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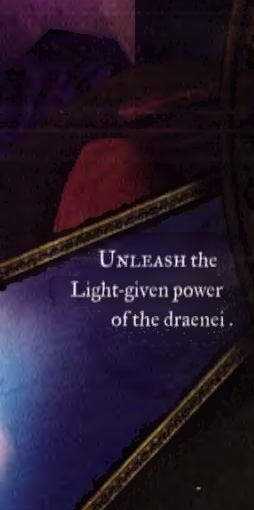
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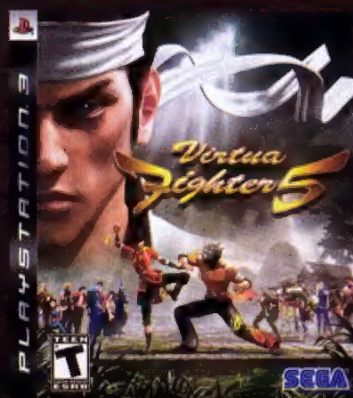
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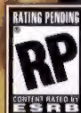
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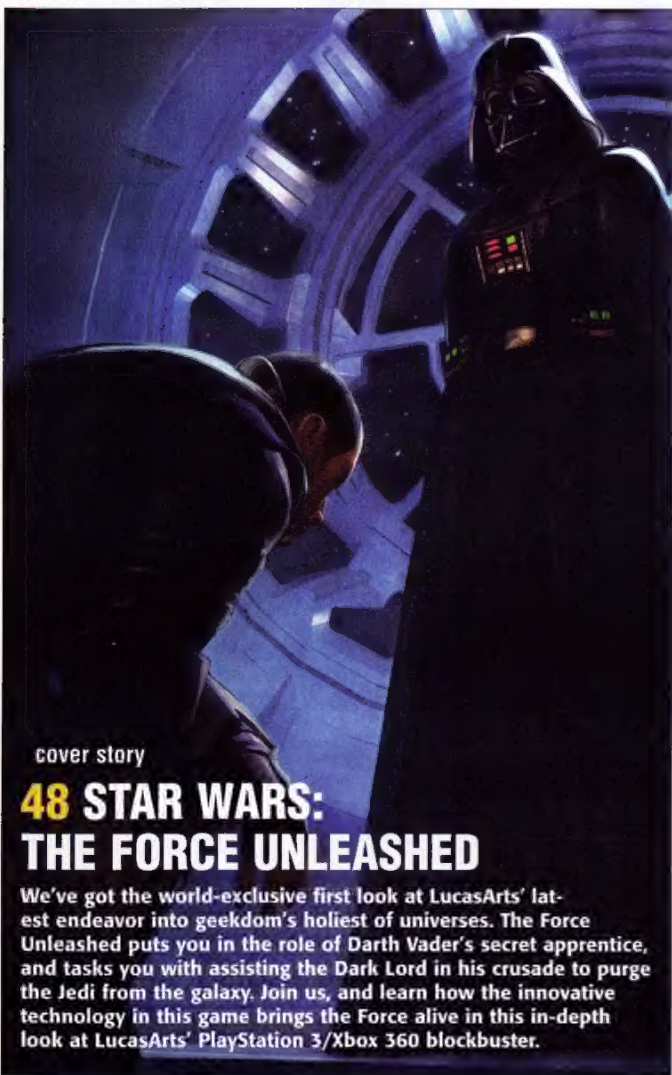


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We've got the world-exclusive first look at LucasArts' latest endeavor into geekdom's holiest of universes. The Force Unleashed puts you in the role of Darth Vader's secret apprentice, and tasks you with assisting the Dark Lord in his crusade to purge the Jedi from the galaxy. Join us, and learn how the innovative technology in this game brings the Force alive in this in-depth look at LucasArts' PlayStation 3/Xbox 360 blockbuster.

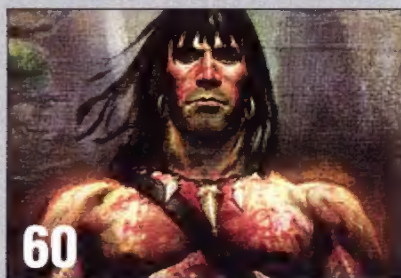
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YEAR OF THE GAMECOCK

Mike Wilson & Harry Miller, the masterminds behind GodGames, have returned older and wiser to the video game scene. Their new company, Gamecock, is ready to make waves with a unique publishing model. Find out why that matters to the average gamer inside.



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CONAN

Aragorn? Wussy. Drizzt? Effeminate. Not even Kratos can compare to the original man's man: Conan the Barbarian. He's getting his very own action/adventure title in which to satisfy his larger-than-life urges with his superhuman abilities. Check out the first look that you won't find anywhere else right here in Game Informer.

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THIS IS SIMPLY A PICTURE OF A WOMAN
EATING A VANILLA ICE CREAM CONE.



SURE, SHE'S ATTRACTIVE. SULTRY, EVEN. BUT SHE
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IT IS HOT WHERE SHE HAPPENS TO BE.

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STAFF

People Who Actually Get Paid To Play Video Games



WHY ISN'T THERE ANYTHING I LIKE?

ANDY McNAMARA
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

I know I work at a video game magazine, and I realize that I am supposed to know anything and everything about video games that there is to know. But there is one thing that has always escaped me, my personal video game Achilles' heel if you will. And that elusive monster is the video game peripheral.

Every time I head to my local game shop to get a new keyboard, mouse, joy pad, or headset there is always something wrong with them. These are the tools of the trade, yet all too often - at least in my opinion - you either use the pack-in control pad or you use nothing at all. There is obviously something wrong if a video gamer can't get the tools they need to play. Would a golfer put up with less-than-perfect clubs? I think not.

