■■■■



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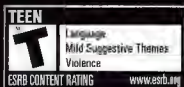
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PHOTOPHILE

Mini Previews With Big Pictures



Wii

Battalion Wars 2

We still don't know a lot about Nintendo's sequel to the GameCube's silly military action/strategy game. We do know that it will feature at least 15 single-player missions and 20 multiplayer maps across three different modes: assault, skirmish, and co-op. Expect to find six different races to choose from with new vehicles for every side. We've always enjoyed the strategy of the Advance Wars series, which Battalion Wars is based on, and hopefully Battalion Wars 2 can utilize the Wii remote to somewhat more faithfully replicate the series strategy when it launches sometime in 2007.



PSP

Dungeons and Dragons Tactics

Atari is getting back to the basics with its latest use of the D&D license, and strategy fans should be just as excited as D&D players about the result. The grid-based battles that play out on your PSP are meticulously modeled after the 3.5 ruleset, right down to attacks of opportunity and encumbrance modifiers. Character creation is as close to the real pen-and-paper thing as you can get, with every major race and class represented. There are even two psionic classes, if that's your thing. A huge number of dungeons and fields to explore add up to dozens of hours of questing and killing. You will face such monster mainstays as mind flayers, beholders, and dragons. While the game may end up being too complicated for some, it should be just the thing for fantasy buffs to wile away the cold months when it releases early next year.



Wii

Mario Ware Smooth Moves

When we first heard of Nintendo's new controller, this series was naturally one of the first things we thought of. Come January we will finally get to see our dreams come to life. Smooth Moves will pack 200 microgames that utilize the Wii remote in interesting ways, making you perform insane tasks like giving high fives to puppies and inserting dentures into the mouths of the elderly. Yeah, we have some weird dreams.



PLAYSTATION 2

Lumines Plus

Not to be confused with the sequel recently released for PSP, Lumines Plus is coming to the PS2 in February courtesy of Buena Vista Games. Lumines Plus isn't quite a port, but it isn't a sequel either. The game will feature the same modes and interface as the first Lumines (with two-player split-screen versus instead of online), but it has several new skins from Lumines II thrown into the mix. It may not have all the sleek new improvements, but gamers who never got a chance to play the original can check out Lumines Plus to see what all the commotion is about.

PC

Silverfall

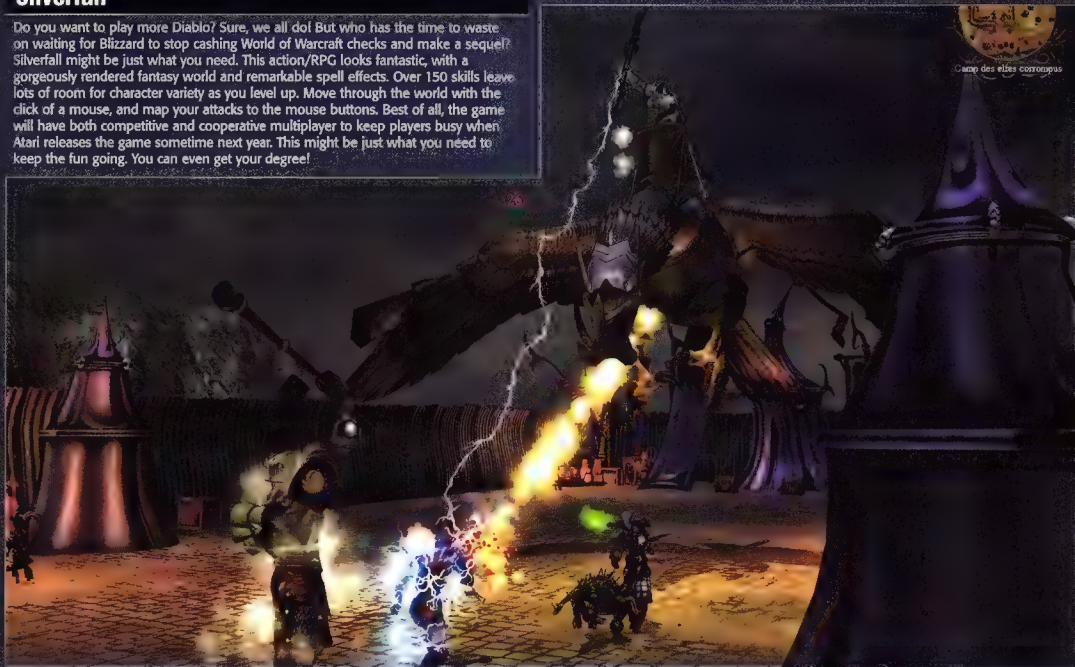
Do you want to play more Diablo? Sure, we all do! But who has the time to waste on waiting for Blizzard to stop cashing World of Warcraft checks and make a sequel? Silverfall might be just what you need. This action/RPG looks fantastic, with a gorgeously rendered fantasy world and remarkable spell effects. Over 150 skills leave lots of room for character variety as you level up. Move through the world with the click of a mouse, and map your attacks to the mouse buttons. Best of all, the game will have both competitive and cooperative multiplayer to keep players busy when Atari releases the game sometime next year. This might be just what you need to keep the fun going. You can even get your degree!



NINTENDO DS

Mega Man Star Force

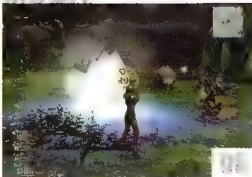
Mega Man Battle Network just will not die! Capcom is retooling the RPG-lite collect-a-thon gameplay into this new franchise for the Nintendo DS, scheduled to appear stateside next fall. Star Force features a new perspective that has players controlling the battles from behind the main character, a link system that allows you to tap into the powers of friends who also have the game, and the same Saturday morning cartoon sensibility that Battle Network has had for years. Players will have to navigate both the physical world and the Wave Road (a parallel world of electromagnetic waves) in order to save existence from the depredations of evil aliens. The main character's name is Subaru, so you'll have plenty of automobile-related jokes to pass the time as you catch 'em all...err, collect all the Battle Chips.



REVIEWS

We Play The Crap So You Don't Have To

MULTI



Phantasy Star Universe

PS3



Fight Night Round 3

WII



Excite Truck

XBOX 360



Rainbow Six Vegas



The Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess

The Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess is not only a must-have launch title, it's one of the greatest games ever made. Just when you thought this legendary series couldn't possibly live up to the hype, Nintendo comes out with the most riveting entry yet. Labyrinthine dungeons, explosive combat, and a cinematic flair usher Link into the next generation of gaming — and that's just scratching the surface. To discover everything this astounding game does right, turn to the full review on page 102. The wait is finally over.



Castlevania: Portrait of Ruin

Once again, Konami has managed to stuff enough innovation and new content into the latest handheld Castlevania to prevent it from being more of the same. A unique way of controlling two heroes, fresh environments unlike anything we've seen in the series before, and the most hair-raising epic boss fight in Castlevania history make this a clear winner. Get your vampire slaying on over on page 114.

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** Owned. You know, kinda like waiting in line for 24 hours to pick up your PS3 or Wii preorder and walking away empty-handed.

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

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

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

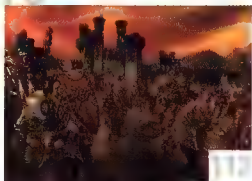
> **Playability:** Basically, the controller to human interface. The less you think about the hunk of plastic in your hands, the better the playability.

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

> **Replay Value**

- High** — You'll still be popping this game in five years from now.
- Moderately High** — Good for a long while, but the thrills won't last forever.
- Moderate** — Good for a few months or a few times through.
- Moderately Low** — After finishing it, there's not much reason to give it a second go.
- Low** — You'll quit playing before you complete the game.

PC



Warhammer: Mark of Chaos

HANDHELD



SOCOM U.S. Navy SEALs: Fireteam Bravo 2



Medieval II: Total War

When it comes to simulating ancient war, the Total War franchise has been top dog since its inception. This latest entry in the series has all the fantastic strategic gameplay of its predecessors, combined with several streamlined systems and a shiny new graphics engine. Find out why this is the best way to experience the Dark Ages on page 112.

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The Edge

When All Content 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 (= interlaced), to create a noticeably sharper image. The 480p image offers higher picture resolution and eliminates virtually all motion artifacts in a 640x480 pixel resolution setting.

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

action – A term we use for games like Devil May Cry and Viewtiful Joe.

ad hoc – A type of wireless connection that connects you with other players in your immediate vicinity.

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

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

bloom – An effect that simulates the soft, blurred glow of bright light reflecting off of surfaces.

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

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

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

fighting – A term we use for games like Mortal Kombat and Dead or Alive.

first-party – A game made by a console manufacturer’s internal development teams exclusively for its own system.

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

FPS – Frames Per Second. How many animation frames happen in one second. Also used to denote First-Person Shooters like Halo, Doom, and Call of Duty.

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

front-end – A game’s menus and options.

garbage and staples – What we look turns throwing at Miller after reading the first sentence of his Will Marvel Ultimate Alliance review.

GBA – Game Boy Advance.

GC – GameCube.

HDTV – High Definition Television.

infrastructure – A type of wireless connection that uses the Internet to connect with other players over long distances.

isometric – Three-quarters top down view, like StarCraft or Baldur’s Gate. Dark Alliance.

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

jiggles – 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 the 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 three-bit containing 3D information, revealed by light reflecting off the surface, is swapped 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 Pop Pop Pop.

roster – 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 Xenogears.

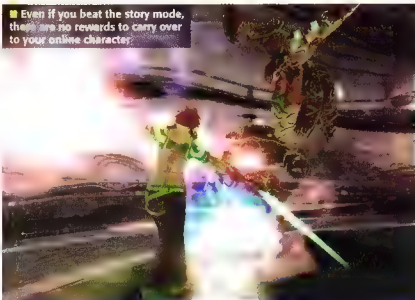
shooter – A term we use for games like Fraggle and Crusus.

sports – A term we use for games like Madden NFL.

strategy – A term we use for games like La Pucelle and Front Mission.

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

■ Even if you beat the story mode, there are no rewards to carry over to your online characters.



■ Players can freely switch between the three main classes: Hunter, Ranger, and Force User



XBOX 360 | PLAYSTATION 2 | PC

Phantasy Star Universe

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ROLE-PLAYING GAME (MMORPG VIA XBOX LIVE, PS2 ONLINE, OR PC INTERNET) > **PUBLISHER** SEGA > **DEVELOPER** SEGA
> **RELEASE** OCTOBER 24 > **ESRB** I

A FADING STAR

No one can deny that Phantasy Star has an illustrious past. From traditional 2D adventures to card based grid combat, this series has successfully applied its brand of role-playing to a variety of gameplay styles. This is most evident in the pioneering Phantasy Star Online, the Dreamcast title that introduced console gamers to the MMORPG. Phantasy Star Universe attempts to tap into the same addictive online formula, but has been so far outpaced by its con-

temporaries that its efforts are almost humiliating. The future is growing dark for this classic franchise.

Phantasy Star may have its roots in single-player RPGs, but if you're looking for a solid story mode, PSU is a grave disappointment. The plot is boring, and the characters are the same clichéd archetypes you've probably seen a hundred times before — especially the doofus protagonist, Eihan Weber. The story mode can't even distinguish itself in terms of gameplay, since it just recycles elements from the online side and contorts them to fit within the restrictions of single-player framework.

There are several PC games that count the online multiplayer as the main mode, and that is also the case with PSU. Given that, I just can't understand why it feels so broken at every turn.

The movement of other players on-screen is jerky and imprecise — even when you stand still. C'mon, look around! It's



edge

When All Games Aren't Created Equal

In terms of features, all three versions are essentially the same. The 360 has in-party voice chat and single-player achievements, but those shouldn't be deal-breakers. Instead, decide based on who you want to play with online; PS2 and PC gamers can play together cross-platform, while those with the 360 version are on separate servers and can only play with each other.



■ Choose from four customizable, embarrassing races



“The future is growing dark for this classic franchise.”

not like the game needs to render any gorgeous graphics

The missions have a shocking lack of variety, mostly just forcing you to do the same handful of things, but with stronger foes. This could be remedied with Sega's monthly content updates in the future, but it's a pretty pathetic offering for launch. Oh, don't forget it will also cost you \$10 per month to play what little is there.

Phantasy Star Universe does give players an avenue to kill a bunch of monsters with their friends when it isn't tripping over its own feet. The combat provides simplistic thrills, and it's always gratifying to equip a sweet new weapon. On the other hand, those few redeeming qualities are readily available in many other games that are well-executed and enjoyable. I suggest you look into those instead. —JOE

BOTTOM LINE 6

> **Concept:** Create another online Phantasy Star without learning any new tricks in the five years since the last one

> **Graphics:** Substandard, even for a cross-generational game. Some of the special move effects are cool, though

> **Sound:** Generic and repetitive, and the story mode has the added burden of bad voice acting

> **Playability:** Character creation for the online game is cool. Too bad my character lives in a boring world

> **Entertainment:** If you and five other friends were huge PSO fans and want to keep the party together, then (and only then) will this be fun

> **Replay Value:** Moderately High

Second Opinion 6.25

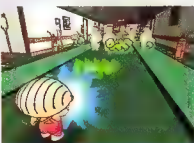
Like a tagalong little brother, Phantasy Star Universe barely manages to keep pace with the games it's trying to emulate. On the single player side, it's a BRPG with clichéd characters pushed through a galaxy-saving story with all the emotional force of a well-blown sneeze. Huge empty spaces between missions at the central hub headquarters halt any momentum you might build. Once in actual combat, the action is relatively fun, but certainly no different in any real way from earlier games in the franchise. Still, cool weapon effects and bizarre monster designs have their own sort of appeal, even if the muzzak playing in the background doesn't add any excitement. Multiplayer is pretty much the same, but adds a detailed character creator and the ability to play with any gullible friends you manage to reel into the experience. Too bad it has a dummey and buggy server system. This is a game that offers just a little less than what you'd expect from it — and you have to ask yourself if that's all you want from a game these days. —MILLER

MULTI QUICKIES

PLAYSTATION 2 | XBOX

Family Guy

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION > **PUBLISHER** 2K
> **GAMES** > **DEVELOPER** 11 BIT VOLTAGE SOFTWARE
> **RELEASE** OCTOBER 16 > **ESRB** M



BOTTOM LINE

5.5

I plopped past men washing each other in a prison shower, shrunk down to microscopic proportions to invade Peter's testicles, and I even punched an old lady with a walker directly in the face. At the very least, Family Guy delivers new experiences that, depending on how open-minded you are, may be side-splittingly hilarious. The show's writers and voice talent have done a tremendous job bringing their trademark humor to the game, and even make some great jobs at video game stereotypes. The game, however, is a complete disaster, and is just barely playable. The content is definitely worth seeing, but you'll have to trudge through garrling hell to see it. —REINER

PLAYSTATION 2 | XBOX | PC

Reservoir Dogs

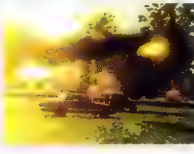
> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION
> **PUBLISHER** EIDOS INTERACTIVE
> **DEVELOPER** BILT7 GAMES
> **RELEASE** OCTOBER 24 > **ESRB** M

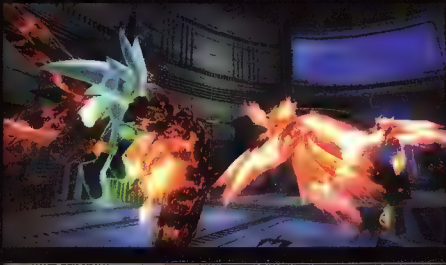


BOTTOM LINE

5.75

Reservoir Dogs is one of those thoughtlessly enjoyable movies. With that in mind, Blitz Games probably should have taken a little more time with this license. The sad thing is that this game does have some good ideas, like the ability to threaten people into submission with hostages, and a rating system that ranks you somewhere between psychopath and professional depending on how you perform in the level. Unfortunately, the cartoony graphics, stilted shooter gameplay, and completely random car missions fall what could otherwise be a passing game. —BEN





PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360

Sonic The Hedgehog

> **STYLE** 1 OR 2-PLAYER ACTION > **PUBLISHER** SEGA > **DEVELOPER** SONIC TEAM > **RELEASE** NOVEMBER 14 (XBOX 360), DECEMBER 19 (PS3) > **ESRB** E10+

NEXT-GEN OPPORTUNITY KNOCKS, LEAVES

The latest Sonic the Hedgehog game opens with an impressive evening CG festival in a city reminiscent of Venice. Realistic humans dance around, and the princess lights a classy pyrotechnics display. All of a sudden, wacky Dr. Eggman kidnaps Princess Elise and a three-foot tall cartoony blue hedgehog zips in to save the day.

This ridiculous mix of realistic fantasy and ultra cute characters permeates the entire game. There are several scenes of lovebirds Sonic and Elise prancing through idyllic green fields like Anakin and Padme. But the story later delves into some cool time travel twists and differing perspectives on the same events.

Over the course of the main quest, you can unlock Shadow and the all-new Silver, who can levitate objects for projectile and platforming purposes. These alternate character options provide a nice relief after several camera-related deaths with the anthropomorphic mammal you were previously using. Speaking of cheap deaths, why does Sonic survive a dip in liquid hot magma, but dies instantly when he touches water or sand? Sand, people!

Nonetheless, there's a whole lot of game for the hardcore Sonic set to check out. Three separate quests and a special bonus quest will keep fans busy for quite a long time.

In the end, Sonic nuts will love it. Everyone else should stay away.—**BRYAN**

BOTTOM LINE **6.75**

> **Concept:** Throw in some RPG and romantic elements to the same old Sonic formula and see if it sticks

> **Graphics:** Sonic and his pals look better than ever, but environmental features are a little flat and bland

> **Sound:** Featuring the unnecessary celebrity voice of Lacey Chabert as Princess Elise and standard cheesy music and voice acting

> **Playability:** Expect to fall off a lot of cliffs due to the persistently horrible camera. That is, when you're not sitting back watching Sonic run through loops on his own

> **Entertainment:** The story, though outlandish and nonsensical at first, eventually incorporates an interesting mix of intertwining time travel, pathos, and all-star teamwork to defeat an ancient evil

> **Replay Value:** Moderately High

Second Opinion **6.25**

I'll give Sonic the Hedgehog this: it's ambitious. Featuring dramatically improved graphics, yet another new playable character (Silver the Hedgehog) in addition to the old "favorites" (quotes to indicate irony), a new RPG-style overworld, and a handful of vehicles, there's quite a bit of game here. However, at this point, Sega's bit like a homeowner who is busy installing a new patio and hot tub while the foundation is crumbling. The basic play control is still erratic and frustrating (especially as Shadow), and the camera is fairly amazing in its ability to take the action out of your view. To be honest, I think the time spent adding new content to this franchise would be better spent working on the fundamentals of gameplay.—**MATT**



■ Sonic destroys his 5,734,892nd robot



■ Shadow, Elise, badass

XBOX 360

Star Trek Legacy

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION/STRATEGY (UP TO 4-PLAYER VIA XBOX LIVE) > **PUBLISHER** BETHESDA SOFTWORKS > **DEVELOPER** MAD DOG SOFTWARE > **RELEASE** NOVEMBER 21 > **ESRB** E10+



BOLDLY GOING

You'll have to excuse a little enthusiasm for a game that so lovingly offers so much of what Trek fans have long clamored for. Legacy is a game rooted in Star Trek lore filled with amazing visuals that offers the chance to fly around in pretty much any starship you've ever cared about in the long history of the franchise. Soured by some nagging flaws, Legacy isn't a title that will appeal to everyone. However, its willingness to try something new deserves some healthy praise.

Appropriately, Star Trek Legacy spans the full history of characters and ships from the various shows and movies. A story about a mad Vulcan scientist stretches out over the centuries, and connects the stories of the various captains (voiced by the actual stars) and their ships. Individual missions play out as military conflicts across whole solar systems, where you take control of up to four ships at once and phaser your way through different objectives. The campaign has players controlling Federation ships. However, the skirmish mode and online multiplayer let you adopt the roles of Klingon, Romulan, or even Borg task forces.

In whatever mode you play, you're in for some chaotic space battles, as literally dozens of ships can be in play at once. Because you're juggling multiple ships, weapon arcs, ship speed, power output, and mid-flight repairs, Legacy manages to make slow-moving ship-to-ship space battles exciting, and that's no small feat. Sadly, that need to multi-task creates a high learning curve that isn't remotely friendly. Campaign missions can get pretty lengthy, and one failed objective means a total level restart. It doesn't help that your ally AI doesn't include the option for basic orders like patrol or guard. The most frustrating failures come when you just can't get your ships to go where you want or target the right thing, and an attack fails to pieces as you watch.

Despite these problems, this game should be a no-brainer for Star Trek enthusiasts. This is a great direction to take the Star Trek gaming franchise, and I can only hope Mad Dog is given the chance to expand and perfect the formula through Xbox Live expansions, and maybe even a sequel. Until then, live long, prosper, and make sure anyone you play on Live doesn't get the chance to do the same.—**MILLER**

■ Battles are hectic and frenzied, as you juggle a dozen things that all need to be happening at the same time



BOTTOM LINE **7.75**

> **Concept:** Battle through the different Star Trek eras

> **Graphics:** Positively gorgeous space vistas and meticulous ship models make it a marvel to look at

> **Sound:** Voice acting from the real captains, and an original score that sounds like it should be placed in the next TV series

> **Playability:** A very steep learning curve never really gets comfortable, and ships aren't as responsive as they should be

> **Entertainment:** A huge treat to faithful Trek followers, but a little too complex and frustrating for many others

> **Replay Value:** Moderately High

Second Opinion **6.5**

Star Trek Legacy does one thing well: capture the mojo of the Star Trek universe. Playing through the game really does feel like taking the helm of the Enterprise (in any of its incarnations) for the course of several episodes of the show. Unfortunately, the gameplay limps along at sublight speeds more often than it engages warp drive. The ponderous capital ships of Starfleet are nearly impossible to maneuver, much less fight with. Also, the strategy of deploying your fleet effectively to best complete your objectives is simplistic enough to be boring to all but the most inexperienced of admirals. As Star Trek, this title is enjoyable enough. As a video game, it's nothing more than mediocre.—**ADAM**

...continued from page 3

As the story continues to unfold down here on Earth about what may or may not be happening on the ship orbiting the planet, one thing's for sure: If those people are to get home, it will be thanks to your efforts.

...st place Tommy even the reaction from taken. He was the mechanic friend, Jen explore. It's a good for all of them up there, that Jen reluctant to go.

Tommy has never been very into his ancestry, but if you ask his co-workers they'll tell you that he holds those do him very dear. He'll go to any length to protect the people he cares for.

