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METAL
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PG. 109**



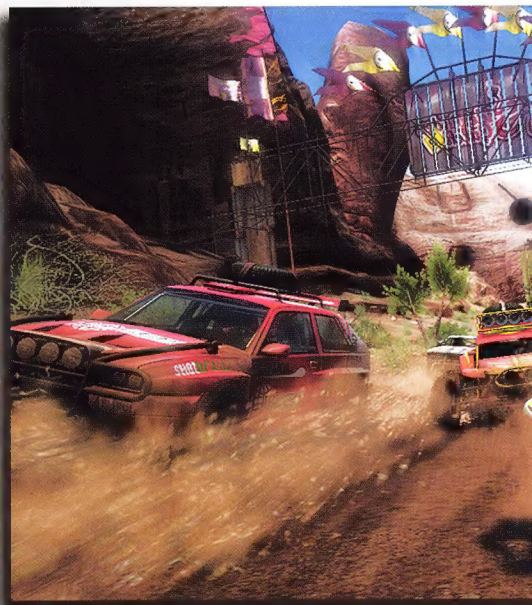
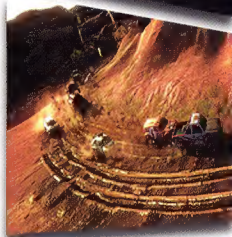
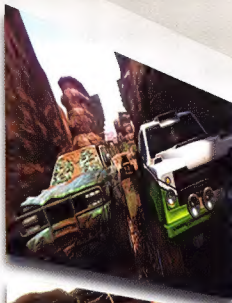
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FEBRUARY 2007



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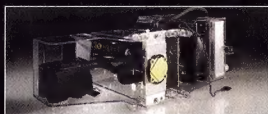
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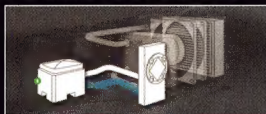
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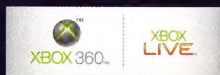
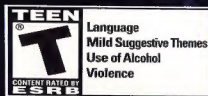
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- PC GAMER



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The "Life After The Holidays" Issue



cover story

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Microsoft's opening salvo in the war for the hearts of Japanese gamers is coming to our shores soon, and we spent many sleepless nights playing Blue Dragon to formulate this in-depth report. Plus, we interviewed legendary RPG creator Hironobu Sakaguchi to get the inside word on everything Blue Dragon. Even though this is one of the highest-profile games coming out on the 360, gamers haven't been able to learn much about it – until now.

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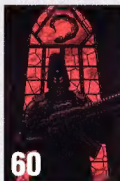
THE PETE WANAT SCHOOL OF LICENSED GAMES

Scarface. The Chronicles of Riddick: Escape from Butcher Bay. The Thing. All these games have one thing in common: They all follow Pete Wanat's 10 rules for creating great licensed games. Find out what those rules are and what they mean inside.



GAMER ON THE STREET

By now, you know what we think. Here, find out what ordinary gamers who stood in line and shelled out the dough think about their new PS3 and Wii consoles. We get the uncensored reactions of the man on the street and boil them down to nuggets of truth in this feature.



COMMAND & CONQUER 3: TIBERIUM WARS

Electronic Arts is finally putting its purchase of Westwood Studios to good use. Find out everything you need to know about this next-gen RTS for Xbox 360 and PC in this four-page in-depth look at the next evolution of the Tiberium universe.

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Virtua Fighter 5



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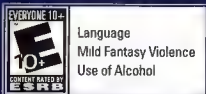


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GISPY

Candid Photos From The Seedy Underbelly
Of The Video Game Industry



1 Ben chills with 2K Games' PR director Marci Ditter and BioShock/The Darkness producer Anthony DeLuca
 2 Mr. Snakes on a Plane, Samuel L. Jackson, spreads peace, love, and gaming at the Spike TV Video Game Awards
 3 Here are some of the unsung heroes of Game Informer enjoying a particularly rocking lunch! From left to right: Amy Arnold, Rachel Nimerfron, and Cissy Coe
 4 Mario Lopez might be known for his dancing moves, but he'll always be A.C. Slater to us! Recently the former TV teen/world class hooper partied with the Viva Piñata gang at a Microsoft event
 5 The Sonic Fan Club - Barbara Gamlen, Sega's Erica Mason, and Dana Whitney, hang tough like NKOTB at the Game Informer offices
 6 Miller and Funcom's Jørgen Tharaldsen play a rousing match of Blank White Screen, one of the greatest arcade games in history
 7 Backbone's Chris Charla, Sony's Ted Regulsky, and Capcom's Robert Johnson party down in Tokyo



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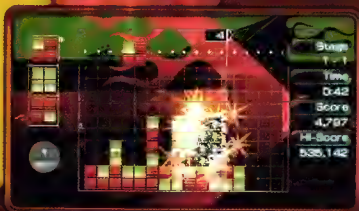
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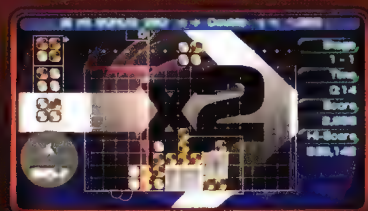
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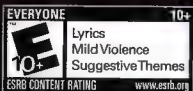
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GI COMMUNITY

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

THE QUESTION:
Do you believe that playing on a standard-definition TV excludes you from next-gen gaming?

I didn't really feel like I was having a next-gen gaming experience until I got my HD TV. I was floored when some games looked nearly twice as good just because of my new TV. Kameo is a perfect example of this.

jeffwgn

Owning an HD TV is a clear advantage in online gaming. If your TV is putting out a 16:9 picture in 1080i, while your opponent is playing on a 4:3 picture, doesn't that battlefield become a lot more one-sided towards the guy who is viewing a larger perspective of all times?

TKMiller



I recently bought myself an HD TV. I felt the time was right to get one, and I'm very satisfied with it. Is there a difference? Yes, but I still believe you can have a great gaming experience with an SD TV.

TheKissedKissadee

With this next generation of games pushing HD at the forefront, HD is almost a necessity. Many more games are noticeably different on HD than SD when compared to last gen. HD TVs are next gen. If you're going next gen, that then means the entire experience must go as well.

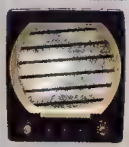
gnorobno

Your TV definition or screen size can't change the fact that you're playing next-gen games. I know it can get a lot better, but I find my standard-definition TV looks great with component cables and the detail option miced.

Messumair

No. But come on, not everyone's rich. I'm like with my current 30-inch TV. As long as I'm not playing in black and white, I feel like I'm "in."

Nom Anor



Do you want to make your voice heard? Weigh in with your opinion at www.gameinformer.com/forums

LANGUAGE IS OVERPOWERED

Do you guys QQ over warlock IMBA-ness as much as I do in-game? You ever gotten killed by a warlock in tier 1 MC epics while you're on your lv 60 rogue with 5/9 tier 3 and full tier 2 during a single fear? I think that if we band together, we can defeat the warlock menace!

Saxon Whitten
via hotmail.com



■ For those of you who don't speak World of Warcraft, this gist of this letter is: "Warlocks are still overpowered." With the new changes classes have received in preparation for The Burning Crusade, we can't disagree. If you read between the lines, the letter also says "I play Alliance," because outside of Barrens chat the Horde speaks using intelligible words and phrases.

NOT AN OVERSIGHT

I speak as a gamer — not as a snooted fanboy — when I say that you're leaving Nintendo behind in the next-gen race. I mean, come on: no Wii reviews in the December issue? Why? I know that the GameCube wasn't as huge as the PS2 or Xbox, but you know very well that Nintendo still has a shot. You have a duty to report all sides of the video game industry, and not to leave out an entire console because of your personal bias.

Jose Virella
via hotmail.com

■ We would have loved to review Wii games in our December issue. Seriously. In order for our magazine to be current when it hits your mailbox, we play games well before their retail release date. In order to do that, we need the cooperation of publishers to make sure that we get them soon enough. In the case of the Wii, Nintendo was not providing this cooperation. It wasn't just us, either. All media outlets were only given the chance to review the console's games shortly before the system hit stores. It isn't uncommon for this to happen around the launch of a new console. At any rate, rest assured that we do absolutely everything we can to ensure that every issue is packed with the biggest events and games in the industry.

THE ETERNAL DEBATE

This letter is in response to the opinion piece by David Reid in issue 164. Although the premise of a decline in the console market due to core gamer rejection is interesting, I feel it is ultimately flawed. To compare the current console industry to the sports card and comics industry of the

1980s is inaccurate. I remember those days, and frankly those hobbies were still niche pursuits.

Contemporary hardcore gamers, to which his article attributes the health of the industry, are a much more diverse group than the hobbyists of the 1980s. Console gaming is a mass-market industry that crosses many generations and interests, and has penetration into a larger percentage of homes than comics and trading cards. The characterization of the gamer as someone who will abandon his hobby due to too much media is akin to saying a movie enthusiast is going to stop watching DVDs because too many enter the market. It seems the continued introduction of new consoles with quality software will only invite larger pockets of the population into this hobby, and although the hardcore gamer may not be able to own everything, the harm this will have on the console market is not as great as Mr. Reid assumes.

Scott Kilberg
via yahoo.com

I would like to commend David Reid for his op-ed piece on the PS3 and Xbox 360 as the "last great consoles." Not only was he right in assuming that console gaming is slowly dying, but that the PC will never die. I build computers and I'm an avid fan of computer games, and I can't understand

why every console cycle, the majority of gaming press report it as the death of PC gaming. Do they not realize that PCs constantly improve and that the precious consoles become obsolete only months after coming out? The consoles may very well be in their last lives. Both Microsoft and Sony are rehashing the same games and gameplays in the hopes that we pay \$60 for pretty graphics. What's the point of rehashing the same types of games without innovation? Pretty graphics only get you so far.

Matthew Coughlin
Via Comcast.net

■ You both make excellent, thoughtful points. It's responses like these that make the whole "death of console/PC gaming" such an interesting issue. Each side has valid arguments, and we get the sense that the debate won't be resolved out any time soon. But does it really need to? Isn't there enough space in the entertainment market for both types of platforms?

LEFT BEHIND

I refuse to buy a next-generation console until they make better games. I don't care if I can see the players' sweat in Madden, and I don't care if the load times are shorter. If the PS3 and 360 are so powerful, can they pronounce the full name of my created team instead of reciting a pre-programmed sound clip? I'm tired of only getting graphical upgrades, faster loading times, and a few new features. Until they come with something ground breaking, I'll wait. Just keep me posted.

Aaron Jackson
via hotmail.com

VAMPIRE LOVE

Let me start by saying I thought the Classic GI piece you did about Castlevania in issue 164 was great. I'm an old-school gamer and I think that Castlevania is one of the best gaming franchises created. However, I have a game called Castlevania: Vampire's Kiss for the SNES and I didn't see it on the timeline. I was wondering if it went by a different name and where it fits in on the timeline.

Chase Chandler
via yahoo.com

■ The game you have is on the timeline, just under a different title. Castlevania: Vampire's Kiss is another name for Castlevania: Dracula X, which came out in 1995. This is actually one of the more controversial games in the series, since it was significantly altered from its original Japanese version (known as Akumajou Dracula X: Chi no Rondo). To this day, fans of the series are still clamoring for a re-release of this game as it was originally intended.



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■ It's great to have principles and stick to them, Aaron, but we think you're going to miss out if you don't make some concessions here. Everyone has certain things that they would like to see video games achieve, but to count them out entirely until they meet your specific criteria only means that you won't be playing any awesome new games. Who are you trying to punish here? We'd eventually like flying cars in the future, but that doesn't mean we're going to walk everywhere until they are readily available.

LOOK YOUR BEST

Since PlayStation 3 is supporting the 1080p HD output, I've been shopping online for an HDTV. Not every single game supports that format; they support lower resolutions instead. If I get a 1080p HDTV, will it still play games like Tony Hawk's Project 8 that only support 720p?

Briar Carrick
Via yahoo.com

■ Yes. It can be confusing to figure out all of the intricacies of HD, but here's a tip to help with your purchase: Buying a TV that plays in 1080p doesn't mean it is the only compatible resolution. It supports up to 1080p, so lower HD resolutions like 1080i, 720p, and 480p will still work and look great. There aren't tons of games out there yet that run in 1080p, but as more big titles support it in the coming years, you'll be treated to video game visuals at their finest.

BEEN THERE, DONE THAT

I've always wondered why developers don't remake more games with new updates. We've seen it with Metal Gear Solid: The Twin Snakes for GameCube, but why not more? Who wouldn't play Resident Evil 2 on PS3 with next-gen features? I'm sure I'm not the only gamer who longs for SewerShark on Xbox 360!

John Hensley
via aol.com



■ Metal Gear Solid: The Twin Snakes

■ You probably are the only gamer who longs for SewerShark on Xbox 360, but you raise a good question nonetheless. Some classic titles would undoubtedly be great to relive with improved visuals and mechanics, but we're glad that more developers aren't focusing on games we've already played. Sure, it may be comforting to pick up a title and know exactly what to expect, but that hardly seems like the best way to move forward. Part of being a gamer is enjoying the new and exciting experiences developers create. Remember the past by all means, but it's important not to get stuck in it.

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JAMES ALLEN

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MONTGOMERY HOUSE III

We wish our helmets had ponytail holes. Heck, we'd settle for eye slits. Actually, our helmets are more like buckets

MICHAEL SANTOSS
Simpsons Wrestling?!
We're not falling for that again!



NICOLE RESTREPO
Link has to settle for the guitar until someone makes Ocarina Hero

NICK LOW
"We're BFF, right Chief?"



CHRISTINE ABERNATHY
This is the first Baten Kaitos: Origins art we've received, and it's one more than we expected

CORRECTIONS

In our last issue (January 2007, GI #165) our Fight Night Round 3 review for PS3 incorrectly stated that the new first-person in the Ring camera angle is not available in the career mode. In the final version of the game, you can enter the Options menu and enable this feature for use in all game modes. Also, the article "Fragging on the Verge" incorrectly listed Tom "Squashed" Taylor as the captain of Final Boss. Dave "Walshy" Walsh is the captain of Final Boss, while Taylor is captain of Str8 Pippin. We apologize for the oversight.



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>> As Sony's PlayStation 3 continues to be in short supply, the company is beginning to position itself for the future of a system it hopes will be viable for a decade. Recently, some big moves have shaken up Sony's corporate structure, with former SCEA head Kaz Hirai moving over to Japan to take PlayStation creator Ken Kutaragi's position as president and COO of Sony Computer Entertainment Group. In his place, long-time Sony veteran Jack Tretton stepped up to become the president and CEO of Sony Computer Entertainment America. We recently spoke to Tretton regarding the troubled PS3 launch as well as other issues surrounding the future of all the company's gaming platforms. <<



INTERVIEW

JACK TRETTON

PRESIDENT AND CEO, SONY COMPUTER ENTERTAINMENT AMERICA

Obviously, there have been huge shortages of PS3s since launch... You've said that the manufacturing difficulties that resulted in this have been resolved. What were the issues and how were they resolved?

The very publicly known and very honest answer is that we had a problem creating the blue laser diode. "Blue laser diode" is something that doesn't mean a lot to the average consumer and it's not something that I can readily explain to you. Other than knowing, as a consumer and the head of this company, that we're trying to do something that no one's ever done before. We're taking a device that is going to be state of the art and future-proof for the next decade, and provide you with the ultimate gaming experience – in addition to giving you a state of the art Blu-ray DVD experience. And, we're incorporating the ability to read standard DVDs, audio CDs, and games from platforms going back 10 years. To have a consumer device that's going to read six very disparate platforms effectively is an extremely noble undertaking and impossible for me to even imagine. It's a little more difficult to pull that off and manufacture it – and we made that work. But to pull off such an amazing feat, when you're dealing with something that is not off-the-shelf technology, you run into some start-up problems with manufacturing. It's something that we've overcome now, and we've ramped up production.

How many PS3 units can Sony produce per month on a worldwide basis now that production is up and running?

The number is a moving target, so the best perspective I could give you is that we've been manufacturing hardware for the past 11 years. It started in the six-figure numbers when we first started producing [the original] PlayStation – you were lucky to get 100,000 a month. We were able to grow to a million and a half a month. We're very fortunate that the technology is ours; we create and manufacture almost everything, so we control our own destiny. The problem I have with talking about something that's going to happen in the future is that it's speculation. I tend to look at what we've accomplished in the past as a good indicator.

Do you know what the production capacity is right now?

No, not off the top of my head, to be honest with you. It improves on a daily basis. I know that we're very confident that we're going to get a million units into the marketplace, and two million units out by the end of the year.

Is that two million worldwide?

It's two million worldwide

And a million to the U.S.?

Yes.

Are you still airlifting PS3s to the U.S.? Hasn't that been very expensive, adding to the loss you're taking on the units themselves?

Yes, we are. It's a very costly venture.... People will say to us, "Why are you spending so much money on marketing? Why are you spending money airlifting goods in?" We're positioning the platform for the next decade, we're not counting the pennies on what we're accomplishing in a couple of days in November or in a couple of weeks through the end of the calendar year. We're in this for the long haul; we know what we're doing. So, we make investments for the long term, not the short term. In order to do that, you've got to have a system that's state of the art and you've got to invest billions of dollars to do that. You've got to invest in marketing and positioning that platform, and you've got to get goods to market any way you can to make sure that you don't disappoint consumers. If that means air-freighting goods in, that's something we're more than willing to do regardless of the expense.

Nintendo sold about 600,000 Wii's in the U.S. at launch. Microsoft sold another 511,000 Xbox 360s in November. Right now, you're in third place due to the shortages. How do you make up this gap and how soon do you think you can do it?

I'm a big sports fan. It's like doing an interview with the lead-off hitter in a baseball game and saying, "You didn't get on base. So, now you've got one out at the top of the first inning. How do you feel you guys are ultimately going to win the

We are not in this to create a PR event for 30 days.



game?" The guy's going to look back at you and say, "Are you nuts? It's the top of the first inning and we've had one batter come to the plate. It's a little early to talk about who's winning the game right now." I think the same is true in this industry. Yes, on a platform that is 31 days old, we did ship less units into the U.S. If you really want to get caught up in meaningless stats, I'll throw a few of them out there to you. We've been in the business a matter of weeks, and we have a larger installed base in Japan than the Xbox 360. We've been in the business 31 days, and from what I understand, we've shipped more goods into Canada than the Nintendo Wii has. Those are fairly meaningless statistics, but I think they are just as meaningless as saying, "You guys are in third place in America now" on a platform that is 31 days old. One thing that you're very aware of is that, while we're very excited about PlayStation 3 and what it will do over the next decade, it's not the only machine

out there. The machine that is far and away the best-selling machine on the market right now and the machine that will sell the most units this year is the PlayStation 2. So, if it all about being the best-selling console, we've already got that done without even selling a single unit of PlayStation 3.

Do you think the launch shortages will have any long-term effect?

Not at all. Again, we put a lot of effort into the last six or seven years of PlayStation 2. We sold 500,000 units initially on PlayStation 2. I don't know that I had the confidence to say, based on that, that we'd sell 110 million units and we'd be the number-one-selling platform seven years later in the face of new platform introductions. I'd love to tell you that selling 500,000 units guarantees that or indicates that that's going to be the case. I don't really think it has that much impact on the long-term success. I don't get too excited or concerned about what the initial numbers are. The fact remains, and this is undisputed, that our sales are relative to what we ship. We'll sell every unit that we ship for a long time to come. Our numbers are based on manufacturing; they're certainly no indication of demand.

Going into the end of next year, how many do you plan to ship?

I'd like to ship to the point where every consumer that wants one is able to buy one and every retailer that wants supply from us is able to be in stock.... What's the right number for a system that's in its first full calendar year? Your guess is as good as mine. I really don't know how big that number needs to be or can be, in terms of our production capabilities. It's really a guess at this point.

There was speculation that Sony created the shortage to create a media and consumer buzz. Is there any truth to that?

I think it's absolutely ludicrous. We don't need to short supply to create consumer demand; there's tremendous consumer demand out there. We are not in this to create a PR event for 30 days. You would not spend the kind of money we've spent on marketing; you would not spend the kind of money we've spent on R&D to build this platform if it were all about creating artificial shortages. I think if you look over the last 10 years, trying to undersupply the market has never been a goal of ours; it's trying to catch up with demand. I think one of our wonderful blessings and curses is that we're an extremely relevant brand all over the world. Where one publisher could focus on the North American market because that's where they're strongest or another publisher could focus on Japan because that's where they're strongest, we've got to focus on all markets because we're the leader in all markets.

The best-selling launch title at PS3 launch was Resistance: Fall of Man, which sold just 70,000 copies. What do you attribute this historically low launch rate to?

Well, I guess if you're talking about 70,000 units, you're talking about the Tryst Data in November. That data said we sold 195,000 [PS3] units, correct?

Yes.

That says that one out of every three of those people bought Resistance: Fall of Man. Then you have to also assume, as has been widely reported, that a number of those units that were purchased probably went on sale on eBay. It's also safe to assume that, since we launched on November 17th, some of those units that were purchased were put away as gifts. Some people might have had limited budgets or not necessarily know what that gift receiver was going to want in terms of software. So, to sell a piece of software to one of every three people that were counted in there would be pretty impressive. Conversely, if you look at the [ratio in terms of] 40 million PS2s, then you'd have a piece of software that would've sold 13 million.

You brought up eBay. That's something that you and any number of other companies are dealing with now. Do you see it as a problem that so many of the units on day one are going to profiteers rather than real Sony fans? Is there any way you can deal with it?

Our goal is to make sure that every consumer that wants one of our products is able to get one. We try to give it to them at the greatest possible value.... We also want to make it as easy for the consumer as possible – to be long-term in our thinking, and not short-term. So, if you wanted to be short-term in your thinking, you could turn to a retailer or a consumer and say, "The only way you're going to get a PlayStation 3 is to buy this bundle. You have to buy extra peripherals and 10 pieces of software." That drives the cost up; that guarantees you a great software-to-hardware ratio and basically gouges the consumer and forces them to spend big money. Now, if you do that, you take away the "eBay factor." But you basically held somebody by the throat and forced them to make a huge initial investment. We didn't want to do that. But by not doing that, you allow people that are willing to line up to buy the hardware to turn around and sell it for a profit. Whenever there is a high-demand, low-supply situation, somebody is going to try to take advantage of that situation. But I think the other thing the eBay scenario tells you is that people are willing to pay not only the retail that you've asked, but several times more. I think that's a testament to the value of the PlayStation 3.

How aggressive do you have to be with the PS3 price point? How long will it be before the price drop and what will you drop it to?

I think you can look back historically and see that, with the original PlayStation, you had modifications to the form factor, increased feature set, and – as the installed base grew – the prices came down. The amount of technology investment on the original PlayStation paled in comparison to the investment on the PlayStation 2. So, on the PlayStation 2, it was tremendously successful, and had an incredibly long lifecycle. We added product enhancements and redesigned the unit, which is now at \$129. But if you look at the pricing curve and the investment between PlayStation 1 and PlayStation 2, you see some stark contrasts. It was a much higher R&D investment on PlayStation 2 versus PlayStation 1; much more shallow pricing curve in terms of getting down to lower price points. I think PlayStation 3 is an extension of that. We've invested much greater in the PlayStation 3 over our initial investment in PlayStation 2. There's a heck of a lot more under the hood and it costs us more money to make it. I think it's going to be a lot more difficult to cost-reduce this. I think the consumers that get their hands on a PlayStation 3 clearly see the value and not only want to pay for \$599, in some instances they're willing to pay ridiculous prices to buy one off of eBay. I don't think that price as compared to the value and the technology we're giving consumers is something we need to be concerned about any time soon.

So, we shouldn't expect the price drops to be as soon or as drastic as they were for the PlayStation 2?

Another major business for Sony is the PSP. The Nintendo DS by any measure has been a critical and commercial success, especially in Japan. Nintendo sold almost a million units in the U.S. in November. Is enthusiasm for PSP waning and what can be done to jump start that system and catch up to the DS?

One thing I'd do is make sure that you and your readers understand what we were trying to accomplish and what we continue to try to accomplish with the PlayStation Portable. When we entered this business in 1995, we looked at the opportunity and we thought there was an opportunity to come in with a more sophisticated machine targeted towards an older demographic and taking gaming beyond where it was when we entered the market. I think we accomplished that with the PlayStation.

I think we look at the PSP the same way. We've seen, in the past, the handheld market tended to be a younger consumer. It tended to be a more youth-oriented technology

if you look at any of our platforms, we're always evolving our devices. While the form factor has not changed on the PSP, we've done numerous updates to our firmware that changed how the unit performed and the things that the consumer could do with it. So, to answer the question, we're always looking at adding features and looking at the form factor. However, I think we feel like we've got a device that is a tremendous value at \$199 and it's doing extremely well right now. Yes, we will evolve the machine, but, no, there are no short-term changes to talk about in terms of form factor or feature sets.

So, no hard drive? Right.

Recently, Microsoft has been very aggressive in getting exclusive games for Xbox 360. We'd heard that certain games that were exclusives were lost because Sony Japan didn't move on the deals fast enough – particularly Grand Theft Auto. Will Kaz Hirai's move to running things in Japan help the company move on things like this more quickly? Have you lost some momentum on gathering exclusives for PS3?

Well, there are a number of questions in there, so I'll address a few points. First off, we are well aware of the fact that development costs have risen greatly, that platform differentiation is more challenging for the development community than it's ever been, so it's difficult for a publisher to build a game exclusively for a certain platform, unless the hardware manufacturer wants to pony up big dollars to lock in that exclusive. It has always been our philosophy that we earn support from publishers; we don't buy it. That's in contrast to some other publishers that feel that it's important to lock down strategic relationships with software publishers – if they have to buy it, so be it.

So, you've never paid for an exclusive?

We've lent marketing support in the past, but we've never paid for exclusivity on any platform for any piece of software. Because we know that the barriers to buying exclusives, even if you were interested, have grown greatly; the only thing you can really control is the software that you develop yourself from a first-party standpoint. So, we've invested heavily since we've been in the business, but even more so over the last five years, in building our internal software development organization. It is, far and away, the largest effort worldwide of any hardware or software company in the business.... Coupled with that, I think we work really closely with the publishers to make sure that they differentiate their offerings for our platforms from the others and that we work to aggressively promote and market those products together to call consumer attention to it.

Do you think Kaz Hirai being in Japan now will make some things easier in terms of communication between the U.S. and Japan?

Well, I think that's a good question. One of our strengths in the past, though, is that we are a regionally centered company. The technology is something that emanates out of Japan, but our approach to how we market and sell and do business with our publishing and retail partners and our consumers varies from territory to territory.... One thing I'm very excited about with Kaz's involvement is he obviously worked extremely closely with our U.S. operations and our Japanese parent over the last 11 years, and for him to take that expertise and that know-how specifically to our market and apply it on a global basis as a resource in Japan is clearly something that will benefit the U.S. organization as well as the worldwide organization.



in terms of the gaming applications and the depth of that. We thought there was a great opportunity to do for portable gaming what we did the original PlayStation. It appealed to the older consumer, and took a more sophisticated gaming experience and gave people console gaming in a portable environment.... I think we've done that. We're comparing the adoption rate of the PlayStation Portable to the original PlayStation because we're carving out a new business to a new group of consumers. The adoption rate of PlayStation Portable far exceeds that of the original PlayStation. When we see the demographics coming back from the consumers, we're clearly hitting that audience. They're interested in playing games like Syphon Filter: Dark Mirror, SOCOM: Fireteam Bravo and Combined Assault, Grand Theft Auto, and Madden. That's an older, more in-depth consumer than portables have traditionally appealed to. So, we think we're on the right track, but we also feel proud about the fact that we've got over 20 million machines out there worldwide; we're proud of the fact that there are seven million people in North America.

With that being said, we had competition that had different ideas on each of our console platforms and I think we have competition that have a different strategy as it relates to their portable devices. If they're happy with their success, and they're happy with the consumer that they're carving out, I can tell you that we're very comfortable with the pace we're moving at and the audience we've carved out for PSP.

American Technology Research analyst P.J. McNealy had speculated that Sony was preparing some new PSP models, possibly with larger, built-in flash memory or a hard drive, with a possible different form factor. Can we expect a new version of PSP in the future?

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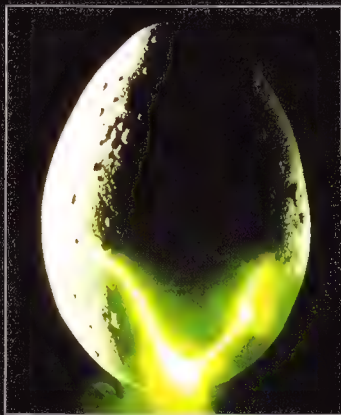


SEGA CAPTURES ALIEN

DEVELOPERS OBSIDIAN,
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Sega scared gamers when it released Xbox 360 horror game *Condemned*, and now it's going to take things to a whole new level. The company has signed a deal for the rights to the *Alien* film franchise, and has already entered pre-production on multiple next-gen *Alien* titles, including a first-person shooter and an RPG. The first fruits of this deal aren't expected until 2009.

We don't know if film franchise actress Sigourney Weaver will reprise her role as Ripley for the games, nor whether they will re-tell the stories of the movies. Direction is being provided by acclaimed developer Obsidian Entertainment (*KOTOR II*), which is handling the *Alien* RPG (also appearing on PC). Sega of America president and COO Simon Jeffery said Obsidian was "the only developer for us that could effectively combine the *Alien* mythology with compelling RPG gameplay to create the ultimate *Alien* experience." The *Alien* FPS, meanwhile, has been handed over to *Brothers in Arms* developer Gearbox.



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the top xbox360 achievements

When Microsoft unveiled the Achievement program for Xbox 360, no one really knew what to expect. Some developers scoffed at the idea of including something that they thought no one would care about. Flash forward a year, and this shot in the dark by Microsoft has gamers playing games more than they normally would just to add points to their Gamerscore—a ranking that has become a point of pride within the gaming community. If handled correctly by the developer, Achievements can add longevity to games, and also push games to play in different ways. Some Achievements are nearly impossible to obtain. Others are there for comedic reasons. We all have hearing the “bloop” sound when an Achievement is unlocked. Listed on this page are Game Informer’s Top 10 favorites.

Dead Rising

Zombie Genocider

Beating the snot out of zombies with household appliances is a great way to spend a weekend, or if you are going for the Zombie Genocider Achievement, an entire week. To get this one, you’ll need to kill 53,594 of the undead. Why such a strange number? It’s the exact population of Willamette, the city where the game takes place.



2 Burnout Revenge Celebrity Status!

This goal is incredibly hard to reach, but we like it because it shows how diverse Achievements can be. In Burnout Revenge, players can record their own footage, send it to friends, and upload it for all to see. To reach Celebrity Status, your video must be one of the Top 20 viewed. It’s kind of like video game YouTube.



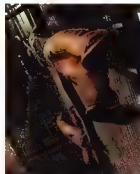
3 Ghost Recon: Advanced Warfighter Assassin

In this particular Achievement, you are fitted with the role of bounty hunter. Prior to a match’s start, you must look at the Achievements earned by each player to see if one of them has Assassin. If you kill this person, you in turn will earn the Assassin mark. Tony Hawk’s Project 8 also boasts a similar Achievement for beating a developer or anyone else who has accomplished this feat.



4 Splinter Cell: Double Agent The Invisible Man

One of the greatest moments in Splinter Cell is hiding in the shadows as terrorists go about their business. The series has recently moved away from the importance of being hidden at all times. To earn this Achievement, you must become one with the shadows and complete a level without being detected. Leave it up to an Achievement to truly bring out the great elements of a game.



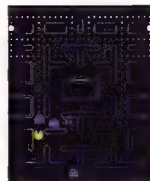
5 F.E.A.R. Afraid

To earn this embarrassing mark, the player must find a way to finish a multiplayer match with a negative score. This basically means sucking to the greatest degree possible. Dead or Alive 4 features a similar Achievement for losing five matches in a row online, but we have to give F.E.A.R. the nod since we didn’t even think it was possible to score in the negative.



6 Pac-Man Perfect

We’re certain that even Billy Mitchell finds this Achievement impressive. As you all know, eating all four ghosts with one power pellet is incredibly difficult. What this Achievement asks is that you eat all four ghosts four times within a level. If you can earn this one, you deserve to be made President of the United States of America. Gamers will follow you anywhere.



7 Dead Rising Zombie Road

This is one of the more amusing Achievements on Xbox Live. Your first goal is to find a tightly-bound swarm of zombies. Once you do this, you must jump onto the back of one of the zombies, then proceed to walk from one zombie to the next for a total of 33 feet. Stupid zombies! You are on their backs, and they can’t do a thing about it!



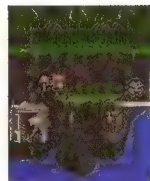
8 Call of Duty 3 Hot Potato

Usually games teach players to find cover and protect their bodies. The Hot Potato Achievement does the exact opposite. To earn it, you must pick up and return five live grenades. And yes, this is easier said than done. We blew up our team more times than we care to admit.



9 Contra Full Assault

Remember the good ol’ days when you would beat a game over and over again just to see how quickly you could do it? This Achievement rekindles this lost art of gaming. To earn it, you must complete Contra in less than 12 minutes.



10 Tony Hawk’s Project 8 Break 15 Bones in One Bail

This Achievement is pretty self-explanatory. You simply must inflict an incredible amount of pain upon yourself. This usually consists of multi-story drops, smashing into stationary objects, and roughly 300 feet of tumbling.



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AMERICAN PIE PRESENTS BAND CAMP UNRATED 4341301	CRY WOLF (2005) UNRATED 4341103	WHITE NOISE (2005) 3866388	CRAY WOLF (2005) UNRATED 4341103	SAMURAI 7 - VOLUME 1 4357901	VOLUME 2 - A NEW TOKYO 4351102	THE RING TWO UNRATED 4125665	THE RING TWO UNRATED 4125665
HARRY POTTER AND THE PRISONER OF AZKABAN 3345808	WALKING TALL (2004) 3248603	TRAINING DAY 2679900	THE ISLAND (2005) 2871101	MEET THE PARENTS (2006) BONUS ED. 3624707	STEALTH (2005) SPEC ED 4248506	THE RING TWO UNRATED 4125665	THE RING TWO UNRATED 4125665
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Don't worry about trying to determine if Gran Turismo HD is a full game or not, because Sony and developer Polyphony Digital have decided to can the project altogether. Instead, the developer is going forward with Gran Turismo 5 as the next release for the PlayStation 3. Given Polyphony's track record with delays, it's impossible to guess how long it will be before GT 5 hits shelves.

Gran Turismo HD was originally going to be a precursor to GT 5 that would consist predominately of content that players would have to download over the PlayStation Network. Perhaps this project was cancelled because Sony sensed that fans wouldn't want to be nickel and dimed for content, or because there aren't enough PS3 units out on

the market yet. Whatever the reason, GT HD features like online racing will be moved to GT 5. We shall have to wait and see if downloadable content remains an important component for GT 5.

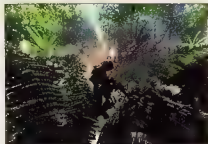
Japanese gamers will still get some PS3 Gran Turismo, however. As of press time, Sony of Japan was planning to release Gran Turismo HD Concept – a demo available on the PlayStation Network that would feature high-definition graphics. Polyphony head Kazunori Yamauchi says that ongoing Concept demos would be available for download, with future installments offering a glimpse of GT 5's new driving engine. No U.S. dates have been given for GT HD Concept downloads.

DATA FILE

More News You Can Use

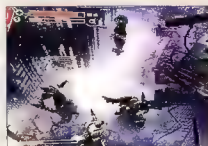
CRYSIS SUFFERS SETBACK

Originally scheduled to come out sometime this winter, EA and developer Crytek have delayed Crysis to some undefined date in the future. The developer says it wants to put more work into the title before it hits shelves.



RED STAR SHINES AGAIN

Game Informer ran a review of then-PS2/box title Red Star back in our October 2004 issue, but the game was cancelled before it could ever be released. Now, however, lack of All Games is bringing the PS2 version back into circulation. Retail sites list a vague January date for the title, but this could not be confirmed with the publisher as of press time.



BUSY, BUSY RELIC

Warhammer 40,000: Dawn of War (shown) developer Relic has recently advertised job openings for two positions, pointing to new projects in the RPG and MMO spaces. The company is also working on an unannounced next-gen console strategy project.



ROMERO'S BACK... AGAIN

After having made a splash with competitive gaming, the infamous John Romero is giving back. Romero's next project is an FPS named Severity that will be timed specifically for professional gamers such as those in our "Tugging on the Verge" article last month. The game will use one of id Software's engines, and come out for console and PC in late 2007.

FACTOR 5'S PS3 PAIR

In an interview with Gamasutra, Factor 5 president and co-founder Julian Eggebrecht said that the Lair (shown) developer is currently making two PS3 Network games for download on the system.



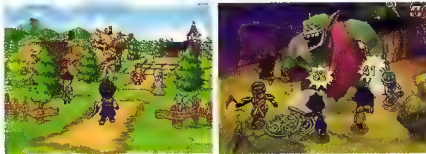
games

DRAGON QUEST HEADS TO DS

Wii DQ ALSO ON THE WAY

Nintendo's little handheld just scored a major coup. Given that the Dragon Quest franchise is a byword for the entire RPG genre in Japan, the fact that Square Enix has just signed a deal to bring Dragon Quest IX exclusively to the DS means that the handheld, which was already insanely popular in that country, is only going to become even more of a phenomenon. Dragon Quest VIII appeared on PlayStation 2, and the loss of the franchise is sure to be a blow to the PS3 in Japan.

The game is subtitled Guard of the Starry Night, and it will utilize four-player action using the DS' Wi-Fi capabilities. DQ IX is being scheduled for a 2007 release in Japan, but this isn't the only Dragon Quest on the horizon. Nintendo's Wii will get Dragon Quest Swords: Masked Queen and the Tower of Mirrors in the spring of 2007. No U.S. dates for either title have been set.



Dragon Quest IX exclusively for Nintendo DS

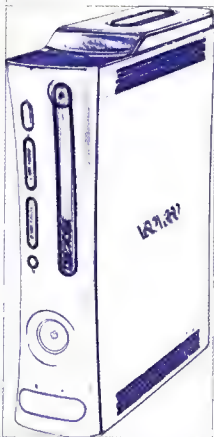
Dragon Quest Swords: Masked Queen and the Tower of Mirrors for Wii.

NEXT-GEN DESIGN SCORECARD

While the media has spent a good portion of the last year handicapping the technical specs of the three next-gen systems in the marketplace, there's a side to console manufacturing that often gets ignored: industrial design. Of course, the purpose of any system is to deliver top-quality gaming experiences, but history shows that the way products look and feel ultimately plays a large part in their success – for example, the way the sleek but relatively overpriced iPod still dominates the MP3 player market over cheaper alternatives. To help us grade the PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, and Wii on pure aesthetics and form, we spoke with Mark Rolston, the senior vice president of creative at Frog Design, a long-running design studio that has worked with such huge brands as Apple, Dell, Ford, Disney, and Acura. Read on to see what Rolston's take is on the current crop of home consoles.



Mark Rolston, senior vice president of creative at Frog Design



XBOX 360

GRADE: 7/10

Winner of the most-improved design from the first generation. It's very clear that the brutal, awful design of the first Xbox has been vastly improved in the Xbox 360. I think it's nice. What's funny is that it looks a lot bigger than it really is. It doesn't seem as classy as the PS3; the PS3 has some very nice glossy surfaces. It looks like you must've paid a [pretty] penny for that, and you did. The Xbox 360 looks more like the middle-of-the-road consumer device – the textured surface, the choice of white. It's very nice and elegant, but it doesn't look expensive; it looks competent. There are some really nice touches that integrate with the software; I like the lights and the placement of the button. The concave form is a nice choice.

I think [the detachable faceplates] are clever; it appeals to a certain class of gamer. I haven't tried it myself. I tend to like to admire the product for what the designer intended, so I leave mine alone. The idea of customization is great. However, the shape of the console tends to fight the idea of customization; it has a narrow waist that's so pronounced. If you just had a simple rectangular form, then the idea of customizing would have a certain value, but here it's a bit too superficial.