So here and now I am going to lay it all out. I hereby begin my journey to find the greatest keyboard, mouse, wireless joy pad, or whatever over the next six months. And if there isn't one...well, I don't know what I'm going to do, but it will most likely involve a glue gun, fire crackers, some duct tape, and a six story building.

So anyone out there in the great wide open, the gauntlet has been thrown down. I want to know what you think are the best peripherals out there that money can buy. My email inbox is yours to assault. Either we work together and solve this thing, or I'm going to have to create a Game Informer line of game products. I simply don't have the time to write this column and create game products, and I know that is something you simply can't live without.

Enjoy the issue.

Cheers,

Andy >> andy@gameinformer.com

Handle: The Game Hombre **Expertise:** RPGs, Action/Platform, Driving, First-Person Shooters **Interests:** Behind The Mark On Guitar Hero, 30 Rock, My New Dell 24-Inch Widescreen Monitor (I Love Gaming in 1900x1200) **Dislikes:** When The Cable Company Changes All Your Channels The Second You Finally Learn Them, That Movie Companies Are Charging Way Too Much For Blu-Ray And HD-DVD Movies (I Want To Watch It In HD But The Price Gouging Has To Stop) **Current Favorite Games:** World Of Warcraft: The Burning Crusade, Guitar Hero I And II, Virtua Fighter 5, Final Fantasy XII, Crackdown



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Handle: The Raging Gamer **Expertise:** RPGs, Action, First-Person Shooters, Strategy, Sports, Fighting **Interests:** Finally Getting Around To Watching *Six Feet Under* And Reading *Wheel Of Time*, Xbox 360's IPTV (My Precious), Ninjatology, Atlas Dusk **Dislikes:** George R.R. Martin Dragging His Feet On The Release Of *A Dance With Dragons*, Neighbors That Complain That My Surround Sound Sounds Like a Space Shuttle Launch, Buying A New House **Current Favorite Games:** Crackdown, MotorStorm, Blue Dragon, NBA Street Homecourt, Def Jam: Icon, Metal Gear Solid: Portal Ops, MLB 2K7



Matt >> matt@gameinformer.com

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Adam >> adam@gameinformer.com

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Handle: The Real American Gamer **Expertise:** RPGs, Adventure, Action, Strategy, Puzzle **Interests:** Pixel & Sprite (Matt's Imaginary Webcomic), *M1-5*, Playing "Co-Op" (i.e. Shooting My Teammate), HBO Making *A Song Of Ice And Fire* Into A TV Show (Clancy Brown As The Hound - Make It Happen!) **Dislikes:** Bryan Making Fun Of Soundwave (He's Not iTunes Compatible), The Mysterious Reappearance Of Reiner 2K5, Naked Blood Elf Dancers, *Zombie Nation* **Current Favorite Games:** Star Wars: The Force Unleashed, God Of War II, Crackdown, World Of Warcraft: The Burning Crusade, The Legend Of Zelda: Twilight Princess



Miller >> miller@gameinformer.com

Handle: The Once And Future Gamer **Expertise:** RPGs, Action/Adventure, Fighting, Platform, First-Person Shooters **Interests:** The End Of Mid-Season TV Breaks, The Eberon Campaign Setting (So They're Basically Like Giant Sentient Robots?), The End Of Twilight Princess, Chopin Nocturnes **Dislikes:** Having To Send In My Xbox 360 For Repairs Twice In One Month, The Exaggerated Price Of Heated Bathroom Tile **Current Favorite Games:** Conan, Excite Truck, The Legend Of Zelda: Twilight Princess, Gears Of War, Guitar Hero



Bertz >> mattbertz@gameinformer.com

Handle: Lord Gaminion III **Expertise:** First-Person Shooters, Sports, Action, RPGs, Strategy **Interests:** The Return Of *Rome*, *Assy McGee*, CES Tech Goodness, Countdown To Crisis, IPTV On Xbox 360, Old Bob Dylan Footage On YouTube **Dislikes:** Sub-Zero Temperatures, Comcast DVR, Football Offseason, In & Out Burger Hours In Vegas (It's Vegas, Stay Open!), The Destruction Of The Far Cry Franchise **Current Favorite Games:** Rainbow Six Vegas, GRAW 2, Medieval II: Total War, Castlevania: Portrait Of Ruin



Ben >> ben@gameinformer.com

Handle: Your Friendly Neighborhood Gamer **Expertise:** Action/Adventure, Action/RPGs, Platform, Survival Horror, First-Person Shooters **Interests:** Marvel's Civil War, Hot Chocolate, Not Getting Arrested During My Holiday Trip Back Home, My Fake Marriage To Keira Knightley **Dislikes:** Being Subject To A Certain Someone's Sandwich Propaganda (i.e. Joe), People Who Think Intellectual Writing Like *Tales From The Greyhound* Is Pretentious Crap Before Reading It (i.e. Joe), Joe (i.e. Joe), Watermelon Seeds **Current Favorite Games:** Marvel: Ultimate Alliance, Guitar Hero II, The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion, Dead Rising, Lumines II



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Handle: The Gamer's Advocate **Expertise:** Action/Adventure, RPGs, Survival Horror, First-Person Shooters, Rhythm **Interests:** New Guitar Hero Songs, The Good, The Bad And The Queen - *Kingdom Of Doom*, Corey Haim "Me, Myself, And I" On YouTube **Dislikes:** Creating Miis For Female Friends (So How Fat Would You Like To Be?), Having To Buy Another Version Of Guitar Hero II, Having To Remember People's Birthdays During Mii Creation, Mushroom & Swiss **Current Favorite Games:** GRAW 2, Resistance: Fall Of Man, Gears Of War, Excite Truck

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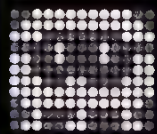
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Candid Photos From The Seedy Underbelly Of The Video Game Industry