The only thing we know about the ship that's circling us and stealing us from random is that no one come there. We can only assume they being enslaved, killed or worse. is an option, and if you ask what worse than being killed, just think about for a second or two.

To combat forces like this someone needs to be relentless, tough, fearless and quick. Tommy embodies all of these characteristics and more. He has always been athletic. Blessed with a physique that holds muscle and a mind that keeps him alert, the Cherokee mechanic is ready for anything. Rest assured, his skills are facing the ultimate test as we speak.

He's always been in search of the ultimate adventure. Those who worked at the roadhouse with Jen remember him coming in before quitting time. "He would sit at the end of the counter and look through books about big cities, small campgrounds, beaches and foreign countries. The whole time, you could see the sparkle in his eyes like he was imagining himself in those pictures," says a waitress named Dawn.

His grandfather once echoed those

can not control my life. He must...

Shortly before the abduction, Tommy began telling those close to him that his grandfather, now deceased, had been appearing to him. If this is true, it's likely that his grandfather is up there with him now acting as a spiritual guide and helping him to make all the right decisions.

It's safe to say that this is the adventure he was looking for, he's got more than he can handle right now. Telescope images of the space ship reveal a sinister exterior. If the outside looks that bad, it's safe to say there's no carnival going on inside. Except maybe for Tommy. This could be just what he's been dreaming of. It might just be what inspires Jen to tell him she's ready to see the rest of the world with him. If they can just make it home first.

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- > **Concept:** Give a fresh coating of paint to a year-old game
- > **Graphics:** Better than the Xbox 360 version in most respects
- > **Sound:** Same 12 hip-hop songs and bombastic bone crunching
- > **Playability:** Punches feel just a bit faster and more responsive than on that other next-gen console
- > **Entertainment:** Still the perfect game to get testosterone flowing, especially in a room full of dudes
- > **Replay Value:** High

> **Replay Value:** High



Second Opinion **9**

Fight Night on PS3 offers the same bone-crunching punches that made the 360 game so great. For raw realism, it's unrivaled. Like a birthday gift to the new system, EA has included one huge bonus for the PS3. The new Get in the Ring mode plays entirely in first person. This new angle on your opponent is, in a word, intense. As you dip and weave in front of his attacks, there's a terrifying quality to his ceaseless assaults. Take too much damage to one of your eyes, and you'll see the screen on that side darken to a reddened haze. Sid Spindig has guard with a ruthless uppercut and you can feel your knuckles tighten for the hit. I'm not sure I'd always want to play like this, but it's definitely a cool addition. Unfortunately, if you fall in love with this mode, you won't get to enjoy it anywhere else in the game, including the career. I'm not sure why the developer opted to leave this exciting new feature out of the rest of the game, but at least it's there in some form. Unfortunately, the PS3 Fight Night shares the same problems that held back the earlier iteration — repetitive announcing and some really AI being the most egregious offenders. It's enough to make it lose a point in my scoring, but not enough to keep me from having this as a bout you really have to fight. —MILLER



PLAYSTATION 3

Fight Night Round 3

> **STYLE** 1 OR 2-PLAYER SPORTS (2-PLAYER VIA PS3 ONLINE) > **PUBLISHER** ELECTRONIC ARTS > **DEVELOPER** EA CANADA
 > **RELEASE** DECEMBER 12 > **ESRB** T

FACE STEAK FOR ALL

From the moment you hear Sean Biggs and Co. sing, "I know you like my swagger/ Oh, oh," upon loading up Fight Night Round 3 on PlayStation 3, you might think you're in for the exact same game you fought through last year. For the most part, you'd be right. Everything from the menus to the lengthy career mode returns with few changes. But thankfully EA Canada made a few minor tweaks here and there when porting EA Chicago's boxing breakthrough.

Skin textures on the in-game character models are among the most realistic in all of video gaming. The 360 fighters may have looked really good, but these guys look damn good. Winkles

on their foreheads, moles and chest hairs on their torsos, and bulging veins in their arms had me admiring the male form way more than any hetero guy should admit (which obligates me to mention that the ring girls are noticeably hotter this time around). The pugilistic sweat shine looks so good that you'll be dabbing off your television screen between rounds. The only graphical element that's taken a step back is the shiny shorts. They're more like stiff stove pipes than the flowing fabric of the 360 iteration.

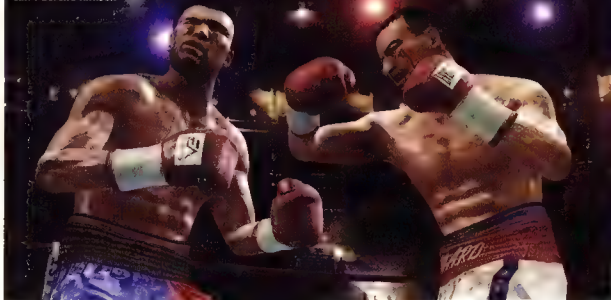
The biggest addition to the Fight Night formula is the Get in the Ring mode, which allows you to punch out chumps from a first-person per-



spective. Analog fighting controls remain almost exactly the same, outside of the obvious adjustments to movement around the ring. It's quite satisfying (not to mention intimidating) to look your opponent in the eye while you're trying to knock his teeth out. The sim effect is slightly diminished by the fact that you're fighting with two disembodied, floating arms. But I guess it's a more effective solution than see-through, green-grid Little Mac from the arcade version of Nintendo's Punch-Out!! As cool as it is to see your blood blurring up the screen and a violent camera shake every time you get rocked, this mode just doesn't have that certain something from the main game, which is probably why it isn't available in career mode. Most people will just try a fight or two and go back to the normal view.

It's tough to tell if the PS3 version's graphical pizzazz is due to superior hardware power or simply more development time. Round 4 will have to be the true next-gen test. —BRYAN

■ The ref only threatens to stop the fight if one boxer can't defend himself



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Objects in the environment can wreak havoc on other racers

PLAYSTATION 3

Full Auto 2: Battlelines

> STYLE 1 OR 2-PLAYER RACING (UP TO 8-PLAYER VIA PS3 NETWORK) > PUBLISHER SEGA > DEVELOPER PSEUDO INTERACTIVE > RELEASE NOVEMBER 17 > ESRB T

DESTRUCTION WITH MEANING

The first installment of Full Auto embraced the true essence of destruction. Buildings collapsed under the might of wayward rockets, parked cars transformed into infernos as roadsters zoomed by with machine guns ablaze, and it was only a matter of time before a gas station was permanently removed from the face of the Earth. Watching pristine city streets become war-torn wastelands led to much amusement, but also the revelation that Full Auto's strongest element was the devastation unfolding on the side of the road. The racing itself lacked spark, and ultimately it ended up being one of gaming's most explosive yawns.

With the PS3 sequel, developer Pseudo Interactive has made a strong push to blend the destructive elements with the racing. Now, structures struck with weapon fire can topple onto your opponents, causing magnificent, fiery chain reactions. Combining these elements not only leads to more excitement on the track, it adds layers of unpredictability and strategy that you don't see in other racing games. Should I target

the car in front of me? Or should I aim for the bridge up ahead to try and take out the entire pack? It's this kind of strategizing that gives this sequel a ferocious bite.

Better yet, the vehicles no longer feel like they are floating anymore. You can feel weight being distributed as you turn, and the differences between vehicle classes are more prominent.

The racing is now roaring with excitement, but unfortunately, the game has gone flat in another way. The newly implemented arena battles resemble Twisted Metal in design, but play so poorly that it feels like someone is dragging your face across the pavement at 100mph. The dunce enemy AI, frustrating targeting system, and annoying level designs will make you dread these stages when they pop up in your career.

These segments put a damper on the experience, but they aren't enough to deflate it entirely. Pseudo Interactive has created a respectable racing game that stands out as something different. Outside of the arena battles, this is what I wanted to see from the original game.—REINER



Weapon loadouts are fully customizable

BOTTOM LINE 7.5

> **Concept:** This sequel strikes the perfect balance between racing and environmental destruction. This is the smash-em-up, blow-em-up fest that the original game wanted to be.

> **Graphics:** There's s— blowing up all over the place. It's a festival for the manual eye.

> **Sound:** The machine gun sounds theme and the rocking soundtrack blends nicely with the intense play.

> **Playability:** Vehicle controls have been addressed, and the interactive destruction opens up new options.

> **Entertainment:** A solid racer both online and off that is held back only by its Twisted Metal imitation.

> **Replay Value:** Moderately High

Second Opinion 7.5

I feel like I'm reviewing two different games stuffed unceremoniously together on one disc. One is an explosive mix of racing and destruction that offers such a feast of speed blur and wild action that it's hard to tear your eyes from it. The other is a misbalanced chore of arena battles and regrettable protection missions where frustration is served up as a main course. Can you guess which game I'd prefer to play? The racing mechanic from the earlier 360 Full Auto game has been vastly improved, and if the whole shebang consisted of those insane dashes, I'd be a happy gamer. But add in some poor imitation of Twisted Metal-style battles, and I'd just as soon go outside and rake leaves. Problem is, the linear setup of missions means I have to play the crappy part to get to the too-short fun stuff. The franchise still has the potential to be entertaining, but this installment is still firing just shy of the target—maybe next time.—MILLER

PLAYSTATION 3

Call of Duty 3

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 24-PLAYER VIA PS3 ONLINE) > PUBLISHER ACTIVISION > DEVELOPER TREVARCH > RELEASE NOVEMBER 14 > ESRB M



DUTY CALLS AGAIN

Just as Call of Duty 2 was a standout shooter for the Xbox 360 debut, Call of Duty 3 earns a Distinguished Service Medal as a must-play launch title for the PlayStation 3. Everything we loved about the Xbox 360 version—the ferocious single player experience, the awe-inspiring graphics, and the improved multiplayer—have reported for duty on the PS3.

The single-player mode may not offer anything new, but it benefits from a more focused campaign than the previous Call of Duty titles, which had you fighting on several different war fronts. You'll still spill blood in the trenches from three different perspectives (this time as a Joe, Brit, and Pole), but COD 3 centers around one historical campaign: the Breakout of Normandy. The Allied forces are working with the French resistance to push back the Nazi invasion and save the cheese-eating surrender monkeys (Just joking, France).

The only real difference between the Xbox 360 and PS3 versions is the Sixaxis motion-sensing controls. The standard gameplay remains intact, but motion-sensing is implemented for melee moves, navigating vehicles, shooting sniper rifles, and the annoying minigames scattered throughout that have you fighting Germans face-to-face and planting explosives on flak cannons. While smacking Nazis in the face with the butt of your rifle by aggressively rotating the controller can be satisfying, overall these controls don't make or break the gameplay.

If you own both an Xbox 360 and a PS3, choosing which version of this accomplished WWII shooter to buy comes down to how much you like or dislike the motion-sensing elements.—BERTZ

BOTTOM LINE 8.75

> **Concept:** Allied forces fight in Normandy to liberate the French and send the Nazi war machine back into Germany.

> **Graphics:** Looks nearly identical to its Xbox 360 counterpart, which is a high compliment.

> **Sound:** Has there ever been more immersive sound in a video game?

> **Playability:** By-the-numbers shooter, with a few annoying minigames sprinkled in between firefights.

> **Entertainment:** Another intense round of "spot the Nazi, shoot the Nazi." The single player may lack innovation, but the multiplayer is better than ever.

> **Replay Value:** High

Second Opinion 8.5

Surprising absolutely no one, Call of Duty 3 is almost exactly the same game on the PS3 as it is on the 360. The lone noticeable difference, the motion-sensing control, is entirely trivial. Ooh, I can waggle my controller for a melee attack or for the banal "Battle Action" minigames? This is clearly worth buying a \$600 system! To be fair, there's nothing wrong with the PS3 version (though I did notice some minor bugs that weren't present on 360), but for my money, I'd go with the 360 flavor of the game just to avoid the tacked-on motion-sensing. Either way, you're getting a whole lot of Nazi-shooting in the single-player campaign and a whole lot of fantastic multiplayer via online play.—ADAM





BOTTOM LINE **8.25**

> **Concept:** Pick one of three characters, fight several enemies across different dungeons, and then level them up while upgrading your weapons and armor just like you have been doing in every action/RPG since the beginning of time

> **Graphics:** Sure the capes look cool, and the graphics are nice and shiny, but I think it could look better

> **Sound:** There is some fairly good background music, but the character voiceovers are very dramatic

> **Playability:** Who are you playing this with? The new closed-in camera works okay for single-player, but horribly in multiplayer

> **Entertainment:** Great fun if you are the kind of gamer who can't wait to get to that next level

> **Replay Value:** Moderate

PLAYSTATION 3

Untold Legends: Dark Kingdom

> **STYLE** 1 OR 2-PLAYER ACTION/RPG (2-PLAYER VIA PS3 ONLINE) > **PUBLISHER** SONY ONLINE ENTERTAINMENT
 > **DEVELOPER** SONY ONLINE ENTERTAINMENT > **RELEASE** NOVEMBER 11 > **ESRB** T

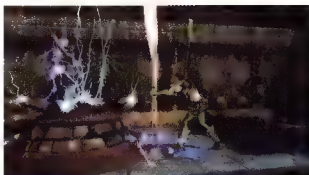
ANOTHER GRIND THROUGH A DARKENED KINGDOM

Untold Legends reminds me of that guy nerd you knew in high school who went off to college. He slicked back his hair and started dressing better and hoped to start hanging out with the cool kids. Untold Legends has moved to the PS3 campus, it's gotten a snazzy new graphical wardrobe, and now it's hoping to hang out with Tony Hawk and score a date with Resistance. Well, Dark Kingdom might not be quite in Resistance's league, but it can come party at my house if it wants to.

Dark Kingdom isn't particularly innovative, and it falls prey to a number of RPG clichés, but when it comes to the important things—the hacking and the slashing—it performs admirably. There a fair number of enemy types throughout the levels, so you never really get tired of what you're fighting because something new is always popping up.

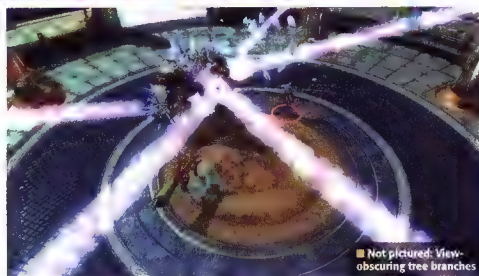
In addition, developer SOE has added a decent combo system that continues to evolve as you level up. Some of the later moves, in particular, make you look pretty cool. This is a great addition to the genre and something that I hope more games of its kind latch onto and continue to evolve.

But, as I have said, Dark Kingdom is not com-



pletely fresh. The story is not particularly interesting, and at times glannigly absent. The game is also not very good at making you feel like you are constantly evolving. Your character's look does change over time, but this is a slow process that seems to have more to do with how far along in the story you are rather than the cool new equipment you wear.

The most noteworthy problem has to do with the camera system. The behind-the-shoulder camera works fine in single-player, but the real problems start when you play two-player on one system. When the game pans back to a more traditional top down view, buildings, trees, or anything really tall gets in the way of the action. If you are planning on playing this with another buddy at home you might want to take half a point off my score, or at least consider whether you want to deal with the camera hassle. —**BEN**

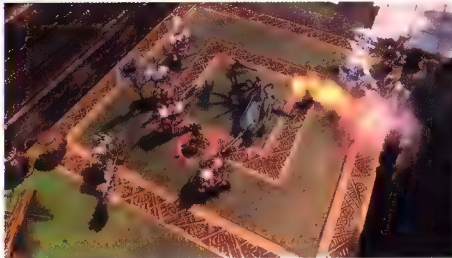


■ Not pictured: View-obscuring tree branches

Second Opinion **7.75**

The single player experience of this PS3 hack 'n slash is a blast, as you watch your character throw down with evildoers using any number of great-looking spells, high-flying blade attacks, and destructive hammer smashes. This isn't the prettiest of the PS3 launch titles, but that's not to say it looks bad—the cloth physics and particle effects are high-lights. Playing cooperatively would have been just as fun, except for one glaring problem—the camera is frequently a total disaster when panned up high to adjust for multiple onscreen players. Rather than becoming transparent, trees and buildings impose themselves on your communal view all the time, sometimes completely obscuring the action. It doesn't totally ruin the fun, but it seems like a strange mistake in what is otherwise a highly polished level-grinder filled with great environments, a fantastic orchestral score, and plenty of challenge. —**MILLER**

■ Some of the special moves make you feel like a total badass



PLAYSTATION 3

Tony Hawk's Project 8

> STYLE 1 OR 2-PLAYER ACTION > PUBLISHER ACTIVISION > DEVELOPER NEVERSOFT ENTERTAINMENT > RELEASE NOVEMBER 17 > ESRB T



NEVERSOFT BAILS THE ONLINE BUT STILL MANAGES TO LAND AN IMPRESSIVE TRICK

I can't comment enough on how well designed the Career mode is in this newest addition to the Tony Hawk lexicon. Developer Neversoft Entertainment finally moved away from all the wacky missions that made the game feel either silly or like one giant training mode. With Project 8, the series is back to its roots — a pure skateboarding game that focuses on the player's skill.

The story gives the player the chance to complete challenges in their quest to join Tony Hawk's elite group of undiscovered skaters, known as the Project 8. To get there, you must master all the trials scattered about the seamless, load-free world.

Instead of picking a difficulty level at the beginning of the game, all the various objectives are presented to the player in the game at any time. For example, if you want to pull off the amateur version of a grind, you simply grind to that point on the designated line, and land it. If you want to pull off the pro or sick level of the same grind, you attempt the challenge again, but simply ride further along the line to the more difficult destination.

This lets the player pick and choose when and where they want to take on the various goals.

Bypassing some of the challenges that doesn't fit his or her particular play style. However, if you ever want to make it to the top spot in the Project 8, you will be required to master all the goals.



■ The motion sensitive options are kind of cool, but largely useless for real competition

Unlike the Xbox 360 version, the PlayStation 3 edition doesn't feature any of the online play modes, which is the reason for my slightly lowered score. However, this game does support motion-sensing input through the Sixaxis controller. While you can control things like balance or turning with this option, it's more of an odd thing you try out, before deciding that it is about as worthless as it sounds. That said, the PlayStation 3 controller is by far the best for pulling off Tony Hawk's complex combos. Unlike the Xbox 360 edition that requires that you hold the left analog stick down for an extended period to enter focus mode (which is really annoying in my opinion and something that should have been optional), the PlayStation 3 version only requires a quick tap to enter this state. Plus, the d-pad is simply second to none, and works flawlessly in this edition.

There are certainly moments in this game where the new physics engine offers up some less-than-impressive bails or odd gameplay challenges, but the good definitely outweighs the bad in this first true next-gen effort from Neversoft. If you like the Tony Hawk titles like I do, you will find Project 8 to be both a challenging and entertaining addition to the series. —ANDY

BOTTOM LINE 8.75

> **Concept:** Revamp the Tony Hawk franchise for the next generation of consoles

> **Graphics:** The game has its moments of pop-in and chop, but overall it looks quite nice

> **Sound:** Not my favorite Tony Hawk soundtrack, but it most certainly doesn't suck

> **Playability:** Tony Hawk belongs on the PlayStation controller and the PS3 Sixaxis is no exception

> **Entertainment:** With the best Career mode in Tony Hawk's history, it's a great challenge, but no online support is a bummer

> **Replay Value:** Moderate

Second Opinion 8.5

I love the new Tony Hawk, but I'm a little surprised that I like the 360 version a little better than this PS3 port. The framerate on the 360 looks a little better, with noticeably less chugging. Add on the fact that there wasn't time to include an online mode for the PS3, and it seems like the choice is clear for where to spend your money. The only saving grace for the PS3 option is the controller, which still feels like a better fit for Tony Hawk than the alternative — maybe that's just long-time familiarity speaking. You'll want to try the motion-sensitivity for five minutes and then turn it off to get back to the real action. I said it last month, and I'll say it again, this is the best Tony Hawk in years. This just isn't the system to play it on. —MILLER

PLAYSTATION 3 QUICKIES

PLAYSTATION 3
NHL 2K7

BOTTOM LINE 8.25

> STYLE 1 TO 4-PLAYER SPORTS (2-PLAYER VIA PS3 ONLINE) > PUBLISHER 2K SPORTS > DEVELOPER KUSH GAMES > RELEASE NOVEMBER 17 > ESRB E10+

The PlayStation 3 only gets one hockey game this year, and thankfully, it's the only one that matters. NHL 2K7 is a well-rounded game that offers rich offensive and defensive strategies, fluid animations and movement, and solid AI across the board. You really get a good sense for how your player's weight affects their movements, and also how your teammates are going to react to certain situations. As realistic as the gameplay has become, the goalies are now starting to look a little out of place. Their twitchy movements, inability to read plays, and minuscule list of animations don't deliver the next-gen vibe that the gameplays banks in. To give the PS3 owners a little something new, developer Kush Games has tapped into the Sixaxis' motion-sensing for checking and goaltending. Sadly, both mechanics feel tacked on and are not as reliable as the standard controls (which are also offered). All told, NHL 2K7 is a hell of a play; it just needs a little work. —REINER

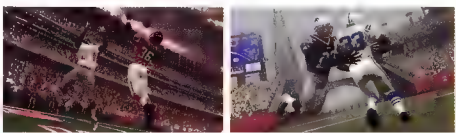


PLAYSTATION 3

Madden NFL 07

BOTTOM LINE 7.75

> STYLE 1 TO 4-PLAYER SPORTS (UP TO 4-PLAYER VIA PS3 ONLINE) > PUBLISHER EA SPORTS > DEVELOPER EA TIBURON > RELEASE NOVEMBER 17 > ESRB E



So this is what it must feel like to be the Arizona Cardinals: You've got a new home, but the results are just the same. Even with the power of the PS3 and the Sixaxis motion controls of this game (which aren't that fun), there's next to nothing that makes this title stand out from the 360 version. And when you add problems like framerate issues, sluggish play, and players who feel like they are on skates, the football fun here doesn't last as long as it should. This is too bad, considering the depth and fun to be had in Superstar mode. —KATO

PLAYSTATION 3

NBA 2K7

BOTTOM LINE 8

> STYLE 1 TO 7-PLAYER SPORTS (UP TO 10-PLAYER VIA PS3 ONLINE) > PUBLISHER 2K SPORTS > DEVELOPER VISUAL CONCEPTS > RELEASE NOVEMBER 17 > ESRB E

NBA 2K7 is a mirror image of its Xbox 360 counterpart. Expect the same great polished gameplay, realistic player animations, TV-styled presentation, and online multiplayer you would find on the 360. The only area where the game steps away from the tried-and-true formula is with the gimmicky Sixaxis free-throw mechanic; simply mimic a shooting motion to knock down your shots at the line. The IsoMotion controls are still difficult to master, and the story-driven 24/7 mode still lacks decent team AI, but these faults pale in comparison to the amount of things Visual Concepts does right with this hoops title. Look nowhere else for solid action on the hardwood floors. —BERTZ





PLAYSTATION 2

Rogue Galaxy

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION/RPG > PUBLISHER SONY COMPUTER ENTERTAINMENT
AMERICA > DEVELOPER LEVEL 5 > RELEASE JANUARY 30 > ESRB T

THE EXPANDING UNIVERSE

- > **Concept:** Yet another fantastic Level 5 RPG rich with character progression
- > **Graphics:** The cel-shaded look is excellent, and the in-game and rendered cutscenes are top notch
- > **Sound:** Both the voice acting and the score are well above average
- > **Playability:** You'll have to do some camera managing during battles
- > **Entertainment:** A rare RPG that still excites players the deeper they go
- > **Replay Value:** Moderate

Second Opinion 8.5

I've helped so many young adventurers make their initial dives for world-saving heroes that I could probably start a consulting business. Even though you may think you know what's coming, *Rogue Galaxy* quickly transcends this familiar premise with its stylish visuals and outstanding gameplay. The combat provides a high level of flexibility, since you can control any party member, but I wish there were more precise ways to control ally AI. The characters accompany player Rogue don't defy any stereotypes, but I was instantly engrossed in powering them up thanks to the cool weapon crafting system and the Revelation Flow chart. These mechanics are totally addictive, and do an excellent job inspiring players to plumb the depths of the game. It's a good thing these elements make *Rogue Galaxy* so much fun to play, because the story is delivered through stilted, obvious dialogue and the dungeon puzzles can be somewhat formulaic — and I've never seen a game use this many damn Mimics. Can't I just get some loot in peace? Some puzzles of *Rogue Galaxy* may only be slightly above average, but when it excels, it takes the action/RPG genre to new heights. —JOE

You could call this a role-playing game, and you certainly wouldn't be wrong, but to me *Rogue Galaxy* is more than just an RPG in a genre already filled with slaves to convention. No, this game is more accurately and flatteringly described as a Level 5 game. Not only is *Rogue Galaxy* imbued with the developer's particular approach to the genre as already seen in its *Dark Cloud* series, but the experience and evolution afforded by those titles is evident in this excellently crafted title. In this way, Level 5 is on a Final Fantasy-like path, where there isn't strict continuity from game to game, but you buy them because you trust the developer implicitly.