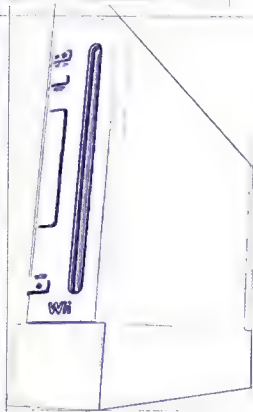
PS3

GRADE: 7/10

What is interesting about all three of them is this dichotomy between how they appear in a photograph and how they actually look when you're standing in front of them. The PS3 is one where the design in a photograph looks very elegant and makes it look smaller than it is. But when you stand in front of it, you realize that this is a fairly large box. With that said, it looks like a much higher quality product than it has in the past. It looks like a much more serious box than the previous one. I wonder where that takes their brand? The PS2 was successful not only because it was a good all-around box that supported a lot of popular games, but that it looked like a simple device to own. This thing seems so monolithic. I wonder if that can win as many customers?

I think what they've done is nice in the sense that it's a fairly original form and [the arched top] tends to mask the mass of the device. But at that much of an investment, they're starting to get into the customer that insists that the box integrates with the rest of their system...at the point I'm spending \$600 on a box, I'm thinking, "Hey this needs to integrate with my system a lot better." But, aesthetically it's a nice box and it looks like money, which is good for something that costs \$600.

In pure aesthetic terms, I'd give it a pretty high grade. In terms of meeting a certain brand promise and potential, it's stuck between what it costs and what it appears to be and the actual impact it has when you're using it.



Wii

GRADE: 8/10

This is where I started thinking about the photographs, because the Wii looks very slick in the pictures. Like a lot of the Apple products, it's a super-simple form where there are nicely chosen materials and shapes. It's not screaming, "Love me, look at these cool curves." It's the simplest shape they could come up with. But, when you get up close to it and touch it, you realize it's really cost-optimized. The thing is made of the cheapest materials they could get away with. So, it's a little bit of a letdown to hold it as opposed to the photographs.

But it photographs well and looks fine on the shelf at home. I think it was a fantastically clever idea to put it in that little riser. It totally changes the nature of what otherwise would have been a very disappointing brick. Very clever in that sense, so for that and utter simplicity, I'd give it a [grade] above the other two.

The Wii's whole message of simplifying games is being much more populist in its presentation. The whole gaming style is populist, trying to get grandma and mom involved. The shape is sending the same message; it's not so serious. It doesn't look like a computer; it looks innocuous. That's important.

GHOST RIDER

THE VIDEO GAME

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...To protect the life—and soul—of his love, Roxanne.

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Coming to PlayStation®2 computer entertainment system, PSP™ (PlayStation® Portable) system and Game Boy® Advance.



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PETTE WANAT'S SCHOOL OF LICENSED GAMES

➤ 10 RULES OF KICK-ASS LICENSED GAME DESIGN ◀

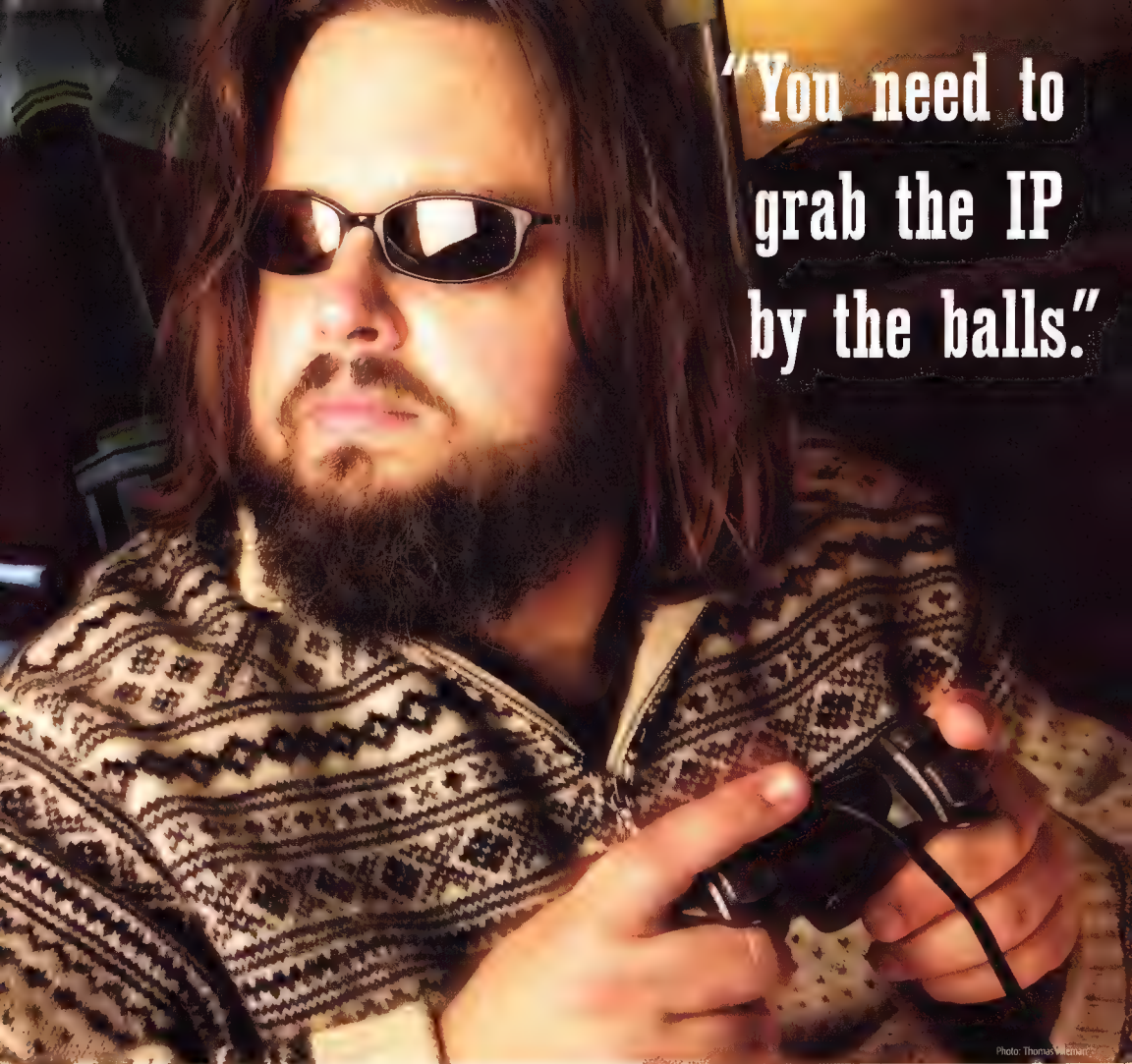
Licensed games have suffered a questionable history ever since more copies of Atari's E.T. ended up in the New Mexican desert than in people's homes. Vivendi Games' Pete Wanat is fighting to reverse this stereotype, and has enjoyed a great deal of critical and commercial success with games like *The Thing*, *The Chronicles of Riddick: Escape From Butcher Bay*, and *Scarface: The World Is Yours*. We caught up with the outspoken producer to get a lesson on how to overcome one of the most difficult challenges in the industry - making a good licensed game.



#1



Above all else, be
true to the license



"You need to grab the IP by the balls."

Photo: Thomas Wilmar

"The general rule of thumb whenever you're doing a licensed product or IP is to be true to the license first and then make a great game. Why would you go and spend money to get a license if you're not going to be true to it? Just make an original product at that point.

The first thing you have to do from the beginning of the first day is say, 'How do we nail the assets of the license? There are no shades of gray in that area. Either you do it or you don't'.

#2

Picture the game as an original IP

"You need to make such a good game that if you took the license out of it and just had the character, the movements, the playability, and the motion, the game would be fun regardless of the license.

Treat a licensed game like it's an unlicensed product when you're building it because you don't want it to suffer because of the license. That becomes really difficult because a lot of times you have the rights holder go, 'That doesn't look like Superman. You need to change his shoulders,' instead of focusing on, 'Well, your game sucks.' Who gives a s— if Superman's shoulders don't look right if Superman doesn't play well? If the game plays great nobody gives a s— about the damn shoulders!"



Chronicles of Riddick was one of the first Xbox games to incorporate liberal use of manual mapping technology

#3

The right team makes all of the difference

"You have to have really confident people who are willing to work really f—ing hard. These games are not easy. They probably require a little more work because not only do you have to have a great concept and also nail what the character plays like, you need to get it approved by the licensor.

When David Jaffe's working on God of War, he doesn't have to take that third boss character to anyone and get it approved. We do. Not only do we have to make it, we've got to get it approved by someone who's not working on the game. In the case of Riddick, we not only had to get it approved through Universal, we had to get it approved through Tigon as well. So it helps that Tigon had someone like Cos Lazouras, who is a big gamer, and was just tremendous in helping us make the game better."

#4

Don't follow the movie plot

"Give me a prequel, give me a sequel, give me a side story. Give me anything other than the exact plot of the film. I watched the movie. That's why I bought the game! I like the characters and this universe. Don't regurgitate the film in game form. You know why? Because you'll never do it as well as they did it in the film because they're telling the story the way they wanted to tell it. You need to grab the IP by the balls and bring it into that world. Explore the universe, explore the characters, explore anything other than vomiting back up the storyline of the film.

You need to give gamers another way into the universe. We call them 'tethers,' little elements that we put in games that tie into certain moments in the film. Maybe it's one line of dialogue that mentions a character that you don't

ever get to see. If you put that character in the game, the person who really loves that film plays it and jumps up and says, 'Oooh, that's from the film! I remember that part. That's the guy.' Those are the moments I'm looking for.

Tell me what happens after the movie ends. Tell me how the characters got to the place they were before the movie started. Those are the things that I'm interested in and I think most gamers are interested in."



Scarface: The World Is Yours was the top-selling game in October 2006



Elements of the movie focus within your squad were a major focus in The Thing

#5

Find a flexible rights holder

"You can't do great licensed products if your license holder doesn't get it. Some just live in the past. They're still worrying about games from 1995 when there was one great movie licensed game and the rest of them were turds. You had GoldenEye and everything else was s—.

Our guy at Universal, Bill Kispert (VP of Interactive Entertainment), 'gets it' on a level beyond most people. I couldn't do the job on those games that I did — that my teams have done — without someone on the other side who was a true partner in the process. You've really lucked out if the person who controls the interactive rights really understands games. It's essential that you have someone that you can go to and say, 'Hey, look. I think this is bulls—. I don't want to follow the storyline of the movie.'

The Scarface game wouldn't be what it is if Universal didn't say it was okay to have Tony survive the ending of the movie. If the studio doesn't buy into your concept, you're just going to have to redo the entire thing."

#6

Leverage the power of the license

"Scarface the game itself would be fun with or without the license, but the license is what makes it special. It really takes things to another level. You get laughed out of most agents' offices when you ask if their big-name client would appear in your game. Scarface was the opposite. We had people calling us saying, 'I want to be in this thing!'

We had the ability to draw out the multitude of open-world voices to name talent that actually does a really good job in the role. Everyone's like, 'They spent a bajillion dollars on their cast.' Bulls—, we got people at scaled rates because the property was cool. They wanted to be in Scarface.

For Riddick, Vin Diesel came to a four-hour recording session. Thirteen hours later he was done because he wanted it to be great. It's really lucky when you get a talent like that who really cares about games. He's got his own game company. How many stars have their own video game company?"



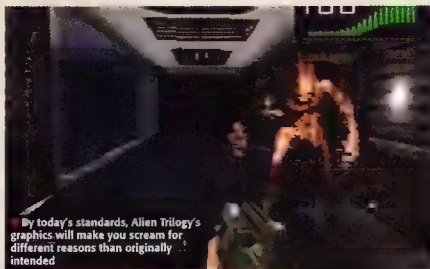
South Park was made in only eight months

#7

Get all the small things right

"If you're going to take somebody's baby and make a game out of it, you better make sure you're getting all of the nitty gritty details right. Why? Not for the studio. At the end of the day you're not making the game for the people at the studio. You're making the game for the players and the fans of that IP, and they know what the eye color of your protagonist is and if you get it wrong they're going to be like, 'They don't even know what f—ing color his eyes are!'"

Fans notice. And if you f— it up they're going to be the first ones calling you out on it. You need to have all of that stuff wrapped up early because you need to be worried about making a game."



By today's standards, *Alien Trilogy's* graphics will make you scream for different reasons than originally intended

#8

Target the best games

"I remember sitting in a meeting and we were talking about Riddick and I mentioned Halo 2 and Doom 3. My boss at the time came up to me and said 'Don't ever mention those games in the same sentence as Riddick. Your game isn't on par with those games.'"

I was like, 'Go f— yourself! Don't tell me my game's not as good as theirs.' A) Don't send that message to me because I'm working my ass off to make sure the game is the best it can be, and I don't need somebody above me trying to diminish the game.

B) Starbreeze had serious chops. Magnus Högdahl, our lead programmer, I'd put with anyone in the world in terms of programming. He's the smartest technical guy I've ever met in the industry.

When you have true talent like that you can try to make games that compete with those types of games. Can we compete with them in terms of sales? Probably to a lesser extent. But in terms of quality product I'll put Riddick up against anything."

#9

Don't be afraid of Hollywood execs

"When you work for a game company and sit down with a bunch of studio executives you have to know your s—. You have to be able to fight. You can't go in and be like, 'Oh, this is a big Hollywood guy.' I don't care who the f— you are. It doesn't matter. I'm here to make a good game. I'm not in the movie business. I work in interactive entertainment. I love movies, but I don't want to be in the movies, so I don't need to kiss anybody's ass at a studio.

I tell them what they need to do to make a good game, period. At the end of the day if you fight for what you believe in, any studio head worth his salt is going to say 'This guy cares. He's got a passion for it.'"

The biggest problem that we have as people who make games is oftentimes the people who choose to do movie-based games would rather go to do something of their own. If you don't have fight in you, go sell shoes or something else. Do anything other than make games. If not, then you're just going to turn out s—y product, and we have enough of that in this industry without trying."

#10

Work your passion into the license

"What I try to do every time I work on a movie-based game is explore some gameplay passion I have that fits with the IP. I always wanted to make a game where you escape from prison because I love escape movies. I hadn't actually seen *Pitch Black* before starting on Riddick, but after watching the DVD I thought it would work well with my escape idea.

We went and talked to some of the people from Universal and they're like, 'Well, we'd really like you to stick with the storyline of the movie.' And I said, 'That's great. Go find someone else to do it.'"

I explained that I wasn't going to invest two years of my life to do a see-the-movie-play-the-movie experience. There's gotta be something in every game I do that I'm passionate about.

With *The Thing*, I loved the idea of putting emotional states on non-player characters. Players have to think, 'Are they real humans or are they this abominable monster inside?' That concept of trust and fear. There were several different items in the game that I had a true passion about bringing to life. And the IP helps because it's a vehicle to get your game and name out there to more people." ■ ■ ■

Check out *Unlimited* to see what other well-known licensed game developers like Raven, Radical, and 7 Studios think about this challenging genre. We also talked to the VP of interactive entertainment at NBC Universal to get the film studio's perspective on game adaptations.

CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

Wanat cut his teeth at the most infamous licensed game publisher of them all — Acclaim. Not everything was a home run, but he worked on several generally well-received sports titles and standouts like *South Park* and *Alien Trilogy* during his tenure.

- **Frank Thomas Big Hurt Baseball** (1995) Acclaim, Game Analyst
- **Alien Trilogy** (1996) Acclaim, AP/Producer

- **NBA Jam T.E.** (1996) Acclaim, Game Analyst

- **NFL Quarterback Club 98/99** (1997/1998) Acclaim, Producer

- **No One Can Stop Mr. Domino** (1998) Acclaim, Producer (US version)

- **Extreme-G 2** (1998) Acclaim, Producer

- **Re-Volt** (1999) Acclaim, Producer

- **South Park** (1999) Acclaim, Producer

- **All-Star Baseball 99/2000/2001** (1998/1999/2000) Acclaim, Producer

- **The Thing** (2002) Black Label Games, Producer

- **The Chronicles of Riddick: Escape from Butcher Bay** (2004) VU Games, Producer

- **Scarface: The World Is Yours** (2006) Sierra Games, Executive Producer

WHAT'S NEXT FOR PETE?

Any new licensed games we should know about?

I'm working on at least two new movie properties and I'm excited for both of them. One is going to be a non-mature rated game. I have a passion for mature content, but I'm going to try to do a game for my nieces and nephews.

Will we ever see another Riddick game?

If Universal and Tigon want to do another one — even better if Starbreeze also wants to join that party — you can count me in. I would love to make a sequel game for Riddick. That would be tremendous fun. Somebody beyond just me has to come along and say 'Yes, we're willing to do that.' We're willing to put the money behind that as well. I don't think that there's anything on the schedule for that right now, but hopefully it happens. We are looking in to doing some things with that and I hope at some point we can have a nice announcement, but as of now I don't think there's anything concrete for a Riddick sequel.

PAYTRON

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LOOSE TALK

Hot Gaming Gossip



FALLOUT MMO ON THE GO?

According to SEC filings, Interplay's Fallout MMO has a proposed launch date of 2010. Unfortunately, part of the financing for the \$75 million project comes from anticipated proceeds from Interplay stock, which, given the company's debt, should be worth as much as a portable full of feces.

NFL CALLING THE EA PLAYS?

EA Sports' NFL Head Coach was as successful as the Dave Campo era in Dallas, but despite the game's utter lack of execution we could see another iteration in the series. The NFL says that it expects to see another game come out for the franchise (no word if Rich Kotite is going to be the next cover star). Given that the league has an exclusive deal with EA, it would not surprise us if the NFL is pushing the publisher to make the game. Expect future NFL Head Coach games to follow the release schedule of an offshoot like NFL Street, with new versions appearing every couple of years.



HARD DRIVE-REQUIRED 360 GAMES COMING?

Microsoft will shortly add new information to its Xbox 360 boxes, requiring developers to tell gamers whether or not the title "Requires Storage." Such a requirement would also be on the front of the box. Although no more is known at this point, this would seem to point toward some games requiring a hard drive in order to play them. Other information is also being added to boxes, including another check box denoting "Online Only." Presumably, this labeling will be for MMOs or other titles that require a "Net" connection to play.



PSP DOWNLOAD SERVICE

The Financial Times says that Sony is in talks with Amazon.com, MovieLink, and Cinemahow for a download service in 2007 that would let PSP owners download movies. Users would have to download them on their PC first and then transfer them to the handheld via memory stick. The service would allow only one copy per purchase. Sony has also talked about a similar service in the future for the PS3.



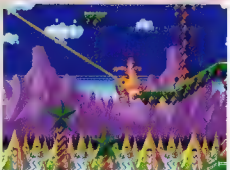
Get some insider info? Email us at tabbotell@gamemaster.com and we'll be on site.

NAME THAT GAME

Test Your Sight

Everyone's scrambling to get Burger King's trio of Xbox games, but this isn't the first time a fast food chain (or "good food fast" as we like to call it) has merged food with video games to create an unbeatable tandem promoting childhood obesity. Burger King and McDonalds once put out this month's game — that's obvious from the screenshot (what other mascot runs around scaring kids with his big shoes and clown makeup?). But can you tell us its full title and what system it exclusively appeared on?

(Answer on page 36)



NEWS

THE SYSTEM LAUNCH BREAKDOWN

GUESS WHO WAS THIS SEASON'S BIGGEST SELLER?



The early sales numbers for the holiday season are in, and things went about how you'd expect them to. There weren't enough PlayStation 3s to go around, Wii owners loved Zelda, and the 360 picked up some steam even with the new kids on the block.

Sony was only able to get 200,000 PS3 consoles out at launch here in America, with industry sales-watchers NPD posting sales of 197,000 in November. Similar sales numbers were put up in Japan. At the time of this writing, Sony PR head David Karaker said that the company's initial manufacturing problems had been cleared up and that the company expected a million systems to ship by the end of 2006 in the U.S.

Perhaps a more interesting story, however, is that little more than one out of three PS3 owners bought Resistance: Fall of Man (the system's biggest seller), creating some speculation that a significant portion of those who bought PS3s at launch turned around and sold them on eBay. There may be some truth to this, as the number of systems available on the auction market drove down the PS3's price.

On the other hand, an impressive 86 percent of Wii buyers also picked up the Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess, totaling almost half a million copies in the month of November according to the NPD. An average of two Wii titles were sold with each console.

The unit itself sold over 600,000 in its first eight days in North America, although Nintendo rescinded its own press release which said there would be "more than a million Wii systems available in the U.S. by the end of the year." In the U.K., the platform shattered the country's record for most sold in its first week-end, with 100,000 units flying off shelves. The Xbox 360 held the previous record of 70,000 units.

Microsoft and its console may have benefited most. NPD data shows that 511,000 Xbox 360 systems were sold in the month of November, which is double the number of platforms it was moving on a monthly basis in the fall. Gears of War also did extremely well, reaching the million mark within a month of going on sale and becoming the fastest-selling Microsoft-exclusive title ever. Worldwide sales of Gears of War have exceeded two million. Total U.S. sales of the Xbox 360 at the time of this writing appear to be in the 3.5 to 4 million range. Microsoft says it is on target to sell 10 million 360s worldwide by the end of 2006.

New consoles come and go, but Nintendo's grip on the handheld market remains supreme. The NPD's biggest seller in November was the Nintendo DS at 918,000 units.

tech

DIRECTX 10 FOR NEWBIES

WHAT'S IT GOING TO DO FOR YOU?

As we near the launch of Windows Vista, gamers should be familiarizing themselves with Microsoft's other big software initiative: DirectX 10. This piece of code defines how your games interact with your graphics hardware, and the improvements in DirectX 10 over DirectX 9 will ultimately result in much better-looking games. We'll spare you the majority of the technical mumbo-jumbo, but there are a few things that everyone should know about it.

The most noticeable difference in DX10 is that games will be able to display more unique objects on screen due to the lessened CPU overhead of rendering them (no more hundreds of carbon-copy trees!). Additionally, new hardware standards for graphics cards should allow games to offload things like physics and AI to the GPU, leading to improvements in those areas as well. Finally, graphics errors should no longer crash your PC because the display drivers are largely isolated from your operating system.

So why should you care? Frankly, except for hardcore early adopters, you shouldn't — yet. The upgrade path is expensive; you'll need Windows Vista (DX10 won't be available for Windows XP), a DirectX 10-capable card (the Nvidia 8800 series is the only one on the market now, and it's still \$400-plus), and DirectX 10-enabled games to enjoy it. Furthermore, it's incredibly unlikely that any games released in the next year or even two won't run on DirectX 9 systems, since publishers always want their games to have the widest potential audience possible.

Unless you have some serious cash to burn on upgrading your PC in the next few months, we would suggest waiting until DirectX 10 hardware reaches mainstream-level pricing before buying into it. It'll certainly be tempting to be able to play upcoming titles like Hellgate: London and Shadowrun with all their fancy visuals turned on, but for a while yet that capability will come with a hefty price tag. DirectX 10 is certainly a large advancement in gaming technology, but we likely won't see its true power for quite some time.

Microsoft wants its games like Flight Simulator X to shine with DirectX 10



abovetheinfluence.com

TOP FIVES

Favorites From Industry Pros And GI Readers

DEVELOPER

JUSTIN COOK
Designer, Rare Ltd.
(Viva Piñata)

READER

LEIF S.
ROSEWOOD
Forest Grove, Oregon1 Elite – Sinclair ZX
Spectrum2 The Legend of Zelda:
Ocarina of Time – N64

3 Amplitude – PS2

4 Half-Life 2 – PC

5 Worms World

Party – PC

1 Chaos Legion – PS2

2 Metal Gear Solid 3:

Snake Eater – PS2

3 Final Fantasy

X – PS2

4 Onimusha 2:

Samurai's

Destiny – PS2

5 The Elder Scrolls IV:

Oblivion – Xbox 360

Send Top Fives and a photo of yourself to:

Game Informer Magazine/Top Five
724 N 1st St 4th Fl
Minneapolis, MN 55401-9022
email: topfive@gamerankings.com
(attach digital picture)

TOP TEN

Lists... Everybody Loves Lists...

Top 10 Worst
Destinations for a Video
Game Pilgrimage

10 Burger King. Because when you mix games and hamburgers, you get what you pay for. With the exception of Burger Time, of course.

9 Hoth. Even though it's probably been in more video games than the ubiquitous "lava level" by now, it is inhospitable even for tauntauns.

8 Shemue's grave. It's too crowded, what with the thousands of fans holding vigils, convinced it will be resurrected.

7 Traverse Town. Disney and Final Fantasy characters together in one place? This is obviously a doomed concept no one could enjoy.

6 Mushroom Kingdom. Scattered across sewer pipes and bottomless pits make it hazardous deathtrap for the unwary.

5 Earth. In 99 percent of its appearances, it is threatened with destruction by sinister cosmic/spiritual forces.


4 Katamari land. Despite how secure that building, bench, or giant squid may look, no place is safe.

3 Floating cities. They may look cool, but you just know they're going to plummet into the ocean. If you go, bring a parachute and sturdy life raft.

2 Vice City. If you're stupid enough to go a place called "Vice City," don't come crying to us when a psychopath torches you with a flamethrower.

1 The Dark World. No one wants to be a pink bunny with no weapons. Avoid at all costs.

Name That Game Answer: McDonald's Treasure Land Adventure for the Sega Genesis



THE REBUILDING YEARS

IS EA SPORTS ON THE DECLINE?

EA Sports is synonymous with sports video gaming after its years of critical and consumer success. But the publisher did not have the smoothest of transitions when it introduced its franchises onto the Xbox 360, and some of them are still struggling in their second year in the next-generation.

One recent high-profile cry of dissent was a protest petition started by a community of NBA Live PC users who decried flaws such as the CPU not bothering to use its bench players in NBA Live 07 to be the "final straw." These long-time Live loyalists have even threatened to move over to EA's competition, 2K Sports' best-selling NBA 2K franchise.

Those gamers that believe that EA has gotten complacent point out the dropped feature sets as EA Sports moved its portfolio of titles from current to the next generation – a move which an EA spokesperson we talked to said was done for a reason. "We made decisions to not just port games over, and there have been instances where maybe a few of the feature sets have not been in the games in the interest in not porting it over so we could rebuild those and make the best possible experience."

WHAT'S THE SCORE?

Is this just a bump in the road for EA Sports or is it a trend? Game Informer checked aggregate review score website gamerankings.com, and found that when comparing iterations of several EA Sports franchises, scores were both down and up over the last few years (see inset table for more). However, the PS2 edition of Madden in particular has dropped every year since its height with the 2004 edition. Interestingly, the next year EA signed a deal for exclusive NFL rights through 2010.

Even the highly regarded Fight Night series dipped slightly, with the current-gen 2006 versions scoring better than both the next-gen games by garnering 87.5 percent and 88.2 percent on PS2 and Xbox, respectively. This is compared to the 360's 85.3 percent and PS3's 85.8 percent. NHL, NBA Live, and NASCAR also had drops, while FIFA, NCAA Football, and Tiger Woods showed increases.

Regardless of review scores, one thing that has not changed is the sales of EA Sports titles, which continue to rank high on the monthly NPD sales charts. "We value what review scores and critics say," said the EA spokesperson, "but what we really value is what the consumer says,

and consumers get a chance to vote when they go out and buy a game. It's irresponsible to just say 'Are EA Sports games down?' when you actually look at the numbers. I think there are a lot of great success stories with EA Sports right now."

LICENSING THE LEAGUE

With EA and the leagues it has partnered with all satisfied with the money being earned by these franchises, we shouldn't expect a sea change any time soon. Game Informer talked to representatives from the NFL, NBA, and NHL who were all happy with the way their licenses were being treated by the EA Sports brand. Putting some context on EA Sports' review scores, NFL licensing manager Tim Langley told us, "It's not just Madden that's showing decrease in critical reviews. I don't think we're sitting alone."

Dave McCarthy, senior director of consumer product marketing for the NHL, had a magnanimous view of the responses that NHL-licensed games in general were getting. "When it hits and it's right, everyone loves it. But when it's a little quirky or meddlesome, they are open to criticism."

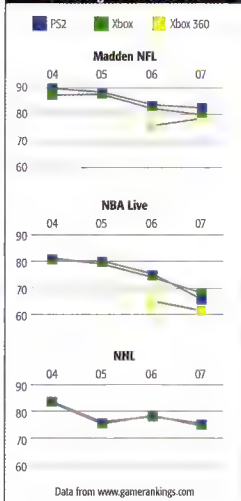
Although there are no NFL-licensed titles that compete with Madden – a fact which some believe has hurt the franchise – Langley's opinion is that most gamers have put down their pitchforks. "We hear less and less to the point where we almost don't hear anything at all from fans [on this topic]," Langley says that the league has the ability to get out of any contract we have with any licensee," but it has no intentions of doing so.

However, unlike the NFL, the NBA and NHL representatives we talked to feel that their sports benefit from the competition, apparently leaving these sports open for the time being. "Competition creates more creativity," Greg Lassen, NBA vice president of entertainment products and licensing told us, "if there is a company with a compelling idea for a basketball game, we're certainly open to the idea."

With sales as high as ever, perhaps gamers' discontent with the EA Sports brand will have to stir in place until sales numbers reflect their attitude. However, the company said it will continue to hone its next-gen games in the coming years. "I can promise you we care," said the EA representative. "We try."

*All review scores used in this piece were taken from www.gamerankings.com, and reflect the scores as of the time of this writing.

Charting the Franchises



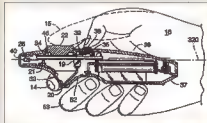
THE GOOD, THE BAD, THE UGLY

When You Want Your News Categorized With A Sarcastic Editorial Spin



UGLY

California's Interlink Electronics is suing Nintendo for patent infringement, claiming that the Wii's remote too closely resembles Interlink's trigger-operated pointing device. Interlink is seeking a restraining order on Wii sales, damages, and a reimbursement of legal fees.



GOOD

Following up last month's article on professional video gaming, cable company Comcast has signed an agreement with Major League Gaming (MLG) to show the league's MLG Pro Circuit show on Comcast's new GameInvasion.net site. CBS also put pro gaming in the spotlight recently. The network showed highlights of the World Series of Video Games on its *They Got Game* show.

STUPID

Some Wii gamers are saying that their Wii remotes came with faulty straps that broke, sending their controller flying when playing titles like *Wii Sports* tennis and baseball. What they don't know - probably because they are nerds - is that it is not normal in either tennis or baseball to let go of your racket or bat in mid-swing. Muster up the strength and get a grip, people! All you weak-armed gamers can still take solace in the fact that Nintendo is replacing the busted straps.

BAD

Founding ESA president Doug Lowenstein is leaving the industry organization after 12 years. Lowenstein was a tireless advocate for video games, often taking heat from Congress and parental groups in his protection of our Constitutional rights. He is believed to be taking a new position outside of the industry, and we would like to pass on both our thanks and best wishes.



UGLY



UGLY

N'Gai Croal from *Newsweek* has reported that both Ubisoft's *Assassin's Creed* and Rockstar's *Grand Theft Auto IV* were both originally meant to be PlayStation 3 exclusives, but were lost due to Sony's Ken Kutaragi's "slowness" on pulling the trigger to make the titles exclusives. In fact, Sony president Kaz Hirai's promotion to oversee the day-to-day SCE operations in Tokyo is seen as a reaction to the bungled PS3 launch. With enemies like these, Microsoft and Nintendo won't need friends.



UGLY

The headline must read something like this: Pro Athlete Not Man Enough For Video Games! During this past World Series, Detroit Tigers pitcher Joel Zumaya was ordered by his coaches to stop playing *Guitar Hero* because it was straining the forearm of his pitching arm. No wonder these guys are juiced up on steroids all the time.



The last few months of the gaming world have been devoted to speculation and opinion on Sony and Nintendo's new systems. You've read the articles. You've seen the multi-million dollar campaigns you've seen released on the screens. You've read our thought analyses of the PlayStation and Wii. Chances are, you've even held your hands, whether at home, a friend's house, or at a retail kiosk.

However, if you weren't fortunate to get one at launch, you're likely wondering what to do next. Do you follow the lead of the 100 million gamers who've purchased a number of new-age gamers who've made recent console purchases, about their thoughts on the PS3 and Wii. Hopefully, these unvarnished, honest opinions will help you decide where you spend your gaming dollars in the future, and what system might be the best fit for you.

gamer on the street

Readers Respond to the Release of PS3 and Wii

did you have any strange experiences while trying to purchase your new console?

BRENDAN MILLINGS (PS3) I decided that I would take Thursday and Friday off from school to get the PS3. So much stuff happened that night. People were selling their spots in line for \$300-500, and someone tried to push me off of my spot by telling the security that I cut the line. Would I camp out again? Definitely not, because it was a pretty brutal experience. But I am glad that I did get a chance to experience it.

DAVID MILLER (Wii) I waited in more lines than I can remember. In addition, I had various members of my family scouring local stores. We called it the Great Wii Hunt. Unfortunately, I had to leave town to go back to school, but my family kept up the hunt. So I finally got my Wii four days before I came home and was able to play it.

MARCUS WESTBROOKS (PS3) I was the third person on the list when my local GameStop started doing pre-orders. I walked up to the store at about 5:00 pm on November 17, and picked up my shiny new 60 GB PlayStation 3.

CC
this is the
first time
that a game
has sold the
system to
me, and that
was zelda

CHRIS DeMEO



is there any one thing in particular that made one console a must-buy over the others?

MILLINGS (PS3) Upcoming titles such as White Knight, Heavenly Sword, FF XIII, and MGS 4 are among a huge list of games on the PS3 that are definitely worth taking a look at. I also wanted the PS3 for its Blu-ray playback. Why buy a \$1,000 Blu-ray player when you can buy one for \$500 cheaper?

CHRIS DeMEO (Wii & PS3) I was the biggest outspoken person regarding the Wii project. I said that people do not want to be flailing their arms around, people want a traditional button-pressing game experience, and I thought Nintendo was making a novelty system. Then Nintendo decided to change their name to the Wii, with all the innuendo that brought, and I was a big critic of it. This is the first time that a game has sold the system to me, and that was Zelda.

MATT OLSEN (Wii) Probably the Virtual Console. Right now it sucks, to be blunt, just because they don't have all of the great games out for it yet. If it ever comes out, I will want Mother for the NES and Chrono Trigger. Also, pretty much all of the RPGs that came out on the SNES and Sega Genesis – especially the ones that never came out in the U.S.

what games and accessories have you bought?



MOHAMMAD JAHANGARD

MILLINGS (PS3) Call of Duty 3, Marvel: Ultimate Alliance, Madden NFL 07, Resistance: Fall of Man, Tony Hawk's Project 8, Fight Night Round 3, and two extra Sixaxis controllers.

MILLER (Wii) I have not been able to find any accessories I want in stock. It's a little awkward that most Wii games require at least one accessory, the nunchuk. It comes with the system, but has to be bought separately with subsequent controllers – a setup that frankly, I think is scandalous.

MOHAMMAD JAHANGARD (Wii & PS3) For the Wii I bought Zelda. However, I am looking around for third-party component cables so I can enjoy Wii games at a higher resolution. Once my winter break begins I will buy more games (such as Rayman and Elebits). For the PS3 I purchased Resistance: Fall of Man, and an HDMI cable. I will also purchase another controller as well as Marvel: Ultimate Alliance.

what did you think of the launch lineup? do the games justify owning a console early in its life?



MILLER (Wii) With a cheap system like the Wii, I think that games like Zelda, Marvel, and Rayman absolutely justify owning the console.

WESTBROOKS (PS3) Well, in the PS3's case, it went from awesome to lame in about a month due to a few key games getting delayed like Oblivion and MotorStorm.

JAHANGARD (Wii & PS3) While there are a couple of games that were interesting, the only reason I decided to pick up the Wii at launch was to get my hands on Zelda. Most of the third-party games on the PS3 can be experienced on the 360. Most of Sony's first-party games like Dark Kingdom and Genji, as well as games like Gundam, are just pure crap. However, I think Resistance is worth purchasing a PS3 for now. I would say that Resistance is my game of the year.

is gaming social for you? did your friends figure into your decision to buy this console?

MILLINGS (PS3) Sure, I had my friends in mind when buying the PS3. I mean, I'd be the only one out of my group of friends that has one. However, it kind of backfired due to the Wii; I can't get them away from that thing.

DeMEO (Wii & PS3) With the Wii, absolutely. The Wii I thought of from the very beginning as a fun multiplayer system. And it has been. My sisters have never been into games. I hate to be stereotypical, but they're sisters. They'd rather do their hair than save the world. They've actually started playing with me and they've had fun. I hate to say it, but my PS3 has more or less been my DVD player and a very expensive paperweight.

what have you spent the most time playing?



CHRIS DeMEO

MILLINGS (PS3) Initially, I spent the most time playing Resistance, but I've been spending a lot of time playing Fight Night. I'm hooked on Get in the Ring mode.

DeMEO (Wii & PS3) Other than Twilight Princess, I have been playing Wii Sports. I was recently discussing with some people on message boards how the Wii is an alternative to war. A friend of mine was dating my sister (that's just a recipe for disaster) and ended up getting angry at her and calling her some horrible name. So I went to him and I said, "Look, here are the options: We can fight it out like kindergartners, you could stop dating my sister and leave us alone, or I can challenge you to a Wii Sports competition." Well, halfway through we were having so much fun that we were like, "Hey, this whole thing is stupid. Just chill out with my sister and be nice."

WESTBROOKS (PS3) Resistance – online and co-op are a joy. I've also had a lot of fun playing the MotorStorm demo.



What is your favorite feature of your new systems?



MARCUS WESTBROOKS

MILLINGS (PS3) The days of having to get up to boot up your console are over.

MILLER (Wii) When Nintendo finally gets around to releasing all my favorite games on the Virtual Console, I'll have a more definitive answer.

WESTBROOKS (PS3) I don't think there's any one feature that rules them all. It's more the combination of the different multimedia options available like downloading PSone games to my PSP or checking out my photos with the PS3's awesome photo viewer.

the days of
having to get
up to boot up
your console
are over

BRENDAN MILLINGS

What are the advantages of being an early adopter with new consoles?



MATT OLSEN

DeMEO (Wii & PS3) I think that there are positives and negatives. Like when the 360 happened, the system shipped with a lot of the early consoles burning out and things like that. [It's nice] having a more competitive advantage against those who have to play catch up with their system later.

OLSEN (Wii) Just because you can say, "I have it." I'm the first person to have it at school. I'm better than all of you. You don't have it.

JAHANGARD (Wii & PS3) Just being one of the first to try something new is an awesome feeling. Another advantage is that you can provide answers to generally asked questions by fellow gamers – be the reviewer yourself through word of mouth.

Is there anything you regret about buying the system?



BRENDAN MILLINGS

MILLINGS (PS3) Yeah, I'm pretty upset that I can't use my guitar peripheral for Guitar Hero II. And a lack of rumble feedback does indeed take away from the gameplay experience. Sixaxis + Dual Shock would be so ideal.

DeMEO (Wii & PS3) Other than not hitting on the gorgeous girl behind the counter, none at all.

MILLER (Wii) There are things I wish were different (cheaper Virtual Console games being at the fore), but I couldn't classify them as regrets, as none of them make me question the wisdom of the purchase.

WESTBROOKS (PS3) Nope. I mean, yes, I do wish the launch line-up was a little better, but it's a great console. I don't think I'm going to have to wait long for great games either, seeing as MotorStorm, Lair, Virtua Fighter 5, and Heavenly Sword are due out early next year.

What do you think Sony/Nintendo needs to do to win the console war?

MILLER (Wii) Sony won it [last time] by acquiring massive third party support. Nintendo can gain ground again by taking it back. People buy the console that has the games they want, and the Wii [needs] to average more than two games a year – the last few years of GameCube's life were pathetic.

WESTBROOKS (PS3) At the end of the day, no one is going to care about how much motion your controller can sense or how good *Hitch* looks running in Blu-ray. Whoever has the games will win.

JAHANGARD (Wii & PS3) Nintendo needs to keep on doing what they're doing at the moment: reemphasize the entertainment experience the Wii provides not only to hardcore gamers, but also to the general public. Also, Nintendo needs to continue to get great games from third parties. In order for Sony to win the console war, I think first and foremost, they must return to the original company they were about 10 years ago. When the original Playstation launched, Sony listened to the gamers and created content designed towards the gamers. Sony also needs to work on their online system. While Sony's online offering is free, I would not mind paying \$50 or \$60 for a year's worth of service of PlayStation Online if it were the same as Xbox Live.

Do you think the PS3 is worth the price you paid for it?