1 Reader BJ Russell sent us this photo of his World of Warcraft axe, specially made to smite Horde newbies 2 GI's Matt Bertz proudly accepts his Emmy for his starring role on *Heroes*, the hit show where he plays a cheerleader possessed of superpowers. He looks a little different without makeup 3 Crytek's Cevat Yerli accepts his payola (a candy bar – we're cheap!) for giving us some inside info on the company's upcoming shooter *Crysis 4* Adam is blissfully unaware that death is about to strike in the form of Eidos' Sam Tehrani and Tali Fischer 5 Red Octane's Bryan Lam (right) and the Guitar Hero's resident axe-slinger Marcus Henderson show off their chops on these wicked double-neck SGs at CES. Jimmy Page would be proud 6 LucasArts shows mad love for GI Spy! Here's the crew: Julio Torres, Haden Blackman, Cedrick Collomb, Matt Omernick, and Chris Baker 7 Former GI editor Jay Fitzloff treks all the way to Minneapolis to award Kato with his prize for winning their annual football bet. Ladies and gentlemen, we present the Trophy of the Jeweled Frog!





PREPARE FOR GLORY!

INSPIRED BY GRAPHIC NOVELIST
FRANK MILLER

300

WARNER BROS. PICTURES PRESENTS

IN ASSOCIATION WITH LEGENDARY PICTURES AND VIRTUAL STUDIOS A MARK CANTON/GIANNI NUNNARI PRODUCTION A ZACK SNYDER FILM
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DEARGI

The Readers Strike Back

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 The Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess deserved the 10/10 score Game Informer gave it?

Definitely. I hadn't played a Zelda title beyond A Link to the Past until Twilight Princess. It's an excellent reminder of what I've been missing.

Artemis_Galant



I started to doubt what they had left in them after playing Wind Waker. However, Twilight Princess re-confirmed my faith. Both the great story and gameplay definitely earned it a 10!

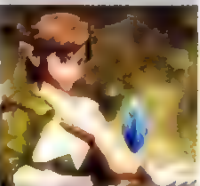
AngelGamer

Aside from some small changes and slight innovations, Twilight Princess is the same Zelda game we've had around for years in terms of gameplay and quality. But for me, that's exactly what I want. Does it deserve a 10/10? Yes/Yes!

schmuck

Of course it does. Some people may say that it's overrated because it's named Zelda, but the opposite is true. We expect more from it because of its namesake, and once again Nintendo has surpassed those expectations.

King Sushi



No. While I support it being GOTY, I don't feel it deserved a 10. The boss battles were too easy, the overworld was a mess, and it was even somewhat buggy. I know the value of a little rupee, now SHUT UP!

Donttalktochris

There is no realm of reality in which Twilight Princess deserved a 10. This is one of the most inaccurate scores I've seen come from Game Informer, and I'm honestly a bit disappointed. This game deserved at LEAST a 12.

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

JAYNE IS A GIRL'S NAME

I just finished issue 165 and couldn't help but to agree that *Firefly* is the number one license that deserves to be a game. After I read the article, I went online and discovered that a MMORPG based on the series was announced to be in development, and scheduled to release in 2008. It seems like a strange coincidence that you guys were just a little ahead of the curve on that -- did an inside source tip you off? I can't wait until this game comes out so we can all be "big damn heroes, sir."

Chadd Reed
Vancouver, WA

■ We do often hear whispers and rumors about what's going on in the industry (see the Loose Talk section on page 32), but this is a situation where we were just as surprised and excited as you. We hope things turn out well for this project, but a bunch of nerds wanting something really bad isn't a guarantee for success. If it were, the Star Wars holiday special would have been released on DVD long ago.

GOOF OF THE YEAR?

How did Zelda win game of the year? When I turned to the editors' picks, more than half of you didn't even have the game in your top 10. I'm just curious how it was decided, since so many of you weren't giving it love. Especially when Oblivion seemed to be the biggest hit with everyone. It looks like The Elder Scrolls might have gotten hosed to me.

Chris Losby
Via msn.com

I do have an issue with your choice for Game of the Year in issue 165. It's not that The Legend of Zelda doesn't deserve it, but I am concerned with how you arrived at your choice. Looking at

the editors' top 10 picks, it is apparent that Zelda is not the winner. It only topped one person's list, and it only found its way onto four lists total. Assigning weights to each spot on the lists (10 points to #1, 9 to #2, etc) shows that a number of games topped Zelda. Oblivion comes out as #1, FF XII as #2, Okami as #3, Gears of War as #4, and Zelda as #5. No matter how you slice it, Zelda was not the Game of the Year.

Ryan Pawloski
Via msn.com

■ Our Game of the Year is decided in a discussion among all editors, not by plugging numbers into an equation. If you prefer to use the mathematical approach, here's the only number that really matters: 10. The Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess' score of 10/10 was higher than any other title's in 2006, not to mention the unparalleled quality that a perfect score implies. This flawless rating -- along with the crowds that formed around Andy's and Reiner's desks as they were reviewing Zelda -- was enough for us to unanimously select it to receive the Game of the Year award. So, why didn't it appear on more editors' lists? The answer is simple and disappointingly devoid of conspiracy. Issue 165 went to print in November, just days after the Wii released. Since we didn't get advance copies of the game from Nintendo, not all of the editors had a chance to play it before compiling their top 10. In the months since, more of us have had the chance to beat Twilight Princess, and we still stand by our GOTY decision 100 percent.

DON'T TRY THIS AT HOME

I recently read a story about how Wii controller straps are breaking and sending the controller flying. That alone is stupid. But then I heard the part of how the controllers are supposedly smashing into TVs and breaking the screen. This is absolute

crap. There is no way a plastic controller would break a screen. To prove it, I dare you to take a Wii remote and throw it as hard as you can against your TV, several times. The remote is going to break before the TV.