The best decision that Level 5 made in moving from the *Dark Cloud* series is doing away with dungeons that you have to clear before you can leave. Level 5 even went a step further by letting you teleport between save points across the map. This freedom of movement coupled with the game's random encounters puts an emphasis on Level 5's strong point: character progression.

Level 5 has always been good about rewarding players for their accomplishments beyond just dishing out some money and XP for a kill. *Rogue Galaxy* brings this to new heights with the Revelation Flow chart. Items that you get during your travels (through combat, treasure chests, or in shops) open up battle abilities. Each new ability

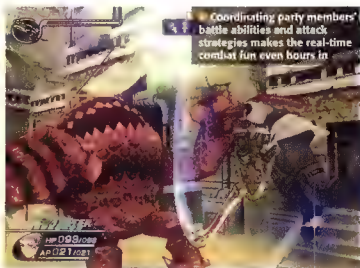
you unlock creates paths to other abilities. Since you can assign an item to anyone in your party, the fun comes in charting out the skill set of each character. It's similar to Final Fantasy XII's License Board, only it's not as daunting and it doesn't seal your characters into certain fates. Instead, the game is balanced enough to encourage you to dive in and pick up any ability that suits your fancy.

Rogue Galaxy's combat is of your standard real-time action variety, but it adds an element of strategy by allowing you to control some of the combat functions of your two other party members. Although I can see some growing weary of telling their companions to use a healing item, I liked the way it's integrated into combat. Party members' item and battle ability usage is performed at certain times using the L1 and L2 buttons, and they flow well into the usual combo button presses of a hack n' slasher. The one problem I have with the combat is that the camera can be a little off at times, requiring you to either manually adjust it or rely on an onscreen radar to track off-screen enemies.

As is the case with any Level 5 title, what I've described to you so far is just the tip of the iceberg. Apart from being a far-reaching story spanning multiple worlds (including one exclusively



included for the U.S. release), this game wraps you up in its characters through a variety of development systems that will keep you enthralled. There are Hunter licenses to earn, weapons you can combine for supreme damage, and even a factory where you follow blueprints and create an assembly line to manufacture items. When you consider that you don't even discover the factory until you're over 100 hours in, it's clear that *Rogue Galaxy* is a deep, well-crafted adventure that will keep you playing until the end. This game offers a wealth of RPG riches and shows a developer exceeding its previous efforts and working at the height of its powers. —KATO



Coordinating party members' battle abilities and attack strategies makes the real-time combat fun even hours in.



Revelation Flow
Filling in items you find on the Revelation Flow chart unlocks battle abilities.

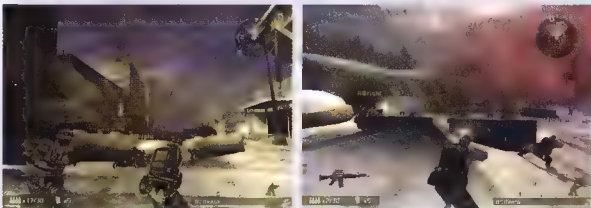


Setting up your factory production line yields new items.

PLAYSTATION 2

SOCOM: U.S. Navy SEALs Combined Assault

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 16-PLAYER VIA PS2 ONLINE) > **PUBLISHER** SONY COMPUTER ENTERTAINMENT AMERICA > **DEVELOPER** ZIPPER INTERACTIVE/SCGA > **RELEASE** NOVEMBER 7 > **ESRB** T



SO-SOCOM

Here is a recap of my first 20 minutes with Combined Assault. "Okay, so I need bud this thing up. How do I set C4? Okay, cool. So how do I detonate it—" I die in a fiery explosion as the C4 auto-detonates. "Okay, I guess I need to get over this fallen tree. It doesn't seem like I can climb over it. Can I jump over it? No. Maybe if I do a running jump. No. It's a freaking tree trunk! Why can't I—" I die as I get shot from behind. "Okay, I guess I need to swim stealthily past these guys." I die twice trying to swim slowly past them and getting caught anyway before figuring out how to submerge in water. Then, after almost drowning, I resurface too early and get gunned down a third time.

It's not that Combined Assault is hard. It's more like the game is very impolite, barely introducing itself to new players. The control and game interface are showing their age, too. They weren't very good even back when the first SOCOM came out. It's probably time to rethink the way this game plays. Adding to the problem are the training levels, which are complete garbage. What exactly was Zipper training us for, to put up

with the mediocrity of the rest of the game? The AI is broken on both ends. Don't count on your guys helping you stay hidden. And the game looks terrible; I'm not convinced that Zipper has done any animation or texture work since the first SOCOM.

Of course, this game is chock full of decent multiplayer, but I don't think it's enough anymore. If you are the kind of person who just can't seem to get enough of SOCOM, then you'll probably play the crap out of the new 4-player co-op or play against your buddies who still own SOCOM 3 (though this game also features 10 new maps). But let me just say this: SOCOM isn't the only online PS2 game in town anymore, and these glaring single-player problems have been around for a long time. Zipper might have been able to get away with all this a couple iterations ago, but it is definitely time for this series to evolve.—**BEN**

YOU TALKING TO ME?

The CrossTalk feature makes a return. Though they're different games, if you hook this game up with Fire Team Bravo 2, certain missions in either game will affect levels in the other. For example, snipe a few guys in a certain area on your PSP and you'll find those guys have been taken care of for you on the PS2.

■ Like to see what you're shooting at? So do we. Too bad this game doesn't feature that



BOTTOM LINE 6.5

> **Concept:** Thirty minutes of intense military shooting action stretched over three hours

> **Graphics:** We're sure it's not just the next-gen glitter in our eyes. This game really doesn't look good

> **Sound:** A solid musical score accompanies the game's decent sound effects

> **Playability:** A tired control scheme bogs down the single-player experience. But hey, there's multiplayer

> **Entertainment:** Well, depends. Do you like SOCOM?

> **Replay Value:** High

Second Opinion 6

If ever there was a franchise that got by solely because of the platform it exists on, it's SOCOM. Ask yourself this question: Would SOCOM have a fanbase if there had been any competition in the online space during the early days of the PS2? Like all three of its predecessors, Combined Assault looks and plays like a relic from the dark age of video games. The framerate is crap. The environments are ugly. The weapons don't feel anything like real guns. Controls are still substandard in that accessing your inventory is a huge pain. Both enemy and ally AI is just shy of horrifically stupid. The list goes on and on, but the bottom line is that Combined Assault does almost nothing to improve on the mediocre SOCOM formula. Unless new multiplayer maps are worth your \$40, skip this entry and hope that Sony does something interesting for the inevitable PS3 sequel.—**ADAM**

PLAYSTATION 2 QUICKIES

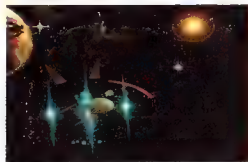
PLAYSTATION 2

Star Trek Encounters

BOTTOM LINE 7.25

> **STYLE** 1 OR 2-PLAYER ACTION/STRATEGY > **PUBLISHER** BETHESDA SOFTWARES > **DEVELOPER** 41 STUDIOS > **RELEASE** OCTOBER 5 > **ESRB** E10+

When I heard Bethesda was releasing what amounted to an arcade shooter with Star Trek ships, my inner Trekker started getting ornery. Now that I've played the budget-priced result, I think it's amusing that I find myself recommending the game to fellow enthusiasts. Sure, it's a little silly that the Enterprise is flinging itself around the galaxy taking out Klingon Birds of Prey to and fro, but there are some classic Trek moments to be had, from beaming off away teams to outunning the shockwaves of exploding planets. Sadly, this is also an instance where you get what you pay for, and your 20 smackers is going to earn you some questionable controls, boring mission objectives (enough with the scanning for warp trails), and some piss-poor graphics to boot. It's enough to warn away casual players, but more devoted fans will revel in all the Trek eras represented and even the game narration by the Shat himself. Set your expectations at a reasonable level, and there's some fun to be found here.—**MILLER**

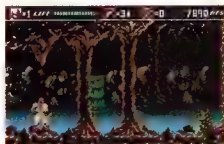
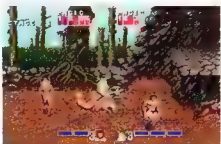


PLAYSTATION 2

Sega Genesis Collection

BOTTOM LINE 8.5

> **STYLE** 1 OR 2-PLAYER ACTION > **PUBLISHER** SEGA > **DEVELOPER** DIGITAL ECLIPSE/SEGA > **RELEASE** NOVEMBER 7 > **ESRB** E



I know everybody's excited for downloading classic games on Nintendo's Virtual Console, but if you're looking for the best value for your old-school dollar the best choice is the Sega Genesis Collection. For the low price of \$20, you get 28 of the best-loved (and in a few cases, least-loved) 16-bit games ever. While it features a good number of Sega standbys like Sonic, Ecco, Phantasy Star, and the ubiquitous Altered Beast, I really love the inclusion of such underrated gems like Comix Zone, Ristar, and Sword of Vermillion. Everything plays just like you remember, which can be good (most of the time) or bad (did Alex Kidd always suck this hard?). Kudos for cool unlockables like classic arcade games and developer interviews.—**MATT**

PLAYSTATION 2

ATV Offroad Fury 4

BOTTOM LINE 7.5

> **STYLE** 1 TO 4-PLAYER RACING (UP TO 8-PLAYER VIA PS2 ONLINE) > **PUBLISHER** SONY COMPUTER ENTERTAINMENT AMERICA > **DEVELOPER** CLIXMAX RACING > **RELEASE** OCTOBER 31 > **ESRB** E



This series used to be done by MX vs. ATV developer Rainbow Studios, and this title takes such inspiration from Rainbow's work that it's almost like it never left. Of course, "almost" is the operative word here. Offroad Fury 4 gives a wider selection of rides than just an ATV. However, this title misses Rainbow's attention to detail.

Mid-air physics are absent, a shifting camera hampers tricks, the courses aren't as complex, and the variety of races just isn't there. The point-to-point races, however, are cool. Offroad Fury 4 has online, a track editor, and enough racing to make this a title that fans are going to enjoy. But trying to play catch-up with Rainbow isn't a race that this franchise is likely to win.—**KATO**



■ Basic movement and the enemy lock-on are handled on the nunchuck peripheral. The remote handles all weapon functions



■ The biggest chance this installment takes is its newfound cinematic majesty

Wii

The Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION/RPG > PUBLISHER NINTENDO > DEVELOPER NINTENDO > RELEASE NOVEMBER 19 > ESRB I

THE LEGEND CONTINUES

There are epics, and then there is *Zelda*. This long-running series, which boldly began with a cartridge made of gold, has become the very definition of a timeless classic.

With each new Hyrulean adventure that has hit the market, Nintendo has built upon perfection. From the moment that Link first unsheathed his sword, this series has redefined how we look at video games. As monumental as each entry has been, nothing, and I repeat, nothing can prepare you for the adventure that unfolds in *Twilight Princess*. The debate that has waged for decades over which *Zelda* game should stand as the series' best will at long last come to a satisfying conclusion, as this is unquestionably the greatest *Zelda* yet.

From A Link to the Past's complicated dungeon designs to *Ocarina of Time*'s powerful swordplay, this series has made its mark mainly through its remarkable gameplay. As memorable as the characters and battles are, the story has always been used as a device that moves the player from one dungeon to the next. Through an intelligently written script, *Twilight Princess* breaks free from this crutch and now stands tall as a vehicle for storytelling. Depending on the events at hand, you may go for hours without learning of a new dungeon, and may instead find yourself immersed in gameplay segments that tie into and build upon the story. Even without spoken dialogue, the tale is highly cinematic, surprisingly moving, and so creative that it rivals the best that Hollywood has to offer. This is a much darker saga that dabbles with the power

of corruption much like *Star Wars*, but it's not the influence of evil that drives the pulse of this plot. It's the mysticism, the believability of the characters' emotions, and the visuals that continually make you say, "I've never seen anything like this before."

Amazingly, you'll find yourself repeating these same words when you take in the gameplay. The story sets the tone and opens up new possibilities, but it's the gameplay that truly grips you. Every dungeon is a large and glorious creation, often keeping you confined and searching for the secrets to its puzzles for hours on end. The water temple in particular stands as a segment that made my brain spin in more different ways than anything I've encountered to date. The Wii's motion-sensing functionality also makes you play very differently. It would have been nice to see the remote track your sword-swinging motions as opposed to triggering pre-made animations, but it's a small gripe, especially considering how explosive the combat

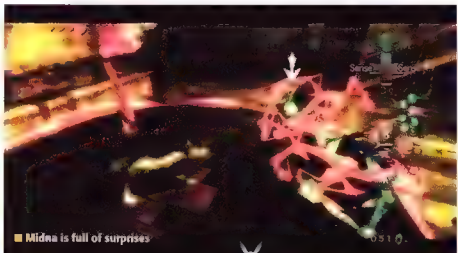
is and how much fun it is to use weapons like the bow.

The selection of weapons and gadgets ranges from trusty staples like the boomerang to new inventions that lead to amazing new feats, such as a device that allows you to zip along rails. The game does a great job of exploiting every possible usage for these items, especially in the larger-than-life boss battles.

This adventure also moves into uncharted territory with the introduction of the wolf transformation and a sidekick named Midna. The two go hand-in-hand. I won't spoil how, but let's just say that both have incredible effects on the gameplay, leading to amazing feats, brain-bending puzzles, and some of the flashiest animations to ever grace *Zelda*. I especially like how Link's combat prowess is replicated perfectly as the wolf, but rather than brandishing a sword, he lets his fangs do the talking. Link's musical expertise is also expressed through the wolf's howling.

The adventure itself is a hefty one, and that's without the seemingly endless array of sidequests, minigames, and secrets. Similar to the statues you could unlock in *Wind Waker* by taking photos of the world's denizens, *Twilight Princess* will task the collector in you to find bugs (both male and female) for a creepy girl in Castle Town. This task alone can lead to hours upon hours of questing.

There really is no better introduction to a new console, or a better game for that matter, than *Twilight Princess*. This is the game of the year. —REINER



■ Midna is full of surprises



■ Most of the minigames are new to the series, such as this sumo match



■ The Wii's motion-sensing is best used for long-ranged weapons



BOTTOM LINE 10

> **Concept:** A darkly themed and lengthy adventure that takes *Zelda*'s gameplay to the next level

> **Graphics:** The detail won't blow your socks off, but few games are this creative in their designs. The monsters are some of the best I have seen since *Princess Mononoke*

> **Sound:** The music in the twilight realm is chaotic, yet so pristinely beautiful. As always, the game's sound effects recall the best time that you ever played *Zelda*

> **Playability:** The Wii's motion-sensing technology perfectly handles *Zelda*'s classic gameplay. The entry also houses the most harrowing dungeons, most diverse weaponry, and the widest assortment of side content

> **Entertainment:** I never spill how, and never gets old

> **Replay Value:** Moderately high

Second Opinion 10

Without a doubt, *Twilight Princess* is a masterpiece. While I could knock it for its lack of voice-overs, sometimes stilted animation, or poor texture mapping of the game is stunning in so many other ways that all its technical shortcomings are irrelevant. Originally, I had planned on waiting for the GameCube version to play this game with a standard controller, but the Wii controller works marvelously with *Zelda*.

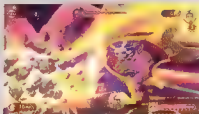
It delivers the swordplay in a fun way, and makes some of the puzzles and interactions more interesting. A big part of this perfect score however, has to go to the ingenious dungeon design. Not only are they good, there are a lot of them and some surprising new tools make the exploration all the more charming. It's most certainly classic *Zelda*, but you can feel an influence from Miyazaki, and it gives the game a whirring touch that I found to be unbelievably addicting. It's genius. —ANDY



Wii QUICKIES

Wii
Super Monkey Ball: Banana Blitz

> **STYLE** 1 TO 4-PLAYER ACTION
> **PUBLISHER** SEGA > **DEVELOPER** SEGA
> **RELEASE** NOVEMBER 19 > **ESRB** E



BOTTOM LINE **6.75** This is an example of a game where the novelty of Nintendo's Wii controller can be deceptive — for a while. My first hour with Super Monkey Ball, which was also my first experience playing a Wii title since E3, was pretty pleasant. I was impressed by how the little simians would move onscreen at the slightest tilt of my wrist. And, for the most part, I can't complain about the Wii controller functionality during the main career mode. However, the more I played, the more I started to notice the flaws of this title, including some very frustrating level design and new boss battles that did little to enhance the experience and a lot to anger me, are a moed bag. They use the remote in unique ways, but I found very few to be really satisfying. Ultimately came the realization that, at the end of the day, I would have been happier playing this game with a conventional analog stick. —**MATT**

Wii

Excite Truck

> **STYLE** 1 OR 2-PLAYER RACING > **PUBLISHER** NINTENDO > **DEVELOPER** MONSTER GAMES
> **RELEASE** NOVEMBER 19 > **ESRB** E

BURN IT UNTIL THE TANK RUNS DRY

It's not enough that Excite Truck uses the Wii's motion-sensing controller. Instead of just utilizing it, it takes it and catapults it off of cliffs for monster air, sends it hurtling through valleys at insane speeds, and makes the console scream at the top of its lungs. Luckily, we're along for the ride.

Developer Monster Games makes sure every moment of the races has you at the edge of your seat. One second you'll be twisting your controller to drift around corners at blazing speed, and the next you'll hit a power up that sends you flying into the air. Although it doesn't invent anything revolutionary for the arcade racing genre,

a few problems here and there. If you get too far off the track your remote can become unresponsive, and this can also plague some of the mid-air tricks. Even if you don't bother with the tricks, however, you'll still be racing on the edge.

As undeniably fun as this game is, its downfall is its lack of depth. You can burn through the initial difficulty setting in the career mode in a couple hours. The Challenge mode isn't as fun as the main races because it breaks up the non-stop action and has you focus on particular tasks, which you get in the normal races anyway. Also, the tracks' thrills don't really get



progressively cooler as the game goes on. The state of the game's multiplayer is particularly regrettable. What could have been the life of the party, inducing wild gaming sessions, is neutered for a couple of reasons. Not only is there no online (which you can chalk up to Nintendo), but the split-screen cuts down on one of the game's most important assets — its sense of speed.

Anyone getting a Wii should definitely play this game; just don't expect the thrills to last very long. —**KATO**

BOTTOM LINE **7.75**

> **Concept:** Not just a good racing game for the Wii, a good racing game, period

> **Graphics:** The game's sense of speed is awesome, and little touches make it look better than you'd think

> **Sound:** The squealing guitar solos never dip below the 12th fret. However, you can listen to your own tunes off an SD card

> **Playability:** About as pick-up-and-play as you're going to find

> **Entertainment:** The game is an absolute blast to play, but sadly the multiplayer doesn't hold up

> **Replay Value:** Moderately Low

Second Opinion **8**

I'm quite pleased by what developer Monster Games has accomplished here. The Wii racing controls work well enough to the point where I wasn't even conscious of them after a few hours. More importantly, this is a well-designed and fun racing title in its own right that doesn't rely solely on motion-sensitive thrills for its appeal. The twisting environments fly by at insane speeds, and the unique scoring system rewards you for taking as many risks as possible.

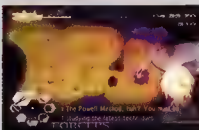
Stringing together turbo jump after turbo jump is an amazing sensation, making this one of the most visceral racing games I've played since the Burnout series. My only complaint is that I went more — playing through the career mode only takes a few hours, and I didn't find the multiplayer or bonus modes to be particularly interesting. —**MATT**



Wii

Trauma Center: Second Opinion

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION
> **PUBLISHER** ATLUS
> **DEVELOPER** ATLUS
> **RELEASE** NOVEMBER 19 > **ESRB** T



BOTTOM LINE **8.5** The first Trauma Center was an equal combination of innovation and damning difficulty. Now

Atlus has translated DS touch screen controls over to the Wii's motion-sensing. The new setup is smoother in some areas (syringes and draining) and trickier in others (scalpel slices), but is overall quite effective. Selecting tools with the nunchuk analog stick feels a lot faster and more intuitive than before, and all of the character art and music has been redone for the better. If you've never played this on the DS, Second Opinion is one of the few must-have Wii launch titles. If you're a Caduceus veteran, the new controls, multiple difficulty options, and new surgeries and tools will more than satisfy. —**BRYAN**

Red Steel

> STYLE 1 OR 2-PLAYER ACTION > PUBLISHER UBISOFT > DEVELOPER UBISOFT PARIS > RELEASE NOVEMBER 19 > ESRB M



A STANDARD FPS, NOW WITH 10% MORE SWORDS!