MILLINGS (PS3) I got a \$1,000 Blu-ray player, a fully-functional web browser, and 1080p games for \$500. That sounds like a steal to me.

WESTBROOKS (PS3) Yes.

JAHANGARD (Wii & PS3) Absolutely yes!

What role do you see Blu-ray playing in the success of the PS3?

MILLINGS (PS3) It'll be crucial because Sony is pretty much riding on this feature. Sony needs to prove to everyone that Blu-ray is more than just preventing a multi-disc game.

WESTBROOKS (PS3) Well, I think the common thought is that the PS3 is the cheapest Blu-ray player you can find, but I don't know if Sony has done a good enough job proving to people that Blu-ray is the future.

Do you even see the PS3 and Wii as competing with each other? Do you own each for different reasons?

DeMEO (Wii & PS3) I actually would not say they are competing, because the demographic that they are aiming for is so wildly different. The PS3 is aiming more for the hardcore, "I want to play some serious, serious games" type of system. Unfortunately, they haven't put out any serious, serious games yet, but they will. The Wii is more about fun, and I respect that. I remember when games like Super Mario World and Donkey Kong used to be about fun. They weren't about accomplishing anything or engaging in any deep or compelling story.

JAHANGARD (Wii & PS3) I own the Wii primarily to enjoy Nintendo's first party games and to introduce and charm non-gamers into the gaming world. Furthermore, enjoying classic games that are found on the Virtual Console is a big plus. I own a PS3 because I genuinely loved the previous PlayStations, and the name the Playstation brand carries. I own a PS3 for not only the amazing games that will eventually come, but also for the ability to download video content and watch high-definition movies on it. I think the PS3 is really growing on me and becoming my number one console. The 360 and Wii offer amazing experiences, but I am just loving my PS3. ■■■

IT COMES...

Vengeance, Power, and a Menace born of Jewels.

Over 5 hours of brilliantly
voiced gameplay!

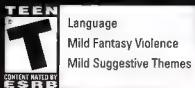


Wireless vs mode lets you
battle and trade over
100 monsters!



Monster Kingdom Jewel Summoner

From the creator of the Shin Megami Tensei® series, with a stunning soundtrack and detailed storylines, this is the first truly deep RPG for the PSP® (PlayStation®Portable) system!



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CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

Opening Windows

After a childhood spent as a computer enthusiast, Newell joins Microsoft as a programmer on the first three editions of Windows. There he works with John Carmack of id Software to bring Doom to the Windows platform, which was not well liked amongst gamers at the time.

Starting The Game

With encouragement from John Carmack, Newell leaves Microsoft to form Valve Software, a game development studio, with fellow MS employee Mike Harrington

A Home Run



Valve delivers a classic with its very first release, *Half-Life*. The game sets a new standard for FPS games with its seamless experience, excellent design, and compelling storytelling. It also introduces the fan-favorite character Gordon Freeman

Redefining Multiplayer



Valve publishes *Counter-Strike*, a proper version of the popular military-themed *Half-Life* mod created by Minh Li and Jess Cliffe. Even by the time it formally releases, *Counter-Strike* is already one of the most important online multiplayer titles of all time.

Another Classic



Although long delayed, *Half-Life 2* proves to be yet another classic for Valve. The game is universally praised as a triumph of both technology (it used the company's new Source engine) and artistry.

The Big Prize

Half-Life 2's excellence is recognized by the industry when the title wins Game of the Year at the annual Academy of Interactive Arts and Sciences awards.

Digital Innovation

Valve begins its new program of episodic content with the *Half-Life 2* Episode One, which is distributed digitally through the company's powerful Steam download service. In the same year, publishers Activision and 2K Games also sign on to distribute games digitally through Steam.

GABENEWELL

FOUNDER/MANAGING DIRECTOR, VALVE SOFTWARE

>> Since co-founding Valve Software in 1996, Gabe Newell has guided the company to become among the most highly regarded development houses in history. Most known for its stellar *Half-Life* franchise, the company has also pioneered on the technology side with its Source engine and Steam download service. We recently spoke with Newell on a number of topics, including the future of *Half-Life*, Source, and Windows Vista. <<

How would you characterize your role at Valve now? Are you still hands-on with projects or more managerial?

I'm hands-on when people need me to be. We have a fair amount of projects going on. The way we work is that we pull people in as needed on certain things. So, for example, on *Team Fortress 2*, they're in pretty good shape and it's fairly rare that they need my input. Whereas on *Portal*, I tend to have more input and participate more in the design decisions.

Valve has been praised for your ability to deliver a really compelling story. Why do you think that story is important?

I think that interactive entertainment is going to be a superior storytelling medium in the future. [Just] look at things like basic psychological research as to

been doing a lot of periodic improvements to the engine, like adding high dynamic range lighting. Is that the plan going forward, or are you working on a brand new, Source 2.0 engine?

Right now, the continual improvement approach seems to be much faster. The complexity of delivering functionality to customers increases enormously the more things you try to do at the same time. If you're trying to do four things, it's a lot more complex than just being four times more work — because you have the interactions of those things slowing you down. So, our view is that these monolithic, multi-year engine projects are actually very expensive ways of getting things done. We're going to be able to get a lot more done more quickly through this incremental approach.

game developers. Now, John and Steve would have ended up at DigiPen. Some of these projects and people are impressive.... We're providing Source code to these programs. We do guest lectures. We send out Valve employees to teach a class. I work with some of the programs, like the one at SMU

In a 2005 interview with CGW you expressed concerns about Windows Vista. You said, "I can't point to a single feature that solves problems for us. At all." Now that Vista is closer on the horizon, have you changed your view?

Well, I installed Vista in my personal machine and it didn't support SLI and it didn't support the 8800 [graphics card] and it was less stable than Windows XP. So, I'm pretty lukewarm on Vista.

I think that interactive entertainment is going to be a superior storytelling medium in the future.

why people prefer to be active rather than passive participants in a wide variety of experiences. One of the things that [Turtle Rock/Valve title] *Left 4 Dead* has is procedural pacing. The rate at which you are doing things is monitored by the AI so there are peaks and valleys. We're trying to move out of the strictly authored narrative techniques to more procedural approaches. It'll be interesting to see how far we can push that.

You've been innovating in the field of episodic content with the *Half-Life* Episodes. How happy have you been with the sales and reception so far?

Yes, it's been successful so far. Some things have gone very well in terms of being able to continually move the technology forward. But even with the smaller scale of the projects, we're still having to slip [release dates] to maintain the quality. So, some things are working as well as we'd hoped and with other things we're still scratching our heads. We want to go through at least three Episodes then reflect back and say, "Was this a better way of doing this or not?"

Has work begun on *Half-Life 3*?

I don't know what *Half-Life 3* would be. We're going to finish these first three episodes and then figure out what we're going to do next.

With regards to the Source engine, you've

Steam has gained a lot of momentum with the deals you signed with 2K Games and Activision. Do you envision Valve as the center of a huge digital distribution network in the future?

We try to focus on what makes life better for consumers and what makes life better for other developers instead of trying to position ourselves as some end-all, be-all digital distribution platform. One of the things we're about to release is peer-to-peer support, so you can take advantage of P2P functions within Steam to provide more robust distribution technologies for end users and mod makers. It will be part of our mod rollout strategy; so mod makers can take advantage of it. It won't be something where you can pirate a bunch of music and movies and put them up there. On the other hand, if you're a music or video creator, you can use it to get you an incredibly powerful distribution system where you control the authoring.

Portal is a unique project in that it was an experimental student project that you guys have picked up. Do you see this new crop of video game schools and university programs as the real frontier of development?

I think that a lot of the energy of the mod community was because people didn't have schools to go to. Back when John Guthrie and Steve Bond were doing *Quake Command* in 1995, there weren't any academic vehicles for them to become

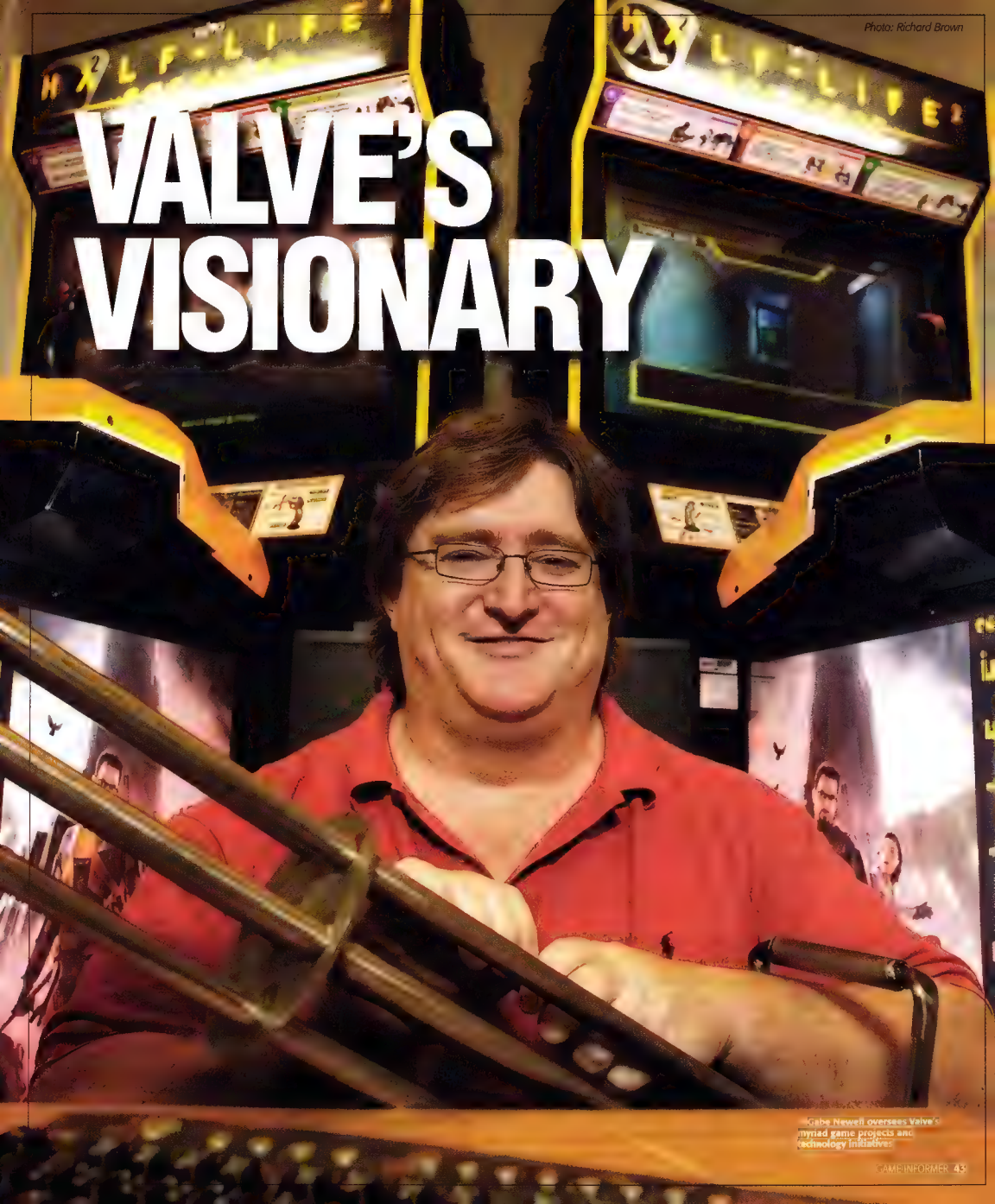
What about the PS3?

The PS3 is a total disaster on so many levels. I think it's really clear that Sony lost track of what customers wanted and what developers wanted. I'd say, even at this late date, they should just cancel it and do a "do over." Just say, "This was a horrible disaster and we're sorry and we're going to stop selling this and stop trying to convince people to develop for it." The happy story is the Wii. I'm bettering that by Christmas of next year, the Wii has a larger installed base than the 360. Other people think I'm crazy. I really like everything that Nintendo is doing.

What's your opinion of the Xbox 360?

Microsoft has so many problems with Vista; I wish they were focusing more on the thing that runs on hundreds of millions of PCs rather than six million proprietary clients. Vista really shows a lack of focus on making a better consumer platform. I came out of the Windows group, and right now, I'd go with a Macintosh as being a better solution for most consumers than a Vista-based PC. It's shocking to me. If you're an XP user, you're going to be more comfortable upgrading to an Apple than Vista. Vista is going to drive you crazy in terms of some of their user interface decisions. Other than gaming, which is Apple's Achilles heel, almost everything else works better on a Mac. As somebody who used to live and die to make Windows successful, that's super sad to me.

VALVE'S VISIONARY



Gabe Newell oversees Valve's myriad game projects and technology initiatives.

GATEWAY FX530XT



Manufacturer: Gateway
Website: www.gateway.com
List Price: \$3,999.99 (PC)
 \$679.99 (monitor)

SPECS

- Processor: Intel Core 2 Extreme QX6700 (quad core) (2.66GHz, 4MB L2 cache, 1066MHz FSB)
- Chipset: Intel 975X
- Memory: 2048MB Dual Channel DDR2 SDRAM
- Hard drive: Two 150GB 10,000-rpm SATA
- Graphics: Dual ATI Radeon® X1950 XT CrossFire cards with 512MB DDR3
- Audio: Creative Sound Blaster X-Fi
- Optical: 8X DL DVD-RW

While it might be even louder than an Xbox 360, the Gateway FX530XT has the firepower of a top-of-the-line Alienware machine for about \$2,000 less. Armed with a quad core processor and a dual card ATI Radeon graphics array, this beast is ready for Windows Vista (though you would have to upgrade the graphics cards to take advantage of Direct X 10) and any power-sucking game you can throw at it. The accompanying monitor is equally elite, with a 24" widescreen HD display and a 6ms response time perfect for explosion-heavy fragfests. Since it's paired with an HD monitor, it's strange that Gateway didn't include an HD-DVD or Blu-Ray drive. But if gaming is what you're after, the FX530XT won't disappoint. This sucker is hotter than your girlfriend in a leather corset.



etc.

BOOK OF COOL

Manufacturer: Ocelot Productions LTD

Website: www.bookofcool.com **List Price:** \$39.99

This DVD/book set includes 18 categories of things that are... well, cool. This encompasses activities like card and magic tricks, advanced soccer and Frisbee maneuvers, bar flaring, and even gun tricks. With step-by-step instructions from experts in the various fields, it endeavors to teach you how to perform these mostly-useless-yet-totally-awesome skills. Just be careful what you try at home. We're afraid to tell you what happened to Bryan when he tried to reenact some of the rope and whip tricks.



toys

WORLD OF WARCRAFT TCG: ONYXIA'S LAIR RAID DECK

Manufacturer: Upper Deck

Website: www.udc.com/wow

List Price: \$29.99

Okay, we'll admit it, we're pretty much nerds when it comes to anything WoW, so of course we had to get the new Onyxia's Lair Expansion deck. Using this pre-constructed deck, players can simulate a raid with up to five players battling against one boss deck. At least two more boss decks are in the works, and Upper Deck will be heavily supporting Onyxia's Lair with special tournaments and programs. As an added bonus, treasure cards that help boost your Heroes of Azeroth decks will also be included. Trust us — they own.

PLAYER 1:

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

PLAYER 2:

Got vaporized
by Player 1.

AT&T
blue room.

Go to attblueroom.com/gaming for the ultimate edge
in gaming. Check out the latest content, including tips, tricks, clues and codes.

of the game — and your opponent.

The new



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Your world. Delivered.

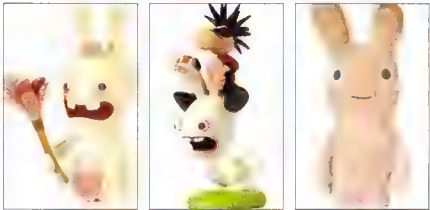


toys

RAYMAN RAVING RABBIDS FIGURES

Manufacturer: Ubisoft
Website: shop.ubi.com
List Price: \$7.99-13.99 (figures), \$19.99 (shirts)

Demented and slightly disturbing, there is just something about the Rabbids that makes us want to give them a hug. Or at least hide them under our sister's bed sheets. These vinyl and resin toys are between 8 and 11 cm tall, and should be on sale by the time you read this. You could also try some of the crazy Rabbids shirts made out of 100 percent cotton.



tech

NODUS PSP SPEAKER SYSTEM

Manufacturer: Psyclone **Website:** www.psyclonegamer.com **List Price:** \$199.99
 The PSP kind of reminds us of our little brother. Whatever the iPod can do, Sony's little portable thinks it can do too. The Nodus speaker dock for the PSP includes auxiliary input and remote volume control, you can listen to your favorite games, movies, and music up to six feet away.

pc

NEC MULTISYNC 20WVGX2 DISPLAY

Manufacturer: NEC Display
Website: www.necdisplay.com
List Price: \$649.99

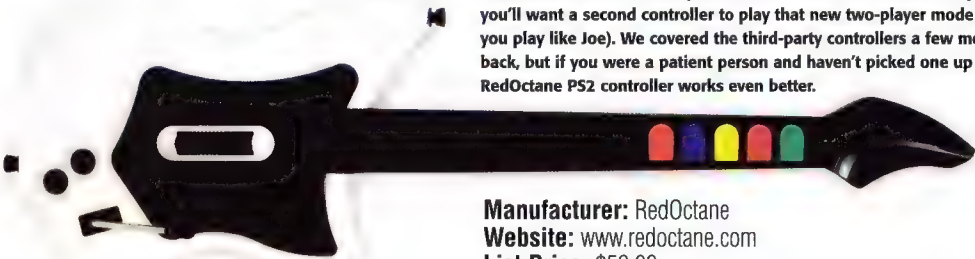
We've got another sweet monitor for you. This 20" wide-screen display has a 6ms response time. Not only does it feature A/V inputs for your home consoles, but also comes equipped with a four-port USB hub, another useful gaming feature. The 20WVGX2 also has built-in speakers, so you can save desktop space by feeding audio directly from your computer to the monitor. This baby also has a picture-in-picture feature and an integrated TV tuner, so you can watch TV while you play PS3 (or hunt one down online).



etc.

WIRELESS GUITAR HERO CONTROLLER

Guitar Hero mania has swept the nation, so trust us when we say that you'll want a second controller to play that new two-player mode (unless you play like Joe). We covered the third-party controllers a few months back, but if you were a patient person and haven't picked one up yet, this RedOctane PS2 controller works even better.



Manufacturer: RedOctane
Website: www.redoctane.com
List Price: \$59.99



SEE THE WORLD THROUGH THE EYES OF AMERICA'S MOST ELITE TWO-MAN TEAM



SOGOM U.S. NAVY SEALS FIRETEAM BRAVO 2

You've just enlisted in the most elite two-man counterterrorism unit on the planet, Fireteam Bravo. Handpick your SEAL team to form your own stealth unit to infiltrate, acquire intel and neutralize enemies in diverse conditions—anytime, anywhere. Utilize 40 new weapons to combat an even more realistic and smarter enemy. Play in single-player campaign mode, or team up for some multiplayer SEAL action on the go. The eyes of the free world are upon you. Think you have what it takes to see the world through the eyes of Fireteam Bravo?



Drug Reference
Violence

www.us.playstation.com/psp
www.seal.navy.mil
www.socomseals.com

ZIPPER
INTERACTIVE

PSP
PlayStation Move game



SOCOM: U.S. Navy SEALs Fireteam Bravo 2 ©2006 Sony Computer Entertainment America Inc. Developed by Zipper Interactive, Inc. "PlayStation," "PSP" and the "PS" Family logo are registered trademarks of Sony Computer Entertainment Inc. Memory Stick Duo™ may be required. The U.S. Navy provided technical support, but does not officially endorse this product.

A TASTE OF THE TESTING LIFE



BY NATHAN D. MCMAHON,
GAME TESTER

My video game birthday is November 22, 1985. You see, that was when I received my first video game console, the Nintendo Entertainment System. From the moment I first hit the A button and made Mario jump, I was hooked.

Here I am, 21 years older and many console generations removed from that day. My gaming dreams are coming true, for I am in Quality Assurance for a video game publisher. In layman's terms, a tester.

When I was younger, I never had a concept of video games as a job. It was a hobby that went along with comic books and baseball cards. Never in my wildest dreams did I see the opportunity of being good at games leading to a job in this burgeoning industry. Yet, here I sit in a cubicle that makes *Office Space* look, well, spacious.

Testing is often seen as an entry-level position to break into this industry. It's on the same level as a production assistant in the film industry. Testing is an often low-paid, uncertain job, where one can expect to work long hours. As their titles' development ramps up towards a final release date, most developers and publishers hire testers from temp agencies for freelance. When a project is over, the testers are the first to be let go. It's a tenuous job at best.

It's unfortunate that the industry views this position as an easily disposable one. In my high-spirited co-workers, I see a lot of hidden talent waiting to be discovered. Whether it's due to the short lifespan of a tester or the lack of upward mobility, that talent oftentimes goes undetected.

Many ideas in a game's development process are derived at the beginning of the testing phase. Initial impressions are given by testers on how the game looks, plays, and feels. Ideas at this

level are often removed from, and sometimes incorporated into, the final version of the game. These ideas come from the audience that the developer is trying to reach — gamers. It may come as a shock, but the majority of testers are, in fact, hardcore gamers. They thrive on this medium, often spending over 10 hours a day playing one game over and over, and then go home and play their own games. They keep up to date with the happenings in the industry, read and post in blogs and on message boards, subscribe to magazines, watch machinima, listen to podcasts, and immerse themselves in the culture of gaming. Suffice it to say, their understanding and love of video games is exceptional.

I have noticed that the industry is fast approaching a brick wall, where new concepts and fresh ideas are often neglected in favor of tried-and-true formulas for maximum profit with the least amount of capitol expenditure. This is reminiscent of the path the film industry was on prior to the early '90s. During that time, the surge of independent films and new methods of storytelling was like a splash of cold water in the face of cinema. It opened eyes and evoked feelings of wonder and joy in seeing something new. That splash led to a renaissance of sorts for that industry. Why can't it be the same for us?

With the exponential rate at which video game technology is developing, we are fast approaching a similar dilemma. Do we follow the lead of the past and play it safe? Or do we blaze our own trail and propel video games into their rightful place as the ultimate entertainment medium? That, I believe, is up to us, the people who help bring this media to the masses. Fortunately, we have the ability to observe the history of film and apply many of the same concepts to our own industry. We are in the process of growing, and I, for one,

Testing allows one to see that the process involved in bringing a game to fruition is a long and arduous one.

am excited by the prospects. For example, recent offerings, such as XNA Development Studio from Microsoft, confirm that revolution is an almost certainty. This will allow the creative minds outside of the mainstream to give their fresh ideas a chance and to show their wares to the world.

I've already begun to see these future offerings in their infancy, maturing in the minds of my fellow testers. Artists designing their own concepts; bloggers starting their own websites; writers scripting out their own stories; programmers coding their own games. These individuals are currently at my level, and they have the same dream that I do: to help revitalize the industry with fresh ideas and perspectives straight from the gamers themselves.

It is often questioned whether testing is a truly viable option for furthering oneself in the gaming industry, which is understandable due to the constraints of the job. From my perspective, I wouldn't have it any other way. Often, in order to get to the top, one has to start at the bottom. Testing allows one to see that the process involved in bringing a game to fruition is a long and arduous one. There are many obstacles to overcome, but the end result is a game that is released to the gaming public and that if everything is done right will stand the test of time.

So, to the future testers and industry players out there, keep on playing and remember that all it took for me was a simple press of the A Button to fill me with a sense of awe that has led me to a career path I could never have envisioned in my gaming-dazed youth. Hopefully the fresh ideas gestating in the minds of testers will inspire future generations of gamers. ■■■■

Nathan McMahon is a game tester for a major video game publisher.

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.

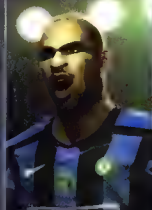
sun mon tue wed thur fri sat

february



F.E.A.R. - 02/06

04



Winning Eleven Pro Soccer 2007 - 02/06

SUPER BOWL XLII
The sporting event that every one watches for the commercials will air on CBS tonight. In addition to the half-time concert, celebrity appearances, and odes to America, there will also be football played between two teams no one cares about.

06

NEW RELEASES
• Bust-A-Move: Bash - Wii
• Capcom Puzzle World - PSP
• Diddy Kong Racing - DS
• F.E.A.R. - PS2
• Final Fantasy III Advance - GBA
• Ghost Rider - PS2, PSP
• The Godfather - PS3
• Maelstrom - PC
• Rocky Balboa - PSP
• Singstar - PS2
• Winning Eleven Pro Soccer 2007 - 360, PS2, PSP, DS

07

LOST RETURNS
The greatest mystery on television returns, and begins a run of 16 straight weeks! What will happen in this time? We predict that Sawyer will fall in love with a polar bear and Locke will build a resort for the Harlem Globetrotters. Trust us on this one.

09



Wanna watch people get eaten... again? The fourth Hannibal Lecter film, *Hannibal Rising*, graces the silver screen today. We recommend loudly eating hotdogs while you watch this movie. Oh, and out lots of ketchup on them. And be sure and bring a date - preferably someone that doesn't know you very well.

Virtua Fighter 5 - 2/13



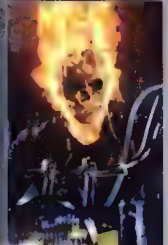
13

NEW RELEASES
• Blades of Glory - Xbox 360
• War - PS2
• The Fast and the Furious - PSP
• Fatal Inertia - PSP
• Gungrave - PSP
• Lunar Knights - DS
• Test Drive Unlimited - PS2, PSP

14

SHAZAM: THE MONSTER SOCIETY OF EVIL
It seems like we've been waiting eons for this comic to hit store shelves. What's so special about a Shazam comic you ask? It's written and drawn by Jeff Smith, the creator of the amazing comic series Bone. If you haven't read Bone yet, well... consider yourself a very unfortunate nerd.

16



Nicolas Cage's career-ending film, *Ghost Rider*, turns into a mess in this sequel. Netflix abuses today. And here we thought we would enjoy seeing Cage's skull ablate.

NBA Street Vol. 4: Homecourt - 2/20



20

NEW RELEASES
• Dungeons & Dragons: Tactics - PSP
• Fusion: Treach 2 - 360
• NBA Street Vol. 4: Homecourt - PS3, 360
• Steel Horizon - PSP, DS
• Supreme Commander - PC
• UFO Extraterrestrials - PC
• Virtua Fighter 5 - PS3

21

DARK TOWER: THE GUNSLINGER BORN
Steven King's long-running series of novels is finally being adapted into illustrated form. King is overseeing the production of this comic series, but he won't be writing it. Robin Furth (author of Dark Tower: A Concordance) is handling the adaptation, and Peter David is pounding out the script.

DARK TOWER



Ratchet & Clank: Size Matters - 02/27



Bullet Witch - 2/27

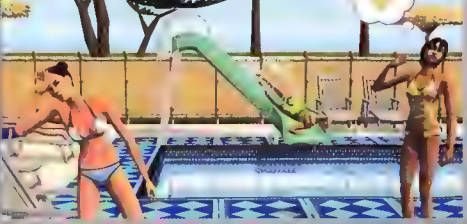


27-28

NEW RELEASES
• Bullet Witch - 360
• Dance Dance Revolution Universe - 360
• Gods & Heroes: Rome Rising - PC
• Hot PA! - PSP
• Luminous Plus - PS2
• Marvel Trading Card Game - PSP, DS
• Meteos: Disney Magic - DS
• MLB 07: The Show - PS2, PSP

• Ratchet & Clank: Size Matters - PSP
• The Sims 2: Seasons - PC

The Sims 2





BLUE DRAGON

The majority of role-playing games have long and respected histories. Encompassing storied names like Final Fantasy and Dragon Quest, the genre is populated by many franchises with 8-bit roots and longevity that has been proven through years of blockbuster releases. In a gaming category where many consumers already know what they like and are hesitant to stray, there is an entry barrier that makes it difficult for a new property to establish itself as a heavy hitter. Though the task seems daunting, it isn't impossible; the right concept combined with the right creative team can break through. Ever since its initial announcement, many gamers have viewed Blue Dragon as a title with that potential.

Blue Dragon is a result of the collaboration between three of the most respected names in gaming: Hironobu Sakaguchi, creator of Final Fantasy; Akira Toriyama, famed artist behind Dragon Quest and Dragon Ball Z; and Nobuo Uematsu, composer for Final Fantasy. The last time these three luminaries worked together, the gaming world was treated to the revered Super Nintendo RPG, Chrono Trigger. If only for that reason, expectations for Blue Dragon were high. Now that the game has seen its Japanese retail release, we spent hours of extensive hands-on time with it and we have the full report on the story, battle system, and all of the other elements RPG fanatics can look forward to in this beautiful next-gen adventure.

OUT OF THE SHADOWS
A 1-PLAYER ROLE-PLAYING GAME
PUBLISHER MICROSOFT GAME STUDIOS
DEVELOPER MISTWALKER/ARTOON
RELEASE SUMMER



OUT OF THE SHADOWS

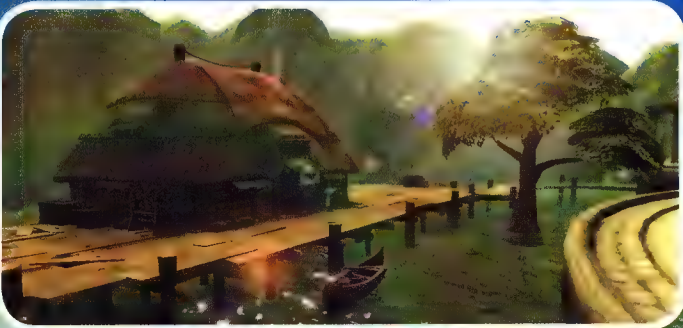
The Tale Unfolds

Like many classic stories, the saga of Blue Dragon starts small, then grows in scope as players learn more about the world around them. The story begins as a dark purple cloud descends over the rural village of Tata. It appears to be a storm, but when a giant rock formation shaped like a shark fin surfaces from the sand, it is clear that a more sinister force is at work.

This is not an unusual occurrence. Everyone in Tata is familiar with the menace of the violet clouds, as they have fallen on the village once each year for the past 10 years. The clouds come, then the beast, then the devastation that always claims the lives of a handful of villagers.

As Blue Dragon begins, the village faces this calamity under the sand yet again. A 16-year-old orphan named Shu, along with his friends Jiro and Kluke, launch an attack on the fin only to discover that it is actually not a monster at all – it is a mechanical craft. After sustaining a little damage, the vehicle carries the kids skyward toward the mothership amidst the swirling clouds.

Once aboard the central vessel, Shu and company are faced with constant attacks from robotic guardians until they discover three glowing blue orbs. Cornered, out-matched, and out of options, the children



“It’s a much bigger scale than games like Gears of War – not to be taken lightly – just because of the nature of an RPG.”

– Hees Kyung

Global Product Manager, Blue Dragon



The Major Players



Kluke

Views joining Shu and Jiro as a way to prevent suffering around the world. Kluke has a good heart, and behaves like an adult despite her young age.

Shu

Plucky, daring, and willing to run headfirst into just about any situation. These qualities often apply to RPG protagonists, but in Shu they are endearing without being insulting.

General Szabo

A mechanical warrior that terrorizes the world alongside Nene. An imperious and formidable figure, anyone wishing to get to Nene has to go through Szabo first.



Marumaro

This little guy shouts and dances a lot, providing some comic relief at key moments. Marumaro is a member of the Devi tribe – tiny humanoid that wear funny hats.





see no way to escape. Then they hear a disembodied voice explain that they must ingest the glowing orbs and utilize their power. The kids take the advice, and their shadows grow into powerful animalistic forms, which then proceed to smash any oncoming attacker... with one exception.

In their search for a way off the craft, the children encounter Nene, a seemingly frail old man who completely overpowers them with a massive purple shadow beast of his own. Shu, Jiro, and Kluge flee, find an escape shuttle, and crash back to the earth far away from home. At this point, Blue Dragon's true story begins. The three young adventurers explore the world making new friends, searching for answers about Nene, and trying to undo damage he has done along the way.

The quest is a massive undertaking, so players shouldn't expect to finish it quickly. In fact, Blue Dragon's full narrative spans three discs – something many gamers thought would be phased out with next-gen gaming. The title's global product manager, Hees Kyung, explains why Blue Dragon needs to be spread across multiple discs: "We're dealing with 40 to 60 hours of gameplay, a lot of text and cinematics, and the sheer size of the story," he tells us. "The world that we're dealing with is huge. It's a much bigger scale than games like Gears of War – not to be taken lightly – just because of the nature of an RPG."

Whether this means we can expect all high-profile RPGs on the 360 to have similar requirements



Jiro

An intelligent young man focused on details who has a gift for planning. This is excellent when his plans work, but he tends to get depressed when they don't.

Zola

A calm and collected mercenary, Zola is cool and distant. She is helpful, and uses her knowledge to assist Shu, but also remains somewhat detached.

Nene

An old man who flies around the world causing destruction and despair in a ship surrounded by purple clouds. Like Shu, Nene wields a dragon shadow, but his power is far beyond anything Shu's is capable of.

Deathroy

This creature appears to find great joy in his master's malevolence. He sits dutifully on Nene's shoulder, attached by a little rope.

is uncertain, but even a simple glance at Blue Dragon's visuals should be enough to make any gamer believe that none of the space on the discs is wasted.

Art of the Dragon

An average, non-RPG gamer might gaze at Blue Dragon's visuals and say they just "look Japanese." This is due, in part, to the fact that the distinctive style of the game's artist, Akira Toriyama, has had an enormous impact on how Japanese animation is perceived in North America. His work, particularly with Dragon Ball Z, has become so widespread that many just associate it with anime-style visuals in general.

Many of Mr. Toriyama's previous character designs have made the jump to video games in a cel-shaded or 2D rendition. Blue Dragon marks the first time his unmistakable creations have made the transition to full 3D. "This is the first time Mr. Toriyama has taken a very positive role in shaping how 3D versions of his characters are placed in a game," Kyung informs us. "He offered feedback and critique in the process, and we're very proud to have him bring that realism into high-definition."

This attention to detail is immediately apparent in the first few minutes of gameplay. The vibrant colors and expressive faces on the in-game character models are better than many CG cinematics found in last-gen RPGs. The 3D characters are so well-executed that they look like living figurines running through the world. The environments are just as impressive — done in a more realistic style, the less cartoon-like surroundings contrast with the characters, but complement them at the same time. "In traditional games that use Mr. Toriyama's work, it's anime content on an anime landscape," comments Kyung. "We have photorealistic areas that carry Mr. Toriyama's style, and that combination can create a very powerful effect."

The impact of the visuals is only heightened by the game's high-def support. Designed for 1080i, Blue Dragon will use an upscaling chip in the 360 allowing it to be viewed in 1080p. The game undoubtedly looks amazing in HD, but we also tested it on a standard definition TV, and it still stands out as one of the best-looking RPGs to date; these are the kinds of visuals that gamers have dreamed RPGs would be capable of displaying.

Playing the Field

One of the holdovers from older RPGs that developers are still trying to maneuver around is the convention of random encounters. Many gamers believe it is jarring to be wandering through an area only to be unexpectedly thrust into battle. One popular alternative is to make enemies visible prior to battle, allowing players to predict and initiate combat. Blue Dragon takes this concept and elevates it to the next level, giving the player an unprecedented number of options to affect the outcome of combat before it even begins.

In many RPGs, to begin a fight, the player is simply required to steer their onscreen character into an enemy. While that approach works in Blue Dragon, it will start a battle with the least favorable conditions, since your foe will have an advantage in the action queue. On the other hand, if you press X

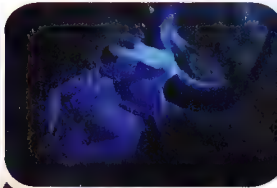
while facing a monster in the field, combat will start on your terms (i.e. Shu and friends will act sooner in the queue). This strategy will work for much of the game, but there are areas where players will need to utilize an even more dynamic approach to enemy encounters.

At any time in the field, pressing the R trigger pauses the action and brings up a ring that encompasses the player and any nearby monsters. Enemies



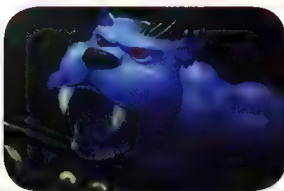
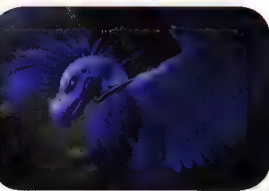
within range are listed on a vertical menu on the right side of the screen. From this point, it is possible to select one foe, choose an attack, and battle will begin as usual. However, players can also choose to select any and all enemies within range and initiate a series of linked encounters that proceed without ever leaving the battle screen.

This doesn't mean that all of the foes are encountered simultaneously. If there are three scorpions nearby, and you highlight all three before attacking, you will face three discrete groups of enemies with no breaks in between. This may only appear to be a timesaver at first, but there is another advantage. In between each section, your characters will gain one "trance" effect for the upcoming fights, including buffs like increased power,





As you can tell from the characters' max HP, the first encounter with Nene occurs early in the game.



defense, or accuracy. While not necessary for average throwaway fights, later in the game players will encounter difficult enemies that become more manageable if players initiate a linked encounter. By plowing through some easy foes, it is possible to accumulate several bonuses before the main event.

Another interesting side effect of linked encounters is that sometimes they can result in the monsters killing each other off. Some areas have monsters with basic predator/prey relationships. If you start a linked encounter with two conflicting species, they will lay into each other and

ignore your party altogether. At one point we began a fight with some giant crickets and warrior lizards, then watched as the lizards devoured all of the crickets, which gave us the opportunity to strike while they were distracted.

There are other ways players can tip the scales in their favor before combat starts. Skills in

certain categories can only be used on the field, and at the cost of MP, you can activate them for a variety of effects. Some of these will stun or slow enemies, and others let you avoid fighting entirely. One particularly cool skill lets you automatically defeat an enemy and gain precious Shadow Points (SP), providing the enemy is weaker than you. Later in the game when you want to revisit old areas, this skill is a useful way to gain extra SP and build up your shadows.

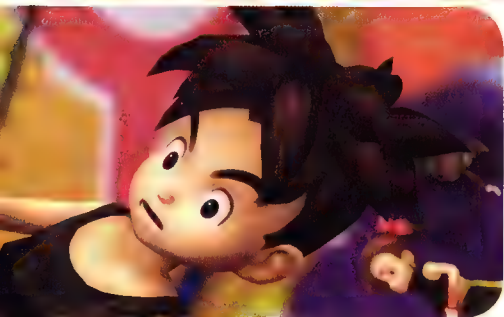
Whether you're using field mechanics to avoid combat or give yourself an edge, Blue Dragon does an admirable job of conveying a sense of control over the characters' surroundings. Going from town to town is no longer a simple exercise in moving from point A to B with fights along the way; it provides avenues for influencing battles that are almost as compelling as the fights themselves.



Growing Numbers

Since Blue Dragon was first announced, gamers recognized its potential to help the Xbox 360 gain ground in Japan. Now that the game is out in the region, we're starting to get a clearer picture of how it is living up to those expectations. Released on December 7, 2006, over 80,000 copies were sold in about a week, which makes it the fastest-selling Xbox 360 game in the country (closely followed by Dead or Alive 4). Approximately 30,000 of those copies were included with the Xbox 360 system in a bundle, suggesting that Blue Dragon has what it takes to sell systems to Japanese consumers. It may not be putting up numbers as high as the PS3 or Wii yet, but this momentum is definitely a good sign for the 360's future.

■ Nene's dragon, in addition to being a different color, is much stronger than those players possess



The Adventure Continues

During the localization process, exclusive content is sometimes added to the U.S. release. That isn't happening with Blue Dragon, but gamers can look forward to another way to get extended replay out of the game: downloadable content. While no one at Microsoft is talking specifics about what the content will entail, you can count on more than simple cosmetic changes like alternate costumes. Global product manager Hees Kyung promises the additions will have "a significant impact on post-release Blue Dragon around the world." As to whether this will include new dungeons and extra-hard bosses, we'll just have to wait and see.