Alex Everhart
Via msn.com

■ Attention readers: Do not do this. Alex here is either trying to trick you into breaking your television sets, or he owns some kind titanium-infused screen. As a general rule, repeatedly throwing expensive electronics against other expensive electronics only results in sadness...and sparks.

NEW TO YOU

I've been playing my way through Final Fantasy XII, and I have noticed that every Esper you get is new to the series. To be honest, I feel extremely ripped-off by not being able to summon my favorites like Bahamut or Ifrit and watch them beat a boss into a bloody pulp.

Beau Bellatty
Via hotmail.com

■ It is sad to see the many classic summons missing, but their replacements aren't actually newcomers to the Final Fantasy franchise. Many of the beasts made previous appearances as enemies and summons in either Final Fantasy Tactics for PSone or Final Fantasy Tactics Advance on GBA. Others are actually named after final bosses from the 8- and 16-bit games in the series, like Chaos and Zeromus. It might be tough to play through a whole Final Fantasy game without watching Bahamut perform Megafire, but on the whole, FF XII's crop of summons beats out losers like Bismarck and the Magus Sisters any day.

NO CROSS BREEDING

I've been wondering whether games like Resistance: Fall of Man and Heavenly Sword are ever coming out on the Xbox 360. After all, the PS3 sales tanked and the developers need to use other consoles to pay off expenses, right?

Jared Hughes
Via Comcast.net

■ Whether or not PS3 sales "tanked" is a debatable point, but there is an easy answer to your question. No, Resistance and Heavenly Sword won't come to Xbox 360. They are both Sony-owned properties, and Sony probably isn't going to give its competitors the biggest titles being used to sell PS3s. This is the same reason that you'll never see Halo on Wii, or The Legend of Zelda for Xbox 360. These flagship titles are the property of their respective publishers, and they are the ones used as leverage to influence gamers' purchasing decisions. It's true that more high-profile games have been making multiplatform moves (like The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion and Assassin's Creed), but you can basically count on titles published by Sony, Microsoft, or Nintendo to remain exclusive. Oh, this is also the reason why a four-player co-op shooter starring Samus, Master Chief, Jak, and Mario isn't going happen -- just don't tell Bryan. He draws the most adorable, crude little pictures of how that game might look!





LUCKY LUCKY BOY...

HAVEN'T YOU GUESSED?

FLAMING THE FLAME-BROILED

Are people actually playing those stupid games from Burger King? Are we really going to put our Xbox 360s through misery just so we can play a four-dollar piece of garbage publicity? I don't know about you, but I would rather play games like Crackdown and Rainbow Six Vegas. I honestly thought Sneak King was a fake parody game at first. It's that bad

Johnny Bruce
Shawsville, VA

■ **Someone must be playing them.** According to Burger King, the restaurant sold 2 million copies in the first four weeks. While that figure does lump all three games together, it's still a pretty impressive number. Too bad the games aren't equally impressive. Bare-bones diversions like Sneak King may be ushering in a new kind of product into the video game arena – the “so bad it's good” game. In the film industry, movies that fall into that category can amass a huge cult following (like *Spider-Man* director Sam Raimi's *Evil Dead*), and up until the BK titles, the video game industry hadn't seen an analog. When you think about it, paying \$4 for an hour or two of hilarity is a decent bargain. Plus, if you're really into the “sneak up on people and deliver sandwiches” subgenre, Sneak King is pretty much your only option.

IT'S CALLED “ALTERNATE HISTORY”

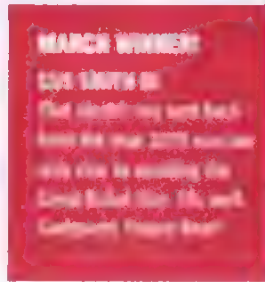
In Issue 164, a *Resistance: Fall of Man* advertisement says that the setting of the game is the year 1951. However, when you review the game, you claim that World War II never happened. Someone over there needs to brush up on their history, because WWII ended in 1945, six years before the game even begins!

Nick Vitale
Warren, OH

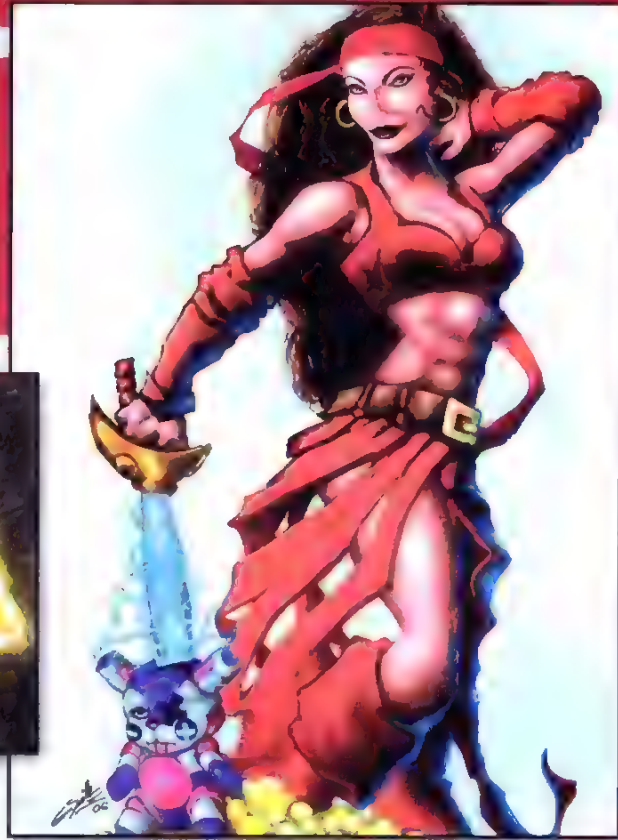


■ **One of the great things about video games is that they allow us to explore worlds that aren't bound by the cold, ruthless facts of history.** In reality, yes, World War II ended in 1945. However, according to the fictional premise of *Resistance: Fall of Man*, the key events of the war as we know it never happened because humanity has been wrapped up battling the Chimera, not each other. When the game begins in 1951, this conflict has already been going on for decades, which overwrites the time period in which World War II would have taken place.