Aside from *Zelda*, *Red Steel* may be the most-anticipated Wii launch title. Unlike our boy in the green tights, this game's doesn't fully deliver on its promise.

Red Steel follows the story of Scott Monroe, an everyman who goes with his hancé to meet her father at a fancy restaurant. It turns out daddy has ties to organized crime, and when a group of Yakuza kidnap your special lady-friend and wound your future father-in-law, it's up to you to get her back. See what happens when you date a gangster's daughter?

Most of the game's levels follow the standard FPS formula—shoot enemies who flow to predetermined cover locations, rinse and repeat. The swordfights break up this monotony, but in the end these also suffer from repetition. Thankfully, the forgiving damage system and harebrained enemy AI are often enough to keep you moving through the game.

Compared to the sloppy Wii controls of *Call of Duty 3*, *Red Steel* feels like an everyday trip to the gun range. The remote adeptly follows your movements to track

enemies moving through the environments, and the focus targeting works well. The zoom feature, while clunky at first, eventually responds fluidly through practice. The only complaint I have is with the auto-targeting, which redirects your reticle slightly whenever the targeted enemy moves.

Most of *Red Steel*'s faults lie with the game's presentation. Enemies shout annoying obscenities in your direction during every firefight, the cheesy score is bad enough to incite chuckles, and the jaggy graphics look worse than many Xbox and PlayStation 2 games.

I would also like to point out that *Red Steel* is the proud owner of the most homoerotic shootout scene in video game history (not that there is anything wrong with that). When you enter a bathroom while hunting for information about your girlfriend's abduction, your workroom committee is a band of half-naked men dressed only in towels who chase you with shotguns through the inviting hot tubs and steamy saunas. This level is quickly followed by a firefight in a carwash. I'm not making this stuff up. —BERTZ



BOTTOM LINE 7.5

> **Concept:** Save your special lady-friend from Yakuza with your trusty pistol and sword.

> **Graphics:** If any game is in desperate need of anti-aliasing, *Red Steel* is it.

> **Sound:** The cheesy, late-night Cinemasoundtrack is so bad it's almost good.

> **Playability:** The best FPS controls I've experienced on the Wii, with easy-to-control swordfights.

> **Entertainment:** If you've always dreamed of shooting men wearing only towels who are armed with shotguns, your moment has arrived.

> **Replay Value:** Moderate.

Second Opinion 7.5

Red Steel takes the Wii's motion-sensing technology for a ride, allowing players to flip over tables with a forceful motion, enter sniper mode by stretching an arm toward the TV, and swordfight by swinging the remote. Your arms are constantly moving, yet you never really feel like you are out of control. Ubisoft has done a bang-up job with the gameplay. When you get into the zone, you'll be popping shots between the eyes of your attackers with ease. The swordplay, on the other hand, is painfully dry. Not only do your enemies possess the aggression of sloths, you never really feel like your sword strikes hit opponents. *Red Steel* is a mindless shooter that offers a different experience with its gameplay, but is by no means pushing the FPS genre forward. —REINER



Wii

Chicken Little: Ace in Action

> STYLE 1 OR 2-PLAYER ACTION > PUBLISHER BUENA VISTA GAMES > DEVELOPER AVALANCHE SOFTWARE > RELEASE DECEMBER 12 > ESRB E10+

BETTER THAN YOU THINK

BOTTOM LINE 7.25

Write it off if you have to, but you could do a lot worse than the solid play mechanics offered by this early release for the Wii. There's a fun premise involved about the kids from *Chicken Little* getting a new Wii game that stars their own overblown alter egos. As the actual player, you'll be controlling the action as you run these caricatures through the '50s sci-fi world they call home. For what it's worth, you ought to have a pretty fun time doing it.

It's hard not to recognize the similarities that *Ace in Action* shares with the much better *Ratchet and Clank* series. From music to art style to combat, this Disney title offers simplified gameplay but a nearly identical aesthetic. Unfortunately, very few of the varied enemies or weapons are present to offer the crazy action that *Ratchet* so regularly delivers.

On the plus side, this is an excellent showpiece for the Wii remote, which works great in delivering solid aiming and movement in an uncomplicated package that shouldn't scare off the kiddies. Levels are split between on-foot shooting, tank shooting, and hovercraft (you guessed it) shooting. Of these, only the hovercraft takes some getting used to, as you move the nunchuck up and down to change altitude. Otherwise, the point-and-fire battles rarely disappoint.

Not to oversell, *Chicken Little*'s latest soiree is also filled with repetitive level design, a complete lack of challenge to forward progression through the game, and a few poorly balanced on-rails turret sections. It's the definition of basic action, but almost every element works the way it's supposed to. —MILLER

> **Concept:** Chicken Little and his friends play the game loosely based on themselves, and a sci-fi shooter is the result.

> **Graphics:** Bright and explosive weapon effects and imaginative (but repeatedly) environmental details. Fun to look at, but unremarkable.

> **Sound:** Actual voices from the movie are the standout, and Acam West as *Ace* is a perfect fit.

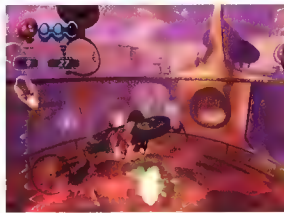
> **Playability:** Very accessible and functional controls with the brand new Wii remote. Simple and fun game control is the best part of this title.

> **Entertainment:** While unlikely to capture the attention of experienced gamers, this launch window kids franchise is a pleasant surprise.

> **Replay Value:** Moderately Low.

Second Opinion 7.25

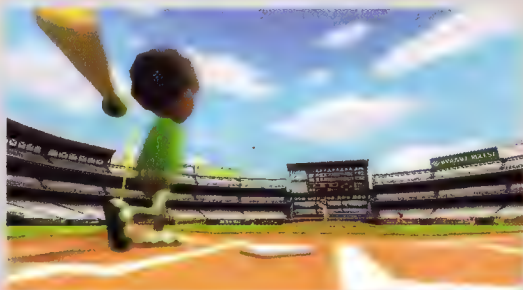
While I'm betting you're ready to write this off as just another licensed movie platformer, fans of *Ratchet & Clank* might want to at least give this game a try. It doesn't offer a tenth of the awesome weapons or variety of the franchise from which it takes most of its inspiration, but it is a good, solid, fun 'n' shoot experience. Offering three basic gameplay modes—on-foot, hovercraft, and tank—there's enough here to satisfy both a younger audience and the parents that bought it for them. I'm happy to report that the Wii controls work very well, save for a few hiccups. If it were more imaginative in its level design and less repetitive, I might be tempted to give it a much higher score. As it stands, it's still a solid early entry in the Wii catalog. —MATT



Wii

Wii Sports

> STYLE 1 TO 4-PLAYER SPORTS > PUBLISHER NINTENDO > DEVELOPER NINTENDO > RELEASE NOVEMBER 19 > ESRB E



NOT WAVING, DROWNING

This game reminds me of gym class in elementary school, where you don't play how the sport is designed to be played and the teacher adds made up rules so all the kids can feel good about themselves. None of these sports are fully fleshed out, and they simply represent a range of motions to perform with the controller. Fittingly, there's even a Wii Fitness mode where you play the games to get your heart rate up. At least in multiplayer you aren't the only person who looks like a fool waving the controller around. Here is our take on the minigames:

Tennis: One of the weaker sports in the game, which inexplicably only offers doubles play. Unfortunately, you can't actually control the movement of your player, so there's not much to this mode of Wii Sports except to hope it reads your cross-court and down-the-line shots correctly. Warning: It may bring out your inner McEnroe.

Baseball: Nothing more than a three-inning warm-up. This could have been more fun if you could actually field the ball, but that's handled

for you. There's not much to pitching, but batting is cool and actually offers a modicum of bat control.

Bowling: You can't bowl against the CPU, but this pretty much works as advertised. Golf: Beats out tennis for the weakest sport in the package, primarily because the Wii sensor doesn't read the full range of your clubs' movements. I found the putting power to be erratic, and I didn't like how you automatically slice or hook the ball if you strike the ball at full power.

Boxing: This sport produces the most inconsistent

BOTTOM LINE 6.5

> **Concept:** An uneven intro to the system and its controllers, but at least it's free

> **Graphics:** The game uses the Wii avatars on your Wii, but that's the only eye-catching thing about it

> **Sound:** The biny sound that comes from the Wii remote is starting to really bug me

> **Playability:** Sometimes there are inconsistencies between your movements and what happens onscreen

> **Entertainment:** This is a shallow game by design, but it does offer some occasional fun

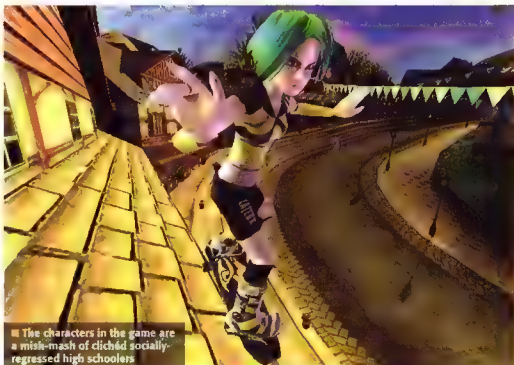
> **Replay Value:** Moderately Low



onscreen actions. Playing it will remind you of that time you spazzed out and tried to punch Chad Peterson for giving you a wedgie in the fourth grade.—**KATO**

Second Opinion 7.25

If Wii Sports is any indication of actual skill, then maybe I have a shot in a pro bowling league. Then again, it's probably good that I never pursued that career in tennis. Honestly, I had a little trouble deciding what to give this title because it doesn't really feel like a complete game. These five shallow mini-games might provide you and your friends with some early multiplayer fun, but will quickly fall to the wayside. Then again, we're getting this one for free, so I'll stop complaining.—**BEN**



The characters in the game are a mish-mash of clichéd socially-regressed high schoolers

Wii

Tony Hawk's Downhill Jam

> STYLE 1 TO 4-PLAYER ACTION > PUBLISHER ACTIVISION > DEVELOPER TOYS FOR BOB > RELEASE NOVEMBER 14 > ESRB E10+

IT'S CERTAINLY GOING DOWNHILL

On one hand, Nintendo's Wii offers up a chance for developers to create new and innovative product. On the other hand, the Wii makes some of the old tried-and-true video game series nigh impossible to execute to the same level they are on other systems.

The Tony Hawk franchise is an unfortunate victim of this conundrum. While Tony Hawk's Downhill Jam takes the franchise in an interesting direction by basically turning it into a racing game with tricks and grinds, it loses its roots and finds itself treading dangerous and unexplored waters.

Downhill Jam's play mechanics are simple. You hold the Wii remote like an NES control pad, and steer your onscreen character by turning it to the left or right. Grinds are executed with the 1 button, and grabs are done with the 2 button. Combine those with the d-pad and moving the controller in various directions, and voila — you have a trick system.

The system, while fine on paper, really doesn't require any skills. I was getting just as many points from smashing buttons and flailing my hands around as I was from seriously working on executing complex

combos. So the trick system, while interesting, doesn't really matter, other than needing to pull off something every once and while just to keep up your speed.

This sums the game up in a nutshell. While there is something here, it's more novelty than a game. It took about four hours of simple one to two minutes runs for the game to even start offering a challenge, and even then it was just a question of finding the secret route hidden in the level and getting lucky once or twice.

The features list reads like it was taken from a Gaming 101 handbook with standard issue highlights like boards to unlock, different race types to "challenge" you, and outrageous skating destinations like Machu Picchu to make you feel like you are truly radical. Combine this laundry list of features with high-school interactions with the other skaters with names like Crash, Jynx, and Tiffany, and the picture becomes clear. Tony Hawk's Downhill Jam is an unimaginative and often times annoying game that hangs its hat on a Wii controller interface that is interesting because it is different, but easily forgettable after a few short hours.—**ANDY**

BOTTOM LINE 5

> **Concept:** Since the Wii can't do "real" Tony Hawk, we get an awkward racing/trick game

> **Graphics:** The sense of speed is impressive, and the cartoonish graphics, while not great, certainly get the job done

> **Sound:** A halfway decent soundtrack bookends a plethora of average at best sound effects

> **Playability:** The Wii controls are simple, but you are never quite sure if it's luck or skill

> **Entertainment:** More of a novel diversion than a game

> **Replay Value:** Moderately Low

Second Opinion 4

Downhill Jam spits in the face of the Tony Hawk fanbase with a loogie loaded with sloppy racing and meaningless tricks. The tracks are filled with eye-popping architecture, but their designs do little to elicit exciting racing. You usually just have to find a shortcut (which are hidden about as well as the Golden Gate Bridge), and mash buttons to perform tricks. The most difficult element in this game is not winning. If you bail, you are an idiot. The balance meter is incredibly forgiving, as are the trick landings. Downhill Jam has the potential to be the skateboarding equivalent of SSX, but as it stands, it's about as much fun as playing with a skateboard that only has three wheels.—**REINER**



Elebits

> STYLE 1 TO 4-PLAYER ACTION > PUBLISHER KONAMI > DEVELOPER KONAMI > RELEASE DECEMBER 19 > ESRB E

POINT AND CLICK

One of my favorite game shows growing up was *Finders Keepers*, which had kids rampaging through a house looking for clues and generally leaving each room in shambles. I always wanted to be a contestant on that show, but I think *Elebits* replicates the experience almost exactly.

On the surface, *Elebits* is about a boy who uses a special gun to locate and collect cute creatures that produce electricity. In gameplay, this basically translates into players using the Wii remote to trash the house, garage, or amusement park in search of the cowardly little monsters. They hide under tables, shrubs, and buildings, so you throw that stuff around to expose and capture them. It taps into the same vein of quirky fun as titles like *Katamari Damacy*, but isn't

as endearing.

Even though you eventually manage a life bar and other restrictions, *Elebits* never gets much deeper or more complicated than a game of hide and seek. With such a simple concept, it is really up to the control scheme and the Wii remote to salvage the experience, and it is only partly successful. The tactile sensation of pointing at a popcorn cart and flinging it into the stratosphere is interesting and fun, but simple movement and navigation will occasionally be a needlessly frustrating obstacle.

Elebits is a unique title that showcases the Wii's controls well, but I couldn't shake the feeling that the game's big draw — total power over the surrounding world — will one day just be a small part of a much more involving and full-featured title, probably starring Jedi. —JOE

Though it looks like it is for a younger audience, some of the later levels get surprisingly difficult.



Delayed Effect

The full functionality of *WiConnect4* isn't available at launch, but *Elebits* has been developed to utilize it once it is active. You'll be able to upload and share your created levels with other users, though the multiplayer will still be limited to four players on one console.

BOTTOM LINE 7

> **Concept:** Leave no table, vehicle, or house untrashed in your search for Elebits.

> **Graphics:** Uses bright, stylized visuals that nicely mask any graphical shortcomings.

> **Sound:** Little more than nondescript music and little squeaks and squeals.

> **Playability:** Excellent use of the Wii's capabilities, but some actions (like opening doors) take some practice.

> **Entertainment:** The high level of interaction delivers short-lived fun.

> **Replay Value:** Moderately low.

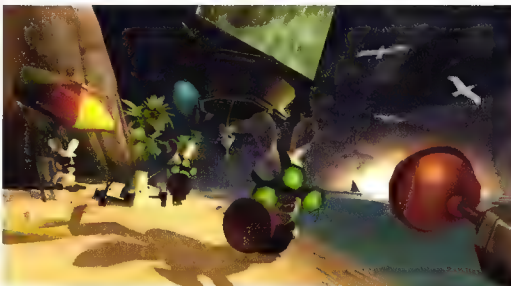
Second Opinion 6.75

This game reminds me of the days when the PSone and Saturn first came out and no one knew how to make a game in 3D. *Elebits* feels a little awkward to control, the premise is a bit boring, and manipulating object in the environment can be a hassle. Oh yeah, and the boss battles are lame. I think years from now we will look back on this game saying, "Hey, remember when games used to do this?" Then we'll smile and pat our buddy on the shoulder before going back to playing videogames with telepathy. —BEN

Wii

Rayman Raving Rabbids

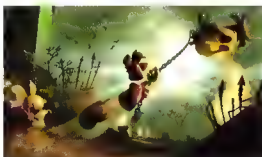
> STYLE 1 TO 4-PLAYER ACTION > PUBLISHER UBISOFT > DEVELOPER UBISOFT MONTPELLIER > RELEASE NOVEMBER 19 > ESRB E



INSANITY

Bunnies and their plungers are a grave threat to national security. This, a lesson I learned from Michel Ancel's latest success, is but one of many important things to be gleaned through *Raving Rabbids*. It also becomes clear while playing that bunnies enjoy dancing to odd Cyndi Lauper songs, a well-thrown cow can surpass the one hundred foot marker, and warthogs make for temble racing steeds. This is one of the funniest games ever made, and a fantastic way to teach yourself the controls of the Wii while simultaneously charming friends into understanding why you just spent a few hundred dollars on this new game system.

Rayman has traditionally come to our doorsteps as a platforming hero. With his Wii premiere, he drops that title to become a master of the mingame. *Raving Rabbids* is little more than a string of those short but hilarious little assignments — whack a crazed bunny over the head with a mallet, spray carrot juice into the face masks of attacking scuba-diving bunnies, or deliver explosive packages to unsuspecting bunnies before they blow up in your face. While Ancel's seeming obsession with our long-eared lagomorphic friends has forced me to question his sanity, I certainly can't fault his originality. The short



events you participate in never cease to surprise and delight, and utilize a huge range of movements and actions that the Wii remote makes possible. Most are also great fun to play, and those that aren't pass quickly. Unlockable costumes and songs drive you forward, but not so much as the desire to see the ever-changing attitude of the Rabbids towards Rayman. Beginning with homicidal tendencies directed at the little guy, you'll watch the slow transition as their demeanor shifts with his successes. It's a story told without words, through animations and sounds, and it works great.

A scored mode for each mingame unlocks as you complete the story, allowing for yet more unlockables. In addition, a multiplayer component allows for some healthy competition if you've sprung for that pricey second remote and nunchuck. Rayman comes to the Wii offering that rare combination of engaging gameplay and laugh out loud humor. It's a great launch title that's a little limited by its scope, but will still have you coming back months later, if only to take out just a few more evil bunnies. You've really got to keep your eye on those guys. —MILLER

BOTTOM LINE 8.5

> **Concept:** Complete in a series of gladiatorial mingames against killer hares to win your freedom.

> **Graphics:** An art style that's funny all by itself makes up for any lackluster texturing.

> **Sound:** Some of the strangest remakes of popular old songs ever, and the sound effects guys deserve some sort of prize.

> **Playability:** Almost every one of the games works and makes sense to play in a matter of seconds, with a few notable exceptions.

> **Replay Value:** Hugely amusing but lacking depth, it's still great fun.

> **Replay Value:** Moderate

Second Opinion 8.5

You haven't lived until you've watched a rabbit, which happens to have a plunger stuck on its face, stumble blindly into the jaws of a bear trap. The goal of this insane game is to inflame him through dozens of hilarious mingames. Every movement that the Wii can recognize is exploited to create a wonderful variety of challenges. Most of these finely developed games are demanding of skill. In some cases, your nerdy physique will be pushed to shake violently for minutes on end. It's a workout. It's a test of skill. But more importantly, it's a blast. The humor and simplicity of play makes it the perfect party game, and something that everyone can quickly pick up and enjoy. —REINER

Wii

Madden NFL 07

> STYLE 1 TO 4-PLAYER SPORTS > PUBLISHER EA SPORTS > DEVELOPER EA TIBURON > RELEASE NOVEMBER 19 > ESRB E



TINKERING WITH THE PLAYBOOK

Imagine you're a football player on a team with a new coach who is installing a whole new offense. That's what it's like playing Madden on the Wii. It's still the same football you know and love, it's just that the Xs and Os are a little different.

That this Wii version manages to keep the complexity of the series while still being an easy-to-enjoy experience that utilizes the Wii controller at every turn is a good sign. You'll become comfortable with the controls the more you play, and some moves you'll like more than others. Although I was never able to get a handle on the kicking, I loved it. I also liked the passing, where my poise in the pocket — or lack thereof — translated directly to my on-field play. For instance, if I panicked and wanted to get rid of the ball,

my body would naturally make a quicker motion with the controller even if I didn't want to throw a bullet pass.

As good of a job as this game does of adapting itself to the console without sacrificing its identity, it's not a perfect fit. Running back actions like jukes have to be done well in advance of when you need them, and the tightness and position of the controller's d-pad means you'll sometimes throw the ball to the wrong receiver. It's also not unusual to accidentally pump fake because you graze the B trigger while throwing.

I definitely had some fun with this game, but when I was having trouble calling pre-snap commands I couldn't shake the feeling that for all this title's individuality, I'd still rather play regular Madden. —KATO

BOTTOM LINE 7.75

> **Concept:** Flailing your arms around during a football game? This is what it must be like to be a cheerleader.

> **Graphics:** To my eyes, it looks worse than the current PS2 version.

> **Sound:** The QB calls that emanate from your controller's speaker are lame.

> **Playability:** You will occasionally throw to the wrong receiver thanks to the d-pad!

> **Entertainment:** I don't think you'll like all the Wii remote actions, but everyone's going to at least have one or two favorites.