The Good Fight

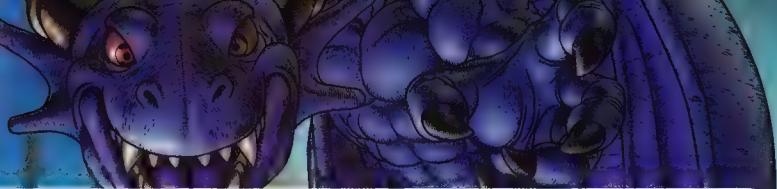
Considering that Blue Dragon is one of the games expected to define RPGs in the next generation of gaming, we were eager to see how it would handle the evolution of combat systems. At first glance, gamers may be surprised that nothing about the battle mechanics overtly pushes any previous boundaries; there isn't much in the way of drastic deviation or totally unique concepts. Even though that may sound like a shortcoming, it is actually a great asset to Blue Dragon; the real strength of the battle system is in the way it draws from the entire history of the RPG genre, incorporating and refining time-tested ideas with a fresh spin.

Blue Dragon uses a turn-based system in which players can take their time to select actions from a menu. On top of the screen is a queue showing who acts when, while the bottom has your characters' HP and MP. This set-up may sound familiar, but the way battles play out isn't quite like anything you've seen before.

Because of the huge variety in skills available, there are innumerable variations on the simple "select attack,

watch damage" formula. For instance, you can choose to charge most magic spells before casting them. Depending on how long you charge, the caster might fall back several slots in the action queue (clearly indicated by an on-screen menu). However, once the spell is finally unleashed, it will have gained considerable power. This mechanic is surprisingly effective in drawing players into the battle. We were weighing the costs and benefits of charging practically every time a spell was cast — sometimes taking risks, other times playing it safe. For the Monk class, this same decision needs to be made every time you perform a regular physical attack.

Players will also need to consider the placement of the characters on the battlefield. There are front and back rows, but choosing who goes where involves more than just putting your casters in the back. It is important to take into account a character's current skill category, plus any abilities learned along the way. The Support Magic category, despite being spell-based, has decent all-around defense, which could make it a good candidate for the front row — especially if the character has skills from the Assassin or Sword Master class. But if that character



only has a black magic background, the back will provide better protection.

At first you only need to manage the skills and actions of the three youths from Tata, but your party eventually grows to include five characters (Shu, Jiro, Kluge, Marumaro, and Zola). All five characters fight simultaneously in battle, which allows players to advance everyone's skills and levels at a comparable pace instead of prioritizing certain members over others.

It is impossible to deny that Blue Dragon's key combat elements are things that have appeared before. Gamers have been casting spells and using potions for years, but what impressed us most about the battles in Blue Dragon

is how so many effective concepts have been consolidated and honed into a cohesive and addictive system that got its hooks in us right away.

Job Search

Anyone familiar with Final Fantasy V will instantly recognize the core ideas behind Blue Dragon's job system. Don't let the initial familiarity fool you, though. Learning its intricacies quickly becomes an involved pursuit with a long list of payoffs.

The five playable characters' shadows can be assigned one of nine possible jobs, and they learn new abilities as they gain ranks. The shadows' ranks increase independently

of the characters' levels through the collection of SP. At set ranks, new skills will be unlocked for that job. If Shu's dragon advances in the Monk class, it may gain the ability to randomly counterattack when damaged. If Kluge's phoenix sticks with black magic, it learns how to blast a jet of fire from its mouth.

Once a skill is learned, the shadow will have access to it for the rest of the game. The only restriction is that shadows can only have a small number of skills equipped and active at any time. In other words, it won't be possible to just keep stacking new abilities until you are an unstoppable amalgamation of all possible attacks. Part of the challenge of Blue Dragon is deciding which abilities take precedence over

Classified

Here are brief descriptions of all nine jobs available to Shu and his companions. Not all of them will be available to everyone at the outset, but as players advance in levels, new categories will be unlocked.

Sword Master

This is a decent all-purpose attack category that can use MP to charge attacks with a variety of elemental attributes. Because of this reliance on magic, it gains MP relatively quickly as it advances.

Black Magic

Black magic users will gain the most MP, which they expend by casting offensive spells. Some of the spells have large MP requirements, which the class offsets by teaching a skill to increase max MP.

White Magic

White magic includes healing spells and spells that cure abnormal status effects like poison and paralysis. It also has a small selection of holy attack spells that work well on undead foes.

Support Magic

A class that specializes in helping allies and hindering enemies. The spells in this category have a variety of effects, like lowering a monster's speed or raising the defense of a party member. Of course, none of these alterations are permanent.

Barrier Master

This category focuses on reducing damage through the use of barriers. It also has a useful field skill, Barrier III, that allows you to move through areas quickly because it can disable enemy encounters altogether.

Assassin

A class with high attack power, but low defense. It does have high agility, so users move quickly, and it even teaches some non-offensive skills (like steal) that come in handy.

Monk

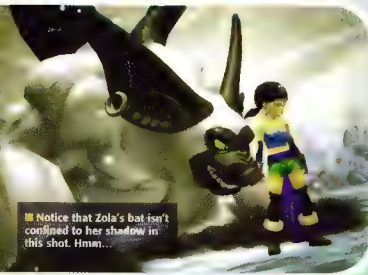
This category has the highest potential attack power, due mainly to users' ability to charge attacks for extra damage. However, Monks are not skilled with magic, which can limit their utility.

Guardian

It doesn't do anything flashy, but the Guardian is a reliable class. It has a high defense, as well as special defensive skills, that let users take a few extra hits. It also gains more HP than any other class.

Jack-of-all-Trades

This category is less focused on specialized skills and more about letting players utilize skills they've already learned. It gains extra skill space, plus new equipment slots, so you can make the most of what you know.



■ Notice that Zola's bat isn't confined to her shadow in this shot. Hman...



■ Many of the monsters are a mixture of fantasy and high technology

"I believe in the 'enjoyment' or 'fun' that transcends age and nationality"

- Hironobu Sakaguchi

Achieve This

Because of the structure and length of the average RPG, it may be tempting for developers to use the 360 Achievements simply as story benchmarks. Mistwalker and Artoon have avoided this pitfall with Blue Dragon, placing the focus on effective use of the game's mechanics instead. You earn Achievements by setting groups of monsters against each other, pulling off back attacks, and maxing out a skill category. Those will probably happen during the course of a normal game, but you can also boost your Gamerscore through more hardcore endeavors like defeating legendary monsters, getting all characters to level 99, and amassing 1,000,000 gold.

others, and equipping characters with the ideal set of powers for a given area.

Players' allotted space for skills includes more than just battle actions; it also applies to passive abilities like counter attacks and field skills like invisibility. With so many options, there is definitely a strategic element to choosing how to customize your characters. The strategy becomes even deeper when you consider that any time players aren't in battle, they will be able to change any of the shadows' jobs. If you feel Marumaro has gone far enough with the Monk class, you can switch it up and have him start learning Assassin skills. In this

scenario, Marumaro still retains all of the Monk abilities he knows, so you would be able to integrate them with Assassin talents.

Early in the game it seems wiser to have each character specialize in one class. Once your party fills out with all five members, however, it feels as though you have more room to experiment and test the capabilities of each job. The true fun of this system really begins to sink in once you have several characters who have spent time in a handful of job classes, since only then do you begin to see the seemingly limitless options in front of you.

Hironobu Sakaguchi

Game Informer interviews the legendary developer about his latest creation

Can you tell us a little about how the Blue Dragon project began? How did you organize another partnership with Mr. Toriyama and Mr. Uematsu?

After two-and-a-half years of repose following my retirement from Square (now Square-Enix), I had nothing in my hands and only a few staff members. When I thought about what I would like to create myself, Toriyama-san immediately came to my mind. I thought about how I could work together with Toriyama-san again. I worked with him on Chrono Trigger and I am just a huge fan of his. Right after that, I created a plot about a shadow being turned into the shape of a monster, and I talked to Toriyama-san and had him approve it. In regards to Uematsu-san, I could not think of anybody besides him to work with. The two of us worked on Final Fantasy for 20 years. The melodies he creates are very important to me. Uematsu-san also left Square and set up

his own company, so Blue Dragon became the first title after both he and I went independent.

What inspirations did you draw from when designing the scenario?

I turned down all of my original plot because I wanted to incorporate the ideas given by Toriyama-san and to improve the quality of the story. Some of the concept art that was completed for my first plot became a source of great inspiration. The plot, more specifically, is that the planet was reconstructed by ancient people and some strange objects, such as watery cubes that appear in the world of Blue Dragon.

Because of Chrono Trigger's status as a classic, you, Mr. Toriyama, and Mr. Uematsu are viewed as a video game "dream team." Does that perception add any pressure?

There was no pressure. You can't create a good piece of work if you are feeling tense in the shoulders. I focused on being spontaneous and pushing myself to do my best. And I think it panned out.

Are there any major differences in the way you approach making an original property like Blue Dragon versus an established franchise like Final Fantasy?

Being able to put thought into a brand new worldview and characters – that level of freedom is huge. Also, there were some challenges associated with working with new project members, but because of working with programmers with new and different skills, we were able to finish off some areas of the game at a quality higher than I expected.

Blue Dragon is seen as Microsoft's trump card in Japan, and initial sales figures seem to be very positive. Did

Moving Overseas

It may drive North American gamers crazy to know that there are people in the world already enjoying Blue Dragon, but the good news is that it won't be too long before the English version hits our shores. Localizing for a new region involves far more than just translating the language, but gamers can rest assured that no changes will occur to Blue Dragon that will alter its overall aesthetic or charm. "We would like the creators' and developers' vision to be fully enjoyed by gamers everywhere," Kyung tells us. "We want their vision to be

conveyed throughout the world." Apart from the translation, the only major differences can be attributed to the need for an English voice cast. For instance, during the course of the game there are a couple of songs sung by Kluge herself, so those will be changed so the new voice talent can sing them – and so U.S. gamers can actually understand the lyrics.

Microsoft isn't just switching music around to cater to what is popular in a certain region, though. The over-the-top song "Eternity," which plays during many major boss encounters, will still be there in full sword metal glory. This track – which was written by Mr. Sakaguchi,

composed by Mr. Uematsu, and sung by Deep Purple's Ian Gillan – is often humorously at odds with the epic dashes it accompanies. Even so, the music is a part of the Blue Dragon experience, and this juxtaposition actually adds a lighthearted element to otherwise tense fights.

There is a faithful contingent of hardcore RPG fans that believe any changes, no matter how small, diminish the intended impact of a title. Gamers cut from that cloth will be happy to learn that Blue Dragon will feature an option to use the subtitled Japanese voice track instead of the English recording. This kind of content may seem pointless to some, but the decision to include it demonstrates Microsoft's commitment to making this title accessible to the widest possible range of gamers.

"The overall strategy for Blue Dragon is to broaden the Xbox 360 portfolio and ownership," Kyung reveals. In addition to appealing to the hardcore set, he says the game will "contribute to growth and expansion by reaching out to a younger audience and more casual audience."

Words like "younger" and "casual" probably aren't what diehard RPG fans wanted to hear, but in our experience with Blue Dragon, the game certainly didn't appeal to those demographics exclusively. While accessible to many gamers, care seems to have been taken not to exclude anyone based on age or nationality. "The RPG elements in Blue Dragon transcend national boundaries," Kyung states. "It was created with the intention of having Asian gamers enjoy it, but we're hoping that combining the developer talent and creative vision of Blue Dragon will appeal to gamers of all ages around the world."

After our hands-on time with the game, we have no doubt that Blue Dragon will be able to attain the broad attraction its creators are aiming for. It offers an accessible simplicity that branches out into all of the depth and complexity an RPG fan could hope for. We've already got a head start on diving into this amazing world, but we can't wait for this summer to become immersed in it completely. ■■■

FIGHT ORDER



■ When this message appears, enemies will attack each other until one species is wiped out. You can use that time to attack without fear of retaliation.

Monster's Fight!

CHAR	JIRO	SHU	KOIKE	MARUMARU
HP 147 MP 58	HP 106 MP 130	HP 123 MP 79	HP 82 MP 136	HP 144 MP 45

you approach the game with a Japanese audience in mind?

As was the case with Final Fantasy, I am less concerned with target audience when creating games. I believe in the "enjoyment" or "fun" that transcends age and nationality, and I just thought about sticking to the direction that was very clear in my mind.

"Stealth," and also the ability to fight with multiple monsters all at once. The game offers many ways of playing when you encounter with the enemies.

Was it a conscious decision to consolidate and fine-tune many proven concepts into one experience?

I thought about incorporating new

Since many recent RPGs have been making a move toward real-time combat, was it difficult to arrive at the decision to use a turn-based system?

I had no desire to be swayed by a fad. Conversely, if there are less turn-based games now, then the project may have scarcity value.

interactive high-definition footage and imagery. Rich animation and staging that are appropriate to the high-resolution movies will also evolve. This will allow people to add personality to the characters and the world at a detailed level, and it adds to the enjoyment of a virtual world that makes the gamers think "I want to stay in that world."

Do you see Blue Dragon as a game with potential to develop into a franchise, or would you rather have Mistwalker continue to work on stand-alone, original projects?

The franchise will go into anime, cartoon series and card games. It may develop into a new and different game, and that's also desirable. Of course, I'm thinking about a sequel as well. Moreover, I consider creating original projects and new things to be very important, so I'm thinking about various projects that follow "Ash," "Lost Odyssey," and "Cry On."

"There was no pressure. You can't create a good piece of work if you are feeling tense in the shoulders."

As a long-standing creator of role-playing games, what are the most important ways Blue Dragon distinguishes itself from your previous work? The fact that monsters roam and prowl in the field. I gave variety to this area, especially with respect to subtle jockeying, using skills such as "Barrier Master" and

elements like Field Encounter into a polished-up and refined version of the grand sum from what we did with Final Fantasy. And I wanted to utilize these systems, develop Toriyama's world, and create the world that is full of life, response-rich, and exciting.

Now that RPGs are moving into the next generation, what directions do you see them taking in the future? What areas have the most potential to evolve?

Wonderful footage and imagery is only to be expected. I think the more important thing is how it reacts, interacts, and evolves. It is meaningless unless it's



COMMAND & CONQUER

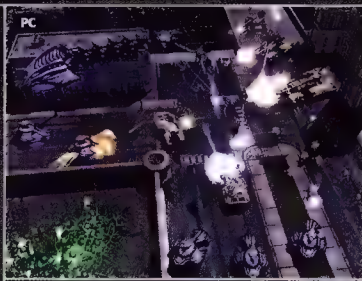
T I B E R I U M W A R S

A MAMMOTH CONFLICT

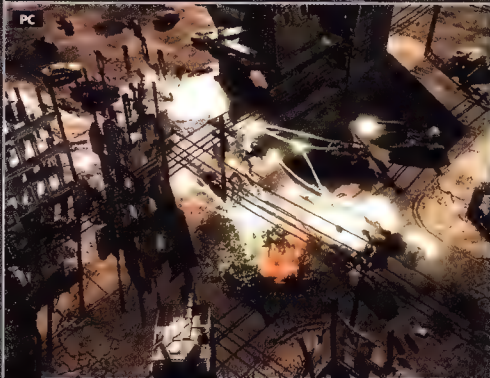
THE LAST FEW YEARS HAVE BEEN ROUGH FOR COMMAND & CONQUER FANS. SERIES CREATOR AND LEGENDARY REAL-TIME STRATEGY DEVELOPER WESTWOOD STUDIOS WAS PURCHASED BY MEGAPUBLISHER ELECTRONIC ARTS. FOLLOWING THIS, MANY FORMER WESTWOOD EMPLOYEES FLED THE SCENE TO FORM INDEPENDENT DEVELOPMENT STUDIO PETROGLYPH. OTHERS STAYED ON AT EA TO WORK

ON THE LORD OF THE RINGS: THE BATTLE FOR MIDDLE-EARTH. SOON, THOUGH, THE WAIT WILL BE OVER FOR THE C&C FAITHFUL. THE TALENTED TEAM AT EA'S LOS ANGELES STUDIO IS PUTTING THE FINISHING TOUCHES ON COMMAND & CONQUER'S TRIUMPHANT RETURN, AND ALL INDICATIONS POINT TOWARD THIS BEING THE C&C GAME THAT RTS FANS HAVE BEEN WAITING FOR.

THE SITUATION REPORT



Speaking with C&C 3's executive producer (and EALA vice president) Mike Verdu and senior producer on the 360 version Mike Glosecki, it's impossible not to get hyped up for Tiberium Wars. It's clear that these guys and their teams (Verdu previously worked on C&C Generals and led the BFME team; Glosecki oversaw the 360 version of BFME II among many other titles) have a deep-seated love for the RTS genre, and we can't think of any hands that we'd rather see this venerable series in.



C&C 3's bread and butter is exactly what you'd expect: fast and furious traditional RTS action, complete with a familiar style of teching up and resource gathering. The team at EALA is aiming to hit the perfect mix between building your own army and blowing up your opponent's. "There are not-so many units on your screen that you can't be telling individual units to do interesting things. I know that in some games there's just so much stuff on the screen that it's really more about how you build the army that you put into combat rather than controlling the army in combat," states Verdu. "The focus is not on resource production and economy management; it really is about getting the right mix of forces out into combat and then fighting those battles." Glosecki adds, "For me, the game really is about being fast and fluid. There is the traditional resource management, but to me it's really about how quickly you can get in and demolish

your opponent without spending hours and hours just figuring out how to build your base."

That's not to say that Tiberium Wars doesn't have any new ideas to bring to the table. The three factions [see sidebar on page 62] all have remarkably different playstyles, which hopefully will open up strategies like in Starcraft. The story is both classic and fresh, advancing the timeline of the popular Tiberium universe and if it turns out to be as cool as EALA insists that it is, it'll be a clear step up from most RTS titles. "I miss the great stories," laments Verdu. "I think some of the great games in our genre had this magic mix between the strategy gameplay and the story that makes the whole much greater than the sum of its parts. I feel it's been missed, and we're working very hard to bring it back."

Indeed, the 30-plus missions of C&C 3's single-player campaign promise to deliver the kind of experience that made us fall in love with the franchise years ago. The classic full-motion video is being taken to the next level, with real-life reporters doing news spots on the Tiberium threat, the disintegration of order around the world, and the original Kane actor's return. If all goes according to EALA's plan, C&C 3 will seamlessly blend plenty of fan service into its next-gen RTS gameplay.

CONSOLE WARS

EALA has made significant advances in the science of bringing RTS to console. Loading times are dramatically shorter, the gameplay is reportedly much smoother and stutter-free, and the in-game menu navigation has been streamlined. On the gameplay side, the Xbox 360 and PC versions of C&C 3 will feature identical single-player campaigns. However, based on player feedback, different online modes will be available for each platform; the 360 has more directed objectives like capture-the-flag and king-of-the-hill modes, while the PC stays closer to traditional RTS deathmating.

and economy management; it really is about getting the right mix of forces out into combat and then fighting those battles." Glosecki adds, "For me, the game really is about being fast and fluid. There is the traditional resource management, but to me it's really about how quickly you can get in and demolish



■ As always, combined-army assault forces will be the main focus.

UNLIMITED ENABLED

- > XBOX 360 | PC
- > STYLE 1-PLAYER STRATEGY (UP TO 4-PLAYER VIA XBOX LIVE, UP TO 8-PLAYER VIA PC INTERNET OR LAN)
- > PUBLISHER ELECTRONIC ARTS
- > DEVELOPER EALA
- > RELEASE SPRING (XBOX 360), MARCH (PC)

ROCK-PAPER-NUKE

As a genre, RTS has seen arguably the most delicate balancing work in video games. It's a constant challenge for developers to ensure that there is no one strategy to rule them all. Sometimes, you have to step outside the cube farm to get a new perspective. "As good as we think we are on the team, we can't foresee all the strategies and exploits and interesting things that people are going to do with our game once it gets out onto the shelves. So what we're doing is bringing the best C&C players in the world on-site with us," admits Verdu. "They're going to help us finish, and I think that they'll help us get the balance and the tuning and preserve the viability of all the different types of strategies that you have at different points in the game."

The game follows the genre-standard method of unit counters – guys with rocket launchers blow up tanks, tanks blow up other vehicles, light machine gun-toting vehicles blow up infantry – but there are enough wrenches thrown into the rock-paper-scissors machinery to ensure plenty of strategic depth. As in *Battle for Middle-earth*, players will have access to global powers (things like airstrikes or orbital bombardments in this case) that can change the tide of battle. However, in a tacit admission of one of BFME's design blunders, Verdu states, "We firmly believe that everything should be able to be countered, so having all these powers floating around that aren't tied to a structure that you can blow up could unbalance the gameplay."

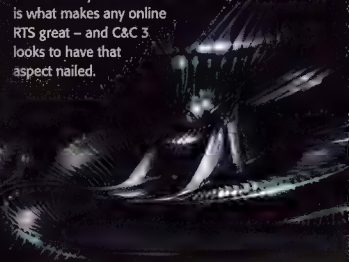
Another cool option available to players is the idea of concentrating on a few select units. In particular, Nod has a unit called the Avatar that scavenges parts off of other units – the laser cannon from an artillery piece, the cloaking device off of a stealth tank, etc. – to become an army unto itself. The GDI and aliens also have opportunities for unit-specific upgrades that push them over the top in terms of concentrated power. Of course, doing so requires commitment of resources, time, and technology, so this firepower will come at the opportunity cost of building up conventional forces. The option is there, though, and we're confident it will all be worth it

XBOX 360



when you send that sucker into the enemy base knowing full well that it can't be stopped by anything short of a miracle.

With all of the work and passion going into the balancing of C&C 3, we expect all of the classic RTS strategies make an appearance here. Switch-teching, tank rushing, tower rushing, and turtling all sound viable. Additions like super-units mean that there are bound to be a number of brand-new tactics concocted in players' quests for dominance. Developing those schemes, and trying to figure out how to stop them when you're on the other end, is what makes any online RTS great – and C&C 3 looks to have that aspect nailed.



GLOBAL DEFENSE INITIATIVE

The GDI considers defending humanity's last bastions of Tiberium-free "clean zones" its highest priority, and uses advanced military technology to achieve that goal. High-tech, disciplined units are the backbone of the GDI's forces, and the faction makes up for its lack of trickery with brute force. With the iconic Mammoth Tank at its disposal, the nearly fascist GDI is a force to be reckoned with.

BROTHERHOOD OF NOD

Led by enigmatic mastermind Kane, the Brotherhood of Nod most closely resembles modern terrorist groups (or freedom fighters, depending on who you ask). Nod operates out of the Tiberium-infested areas of the world that GDI dares not enter, and ostensibly fights to better the lot of the disenfranchised peoples of Earth. As such, Nod relies on hit-and-run tactics and scavenged technology to attain its objectives. Nothing says "pwned" like a group of stealth tanks decoaking in the middle of your base.

THE ALIENS

Though this faction is still largely under wraps, these extraterrestrial visitors promise to add a huge twist on the classic GDI-Nod conflict. We know that they need Tiberium to live, and that the mineral is what drew them to Earth in the first place. We also know that they can combine units to form more advanced troops. Other than that, we only know that we can't wait to crush some foolish humans under our unstoppable, biomechanical army's boots.

XBOX 360



■ Suddenly appearing in the middle of a foggy airborne force is a good way to get your opponent to disrepect in disgust.

PC



KEEPING THE FAITH

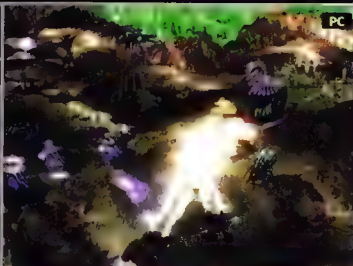
The light at the end of C&C fans' tunnel is quickly growing larger. We can't say for sure yet whether it's the promised land of tight and intense RTS action or the train of shattered dreams. Based on what we know so far, though, we'd put the odds decidedly in favor of Tiberium Wars bringing Command & Conquer back to the top of the genre.

The PC isn't the only platform we're excited for, either. The Battle for Middle-earth II was a surprisingly solid title on Xbox 360, and this time around EALA has a lot more experience on that hardware and the challenges of adapting RTS to a controller. "We're not going to rest on our laurels," insists Glosecki. "We're going to advance the state of the art with our controls and our interface and the gameplay style."

The screenshots speak for themselves, and the little tidbit we've heard about C&C 3 has only increased our desire to get our hands on the game. Even so, perhaps most telling is the excitement evident in the talent involved in creating the game. "I think C&C is back. That's the thing that I'm most proud of, that you can say that and mean it. I can't wait to get the game out there so everybody can experience that," says Verdu. When the person in charge of a project has such a reverence for the material and enthusiasm for the gameplay, you can't help but have a good feeling for how it's going to turn out. ■■■

SAY WHAT?

At one point during our chat, senior producer of the Xbox 360 version Mike Glosecki made a stunning declaration: "I feel that in the future when we're able to play PC versus console RTSs, you're going to find that the console is extremely competitive and in many cases there's going to be guys winning using these controls because they're really straightforward and easy to pick up and understand." Executive producer Mike Verdu quickly retorted with a chuckle, "But of course the best PC players will always win!" That's an argument that we're looking forward to settling for good sometime in the future.



SPECTATOR SPORTS

Command & Conquer 3 is taking a cue from the highly competitive online RTS scene and including a broadcast mode to allow spectators to watch either recordings of games or matches currently in progress. You can even set one viewer to be the broadcaster, which allows him or her to control everyone's camera and offer commentary over voicechat. Verdu declined to comment on any possible deals with organizations like the Cyberathlete Professional League or Major League Gaming, but with this kind of functionality built into the game it's safe to assume that sponsored competitions are only a matter of time. Additionally, EALA plans to maintain a comprehensive official website for stat tracking, ladder rankings, and player profiles.



■ The 360 version offers comparable visuals to a high-end gaming PC



■ Go ahead and blinch up your infantry. We do so love showing area-affect attacks

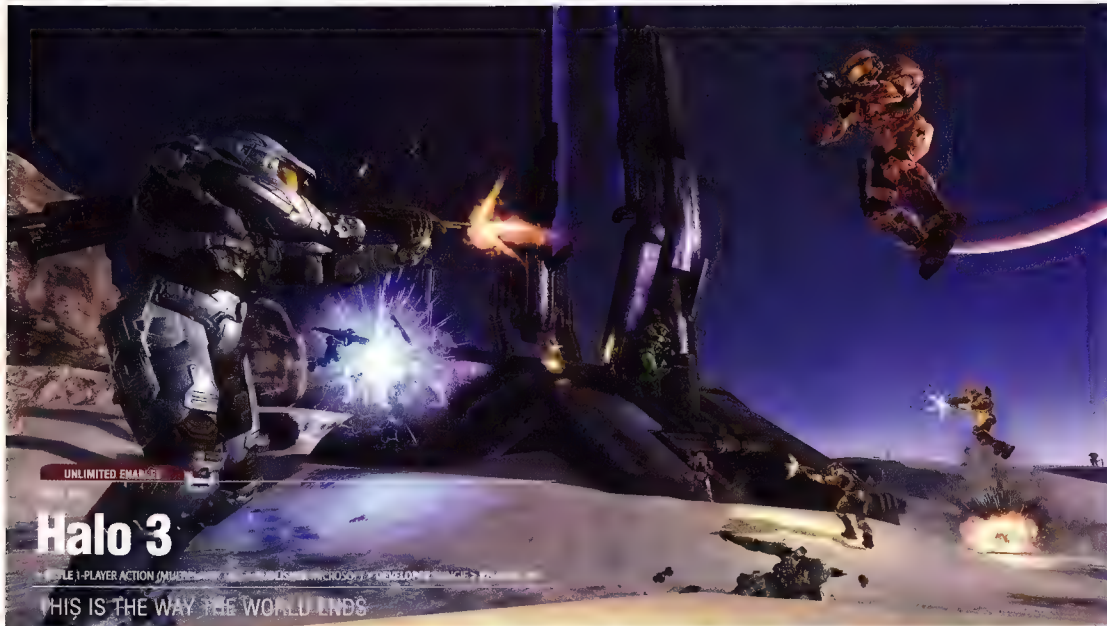
IT'S REALLY ABOUT HOW QUICKLY YOU CAN GET IN AND DEMOLISH YOUR OPPONENT.

— SENIOR PRODUCER MIKE GLOSECKI



PREVIEWS

A Glimpse Into The Future Of Gaming



Halo 3

UNLIMITED EMERGENCY
SINGLE-PLAYER ACTION (MILITARY) | BUNGIE | MICROSOFT | DEVELOPMENT

THIS IS THE WAY THE WORLD ENDS

You know there's a pretty strong hype machine driving a game when people start putting pre-orders down on it more than a year before its suspected release. Then again, Halo 3 isn't just any other game. Hailed by some as a cultural phenomenon, there are few titles that can garner as much speculation and excitement from its fans. Even for gamers who pipe in to question what the big deal is with the franchise, it's hard to argue with the numbers. This month, we thought it might be time to gather together the nuggets of truth that Bungie has dropped about the game as well as chat with them about this upcoming blockbuster.

In its typically reticent manner, Bungie was hesitant to reveal too many secrets this early on when we questioned Frank O'Connor (Content Manager) and Brian Jarrard (Community Lead). Nonetheless, a few pieces of info emerged. "We've revealed some new weaponry such as the Spartan Laser, the Brute 'Spiker' and the Brute Spike Grenade," Jarrard informs us. "And yes, we've brought back a slightly modified version of the Assault Rifle from Halo 1. However, just because it looks very similar doesn't mean it's useless like its predecessor was." He also tells us that pretty much all the weapons from Halo 2 will be returning. As for vehicles, the only confirmed addition is the Mongoose, a 4-wheel ATV designed for quick jaunts across large battlefields, perfect for bringing a flag back to your base.

Jarrard also had an interesting answer when we questioned him on whether game demos should ever cost money on Live Marketplace. "Those types of decisions aren't ever made by us as the developers. However, personally speaking, there are some demos that are cool enough and big enough in scope where I'd prob-

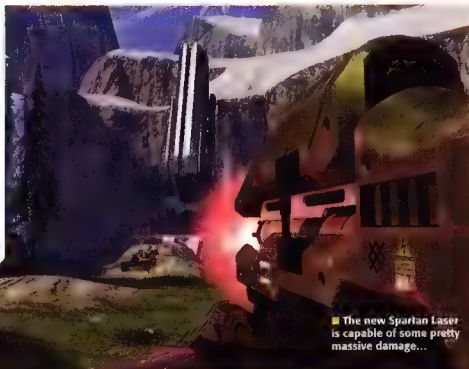
■ The Mongoose can carry a passenger, and seems like it will be the vehicle of choice for a quick getaway.





■ If you haven't seen the latest CG trailer, you're missing out. Download it from Live Marketplace onto your 360, or flop onto GI Online to watch it on your PC

■ Bungie's Brian Iarrard names High Ground as the current office favorite – an asymmetrical map that shares some traits with Halo 2's Zanzibar. Check out the new spike grenade near the top of the screen



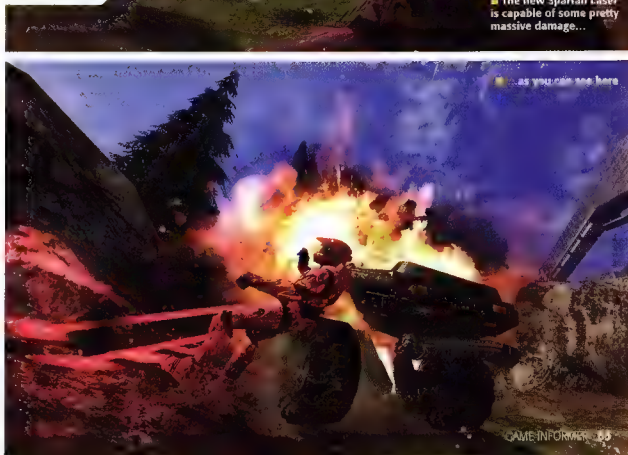
■ The new Spartan Laser is capable of some pretty massive damage...

ably be willing to pay something." A betting man might read something into that in regards to the rumored upcoming Halo 3 demo.

On the story side of things, we asked O'Connor about what he felt needed to be resolved by the end of the third game to effectively complete the plot began in the first installment. "It's safe to say that most of the open questions – the unleashing of the Flood, the Covenant schism, the Chief's attempt to save the world – will be resolved, one way or another, or at least addressed," he told us. "Naturally we're not going to say how. Cortana's whereabouts and condition will play a vital role too." And as for who and what the Forerunners are? "You will know more about them. That's for sure."

Beyond the cryptic comments of our friends at Bungie, it doesn't take more than a glance at the recent Halo 3 trailer to garner a few other hints. In it, we see a badly beaten Master Chief preparing for a stand against a whole host of Covenant. As mortar rounds hurtle towards him, he throws down what appears to be a new grenade type that creates a near impenetrable shield for just a few moments. After surviving the onslaught, he drops into a desperate sprint (very possibly a new control option in the game), and dives off a cliff into a surprised crowd of Covenant attackers.

It's enough to whet our appetites for one of the biggest games coming our way this year. While it's laughable to think that we'd have a confirmed release date from Microsoft this early on, we'd be really surprised if Halo 3 wasn't its headliner for holiday 2007. We'll let you know for sure when that's more than just speculation. ■ ■ ■





PLAYSTATION 3

Lair

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION > PUBLISHER SONY COMPUTER ENTERTAINMENT
> DEVELOPER FACTOR 5 > RELEASE SPRING

HERE BE DRAGONS!

One of the earliest games to garner attention for the PlayStation 3, Lair has long been a giant question mark in Sony's lineup. Originally thought to be a launch game from the famed makers of the Star Wars: Rogue Squadron series, Lair has slipped into a tentative spring release. This month, we got a glimpse into the world of the game, and a conversation with producer Brian Krueger revealed some promising, and insanely ambitious action.

The unnamed knight who we see throughout these screens is far from the touchy-feely dragon-hand-holders of some fantasy universes. This protagonist is a warrior on one side of a giant war that spans a continent. His dragon doesn't speak or ask for rubdowns. Instead, these dragons are domesticated beasts, bred and raised for combat. "We don't have talking magical dragons like you see in some movies," Krueger explains. Like a trained warhorse, the dragon you ride in Lair will be your constant companion, and frequently your only ally against a host of armies and strange creatures. To guide him and spur him forward, as well as attack your foes, you'll carry the Striker, the nasty hook weapon/tool that is the signature accessory for Lair's riders.

Like air support in a modern military campaign, your dragon can swing the tide of a battle, whether by strafing ground troops with a gout of flame or slamming headlong into an enemy dragon to take it out of the fight. While your beast can breathe out damaging fireballs or a flame-thrower-like spray, Factor 5 has focused on the titanic melees that occur when one flyer slams into another. Once entangled with an enemy, players can use special attacks to leap from their saddles and onto the enemy dragon. Then you can strike down its rider, kill the scaled menace, and dive back onto your steed before plummeting to the ground. The game will fully utilize the tilt and motion sensitivity of the Sixaxis to steer and maneuver in free flight. When combat becomes heated, controls will shift into a combat focused mode, where navigation is partially automated by the intelligence of your dragon.

While ground combat is present in the game, it seems as if it will be just one option among many. To take out a horde of enemy soldiers, you might swing past and sweep them off a cliff or land and engage them in claw-to-hand fighting, all depending on your preference. "The great thing about having this dragon is you have this incredible

physicality," Krueger excitedly relays. "We really wanted to be able to land on the ground. We wanted you to be able to swing your tail, swing your arms, eat the soldiers, and breathe fire. We wanted to be able to get the dragons up close and personal and have a really visceral combat experience." These battles will play out in gigantic mission-based arenas, some as big as 32 square kilometers.

When asked to compare Lair with Factor 5's earlier work on Star Wars, Krueger explains the core difference. "In an X-Wing, or any sort of aircraft, a game with that kind of craft is all about not touching anything. It's about staying away from everything else," Krueger tells us. "Lair is the opposite of that. Lair is about having this creature, and getting in close, and really just beating on the other guy, ramming him, smashing into him - claw, bite, scratch, you name it!" It's a compelling approach to flight games, and enough to have us desperate to play a new version of Lair as soon as possible. We've been known to get more than a little excited about giant, barely tameable, fire-breathing dragons. You know, in a cool way. ■ ■ ■

■ Factor 5 has focused entirely on the single-player experience of Lair, so it doesn't look like we'll be seeing any multiplayer dragon battles this time around



■ The mania, like the many breeds of dragon you'll see in the game, are a domesticated animal of this strange world - bred and raised to war

■ The Striker serves as your primary weapon both to attack enemy riders and spur your dragon forward into battle



■ Your dragon in ground combat is a force to be reckoned with



■ The tilt functionality of the Sixaxis will be your primary navigation tool during gameplay



■ Titanic clashes against other dragons remain the focus of the game



■ The sense of scale in this game gives Shadow of the Colossus a run for its money



DAYTRON

WANTED
FOR SPACE PIRACY



UNLIMITED ENABLER

XBOX 360 | PC

The Elder Scrolls IV: Shivering Isles

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION/RPG > PUBLISHER 2K GAMES > DEVELOPER BETHESDA > RELEASE APRIL

BEYOND OBLIVION

If you were anything like us, you spent a good chunk of last year closing Oblivion gates and striking down evil cults. Either that, or you spent a lot of time punching townspeople and engaging in the subsequent run from the town guard. Whichever play style you preferred, the fourth installment of The Elder Scrolls probably spent a lot of time in your disc drive. Are you ready for some more?

Shivering Isles is a brand new expansion for last year's smash hit, and it does far more than just add a couple of new dungeons. It boasts somewhere in the range of 30 hours of new quest-driven gameplay, and is set in a new area completely separate from Cyrodiil. The Shivering Isles are actually an entirely different plane of existence whose landmass is about a quarter the size of the base game. It's a world ruled by a Daedric prince named Sheogorath, the god of madness, and he has a problem. A strange power threatens his kingdom, and he's incapable of dealing with it himself. To solve his unique dilemma, he must find a champion, and apparently you fit the bill.

The Shivering Isles are filled with a host of new sights to see, not the least of which are the numerous never-before-seen monsters, weapons, armor, spells, and landscapes that are part of this otherworldly landscape. There's one large city to explore along with six smaller towns. Your wanderings will include a new main quest line connected to Sheogorath, plus a number of side quests in his realm that are totally independent adventures. While the expansion utilizes the same game engine as Oblivion, the environments themselves are totally redesigned, from plant life to the sky itself. The realm of Sheogorath is split into two unique areas

that have drastically different appearances. Gameplay will remain largely unchanged, with the exception of a new ability to craft weapons and armor. We've also been told that crime and punishment is handled in an entirely new way. Given that the whole game takes place in some sort of world of insanity, we can only imagine the strange fate that awaits wrongdoers who stray from their appointed path.

Gamers will be able to freely switch back and forth between this new expansion



It's a well-known fact that female fantasy warriors protect their torsos by not wearing armor on their chests. It's like reverse psychology, or something



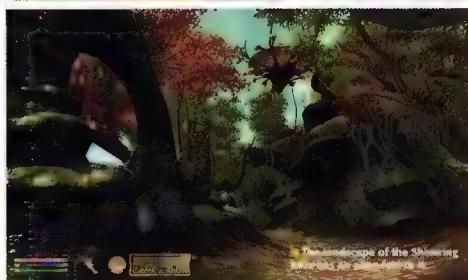
and the original game. You'll be allowed to use your powered-up character or create a brand new hero for this adventure. Bethesda is still working with Microsoft to hammer out the details of an expansion like this on 360, but current plans are to release the game both as a download and as a retail release that can be picked up in stores. Needless to say, we're pretty excited to see so much new content for one of our favorite games of last year. Unless the delay monster rears his ugly head, we should only have to wait until April to delve into the very home of madness. ■■■



THERE ARE ALREADY EXPANSIONS?

In case you haven't been paying attention, there are plenty of new adventures already available to players who've tapped all that Oblivion's retail release had to offer. Available for download on Xbox Live or PC, and even as a retail release for PC gamers, the numerous smaller expansion packs offer all sorts of cool additions, from a new wizard's tower for magic-wielders to a mammoth new dungeon called Mehrune's Razor. The largest and most recent addition was Knights of the Nine, a new quest line that deals with the restoration of an ancient knightly order. If you're chomping at the bit for Shivering Isles, these smaller add-ons could offer some relief in the meantime.