ENVELOPE ART



JOHN DODSON
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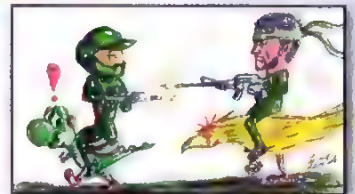


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Mpls, MN 55401



CHERYL VOGT
They found mushrooms and pills, but they picked him up on an anonymous tip that he was licking Toads



FERNIE ALMEIDA
Unrealistic! We all know that Snake would rather eat a Chocobo than ride one

DEVAN REY-SOLDS
Classic strategy. Put your expendable, annoying soldiers in front so they absorb the initial assault. Go for it, Captain Cannon Fodder!



J. CHOULNARD
“Must...play... Trauma Center!”

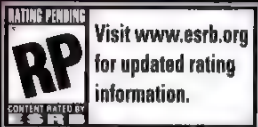
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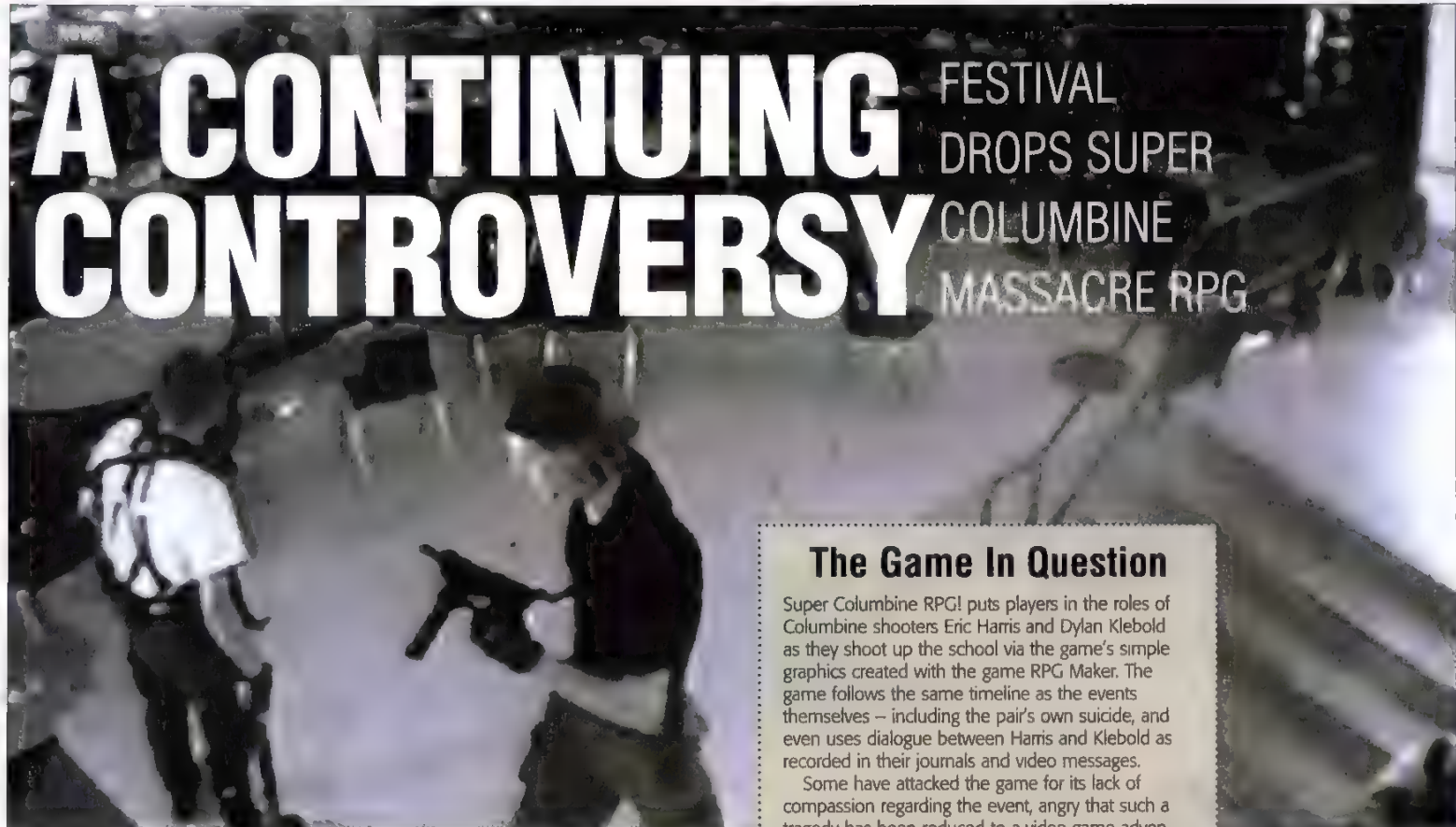


XBOX LIVE



A CONTINUING CONTROVERSY

FESTIVAL
DROPS SUPER
COLUMBINE
MASSACRE RPG



The Game In Question

Super Columbine RPG! puts players in the roles of Columbine shooters Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold as they shoot up the school via the game's simple graphics created with the game RPG Maker. The game follows the same timeline as the events themselves – including the pair's own suicide, and even uses dialogue between Harris and Klebold as recorded in their journals and video messages.