> **Replay Value:** Moderately High

Second Opinion 7.5

If you're not bothered by noticeably last-generation visuals and a lack of online gameplay, Madden NFL 07 for Wii offers a decent football experience. All your basic gameplay modes, including minigames, building a franchise, and Create a Superstar are included. Even better, basic commands like running, passing, and kicking work great with the Wii controls. The only area this configuration fails to deliver is in pre-snap adjustments. Calling hot routes, sending players in motion, and sliding your protection can be a slow and painful process. Choosing your defensive plays can be frustrating as well, since Tiburon forgot to let you analyze the opposing team's personnel package on the play-calling screen. —BERTZ



Wii QUICKIES

Wii

Call of Duty 3

BOTTOM LINE 7.25

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION > PUBLISHER ACTIVISION > DEVELOPER TREVARCH > RELEASE NOVEMBER 14 > ESRB M

Out of all the tours of duty I've served in World War II, I felt the most inadequate during my Call of Duty 3 experience on the Wii. As the first few firefights raged, I was so busy trying to master the difficult controls that my fellow soldiers had to lead the charge. Though my shooting accuracy and general battlefield navigation were deserving of another boot camp, that's not to say the Wii version isn't fun. The game offers the same great single-player campaign as the other next-gen versions, which chronicles the non-stop action during the Breakout of Normandy. The similarities end there, as the Wii version is hindered with noticeably weaker graphics and the inexcusable exclusion of the great multiplayer mode. —BERTZ



Wii

Marvel: Ultimate Alliance

BOTTOM LINE 8.25

> STYLE 1 TO 4-PLAYER ACTION/RPG > PUBLISHER ACTIVISION > DEVELOPER RAVEN SOFTWARE/CAVICARUS VISIONS > RELEASE NOVEMBER 19 > ESRB T



I just flew in from the S.H.I.E.L.D. Helicarrier, and boy are my arms tired. Seriously, waving that Wii remote around for every attack makes me look like a crazy person. The gestures totally work, but darned if I want to play a dungeon crawler that way. Luckily, many of the actions in the game can still be performed by good old-fashioned button pressing. Visually, it's a little hard to step back to the less-detailed Wii version after seeing what the 360 and PS3 versions look like, and those are still the systems I'd suggest for you to play this on if you have the option, especially since you can't play online with your buddies here. However, the core of this fantastic superhero game is still in place, and if you have ever wanted to feel more like you were actually slashing with Wolverine's claws, now's your chance. —MILLER

Wii

Metal Slug Anthology

BOTTOM LINE 7.5

> STYLE 1 OR 2-PLAYER ACTION > PUBLISHER SNK > DEVELOPER SNK > RELEASE NOVEMBER 19 > ESRB T

There are few series out there that capture the essence of arcade-style action as well as Metal Slug. As if all the games included (Metal Slugs one through six, along with X) weren't already blisteringly difficult, the Wii version lets players choose between five unique control schemes (six if you count the GameCube controller). The problem is that no matter which one you select, you'll sacrifice functionality — either in maneuverability or how you lob grenades. It's fun to experiment with the options, and I can't argue with the amount of content, but if you truly want to meet the challenges at full capacity, you'll need to take a more conventional approach. On the other hand, if you want to add more unpredictability and craziness to this outlandish franchise, the Wii's Metal Slug Anthology delivers. —JOE





■ Sound squad tactics are the key to completing your objectives



■ Customize your character's look in multiplayer



BOTTOM LINE **9.5**

- > **Concept:** Terrorists attack America's adult playground, and the government responds by sending in its best counter-terror unit.
- > **Graphics:** Ubisoft ditches the drab color palette normally found in Rainbow Six for the bright lights of Vegas.
- > **Sound:** The sounds of whizzing bullets and slot machine melodies lend harmony.
- > **Playability:** Borrowed squad control elements from GRAW + new cover system = the best Rainbow Six controls yet.
- > **Entertainment:** Who hasn't felt the urge to shoot a slot machine at the casino?
- > **Repeat Value:** High

XBOX 360

Tom Clancy's Rainbow Six Vegas

> **STYLE** 1 TO 4-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 16-PLAYER VIA XBOX LIVE) > **PUBLISHER** UBISOFT > **DEVELOPER** UBISOFT MONTREAL > **RELEASE** NOVEMBER 20 > **ESRB** M

LEAVING LAS VEGAS (IN ASHES)

Since Ubisoft brilliantly recreated the Ghost Recon experience with GRAW, my expectations as an avid Rainbow Sixer for the series' first Xbox 360 title were sky high. After seeing the gorgeously rendered Vegas strip from a helicopter, rappelling through casino windows with guns blazing, and exchanging lead volleys across a row of slot machines, it's hard to say that Tom Clancy's Rainbow Six Vegas didn't match or exceed all of those expectations.

The story is classic Clancy: After a terrorist group hatches a dastardly plan to siege Sin City, a Rainbow team led by rookie Sier Logan Keller is sent in to give hundreds of mercs lead baths and to protect the city's blessed slot machines, gamblers, and ladies of ill repute. As in Ghost Recon, the plot unfolds within the game engine via digital feeds apprising Keller of the situation.

This wouldn't be a Rainbow Six game if tactics didn't spell the difference between life and death. The enemy AI is smarter than ever; they unload suppressing fire and move to flank you once they lock down your location. Positioning your team is critical to your success when the lead starts flying. Luckily, Ubisoft has improved the squad control by simplifying the system from Rainbow Six 3 and borrowing elements from GRAW. Directing your team is as simple as pointing your reticle to a

location and pressing a button. If your team arrives in a context-sensitive area like outside a door, a new menu of commands will become available. Keeping yourself alive is also easier with the vastly improved cover system, which pulls the camera out to a third-person view so you can examine your surroundings and peer around corners.

Given the game's difficulty, Ubisoft Montreal smartly implemented a more forgiving player damage system like the one in Call of Duty 2. This will keep players in firefights longer, which is crucial because the game relies on checkpoints rather than manual game saves. If masochistic FPS veterans need a tougher challenge, the hardcore Realistic mode won't be as forgiving.

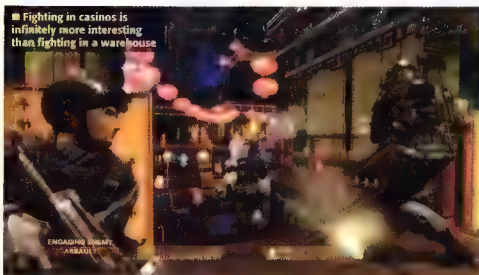
While the single-player mode is great, the multi-

player may be the best thing to come to Xbox Live since Halo 2. Borrowing several front-end aspects from Battlefield 2, RSV features a ranking system that rewards combat exploits. Fraggers can level up to unlock new weapons, costumes, and gadgets while earning ribbons, medals, and achievement points for their online skills. Even the character customization goes deeper than ever before, with clan tags, face mapping via Xbox Vision, and armor customization that will make players balance protection versus mobility.

RSV features all of the classic multiplayer modes and a great mix of old and new maps that will keep clans and lone wolves striving for medals well into the next year. The best addition in the game, though, is without a doubt the four-player co-op.

You and three of your friends can now experience the entire single-player campaign together as one Rainbow Six squad. Note to game developers: Every first-person shooter should feature this mode from this day forward. The only way Ubisoft could improve this mode would be to include the story elements, which it inexplicably cut out.

Fans of Rainbow Six, and first-person shooters in general, should not miss this game. As a co-op experience and as a tactical shooter, Rainbow Six Vegas sets a new benchmark for the gaming industry. —BERTZ



■ Fighting in casinos is infinitely more interesting than fighting in a warehouse

Second Opinion **9.5**

Rainbow Six Vegas' single-player campaign is deserving of praise for its uncompromising gunplay, intelligent teammate AI, and exciting hostage-saving scenarios. But it's only a small taste, and a fairly insignificant one, when stacked up against the game's multiplayer experience. Whether you are gunning to earn a promotion by exciting headshots in a versus match, or find yourself infiltrating a terrorist-held complex with three friends at your side in co-op, there are few games out there that deliver such intensely satisfying moments. The team-based tactics amplify the excitement, but the one element that makes the multiplayer so dangerously addictive is the pitch-perfect gunplay. The cover mechanic is, dare I say it, better than Ghost Recon's, and the targeting system is so precise that you'll feel like you were born wielding a gun. Simply put, Rainbow Six Vegas raises the stakes for console FPS. —REINER

BOTTOM LINE **6**

> **Concept:** Not just a movie game. Comic content is injected into the story from the film, but sadly, none of it stands out. The only redeemable quality in this game is flying.

> **Graphics:** Superman looks like a brain-dead doofus, and Lex Luthor looks more like Benny Hill than Kevin Spacey. The city of Metropolis, however, is a beautiful sight.

> **Sound:** Breaking the sound barrier is music to my ears. And just so you know, Superman sounds like a moron, too.

> **Playability:** You guessed it... Superman fights like a ninny. The only thing he's good for is flying. If he's not doing that, you'll want to drag him out back and shoot him.

> **Entertainment:** It's short, completely uneventful, and only worth playing as a flight simulator.

> **Replay Value:** Low



Whenever there's a Superman game, there seems to be a ball of fire.

XBOX 360

Superman Returns

> **STYLE:** 1-PLAYER ACTION > **PUBLISHER:** ELECTRONIC ARTS > **DEVELOPER:** EA TIBURON > **RELEASE:** NOVEMBER 20 > **ESRB:** T

THE WORLD WAS BETTER WITHOUT HIM

Look up into the sky! It's a bird! It's a plane! It's another crappy Superman game! When Superman donned a piliated cape on the *Atan 2600*, he also contracted a curse. In the years that have followed, a long list of developers, publishers, and incredibly talented people have attempted to make the Man of Steel soar in video games. Inspiration has been drawn from over 60 years of comic history, five movies, and a fantastic animated series, but the result has always been the same — every game ends up being an epic disaster that only Lex Luthor could enjoy. Superman is the thoroughbred of video game characters, possessing an unrivaled list of powers. But thus far, his only contribution to gamers who aspire to hear the cape flapping behind them is the ability to steal their time and money.

The question now is: Is it even possible for a developer to create a respectable Superman game, or is this iconic character the digital white whale? The development team at EA Tiburon, which consists

of over 140 people, would tell you that they played the role of Captain Ahab, laboring for years to usher in another super-sized disappointment. Superman Returns may be another loss for the son of Krypton, but it isn't a complete waste. EA was definitely on the right track with this game.

The one area that all developers have struggled with is making Superman feel super. This isn't so with this game. Within just seconds of play, it captures your imagination and makes you believe that a man can fly. Never before has flight felt so natural or so powerful. Gracefully weaving between the skyscrapers that make up Metropolis' skyline produces an amazing feeling. Better yet, you can't even begin to imagine how good it feels to rip through the clouds at over 800 mph.

Knowing full well that Superman is impervious to harm, EA decided to focus on his love of the citizens of Metropolis. Rather than giving Superman a health bar, the game instead offers a meter that gauges the well being of this flourishing city. While you do

find yourself darting across town to douse fires far too often, the majority of your time is spent battling gigantic monstrosities in the city streets as you follow a painfully linear story arc. Sadly, this is where the entire game unravels. Superman can certainly fly, but he fights like a sissy.

I love the idea of punching something so hard that it flies up through the stratosphere, but not when it means that I have to accomplish this feat through a shoddily executed combo. The hand-to-hand combat is difficult to control, and Superman's heat vision and freeze breath are two of the most unsatisfying weapons I have ever seen in play.

Superman Returns succeeds in areas where all other Superman games have failed, allowing players to experience what it's like to rocket through the sky and look down upon the mortals of the world. But alas, not even the most powerful man on the planet can save a bad action game. EA focused on the flight, but was unable to make any other feat enjoyable. —REINER

As a flight simulator, this game soars. As a game, it violently bounces off of the pavement.



Second Opinion 6.25

This is the lowest score I've ever given to a game that I like certain parts of so much. At long last, this is a title that makes me feel like Superman, as he flies above Metropolis at insane speeds, rocketing from place to place in defense of truth, justice, and the American way. Add a massive world and some amazing sound and music, and there's a lot to be excited about. Sadly, it takes a lot more than that to be a good game, and Superman would have been better off spending another five years in space than coming back to star in this squandered opportunity. The overly muscle-bound form of Brandon Routh in a tight is forced through a string of missions as mind-numbing as Lex Luthor's head is bald. Major story encounters are few and far between, and rarely relate to what's going on in the action. While the game is way too short, it's artificially inflated by throwing meaningless and repetitive minion battles at you, one after another. Hopelessly linear and lacking in any true character development dramatically or substantively, it's like being a kid with the greatest sandbox ever and the most boring adult in the world telling you how to play in it. I love being Superman in this game, but I hate what I'm forced to do with him in this failed experiment. —MILLER



We always knew the Man of Steel was a little strange, but blowing kisses at dragons? Come on!



And with that, you can work Knight parties for good.

■ Despite the new content, volleyball is still the main part of the gameplay



BOTTOM LINE **7.5**

> **Concept:** A return to Zack Island, a tropical paradise where the volleyball team and bikinis run wild

> **Graphics:** It's clearly running on the same engine as DOA 4, and the sand, sun, and babes look as beautiful as you'd expect

> **Sound:** Reminds me of the music you'd hear at an Applebee's in Cancun

> **Playability:** The volleyball is not solid, but the jet skis races aren't going to make you forget WaveRace or Splashdown

> **Entertainment:** Like a beach vacation, it's a pleasant lark until boredom starts to set in

> **Replay Value:** Moderately High

XBOX 360

Dead or Alive Xtreme 2

> **STYLE** 1 OR 2-PLAYER ACTION/SPORTS (2-PLAYER VIA COOP LIVE) > **PUBLISHER** TECMO > **DEVELOPER** TEAM NINJA
> **RELEASE** NOVEMBER 20 > **ESRB** M

THE GIRLS OF SUMMER

There's something I find a bit baffling about this series. Of course, a large part of DOA Xtreme's appeal is obvious: watching gorgeous women frolicking around in skimpy bikinis has been a staple of men's entertainment since the two-piece was invented. However, this game is amazingly out of step with most of the titles I play from month to month. As games like Gears of War continue to push towards new levels of tension and intensity, Xtreme 2 ambles along at a relaxed pace — it's quite literally a day at the beach. However, under the fun and sun is a leering, creepy vibe that I find a bit disturbing.

Most of the time, it barely feels like a game at all, rather a tropical vacation in a land where wearing a g-string qualifies as being "fully clothed!" You can pursue the various activities available to you at your leisure, whether it's playing some beach volleyball, riding jet skis, or just watching the pretty ladies sun themselves by the pool.

The volleyball, although it has been erased from the game's title, is still the most accomplished and deep part of this fairly slight gameplay package. There is no career progression per se, although trying to woo new partners with gifts and flattery is a game all unto its own. The basic mechanics and feel remain fluid and satisfying. My only complaint is that when the camera shifts to your opponents' side of the net, you sometimes can't see your character in the backcourt, making it hard to get into position.

Last time around, there wasn't a whole lot to do except ogle the talent and play volleyball, a concern that Team Ninja has addressed by adding some new minigames like Jug-o-War, Beach Flags, and (believe it or not) Butt Battle. In addition, there is a mode devoted to jet ski racing that clearly takes

its cues from Nintendo's WaveRace series. The pool-hopping game and the casino from the first game also make appearances. While all these add a bit of variety, none of the gameplay offered enough to keep me interested over the long term, meaning that the core of the experience is still basically volleyball, gift giving, and babes.

The babes themselves, unsurprisingly, look gorgeous. Team Ninja creates some of the best graphics in the business, and Xtreme 2 is no exception. Everything is rendered beautifully, and the water effects in the Jet Ski races are a sight to behold. One thing I found a bit odd, however, were the...ahem...breast physics. They've been taken to the "next level" — a level at which normal human breasts seem to be sentient beings hell-bent on escaping the confines of their host body.

All of this points out my biggest problem with the game, which is that the characters — despite the level of depth that there is in the subtleties of gift giving and partnering up — aren't really women at



■ Watersliding is among the new minigames.

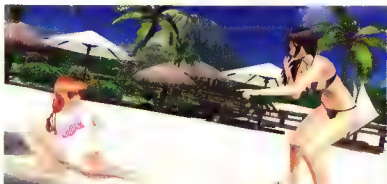
Second Opinion **7**

You know how tons of guys have a copy of *Mazin* or *Stuff* sitting on their coffee tables, but very few will actually play a *Playboy*? That's because the latter makes them look like a homdog. While there is plenty of skimpy attire and jiggling in the main DOA series, at least you can justify it all with the excellent fighting system. DOA2 is completely focused on ogling instead of gameplay, and makes no effort to hide it. Sure, you could find better volleyball and jet ski games elsewhere, but the minigames and the rest are completely serviceable. Plus, if your girlfriend comes over, you can always switch over to the nighttime casino mode where the only hot chicks onscreen appear as static images on the playing cards themselves. —BRIAN



all. Aside from the obvious problems with presenting such unrealistic body images, there's something disappointing about the way these hypersexualized characters are portrayed as childish, vacant, silly, and vain. They either like the gift you gave them or they don't, and have little to say other than snippy put-downs or chirpy compliments. Now, I'm not against eye candy for eye candy's sake, but there's something that feels cold and voyeuristic about Team Ninja's games that, quite frankly, bothers me.

That said, this is a well-made if not extremely ambitious title that will definitely please its fans. I'm just not sure I'm one of them. —MATT



■ Attracting new partners is a fairly complex process



■ Butt Battle lives up to its name



Some animals fall under the classification of lunch.



Fences will keep your vegetation and vulnerable species safe.



XBOX 360

Viva Piñata

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER SIMULATION > **PUBLISHER** MICROSOFT > **DEVELOPER** RAREWARE > **RELEASE** NOVEMBER 10
> **ESRB** E

THE CIRCLE OF LIFE

Take a good look at the animals on this page. Cute, aren't they? Now, picture yourself ordering these happy-go-lucky creatures to procreate. When their adorable little baby is born, you can sell it to turn a profit. Once the toddler is loaded onto the truck, it's your duty to force the mother and father to produce another money-fetching babe. Trade in enough children for coin and you'll have the funds needed to build a structure that will enable another species to start popping out little ones.

Before long, you'll become a soulless machine that specializes in nothing but tearing families apart for a quick buck. Shudder in fear if you will, but this is exactly how I played *Viva Piñata*.

Of course, this isn't just a breeding simulator. The primary goal is to build a garden that attracts wild animals. Some species may be lured in by the plant life and food. Others may look for creatures that serve as their primary diet. A few types of animals will only enter your garden if your experience level is high enough. In building the perfect habitat, you must also lord over the circle of life within it. This is where most of your time is spent. Unlike animals in the wilderness, these ones need to be pampered and cared for. They need food. They need shelter. They need friends. They even need to be treated for illnesses. The interaction with the animals is limited, but you will have the ability to name them, and if you get really crazy, purchase clothing for them. When your habitat fills up, you won't have a second to breathe, as you'll constantly be moving from one animal to the next.

The gameplay is incredibly simplistic, and in some cases, far too repetitive. Your list of abilities is short: pounding sun-dried dirt, planting seeds, watering plants, telling animals to get it on, and placing objects in the habitat.

For the most part, the functionality of these commands is handled well. For

instance, laying down an entire field of grass is as easy as clicking and holding a button. The dirty work in the game is left up to NPCs. With the proper funds, you can pay them to build structures, deliver crates to other people playing *Viva Piñata*, and remove animals from your habitat. As the game progresses, and your garden fills up, you can even hire some help to do the basic functions for you. Your duty is mostly to sit back and watch what happens, then react, hoping that your previous actions allow for the funding of your next set of moves.

The one area that could have used some serious work is the breeding minigame. Before the animals can get it on, they first have to find their love for each other. This bond is created through a minigame that has the male creature navigating a bomb-filled maze. The gameplay is decent, but you'll find yourself playing it over and over again.

Viva Piñata may be based on a children's cartoon, but I wouldn't necessarily say that the youngsters who watch the show are the target audience. Rather, people who enjoy god games and simulations are. This game doesn't offer up the strategic richness of a title like *Populous* — not by a long stretch — but it does take this genre down a different path. As a fan of this genre, I have to report that *Viva Piñata* was just a bit too simplistic for my blood, but I did have a great time watching the animals flourish in my world. The graphics are incredible, and each animal offers a wide range of hilarious animations. I especially like how death is handled with an animal exploding into candy.

With that said, I can, however, recommend this game as a good primer for kids and adults alike who aspire to explore the greater world of god games. It moves at a nice pace, it is never confusing, and it does a great job of holding your hand and showing you what to do next. —**REINER**



Frank just couldn't handle his jello shots.



Next on the Spice Channel: Animals Doing It 15



Stupid animals like this here bear should be visited with the shovel at least once a day.

BOTTOM LINE **8**

- > **Concept:** A god game for beginners
- > **Graphics:** The vibrant colors, Pixar-like animations, and highly detailed character models combine to create one of Xbox 360's finest spectacles
- > **Sound:** Chock full of playful melodies, ridiculously over-exaggerated character voices, and scarily adorable animal sounds
- > **Playability:** There's a lot of action in your habitat, but the interaction is far too simple. You mostly just perform daily chores, then stand around and wait for something to happen
- > **Entertainment:** It's cute and different, but far too repetitive
- > **Replay Value:** Moderately High

Second Opinion **7**

Viva Piñata, Microsoft and 4Kids Entertainment's attempt at creating an animated TV show/video game sensation, is an interesting potpourri of influences. The game combines elements of any number of offbeat titles from recent years, including *Harvest Moon*, *Animal Crossing*, and *Pokémon*. Developer Rare continues to show its visual skills, creating a day-glo world that has a look I've never seen before in a game. A large part of the pleasure of playing *Viva Piñata* comes from transforming brown dirt into a lush paradise. There are certainly parts of the game I like, especially the easy-to-use interface and the humorous antics of the animals. Still, something is a bit off about the entire package. Often, I found myself either bored and wanting something to do, or overwhelmed by trying to foster my misbehaving menagerie of potatas. I fear this game might find itself struggling to find an audience, too complex for the kids that love the show and too slow for adults. —**MATT**

■ Missile units can be useful, but are nothing but dead meat without support



BOTTOM LINE **9.25**

> **Concept:** Take over medieval Europe in one of the most epic empire-building simulations to date

> **Graphics:** Much of the game looks very average, but the titanic clashes of massive armies are some of the best-looking RTS battles around

> **Sound:** Somewhat delinquent compared to the rest of the game, but who needs sound when you've got a continent to conquer?

> **Playability:** Troops are noticeably less brain-dead this time around, which makes all the difference in the world

> **Entertainment:** Armchair emperors won't find much of anything better than this

> **Play Value:** High

Second Opinion **8.75**

This game might be deeper than an Ayn Rand novel. You are tasked with taking care of troop movements, city taxation and upkeep, and the deployment of merchants, diplomats, and spies. You can travel to the Americas and battle the Aztecs, or participate in a Crusade on the Holy Lands. The learning curve can be a little steep, but after you pour a couple hours into the game it sucks you in like any good strategy game. There is always one more little thing you want to do, so this game could keep you up until the wee hours of the morning if you're not careful. I do have a few complaints about this game, though. Watching the computer AI cycle through its turns was a little boring, especially later on in the game as the world opened up. And I could never quite shake the fact that the little historical bits felt like a Sunday afternoon PBS special. But these minor issues don't really ruin the experience. Anyone familiar with the series, and strategy fans in general, will be happy with this sequel. —BEN

PC

Medieval II: Total War



> **STYLE** 1 PLAYER STRATEGY (UP TO 8-PLAYER VIA INTERNET OR LAN) > **PUBLISHER** SEGA
> **DEVELOPER** THE CREATIVE ASSEMBLY > **RELEASE** NOVEMBER 14 > **ESRB** T

MAKE WAR, NOT MONEY

As much as I love the Civilization series, I'll be the first one to admit that it's not for everybody. Thankfully, The Creative Assembly's Total War franchise is here to satisfy players who prefer to avoid the minutia of building an economically viable empire in favor of trampling their rivals under the boots of an unstoppable army. Medieval II: Total War trims the bells and whistles off of empire management in order to dig deep into the tactics and strategy of conducting continent-spanning wars. More importantly, this game does it very, very well.