XBOX 360 | PC

Frontlines: Fuel of War

► STYLE: 1-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 64-PLAYER VIA XBOX LIVE OR PC INTERNET OR LAN) ► PUBLISHER: THQ
► DEVELOPER: KAOS STUDIOS ► RELEASE: TBA

NO FRONTING ALLOWED

■ The battlefields are impressive, to say the least

Since the game's excellent E3 showing, *Frontlines: Fuel of War* has been gathering a lot of buzz around its next-gen FPS action. We recently got another look at the game, and there's no reason in our minds to put the brakes on *Frontlines'* momentum. Developer Kaos Studios' general manager, Frank DeLise, had all the right answers to our questions in a recent chat, and we're looking forward to playing *Frontlines* more than ever.

As you probably already know, *Frontlines'* gameplay is all about huge near-future battles that take place over sprawling maps. The twist here is that there are "frontlines" that players fight over in somewhat non-linear fashion so that the conflict is more focused and directed than in a game like *Battlefield*. "We felt the openness of our previous projects — *Battlefield 2*, *Desert Combat* — was fun, but it really hurt teamwork in a lot of ways," shares DeLise. Accomplishing multiple objectives that can range from simple destruction to construction of a forward position will be necessary to capture the frontline and move toward your team's ultimate goal. In DeLise's own words, "The only way to win the game is to work as a team to move the frontline forward."

Frontlines also takes character customization to a new level for the genre. The roles and loadouts that you choose have a huge impact on your abilities in-game. The near-future setting allows for some sweet toys, to boot. With battle-deciding powers that vary wildly from placing stationary miniguns to directing bombing runs, using your capabilities wisely is key. Similarly, making sure your team has a balance between the different roles will grant a large advantage (see side-

bar for details). Though we don't know specifics on how it will work, Kaos assures us that there will be persistent character growth as well, granting players new abilities and weaponry for performing well in a match.

A single-player campaign that includes cinematics to move the storyline along rounds out *Frontlines'* package, but there's no doubt that the true draw of this game is the online play. A variety of maps with different foci, from tight infantry-centric urban battlefields to sprawling vehicle-friendly plains, only increase the natural replayability of an online shooter like *Frontlines*. Get your clans set up now, because we suspect that you're not going to want to take time away from *Frontlines'* action for such mundane details once it comes out. ■ ■ ■

"The only way to win the game is to work as a team to move the frontline forward."



■ Sgt. Fred was suspended from duty shortly after pulling out his Sega Nomad during combat



■ The detail on the character models is amazing

TACTICAL MAYHEM

Developer Kaos Studios' general manager Frank DeLise shares an example of just how intense a match of *Frontlines* can get: "The Ground Support role can help repair destroyed objectives, but they can also lay down defensive guns. The Air Support role can call in air strikes, gunships, and the mother-of-all bombs to start the offensive. The Drone Tech role can scout the battlefield with remote-control drones that can be used to find and eliminate threats as well as share targets with your teammates. The Countermeasures role can setup EMP shields and offensive weapons to bring vehicles and technology to its knees. A team with these combined Roles can wreak havoc on the frontline. This, combined with *Frontlines'* squad system and inter-vehicle communications, equals teamwork on a whole new level." If the game plays nearly as good as DeLise makes it sound here, you can bet we'll be spending a whole lot of time with it when it comes out.

■ Vehicle combat is a big part of some maps



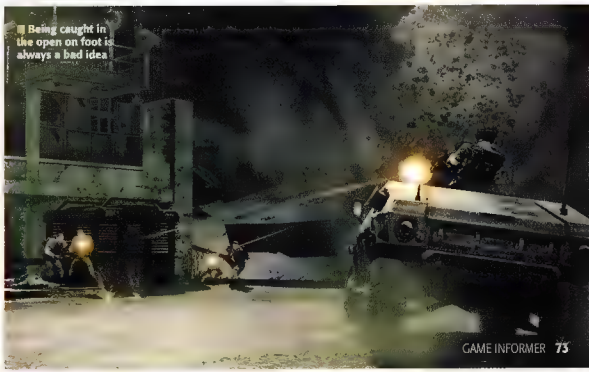
■ The toys you earn access to have multiple capabilities



■ Ah, the chaos of battle. It never gets old



■ Multi-occupancy vehicles are just the start of Frontlines' teamwork aspect



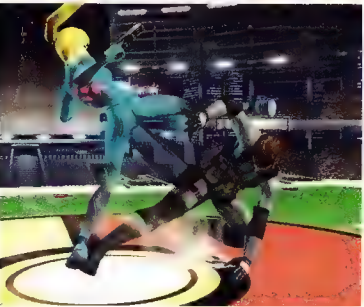
■ Being caught in the open on foot is always a bad idea



■ Remember that air battle between Neo and Agent Smith at the end of *The Matrix: Revelations*? This is kind of like that, but awesome



■ If Snake plays at all like we do, he is about to put C4 on Link's back



UNLIMITED ENABLED

Wii

Super Smash Bros. Brawl

> STYLE 1 TO 4-PLAYER FIGHTING (ONLINE TBA) > PUBLISHER NINTENDO > DEVELOPER SORA > RELEASE JUNE 1



SNEAKY LITTLE FOX

Nintendo likes to tease us. First it announces a new Smash Bros. game for the Wii, then goes quiet with the title for months. Finally, the company has revealed some information about a new playable character, which is — joy of all joys — Fox McCloud. Okay, so Fox is really just a returning character, but we do like the furry little guy, and he hasn't been officially announced until now.

Unfortunately, the Nintendo drought of information hasn't welled into a flood of details just yet, but we did get the chance to check out a new video filled with playable footage. Rest assured; this is still the same Smash Bros. that you have come to love.

The levels promise to be just as diverse as they have always been. We saw one Mario Kart level, similar to the F-Zero arena from *Melee*, where combatants battled on a race track while karts whizzed between them. Another level looked very much like *Yoshi's Story*, and seemed to change like the seasons of the year. There may even be some destructible environments — we

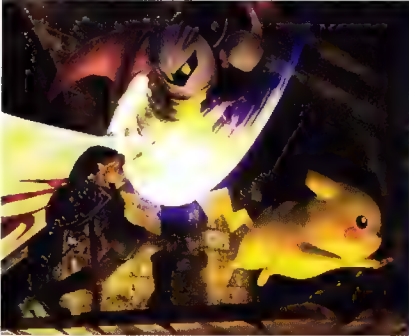
witnessed complete chaos when certain platforms disintegrated under the weight of the characters' attacks.

Nintendo's still alluding to the fact that the game will have a more traditional control scheme and may even use GameCube con-

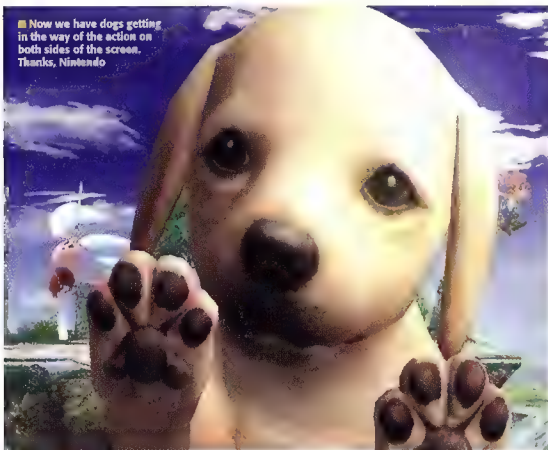
trollers. Though it hasn't been confirmed yet, we're pretty confident that *Brawl* will have some kind of online multiplayer feature.

More characters are sure to be announced soon (we can't imagine Donkey Kong isn't in this game) and the door is still open

for other third-party characters — such as the much-desired Sonic — to join the fray. Sadly, this is all there is to report, because Nintendo enjoys watching us squirm. Come on Nintendo, you're killing us! ■■■■



■ Now we have dogs getting in the way of the action on both sides of the screen. Thanks, Nintendo



previews



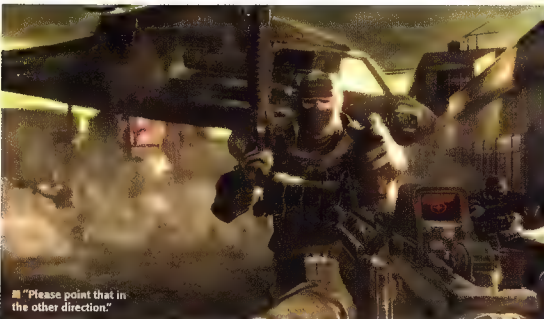
■ Sword, meet Mario's crotch

■ My butt implants bring all the boys to the yard.



■ It was a strange day when Snake learned he could fly





■ "Please point that in the other direction."



■ Even aliens recognize the value of a good phallic symbol!

PLAYSTATION 3

BlackSite: Area 51

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION (MULTIPLAYER TBA) > PUBLISHER MIDWAY > DEVELOPER MIDWAY ALUSTIN
> RELEASE SUMMER 2007

DESTROY ALL ALIENS!

When most people think of Area 51 in gaming terms, they picture Atari's cheesy light gun arcade game at the local skating rink.

Midway tried to change this perception after they acquired the franchise with last year's FPS re-envisioning on current-gen consoles, but it came and went without much notice. Now Midway is getting serious, both in story terms and in resolve to make a top-tier title.

After the team had struggled to find an identity for the game, executive creative director Harvey Smith (known for his key role in the *Deus Ex* games) sat down and punched out a story treatment that focused on modern global issues. The move away from the series' traditional campiness was a welcome change of pace, and Midway recruited writer Susan O'Connor (*Gears of War*, *BioShock*) to help bring it all together.

"We've tossed around current global events like the secret rendition sites or weird weather that might be affecting us due to global warming, but we've also kicked around the beliefs that these things might mostly be the equivalent of modern myths," Smith says. "We've talked a lot about how to handle certain situations without trivializing them. We've talked about all of the current global military flashpoints and associated ethical quandaries."

The story surprisingly begins in Iraq rather than the titular top-secret Nevada facility. Your first mission is a flashback from two years before the main timeframe of the game. You play an as-yet-unnamed commander of a Delta Force squad tasked with an assassination. Things go south when you encounter an alien vessel instead of your intended target.

"Your reaction to the ship — and the ship's reaction to you — mark the beginning of a radical event in human history," declares Smith.

Fast forward to the present day: Your team is responding to a mysterious disaster at Area 51. Players will take on creeping aliens of all shapes and sizes, human soldiers, and some kind of alien-human hybrid.

The developer is focusing on several ways

to separate *BlackSite* from the crowded FPS pack. High on this list is streamlined squad gameplay. All commands for your three-man team are mapped to one button, with several ever-changing options available depending on where your reticle is pointed. You can command your squad to target enemies, take over turrets, commandeer vehicles like trucks and ATVs, or blow open doors. Players can also use this feature for minor puzzle-solving tasks like sending a soldier crawling through an out of reach window to access a locked building.

Realistic squad AI features heavily into the story and gameplay. Morale ebbs and flows depending on how you perform on the battlefield. If they're feeling confident in your leadership, they'll fire more accurately and more often. If you're sucking it up, they'll panic and stay behind cover. This will all figure into their facial expressions, the things they say, and even their body posture. This should help your teammates develop actual identities over the standard nameless squad drones found in many games. If this still doesn't do it for you, the entire game can be played via online two-player co-op.

Weapons include many of the old standbys like machine guns, sniper rifles, and grenades, but the real chance to branch out comes with the alien weapons. The development team is experimenting with a lot of these concepts. "One of my favorites that'll probably end up on the cutting room floor is a black hole generator that sucks up objects, AI enemies, and other players, warps them graphically, then drops them somewhere else in the world," notes Smith.

Midway is coy on multiplayer details, but assures it will include many of the standard game types. *BlackSite* uses Midway's custom version of Unreal Engine 3.0 (called CoreTech), meaning it draws from the same pool as Midway's other next-gen action project, *Stranglehold*. Currently, *BlackSite* is only announced for PlayStation 3, but a multiplatform release hasn't been fully ruled out just yet. "As a game designer and a player," Smith said, "I think each [console] has some worthwhile specialization." ■ ■ ■





■ You can already tell these little guys are going to be annoying



previews

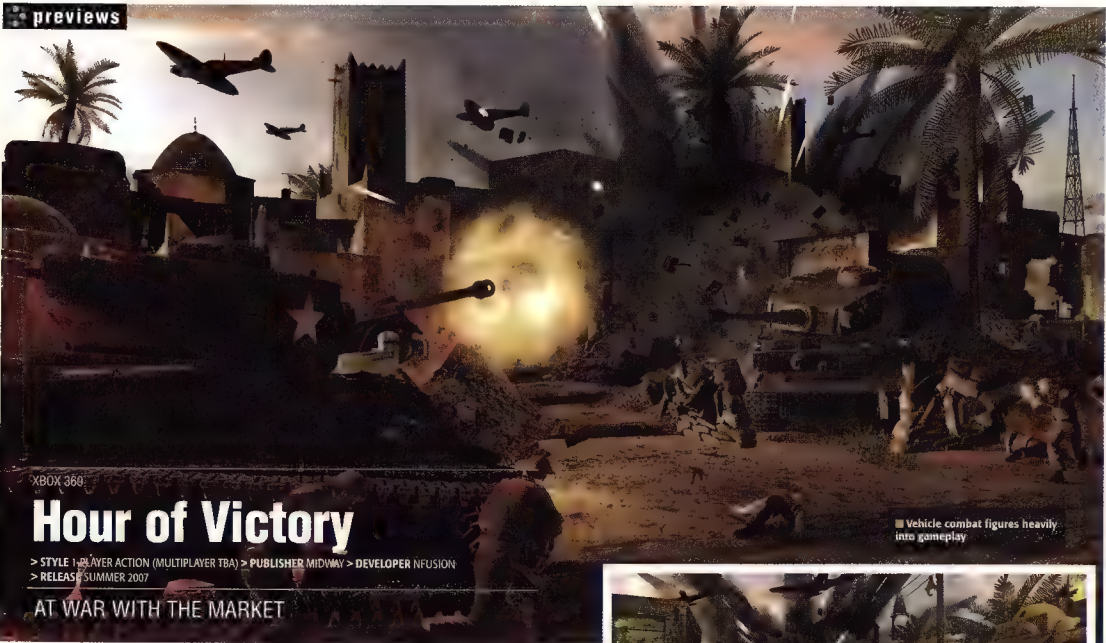


■ Not necessarily little green men are they?



■ "Alright, this room should be just about clear..."





XBOX 360

Hour of Victory

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION (MULTIPLAYER TBA) > PUBLISHER MIDWAY > DEVELOPER nFUSION
> RELEASE SUMMER 2007

AT WAR WITH THE MARKET

■ Vehicle combat figures heavily into gameplay

If you're going to throw another World War II shooter into the oversaturated market it better be pretty darn good. Hour of Victory may look like more of the same at first glance, but nFusion is hoping that its take on the genre can stand out in its own way.

The game isn't based on actual historical battles within WWII, but the environments, vehicles, and weapons (like the M1 Garand and the German MP44 assault rifle) are all based in reality. You'll fight alongside British, U.S., and Russian troops as you attempt to dismantle the Third Reich in such locales as North Africa, the Bavarian Alps, and Berlin.

Players can choose among three different characters at various checkpoints throughout the game including a U.S. spy, Native American sniper, or British commando. Each character has special traits that will be useful in certain situations. Taggart uses silenced weapons, performs stealth kills, and picks locks. Blackbull can climb to special sniping nests that others can't, while Ross is the best at handling heavy weapons. Producer Jeremy Ray believes that it's these distinct per-

sonalities that will help set the game apart.

"I think Hour of Victory is going to be more Indiana Jones than *Saving Private Ryan*. We don't inject fantasy elements like melting faces, but the tone is closer," Ray said. "You are playing very special soldiers, people that are looked up to within the ranks."

Open vehicle combat could also shake up the formula. Instead of driving tanks and jeeps only when the game allows you to, players can hop in any vehicle they see on the battlefield and start rolling. Once you take over an Allied (or Axis) tank you can really do some damage not only to enemy soldiers and vehicles, but also to the surroundings themselves. We saw a couple misplaced shots bring an entire building to the ground.

Obviously, this kind of vehicular destruction would be perfect for multiplayer, but Midway will only admit at this point that online multiplayer exists.

Hour of Victory definitely has some interesting possibilities. Let's just hope it delivers on them. ■ ■ ■



■ Destructible environments abound in Hour of Victory



■ Shooting down planes, hunks of metal will rain down on you



■ To reveal enemy locations the U.S. Army would send out expendable troops called "bitties"



The environments look even better in motion



PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360

Virtua Fighter 5

> **STYLE** 1 OR 2-PLAYER FIGHTING > **PUBLISHER** SEGA > **DEVELOPER** SEGA
 > **RELEASE** FEBRUARY 20 (PSS), SUMMER (XBOX 360)

THE ULTIMATE FIGHTING SIMULATION RETURNS

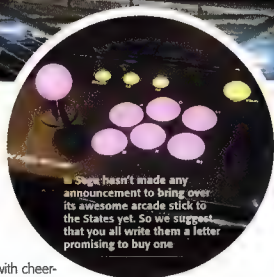
Recently, we have been beating the crap out of each other in the office again. We have also been playing some Virtua Fighter 5, and that is probably the reason we are all getting so pumped. We have always loved the Virtua Fighter series and its hardcore attitude toward the nuances of different fighting styles. This version looks to be the most arcade-perfect of any entry in the series.

There are two new fighters in this entry, the Lucha Libre fighter El Blaze and Eileen, a Monkey Kung-fu style fighter. El Blaze is sort of a small but brawny guy who has some fun-looking moves. Eileen looks like she is a great choice for people new to the series, because she is easy to pick up, fast, and has some great combos.

As usual, the backgrounds are gorgeous. Whether you fight in the mud, water, or snow, the ground environment moves around just like it would in real life. Wood splinters and stone cracks as the fighters slam each other into them. In El Blaze's level, the

stands are filled with cheering fans, and a giant screen shows a live broadcast of your battle. It's too bad the combat is so engrossing, because you will probably miss a lot of the levels' details.

We are a little disappointed that there won't be any online multiplayer, but the arcade mode has been translated perfectly to this version, and there is an ultra-deep practice mode where you can spend hours honing your skills. Still, you will likely spend most of your time with the Quest mode. Here you travel around to virtual arcades and fight over 500 player-created AI characters. In this mode, much like in previous Virtua Fighters, you can unlock items for your favorite characters that will change their appearances. The developer has said that all the items haven't even been unlocked in the Japanese arcades, and the game has been out there for months, so you should stay plenty busy trying to get them all throughout 2007. ■■■



Sega hasn't made any announcement to bring over its awesome arcade stick to the States yet. So we suggest that you all write them a letter promising to buy one



As you can see, items will change the look of your character dramatically

Promotion if you win



TMNT

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION/ADVENTURE > PUBLISHER UBISOFT > DEVELOPER UBISOFT MONTREAL > RELEASE MARCH 13

PRINCELY MOVES



Our childhood memories are filled with our own adventures with the turtles. Like that time that Shredder kidnapped April, then Leonardo and Michelangelo had to go down to the basement and rescue her. Or that time Donatello was gravely injured and Optimus Prime super-heated He-Man's sword to cauterize the wounds. Well, Ubisoft and Warner Bros. are giving us a chance to relive our childhood as the movie and game release in conjunction this March.

All four turtles will be playable in this adventure, but what could be most exciting here is the fact that developer Ubisoft Montreal is making the game using their Jade engine, the same engine used in the Prince of Persia games. "I was inspired by a YouTube video that showed [a full run through] of Mario 64 in 20 minutes," said Nick

Harper, the TMNT creative director at Ubisoft Montreal, when we asked him about the game. "I wanted to create an experience where players could take their time to finish a mission, but true ninja players would be able to exploit all the acrobatic systems to create their own shortcuts and tricks to navigate."

Each turtle will have a unique set of acrobatic and combat moves based on their personality. "For the turtles, we wanted the player to never stop — to always be jumping and speeding along walls and so on — but without the need to analyze the environment first. So we streamlined the input and animation systems to enable moves to flow together rapidly," said Harper. "I'd say we have a healthy dosage of combat and acrobatics." In addition, after you have earned your brothers' respect you will be able to team up with them to perform more powerful moves or acrobatic maneuvers that help you advance through the level.

But don't be expecting any multiplayer from this game. "It was important to match the emotional experience of the movie to the game. On day one of development

we read through the movie script and it was clear the movie was about the importance of family and how that was exposed through the turtles being distanced, both physically and emotionally." Ubisoft wants the player to experience that loss as well as the reward of regaining that unity while playing the game.

Working alongside the movie studio has its advantages. Movie clips are used to further the game's story and the voice actors from the film are featured in game. Expect to find lots of other Easter eggs from the film and comics hidden in the game. This Spring it looks like we will be reliving 1988 all over again, and we can't wait. ■■■





...how many times?
...should touch him?



■ Ah yes! Has there ever been a TMNT's game without a subway level?



■ What makes these shoots impressive is that they are all taken from the current-gen PS2 version.



PLAYSTATION 3

MotorStorm

> STYLE 1-PLAYER RACING (MULTIPLAYER TBA) > PUBLISHER SONY COMPUTER ENTERTAINMENT
> DEVELOPER EVOLUTION STUDIOS > RELEASE MARCH

PURE MAYHEM

Next to Killzone, no PlayStation 3 game has undergone as much scrutiny as MotorStorm. Unveiled a few years ago with jaw-dropping video footage that few believed was real, Sony and developer Evolution Studios have had to meet some pretty high expectations from gamers who have wanted MotorStorm to be just as high-octane and adrenaline-filled as its initial showing. While the visual effects aren't as mind-blowing as that first video, the game definitely achieves its full-throttle vision.

MotorStorm is divided up into 21 tickets, with each one giving you access to up to four races. Some of the races on the ticket require you to specifically race one of the game's seven vehicle classes (Mud Pluggers,

Big Rig, Bike, ATV, Buggy, Rally Car, and Racing Truck), while others let you race whatever you want. If you finish in the top three, points are awarded that let you buy new tickets and vehicles. This basic structure rules the game, so even though we played a good deal of the early portion of the title, it will be interesting to see how everything progresses the longer you play.

MotorStorm's terrain plays a big part in the races. That means courses with a variety of different routes and mud on the canyon floors that increases and gets tracked around as you slosh through it lap after lap. The



undulations of the terrain are very cool – especially if you race using the hood cam. Of course, winning a race requires you to take the best route through the course for your chosen vehicle. The bigger and heavier your vehicle, the better off you are in the lower regions of a course. The lighter bikes and buggies can jump around the game's overhead passes. Best of all is when both light and heavy vehicles share the same stretches of a track (the races we've seen so far usually have 11 to 15 cars per course). That's when things start getting crazy. Bikes and riders become separated at high speeds and buggies become rolling death cages. You can use the Sixaxis to drive using full motion control, but in the preview build we played it was a

little touchy for our taste.

Although the sense of speed for the vehicles early on in the game isn't great, MotorStorm succeeds in delivering that anything-can-happen feeling while you're racing around. The AI takes care of itself really well, crashing, jostling, and flying around the screen even when you're not directly causing the carnage. Cars ahead of you will often smash and fly over your hood as you fly by. This kind of unscripted mayhem is great to see, and had us amazed even hours into the game. You'll also see your own mishaps unfold in slow motion.

Online is planned, but some details are still up in the air regarding this mode. Sony told us that it will accommodate a minimum of eight players, and tracks will also be available for download. The company hinted that perhaps more will be offered beyond just tracks, but it wasn't going to speak in specifics. When we were playing MotorStorm, it was all just a blur anyway. ■■■■

03:01.97

TEMP

You can lay on the boost as much as you want until the meter above heats up. Push it too much and your vehicle will blow sky high.

2 LAP
/3
5 POS
/11

Navigating the changing mud patches in the game is key to racing well.

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PLAYSTATION 2

Shining Force EXA

> STYLE 1: PLAYER ACTION/RPG > PUBLISHER SEGA > DEVELOPER SEGA > RELEASE MARCH

SHINING FORCED?

With Sonic in shambles and Phantasy Star failing, Sega's list of bankable classic franchises is growing smaller. The publisher's next title with a legacy to uphold is Shining Force EXA, the latest entry in a venerable series that began back in the days of the Genesis. Unlike the strategy titles that defined Shining Force in its early days, EXA will continue down the path started by last year's Shining Force Neo, focusing more on action than on tactics.

Players will attempt to bring an end to a worldwide conflict by controlling the game's two main characters on the action/RPG battlefield. One is a feral swordsman named Tom; the other is the silent sorceress Cyllie. They are both determined to find the holy sword Shining Force as a part of their quest. Other party members will be available to command as the



game progresses, and will have improved AI and more flexibility compared to the allies in Shining Force Neo.

Even though the gameplay doesn't seem like it will be leagues beyond its predecessor, EXA does make an important advance by integrating a fortress system. Not only will players use this as a base for managing party members, but it will also figure into the hack 'n' slash combat by forcing players to defend it when it comes under attack by legions of demons and beasts. The

fortress will even adapt and evolve according to your individual play style.

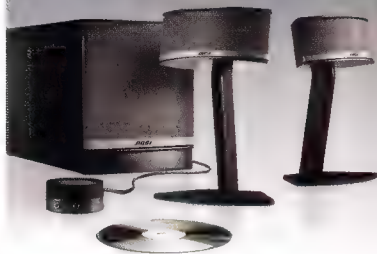
With all of the excitement surrounding the new consoles, will Sega be able to make this PS2 action/RPG stand out in the crowd? We won't know until Shining Force EXA hits in March. If it doesn't work out, maybe Alex Kidd would be ready for a comeback. ■■■■



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PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360

The Darkness

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 8-PLAYER VIA XBOX LIVE OR PS3 ONLINE) > **PUBLISHER** 2K GAMES
> **DEVELOPER** STARBREEZE STUDIOS > **RELEASE** SPRING

DARK DEATHMATCH

Starbreeze came by our offices to show off multiplayer workings for its new game *The Darkness*, based on the popular '90s *Top Gun* comic. While the build still needs some work, it showed promise. Since *The Darkness*

is a modern day Mafiaoso adventure, one of the two player classes is a mob goon. These characters perform much like you would expect from a standard FPS game. They run around the levels with guns blazing, collecting health pick-ups and better weapons.

The other class you can play is the darling. These little guys (and we mean it, they are small) run along the floors, walls, or ceilings much like the *Aliens* from the *Aliens Versus Predator* games that came out a few years ago on PC. These buggers are super fast and harder to hit, but can't wield guns. Instead, they have two basic attacks: the standard (yet powerful) melee swipe and the lunge attack. The lunge works just like it sounds; you fly forward 20 or 30 feet, attacking anything that gets in your way. Land on a dude's head, and you will take him out with one hit. This is a rewarding attack, but it leaves you vulnerable.

In our time with the game, we enjoyed playing as the darlings more than the mobsters, as they could crawl into areas that the mobsters couldn't, but there were areas where we could tell it was

more advantageous to have a gun. We hope that in the final version these two classes are even more diverse and balanced. Starbreeze says it still has a few issues to work out, like whether it will implement the health regeneration feature found in the



single-player game, or if there will be more traditional health pick-ups.

Speaking of the single player experience, we also got to see how that was coming along. Famed comic book writer Paul Jenkins has helped craft the story. The interactive story sequence we saw, where two mobsters kidnap Jackie and drive him through town shooting at cops and construction workers most of the way, was awesome. But we are most excited to play with the darkness powers, because sending darlings after guys and performing sweet close combat kills looks like it might be the best part of this already promising game. ■ ■ ■

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XBOX 360

Eternal Sonata

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ROLE-PLAYING GAME > PUBLISHER NAMCO BANDAI > DEVELOPER TRI-CRESCENDO > RELEASE SUMMER

THE SONG THAT NEVER ENDS

One of the biggest criticisms leveled at the original Xbox was its lack of straight-up role-playing games. Microsoft appears determined to prevent that from happening again. The Xbox 360 is establishing a stable of games from big names in the RPG business, and one of them is *Eternal Sonata* from Tri-Crescendo. The developer has decided to apply its musical roots (the company began doing music for Tri-Ace games like *Valkyrie Profile*) to its first independent project. *Eternal Sonata* chronicles the last hours of famed composer Frederic Chopin as he drifts between life and another world.

In his dream world, Chopin encounters a young woman named Polka, who is suffering from an incurable disease. A side effect of the ailment is magical power, which Polka is determined to use to help her village before it claims her life. Chopin decides to help her, and their adventure in the fantasy land begins to seem just as significant as anything in the real world.

Since Polka is ill and Chopin is on his deathbed as the

game begins, it may seem like the story will be a morbid march to the characters' eventual demise. *Eternal Sonata's* producer, Shinji Noguchi, doesn't see it that way at all. "When we actually get the courage to look death in the face, only then do we begin to think about what our goals are and how we have lived our life," he observes. "We also start to wonder about the meaning of life itself. In this way, we begin to see the light, in a sense. The story of *Eternal Sonata* is not one about death, but about the light and hope we discover at the end of the tunnel!"

This contrast between the light and the darkness is present even in *Eternal Sonata's* combat system. The battlefield is separated into light and shadows, and character skills will differ depending which of are two they stand in. "We decided to utilize light and shadow in this way to add a strategic element to the gameplay," Noguchi explains. "Since the battle system allows the characters to roam freely,

players can use this to their advantage by choosing to stand either in the light or shadow. This, in turn, will largely affect the outcome of each battle." One skill may have certain effects in the light, but slightly different results in the dark, so you can decide which incarnation best suits your needs.

Fights will play out as a mixture between real-time and turn-based mechanics, using what the team calls the time-shared battle system. Characters and enemies act in turns, but they only have a certain amount of time to move into location and carry out actions. "We wanted to create something simple, where players can easily pick up the game and start playing right away," Noguchi tells us. The goal is to provide the accessible excitement of an action/RPG

while retaining some familiar strategic elements of turn-based combat.

With its musical motif and innovative mix of history and fantasy, *Eternal Sonata* is shaping up to be one of the high notes in the 360's upcoming lineup. It is slated for a summer release date, so you can definitely look forward to having it in your hands sooner than most of the other highly anticipated RPGs for the console. ■■■■





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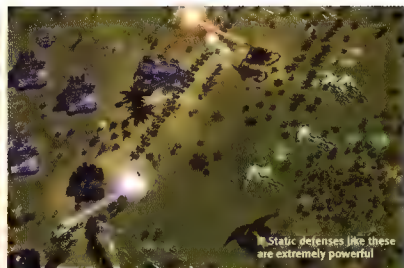
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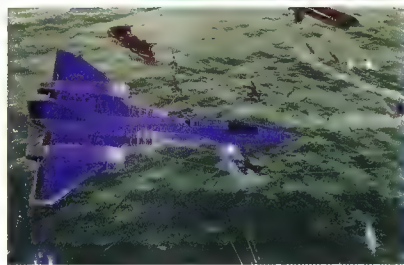
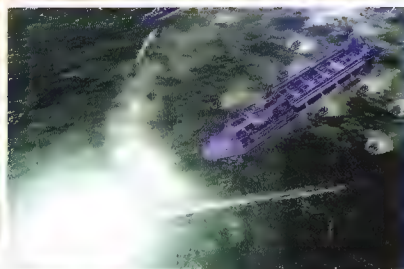
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■ The conflicts are nothing short of enormous



■ Static defenses like these are extremely powerful



PC

Supreme Commander

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER STRATEGY (UP TO 8-PLAYER VIA INTERNET OR LAN) > **PUBLISHER** THQ > **DEVELOPER** GAS POWERED GAMES > **RELEASE** SPRING

WRAP YOUR BRAIN AROUND THIS

This spiritual successor to the beloved Total Annihilation franchise came out of the gates very strongly at E3, and we've been digging around for further info ever since. We recently got our hands dirty with early versions of both the single-player and multi-player modes for Supreme Commander, and we have to say that our first impressions are a bit mixed. The scale of the game is absolutely massive and the strategic concepts are radically different than most RTSs, but major graphics slowdown and some fairly serious UI issues need to be addressed before this game releases.

The first thing to know about Supreme Commander is that it functions entirely differently than the RTS games you're used to. The focus here isn't on making the best units or using the best tactics in battle. Instead, the key to victory is in building your base efficiently and making the best use of your resources that you can. The winner of any given match will nearly always be the player who can balance his mass and energy income against his expenditures, and crank out

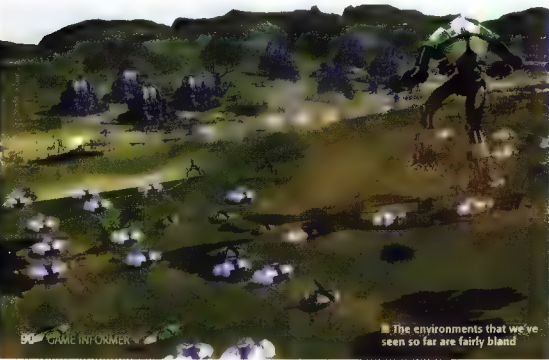
the biggest or most advanced army possible. Simply having a decent unit mix and throwing them all at your opponent is generally enough strategy to win a battle; no amount of clever tactics will overcome the odds that a more-efficient opponent will bury you under.

The other notable difference from RTS convention that we noticed is that the tiers of units vary in power by orders of magnitude. Dozens of tier one units will get slaughtered by a mere few tier two troops, and the same holds true as you climb the tech tree. Combined with the huge relative strength of static defenses, this more or less kills any early rush strategies.

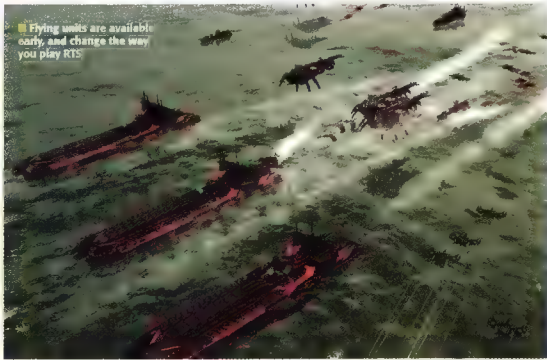
That being said, there is no other game on the market that can compare to Supreme Commander's massive scope. Conflicts take on epic proportions very quickly as players get their production machinery online, and watching these battles play out is quite the sight. The only issue here is that once the fires of war start burning brightly, it's nearly impossible to efficiently control the game with anything other than

the fully zoomed-out, icon-based view – which dampens some of the enjoyment of seeing your forces tear into the opposition.

Though we weren't blown away by this early version of Supreme Commander, a lot of the concerns that we have could certainly be fixed by the time the game ships. If Gas Powered Games can polish up the currently problematic interface, streamline the graphics engine, and balance the gameplay, this could be a unique and excellent way to pass the time in 2007. ■ ■ ■



■ The environments that we've seen so far are fairly bland



■ Flying units are available early, and change the way you play RTS

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PSP

300: March to Glory

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION > PUBLISHER WARNER BROS. INTERACTIVE > DEVELOPER COLLISION STUDIOS
> RELEASE MARCH

HANDHELD DECAPITATION

If you're not getting excited about the upcoming movie adaptation of Frank Miller's *300* graphic novel, you're clearly not clued in. The original book was an orgy of amazing visuals and alarming violence, depicting one of the great military conflicts in history: King Leonidas and the 300 Spartan soldiers who stood with him fighting against thousands of invading Persians at the Battle of Thermopylae. Early word on the film adaptation indicates a remarkable faithfulness to the source, and we can't wait for the cinematic results. While there is no current plan to see the visceral combat of *300* depicted in a major multi-console release, we can get our fix on a much smaller screen with the upcoming PSP battle game.

March to Glory is based directly on the events of the graphic novel/movie, giving players a chance to wade into the bloody conflict in one of two ways. In many levels, players will play as King Leonidas, engaging in single combat with his enemies using an array of upgradeable spears, shields, and swords. At other points in the game, players will control the entire Spartan phalanx, the wedge formation that those ancient warriors are so well remembered for. As the larger army, you'll have access to something that Collision Studios is calling the Wrath combat system, which enables

a spread of combos and special abilities to stand up against the massive Persian army and their endless assaults.

Most significant for its faithfulness to the source material, *March to Glory* is embracing the over-the-top violence depicted in the comic. Mutilation and beheadings are par for the course, and the game is almost certainly headed for an M rating. While the straight-up action combat didn't amaze us the last time we saw it, we can't help but be a little excited to adopt the role of one of our favorite fictional warriors — those Spartans definitely knew how to throw down. ■ ■ ■



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Wii

SSX Blur

> STYLE 1 TO 4-PLAYER ACTION/SPORTS > PUBLISHER EA BIG
> DEVELOPER EA MONTREAL > RELEASE MARCH

A NEW WAY TO SHRED THE MOUNTAIN

SSSX isn't as high profile of a franchise as it was back in the day when it dazzled early owners of the PlayStation 2, but over the years it's proven to be one of the best and most consistent extreme sports series this side of Tony Hawk. Interestingly, the franchise has yet to appear for Xbox 360 or PS3, but recently EA revealed that it does have its sights set on Nintendo's Wii. As you might expect, the move to the console will necessitate a gameplay style that's quite a departure from the familiar SSX control scheme.

However, developer EA Montreal is also attempting to make sure that it doesn't create a title like Tony Hawk's Downhill Jam, which strayed too far from the series' traditional strengths. Instead of forcing players to turn the controller sideways and "steer" via motion-sensing, SSX Blur will put the main control right where it's always been: the nunchuk's analog stick. So, instead of wildly flailing down the mountain, you should be able to step right in and start shredding. Jumping is also controlled by a button; no dramatic flicking of the remote required.

Of course, that's not to suggest that EA is eschewing the use of the motion-sensing altogether. Since the Wii doesn't



The game should deliver the sense of speed we expect from SSX.

use a traditional controller configured with shoulder buttons, tricking is now done by performing certain actions with the remote. In EA's own words, you should "think of yourself as an artist painting different shape outlines in the air for each aerial maneuver." It's certainly an intriguing development choice, one that

could point towards a future where Wii titles can better integrate traditional control and motion sensing into a coherent package. Also, it makes this the first

(and only) extreme sports title you could ever compare to Okami, which is quite an accomplishment in itself. EA also promises "motion-based front end" menus, which require "virtually no use of buttons." We'll have to wait and see whether this means that it's different from the usual point-and-click Wii menu.

While there are big changes on the control front, everything else seems to be SSX as we know and love it. There are three mountain peaks that comprise 12 unique tracks,



allowing you to board from the top to bottom in one run. Familiar characters like Mac, Kaori, Pysmon, and Allegra are also making return appearances. As always, expect the dynamic soundtrack to keep pace with your run, ebbing and flowing with the intensity onscreen. Multiplayer is comprised of two modes: two-player split-screen for race and Slopestyle events and Hot Seat, a four-player mode where you and your friends can take turns in Big Air, half-pipe, and slalom competitions.

Despite our worries about a steady supply of top-tier Wii titles, it looks like at least one triple-A franchise is ready to hit in the normally slow spring retail season. Hopefully SSX Blur will add a fresh spin to the snowboard genre without sacrificing its roots. ■■■



You perform tricks by tracing shapes onscreen with the Wii remote.



Steering is done with the analog stick.





Wii

No More Heroes

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION > PUBLISHER SPIKE > DEVELOPER GRASSHOPPER > RELEASE SUMMER 2007 (JAPAN)

WE COULD BE JEDI... I MEAN, HEROES

Even though no U.S. release for No More Heroes (previously titled "Heroes") has been announced as of yet, the game is generating plenty of excitement outside of Japan. Goichi Suda's Grasshopper Studios is developing the title, and No More Heroes seems to be following the anime look of their previous game, Killer 7.

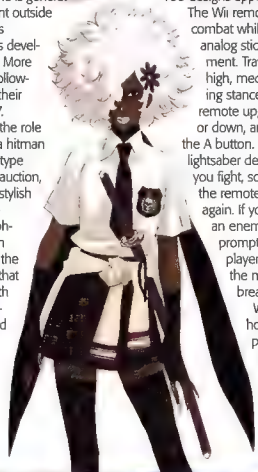
Players will assume the role of Travis Touchdown, a hitman who won a lightsaber-type weapon (from a web auction, of all places). His first stylish victory is over a white-haired man with morphing gun arms. A French woman appears from the shadows to tell Travis that he has earned the 11th rank in a league of killers called the UAA, and that he must defeat the remaining 10 assassins in a quest to become the best of the best.

Travis can freely roam the city of Santa Destroy on

foot or by riding his tough-to-pronounce "Schpeitiger" motorcycle. He'll perform odd jobs to finance his anime shirt fetish (over 100 designs appear in the game).