Some have attacked the game for its lack of compassion regarding the event, angry that such a tragedy has been reduced to a video game adventure – particularly when creator Danny Ledonne's use of simple and cute graphics is juxtaposed against grisly reality.

Ironically, whereas Harris and Klebold found a twisted inspiration in Doom – a connection that some believe requires a condemnation of video games themselves, perhaps those playing SCMRPG! will find this particular video game as a vehicle to think about the Columbine massacre. SCMRPG! creator Danny Ledonne says that by forcing players into the roles of the killers and making them live through the events of that day, he is aiming to make people confront Harris and Klebold's horrific actions in a more personal manner.

The Slamdance Film Festival has made its name by showcasing up-and-coming filmmakers such as Christopher Nolan (*Memento*), and has since extended its patronage to independent video game developers via its Slamdance Guenlla Gamemaker Contest. But this year's festivities have turned controversial due to the festival's removal of Danny Ledonne's Super Columbine Massacre RPG! – a first for the festival. What started out as a celebration of independent gaming turned into an examination of video games as art, and offered us a look at the state of our nation almost eight years after the Columbine tragedy.

In early January, news broke that Slamdance had removed the game from its contest amid protest from some of the other participants and the gaming community at large. Despite this, the organization stood firm and stated that the game would not be re-instated. By this time, several competition finalists – including thatgamecompany's *FlOw* (a title which will also appear for download on the PlayStation Network) – had withdrawn their work in protest just weeks away from the final competition.

Game Informer tried to contact festival organizers to speak about this matter several times, but received no response. However, Slamdance did release a statement that said it feared a lawsuit. "This is not a case of Slamdance lacking courage, sponsor disapproval of showing Danny's game, or wanting to control freedom of expression. Simply and practically, Slamdance can't afford to take on the scope of this potential loss by showing the game to the public"

The decision to pull the game was made by president and co-founder Peter

Baxter, against the wishes of Sam Roberts, Slamdance's game competition manager. In an interview with the *Salt Lake Tribune*, Baxter insinuates that SCMRPG!'s use of licensed music was the legal specter that he feared. However, Game Informer spoke to the game's creator, Danny Ledonne, who described the arguments for the game's dismissal as "circumspect."

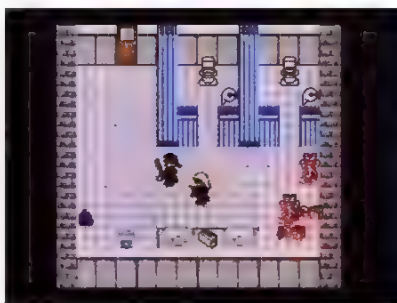
"Back in October, I explicitly mentioned to Sam [Roberts] that this game contains many pre-existing sources, because this game is a conglomeration of existing media that's been put together as a social commentary. Sam took two days to look into it, he got back to me, and assured me that it constituted fair use for social criticism, and that it would not be a problem. If ever along this path, I was notified that music licensing or any of the other minor copyright issues were to

arise, I could easily have re-programmed the game in time for the festival, and that would be a non-issue." Ledonne also says that he offered to have the game only available to mature audiences.

Interestingly enough, Ledonne's game had not only made it through a panel of Slamdance judges to the finals, but the organization itself actually contacted him to enter the game in

the first place, specifically because as Ledonne was told, of "its unique and compelling contribution to gaming." Ledonne says he never had any conversations with Baxter before the game got pulled.

Tracy Fullerton, assistant professor at USC's Interactive Media Division, pulled the school's sponsorship of the competition in protest over Slamdance's move and worked to get the game re-instated. As a sponsor, Fullerton told us that she never had an inkling that the organization would make such a move. "There was no discussion of, 'Well, we're only going to have this kind of game or that kind of game.' When we [Fullerton and Slamdance game competition manager Sam Roberts] talked about the Guenlla Gamemaker contest, the idea of it was to be a celebration of independent media and games in the same way that Slamdance itself is a celebration of independent film. This has never hap-





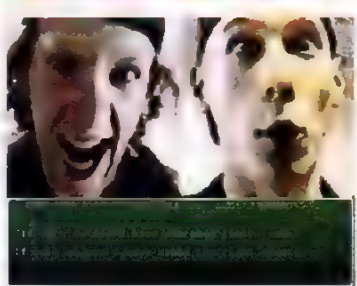
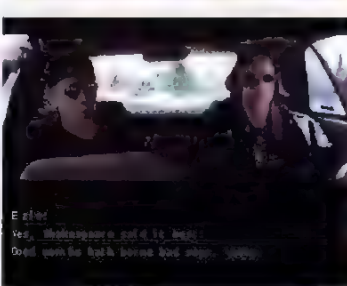
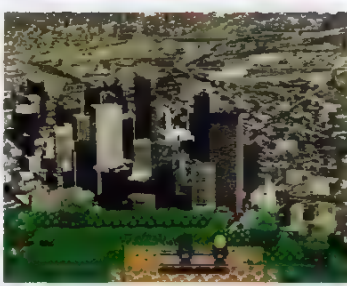
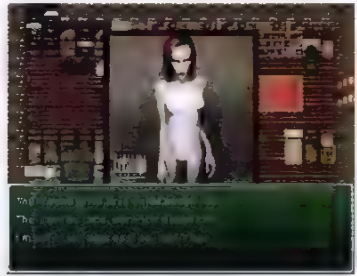
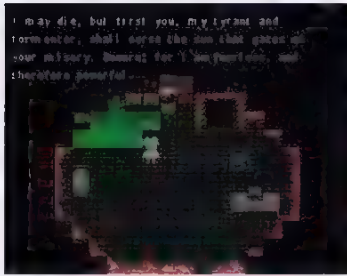
pened in the film component of the Slamdance festival. Never. And they've screened some pretty provocative work. Kudos to them for that. That's one of the few places you can see that kind of work. To have that kind of double standard between games and film is one of our issues." For instance, within this year's film entries, edgy work can be seen in the satire *Murder Party*, where artists kill people for grant money.