The basics of economy-building and city development are certainly a crucial part of victory, but their streamlined implementation has players spending a mere fraction of their playtime (or almost none, depending on how much you let the AI governors take care of your settlements) on them. Likewise, diplomacy with your neighbors and the Pope are crucial to success, but simple enough that they don't take away from the real meat of the gameplay: recruiting, training, upgrading, deploying, and commanding your armies in battle.

A reasonably well-made "auto-resolve" feature allows players who prefer imperial matters to the nuts-and-bolts of combat to skip the fighting (or simply let the computer determine the outcome of minor skirmishes that aren't worth your time), but the big battles that determine the fate of empires are what make this title stand out. Whether you're laying siege to an enemy stronghold or making a stand in the open field, these epic clashes (with

potentially over 1,000 troops on either side) are amazing.

The number of considerations that commanders have to take into account is large enough to feel authentic without being unmanageable. Terrain plays a huge part in crafting an effective strategy; for instance, the strength of cavalry is very dependent on having open, flat ground to bring their devastating charges to bear. Storms can greatly reduce the efficacy of your missile units, while bottlenecks in the lay of the land can allow infantry to truly shine. The morale and energy level of your troops are likewise critical without being obnoxious to deal with — taking advantage of the thundering charge of a company of knights to break the will of your enemies, while preventing the same thing from happening to you, is just the tip of the iceberg on how these seemingly peripheral concerns can make or break an army.

Historical scenarios, multiplayer, and the ability to play as several different factions in the main campaign just add to Medieval II's draw. There is a metric ton of game to be enjoyed here, and I heartily recommend it to anyone with a lick of interest in the subject matter. Small annoyances, like a mediocre overworld interface and the occasional unit AI breakdown in the RTS battles, are nowhere near enough to diminish this game's overall genius. —ADAM

■ Cavalry charges can be devastating if used well



■ The scale of the battles is amazing



■ Generals and their accompanying bodyguards are amazingly powerful troops, but were battles the army whose leader falls or is captured



PC

Warhammer: Mark of Chaos

> **STYLE** 1 PLAYER STRATEGY (UP TO X-PLAYER VIA INTERNET OR LAN) > **PUBLISHER** NAMCO BANDAI > **DEVELOPER** BLACK HOLE GAMES > **RELEASE** NOVEMBER 14 > **ESRB** M

ORCS, GOBLINS, BLAH BLAH BLAH

Despite this title's great potential as showcased at E3s past, the final product has turned out to be yet another pretender to the real-time strategy throne. Warhammer: Mark of Chaos is perfectly competent across the board, and yet the game fails to gel together into anything to get excited about. Games Workshop's long-standing Warhammer franchise is being aggressively adapted to the video game space, but even fans of the tabletop game would be better served with Relic's fantastic Dawn of War series of RTS titles or Mythic's upcoming MMORPG.

Lacking any sort of base-building or resource-gathering, Mark of Chaos has to get by on the RTS combat that makes up the majority of the gameplay. Unfortunately, the battles fail to distinguish themselves in any meaningful way from what we've seen in the genre for years. Morale and unit energy levels are nice additions, to be sure, but even those are used to much better effect in Medieval II: Total War (see review on page 112). Heroes add some distinction to the gameplay with their RPG-like experience gain and

customizable skill trees, but at the end of the day, even these powerful characters too often end up being a simple vehicle for firing off a special ability every so often.

The tactics that you'll find yourself using in Mark of Chaos are much the same as in any RTS. Match your strength to the enemy's weakness,

hold cavalry in reserve for flanking maneuvers if you can, and hope the dice come up in your favor. Because there's no in-battle recruitment and no way to know what you'll be up against, the huge selection of unit types and counters largely goes to waste. Sure, it's entertaining to see some trolls wipe the floor with masses of enemy infantry, but lacking on-the-fly flexibility in your army's composition means that you're out of luck if your foe has a counter ready. Similarly, hero duels (which allow them to square off in single combat to the death, no armies allowed) invariably go to the person who spent more points in their "dueling" skill tree — which, of course, gyms them in terms of leading an army.

There is some tactical entertainment to be had here, to be sure. When the game is firing on all cylinders, the battles are frantic and fun. Unfortunately, that's a somewhat rare occurrence. Choosing one of the many other stellar RTSs, even in the no-resource sub-genre, will be a better option for all but the most die-hard Warhammer nut. —**ADAM**

■ Yeah, we get it. Skulls on your armor, you're totally evil

BOTTOM LINE **6.75**

> **Concept:** Faithfully translate the minicute Warhammer tabletop ruleset into a real-time strategy slugfest

> **Graphics:** On a high-end machine, the detail in the troop models is amazing, though environments remain rather bland

> **Sound:** Just because a character is evil doesn't mean they need a bad voice actor

> **Playability:** Standard point-and-click RTS control shouldn't be a hurdle for anyone

> **Entertainment:** Unless the Warhammer franchise gets your inner nerd all hot and bothered, there are countless better RTSs to choose over this average effort

> **Replay Value:** Moderate

Second Opinion **7**

Imagine you've spent the greater portion of your life hunched over in your basement painting Warhammer miniatures, readying them for battle (someday). As much time and care as you've invested in them, I bet you never imagined they'd be obliterated in one fell swoop. Mark of Chaos' focus on pure combat may seem a little odd given the premeditated nature of the real-life game, but it makes for a good choice in the end. As much as this game is all about simply going toe-to-toe with a foe, it does attempt to fill itself out with various unit-building measures available in towns. Despite this and the fact that I wouldn't want my forces to be involved in routine resource gathering, I do feel the game is missing some depth. Perhaps you'll find it in Mark of Chaos' army creation feature where you can paint your soldiers, but I didn't play this game to reek of Testors. —**KATO**



■ Being cannon fodder is a thankless task



■ Not that the game is playable from this view, but it does look rather nice



■ See those treasure chests? Better pick them up before your objectives are complete, or you'll be out of the money necessary to resupply and expand your army

NINTENDO DS

Castlevania: Portrait of Ruin

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION/RPG (2-PLAYER VIA WIRELESS OR NINTENDO WI-FI CONNECTION) > **PUBLISHER** KONAMI
> **DEVELOPER** KONAMI > **RELEASE** DECEMBER 5 > **ESRB** T



DOOM DOOM DOOM

Every time a new 2D Castlevania comes out, I'm afraid that I'm going to get sick of stopping Dracula's nefarious schemes.

The latest entry in the series, *Portrait of Ruin*, keeps Konami's decade-long perfect streak alive. Though the basic exploration and combat formula has remained unchanged since 1997's *Symphony of the Night*, enough new features and fresh content have been introduced to make this as thrilling of a quest as any in the franchise.

Putting two characters in the player's hands proves to be an ingenious way of expanding on Castlevania's bread-and-butter action. It's been done before, but *Portrait of Ruin*'s system is particularly smooth in execution. Some encounters are much easier with the AI controlling the second character; other situations are best dealt with by calling them in briefly for a quick special attack; others are simplest when going it alone. How they are equipped plays a large role in the strategy as well; the breadth of options at your disposal allows for a lot of creativity in overcoming the endless hordes of evil that stand in your way.

Portrait of Ruin's environmental

gimmick of having the player dive into portraits created by the castle's master provides a nice change of setting from the castle's dank corridors. It's a pity that all of the themes are reused at the end of the game, but taking on the undead in a sand-swept ruined city or a twisted, gravity-defying carnival is yet another reason to jump into Castlevania's world once again.

As has become customary for the handheld entries in the franchise, the boss battles range from challenging to ego-crushingly difficult. I suspect that most gamers, like myself, will appreciate the challenge and sense of accomplishment that comes along with triumph in these epic battles. More casual players could be turned off by the difficulty, though, especially since it spikes noticeably by the boss fights.

The exceedingly minor imitation of reused environments is the only negative comment that I have about *Portrait of Ruin*. Unless the Metroid-like gameformula of modern 2D Castlevania is anathema to you, this will quickly become one of the most beloved titles in your DS library. Don't miss out if you can help it!—**ADAM**



Team attacks tend to dominate everything on screen.



Certain puzzles require the use of both characters.



Not pictured: the map on the top screen. (Important, but undeniably convenient)



Jumping into the portraits leads to ruin. Zing!

BOTTOM LINE 9

> **Concept:** Iterate once again on the 2D Castlevania formula. This time with style!

> **Graphics:** Buttery smooth animations bring the evil castle to vibrant life.

> **Sound:** As always, the score is a high point. I do want to punch Charlotte every time she shouts the name of her attack, though.

> **Playability:** The huge variety of weapons, special attacks, and enemies keeps the 2D action fresh.

> **Entertainment:** The thrills are huge and the flaws minor in this supremely polished adventure.

> **Replay Value:** Moderate.

Second Opinion 9

How do these games keep being so much fun? I've already experienced a lot of what *Portrait of Ruin* has to offer, and yet I'm still completely happy to be wandering the castle, slaying undead cleaning ladies, and finding better whips. This time, the gimmicky addition of a second character adds some variety, as well as some clever cooperative actions that gain you access to otherwise out of reach zones. I also liked the various portrait worlds scattered throughout the castle; spending some time in an Egyptian tomb fighting mummies helps ease the tedium of endless Gothic castle backgrounds. Enemy designs are amazing, bosses are challenging, and secret areas and endings are abundant. In short, it's all you want out of a Castlevania game, and continues a string of one of the best handheld franchises around.—**MILLER**



PSP

SOCOM: U.S. Navy SEALs Fire Team Bravo 2

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION (16-PLAYER VIA AD HOC OR INFRASTRUCTURE) > **PUBLISHER** SONY COMPUTER ENTERTAINMENT AMERICA > **DEVELOPER** ZIPPER INTERACTIVE
> **RELEASE** NOVEMBER 7 > **ESRB** T

MORE OF WHAT YOU LOVE/HATE

I applaud developer Zipper Interactive for putting in a lock-on-to feature in their PSP games instead of bullheadedly plowing forward with a shooting formula that doesn't work for the system. That said, they still haven't been able to get this feature to work very well. In the last game the lock-on made FTB too easy, basically allowing you to lock onto enemies before you could even see them. Zipper Interactive has fixed this problem, but now you can't lock onto enemies (even when you see them) unless you are within a certain distance. Adding to this problem is a completely unintuitive free-look system; sometimes enemies will be in your line of sight, making it difficult to retain the element of surprise.

Oddly enough, the single-player campaign is still more enjoyable than its PS2 brother. At the very least this does a better job of walking you through the first level and teaching you the ropes. Plus, using the Command Equity Points you earn during missions to unlock additional weapons and upgrades is pretty cool.

But FTB's saving grace is its multiplayer, the only real reason to play this game. A lot of the single player problems evaporate when you go online and sample any of the eight multiplayer modes FTB 2 has to offer. It does feel like some (though not all) of the skill is sucked away by the lock-on controls, but that won't keep you from having fun. And there is that thrill of being able to play deathmatch on the go. Sure, it's not the only game to do portable multiplayer, but it's one of the better ones, so if that's what you're looking for then maybe FTB 2 is your game.—**BEN**



Your AI friend is even worse at staying hidden than in the PS2 versions.

BOTTOM LINE 7.5

> **Concept:** Very similar to the console games, but with different problems.

> **Graphics:** Looks about as good as its PS2 counterpart, but that isn't saying much.

> **Sound:** So-so, and about as good as its PS2 counterpart, and that is saying something.

> **Playability:** The button layout has been squashed down into about as compact a form as it can handle, and fortunately it is possible.

> **Entertainment:** The camera is a little too zoomed in, and since the free look mode in this game sucks, the camera is not always facing where you want it.

> **Replay Value:** High.

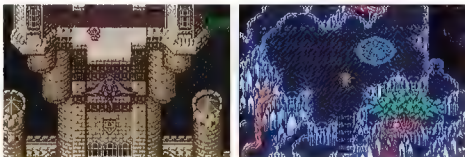
Second Opinion 8

For perhaps the first time ever, the PSP version of a cross-platform PSP/PS2 title is better. *Fireteam Bravo 2* has benefited from the tight constraints of the PSP's hardware, and developer Zipper has created a tightly engineered, polished product that is among the better titles available for the PSP. The thoughtfully laid out controls respond very well making it simple to access even the most esoteric portions of your SEAL's loadout. Multiplayer is a huge part of this title's appeal as well, with a variety of gametypes and maps that should appease the most rabid of SOCOM fans. This little game should serve as an adequate holdover until we see a next-gen entry in the franchise.—**ADAM**

GAME BOY ADVANCE

Final Fantasy V Advance

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ROLE-PLAYING GAME > **PUBLISHER** NINTENDO > **DEVELOPER** SQUARE ENIX
> **RELEASE** NOVEMBER 8 > **ESRB** E

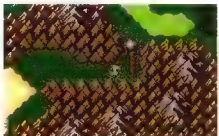


PLAYTIME, NOT PLOTLINE

Final Fantasy V isn't exactly remembered as the best game in the venerated series. It lacks the compelling characters and epic spark of other entries from the 16-bit era; with Cecil and Kain on one side of the Final Fantasy continuum and Kefka on the other, it's not surprising that it doesn't quite measure up to its contemporaries in terms of story.

Can an RPG survive without an intricate and twisting plot? In this case, absolutely. Regardless of the events at hand, there is one area where Final Fantasy V is unparalleled: its use of an innovative and addictive job system. This mechanic transforms regular random encounters into an ever-changing mixture of new abilities and strategies. I was constantly trying out new classes and skills (ninjas rule), and I enjoyed every minute of it as my party members slowly evolved into fully optimized machines.

This isn't the first time I've experimented with this system. I, like other fans of the franchise, played this game on the P-SoNe's Final Fantasy Anthology. While the GBA port remains the same in many ways, there are plenty of improvements in just the right places. The new translation is much more bearable (no more Faris saying "D'yar" every other word), and the new jobs like Gladiator and Necromancer are cool—but only available late in the game.



Without question, this is the best way to experience Final Fantasy V. However, if you're the kind of RPG fan who needs a strong story to keep you playing, even this definitive version won't be satisfying. On the other hand, if you usually skip through dialogue just to get to the next battle, you'll love this game's unique blend of character-building and combat. —**JOE**



BOTTOM LINE 8

> **Concept:** Take an often-overlooked game and make people wonder why they never played it

> **Graphics:** Little visual enhancements are here and there, but it still looks very much like an SNES title.

> **Sound:** Worst overworld music in the series' history. Apart from that, the soundtrack is great

> **Playability:** The job system definitely has an adjustment period, but the payoff is worth it. The battle slowdown that marred FF IV Advance is nowhere to be found

> **Entertainment:** Even if the story won't have you enthralled, the combat will

> **Replay Value:** Moderate

Second Opinion 6

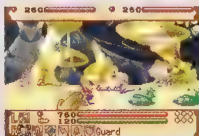
Square Enix is the master of restoration. With enhanced graphics, an improved translation, and additional content like the Sealed Temple and new jobs, this is undoubtedly the best that Final Fantasy V has ever been. With that said, the one area that needed the most work remains largely unchanged. The plot barely has a pulse, lacking both a strong antagonist and the series' trademark mysticism. The combat system holds up incredibly well, and I love how you can tailor the jobs to your playing style, but it's difficult to submerge yourself in this world when the conflict at hand is no more exciting than killing rats in someone's basement. Regardless, I still found myself addicted to the point that I was losing sleep, but it was purely from my fascination and love of the combat system. Gauge what kind of an RPG fanatic you are before visiting this world. —**REINER**

HANDHELD QUICKIES

GAME BOY ADVANCE

Summon Knight: Swordcraft Story 2

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION/RPG (2-PLAYER VIA LINK CABLE)
> **PUBLISHER** ATLUS
> **DEVELOPER** FLIGHT PLAN
> **RELEASE** OCTOBER 17 > **ESRB** T

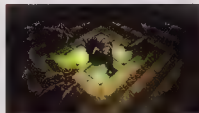


BOTTOM LINE 7.25 Despite its nearly identical interface and visuals, this sequel is not an exact clone of the original Swordcraft Story (which just released in the U.S. last July). The biggest improvements are the game's pacing and the weapon creation system, which no longer forces you to forge a pile of weapons you'll never use. Apart from these changes, most aspects are eerily similar to the first entry, the writing has the same hilarious charm, and the real-time 2D combat is still a bit too sluggish for my tastes. Swordcraft Story 2 has some solid classic appeal, but only enough to make you remember rather than relive the past. —**JOE**

PSP

Dungeon Siege: Throne of Agony

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION/RPG (UP TO 2-PLAYER VIA AD HOC) > **PUBLISHER** 2K GAMES > **DEVELOPER** SUPERVILLAIN STUDIOS, GAS POWERED GAMES
> **RELEASE** OCTOBER 31 > **ESRB** T



BOTTOM LINE 8 Dungeon Siege has officially entered the mobile space to offer an alternative to Untold Legends—and a really good one at that. A choice of three major character archetypes is further customizable by choosing between a complementary follower, which can be anything from a mage to a fire elemental. Like all games of this ilk, power and attribute choices offer added flexibility. And while the fighting is pretty simple throughout, the monsters are fun and the loot has you on that endless quest for something just a little better. Ad hoc multiplayer fills out the package to add even more value. Feeling overly familiar, this is a title destined to change absolutely no one's mind about the genre or its conventions, but that's about the worst I can say about it. —**MILLER**



NINTENDO DS

Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney Justice For All

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ADVENTURE > **PUBLISHER** CAPCOM
> **DEVELOPER** CAPCOM > **RELEASE** JANUARY 16 > **ESRB** T

SWEET JUSTICE

After playing through the first Phoenix Wright title, I was surprised to learn that the game was already part of a trilogy on Game Boy Advance in Japan called Gyakuten Saiban. "Ah, so that's why the game seemed to end after the fourth case," I thought to myself. The fifth case was created especially for the DS version, with 3D evidence examination and a cool security camera sequence. Unfortunately, Justice For All contains no extra case.

But what it lacks in advanced graphics and interface, JFA more than makes up for in charm and intrigue. Classic characters Maya, Oldbag, and Edgeworth return, and plenty of new ones fill out the ranks. Prosecutor Franziska von Karma is your new nemesis and is twice the hard-ass her father was.

To add even more challenge to the proceedings, players can now present character profiles as evidence (so much for the guessing tactic). And the star "health" system has been replaced by a green energy bar. Damage received will persist throughout the entire case, and the only way to replenish it is to complete a "Psyche-Lock." Here you will be able to see a person's lies with onscreen locks and chains, and must present evidence to break them down. This effectively brings courtroom drama into the sometimes tedious investigation phases.

The big question now is, "Will Capcom localize Gyakuten Saiban 3 or skip ahead to the DS-specific fourth game?" I'd love to experience the full saga, but am eager to see what Capcom can do in a courtroom built for the DS from the ground up. —**BRYAN**

BOTTOM LINE 8

> **Concept:** Port the second game in the Japanese GBA series over to DS for American audiences

> **Graphics:** Many environments and character animations are reused from the first game. New content is as charming as ever

> **Sound:** All-new soundtrack with familiar themes mixed in

> **Playability:** Controls haven't changed at all from the first game

> **Entertainment:** There's still nothing like coming a lying witness in court, and the new cases keep getting crazier

> **Replay Value:** Moderately Low



Second Opinion 8

If the legal system is really as entertaining as Phoenix Wright makes it seem, I need to get indicted more often. This title features the same off-the-wall absurdity of the original, with hilarious writing to compliment the game's clever brand of problem solving. The heavy reliance on dialogue makes the detective segments move slowly, but as soon as the text meets the gameplay in the trial sequences, Justice for All becomes an irresistible adventure that you are legally obligated to investigate. —**JOE**



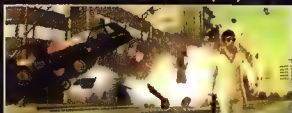
CHARTS

An In-Depth Listing Of The Best Selling Games

TOP 20

Listings Based Upon NPD Data For October 2006 Based On Units Sold

1 SCARFACE: THE WORLD IS YOURS (PS2)



We thought that maybe reenacting this game in real life would be more fun than the game itself, so we got all jazzed up on Play Sticks one night and went out on the town. Needless to say, things did not turn out well. We awoke from our drug haze in Cuba with a ginsu w/ armed police yelling at us to put the puppy down (long story, we don't want to talk about it). Don't be like us, kids.

2 TOM CLANCY'S SPLINTER CELL: DOUBLE AGENT (XBOX 360)



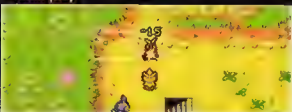
Here is another game that you don't want to re-enact in real life. Assassinations of government officials can be a difficult thing to get away with. Fortunately for us, we are too big of gamblers to actually kill someone and were laughed out of the country after they confiscated our Nerf guns.

3 MADDEN NFL 07 (PS2)



Speaking of Nerf, remember when you were young and played with your Nerf football every day? You were good back then. You were going so pro when you got older. But then Trent Anderson snarled you for Me when he led your football to his dog. What a terrible thing to do to a four-year-old.

4 POKÉMON MYSTERY DUNGEON: RED RESCUE TEAM (DS)



We finally got Trent back. We sent him copies of this game. Actually, we sent him 20,000 copies. That is one of the reasons it sold so well. We only wish we could see his face when he opens the box all excited to collect some Pokémon then realizes that this game is worse than a bed made out of other people's used Kleenex. Disgusting.

5 MORTAL KOMBAT: ARMAGEDDON (PS2)



And speaking of disgusting, that's what it would be like if we could re-enact this game on Trent. Oh man! He wouldn't even see what was coming when we created our own fatality or his childhood-bully-turned-family-cable-repairman's ass. Hell hath no fury like the petrified hatred of an eternally scarred four-year-old's soul.