The Wii remote will handle combat while the nunchuk analog stick controls movement. Travis can assume a high, medium, or low fighting stance if you angle the remote up, straight at the TV, or down, and attack by pressing the A button. The power of your lightsaber deteriorates the more you fight, so players must shake the remote to charge it up again. If you lock swords with an enemy, several onscreen prompts will appear and players will have to follow the motion instructions to break his defense.

We're definitely hoping a U.S. publisher picks up No More Heroes soon. How great would it be if someone beat LucasArts to the Wii with a lightsaber game? ■■■■



Wii

The Sims

> STYLE 1-PLAYER SIMULATION > PUBLISHER EA GAMES > DEVELOPER Maxis > RELEASE FALL 2006



THE WIIMOS

What is this sickness that we have where we enjoy watching virtual people eat, sleep, and pee? We don't know, but The Sims seems to be the only cure. The console versions of these games have added new features tailor-made for the systems, but as you can tell from the screens, EA's new Wii Sims is getting a drastic facelift.

This currently unnamed project is using a cartoon/anime art style very similar to the Miis that players create on the Wii, which might make this game appeal better to the Japanese market. We don't yet know if you will be able to import your Mii characters into the game, but that would make for some interesting play mechanics. Nintendo has said they would like to see their Miis featured in other games, and it would appear that EA has a game tailor-made for this.

Aside from the visual change, the basic Sims premise seems unchanged. You will still build homes and guide your Sims through their daily routines. The animations look good, and despite the cartoon



As most like, it looks like you will have to use your hands to build your house. Okay, not exactly like real life.

graphics, the game's level of detail is pretty high. Some of the gameplay reminds us of Nintendo's popular Animal Crossing series; the game's trailer depicts people stomping on flowers and chopping down trees.

EA is making this version of The Sims exclusively for the Wii. Hopefully this means that it will use the Wii remote in some new ways. We've already seen how it can be useful for building homes by pointing and clicking to put stuff wherever you want. EA has been particularly quiet about this title so far, saying only that it will release more news in the next few months, so we will keep you informed when the company opens up. ■■■

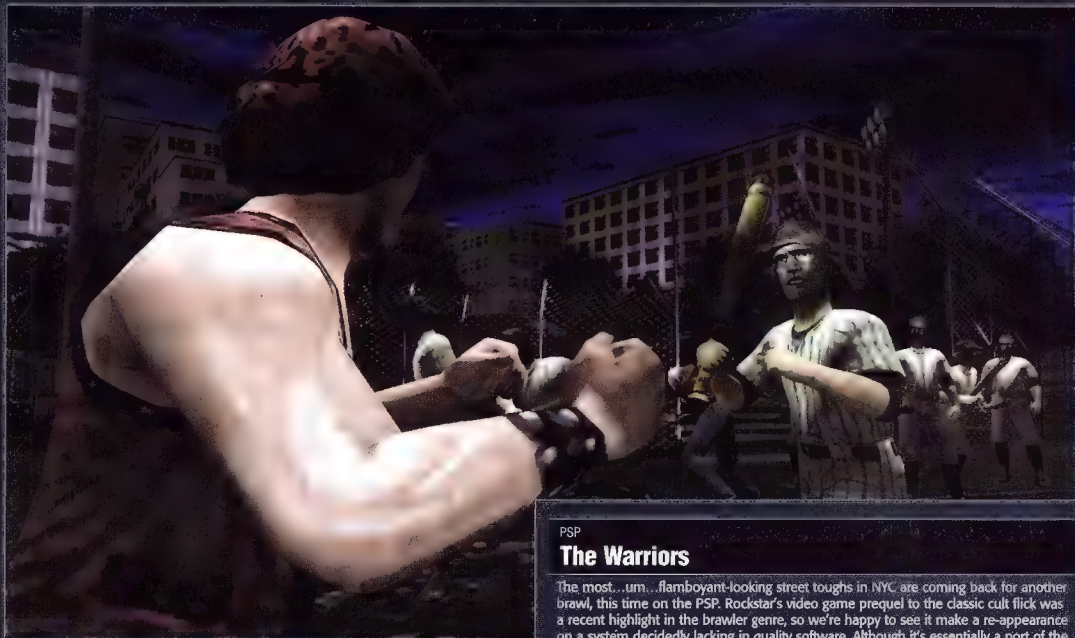
Is this screen a sign that there will be more community interaction?





PHOTOPHILE

Mini Previews With Big Pictures



PSP

The Warriors

The most...um...flamboyant-looking street toughs in NYC are coming back for another brawl, this time on the PSP. Rockstar's video game prequel to the classic cult flick was a recent highlight in the brawler genre, so we're happy to see it make a re-appearance on a system decidedly lacking in quality software. Although it's essentially a port of the PS2 title, there will be a few added features like wireless co-op. Otherwise, expect the same excellent mix of brawling, stealing, graffiti, and classic '70s camp that makes The Warriors so special.



PC

Dance!

What's the next logical step after making a couple of games set in the Matrix universe and leaving the company you helped found? Create a Dance Dance Revolution-style MMO with the new Acclaim, of course! That's what David Perry's doing anyway. Like all current Acclaim titles, Dance! is free to play if you don't mind some in-game ads or paying for extra songs and "premium" items. Your created character will get fat if you don't dance for a while, so be sure to drag out that USB dance pad from time to time. After all, how are you going to make friends online and get married if you're out of shape? Seriously, this game has a marriage feature. The closed beta should be ready at Acclaim's website by the time you read this.



PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360

Armored Core 4

From Software is the master of simulation-style mech combat, and gained even more fans with the 2006 release of Chromehounds. However, for gamers who love tweaking and optimizing every little detail on hulking battle machines, it doesn't get much better than the developer's Armored Core series. In March, this detail-heavy franchise will lumber into the next generation with Armored Core 4, published and localized by Sega. The story focuses on six corporations vying for power in the near future, but the gameplay will obviously revolve around customizing your ideal AC and riding it into battle. Take on AI chumps or square off against up to seven other people through Xbox Live or PlayStation Network.

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Wii
Fishing Master

Called *Mezase Tsuri Meister* in Japan (translation: Arise, Fishing Master), this game is all about catching over 100 different kinds of sushi. Developer/publisher Hudson Soft has done well to simulate the act of fishing with the Wii remote. By holding down the A button, flicking the remote, then releasing the A button, you cast a virtual line similar to if you were actually fishing. Once a fish bites, you pull back on the remote to reel it in. A furry long-eared companion will also tag along with you, helping you by barking when it is time to reel in a fish. Expect this to come Stateside sometime later this year.



Wii
Big Brain Academy

When we first heard about *Big Brain Academy* for DS, we thought it was a game about Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles' disembodied villain Krang and his school days. We're not falling for that again. When Nintendo releases this revamped version of the game on Wii later this year, we'll know exactly what to expect: more brain-bending minigames, reworked controls for the Wii remote, and split-screen versus multiplayer. Maybe, just maybe, we'll see the Technodrome. Hey, we can hope.



NINTENDO DS
Izuna: Legend of the Unemployed Ninja

What if there were no ancient evils threatening the world, and no corrupt officials in need of assassination? In such a world, the services of a ninja would not be needed. That is the premise of *Izuna: Legend of the Unemployed Ninja*, hitting stores soon courtesy of Atlus. The game has the spunky female ninja Izuna exploring various randomly generated dungeons and caves, unfortunately bearing many similarities to the Japanese *Fushigo no Dungeon* series (which includes the recent *Pokémon Mystery Dungeon*). While that could be a kiss of death, at least *Izuna* features a wacky, offbeat sense of humor running through the story and characters that will have you smiling.



PLAYSTATION 2
Raw Danger

Raw Danger! Just rolls off the tongue, doesn't it? Whoever thought of that name must be some kind of genius. Or meth addict. Or both. Still, it's catchier than the Japanese title, *Zettaizetsumei Toshi 2*. A sequel of sorts to the PS2 cult title *Disaster Report*, Agatec's *Raw Danger* will hit our shores in February with the impact of a tsunami — literally! The game traces the saga of six different playable characters as they try to escape a city that's being flooded by torrential rains. As you try to make sense of the chaos and find safe harbor, you'll make decisions that affect the outcome of the story for all the protagonists. If you escape a watery grave, you might even live to discover the mysterious cause of the flood. Put on your hip waders, things are about to get wet.



REVIEWS

We Play The Crap So You Don't Have To



Eragon



Blazing Angels: Squadrons of WWII



Ant Bully



NCAA 07 March Madness



Lost Planet: Extreme Condition

Capcom continues to bring top original IPs to the Xbox 360 with *Lost Planet: Extreme Condition*. Jarring explosions, devastating weapons and armor, challenging gameplay, and ridiculously large bosses all make this frosty ride one worth taking. If this is the kind of gameplay we can expect in 2007, we say "bring it on!" Chill out with the full review on page 104.



Metal Gear Solid: Portable Ops

A full-fledged *Metal Gear* game in the classic style for the PSP? Sign us up. In fact, signing up new recruits ends up being one of the coolest new directions in the continuing saga of *Metal Gear*. With the ability to gather troops by locating real-life Wi-Fi hotspots, you may actually get up off the couch for this one. Bridging the gap between *Metal Gear Solid 3* and the later years of the other games, *Portable Ops* has just the right mix of new ideas and familiar gameplay to draw in the crowds. Check out our full review on page 109.

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

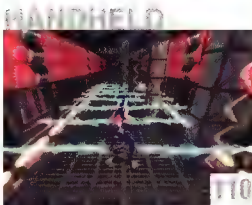
- 10** Outstanding. A truly elite title that is nearly perfect in every way. This score is given out rarely and indicates a game that cannot be missed.
- 9** Superb. Just shy of gaming nirvana, this score is a high recommendation because the game reviewed is head-and-shoulders above its competition.
- 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 could be derived in extremely small quantities, if at all.
- 1** Faccid. That's what she said.

- > **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**

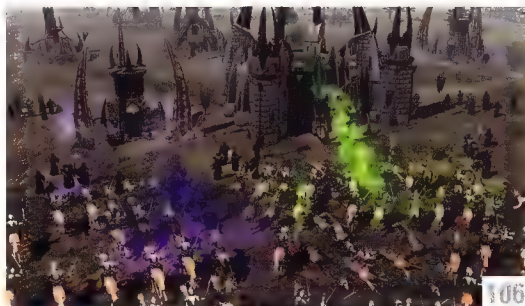
- High** - You'll still be popping this game in five years from now.
- Moderately High** - Good for a long while, but the thrills won't last forever.
- Moderate** - Good for a few months or a few times through.
- Moderately Low** - After finishing it, there's not much reason to give it a second go.
-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



Heroes of Might & Magic V: Hammers of Fate



Star Wars: Lethal Alliance



The Lord of the Rings: The Battle for Middle-earth II – Rise of the Witch King

Aside from having one of the longest titles ever, Rise of the Witch King adds a whole lot of sugar to BFME II's already-sweet mixture. This expansion includes a cool new faction, a revamped War of the Ring mode, and many hours of single-player campaign entertainment. It's time to conquer Middle-earth again, this time for the bad guys.

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The Edge

When All Games Aren't Created Equal

This is where you'll find our most in-depth reviews. When you see this logo, there is important multi-system information regarding that product.

ES Content suitable for persons ages 3 and older	MATURE Content suitable for persons 17 and older
E Content suitable for persons ages 6 and older	TEEN Content suitable only for adults
ESRB Content suitable for persons ages 10 and older	RP Product is awaiting final rating.
T 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 readers 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 frame with double the scan lines of a conventional interlaced picture. 480p (i=interlaced), to create a noticeably sharper image. The 480p image offers higher picture resolution and eliminates virtually all motion artifacts in a 640x480 pixel resolution setting.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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.

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

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

GBA – Game Boy Advance.

GC – GameCube.

HDTV – High Definition Television.

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

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

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

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

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

MMO – Massively Multiplayer Online. Usually applied to role-playing titles, we use this term for games with persistent, multi-user online worlds like EverQuest and World of Warcraft.

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

normal mapping – A graphical technique in which a texture is mapped onto a 3D surface, revealed by light reflecting off the surface; is wrapped around a low-res model.

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

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

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

pop-up – When objects onscreen suddenly appear, typically due to poor draw distance.

PS2 – Sony PlayStation 2.

puzzle – A term we use for games like Tetris and Puyo Pop.

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

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

shooters – A term we use for games like Konami and Godus.

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

strategy – A term we use for games like Lara Croft and Front Mission.

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

three red lights – The precursor to \$30 in shipping fees and a week without your Xbox 360. Learn to qualify cheap, Microsoft!

■ Although there is dragon combat, it's not a large part of the game

XBOX 360 | PLAYSTATION 2 | XBOX

Eragon

► STYLE 1 OR 2-PLAYER ACTION ► PUBLISHER VIVENDI GAMES ► DEVELOPER STORMFRONT STUDIOS
► RELEASE NOVEMBER 14 ► ESRB T

WOW!

I'll give Eragon this. It's definitely a video game based on a major motion picture! There are characters and locations from the movie in the game and everything! You can fight bad guys and even do magic, just like that one magical dragon rider dude in the commercials. And, um, you can also fight some bad guys. Lots and lots of them. And ride a dragon that flies around in the sky and shoots magic arrows at bad guys. And, there's other stuff too, like sometimes you have to clear a path and use your magic to open a door. If you read the paragraph is indicative of how you think about games and what you expect from them, Eragon might be enough for you. However, for me, this title

fails to deliver anything more than hackneyed hack n' slash action that developer Stormfront has done much better in games like *The Two Towers* and *Demon Stone*. Despite a fair amount of combos, the combat is tuned so you'll only rely on a couple moves to dispatch the hordes of enemies. Your magic powers, while interesting, generally prove to be more trouble than they're worth in the midst of combat. While I appreciate the attempt to expand the game with flying dragon combat, those sections of the game are brief and not particularly compelling. Unless you're a hardcore fan of the book series and film, I'd take a pass on Eragon. —MATT

BOTTOM LINE 6.25

> **Concept:** Mediocre hack n' slash gameplay augmented by mediocre dragon flight combat

> **Graphics:** The current-gen games look respectable, while the 360 version features improved textures and other effects

> **Sound:** A fairly cinematic score that somehow fails to resonate.

> **Playability:** The core gameplay, while far too repetitive, is just barely possible. I wish I could say the same for the flight

> **Entertainment:** Like the movie it's based on, Eragon fails to distinguish itself from the pack

> **Replay Value:** Moderately low

Second Opinion 6.25

Because of *Lord of the Rings: Two Towers* and *Forgotten Realms: Demon Stone*, developer Stormfront Studios is no stranger to movie-based hack n' slash or games involving magic and dragons. For some reason, this talented studio just couldn't find its groove with Eragon. The game boasts a handful of interesting ideas — such as track-based dragon riding and action-packed finching moves — but the core gameplay just doesn't have any life to it. Your sword attacks feel weak, and casting a spell takes far too long to ever be useful. You can definitely see moments of the brilliance that you would expect from Stormfront, but it's hidden within mediocrity. —REINER



■ The combat quickly becomes tiresome

PLAYSTATION 3

Blazing Angels: Squadrons of WWII

► STYLE 1 OR 2-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 16-PLAYER VIA PS3 ONLINE) ► PUBLISHER UBISOFT
► DEVELOPER UBISOFT ROMANIA ► RELEASE DECEMBER 12 ► ESRB T



■ Your wingmen may be annoying, but they can help you out of jams by defending you or attacking

EARN YOUR WINGS

Have you ever wanted to fly sorties during World War II with annoying good old boys from Mississippi as your wingmen who happen to be stepbrothers? With *Blazing Angels*, you finally get the chance to live your sordid dream.

Blazing Angels lets you fight in major aerial battles from the cockpit of 33 authentic planes. Before you're through, you'll help the British Royal Air Force fend off the Germans over London, counterattack the Japanese Zeroes after the surprise bombing of Pearl Harbor, and dogfight during the epic Battle of Midway. Along the path to victory, you will be assaulted by horrid voiceovers and insufferable banter between your squad mates. The only way to survive this inane narrative is to channel your anger into gunning down enemy planes. You'll be an ace in no time.

Each of the controller configurations is responsive enough to keep your plane in hot pursuit of the enemy squadrons, though I preferred the well-implemented Sixaxis controls. Blasting through waves of Messerschmitts was fun for a while, but the missions never really offer a challenge. The multiplayer modes can help relieve this boredom, and the

PS3 version of *Blazing Angels* features one new team-based multiplayer mode — Adversarial — that teams you up with other pilots in a race to destroy your opponents base before they take out yours.

The biggest complaint I have with *Blazing Angels* is the presentation. Rather than entertain with action-packed cutscenes of intense battles, the game moves model planes across a Risk map to indicate military moves. The graphics feel underwhelming for a next-gen system. Though the landscape looks great from afar, when you fly low near urban areas it feels more like a barren, lifeless model city than a bustling community suffering through the strains of war. Even when you send planes careening toward their destruction, they don't take out buildings or leave the city in ruins. Instead, we get a supplemental smoke effect to indicate damage.

Blazing Angels is a competent air combat title. I just wish Ubisoft would have delivered the kind of epic experience I'm used to after playing games like *Medal of Honor* and *Call of Duty*. —BERTZ



BOTTOM LINE 7

> **Concept:** Become an ace pilot by shooting down squadrons of Japanese and Nazis

> **Graphics:** Model cities feel lifeless and don't take damage. This is war!

> **Sound:** *Days of Our Lives* conversations overtake the sound of airplane propellers

> **Playability:** The Sixaxis controls feel more natural than the analog stick controls

> **Entertainment:** These historical aerial battles should feel more epic than the simple shootdown bombers, bomb tanks, and repeat gameplay offered here

> **Replay Value:** Moderate

Second Opinion 8

Whether you're torpedoring battleships, shooting Japanese bombers out of the sky at Pearl Harbor, or just taking pictures of enemy encampments, *Blazing Angels* has a nice variety of missions. I like the squad controls in battle, which give you some advantage in a firefight. The story is okay, but it's hard to care much about the characters when they are just talking planes. The graphics aren't as dazzling as I would like, but the PS3 version has the added bonus of offering two new missions and an exclusive multiplayer mode. If you're just looking for a good dogfight, this might be your game. —BEN

PS2 QUICKIES

PLAYSTATION 2

NFL Street 3

- > **STYLE** 1 TO 4-PLAYER SPORTS (2-PLAYER VIA PS2 ONLINE)
- > **PUBLISHER** EA BIG
- > **DEVELOPER** EA TIBURON
- > **RELEASE** NOVEMBER 14 > **ESRB** E



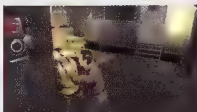
BOTTOM LINE 7

The more cool things this series adds, the more you realize how much of an overhaul the basic gameplay needs. Controlling your WRs, the different winning conditions, wall running, and increased Gamebreakers are all smart additions, but they get mired in the poor AI and unresponsive controls. My favorite was the time I was pulling some moves in the open field and slipped without being touched like I just stepped on a banana peel. Or the time when the CPU AI earned three Gamebreakers and didn't even bother to use them. There will be a point when you don't bother either. —KATO

PLAYSTATION 2

The Sopranos: Road to Respect

- > **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION
- > **PUBLISHER** THQ
- > **DEVELOPER** 7 STUDIOS
- > **RELEASE** NOVEMBER 7 > **ESRB** M



BOTTOM LINE 6

When I first started The Sopranos, I was impressed by its expertly voiced narrative (by the show's cast), the badass atmosphere, and the cool context-sensitive fighting moves. But as time wore on I realized how broken the combat system actually was. You generally only fight groups of a few enemies at a time and they are so easy to take out all you have to do is jam on the X button. The famerate chugs from time to time, and the controls feel looser than the strippers at the Bada Bing. Still, the story and dialogue had me laughing out loud a few times. If you are a big fan of the show it's worth a look, but don't expect much. —BEN



PLAYSTATION 2

Ar tonelico: Melody of Elemia

- > **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ROLE-PLAYING GAME > **PUBLISHER** NIS AMERICA > **DEVELOPER** GUST > **RELEASE** FEBRUARY 6 > **ESRB** T

ROLE-PLAYA

Let's get this out of the way at the beginning: There are pervasive romance and dating elements in Ar tonelico, and they aren't optional. If you think that sounds skeezy or stupid, then this game will be unplayable for you. There are some unique concepts and mechanics in this RPG that make it quite charming, but you'll need to look past (or enjoy) a hunky male protagonist playing cat and mouse with his submissive girl-toys. Borrowing many elements from developer Gust's Atelier Iris games, Ar tonelico appears at first to be just another quirky sprite-based adventure — and in many ways, it is. Only the most clichéd and archetypal characters populate the world, and major plot events occur at a stilted pace. The game deflects many problems on those fronts with clever writing, which frequently comes out of left field with hilarious "did he really just say that?" lines of dialogue that even make the dorkwad man character endearing. It's too bad that a few laughs can't save you from the boredom that lurks in the game's dungeons. These sections consist

of screen after screen of identical-looking backgrounds, punctuated by random encounters. The battles themselves are fun, if a bit easy, and use a neat system revolving around the Reyvateils (female magic-users). Rather than participate as active combatants, these characters are constantly expending MP to charge offensive and defensive spells. It falls on your other party members to protect them while softening up the enemies in preparation for the big magical blast. It's simple and a bit repetitive at first, but gains depth quickly as your Reyvateils learn new spells. Unfortunately, teaching these abilities is tied to your skill as a ladies' man. A Reyvateil's power is unlocked slowly as her relationship with her companion strengthens. This means that you'll need to invest time collecting conversation topics and developing an emotional bond

with the two girls, Misha and Aurica. When they trust you enough, you can dive into their Soulspace (a term that works alarmingly well as a euphemism for "crotch") in order to unlock new spells. The interactions play out like a bizarre male power fantasy, and honestly made me feel a little dirty. It's certainly less overt than titles like DOA Xtreme 2, but that almost makes it worse. Those who have fond memories of the PSONe cult classic Thousand Arms will definitely enjoy Ar tonelico's strange blend of action, dialogue, and courtship. On the other hand, if you aren't really into that sort of thing, this game develops into a painful exercise in endurance as you grit your teeth and wait for the next battle, then try to make it last as long as possible in hopes of delaying your return to the story and characters. —JOE

BOTTOM LINE 6.75

- > **Concept:** Interesting setting, fun combat, and disturbingly pervy conversations.
- > **Graphics:** An awesome art style that could use better animations in and out of combat.
- > **Sound:** For a game with songs as a central story point, the soundtrack should be way better.
- > **Playability:** Be sure to give the manual a thorough read, because the in-game help isn't very illuminating on certain key elements.
- > **Entertainment:** A series of highs and lows. The combat and character progression is cool, but the exploration and story are stale.
- > **Replay Value:** Moderate



Second Opinion 6

I salute Gust for approaching RPG combat in an interesting way, with magic handled by a non-fighting party member that your bruises have to protect. However, I don't care how cool and unique the battle system is when I have to slog through hours of horrendously paced and poorly executed dialogue just to have 15 minutes of fun in combat. Every aspect of this game, outside of the intriguing fights, is terrible. Characters are bland and poorly voiced. The story is boring as only a generic "save the world" plot can be. The gratted-on quasi-dating simulation (which you are forced into using to progress) between the main character and his Reyvateil harem is pervy and weird. And it doesn't help Ar tonelico's case that it looks like a PSONe game. Only the hardest-core Japanophiles should bother with this subpar effort. —ADAM



Grathmelding is Ar tonelico's version of alchemy, allowing you to make new items and weapons from new items.



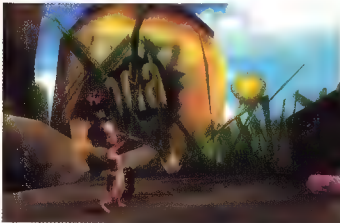
Don't forget about the map. You won't be able to tell where you are by your surroundings alone.



The shop is a place where you can buy items. It's going to happen again.



This is a Reyvateil's consciousness where you unlock new spells.



Wii | PLAYSTATION 2 | GAMECUBE | PC

Ant Bully

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION/PLATFORM > **PUBLISHER** MIDWAY
> **DEVELOPER** AZIM > **RELEASE** DECEMBER 5 > **ESRB** E10+

WE'RE TIRED OF BEING PUSHED AROUND, TOO

I learned a lot of interesting facts about ants while playing *The Ant Bully*. For example, did you know that ants were genetically created in the 1930s from mutant strands of rice, and being nearly as dense as collapsed stars, they can lift more than 10,000 times their own weight? Oh, the game isn't filled with these lies; Reiner and Joe threw these fun facts my way to make fun of me while I played through the game. The sad thing is I had more fun getting talked down to like a kindergarten than I did playing the game.

The game is based on the new Warner Bros. motion picture, so if you no longer count your age on your hands you're probably not interested in this game anyway. That said, this isn't a horrible game for kids who like the movie. The story drops you off immediately after the main character, Lucas, has been shrunk to ant size, but it isn't graceful in bringing you up to speed on the movie's plot (though that isn't too hard to figure out).

Whether you are defending the colony from a hornet invasion by manning goo cannons, racing an obstacle course with a team of ants, or foraging for food, the game keeps things fresh. Too bad none of it is exciting. You also spend a large portion of the game collecting parts for new weapons, but outside of a few instances, I never found any of these gadgets to be more useful than the spear you start the game with.

Aside from learning a few inaccurate oddities about ants, or using it to make fun of your friends, this game isn't worth much.—**BEN**

■ Yes, you will have to carry these stupid ant babies through some of the levels.



Wii QUICKIES

Wii

Dragonball Z Budokai Tenkaichi 2

> **STYLE** 1 OR 2-PLAYER FIGHTING
> **PUBLISHER** ATARI > **DEVELOPER** SPIKE
> **RELEASE** NOVEMBER 19 > **ESRB** T



BOTTOM LINE **6** Dragonball Z Budokai Tenkaichi 2 is packed with content related to the popular anime series. If that doesn't sell you on this game, nothing will. The entire control scheme, which uses the Wii remote and nunchuk, often requires motions and button combinations so awkward you'll feel like you're trying to pat your head and rub your stomach simultaneously. It can provide some wacky fun, but it lacks all of the finesse of a genuine fighting game. Budokai Tenkaichi 2 relies exclusively on a mediocre combat engine and the naivety of fans who will buy it because they want to play through the Cell Saga yet again.—**JOE**

Wii

SpongeBob SquarePants: Creature from the Krusty Krab

> **STYLE** 1 OR 2-PLAYER ACTION
> **PUBLISHER** THQ/NICK GAMES
> **DEVELOPER** BLITZ GAMES
> **RELEASE** NOVEMBER 19 > **ESRB** E



BOTTOM LINE **6.75** Our favorite sponge hasn't had a great career in games, but like most of THQ's cartoon-inspired product, this Wii adaptation of Creature from the Krusty Krab lands solidly in "adequate" territory, just south of "solid." It's a hodge-podge of different gameplay modes, including traditional 3D platforming, driving, side-scrolling, and flight. The side-scrolling portions were my favorite, and the 3D stuff was decent, if predictable and marred by camera issues—which makes it way better than the terrible driving mechanics. Overall, it's about what you expect from SpongeBob on Wii—just barely good enough for a younger kid that loves the show and made a little more interesting by the novel controls.—**MATT**

Wii

Super Swing Golf

> **STYLE** 1 TO 4-PLAYER SPORTS > **PUBLISHER** TECMO > **DEVELOPER** NITREY SOFT > **RELEASE** DECEMBER 12 > **ESRB** E10+

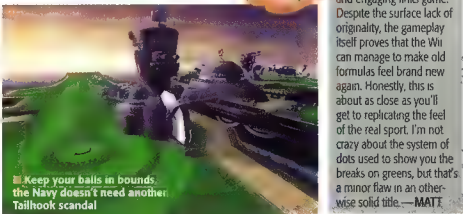


NOT YOUR TYPICAL TECMO STUFFED BIKINI

By looking at the box and turning this game on, an initial glance would convince you that this is a Hot Shots Golf title. This is actually a big compliment. The foundations of cartoon, three-click golf have been laid down so well by said storied golfing franchise that there's little new here beyond getting to swing the Wii remote. Then again, you're talking to a guy who always enjoys this very Japanese way of hitting the links, so I'm not complaining at all.

It may take you a few holes to find your groove with the remote, but I don't think it's a bad thing that—like real golf—you don't always hit the ball straight and true every time. If you do strike the ball just right, the game will award you Pang Points, which allow you to head to the pro shop and outfit your character, buy caddies, or get them stat bonuses. They also allow you to pocket Pang, bang lots of Pang, and bandy about other such euphemisms that fall into the E10+ rating this title gets for "suggestive themes."

Although Super Swing looks, smells, and feels like a normal round of three-click golf, I have to take exception to the spin options and the green tips, which aren't as good as in series like Hot Shots. However, I do like that Super Swing lets you earn special shots if you've got enough Pang. Throw in some crazy locations around Pangya Island (including some wind tunnels) and you've got yourself a good enough time to keep you shooting birdies all the way to the 19th hole.—**KATO**



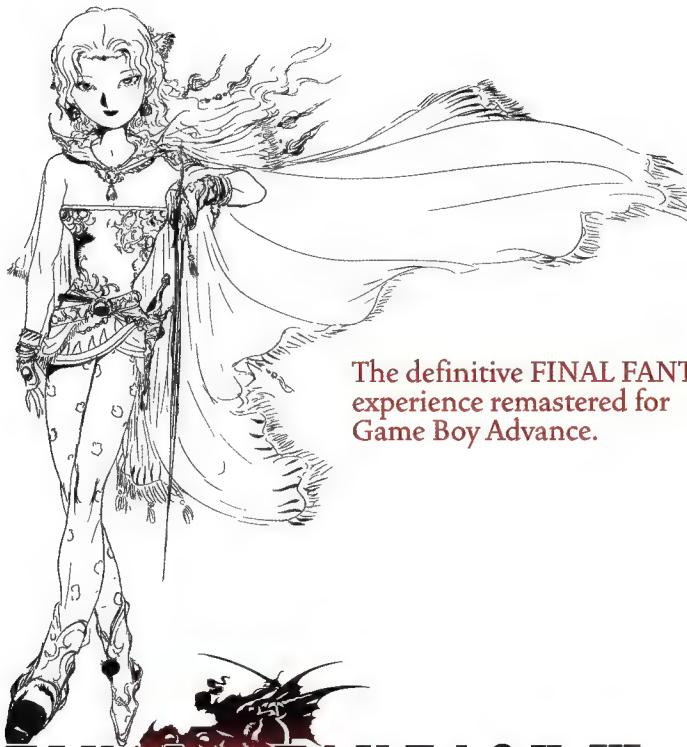
■ Keep your balls in bounds the Nary doesn't need another. Teikook scandal

BOTTOM LINE **8**

> Concept: Not the most original title, but it's fun so who cares?
> Graphics: It's hard to go wrong with this sub-genre's cute quotient.
> Sound: The kind of lite jazz that makes Air Supply look like church-burning death metalists.
> Playability: The Wii reads your putting differently than your fairway shots, making it feel a little looser.
> Entertainment: Finding the perfect swing in golf is hard, but this game nails a straight shot down the fairway.
> Replay Value: Moderately High

Second Opinion **8.25**

With its goofy large-nogger characters, arcade-style play, and collectible items, Super Swing Golf is going to draw a lot of comparisons to Sony's Hot Shots series—as well it should. Still, since there's no way that Hot Shots is ever coming to the Wii, I'm pretty happy Tecmo decided to create this fun and engaging links game. Despite the surface lack of originality, the gameplay itself proves that the Wii can manage to make old formulas feel brand new again. Honestly, this is about as close as you'll get to replicating the feel of the real sport. I'm not crazy about the system of dots used to show you the breaks on greens, but that's a minor flaw in an otherwise solid title.—**MATT**



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experience remastered for
Game Boy Advance.



FINAL FANTASY VI

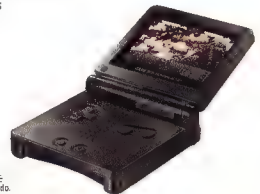
ADVANCE

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Mild Suggestive Themes

SQUARE ENIX.

GAME BOY ADVANCE SP

AVAILABLE: 2-7-07

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■ Since the world is cold, the player can freeze to death. To survive, you'll need to pick up thermal energy that enemies drop. This may sound annoying, but you usually find yourself swimming in energy.

BOTTOM LINE 8.25

> **Concept:** Blow the living crap out of a planet covered in snow and monsters. The setting is a refreshing change, and the monster battles are amazing, but the basic grunt-killing gameplay doesn't have much firepower behind it.

> **Graphics:** Insane detailing with a bang—the creatures, textures, effects, and lighting are true next-gen standouts.

> **Sound:** The explosions are visually impressive, but it's the lack that the sound provides that make them seem larger than life. The weapons and monsters also sound great.

> **Playability:** Standard run and gun play with easy-to-control mechs and awesome boss fights.

> **Entertainment:** It's somewhat short and boring at times, but it does have the ability to kick you in the pants.

> **Replay Value:** Moderate.

Second Opinion 8.5

If you have a penchant for over-the-top boss battles, *Lost Planet* is certainly the way to go. The healthy mix of fully loaded VS and truly staggering Akrid creatures provide nonstop intensity and plenty of water-cooler moments that gamers will be buzzing about for months to come. I can't tell you how many times I've had to jump out of an exploding VS and dart over to a fresh one amid explosions and slashing candy. Many times I completely ran out of suits and barely scraped by with a lucky shot from an oversized rocket launcher. Despite these amazing elements, Capcom missed a major opportunity with the story. Almost all of the plot advancement is confined to cutscenes between stages. And most of the time, protagonist Wayne is putting his life on the line just to investigate some heat signatures. Even major revelations later in the game fail to have any kind of impact. Nonetheless, *Lost Planet* is a solid entry and has plenty of sequel potential. —BRYAN

XBOX 360

Lost Planet: Extreme Condition

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 16-PLAYER VIA XBOX LIVE) > **PUBLISHER** CAPCOM > **DEVELOPER** CAPCOM > **RELEASE** JANUARY 12 > **ESRB** T



MAN VERSUS MONSTER

What would happen if an ordinary person, armed with nothing but a measly machine gun, picked a fight with Godzilla, the king of all monsters? For most people in this unfortunate predicament, I foresee uncontrollable whimpering, wild arm flailing, and epic racehorse-like unimation before their body is reduced to an unrecognizable smear on the asphalt. But if that certain someone happens to be Wayne, *Lost Planet*'s gutsy protagonist (and yet another video game character that suffers from amnesia), toppling a beast that can level a building is just another day's work.

The entire game feeds off of the David versus Goliath theme, dropping the player directly onto the trail of bloodthirsty behemoths whose nose hairs dwarf you. The odds may seem stacked against you, but with a little firepower, a lowly man can slay the world's most dangerous beasts. As you trudge through the knee-deep snow of this frozen wasteland, you'll cross paths with a gigantic moth outfitted with heat-seeking missiles, a hyperactive worm that will devour you in seconds, and an agitated tortoise that makes Camera look like a docile aquarium-bound pet.

Most of these walking monstrosities will wage war on you in different ways, but the secret to taking them down is always the same: A quick glance at their body reveals their weakness: glowing orange spots. Target these sections and their health will begin to drain. As disappointing as it is to know the secret to every foe before you even confront them, challenge is presented in a much

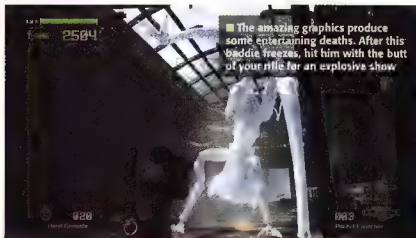
more upfront way. These creatures don't pull any punches. They'll beat the living snot out of you if you hesitate for a brief second. Thus, it becomes a test of skill.

The gameplay unfolds mainly through running and gunning, and *Lost Planet* handles it with style. The flexible targeting system is ingenious, the rocket launcher kicks like a mule, and the Bionic Commando-like grapple grants players a higher level of verticality than you normally see in these types of games. When situations call for a little more firepower and defense, you'll have the opportunity to hop into a mech (Vital Suit), of which there are many types. One VS transforms from a spider into a speedy cruiser. Another boasts nerd-tastic jump jets. All of these wondrous vehicles control exceptionally well, and empower you with the all-too-rare sensation that you are unstoppable.

The excitement that the game delivers in its adrenaline-draining boss battles is captured beautifully through some of the finest spectacles the mighty pixel has ever produced. Remember how

you felt when you first saw the dinosaurs from *Jurassic Park*? You'll be revisiting that feeling quite often throughout the course of this adventure. It's not just the creatures that stand out. The player is also bombarded with effects that range from Zone of the Enders-like particle storms to smoke that blankets the screen; both lead to moments of complete disorientation and awe.

At this point, I'm sure that I've made *Lost Planet* sound like a game that simply oozes awesomeness. There's no doubt that it will bombard you with a ton of great memories. However, outside of the visual candy, cool mech designs, and larger-than-life encounters, the game is quite dull. In moving from one boss fight to the next, you'll confront legions of grunts that don't pose any threat. Boss fights are rarely this exhilarating, but at the same time, disposing of pawns is hardly ever this boring. I walked away from *Lost Planet* with sweaty palms from combating giant monstrosities, but also with the feeling that I wanted so much more as I progressed through the quest. —REINER





■ The Lockdown stick helps you D up your man

XBOX 360

NCAA 07 March Madness

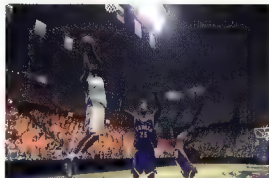
> **STYLE** 1 TO 4-PLAYER SPORTS (UP TO 4-PLAYER XBOX LIVE) > **PUBLISHER** EA SPORTS > **DEVELOPER** EA CANADA
> **RELEASE** JANUARY 17 > **ESRB** E

BANGING IN THE PAINT

After the travesty that was NBA Live 07 for the Xbox 360, I expected the worst while loading NCAA 07 March Madness. To my surprise, the game proved that just because one EA game can't hit a jumper when it matters, it doesn't mean all its relatives suffer the same fate.

The first major difference you'll notice is the new broadcast camera, which gives you a much wider viewing angle than most basketball games. It's not a bad camera angle for running plays, but you'll want a closer view to admire the graphics.

The rest of the presentation could use some basic tweaking as well. Commentators Dick Vitale and Brad Nessler deliver energetic play by play, but you'll hear the extent of their comments by the third or fourth game. The only stat boxes that popped up during gameplay related to team stats and fouls; even when our players were collecting double-doubles, there was no mention of their outstanding performances. If your performance is good enough for an Achievement, it should be good enough for a mention from Dicky V



or a stat box.

March Madness might not be a blue chip prospect, but its gameplay is gifted enough to keep it on the court as a role-player. The player animations shift between awkward and smooth while moving down the court, but player control is vastly improved by enhancements like the Lockdown Stick. This new feature helps you play better D by offering visual feedback about the effectiveness of your positioning. While most of the control is smooth, it tends to break down when moving along the baseline and sideline. Players can't seem to stay in bounds when receiving a pass, dribbling, or shooting under the basket.

The impressive Dynasty mode and new Team Intensity Mode (which lets you track and alter the individual momentum of your players) offer some interesting strategic aspects to the game, but in the end March Madness still ends up a few baskets short of its competition.—**BERTZ**

BOTTOM LINE 7.75

> **Concept:** The first version of March Madness to hit the 360
> **Graphics:** Broadcast camera works for gameplay, but does little to show off character models

> **Sound:** Dick Vitale and Brad Nessler sound great, but repeat themselves too often

> **Playability:** Light years better than NBA Live, but still trailing its competition

> **Entertainment:** An above-average baller

> **Replay Value:** Moderately High

Second Opinion 7.5

This game's improvement over NBA Live 07, which was just released for the 360, is like the Timberwolves' rebuilding phase. Yes, there are bright spots, but don't hold your breath for a championship any time soon. I like the hard-pressing defensive system that gives you visual cues for playing well, and the Impact Moments are good if only to bolster the game's presentation, but this ball still has holes. Although eminently more playable than NBA Live 07, this title still suffers from disjointed animation transitions, a ball that warps into players' hands, and a general clunky feel. I'm glad EA is making progress with its hoops games, because one more brick and that house is done.—**KATO**



XBOX 360

College Hoops 2K7

> **STYLE** 1 TO 4-PLAYER SPORTS (UP TO 8-PLAYER XBOX LIVE) > **PUBLISHER** 2K SPORTS > **DEVELOPER** VISUAL CONCEPTS > **RELEASE** NOVEMBER 21 > **ESRB** E

BIG MAN ON CAMPUS

Last year's version of College Hoops could have used a redshirt, but the sophomore effort on Xbox 360 is well suited to make a run deep into the season. The off-season allowed developer Visual Concepts to improve every facet of the game: better player models, smoother animations, slicker presentation, and the deepest Legacy mode to date.