"Content of the game aside," explains Ledonne, "what Tracy and others have rightly taken issue with, is that this is a game that was first asked to be submitted – but that's less consequential than the fact that it was reviewed by a qualified jury to be selected as a finalist in the competition. And one person – later, for reasons that are amorphous to me because they keep changing – decided to pull the game. That can happen, in my opinion, to any film, any kind of media that gets put into this forum. The precedent that it sets is that if someone is pressured to remove something based on its content, whether it's misunderstood or misconstrued, that it will be ejected from this kind of festival, and that's something that's unhealthy."

Despite the fact that the game has been pulled, Ledonne is keeping his eye on the big picture. "I am not viewing Peter Baxter as an adversary, and I know the press really wants to create that dynamic, but I think there are larger issues at hand. Peter and I have spoken about this, and we both recognize that we want to see independent games published and developed that look at these issues."

One of those issues is whether video games as a medium deserve to be protected as art. "It's a fundamental issue of freedom of expression," says Fullerton. "Games really need to be thought of in the same way as something as film." If that were so, such double standards as those often applied to video games would cease.

Another is a deeper, more important question that deals with the controversy that has surrounded the game itself: Is this country ready to deal with *Columbine* yet? Ledonne himself is not sure if we've gotten to the point. He says he's even gotten a letter from one anonymous student who now attends *Columbine* who told him that the environment at the school in which the tragedy occurred hasn't changed. In a country where we may not have fully faced up to the realities that *Columbine* forcefully brought to our attention, Ledonne wonders if the introspection that his game encourages will ever occur. "This game, frankly, may be either a bit ahead of its time, or there may be no time for this game, depending on how our culture will view serious games in the next five or ten years."



DATA FILE

More News You Can Use

ROCKSTAR CO-FOUNDER QUILTS BAND

Rockstar co-founder and managing director Terry Donovan has left the company. Donovan was already on leave from the company since the fall of last year, and parent company Take-Two says that Donovan's duties have already been accounted for.

ZUNE GAMING

Increasing talk from Microsoft points to the company offering games on its Zune portable music player. Although it is unknown what kinds of games will be available on the unit, it'll be interesting to see it and how these might interface with your PC and Xbox 360.



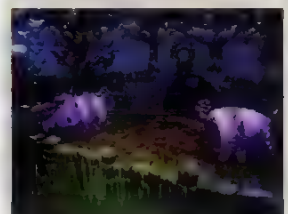
NEVERSOFT NEW GUITAR HEROES

Last E3 Activision picked up the *Guitar Hero* license, but MTV signed the franchise's developer, Harmonix. Now that Activision has the series sans the studio that made it, the publisher is putting its A-team on the job: Neversoft. The *Tony Hawk* developer has started advertising for employment positions for the franchise, including a PlayStation 3 graphics engineer. Activision has also applied and received patents for the names "Guitar Villain" and "Drum Villain."



RARE'S NEW ERA

Rare's Stampers Brothers have left the company after 20 years. The brothers oversaw the company for over 20 years, from *Blast Corps* and *Killer Instinct* to *Grabbed by the Ghoules* and *Viva Piñata*. The Stampers say that they are going to pursue "other opportunities", but what these may be nobody knows yet. For more on Rare, check out *Classic GI* on page 112.



THE DAY THE MUSIC DIED

LucasArts and Kuju were teaming up for a game called *Traxion* on the PSP. The game would have let you take your own MP3s and use them as the basis for over 20 minigames. Sadly, however, the project has abruptly halted. Kuju has released a statement saying that both it and LucasArts have mutually agreed to end work on the game.



This game, frankly, may be either a bit ahead of its time, or there may be no time for this game, depending on how our culture will view serious games in the next five or ten years.

– Super *Columbine* Massacre RPG! creator Danny Ledonne

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THE GOOD, THE BAD, THE UGLY

When You Want Your News Categorized With A Sarcastic Editorial Spin



GOOD

Konami is going forward with seven new titles in development, including a Winning Eleven for the PS3 and four new Wii titles, two sports titles and a "music simulation game."



■ Not suitable for kids?

BAD

A young boy in Utah (or is he a man now?) recently discovered hardcore pornography on his Xbox 360 copy of EA's Madden NFL 07. Authorities say that the game appears to have been factory sealed, and they are currently investigating the situation.



■ Could we see movies based on games like Lost Planet?

BAD

Capcom has got Hollywood stars and dollar signs in its eyes. The Japanese company is looking to secure movie licenses for its games in order to recoup more money off of the rising cost of next-gen development. We hope a company like Capcom – which is known for its support of hardcore gamers – doesn't forget its roots after a night out with Lindsay, Britney, and Paris.

UGLY

A 28-year-old woman in California died in a local radio contest called "Hold Your Wee for a Wii." The contest called for people to drink large amounts of water with the winner being the one who could hold off going to the bathroom the longest. After competing, the woman was found dead in her home of water intoxication. Okay, maybe we've made some bad puns about the Wii, but at least they never killed anyone. Yet.



GOOD

Nintendo DS owners will get a chance to play John Carmack's formerly cellphone-only title Orcs and Elves. Although no concrete release date has been announced, Carmack has said he's interested in doing a version for the system.