Rank	Title	L Mo	System	Score	Release	Price
1	Scarface: The World is Yours	N/A	PS2	8.5	10-06	\$50
2	Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell: Double Agent	N/A	360	9	10-06	\$59
3	Madden NFL 07	1	PS2	8.25	08-06	\$50
4	Pokémon Mystery Dungeon: Red Rescue Team	6	GBA	3	09-06	\$31
5	Mortal Kombat: Armageddon	N/A	PS2	8.25	10-06	\$40
6	Pokémon Mystery Dungeon: Blue Rescue Team	4	DS	3	08-06	\$31
7	NBA Live 07	11	PS2	7.5	09-06	\$40
8	FIFA Soccer 07	N/A	PS2	7.25	10-06	\$40
9	Bully	N/A	PS2	8.5	10-06	\$40
10	Tiger Woods PGA Tour 07	N/A	PS2	8	10-06	\$40
11	Scarface: The World is Yours	N/A	XBOX	8.5	10-06	\$50
12	LEGO Star Wars II: The Original Trilogy	7	PS2	8	09-06	\$39
13	Tiger Woods PGA Tour 07	N/A	360	8	10-06	\$59
14	Marvel: Ultimate Alliance	N/A	360	9.25	10-06	\$58
15	Mario Vs Donkey Kong 2: March of the Minis	N/A	DS	6	09-06	\$30
16	New Super Mario Bros.	10	DS	9.25	05-06	\$34
17	Mario Hoops 3 On 3	17	DS	6.5	09-06	\$30
18	Naruto: Clash of Ninja 2	N/A	GC	6.5	09-06	\$39
19	Madden NFL 07	5	360	8.25	09-06	\$50
20	Mortal Kombat: Armageddon	N/A	XBOX	8.25	10-06	\$40

TOP 10 JAPAN

Rank	Title	System
1	Kirby Squeak Squad	DS
2	Adult Common Sense Training	DS
3	Pokémon Diamond	DS
4	World Soccer Winning Eleven DS	DS
5	Pokémon Pearl	DS
6	New Super Mario Bros.	DS
7	DS Training for Adults: Work Your Brain 2	DS
8	KanKen DS	DS
9	Animal Crossing: Wild World	DS
10	Ace Combat X: Skies of Deception	PSP



TOP 10 GI

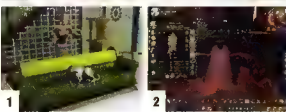
Rank	Title	L Mo	System
1	Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess	N/A	Wii
2	Rainbow Six Vegas	N/A	360
3	Medieval II: Total War	N/A	PC
4	Castlevania: Portrait of Ruin	N/A	DS
5	Rogue Galaxy	N/A	PS2
6	Gears of War	1	360
7	Resistance: Fall of Man	2	PS3
8	Lumines II	4	PS2
9	Guitar Hero II	5	PS2
10	Bully	6	PS2



The Staff's Favorite Pets

TOP 10 PC

Rank	Title	L Mo	Price
1	The Sims 2: Pets	N/A	\$27
2	World of Warcraft	2	\$22
3	Battlefield 2142	N/A	\$48
4	Warhammer 40,000: Dawn of War - Dark Crusade	N/A	\$29
5	MS Flight Simulator X Deluxe	N/A	\$65
6	The Sims 2: Glamour Life Stuff	1	\$19
7	Company of Heroes	3	\$49
8	Paws & Claws Pet Vet	5	\$13
9	The Sims 2	4	\$40
10	MS Flight Simulator X	N/A	\$49



Sold On Monthly Units Sold

REVIEW ARCHIVE

PLAYSTATION 3

Genji Days of the Blade	6	Dec-06
Marvel Ultimate Alliance	9.25	Dec-06
Mobile Suit Gundam Crossfire	3.75	Dec-06
NBA 07	7	Dec-06
Need for Speed Carbon	8.5	Dec-06
Resistance: Fall of Man	9.5	Dec-06
Ridge Racer 7	8	Dec-06

XBOX 360

Bornborn: Act Zero	3	Sep-06
Call of Duty 3	8.5	Dec-06
Chimeraheads	7	Aug-06
Dead Rising	9.25	Sep-06
Enchanted Arms	6	Oct-06
F.E.A.R.	8.5	Dec-06
FIFA Soccer 07	9.25	Dec-06
Geas of War	9.5	Dec-06
Godfather, The	7.75	Oct-06
Hitman: Blood Money	7.75	Jul-06
Just Cause	7.75	Oct-06
LEGO Star Wars II: The Original Trilogy	8	Oct-06
Lord of the Rings: The Battle of Middle-earth II, The	8	Aug-06
Madden NFL 07	7.75	Oct-06
Marvel Ultimate Alliance	8.25	Dec-06
Motor GP 06	8	Jul-06
NBA 2K7	8.25	Nov-06
NBA Live 07	8.25	Dec-06
NCAA Football 07	7.75	Aug-06
Need for Speed Carbon	8.5	Dec-06
NHL 07	7.75	Oct-06
NHL 2K7	8.25	Oct-06
Ninety-Nine Nights	7.5	Sep-06
Over G Fighters	5	Sep-06



Gears of War - Xbox 360 - Dec-06

Prey	9.5	Aug-06
Samurai Warriors	8.75	Sep-06
Samurai Warriors 2	6	Nov-06
Splinter Cell: Double Agent	9	Dec-06
Table Tennis	8	Jul-06
Test Drive Unlimited	8.25	Nov-06
Tiger Woods PGA Tour 07	8	Dec-06
Tony Hawk's Project 8	9	Dec-06
WWE Smackdown vs. Raw 2007	8.75	Dec-06
X-Men: The Official Game	4	Jul-06

PLAYSTATION 2

Buffy	8.5	Dec-06
Capcom Classics Collection Volume 2	7	Aug-06
Capcom Classics Collection Volume 2	7	Aug-06
Da Vinci Code, The	6	Jul-06
Destiny All Humans 2	8.5	Nov-06
Digital Combat	5.75	Dec-06
Final Fantasy VII	6.75	Sep-06
Diagea 2: Cursed Memories	8.75	Sep-06
doHack/ICU Vol. 1/Rebirth	5.75	Dec-06
Evil Genius	5.25	Oct-06
The New Wave	6	Nov-06
FIFA and the Fanatics, The	6	Nov-06
FIFA 07	7.75	Oct-06
Final Fantasy XII	9.25	Nov-06
FluOut 2	7.75	Sep-06
Call of Duty 2	6.75	Jul-06
God Hand	6	Nov-06
Grand Theft Auto: Liberty City Stories	8.75	Aug-06
Guitar Hero II	9	Dec-06
Just Cause	7.75	Aug-06
Just Cause	7.25	Oct-06
Justice League Heroes	7.25	Dec-06
Legend of Spyro: A New Beginning, The	7	Nov-06
LEGO Star Wars II: The Original Trilogy	8	Oct-06
Madden NFL 07	8.25	Oct-06
Marvel Ultimate Alliance	9.25	Dec-06
Micro Machines V4	7.5	Aug-06
MLB Slugfest 2006	5	Aug-06
Mortal Kombat: Armageddon	8.25	Dec-06
Mortal Kombat: Armageddon	8.25	Dec-06
NASCAR 07	7.75	Oct-06
NBA 07	7.75	Oct-06
NBA 2K7	8	Nov-06
NHL 07	7.75	Oct-06
NCAA Football 07	8.25	Aug-06
Need for Speed Carbon	8.5	Dec-06
NHL 07	7.75	Oct-06
NHL 2K7	6.75	Oct-06
Okami	9.5	Oct-06
Oni: Princess Peaches's Carnage	4	Sep-06
Pirates of the Caribbean: The Legend of Jack Sparrow	5.75	Aug-06
Rule of Rose	6.25	Oct-06
Samurai Warriors 2	6	Nov-06
Scarface: The World is Yours	8.5	Nov-06
Shin Megami Tensei: Devil Summoner	7.75	Dec-06



Okami - PS2 - Oct-06

Sims 2: Pets, The	6	Dec-06
Spy Hunter: Nowhere to Run	3	Nov-06
Street Fighter Alpha Anthology	7.5	Jul-06
Super Dragon Ball Z	6	Sep-06
Super Monkey Ball Adventure	4.75	Sep-06
Tales of the Abyss	12.5	Nov-06
Thrillville	7.75	Dec-06
Tiger Woods PGA Tour 07	8	Nov-06
Tochigi Plus	7.25	Dec-06
Metropolis of the Karolun	7.25	Dec-06
Urban Chaos: Riot Response	7.75	Jul-06
Valkyrie Profile 2: Silmasa	8	Oct-06
WWE Smackdown vs. Raw 2007	8.75	Dec-06
Xenogears Episode III	8.5	Sep-06
X-Men: The Official Game	4	Jul-06
Yakuza	6	Sep-06

GAMECUBE

Baten Kaitos Origins	7	Nov-06
Cats	7	Aug-06
FIFA 07	7.75	Oct-06
Legend of Spyro: A New Beginning, The	7	Nov-06
LEGO Star Wars I, The Original Trilogy	8	Oct-06
Madden NFL 07	8.25	Oct-06
Sims 2: Pets, The	6	Dec-06
Super Monkey Ball Adventure	4.75	Sep-06
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XBOX

Cats	7	Aug-06
Capcom Classics Collection Volume 2	7	Aug-06
Da Vinci Code, The	6	Jul-06
Destiny All Humans 2	8.5	Nov-06
FIFA 07	7.75	Oct-06
FluOut 2	7.75	Sep-06
Jaws	4.75	Aug-06
Just Cause	7.25	Oct-06
Justice League Heroes	7.25	Dec-06
Legend of Spyro: A New Beginning, The	7	Nov-06
LEGO Star Wars II: The Original Trilogy	8	Oct-06
Madden NFL 07	8.25	Oct-06
Marvel Ultimate Alliance	9.25	Dec-06
MLB Slugfest 2006	5	Aug-06
Mortal Kombat: Armageddon	8.25	Dec-06
NASCAR 07	7.75	Oct-06
NBA 2K7	8	Nov-06
NBA Live 07	7.5	Nov-06
NCAA Football 07	8.25	Aug-06
Need for Speed Carbon	8.5	Dec-06
NHL 2K7	6.75	Oct-06
NHL 07	7.75	Oct-06
Panikles: Hell Wars	7.25	Oct-06
Rogue Trooper	7.25	Jun-06
Scarface: The World is Yours	8.5	Nov-06
Spy Hunter: Nowhere to Run	3	Nov-06
Thrillville	7.75	Dec-06
Tiger Woods PGA Tour 07	8	Nov-06
Urban Chaos: Riot Response	7.75	Jul-06
Winback 2: Project Response	4	Nov-06
X-Men: The Official Game	4	Jul-06

PC

AutoAssault	7	Jun-06
Age of Empires III: The Warchests	7	Dec-06
Battlefield 2142	8.5	Nov-06
Call of Duty: Resistance	8	Sep-06
Commandos: Strike Force	5.5	Jun-06
Company of Heroes	9	Oct-06
Dark Messiah of Might & Magic	9.25	Sep-06
Dawn of War	7.5	Jul-06
Deadfall: The Longest Journey	8	Jun-06
Dungeon Siege II: Broken World	7.5	Oct-06
F.E.A.R. Extraction Point	8	Dec-06
Half-Life 2: Episode One	8.75	Aug-06
Heroes of Might & Magic V	8.25	Jul-06
Hitman: Blood Money	7.75	Jun-06
Just Cause	7.25	Oct-06
Just Cause	6	Dec-06
Mage Knight: Apocalypse	6	Dec-06
Neverwinter Nights 2	8	Dec-06
Paradise	5.25	Jul-06
Project Gotham World	7	Dec-06
Ray	7	Aug-06
Rise & Fall: Civilization vs. Lege	3	Aug-06
Rise of Nations: Rise of Legeds	8.5	Jul-06
Sid Meier's Civilization IV: World	8	Sep-06
Sid Meier's Railroad	8	Dec-06
Sims 2: Pets, The	6	Dec-06
Sith Episodes: Emergence	7.75	Jul-06

Star Wars: Empire at War	7.5	Dec-06
Forces of Corruption	7.5	Sep-06
Sword of the Stars	7.5	Sep-06
Tiger Woods PGA Tour 07	8	Nov-06
Titan Quest	8.25	Aug-06
Warhammer 00	8.75	Dec-06
Dawn of War - Dark Crusade	8.75	Dec-06

NINTENDO DS

Big Brain Academy	7.75	Aug-06
Brain Age	6.25	Jun-06
Break Em All	7.5	Sep-06
Children of Mana	7.75	Nov-06
Contact	7	Oct-06
Cooling Mama	6.5	Oct-06
Deep Iremily	4	Oct-06
Dragon Quest Heroes	8.25	Oct-06
Rocket Slime	8.25	Oct-06
Site Best Agents	6.75	Dec-06
Final Fantasy III	8	Dec-06
Gunpey	7.75	Dec-06
fi Hi Puffy AmTums	6.5	Oct-06
The Catnie and the Amp	5.75	Sep-06
Lost Magic	6	Jun-06
Mage Knight: Destiny's Soldier	4.5	Dec-06
Magical Strateg	6.5	Nov-06
Magnetica	7.25	Aug-06
Mano Hoops 3-on-3	6.5	Oct-06
Mano vs. Dastley King 2	6	Nov-06
March of the Minis	7.75	Nov-06
MediEvil: Phantom War	7	Oct-06
Mega Man ZX	6	Oct-06
Monster House	9.25	Jul-06
New Super Mario Bros.	4.5	Aug-06
Paint Blast DS	4.5	Aug-06
Rakmon: Mystery Dungeon	3	Nov-06
Blue Rescue: Room	3	Nov-06
Pakemon Ranger	5	Dec-06
Scagee: Hive	7.5	Nov-06
Star Fox Command	8	Oct-06
Tea's Adventure	2	Jun-06
Curse of the Demon Seal	6.75	Nov-06
Youth Detective	6.75	Nov-06
Yoshi's Island 2	8.25	Dec-06

PSP

20 Cent Bulletproof	6.25	Nov-06
C Unit Edition	6.25	Nov-06
Ace Combat X	8.25	Dec-06
Sleazy Deception	4.25	Aug-06
Astoria Story	4.25	Aug-06
Blade Dancer	5.5	Aug-06
Bowery Bunch	6.25	Nov-06
Death in 2: Road of Evil	8.25	Nov-06
Def Jam Fight for NY: The Takeover	8	Aug-06



Dynasty Warriors - PSP - Oct-06

Dynasty Warriors Vol 2	5	Dec-06
EA Replay	6.75	Dec-06
Every Extend Extra	8.25	Nov-06
Genji of London	6	Nov-06
Gitaroo Man Lives!	9	Dec-06
Godfather: Mob Wars, The	4.5	Nov-06
Gradius Collection	8.5	Jun-06
Grand Theft Auto: Vice City Stories	8.5	Dec-06
Gun Showdown	7.75	Dec-06
Gunpey	7.75	Dec-06
Justice Eliminator	7.75	Aug-06
Kuonon Liberation	7.25	Sep-06
Legend of Heroes II, The	6	Jul-06
Leggings	7.25	Jul-06
Locofloco	7.5	Oct-06
Luminous II	9	Dec-06
Medal of Honor Heroes	6.75	Dec-06
Mercury Method	8	Sep-06
Micro Vics	8	Oct-06
Monster Hunter Freedom	4	Jun-06
NCAA Football 07	8.5	Sep-06
Outrun 2006: Coast 2 Coast	7.5	Jun-06
Primates of the Caribbean	3	Sep-06
Dead Man's Chest	3	Sep-06
Race Driver 2006	7.75	Nov-06
Race Driver 2006	8.5	Aug-06
Spectral Souls	5.5	Nov-06
Tekken Dark Resurrection	8.25	Sep-06
Tomb Raider: Legend	8.25	Jul-06
Ultimate Street Fighter	7.5	Jun-06
Ultimate Ghosts 'n Goblins	7.25	Oct-06
Valhalla Profile: Lenneth	8	Aug-06
WTF	7	Nov-06

GAME BOY ADVANCE

Mega Man Battle Network 6	6.5	Aug-06
Clownd Greg/Cloend Falzar	7	Aug-06
Summer Night, Sverdrstadt Story	7	Aug-06
Supernight: Reson	7.5	Aug-06
Original Generation	7.5	Aug-06
Tower 59, The	7	Jun-06

[GEEKED AT BIRTH.]



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



Star Trek Legacy

A Captain's Manual

By Ian Currie, Lead Designer

UNDERSTANDING SHIELDS

When engaged in combat against ships that have shields (and that would be most ships in the game – the exceptions being the Borg and Enterprise-era Federation ships), it helps if you have a strong understanding of shield effectiveness.

Shields excel at absorbing torpedo damage. By now you already know that using phasers against shields is preferable to using photon torpedoes – which are easily and often wasted – and that torpedoes truly come into their own when the shields are down and the hull is exposed. For that reason, it is much better to bring your target's shields down before firing torpedoes. The easiest way to do this is to train all available ships' phasers on a given target – shields are easily overwhelmed this way. However, when this isn't convenient, here are some tidbits about shields that may find handy.

The higher (or stronger) the shields, the more effective they are; in contrast, the lower the shield strength, the higher the chance for damage to "bleed" through the shields to the hull. If you're itching to pull the photon trigger, but you can't quite get a target's shields all the way down, try to at least wait until shield strength is down in the neighborhood of 25% or so. The odds are well in your favor at this point. Of course, when the torpedoes are in flight, if you have enough weapon energy to fire another phaser blast or two and reduce the shields further, all the better.

When shields lose all their strength, they are temporarily offline until they re-charge. With shields down, you can go to town damaging the hull. Each ship has a different recharge time, so pay attention to the gray re-charge bar and exploit this window of opportunity as best you can.

MAXIMIZING WEAPONS

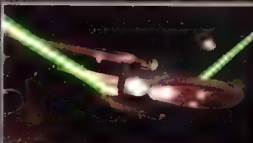
PHASERS

With phasers, distance matters. As long as you have a firing solution (target is within range and positioned within the firing arcs of your phasers), you'll see white reticles around your target and your phasers will hit their mark when fired. However, phaser loss effectiveness over distance, so decreasing your range to the target will greatly increase the amount of damage.

Timing your phaser bursts when your target is closest can make a huge difference when fighting one-on-one.

Phaser bursts intensify in damage. The amount of phaser damage per second increases throughout a single burst – the longer a burst, the better. This means you can do more damage over the long run by waiting until you have full weapon energy each time before firing phasers. Resisting the urge to continuously fire phasers' with only partial energy is key here.

Ships with multiple phaser beams deliver less damage per beam. For ships that fire more than one phaser beam at a time, keep in mind that each beam typically does less damage than a ship that only fires one. To maximize your phaser damage, you'll need to get a good handle on what approaches allow for all beams to fire and maneuver accordingly.



A phaser "lock" results in bleed-through. If your ship's shields are up and you fire during a phaser lock, you're no longer exclusively attacking the shields. Most of the phaser damage is penetrating through the hull.

PHOTONS

Unlike phasers, photon torpedoes can miss. Given that photons take a while to load and are a finite resource, it's good to pay attention to the red "locking" reticles; they indicate your current chance to hit. If you fire as soon as you get a firing solution (see the red reticles), you're going to waste a lot of torpedoes. While your ship's sensors and weapon systems work together to improve your lock on their own, careful maneuvering of your ship can speed this up considerably. While a full lock-on is a guaranteed hit, anything close is still a good time to fire torpedoes. The trick to maximizing torpedoes is to bring your target's shields down, get as close to a full lock as possible and fire multiple torpedoes, swinging around to fire alt torpedoes if necessary.

Using the Fire-at-Will command. When it comes to torpedo usage, your fleet will tend to be somewhat frugal. In the long run, this is a good thing, but you can tell them to fire more aggressively by holding the RB and pressing Y. This works on a target-by-target basis.

ENERGY DISTRIBUTION

Energy management is vital to combat success. Perform this function as often as necessary – just keep in mind that it takes a little time for the new distribution to take effect.

Re-distributing energy to weapons increases phaser range and the rate at which weapon energy replenishes – great when on the offensive. Re-distributing to shields affects the strength of your shields and its recharge rate. Re-distributing to engines affects top speed and improves turning ability. Use combinations as you see fit (e.g. combination of engines and weapons) to improve attack/pursuit ability.

REPAIR

The first thing to know about repair is that it drains a great deal of energy from your main systems. Therefore repairing during combat is hardly a "no-brainer." If your survival relies on being able to destroy a target before it destroys you, you might be better off holding off on repairing as you will otherwise be battle impaired. Repairing during combat makes the most sense when the ship affecting repairs isn't vital to the outcome of the combat. Keep in mind that even though repairing drains energy from shields, weapons and engines, the remaining energy is still be distributed; concentrating energy into shields while repairing can make the difference between life and death.

SUB SYSTEM TARGETING

This is a feature that remains "under the hood" until activated.

When damage reaches the hull – whether it occurs through "bleed" or because shields are down – sub-systems can become damaged. Examples of sub-systems are the shield generator, engines, weapon system, and sensors. The more damaged a sub-system is, the less functional it is, handicapping the overall performance of the ship. A severely damaged sub-system ceases to function at all (until repaired).

The idea behind sub-system targeting is to exploit the fact that a phaser lock can penetrate shields and allow sub-systems to be attacked (and brought offline) when a ship can be otherwise healthy. It takes a fair amount of maneuvering skill, but can be very rewarding. It's most effective on slower, tougher ships (e.g. battleships) using highly maneuverable ships (e.g. scouts and destroyers). Master this and you'll be able to turn the tide in multiplayer by having a scout take out a battleship's shield generator or turning a cruiser into a sitting duck by bringing down its engines.

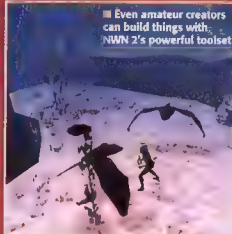
Mod World

NEVERWINTER NIGHTS 2

<http://www.atari.com/nwn2/US/community.php>

The best-case scenario has already happened. Neverwinter Nights 2 has sold well and been embraced by the online community, and there is already a huge amount of fan-created content available for free download. From persistent worlds servers to smaller tweaks like custom armor sets, you can find nearly anything you desire online. The above URL, Atari's official community links page, is a great place to start with its huge number of links to various NWN 2 fan sites and mod pages.

Even amateur creators can build things with NWN 2's powerful toolset



As of press time, we found dozens of persistent worlds scheduled to launch before the end of the year. If even half of these make their dates, by the time you have this magazine you should have several to choose from. They vary wildly in terms of what the goal of each community is, so make sure to find out where the dungeon masters stand on things like roleplaying, class/race restrictions, and custom rules.



If jumping into a whole fan-made world is a little daunting for you, there are still lots of mods available that allow you to tweak the gameplay to your liking. UI mods that change the interface are among the most common, offering things like extra toolbars or expanded inventory viewing. You can even find mods that alter the basic rules of the game, from changing the way that certain feats work to granting player characters completely unfair powers. Have fun, mod up your game, and remember to always, always back up your save files.

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@gamenformer.com for a chance to be featured here and win a very special prize!

XBOX 360

Need For Speed Carbon

Enter the following from the main menu. Correct entry will lead to a pop-up confirmation message. For PS2, simply change the final X in each code to □.