On the court, College Hoops 2K7 mimics the success of its NBA counterpart. The lively stadium crowds, customizable cheers, and hundreds of authentic fight songs give the game its own charm. Player animations transition smoothly, and remapping the dribbling moves from the right-analog stick to the face buttons helps make ball control more predictable.

The star of the game is undoubtedly the Legacy mode. This year you can start coaching at a podunk college and work your way to the major conferences or start at the top with your favorite team. All the typical franchise

options are available—you can recruit your future players, train your current roster, and scout opponents to exploit match ups each week. Taking a page out of the NFL 2K5 playbook, the Legacy mode also features weekly studio commentary from Greg Gumbel and Clark Kellogg, who offer preseason predictions and host weekly recaps to keep you up to date on the season.

The game is not without its share of problems. The create-a-team is essentially broken, as your jerseys will be red and white no matter which team colors you chose while setting up your college. The coach mode also had bugs, many games locked up when we made player substitutions; players would just stand around staring blankly at one another.

But for fans of college basketball, these faults are drastically outweighed by the deep legacy mode, solid gameplay, and immersive campus atmosphere College Hoops 2K7 has to offer.—**BERTZ**

BOTTOM LINE 8

> **Concept:** Become a Cinderella team during March Madness or guide a perennial powerhouse to the big dance

> **Graphics:** Generic player models look much more individualistic this time around

> **Sound:** Smooth but robotic commentary from Verne Lundquist and Bill Raftery

> **Playability:** Remapped jukie moves give players more control

> **Entertainment:** If you want to relive the college basketball season from your console, this is your best bet

> **Replay Value:** Moderately High

Second Opinion 8

You could do worse than base your college game after the pro offering, especially when you're 2K Sports and your pro game is the best in the biz. If there's a knock on this title, it's that it doesn't do enough to step up to the level of the NBA 2K series. One thing that is oddly different with this title from its NBA counterpart is that players are slower to come out of defensive moves like taking a charge and jump blocks, making your guys feel sluggish and awkward. I also wish that college games would expand their career modes so we're doing more than just recruiting kids. Perhaps a more personal approach like the one taken by NBA 2K7's new 24/7 mode is in order.—**KATO**





PC

The Lord of the Rings: The Battle for Middle-earth II – The Rise of the Witch-King

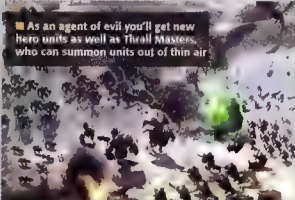
> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER STRATEGY (UP TO 8-PLAYER VIA INTERNET OR LAN) > **PUBLISHER** ELECTRONIC ARTS > **DEVELOPER** EA GAMES > **RELEASE** NOVEMBER 29 > **ESRB** T

EVIL GROWS WHERE MY THRALL MASTER GOES

Expansion packs exist to give you more of what you love, and that's not a bad thing, since *The Rise of the Witch-King* gives us what was so prevalent in *Battle for Middle-earth II*—hordes of enemies to mow through. That fact, and the solid core gameplay mechanics from that earlier title are what make this game worth buying.

Although these games are RTSs, I've never really enjoyed their stories, and *Rise of the Witch-King* is no exception. Beyond being based on the events of *The Tolkien's Third Age*, I found the art cutscenes and fill-in-the-gaps storytelling to be less than stirring. Also, playing as the *Witch-King* is not mind-blowing, and I say that from the perspective that this franchise is already filled with effective hero units—so that's actually a compliment! But then again, this is an RTS and not an RPG, so this title earns its gravitas more from the battles than the story. The new Thrall Master unit is a cool addition, given that he can summon units on site without having to go back to your base, allowing for quicker unit refreshes and more constant action. This kind of emphasis on unit production and combat over resources leads to some pretty epic battles. This game also does a good job of balancing the importance of siege equipment with the fun of being able to throw large numbers of ground units at a problem.

War of the Ring mode offers more persistence for units and greater movement allowance, and with the addition of the Thrall Masters and other useful evil units, this is a good expansion pack that does more than just hold the fort. —KATO



BOTTOM LINE 8

> **Concept:** Send the elves into the west in a commemorative *Witch-King* body bag

> **Graphics:** The shadow textures are pretty blocky, which is annoying

> **Sound:** Having a talking troll hero is a little strange, but the voiceovers are what you'd expect

> **Playability:** I wish you could zoom closer in *War of the Ring* mode to make things easier to control, but that's a very small issue

> **Entertainment:** Like a good expansion, it loses none of the fun of its predecessor

> **Replay Value:** Moderately High

Second Opinion 8.25

Outside of the dubiously executed narrative portrayal of the *Witch-King's* rise to power, *Rise of the Witch-King* is everything you could ever want out of an expansion pack: a cool new faction with unique gameplay mechanics, a lengthy single-player campaign, and tweaks to many areas of the game that streamline the experience.

In particular, the enhanced *War of the Ring* mode is extensive enough to keep you entertained for months. The same issues that I have with the original game persist—notably siege units that level the toughest of bases in seconds—but there aren't many expansions around that deliver as much entertainment and value as this one. —ADAM

PC

Heroes of Annihilated Empires

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 6-PLAYER VIA INTERNET OR LAN) > **PUBLISHER** CDV > **DEVELOPER** CSC GAMESWORLD > **RELEASE** NOVEMBER 16 > **ESRB** T



SNOOZE

At some point, you have to draw the line with an overrepresented genre like real-time strategy. So many games are available that there's just no reason to care about a below-average effort like *Heroes of Annihilated Empires*. Every concept in this RTS is lifted from somewhere else and mashed together in an attempt to approximate innovation, and the overall experience falls short of what gamers should demand out of their investments.

The basic gameplay here is classic RTS. You'll build structures, harvest resources, recruit troops, and research upgrades. *Heroes's* twist

is that each player's hero character is vastly more powerful than what we've seen in an RTS to date. Once they've leveled up a bit and gotten some decent equipment and spells, a solitary hero can be worth literally hundreds of regular units in battle. Unfortunately, the gameplay never gets into anything interesting enough to bring players into the mental gestalt that is the entire point of strategy games.

Two problems are at the forefront of *Heroes's* otherwise marginally competent gameplay. First, it's far too difficult to select units during battle without having a previous control group set or using the clumsy drag-box option, which is particularly frustrating when your base is under siege and you're trying to keep your workers from getting killed while they frantically repair your buildings. Second, unit collision is extremely wonky. As far as I can tell, troops only collide with enemies and not friendlies—meaning that area-effects spells are far too powerful at times, and positioning and battlefield control are marginalized.

Horrible balancing in the single-player game and a decades-old multiplayer frontend further accelerate *Heroes of Annihilated Empires* on its quick trip to the bargain bin. Only bother with this if you've somehow exhausted the entertainment of the dozen or so fantastic RTSs released in the last year. —ADAM

BOTTOM LINE 6

> **Concept:** Ever heard about a little game called *Warcraft III*? Picture it without any of the polish, and with some shiny peripheral features stuck on

> **Graphics:** If there's one thing to admire here, it's the excellent visuals

> **Sound:** If you can't get passable voice actors, why bother including voice in the game?

> **Playability:** Convincing archers to move into range is way harder than it should be

> **Entertainment:** A mediocre campaign and bad online implementation do not a good RTS make

> **Replay Value:** Low

Second Opinion 6.5

I could try to come up with something clever to say about this game's awkward title, but I don't even care about the game enough to do that. The cutscenes are so cheap looking they reminded me of a Sunday school picture book, but a bigger problem here is the mission objectives, which are often unclear. I should also mention that *Heroes* is sleep-inducingly slow; I often left the room to do something else while my troops built up or got into position. This game isn't complete trash, but it is a fairly generic RTS and I have trouble recommending it to anyone given the wealth of great RTS games available on PC. —BEN



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PC

Gothic 3

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ROLE-PLAYING GAME > **PUBLISHER** ASPYR > **DEVELOPER** PIRANHA BYTES > **RELEASE** NOVEMBER 14 > **ESRB** T

■ You can adventure in all the areas you see, but you won't want to



THIS GAME WILL MAKE YOU EMO

Jokes about eyeliner and cutting holes in hoodies aside, Gothic 3 is an interesting experiment in gaming. So many compelling concepts are present here, and they all go to waste due to the worst RPG combat system I have ever come across in my life. From *Might & Magic* to *The Bard's Tale* (yes, the ones from the '80s) to *Morrowind*, I have never in my life seen a battle mechanic broken to this extent.

The core idea behind Gothic 3 is that the player's actions within the game's enormous open world affect how the conflicts play out. Think of it as being like *Oblivion*, but you can choose to help any of the game's factions achieve their ends at the expense of others. This system is good in theory, and to be fair, Gothic 3's world is brilliantly realized in many respects. Sadly, the game is just no fun to play.

Combat in Gothic 3 is, to put it plainly, broken beyond repair. Getting hit by just about any attack sends you (or your enemy) into a long hit-recovery animation during which you can't do anything. If you get hit again

during this period, the animation starts over, making fighting multiple foes all but impossible. The rage engendered by being killed by lowly wolves despite being a magic-sword-wielding, spell-slinging, high-level badass is unbelievable. Try as you might, there's no way to make the combat fun or balanced—and no way to avoid it. Every time I started to enjoy some other element of the game, I'd get thrown into a combat situation that completely destroyed any fun I may have been having. If you must play this game, make sure to save every two minutes or so, because that's about how often you'll die.

It's sad to see so many good ideas go to waste. From the exploration of the wondrous world to the intricate political situation of its denizens, Gothic 3 nails a good chunk of the role-player's wet dream. The character progression is solid and the core mechanics are good, yet I will never ever recommend this to anyone that I even remotely like. Yes, one broken system can ruin a game this completely.—**ADAM**

■ The world contains many beautiful environments



BOTTOM LINE 5

> **Concept:** Add consequence to a player's actions in a huge, open fantasy RPG world

> **Graphics:** Aside from some silly animations, the world is gorgeous in nearly every way

> **Sound:** Be thankful that the voiceovers are merely sub-par, rather than horrendous

> **Playability:** The utterly laughable excuse for a combat system runs an otherwise cool game

> **Entertainment:** Play *Oblivion* instead. Hell, play *Morrowind* or *Daggerfall* again before wasting your time here

> **Replay Value:** Low

Second Opinion 5

It is peniously easy to compare Gothic 3 to *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion*. Realistically speaking, the only time the two games should be mentioned together is in a context like: "Boy, Gothic 3 sure sucks. I want to play a real game, like *Oblivion*." Gothic's biggest draw—exploring a wide-open landscape—is utterly suffocated in the amput of its numerous problems. With a flimsy combat system and an array of crippling technical issues, Gothic 3 is almost amusing in its failure. The visuals appear lively enough at a glance, but looking at the game any deeper reveals a dead world inhabited by poorly executed good ideas. Heck, I'm even sorry I had to write this review, since it is now published evidence that I spent time playing this embarrassing trash.—**JOE**



PC

Heroes of Might & Magic V: Hammers of Fate

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER STRATEGY (UP TO 8-PLAYER VIA INTERNET OR LAN) > **PUBLISHER** UBISOFT > **DEVELOPER** NIVAL INTERACTIVE > **RELEASE** NOVEMBER 14 > **ESRB** T

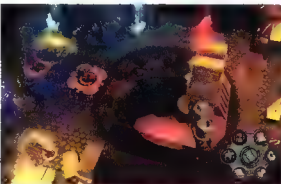
FEAR THE MADNESS OF THE CROWN

We all know that *Heroes V* is no revelation in the strategy genre, but it's a solid and entertaining game that admirably resurrected a disgraced franchise. This expansion pack shores up several of the weaknesses of the original while giving another couple dozen hours of single-player campaign. In the world of \$20 expansions, that's nothing to complain about.

The two major additions in *Hammers of Fate*—the random map generator and the new dwarven faction—are both cool. Though the random maps aren't generally as good as hand-crafted arenas, they're good enough to be fun and add much-needed replay value to the game. The dwarves and their rune magic (which burns resources to add fifty combat effects) are an interesting army, with few ranged options and a whole lot of beef to dog up the battlefield. They won't be replacing the demons as my faction of choice any time soon, but the dwarves are a worthy addition.

One final element of this expansion merits explanation: the caravan system, which fans will recognize as one of the only good ideas from *Heroes IV*. Caravans allow you to ship troops to your towns from standalone buildings on the map, which smoothes out one of the worst rough spots in *Heroes V*. Previously, players had to run an extra hero around to each troop generator they controlled every game week to avoid losing a strategic advantage. Now, you can simply recruit them from the town and they'll automatically march across the map to get there. This loss of tedium is most welcome.

Heroes V still comes recommended to strategy gamers, and *Hammers of Fate* slickly integrates more good ideas into the game. There's no reason not to like this expansion pack.—**ADAM**



BOTTOM LINE 8

> **Concept:** Continue the *Heroes V* story, and patch up some of the original game's issues

> **Graphics:** Colorful and detailed, very much in the series' tradition

> **Sound:** Some voiceovers are laughable, but the score is outstanding

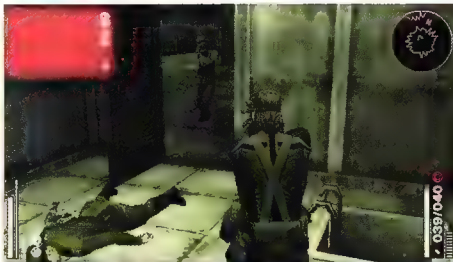
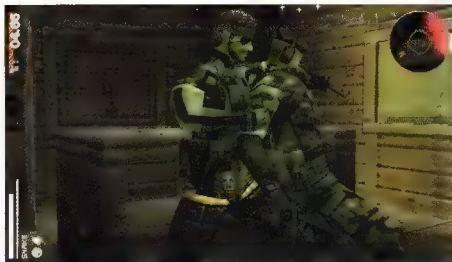
> **Playability:** If you know how to use a mouse, you can play this game

> **Entertainment:** This won't rock anyone's world, but it's a very nice addition to last *May's* release

> **Replay Value:** High

Second Opinion 7.75

It's rare that I like an expansion pack more than the original game, but there are exceptions to every rule. By adding in some small features that improve the core gameplay rather than simply adding more new maps and units, the *Hammers of Fate* pack is a great add-on. It doesn't change enough to repair the things I find lacking in the game as a whole—chiefly a battle system that hasn't evolved significantly in years and some tedious mission parameters in the campaign. This isn't my cup of tea as far as strategy games go, but if your enthusiasm for the series runs in the opposite direction, you should be pleased.—**MILLER**



BOTTOM LINE **9**

> **Concept:** A full-featured and compelling stealth adventure in the series' main timeline.

> **Graphics:** Like a console MGS, but smaller. The graphic novel-styled cutscenes are a great alternative to regular cinematics.

> **Sound:** All of the major voice actors return, and the music sets the mood perfectly.

> **Playability:** A generally excellent translation of the control scheme. The ability to move while in first-person is a helpful addition. In normal view, the camera gets hard to manage in close quarters.

> **Entertainment:** Addictive single-player and robust multiplayer options will keep you playing day and night.

> **Replay Value:** Moderately High.

PSP

Metal Gear Solid: Portable Ops

> **STYLE:** 1-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 6-PLAYER VIA AD HOC OR INFRASTRUCTURE) > **PUBLISHER:** KONAMI > **DEVELOPER:** KOJIMA PRODUCTIONS > **RELEASE:** DECEMBER 5 > **ESRB:** M

LITTLE BIG MAN

For all of their genetic similarities, Big Boss and Solid Snake are not identical. Snake is a solitary soldier, single-handedly taking down nuclear threats. Big Boss is a commander, fighting for a cause with an army at his side. Metal Gear Solid: Portable Ops is the first game to really explore this distinction, and the result mirrors the relationship between the two legendary soldiers. Even though Portable Ops has some key differences from the console entries, it shares the most important qualities; from the cast of characters to the twisting story, this is unmistakably Metal Gear.

The game begins as Big Boss—who continues to use the codename Snake—wakes up in a South American prison to find that he needs to stop an uprising caused by members of FOX. You accomplish this by amassing your own militia, FOXHOUND, accepting volunteer defectors and “persuading” (i.e. knocking unconscious and throwing in prison) others. These recruits do far more than accompany you into battle; most of the game’s real depth comes from allocating your troops into different non-combat units for a variety of benefits. It is incredibly addictive. Of the 20 hours it took me to beat Portable Ops, at least three were spent collecting new troops (see sidebar) and optimizing their deployment.

Not all of your support is behind-the-scenes. You’ll utilize skilled warriors in your sneaking unit to help you complete missions, which are generally short affairs lasting around five to 10 minutes each. The goals range from simple “get here without being seen” stuff to more elaborate sabotage and

kidnapping tasks. These are made more interesting by the addition of a new stealth mechanic: hiding in plain sight. Even though Portable Ops still has you wearing cardboard boxes and crawling in air ducts, infiltration is easiest when you select soldiers that blend in with the enemy. So long as you don’t act peculiar, you can often stroll right through heavily patrolled areas. The danger of encountering

more astute guards is always present though, so the experience remains tense. It works so well, I have to wonder if this isn’t a test-run for concepts being implemented in Metal Gear Solid 4.

The episodic nature of the missions is a great strength of Portable Ops, making it easy to play on a handheld system.

Unfortunately, from the story angle, it is the game’s biggest weakness. The conspiracy surrounding Big Boss just doesn’t unfold with the same impact; it’s hard to feel like you’re falling further down the rabbit hole when each victory sends you back to a central menu screen. The events are still cool, with awesome boss fights present in full force, but there’s just no sense of urgency.

The problems with pacing don’t change the fact that Portable Ops is one of the best games ever made for the PSP. The single-player ties flawlessly into the multiplayer, where you can test your loyal soldiers against up to five other people via ad hoc, infrastructure, and even game sharing. Whether online or off, the content in Portable Ops just keeps coming in more impressive ways, proving that handheld games can stack up against even the biggest triple-A console titles. —**JOE**



GET OUT AND FIGHT!

It’s possible to grow your ranks by dragging soldiers back to Roy Campbell’s truck within each level, but that can be a slow and tedious process. The most efficient way to build an army is by downloading volunteers from Wi-Fi hotspots. Since the game generates a new character for each unique IP, a quick stroll through a neighborhood, mall, or business park should give you a stable of good recruits. As a bonus, there are certain unique and rare characters that can only be obtained via this method. Don’t worry if you don’t live in a Wi-Fi heavy area—there are still plenty of great soldiers to be obtained in-game.



Second Opinion **8.5**

Sometime in the next few months you’re likely to see a curious looking fellow wandering aimlessly down a city street, holding a PSP up in the air as he furiously taps buttons. Don’t worry; he’s just playing Portable Ops. The ability to gather new troops for your army in the latest Metal Gear game by tapping into local Wi-Fi hotspots is brilliant. Thankfully, the game behind the gimmick is also more than capable of wearing the legendary moniker with pride. It fills in a long-mysterious gap in the Metal Gear timeline with a story that is intriguing, smart, and even a little funny. Gameplay maintains the familiar controls and interactions that have begun to feel a little stale to me, but the addition of recruited soldiers changes up the formula in a cool way. Juggling the menus and troop deployments that are now required won’t appeal to pure action fans, but you folks probably shouldn’t be playing Metal Gear in the first place. It’s not the best Metal Gear game I’ve played, but it sure is a fine addition to the PSP library. —**MILLER**

PSP

Star Wars: Lethal Alliance

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION (2-PLAYER VIA AD HOC) > PUBLISHER UBISOFT > DEVELOPER UBISOFT MONTREAL
> RELEASE DECEMBER 6 > ESRB T



TO THE GREAT PIT OF KARKOON

In *Return of the Jedi*, a subterranean creature known as the Sarlacc ate Boba Fett for lunch. With one unceremonious belch, this inert omnivore eliminated one of Star Wars' most highly revered characters. I never thought I would run across a game that exhibited Sarlacc-like traits, but *Star Wars: Lethal Alliance* is most certainly a deathtrap that slowly eats away at your sanity.

Lethal Alliance ties directly into Raven Software's phenomenal *Jedi Knight* series, and tantalizes our inner nerds with some great ideas. Given how expansive the *Star Wars* universe is, most of the new characters introduced these days are derivative of others. Ubisoft can be credited for creating a truly unique character in the Twi'lek named Rianna. She's savvy with firearms, incredibly acrobatic, but interestingly, most of her actions include a droid named Zeeo.

By holding the droid out in front of her, Rianna can block incoming laser fire. The droid can hack into Imperial computers — which leads to some great battles where you have to provide protection. Zeeo can also be told to ascend to a certain point on a wall. When he reaches his mark, Rianna will run up to him. After this Zeeo can be moved to another location on the wall, creating satisfying Prince of Persia-like platforming. Most impressive of all, Rianna can cling beneath the droid and dangle for flying segments. These airborne sequences are far and away the most exciting elements of the game and are very comparable to the *Death Star* run in the old *Star Wars* arcade game.

The PSP has had problems with third-person gunplay, but Ubisoft has found a workable solution in a lock-on that can be switched from target to

target. Yes, it's lame that you have to rely on the game's targeting for you to succeed, but there are always a ton of enemies around, and you never really find yourself fussing with the camera positioning. The weapon selection is quite boring, but the new close-quarters energy blade is something that needs to go into more *Star Wars* games.

Lethal Alliance plays well, and succeeds in exploring George Lucas' universe in a much different way than we've seen before, but it is still torturous. This mainly comes from the uninspired level designs. Rianna is incredibly skilled, yet she spends most of her time trying to get doors to open and platforms to move. As she waits around for these things to happen, she must defeat waves of stormtroopers — who stream out of doorways in such unbelievable quantities that you'd think they were emerging from a clown car. Once your finger is sore from the mindless combat, a hombly designed boss battle usually awaits.

There's certainly a lot to love, yet equally as much to shake your fist and scream obscenities at in *Lethal Alliance*. Ubisoft was definitely on the right track, but the creativity just didn't pass over to the levels. The Sarlacc keeps its victims alive and in agony for thousands of years. On the plus side, *Lethal Alliance* will only inflict about eight hours of suffering upon you. —REINER



BOTTOM LINE 6.5

> **Concept:** This spiritual successor to the *Jedi Knight* series has a strong allure with its gameplay, but the level designs are soaked in a foul stench.

> **Graphics:** Fantastic acrobatic animations are unfortunately framed against grotesque lighting and levels that lack the *Star Wars* flavor.

> **Sound:** The story is fleshed out with decent spoken dialogue, but there really isn't much in terms of ambient noise.

> **Playability:** It taps into the *Star Wars* license in a different way, but the hombly level designs kill any excitement that the game delivers.

> **Entertainment:** Truly lethal, but I wouldn't mind seeing a sequel with better levels.

> **Replay Value:** Moderately Low

Second Opinion 6.75

Don't you hate it when a game gets worse the longer you play it? Sadly, such is the case with *Lethal Alliance*, a promising addition to *Star Wars* lore that falls apart the deeper you move into its twisty corridors. At first, I was on board with the acrobatic flips and stealth kills of the sexpot Twi'lek mercenary girl. A mix of combat, platforming, and even a little flying injects variety, but then you start to see the truth. A vacuum story is the first sign of trouble, and the god-awful boss battles will confirm your worst fears. The entire second half of the game is characterized by repeated waves of tiresome stormtrooper fights, who charge from doors practically screaming: "I'm here to make the game longer!" We deserve better from a galaxy so far away. —MILLER



GAME BOY ADVANCE

Yggdra Union

> STYLE 1-PLAYER STRATEGY/RPG > PUBLISHER ATLUS > DEVELOPER STING
> RELEASE NOVEMBER 28 > ESRB T

UNION KNIGHTS

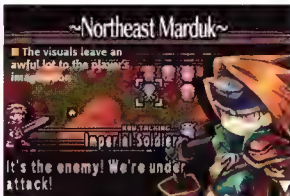
BOTTOM LINE 7.25

The best strategy games are able to transform you into a tactical powerhouse as you maneuver your units to victory. *Yggdra Union* manages to tap into this feeling occasionally with some innovative strategy mechanics, but more often it made me feel like a spectator rather than a commander.

Certain parts of *Yggdra Union* are instantly familiar and accessible. You move units around a grid, initiating battles depending on your units' abilities. There is a rock-paper-scissors relationship among weapons, and your positioning plays a crucial role in your ability to launch an assault. All of these elements fuse together to create a decent foundation, but the attempted twists on the classic formula do more to harm than help.

It is cooler that you can assist the flow of an encounter once it has started, but your interaction is so minimal that you're basically just watching some sprites dance around in place for 20 seconds — and that gets old fast. The cards and skills operate on complicated rules that seem like they're in place to keep you from doing cool things rather than facilitate them. Unit morale takes the place of HP, but since it doesn't regenerate between battles, it's easy to get left in a lurch.

I have to commend developer Sting for trying some refreshing things with this genre. The interplay among all of its systems isn't refined enough for the game to reach its potential, but none of its problems negate the fact that *Yggdra Union* is a decent effort in tactical strategy. —JOE



> **Concept:** An experimental strategy/RPG that needs more polish to really succeed.

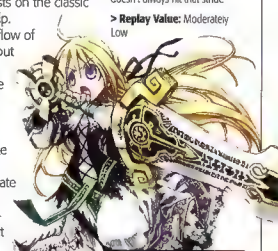
> **Graphics:** Apart from nice character portraits, the whole presentation is sorely lacking.

> **Sound:** Standard battle fanfare and a lot of text-scrolling noises.

> **Playability:** Lots of menus and numbers to examine, but it all makes sense after the first few hours.

> **Entertainment:** Fun and clever when at its best, but it doesn't always hit that stride.

> **Replay Value:** Moderately Low



Second Opinion 7.75

I appreciate this twist on the turn-based strategy/RPG genre, but I can't help getting annoyed at the dozens of rules and systems in *Yggdra Union* that seem superfluous. Tackling on poorly card systems and obtuse statistics doesn't add depth; it only adds frustration. Nonetheless, this title does offer up some interesting strategic battles and a few unique ideas (surprisingly, only being able to make one attack per turn leads to some cool strategy). In the grand scheme of portable strategy, this is far from incompetent. —ADAM

NINTENDO DS

Kirby Squeak Squad

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION (PLATFORM (LIP TO 4-PLAYER VIA WIRELESS))
> **PUBLISHER** NINTENDO > **DEVELOPER** HAL/FLAGSHIP > **RELEASE** DECEMBER 6 > **ESRB** E

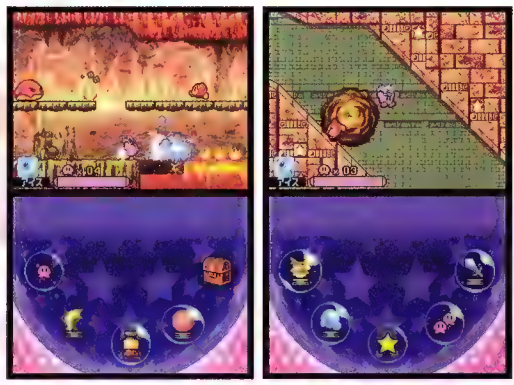
REAL MEN WEAR PINK

Kirby's a guy who has his priorities straight, and I've got to respect that. Just before he's about to sit down and enjoy some well-earned strawberry shortcake, it is snatched away by a bunch of cutesy animal ne'er-do-wells. Not one to take that kind of thing lying down, Kirby leaps into action to save his dessert, a journey that will take him across the world and eventually into the far reaches of space. Now that's the kind of gumption I like to see in my video game characters.

I was a huge fan of last year's Canvas Curse, which had Kirby rolling around with one of the best uses of the touch screen the DS has seen. For Squeak Squad (a reference to those dastardly cake-thieves), Kirby is back to trotting along as he eats and absorbs his enemies. It's a return to tradition I could have

done without in the early levels of this new game, which play out as some of the simplest and least interesting I've seen in a platformer in years. Thankfully, the difficulty and complexity of the level design improves as the game wears on. Kirby's ability to endlessly eat and absorb the powers of what he digests is not only enviable, but pretty darn fun in practice. From breathing fire to donning a magic top hat to transforming into a UFO, every ability offers a little something different. The bottom screen is effectively an X-ray view of Kirby's stomach contents, where additional powers, food, and treasure chests are stored. Tapping these powers should happen faster and without frustration, but it's a minor problem.

There are plenty of unlockables to collect on your journey, but gathering them all is the only



real reason to keep playing after you smash through your first playthrough. It's hard for me to imagine that you don't have better things to do with your time than the silly little multiplayer minigames that are included, but they're there if you want them. Kirby's return to tradition didn't wow me like his first DS roll in the hay. Still, while I might argue with his methods, no one can dispute the results—everybody likes to end their day with a piece of cake.—**MILLER**



BOTTOM LINE 7.75

> **Concept:** Go questing with Kirby after something way more important than any princess—desert

> **Graphics:** Imaginative backgrounds and cute animations are what anybody ought to expect

> **Sound:** Do you like insane callopie music?

> **Playability:** Movement and powers are controlled well, but the touch screen elements don't always work as fast as I'd like

> **Entertainment:** A few boring early levels blossom into a return to Kirby's platforming roots

> **Replay Value:** Moderately Low

Second Opinion 7.75

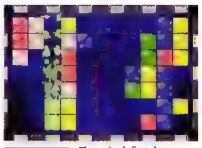
Kirby's a cute little dude, but I've always preferred his more experimental games—like Dream Course, Tilt 'n' Tumble, and the excellent Canvas Curse—to his traditional platformers. His much-lauded ability to absorb enemies and their abilities remains a great gimmick, but Squeak Squad somehow fails to really grab me. For one, the game's initial levels are nearly laborintensive in their simplicity. Things pick up a bit as you advance, but the leisurely pace of play, coupled with the floaty controls, make for a game that really never achieves much momentum.—**MATT**

HANDHELD QUICKIES

NINTENDO DS

Konductra

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER PUZZLE (2-PLAYER VIA WIRELESS OR NINTENDO WIFI)
> **PUBLISHER** Q3 - ENTERTAINMENT
> **DEVELOPER** Q3FUNK
> **RELEASE** OCTOBER 31 > **ESRB** E



BOTTOM LINE 6.25

There is definitely something unique going on here, but it doesn't have that certain hook that a puzzle game needs to pull in the addicts. Players line up matching colors and must trace a line through the clusters from one edge of the screen to another in order to rack up points. You can go for a high score, solve preset task puzzles, or face off with a friend in the various modes. The game could have benefited from a slick presentation, but the graphics, music, and voice work are all bottom of the barrel. It's too bad that demo sharing isn't available, and good luck finding someone to play against online.—**BRYAN**

NINTENDO DS

Brain Boost: Beta Wave/Gamma Wave

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER PUZZLE
> **PUBLISHER** NIKKO
> **DEVELOPER** WITCHEMUEL-HOLDIN
> **RELEASE** NOVEMBER 21 > **ESRB** E



BOTTOM LINE 6

Majesco has obviously followed Nintendo's lead here by digging up its own Japanese puzzle expert. Unfortunately, the developer split what could have been a decent \$30 brain game into two lacking \$20 ones. Each title features only five different minigames that you'll repeat over and over again with increasing difficulty—and they don't significantly track your results. You'll play as a space boy as he helps two idiot friends get back either their thinking cap or memory disc, depending on which game you bought. If you're going to get one of these, go for the faster-paced Beta Wave, but watch out for that nasty addition game.—**BRYAN**

PSP

Warhammer: Battle For Atiuma

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER STRATEGY (LIP TO 2-PLAYER VIA AD-HOC) > **PUBLISHER** NAMCO BANDAI
> **DEVELOPER** 3D GAMES
> **RELEASE** NOVEMBER 14 > **ESRB** T



BOTTOM LINE 7.5

Like any card-based system, you're looking at a good while before you're totally comfortable with the rules of this collectible card game turned video game. However, if you are a Warhammer CCG virgin, a clearly laid out set of tutorial videos should help you along. Battles are engrossing, and there are plenty of strategic elements to juggle without things becoming overwhelming. While the overall visuals aren't much to talk about, the cards themselves are depicted in loving detail. The production values are pretty abysmal, but this absorbing strategy title has hours of potential playtime packed in—more than worth checking out.—**MILLER**

PSP

Mortal Kombat: Unchained

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER FIGHTING (2-PLAYER VIA AD-HOC) > **PUBLISHER** MIDWAY
> **DEVELOPER** 3D INK
> **RELEASE** NOVEMBER 14 > **ESRB** V



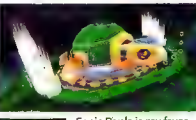
BOTTOM LINE 8

Much like a DVD with bonus features, Mortal Kombat: Unchained is an enhanced port of Deception. It isn't the latest that the MK universe has to offer, but it's still one of the best. Other than a dramatic degradation in the character models, the PSP has no problems handling MK's bloody style of play. When you aren't ripping off someone's head or committing har-kin, there's still plenty to do thanks to awesome diversions like chess and puzzle combat. This version also features a new Endurance mode, plus the additions of Kitana, Jax, Frost, Blaze, Goro, and Shao Kahn to the roster. The loading times are a bit long, but once the limbs begin to fly, it's hard to deny this game's gory charm.—**REINER**

PSP

Sonic Rivals

> **STYLE** 1 OR 2-PLAYER ACTION/RACING (2-PLAYER VIA AD-HOC)
> **PUBLISHER** SEGA
> **DEVELOPER** BACKBONE ENTERTAINMENT
> **RELEASE** NOVEMBER 21 > **ESRB** E



BOTTOM LINE 6.75

Sonic Rivals is my favorite Sonic title in recent memory. Unfortunately, that's sort of like being the coolest member of Barenaked Ladies. I'll say this: Sonic Rivals is better than the last few console games if only because it narrows the franchise's now-staggered shot focus to what's always been cool about it: speed. It's essentially a 2D track race, transposed onto twisting, rendered 3D environments. The base gameplay is decent, although the inclusion of power-up attacks and platforming obstacles only serves to muddle the experience, making success feel more like a matter of blind luck than skill. Still, it's at least a solid addition for the Sonic series, and I hope Backbone gets the chance to refine it in the future.—**MATT**



CHARTS

An In-Depth Listing Of The Best Selling Games

TOP 20

Listings Based Upon NPD Data For November 2006 Based On Units Sold

1 GEARS OF WAR



Let's compare these games to some of our favorite sandwiches. Why would we do this? For science. The guys in Gears look like they eat a lot of protein, so it would have to be a meaty sandwich. Also, Gears is a beauty to look at but the environments are a mess, and that just screams BBQ pulled pork sammich to us.

2 FINAL FANTASY XII



We imagine that Final Fantasy would be some kind of grilled chicken sandwich because all Final Fantasies have Chocobos, and Chocobos are birds, which means they probably taste like chicken. Anyway, no one is going to argue that grilled chicken is a bad sandwich, in fact it is a great sandwich, but...

3 THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: TWILIGHT PRINCESS



...It's not quite as good as The Legend of Zelda: the Reuben. Now, for some reason the grilled chicken sells better than the Reuben, but it is still a tasty sandwich. Don't listen to the register lady who says it's not as good as the grilled chicken. She is going to get fired for giving out bad sandwich advice. And don't listen to your friend eating the grilled chicken he's wrong too. The Reuben is awesome and you know it. Enjoy your lunch.

4 GUITAR HERO II



We suppose that Guitar Hero would be some kind of fried banana, bacon, and cream cheese sandwich. (That's what rock stars eat right?) Mmm, bacon. Actually, after jamming all afternoon to Van Halen and Nirvana you really do work up an appetite. Hold on, we're making ourselves hungry. We have to go get some lunch.

5 WWE SMACKDOWN VS RAW 2007

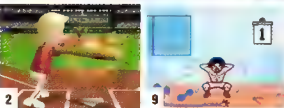


Okay, we're back. Our favorite sandwich shop was closed, so we went to White Castle instead. That was a mistake. Now our insides feel like they are remodeling a scene from Smackdown Vs. RAW. Remember how you could take someone's head and smash it into the toilets? Yeah, we loved doing that too, but we don't like so much when our stomachs starts doing that to our small intestines.