Infinite Crew Charge – Down, Up, (x2), Right, Left, (x2), Right, X

Infinite Nitrous – Left, Up, Left, Down, Left, Down, Right, X

Infinite Speedbreaker – Down, Right, (x2), Left, Right, Up, Down, X

Need For Speed Carbon Logo Vinyls Unlocked – Right, Up, Down, Up, Down, Left, Right, X

Need For Speed Carbon Special Logo Vinyls – Up, (x2), Down, (x4), Up, X

PS2



Grand Theft Auto Vice City Stories

Enter the following codes during gameplay without pausing the game.

All Cars Are Black – L1, R1, L1, R1, Left, □, Up, X

Armor – Up, Down, Left, Right, □ (x2), L1, R1

Cars Avoid You – Up, (x2), Right, Left, Δ, □ (x2), □

Chrome Cars – Right, Up, Left, Down, Δ (x2), L1, R1

Clear Weather – Left, Down, R1, L1, Right, Up, Left, X

Commit Suicide – Right (x2), □ (x2), L1, Down, X

Destroy All Cars – L1, R1 (x2), Left, Right, □, Down, R1

Faster Clock – R1, L1 (x2), Down, Up, X, Down, L1

Faster Gameplay – Left (x2), R1 (x2), Up, Δ, Down, X

Foggy Weather – Left, Down, Δ, X, Right, Up, Left, L1

Get \$250,000 – Up, Down, Left, Right, X (x2), L1, R1

Health – Up, Down, Left, Right, □ (x2), L1, R1

Lower Wanted Level – Up, Right, Δ (x2), Down, Left, X (x2)

Nearest Pedestrian Enters Vehicle – Down, Up, Right, L1 (x2), □, Up, L1

Overcast Weather – Left, Down, L1, R1, Right, Up, Left, □

Code of the Month



Tony Hawk's Project 8



Real skateboarding takes years of practice filled with hard work, skinned knees, and lots of tickets from passing cops. Skating in Tony Hawk may lose the skinned knees and police presence, but you're still looking at a hefty load of work to get as good as the best in the world. But who has time for that these days? You've got the kids to worry about, your cat's throwing up hairballs, and don't get us started on your hair! What a mess. You need cheat codes, and you need them now. We've got the hook-up. Hop into the Options menu to locate the cheat entry screen. Note that some codes apply only to Multiplayer and Free Skate modes, while others apply to the Career.

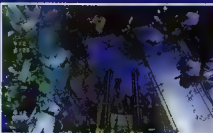
Unlock Christian Hosoi – hohohosoi
Unlock Colonel and Security Guard – militaryman

Unlock Dad and Local Skater – strangeellows
Unlock Grim Reaper – enterandwin
Unlock Inkholt Deck – birdhouse
Unlock Jason Lee – notnomo
Unlock Kevin Staab – mixlup
Unlock Mascot – manineedadate
Unlock Most Decks – needaride
Unlock Nerd – wearelosers
Unlock Pat the Realtor – shescaresme
Unlock Photography Girl and Filmer – themedia
Unlock Specials in Skate Shop – yougoitall
Unlock Travis Barker – plus444
Unlock Zombie – suckstobedeed

Vinnie Salvatore,
Jersey City, NJ

Xbox Live Arcade Spotlight

Assault Hero



Culling the best aspects of classic games like Ikari Warriors, Assault Heroes is a blast. A slowly scrolling world unfolds before you and your cooperative buddy as you zoom along aboard a weapon-toting futuristic all-terrain vehicle. Like Geometry Wars, the left stick controls movement while the right stick handles both aiming and firing. Unlike that great game, Assault Heroes has a constantly changing world as you move forward. We got to play the first level, set on a sandy beach. Our little buggies demolished wave after wave of advancing enemy troops and vehicles with grenade launchers and flame throwers. It looks great. It plays fast. You can't lose with this co-op shooter.

Pedestrians Attack You – Down, Δ, Up, X, L1, R1, L1, R1

Pedestrians Follow You – Right, L1, Down, L1, □, Up, L1, □

Pedestrians Have Weapons – Up, L1, Down, R1, Left, □, Right, Δ

Pedestrians Riot – R1, L1 (x2), Down, Left, □, Down, L1

Make Car Jump By Pressing Down – Down, Left, Up, L1, R1, Δ, □, X

Rainy Weather – Left, Down, L1, R1, Right, Up, Left, Δ

Raise Wanted Level – Up, Right, □ (x2), Down, Left, □ (x2)

Slower Gameplay – Left (x2) □ (x2), Down, Up, Δ, X

Spawn Rhino – Up, L1, Down, R1, Left, L1, Right, R1

Spawn Trashmaster – Down, Up, Right, Δ, L1, Δ, L1, Δ

Sunny Weather – Left, Down, R1, L1, Right, Up, Left, □

Upside Down Mode 1 – □ (x3), L1 (x2), R1, Left, Right

Upside Down Mode 2 – Left (x3), R1 (x2), L1, Right, Left

Weapon Set 1 – Left, Right, X, Up, Down, □, Left, Right

Weapon Set 2 – Left, Right, □, Up, Down, Δ, Left, Right

Weapon Set 3 – Left, Right, Δ, Up, Down, □, Left, Right

"GI Drax"
(location unknown – last seen throwing oranges at people waiting in line for a PlayStation 3)

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IN THE YEAR 199X

LOOKING BACK ON THE SUPER NINTENDO CLASSIC EARTHBOUND



With each console generation, there are many great games, but only a few that will define how a system is remembered. *EarthBound* for the Super Nintendo is one such title. Even though it wasn't a resounding commercial success when it released in 1995, the intervening years have seen this RPG from Nintendo amass an enormous cult following that doesn't hesitate to preach this game's greatness at every opportunity. What is it about *EarthBound* that allows it to garner so many after-the-fact fans? On these pages we take a glance at a handful of reasons to adore this clever, enduring adventure.



Modern is Different

There have been many titles over the years classified as a part of the role-playing genre. For most gamers, the term RPG means fire-breathing dragons, legendary swords, and rustic villages. *EarthBound* defies that tradition, taking place in a modern world set in the year 199X. The silent young hero, Ness, likes his dog, baseball hats, and yo-yos; he's a typical kid — apart from the fact that he can wield powerful psychic energies. The major area where *EarthBound* excels is in taking a setting grounded in reality and, with a distinct tongue-in-cheek style, adding outlandish elements that fall in line with RPG conventions. While Ness' primary weapons are everyday items like bats and yo-yos, he (and a few of his companions) can use PSI abilities against enemies like Scalding Coffee and Manly Fish. The towns are filled with skyscrapers instead of thatched-roof cottages, but the story manages to take the characters through a boundary-bending quest that has them confronting an interstellar threat named Giygas — all with an enjoyable brand of self-conscious, wacky humor.



Culture Shock

Most RPGs offer a way to escape to fantasy worlds, but *EarthBound* does the opposite: It bombards players with familiar cultural references from film, art, and literature. For instance, there is a weapon called the Casey Bat, which boasts an incredibly high attack power. However, it will miss three out of every four swings, making it very unreliable. This three-whiff ratio is a nod to the baseball poem "Casey at Bat" by Ernest Thayer, which details the strikeout of an overconfident slugger. Another example of the game's cultural savvy is an enemy called Dall's Clock, which appears as a surreal dripping time-piece with eyes. This foe is clearly inspired by Salvador Dalí's painting *The Persistence of Memory*, commonly known as "the one with all the melty docks." Players will even encounter several blatant movie references, ranging from Rambo to the Tom Selleck masterpiece *Mr. Baseball*.

OH MOTHER, WHERE ART THOU?

Even though *EarthBound* is one of a kind on our shores, it is actually the second entry in a three-part Japanese series known as *Mother*. Here's a quick overview of the biggest RPG trilogy U.S. gamers never got.

MOTHER:



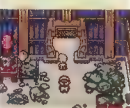
Despite the fact that this game never came stateside (or maybe because of it), *Mother* has gone on to become a cult classic, not only among fans. *Mother* has it that a version of the game was completely localized, but Nintendo decided it would not be profitable to release an NES game with the SNES on the market.

MOTHER 2:



This is basically the *EarthBound* we know and love, apart from the rewording of some dialogue for the U.S. audience (like changing all mentions of alcohol into coffee references).

MOTHER 3:



The last chapter in this series was just released for GBA in Japan in April of 2006. It features the same simple visual style, but the story's somewhat darker in tone, with fewer lighthearted deliveries to relieve tension. Nintendo has not announced any plans to localize this conclusion for American gamers.



WHAT'S IN A NAME?

EarthBound's protagonist being named "Ness" isn't random. It is the phonetic pronunciation of NES, the acronym for Nintendo Entertainment System. This isn't even an isolated occurrence for the series; in the original *Mother* was named *Ninten*. It's also possible that *Ness* is intended to be an anagram of SNES. Either way, the name is definitely a reference to a piece of Nintendo hardware.

Looking for a Fight

The days of game using the random encounter crutch are finally coming to an end. *EarthBound*, alongside other SNES classics like *Chrono Trigger*, were instrumental in phasing out this outdated mechanic. As Ness and his pals waded through Eganland, every enemy encounter is clearly represented by an on-screen sprite, and you know that you'll need to fight once you touch them. The battles play out similarly to the classic *Dragon Warrior* games, with only the enemies (not your party) visible. Selecting options from a menu, players need to strategically plan an attack using weapons and the awesome PSI abilities to hurt stuff while minimizing the party's damage. This formula applies to countless games, but the way that Ness' strengths (and those of his friends) evolve as the game progresses makes it feel like something different.



OH, THAT GUY!

The *Super Smash Brothers* games are packed with Nintendo all-stars like *Mario* and *Link*, but they also feature some lesser-known heroes. The baseball cap-wearing combatant with a yo-yo is none other than Ness from *EarthBound*.

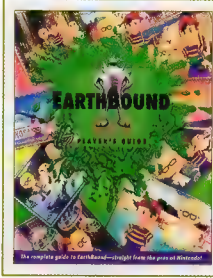


SIZE MATTERS

EarthBound was probably the easiest SNES game to recognize on a store shelf. The box was unapologetically large at about 10 1/2" by 8 1/4", which dwarfed the standard 7 1/2 x 5 1/2" boxes.

Laugh a Little

It is common for humor in a game to rely on stock characters to deliver predictable, groan-inducing one-liners. *EarthBound* thankfully strays from this trend. In fact, the sharp wit displayed in the game's items, enemies, and dialogue is probably the biggest contributing factor to its enduring success, bringing gamers in early and keeping them laughing. For example, in the opening scene, a meteor lands near the town of Onett, and Ness needs to investigate. To restrict the player's ability to explore, there are barricades set up at exits (a common practice in RPGs when the game tries to keep you out of areas). Acknowledging the ridiculously convenient placement of the obstacles, a police officer declares, "Onett police are famous for closing the road when something is going on. We're going for the world record." That isn't the only time the game breaks the fourth wall; there's Ruffini the dog, who is occasionally possessed by the spirit of *EarthBound*'s developer, and he'll ask you to send him feedback — and he gives you a mailing address! Even the enemies can make you chuckle, like the New Age Retro Hippie. Throwing a bunch of funny stuff together doesn't necessarily make a game, but when it is combined with *EarthBound*'s excellent gameplay and setting, it certainly makes a good thing even better. ■■■■



BEST MANUAL EVER

These days, strategy guides are basically required if you want to get the most out of an RPG, and they cost an extra \$20 to boot. Not for *EarthBound*! Instead of a manual, the game came with a full player's guide (which is the main reason the packaging was huge).

START SAVING

EarthBound is regarded as one of the earliest 16-bit RPGs, and as such, it isn't an easy game to find. Because of its rarity, expect to shell out \$100 or more if you're after the full set (cartidge, box, and guide).



GREATEST GAME OF ALL TIME

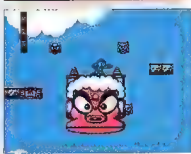
By Zach Miller



MEGA MAN 2

> FORMAT: NINTENDO ENTERTAINMENT SYSTEM
> PUBLISHER: CAPCOM

Exactly when I discovered video games will always be a matter of debate. One game, though, stands out in my mind as the reason I stuck with video games. Super Mario Bros. and Duck Hunt were great, sure, but it was Capcom's futuristic NES classic *Mega Man 2* that hooked me for life. The game's opening scene alone sends shivers down my spine even today. You are Mega Man, a.k.a. the Blue Bomber, a "helper robot" designed by Dr. Thomas Light



to stop the villainous Dr. Wily and his legion of cybernetic malcontents. The game's control scheme is as simple as it gets: Jump with A, shoot with B. *Mega Man*'s infinitely awesome arm cannon can be augmented by absorbing the powers of the bosses he defeats, thus giving our hero access to such incredible powers as Bubble Lead, Metal Blade, and Flash Stopper. The levels themselves are gorgeous, challenging, and varied. You battle rocket-powered shrimp under the sea in *Bubble Man*'s stage, enormous fire-breathing robot dogs in *Wood Man*'s level, and your own reflexes in *Quick Man*'s deadly hideout. After annihilating the game's eight main bosses (no small feat), your skills are really put to the test in Dr. Wily's nefarious multi-tiered laboratory, culminating in a heart-stopping battle between you and his alien clone. The game was so successful, I believe, because it gave players so many different paths to completing the game. Just finding the best order to beat the eight main bosses is a challenge in itself. In addition, the various boss weapons and special items (like the rocket sled) make you think about every step you take. "Would Crash Bomb defeat this enemy faster? Should I just freeze time with Flash Stopper? I wish I had the propeller platforms so I could reach that E-tank." Unlike many modern games, and indeed many of the subsequent *Mega Man* titles, *Mega Man 2* never feels like work, and while it features no real secrets or unlockables (not even a Hard mode), playing through *Mega Man 2* is a reward in itself. If you haven't played *Mega Man 2*, you're missing out; it's truly one of the greatest games of all time.

THIS MONTH IN GAMING HISTORY

On January 25, 2003, the gaming world was given a new way to experience disappointment. That was the day *Devil May Cry 2*



went on sale, and the industry learned that even the most promising heroes can fall from grace. Thankfully, Capcom was able to recover from the debacle by making *Devil May Cry 3* as good as the original — maybe even better. Despite this redemption, *DMC 2* will always be remembered as an example of how not to make a sequel.



PSONE

TONY HAWK'S PRO SKATER

> STYLE 1 OR 2-PLAYER ACTION/SPORTS > PUBLISHER ACTIVISION > DEVELOPER NEVERSOFT ENTERTAINMENT > RELEASE 1999

Before any eight person projects, when no one had skated any American wastelands, and before we went underground, there was Tony Hawk's Pro Skater – one game to set the standard for the genre it would popularize. As a standalone game, the original Pro Skater is still a blast. The simple formula of unlocking courses is endlessly addictive, and many of those levels were immaculately well designed, from beginning to end. That first licensed soundtrack is awash in nostalgia. And you might be surprised how little the core gameplay has changed. Of course, many of the elements that further refined the formula have yet to arrive in this early attempt, most notably any real ability to link tricks for the massive combos that characterize later installments. Likewise, objectives lack variety, there are only a few skaters to pick between, and the camera doesn't always turn at the speed you need it to. But you're not going to criticize Beethoven if his first symphony doesn't wow like his ninth. So it'd be foolish to cry foul on Neversoft for starting one of the most beloved franchises in gaming, especially since this first attempt is a classic in its own right.



PSONE

OMEGA BOOST

> STYLE 1-PLAYER SHOOTER > PUBLISHER SONY COMPUTER ENTERTAINMENT > DEVELOPER POLYPHONY > RELEASE 1999

It's a little known fact that between Gran Turismo 1 and 2 developer Polyphony broke away from creating uber-realistic racing sims to create this on-rails sci-fi shooter. The game starts out with a hybrid FMV/live action video that is so bad and cheesy certain people are bound to love it. The story is completely nonsensical but it has something to do with an evil artificial intelligence and time travel (unfortunately, this doesn't turn out to be as cool as it sounds). On the gameplay end, this is a fairly standard shooter with lock-on homing missile shots (think Panzer Dragoon with less interesting level design). Graphically, it wasn't bad for the time, but even as good as the levels sometimes look, they are often too spartan; much of the game takes place in the void of space. Omega Boost's camera can be horribly unaccommodating when the action gets tight, and the controls leave a little to be desired given today's standards. The game is still fun in that hardcore shooter kind of way, but it's short. You can probably blow through it in one night (actually, you'll have to since there is no level save feature). This shooter may have lost some of its luster over time, but it's worth checking out if you can borrow it from a friend.



PSONE

VANDAL HEARTS

> STYLE 1-PLAYER STRATEGY/RPG > PUBLISHER KONAMI > DEVELOPER KONAMI > RELEASE 1997

Back before grid-based strategy games were meticulously balanced, there was Vandal Hearts. Gamers who were introduced to this genre more recently through games like Fire Emblem will find many familiar elements, like class advancement and utilizing terrain. Some perks are missing, though, like damage estimates before an attack, forcing the player to keep constant tabs on their characters' average damage. Vandal Hearts generally does a good job of balancing challenge and fun factor, but there are definitely a handful of battles that feel carelessly assembled, leaving you to rely on luck rather than skill. This can be countered through a few leveling exploits (or the main character's unstoppable Vandalier class), though it is possible to fight fair and triumph. Even if you lose, each battle is worthwhile for the ludicrous geysers of blood that erupt from enemies when they are defeated. There's nothing quite as satisfying as reducing foes to a fine red mist.





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NEXT GEN VERDICTS

After we've put the PS3 and Wii through the ringer, read what each GI editor likes and dislikes about the shiny new consoles.



The Year In Pictures

Check out the good times, the bad times, and the times when that one guy said that one thing that made everyone laugh in our year-in-review photomontage.



The Professionals

Read our extended interviews with Angel Munoz, founder and president of the Cyberathlete Professional League, Matthew Bromberg, president and COO of Major League Gaming; and Michael Artz, general manager of the World Cyber Games U.S. division.



Preview Bonanza

So, you like the screenshots, eh? Come to Unlimited for more amazing shots of Devil May Cry 4, Crackdown, Two Worlds, and Ciper Complex.

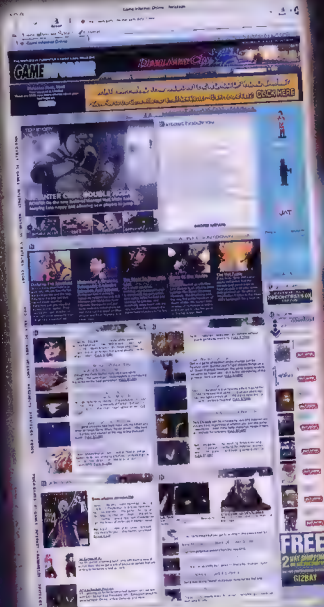
ALSO ONLINE THIS MONTH:

The holidays end and our 2007 wish list immediately begins construction. Check out the latest announcements for the hottest gear coming out of the 2007 Consumer Electronics Show.

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VIDEO GAME TRIVIA

We've all had to make cutbacks in order to stockpile enough cash for this holiday season. Between the new consoles and the growing mound of great games, there is just too much awesome stuff to buy. To afford everything you want, sacrifices need to be made. Answer the questions below to find out how you will be suffering for your hobby in your effort to save up money.

1 Which of the following games is a blatant Pac-Man rip-off that spurred a lengthy legal battle between Atari and Phillips/Magnavox?

- A. T.C. Cruncher
- B. K.C. Munchkin
- C. P.J. Jabber
- D. G.G. Blizzard

2 This screen portrays one of the most mysterious encounters in *Zelda II: The Adventure of Link*. What is the name of the character Link is talking to?

- A. Zelda
- B. Code 11
- C. Samus
- D. Error



3 What is the name of the imperious, cruel prosecuting attorney players face in the fourth trial of the original *Phoenix Wright on DS?*

- A. Manfred von Karma
- B. Miles Edgeworth
- C. Andy Griffith as Matlock
- D. Phoenix Wright

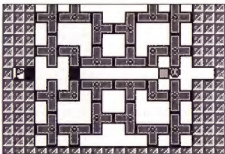
4 If you're playing *Ninja Gaiden Black* on Xbox and Ryu is wearing a pink ribbon on his arm,

what does it mean?

- A. You've died at least 50 times
- B. You've beaten the Hurricane packs
- C. You're using the Ninja Dog difficulty
- D. You've used all of your restorative items

5 In its early life, the Game Boy got some pretty cool puzzle games. This screen is taken from which of the following examples of that trend?

- A. Qix
- B. Tetris
- C. Kwirk
- D. Boxxle



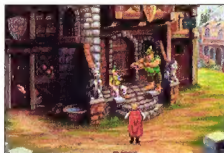
6 This monster, who appears on the floating island in *Final Fantasy VI*, should probably have been called Ultima Weapon. Instead, its name was translated as...

- A. Atma Weapon
- B. Utmo Weapon
- C. Alamo Weapon
- D. Oltimo Weapon



7 This is a scene from what Sierra point-and-click adventure series?

- A. King's Quest
- B. Space Quest
- C. Quest for Glory
- D. Gabriel Knight



8 In the original Tony Hawk's Pro Skater for PSone, which of the following moves was exclusive to Rune Glibberg?

- A. Ollie
- B. Christ Air
- C. Benihana
- D. The 900

9 True or False: In a fight, Crono could easily defeat Sora, who would eventually pass out from sissiness.

- A. True
- B. False

10 In the *Simpsons Wrestling* for PSone, one character was considerably more powerful than any other contender. Who was it?

- A. Ned Flanders
- B. Bumblebee Man
- C. Homer Simpson
- D. Groundskeeper Willie

BREAKDOWN

54% of sports game players could recall the advertising in titles they played, according to a recent marketing study

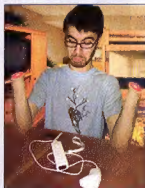
35% of Korean publisher NCsoft's software sales last quarter were earned with the unforgiving MMORPG Lineage II. Guild Wars made up 14%

100% The probability that Sega's upcoming Iron Man game will involve a friendly bear named Chummy, "Buzzzz! Hey, Mr. Stark! Collect 100 whiskey bottles to get to the next area! Buzzzzzz!"

0% of the versus matches of Lumines Live over Xbox Live should be leggy and unplayable. Unfortunately, that isn't the case

33% of the GI staff, having played *Bully*, are now fully trained in the art of potato-launching and egg-throwing. If only we could find some nets to pick on...Hey Reiner, c'mere

★ Trivia Score & Rank ★



0-1:
Sell your hands



2-3:
Trade in your stack of Azukins



4-5:
Settle for imitation-brand games



6-7:
Become a WoW "Escort"



8-9:
Only get one diamond-studded controller



10:
Stop buying countries via Marketplace

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