Rank	Title	L. Mo.	System	Score	Release	Price
1	Gears of War	N/A	360	9.5	11-06	\$61
2	Final Fantasy XII	N/A	PS2	9.25	10-06	\$55
3	The Legend Of Zelda: Twilight Princess	N/A	Wii	10	12-06	\$49
4	Guitar Hero II w/Guitar	N/A	PS2	9	11-06	\$79
5	WWE Smackdown Vs. RAW 2007	N/A	PS2	8.75	11-06	\$50
6	Call of Duty 3	N/A	360	8.5	11-06	\$59
7	Madden NFL 07	3	PS2	8.25	11-06	\$39
8	Need for Speed: Carbon	N/A	PS2	8.5	10-06	\$40
9	Nintendogs: Dalmation & Friends	N/A	DS	N/A	10-06	\$30
10	Pokémon Ranger	N/A	DS	5	10-06	\$31
11	Marvel: Ultimate Alliance	N/A	PS2	9.25	10-06	\$39
12	SOCOM: U.S. Navy SEALs Combined Assault	N/A	PS2	6.5	11-06	\$40
13	Final Fantasy III	N/A	DS	8	11-06	\$40
14	Dragon Ball Z: Budokai Tenkaichi 2	N/A	PS2	N/A	11-06	\$40
15	Guitar Hero II	N/A	PS2	9	11-06	\$50
16	New Super Mario Bros.	N/A	DS	9.25	05-06	\$35
17	Scarface: The World is Yours	1	PS2	8.5	10-06	\$45
18	Yoshi's Island DS	N/A	DS	8.25	11-06	\$31
19	Need for Speed: Carbon	N/A	360	8.5	11-06	\$59
20	Need for Speed: Carbon	N/A	XBOX	7.5	11-06	\$40

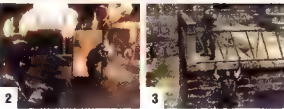
TOP 10 JAPAN

Rank	Title	System
1	Tales of Destiny	PS2
2	Wii Sports	Wii
3	Hajimete No Wii	Wii
4	The Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess	Wii
5	Final Fantasy VI Advance	GBA
6	Summer Night 4	PS2
7	Pokémon Diamond	DS
8	Jump Ultimate Stars	DS
9	WarioWare: Smooth Moves	Wii
10	Oshare MaJo Love and Berry	DS



TOP 10 GI

Rank	Title	L. Mo.	System
1	The Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess	1	Wii
2	Rainbow Six Vegas	2	360
3	Metal Gear Solid: Portable Ops	N/A	PSP
4	Guitar Hero II	9	PS2
5	Super Swing Golf	N/A	Wii
6	Lost Planet: Extreme Condition	N/A	360
7	LOTR: The Battle for Middle-earth II - The Rise of the Witch King	N/A	PC
8	Castlevania: Portrait of Ruin	4	DS
9	Gears of War	6	360
10	Marvel: Ultimate Alliance	N/A	Multi



The Staff's Favorite PCs

TOP 10 PC

Rank	Title	L. Mo.	Price
1	Neverwinter Nights 2	N/A	\$46
2	The Sims 2: Pets	1	\$27
3	World of Warcraft	2	\$22
4	Medieval II: Total War	N/A	\$50
5	Battlefield 2142	3	\$40
6	MS Flight Simulator X Deluxe	5	\$66
7	MS Flight Simulator X	10	\$43
8	The Sims 2	9	\$39
9	Desperate Housewives	N/A	\$14
10	Star Wars: Empire At War: Forces of Corruption	N/A	\$27



Based On Monthly Units Sold

REVIEWS ARCHIVE

PLAYSTATION 3

Call of Duty 3	8.75	Jan-07
Eight Night Round 3	8.75	Jan-07
Full Auto 2: Battlegrounds	7.5	Jan-07
Genji: Days of the Blade	6	Dec-06
Madden NFL 07	7.75	Jan-07
Marvel: Ultimate Alliance	9.25	Dec-06
Mobile Suit Gundam: Crossfire	3.75	Dec-06
NBA 07	7	Dec-06
NBA 2K7	8	Jan-07
Need for Speed: Carbon	8.5	Dec-06
NHL 2K7	8.25	Jan-07
Resistance: Fall of Man	9.5	Dec-06
Ridge Racer 7	8	Dec-06
Some Like Hot	6.25	Jan-07
Tony Hawk's Project 8	8.75	Jan-07
Unltd Legends: Dark Kingdom	8.25	Jan-07

XBOX 360

Bombberman: Act Zero	3	Sep-06
Call of Duty 3	8.5	Dec-06
Dead or Alive Xtreme 2	7.5	Jan-07
Dead Rising	9.25	Sep-06
Enchanted Arms	6	Oct-06
F.E.A.R.	8.5	Dec-06
FIFA Soccer 07	7.25	Dec-06
Genji of War	8.25	Dec-06
Godfather, The	7.75	Oct-06
Just Cause	7.25	Oct-06
LEGO Star Wars II: The Original Trilogy	8	Oct-06
Madden NFL 07	7.75	Oct-06
Marvel: Ultimate Alliance	9.25	Dec-06
NBA 2K7	8.25	Jan-07
NBA Live 07	5.25	Dec-06
Need for Speed: Carbon	8.5	Dec-06
NHL 07	7.25	Oct-06
NHL 2K7	8.25	Oct-06
Ninety-Nine Nights	7.5	Sep-06
Over G Fighters	5	Sep-06
Phantom Star Universe	6	Jan-07
Saints Row	8.75	Sep-06
Samurai Warriors 2	6	Nov-06
Some Like Hot	6.75	Jan-07
Splinter Cell: Double Agent	8.25	Oct-06
Star Trek: Legacy	7.75	Jan-07
Superman Returns	6	Jan-07
Test Drive Unlimited	8.25	Nov-06
Tiger Woods PGA Tour 07	8	Nov-06
Tom Clancy's Rainbow Six: Vegas	9.5	Jan-07
Tony Hawk's Project 8	9	Dec-06
Viva la Fiesta	6	Jan-07
WWE Smackdown vs. Raw 2007	8.75	Dec-06

WII

Call of Duty 3	1.25	Jan-07
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File Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess - Wii - Jan-07

Chicken Licken: Ace in Action	7.25	Jan-07
Heaven	7	Jan-07
Excite Truck	7.75	Jan-07
Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess, The	10	Jan-07
Madden NFL 07	7.75	Jan-07
Marvel: Ultimate Alliance	8.25	Jan-07
Metal Slug Anthology	7.5	Jan-07
Rayman Raving Rabbids	8.5	Jan-07
Red Steel	7.5	Jan-07
Super Monkey Ball: Banana Blitz	6.75	Jan-07
Tony Hawk's Downhill Jam	5	Jan-07
Yamaha Center: Second Opinion	8.5	Jan-07
Wii Sports	6.5	Jan-07

PLAYSTATION 2

ATV Offroad Fury 4	7.5	Jan-07
Bully	8.5	Dec-06
Capcom Classics Collection Volume 2	7	Dec-06
Destroy All Humans 2	8.5	Nov-06
Dregs of Carthage	5	Sep-06
Final Fantasy VII	6.75	Nov-06
Diggas 2: Cursed Memories	8.75	Sep-06
dotmatrix/G.I. Joe: Retribution	5.75	Dec-06
Elekta Seven Vol. 1: The New Wave	5.25	Oct-06
Family Guy	5.5	Jan-07
Fantasy and the Furious, The	6	Nov-06
Final Fantasy VII	9.25	Nov-06
Final Fantasy X	7.75	Sep-06
God Hand	7	Dec-06
Guitar Hero II	3.9	Dec-06
Just Cause	7.25	Dec-06
Justice League Heroes	7.25	Dec-06
Legend of Spyro: A New Beginning, The	7	Nov-06



Bully - PS2 - Dec-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
Mortal Kombat: Armageddon	8.25	Dec-06
NASCAR 07	7.75	Oct-06
NBA 07	7.5	Nov-06
NBA 2K7	8	Nov-06
NBA Live 07	7.5	Nov-06
Need for Speed: Carbon	8.5	Dec-06
NHL 07	7.75	Oct-06
NHL 2K7	6.75	Oct-06
Oni Piece: Pirate's Carnival	9.5	Oct-06
One Piece: Pirate's Carnival	4	Sep-06
Phantasy Star Universe	6	Jan-07
Reservoir Dogs	5.75	Jan-07
Rogue Gallery	8	Jan-07
Rule of Rose	6.25	Oct-06
Samurai Warriors 2	6	Nov-06
Scarface: The World Is Yours	8.5	Nov-06
Sega Genesis Collection	8.5	Jan-07
Shin Megami Tensei	7.75	Dec-06
Devil Summoner	7.75	Dec-06
Sims 2: Pets, The	6	Dec-06
SOCOM U.S. Navy SEALs	6	Dec-06
Combined Assault	6.5	Jan-07
Spy Hunter: Nowhere to Run	3	Nov-06
Star Trek: Encounters	7.25	Jan-07
Star Trek: Command	6	Sep-06
Super Dragon Ball Z	4.75	Sep-06
Tales of the Abyss	7.25	Nov-06
Theville	7.75	Dec-06
Tiger Woods PGA Tour 07	8	Nov-06
Tokaido Plus	7.25	Dec-06
Mysteries of the Karakuri	7.25	Dec-06
Valkyrie Profile 2: Silmnea	8	Oct-06
WWE Smackdown vs. Raw 2007	8.75	Dec-06
Yenogata Fowzie III: Also Sprach Zarathustra	8.5	Sep-06
Yakuza	6	Sep-06

GAMECUBE

Baten Kaitos Origins	7	Nov-06
FIFA 07	7.75	Oct-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
Sims 2: Pets, The	6	Dec-06
Super Monkey Ball Adventure	4.75	Sep-06

XBOX

Capcom Classics Collection Volume 2	7	Dec-06
Destroy All Humans 2	8.5	Nov-06
Family Guy	5.5	Jan-07
FIFA 07	7.75	Oct-06
Final Cut 2	7.5	Sep-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
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
Need for Speed: Carbon	8.5	Dec-06
NHL 07	7.75	Oct-06
NHL 2K7	6.75	Oct-06
Panama: Hell Wars	7.75	Oct-06
Reservoir Dogs	5.75	Jan-07
Scarface: The World Is Yours	8.5	Nov-06
Spy Hunter: Nowhere to Run	3	Nov-06
Theville	7.75	Dec-06
Tiger Woods PGA Tour 07	8	Nov-06

PC

Age of Empires II: The WarChiefs	7	Dec-06
Battlefield 2142	8.5	Nov-06
CrkCity Rome	8	Sep-06
Darkness of Heroes	8	Sep-06
Dark Messiah of Might & Magic	9.25	Dec-06
Dungeons Siege II: Broken World	7.5	Oct-06
F.E.A.R.: Extraction Point	7.75	Oct-06
Just Cause	7	Nov-06
Mage Knight: Apocalypse	6	Dec-06
Medieval II: Total War	9.25	Jan-07
Ninety-Nine Nights 2	8	Dec-06
PreWorld	7	Dec-06
Phantasy Star Universe	6	Jan-07
Reservoir Dogs	5.75	Jan-07

Sid Meier's Civilization IV: Warlords	8	Sep-06
Sid Meier's RailRoads	8	Dec-06
Sims 2: Pets, The	6	Dec-06
Star Wars: Empire at War: Forces of Compaction	7.5	Dec-06
Sword of the Stars	7.5	Sep-06
Tiger Woods PGA Tour 07	8	Nov-06
Warhammer 40,000: Dawn of War - Dark Crusade	8.75	Dec-06
Warhammer: Mark of Chaos	6.75	Jan-07

NINTENDO DS

Break. Em. All	7.5	Sep-06
Castlevania: Portrait of Ruin	9	Jan-07
Chorus of Mana	7.75	Nov-06
Contact	7	Oct-06
Cooking Mama	6.5	Oct-06
Disney Labyrinth	6.75	Oct-06
Dragon Quest Heroes: Rocket Slime	8.25	Oct-06
Diez Best Agents	6.75	Oct-06
Final Fantasy III	8	Dec-06
Gunpey	7.75	Dec-06
Hi Hi Puffy AmiYumi	5.75	Sep-06
The Game and the Amp	4.5	Dec-06
King Knight: Destiny's Soldier	4.5	Dec-06
Magical Starship	6.5	Nov-06
Magnets	7.25	Aug-06
Mario Hoops 3-on-3	6.5	Oct-06
Mario vs. Donkey Kong 2	6	Nov-06
March of the Mims	7.75	Oct-06
MedalHeroes: Phantom War	7	Oct-06
Monster Man ZX	7	Oct-06
Monster House	6	Oct-06
Phonix Wings	7.25	Aug-06
Ace Attorney Justice For All	8	Jan-07



Castlevania: Portrait of Ruin - DS - Jan-07

Pant Black DS	4.5	Aug-06
Pokemon Mystery Dungeon: Blue Rescue Team	3	Nov-06
Pokemon Ranger	5	Dec-06
Scourge Hero	7.5	Nov-06
Star Fox Command	8	Oct-06
Touch Detective	6.75	Nov-06
Yoshi's Island DS	8.25	Dec-06

PSP

50 Cent Bulletproof: G Unit Edition	6.25	Nov-06
Ace Combat X	8.25	Dec-06
Skies of Deception	6.25	Dec-06
Annihilation: Blade Dancer	5.5	Aug-06
Bounty Hounds	6.25	Nov-06
Death Jr. 2: Root of Evil	8.25	Nov-06
Def Jam Fight for NY: The Takeover	8	Aug-06
Dungeon Siege: Throne of Agony	8	Jan-07
Dynasty Warriors V:2	5	Dec-06
EA Replay	6.75	Dec-06
Every Extend Extra	8.25	Nov-06
Gang of London	6	Nov-06
Hitman: Blood Money	8	Dec-06
Godfather: Mob Wars, The	4.5	Nov-06
Grand Theft Auto: Vice City Stories	8.5	Dec-06
Gun Showdown	7.75	Dec-06
Gunpey	7.75	Dec-06
Juiced! Eliminator	7.75	Aug-06
Kilzone: Liberation	7.25	Nov-06
LocoRoco	7.5	Nov-06
Lumines II	3	Dec-06
Medal of Honor: Heroes	6.75	Dec-06
Mercury Meltdown	8	Sep-06
Miami Vice	6.75	Oct-06
NCAA Football 07	8.5	Sep-06
Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest	3	Sep-06
Power Stone Collection	7.75	Nov-06
Race Driver 2006	8.5	Aug-06
SOCOM U.S. Navy SEALs: Fire Team Bravo	7.5	Jan-07
Spectral Souls	5.5	Nov-06
Tekken: Dark Resurrection	8.25	Sep-06
Ultimate Urban Golfers	7.25	Oct-06
Valkyrie Profile: Lenneth	8	Aug-06
WTF	7	Nov-06

GAME BOY ADVANCE

Final Fantasy V Advance	8	Jan-07
Magician Battle Network 5: Cybernet City/Neo Falzar	6.5	Aug-06
Summon Knight: Swordscraft Story 7	7	Aug-06
Summon Knight: Swordscraft Story 2	7.25	Jan-07
Super Robot Taisen: Original Generation	7.5	Aug-06



GEEKED AT BIRTH.



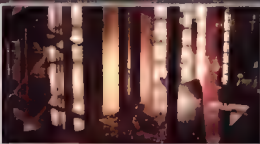
You can talk the walk.
Can you walk the talk?
Here's a chance to prove it.
Please geek responsibly.

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



Rainbow Six: Vegas

The Team Player



By Steven Masters, Game Designer

Rainbow Six: Vegas is all about teamwork. If you play together, you'll win together. But it's always hard to learn how to play with a new group of people and your play styles might not mesh immediately. There are a few things you can do to improve your odds though.

STICK WITH EACH OTHER

It sounds basic, but your team will always benefit if you play together as a team rather than running on your own. Two guns are always more effective than one!

Remember to not run in the classic "grenade kills plenty!" formation but make sure you're working with someone rather than as a lone wolf.

When you're working as a team, you should try to cover the areas that your teammates aren't looking at. This will give everyone in your squad an advantage: You'll be able to pick up on people flanking you and generally provide much better situational awareness. Enemies that you spot will show up on your whole team's radar.

Generally, the person at the front of the formation should be watching forwards (towards the most danger) while the supporting units should cover the angles.

LEAPFROGGING

Leapfrogging is a tactical maneuver designed to move a team of people through hostile territory maintaining fields of fire and providing the most security possible. The core concept is to have people at the front that are stationary and covering the danger areas while the people at the rear are moving up to become the forward cover. At the lowest level, two people leapfrog from cover to cover. At a higher level, much larger teams can leapfrog, even extending the maneuver to parallel corridors or routes for maximal coverage.

Let's use a four-man squad for an example. They are moving in a two by two leapfrog. The two people at the front of the formation should be in cover and aiming at the danger areas where the team is moving to. They should be on separate pieces of cover, ideally covering different arcs. Slaying on separate cover minimizes the potential damage of a frag grenade: you want to spread apart as much as possible.

When the forward security is established, the second pair moves forwards towards the next

available cover, door, or corner.

As much as possible, you should be aware of the covering units' fields of fire and stay out of their way while you are moving. For instance, if someone is on a corner covering down a hall, move to the other side of the hall so he has a clear shot.

As soon as the second pair gets into position and aims out, the first pair can start moving. In Vegas, there is a distinct noise made when you aim out from cover: this is a really handy way to say "got" to each other.

T-JUNCTIONS

T-junctions are one of the more threatening layouts to encounter while advancing. The reason is simple: if you don't know which side the danger is on, you have to guess which way to look first and your back is going to be completely exposed. There are some procedures you can follow to give you the best chances for success.

It's easiest when you have a teammate to work with. The idea is that you're going to stay on opposite sides of your corridor, preferably in cover, and watch over your teammate's shoulder. Once you are both facing each other on opposite sides of the corridor, you start to edge towards the corner. Move slowly, so that you don't expose too much of yourself and you keep your weapon in control. If you're in cover, you'll know exactly when you're at the edge.

Once you've both gotten to the corner, you can collectively see almost the entire corridor: you just need to finish off clearing the corners by sweeping your view around to sweep the corners.

COMMUNICATE

It sounds obvious, but communication is the difference between being able to successfully defend the objective and letting the attackers bust through and make their getaway. Learn to give the important, relevant information to your teammates: "They're at the corner!" doesn't mean anything, while "Contact - three inside the church!" gives your teammates information they can act on.

AMBUSH, AMBUSH, AMBUSH!

The concept of lining up in front of your enemy to stop their attack went out with the middle ages. It's a much better idea to work out where they're going, and counter-attack at the place where they're most vulnerable. If you leave them free to move around their objective at will, they're going to organize a devastating assault. Instead, you've got to be ready to hit them before they're ready.

In most Attack and Defend maps, there is plenty of space between the Attackers spawn point and the objective. This is your hunting ground.

You're looking for somewhere the attackers will bunch up. Somewhere where they have to look in a lot of directions at once to see all the threats. Somewhere that you are going to make them afraid of.



You can use doors, entries to large rooms, small rooms, the gathering points before the objective, or the choke zones they have to pass through.

Scope out the kill zone: the area you want your enemy to be in when you spring your ambush. Your objective is to surprise and eliminate. You have a number of gadgets available that help a lot: C4 is a personal favorite, but flashbangs, gas, smoke, and grenades can be equally effective. Hide in cover, out of the obvious lines of sight. If you're guarding a door, don't stand in front of it: stay out to the sides where they can't see you.

Not all traps are best sprung the moment your enemy walks into it: it's usually best to let everyone get into your kill zone before you light them up. Springing a trap too early can let them respond, so wait until you have the best chance of taking as many as possible down.



Mod World

SID MEIER'S CIVILIZATION IV
<http://www.civfanatics.com>
<http://www.apolyton.net>



It should come as no surprise that the already-huge online Civilization community has taken up the torch with Civilization IV. There are a fairly massive number of mods and tweaks available for both the base game and the Warlords expansion. Ranging from simple little interface enhancements to new scenarios and entire re-workings of the combat system, there should be something to download that will suit just about anyone's taste.



The two websites listed above act as both clearinghouses for mods and meeting points for the Civ community. Forums to discuss the game or your favorite additions to it, downloads of various mods, and links to the vast network of authors' homepages are all readily available at Apolyton and Civfanatics. Nearly everything Civ-related you could want can be easily found from one of these two sites. Luckily, Civilization's turn-based nature has predictably resulted in an online community mostly free of the juvenile 1337-speaking scourge that brings down places like Battle.net.



Two particular mods to check out are Dales Combat Mod [sic] and the cleverly titled Rhye's and Fall of Civilization. Both are highly regarded by the people who play them, and both are well worth the download. Dales Combat Mod greatly enhances Civ IV's combat system to be more complex and realistic, while Rhye's changes the game rules around to engender games that play out more like the natural ebb and flow of history. As if Civ IV needed any more replayability in the first place.

Code of the Month



Guitar Hero II



So there's a shredder hidden deep down inside you, but somehow whenever you pick up that guitar controller you crash and burn like Yanni at a Primus concert? You know what you need? You need you some codes, my friend. Sweet, sweet codes to brighten your musical career. Alternately, if you already think you're the man, why don't you plug in that Hyper Speed cheat or the Performance Mode code, and prepare to cry like a baby peasant who comes face to face with Trogor the Burninator. You'll want to enter the following codes quickly at the main menu. And, we shouldn't have to tell you this, but

R=Red, Y=Yellow, B=Blue, and O=Orange.

Air Guitar (No Guitar) – YYBOYB
Eyeball Head Crowd – BOYOYOB
Flaming Head – OYOYOYY
Horse Head – BOOBOOBOOB
Hyper Speed (1.5x Speed) – OBOYOBOY
Monkey Head Crowd – OBYOBYOY
Performance Mode (Hide HUD and Track) – YYBOYOYY
Unlock All (Disables Saving) – BYOYORVRYRYRYRY

Mark Jones
Gainesville, FL

Attention All Cheaters!

Cheat codes, by their very nature, are in many cases buggier than Virginia in August. So, unless you don't mind re-doing those 70 hours you put into the latest game, do yourself a favor and back up your save before using any codes.

On a lighter note, you can send your codes to secretaccess@gameinformer.com for a chance to be featured here and win a very special prize!

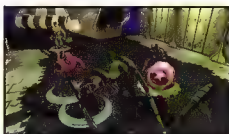
Touch of Death – Left, Right, Down (x2), Right, Left, Start

REVIEW MENU

Unlock All Cinematics – Up, Left (x2), Up, Right (x2), Up, Start
Unlock All Comics – Left, Right (x2), Left, Up (x2), Right, Start
Unlock All Concept Art – Down (x3), Right (x2), Left, Down, Start
Unlock All Load Screens – Up, Down, Right, Left, Up (x2), Down, Start

SHOP

100,000 Shield Credits – Up (x3), Left, Right, Left, Start

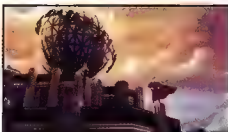


TEAM MENU

All Heroes To Level 99 – Up, Left, Up, Left, Down, Right, Down, Right, Start
Unlock All Heroes – Up (x2), Down (x2), Left (x3), Start
Unlock All Hero Powers – Left, Right, Up, Down, Up, Down, Start
Unlock All Skins – Up, Down, Left, Right, Left, Right, Start
Unlock Daredevil – Left (x2), Right (x2), Up, Down, Up, Down, Start

"Gi Droid" (location unknown – last seen encouraging people to break their New Year's resolutions)

XBOX 360



Superman Returns

Enter the following from the menu at the Fortress of Solitude.

All Power-Ups – Left, Y, Right, X, Down, Y, Up, Down, X, Y, X
All Unlockables – Left, Up, Right, Down, Y, X, Y, Up, Right, X

Enter the following from the pause menu.

God Mode (Limitless Stamina) – Up, Up, Down, Down, Left, Right, Left, Right, Y, X
Infinite City Health – Y, Right, Y, Right, Up, Left, Right, Y

MULTI-SYSTEM



Marvel: Ultimate Alliance

> PLAYSTATION 3, XBOX 360, Wii, PLAYSTATION 2, XBOX, PSP

There's a wealth of cool cheats to check out in Raven's latest opus, but you'll need to hop around to a few different places to enter the codes. Each cheat is listed under the area you'll need to be in to successfully enable the effect.

COMIC MISSION MENU

Unlock All Courses – Up, Right, Left, Down, Up, Right, Left, Down, Start

IN-GAME

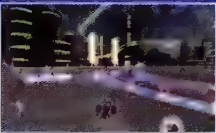
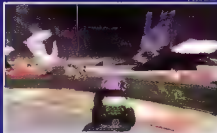
Fill Momentum – Left, Right (x2), Left, Up, Down (x2), Up, Start

God Mode – Up, Down, Up, Down, Up, Left, Down, Right, Start

Super Speed – Up, Left, Up, Right, Down, Right, Start

Xbox Live Arcade Spotlight

Novadrome



Alien robots from planet Nova have abducted you from Earth, and they're forcing you to drive futuristic buggies through an endless array of arena combat challenges in order to prove your worth and prevent an all-out invasion of your home planet. Is it fiction or prediction? This stuff could really happen. And if it did, Novadrome would be a pretty fun way for it all to play out. There are over 20 vehicle variations and a bunch of game types. Admittedly, most of them consist of holding down the fire button as you careen madly around a neon-colored playground. You'll have to unlock each game type in the single player "story" before using them online in multiplayer. In addition, calling the car handling sluggish is doing it a favor. Even with some iffy elements, this game's a blast with enough people logged in, and the destruction is rampant and satisfying. All told – not at all a bad download for the cost of a few rocky road ice cream cones. Mmm...ice cream.



SCHOOL OF GAME DEVELOPMENT

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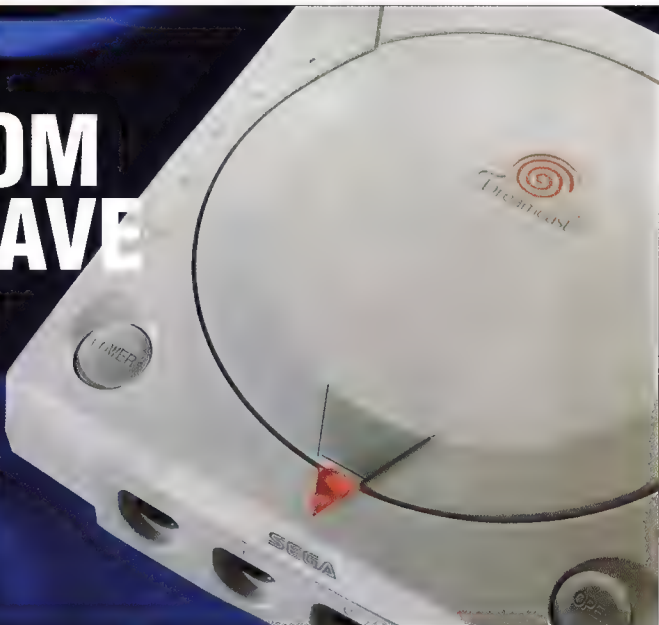


FROM THE LIVING ROOM TO THE GRAVE

REMEMBERING

THE TOP 10

DREAMCAST GAMES



With the rising popularity of classic game downloads, many extinct systems are experiencing a resurgence on new hardware consoles. PlayStation 3 will feature PSone downloads, while Xbox 360 currently specializes in arcade games. Wii casts the widest net with NES, Super NES, N64, Sega Genesis, and Turbo-Grafx 16. But where can the retro gamer get a Dreamcast fix? Until one of the major manufacturers decides to pick up the collection, you'll just have to scan the Internet or the back corner of a local classic gaming shop (if one exists in your town). We've compiled a list of the top 10 Dreamcast games that are worth the hassle.

▶ Soul Calibur (1999)

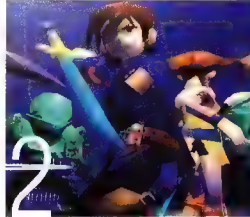
Developer: Namco • Publisher: Namco



Back when the Dreamcast first launched in September 1999, you couldn't ask for much more of a killer app. Soul Calibur was hands-down the best looking fighting game of its time. The deep and easy-to-grasp battle system ensured that Siegfried and company would be air juggling each other for years after the initial release. Even when players didn't have a friend around to pummel, they could always work to unlock alternate costumes, new characters, and the impressive exhibition videos.

▶ Skies of Arcadia (2000)

Developer: OverWorks • Publisher: Sega



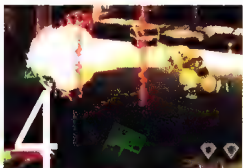
Though it showed its age in the subsequent GameCube release in 2003, Skies of Arcadia was the first great RPG on Sega's last home console. The story followed a teenage sky pirate named Vyse as he battled the evil Valuan Empire. Remember, this was before sky/space pirate RPG plotlines became a cliché. Tense ship versus ship battles punctuated key moments and allowed for some combat variety. The game made full use of the Dreamcast's VMU and rumble features to help players find treasure and warn of impending battles.

▶ Resident Evil Code: Veronica (2000)

Developer: Capcom • Publisher: Capcom



Due to its heavy reliance on scares, survival horror is one of the genres that benefits most from graphical updates. Code: Veronica was a big visual leap forward from the previous PSone games in the Resident Evil series. Outside of more lifelike characters and gore, Code: Veronica's backgrounds were presented in full 3D for the first time, instead of as static prerendered images. The switch in control from Claire to Chris Redfield halfway through the game is one of the best cliffhangers in Resident Evil history.



▶ Power Stone (1999)

Developer: Capcom • **Publisher:** Capcom

Capcom's cartoony fighter made a name for itself by incorporating the most environmental interaction ever seen in the genre. Stages were spacious and featured multiple levels to battle on. Players were encouraged to grab various boxes and chairs scattered all about to throw at each other. Constant movement, flying objects, and flashy effects kept combat exciting, and the four-player versus mode incorporated in the sequel only multiplied the sensation.



▶ NFL 2K1 (2000)

Developer: Visual Concepts • **Publisher:** Sega Sports

In what seems like an incomprehensible move today, EA actually decided not to release its Madden games on a new console. Sega filled the football gap with its own franchise, NFL 2K. While the first title pleased many fans, it was NFL 2K1 that ended up going down in gaming history. 2K1 was one of the first online sports console games, and also featured a new franchise mode and improved controls and AI over NFL 2K.

As with every system, it's almost impossible to come up with an all-time top 10 list that everyone's satisfied with. The following games barely missed the cut and offer a great mix of fighting, role-playing, rhythm, racing, sports, and flat-out craziness.

HONORABLE MENTION:

- Chu Chu Rocket
- Grandia II
- Marvel vs. Capcom 2
- Metropolis Street Racer
- Quake III Arena
- Samba De Amigo
- Seaman
- Space Channel 5
- Sword of Berserk: Gaiden Rage
- Virtual Tennis



▶ Shenmue (2000)

Developer: AM2 • **Publisher:** Sega

While the gameplay may not hold up in today's post-Grand Theft Auto III world, Shenmue was revolutionary for its time. Developers devoted much time and money to creating a painstaking replication of real life. Diehard fans latched on to the dramatic and lengthy story, contextual button-pressing scenes, rare real-time fights, and unparalleled interactivity with characters and objects.



▶ The Typing of the Dead (2001)

Developer: Smilebit • **Publisher:** Sega

Before the disembodied head of Dr. Ryuta Kawashima was tricking us into performing math problems, zombies were increasing our typing speed and accuracy. The game is almost exactly identical to The House of the Dead 2, except players type letters, words, and phrases to defeat enemies instead of shooting them with a light gun. Not only is the gameplay inventive and fun, but the things you have to type are irresistibly ridiculous, like "Borscht," "Tania," "Tailgate party," "Finger of scorn," and so forth.



▶ Phantasy Star Online (2001)

Developer: Sonic Team • **Publisher:** Sega

Even though PC gamers had been playing EverQuest for a while at this point, console players had yet to experience the online RPG. Although this wasn't technically an MMO, Phantasy Star Online allowed up to four people to meet up in a lobby area and go out questing together. The game focused on small instanced groups, but that didn't stop many from investing countless hours continuously powering up their characters.



▶ Crazy Taxi (2000)

Developer: AM3 • **Publisher:** Sega

This is one of the many instances on the Dreamcast where you could finally play a game at home that looked just as good as the arcade version. The concept was simple and addictive: Pick up passengers and get them to their desired destination within the time limit. Performing "crazy stunts" along the way will net you extra cash as you rush to locations like Kentucky Fried Chicken and Tower Records. The soundtrack featured several licensed songs including a few from The Offspring before they feuded.



▶ Jet Grind Radio (2000)

Developer: Smilebit • **Publisher:** Sega

Depending on your perspective, you can either thank or blame Jet Grind Radio for helping to kick off the cel-shaded look. At first glance, this game looks like a cartoony rollerblade rip-off of the Tony Hawk games, but it quickly moves in a different direction. You'll have to tag tricky areas with limited spray paint, fight rival gang members, avoid the cops, and even deal with aggressive tanks and choppers.

GREATEST GAME OF ALL TIME

By Jerry White



FORMAT GAME BOY

PUBLISHER NINTENDO

When I think of greatest game of all time, I think of Pokémon Red/Blue. This game pulled in adults and children alike, and spawned many sequels, card games, movies, and television shows.

Whether you are trying to "catch 'em all" or simply level up and battle with friends, this game has a way of luring you in, eating all your free time, then spitting you out satisfied.

Even though the storyline is virtually non-existent and the animations are lame by today's standards, the game itself is still as engrossing as it ever was.

The story starts with you visiting Professor Oak next door. He gives you and your rival a Pokémon, and you set out on your journey to become a Pokémon master. This includes the capture of all 150 pocket monsters, winning eight badges from gym leaders, and finally taking on the elite four. Each Pokémon is vulnerable and resistant to other types of Pokémon. Some of these little critters are just way too cool for words.

In an ingenious marketing plan, Nintendo put some Pokémon on Red and others on Blue. In order to get certain Pokémon on Blue you have to trade with the Red version and vice versa. This helped kids find new friends on the schoolyard.

I too was a Pokémon skeptic until I found it for cheap and decided to give it a try. I was hooked right away.



THIS MONTH IN GAMING HISTORY

On February 14, 2003, Nintendo released the Game Boy Advance SP in Japan. The updated GBA came out in the U.S. only one month later with a compact clamshell design, front lit screen, and a built-in rechargeable battery. Many gamers were disappointed at the lack of a standard headphone jack. Since then, Nintendo has included the normal input in the GBA Micro and both versions of the DS.





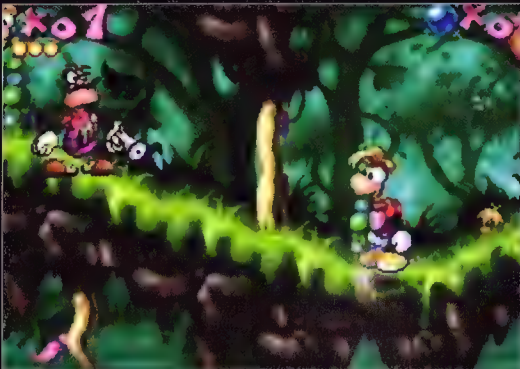
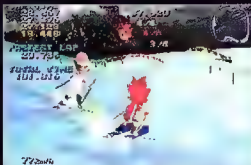
PSONE

APE ESCAPE

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION/PLATFORM > PUBLISHER SONY COMPUTER ENTERTAINMENT
> DEVELOPER SONY COMPUTER ENTERTAINMENT > RELEASE 1999

Travel back with us to a time when dual analog controls were about as unconventional as the Wii controller is now, because that is when this game was born.

Ape Escape was originally planned to come packaged with a special controller, but Sony delayed the game's release in favor of supporting its new Dual Analog controller. As a result, Ape Escape was one of the first to support dual analog controls. This is both bad and good, since the controls can be very awkward, and many of today's useful standards (such as camera control or a map) are not present in the game. At the same time, Ape Escape is amazingly inventive, constantly providing a variety of crazy minigame-like tasks to overcome. This game makes more creative use of the two analog sticks than most games do today. Then there are the monkeys, which provide a wealth of absurd comedy — though they may not have been fully mined in this installment. Nonetheless, Ape Escape is worth looking at again if for no other reason than nostalgia.



PSONE

RAYMAN

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION/PLATFORM > PUBLISHER UBISOFT > DEVELOPER UBISOFT > RELEASE 1995

The gorgeous color-blasted worlds of Rayman's first adventure are a sight to behold, especially given that they were produced for the notoriously muddy visuals of an early PSone game. You slide along platforms made of musical staves, and hop from giant pencil erasers into bubbling graves of ink, all amid a clever and imaginative art style. Produced in 1995, Rayman and games like it were the height of platforming challenge. In more recent years, the genre has steered away from bottomless insta-death kill pits for good reason — they're not that much fun when placed in abundance. Sadly, Rayman didn't get that memo before this game was released, so players are tasked with endlessly frustrating jumping sequences where one small mistake almost always means heading back to a distant checkpoint. It's a frustration that goes contrary to the bright inviting characters of the game, and makes this first installment of the series far less memorable than the games that follow.



ARCADE

QUIZ & DRAGONS

> STYLE 1 OR 2-PLAYER BOARD > PUBLISHER CAPCOM > DEVELOPER CAPCOM > RELEASE 1992

This is just ridiculous. If you're a giant black dragon and you have a tiny barbañan at your feet, you don't ask him what 1986 movie starred Bette Midler and Danny DeVito. You eat him! End of story! As stupid as the concept is, at least Quiz & Dragons delivers on exactly what its name promises: You run into monsters, and they ask you questions. You select one of four medieval warriors, and you roll a die to move along a board-game path. Most spaces are home to trivia-obsessed demons, ghouls, and (duh) dragons. The whole fantasy motif is constantly at odds with a slew of early '90s questions that, if answered correctly, allow you to proceed. In 1992, a kid in an arcade who saw this cabinet right next to The Simpsons or X-Men game wouldn't have even given this game a second glance. That kid would have made the right choice. Quiz & Dragons is basically the same as reading through a pack of trivial pursuit cards by yourself, but lamer.





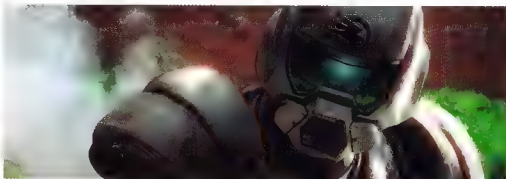
ONLINE

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The visuals are one of the defining characteristics of Microsoft's Blue Dragon, and you can see where it started with an extra batch of exclusive concept art straight from Mistwalker.



The Drums of War

Listen up, armchair generals! After our briefing with two EA producers, we are ready to share the latest sit-rep on Command & Conquer 3: Tiberian Wars.



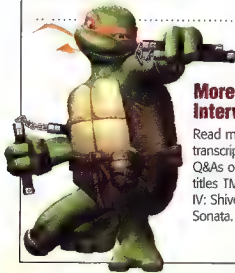
Halo 3

GI takes Bungie's Frank O'Connor and Brian Jarrard to an undisclosed location to extract as much intel as possible about Halo 3. But is it them or us that gets tortured over the minutia of this blockbuster?



300 Reasons To Read

We explore the latest cinematic epic inspired by *Sin City* author Frank Miller, *300*, with the film's director, Zack Snyder.



More In-Depth Interviews

Read more full-length transcripts of our exclusive Q&As on the highly-anticipated titles TMNT, The Elder Scrolls IV: Shivering Isles, and Eternal Sonata.



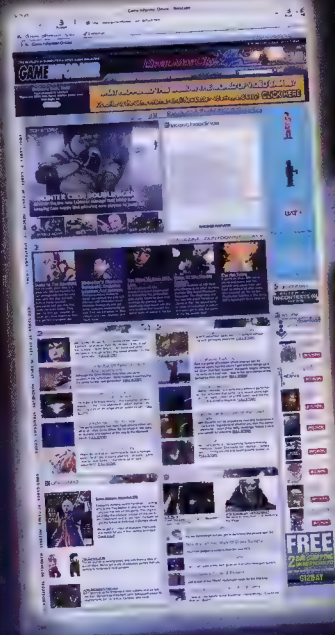
ALSO ONLINE THIS MONTH:

GI heads to Vegas to get hands-on time with Unreal Tournament 2007 at Midway's Gamer's Day event.

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GAMEOVER

Nuclear Launch Detected

VIDEO GAME TRIVIA

Out with the old, in with the new. With the PS3, Xbox 360, and Wii finally taking up their places in living rooms around the world, gamers are faced with a question that comes around every hardware generation: What can be done with the old systems? Answer the following bits of trivia to find out how you will be utilizing your Xbox, PS2, and GameCube now that their bigger brothers are in the spotlight.

1 Which of these groan-inducing names is not used for any of the chocolate-filled abominations in Viva Piñata?

- A. Fudgehog
- B. Bunnycomb
- C. Pigxie
- D. Cowamel



2 In Rare's original Perfect Dark for N64, what foe do you need to defeat at the end of the ninth mission in order to beat the game?

- A. Skedar Leader
- B. Trent Easton
- C. Conker
- D. Dark Joanna

3 Having a handful of socio-pathic split personalities to pin crimes on could be handy. In Killer 7, which of these names does not belong to a member of the Smith assassination squad?

- A. Coyote Smith
- B. Julian Smith
- C. Kaede Smith
- D. Kevin Smith



4 Never forget Psi-Ops! Which of the following powers are not at protagonist Nick Stryer's disposal in Midway's 2004 psychic thriller?

- A. Telekinesis
- B. Mind Control
- C. Pyrokinesis
- D. Psi Blade



5 Nuclear tanks and card-based combat finally came together in the first Metal Gear Acid. In that game, the female teammate who accompanies Snake is named...

- A. Eva
- B. Venus
- C. Teliko
- D. Rose

6 What is the name of that fancy-looking eyepiece in Ghost Recon: Advanced Warfighter?

- A. Sir Eston's Monocle
- B. O-Scope
- C. TF Display
- D. Cross Corn

7 It may not have garnered much attention, but the game this screen is taken from is a clever little RPG published by Atlus in 2005. What is it called?

- A. Stella Deus: The Gate of Eternity
- B. Riviera: The Promised Land
- C. Magna Carta: Tears of Blood
- D. Exotic Name: Unnecessary Subtitle

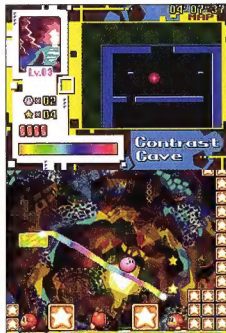


8 What European developer is responsible for such games as Speedball, Gods, and the more recent PC port of kill-switch?

- A. The GIF Group
- B. The Bitmap Brothers
- C. The PNG Pals
- D. The Targa Team

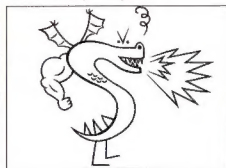
9 Kirby's first DS outing, Canvas Curse, had several playable characters apart from our favorite pink puffball. Which of the following creatures cannot be unlocked?

- A. Waddle Doo
- B. Meta Knight
- C. Goopy
- D. King Dedede



10 Of the non-licensed songs available for purchase in Guitar Hero II, which one rocks the hardest?

- A. "Troglodur"
- B. Seriously, "Troglodur"



BREAKDOWN

75% of consumers who bought a Wii in the eight days following its release also purchased Twilight Princess

4% of the Bluetooth failures while using the Sixaxis are hilarious. The other 96% are infuriating

1,000,000 copies of Gears of War sold in the first two weeks, according to Microsoft. That makes it the fastest-selling Xbox 360 title to date

100% of the pages in this issue will self-destruct in five seconds. Run!

77% of non-gamers believe that it is appropriate to ban certain video games, according to a recent survey

★ Trivia Score & Rank ★



0-1:
Nothing...still



2-3:
Build a lame fort



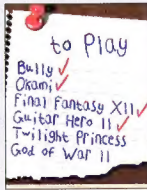
4-5:
Perform next-gen surgery



6-7:
Whip 'em at jerks



8-9:
Force them to mate and produce more advanced offspring



10:
Keep playing awesome games

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-Games Radar

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-Hardcore Gamer

"...an action game on full throttle..."

-Play

"Gorgeous graphics..."

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"...one lean, mean, addictive futuristic shootin' machine."

-Official Xbox Magazine



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XBOX 360

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