GOOD

Just when we thought we couldn't be any more excited for Will Wright's Spore, EA announced that experimental music legend Brian Eno has been signed to do the music for the PC title. Eno, who created the ambient music genre with his album *Music for Airports* and is famous for his work as a player and producer on albums by David Bowie, U2, Roxy Music, and the Talking Heads, is creating a "generative" score that will morph and change depending on the on-screen action.

news

THE 360 LIVING ROOM

MICROSOFT EXPANDS 360 FEATURE SET

■ Your 360 Guide blades will be superimposed on your television broadcast, allowing you to chat with your friends while you watch TV

At the Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas, Microsoft's Bill Gates unveiled a new functionality for the Xbox 360. The company is planning to debut an IPTV (Internet Protocol TV) service before the end of the year. This would allow the platform to act as a digital video recorder similar to TiVo, letting you record and watch TV programs.

This new functionality would work in tandem with your 360 to seamlessly blend the two. For instance, you could play 360 games while you're recording your favorite TV show, or you could watch TV while talking with someone on your 360 Friends list. You'd also have access to Xbox Live Marketplace, and the service would enable picture-in-picture channel browsing, movies/TV on demand, and searches for a specific actor or director.

Enabling this functionality through your 360 will require that you already have service with one of Microsoft's telco partners. Currently, AT&T is the only confirmed company onboard, and its compatible U-verse service is only available in five states at the moment. Seeing traditional phone companies such as AT&T offer "triple-play" packages of cable, phone, and internet service are more and more common, and Microsoft's IPTV functionality requires your provider to have a fiber optic network. This allows service to enter your Xbox 360 directly via a T-100 broadband connection and not the usual coaxial cable coming out of the wall. It also does away with long pauses when switching to high-definition channels, as well as simply providing more bandwidth for more HD programming.

This expansion of the Xbox 360 is yet another step Microsoft has made towards making the system an integral part of your living room beyond just gaming. Late last year the company unveiled downloadable movies and TV shows via the Xbox Live Marketplace, and recently Bill Gates – after years of saying the Xbox brand was all about gaming admitted, "We wouldn't have done [the 360] if it was just a gaming device. We wouldn't have gotten into the category at all." In fact, imbuing the 360 with TiVo features is something that Game Informer has heard about since before the launch of the system.

This expansion of the Xbox 360, along with the aforementioned downloads, is surely yet another development that necessitates that Microsoft release a larger hard drive for the system. For instance, TiVo's digital recorder that records high-definition broadcasts comes with hard drives that are 80GB and 250GB in size, the latter of which delivers 300 hours of low-quality recording.

Another important component to IPTV on the 360 is getting people to switch their service over to AT&T or other service providers that support Microsoft's software platform. With fiber optic service not yet available to a majority of the country, getting the network installed could pose a problem. But, with growing competition ready to deliver consumers lower rates on triple-play packages, there should be little love lost for most people when it comes to switching to a new service provider. It's also likely that Microsoft will offer reduced-rate Xbox 360s as a part of package deals for those wanting to use the service but who don't already have a unit.

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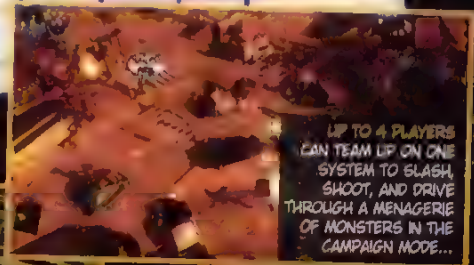
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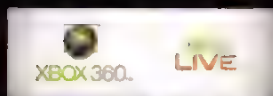


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Although *Guitar Hero I & II* featured some amazing tracklistings, there are more than a few classics that have failed to appear as yet. Here's a list of our top 10 most wanted *Guitar Hero III* songs, some obvious classics, as well as some underrated gems.

the top 10 most wanted songs for guitar hero III



1 "Stairway to Heaven" – Led Zeppelin Album: IV (1971)

Here it is, the granddaddy of all classic rock anthems. Led Zeppelin, the most epic of all the '70s rock legends, created the most epic of songs in "Stairway to Heaven." Guitar god Jimmy Page, who is the inspiration for *Guitar Hero II*'s Clive Winston character, is all over the place on this track, which helped create the template for the modern power ballad. The delicate acoustic work of the intro gradually gives way to Zep's elephantine stomp in the climax, and along the way you'll get to play along to one of the most memorably tuneful solos in history. We still don't know what the heck a "bustle in your hedgerow" is or why the May Queen needs a "spring clean," but "Stairway to Heaven" was made for the *Guitar Hero* treatment.



2 "Master of Puppets" – Metallica

Album: *Master of Puppets* (1986)

The raging title track from Metallica's thrash masterpiece, "Master of Puppets" on expert mode would make your puny fingers cry. From the breakneck opening through the last whiplash rhythm lick, we can't think of a song that seems better suited for *Guitar Hero*. The dramatic middle movement even provides lyrical neo-classical action for good measure. For those of our readers too young to remember Metallica's glory days, this song will show you why those therapy-addled d-bags from the *Some Kind of Monster* documentary used to be the greatest band in the land. Of course, given their money-grubbing ways, the millionaire metal merchants would probably demand part ownership of the *Guitar Hero* brand just to license the track.



3 "Back in Black" – AC/DC Album: *Back in Black* (1980)

AC/DC have mined their singularly simple vein of rock for three decades, their skill in crafting catchy riffs exceeded only by their knack for naughty double entendre. Since AC/DC's rock is as hard as it comes – even Harmonix's founder Alex Rigopulos picks them as his number one wish for *Guitar Hero III* on page 38 – it would be a sin not to include the band on this list. "Back in Black," off the album of the same name, remains their signature song, as the strutting main riff (one of the best ever) provides the foundation for resident crazy Angus Young to launch into one of his trademark scrawling solos. *Guitar Hero III* NEEDS this song – period. Forget the noose, 'cuz it never dies.



4 "Layla" – Eric Clapton (Derek and the Dominos)

Album: Layla and Other Assorted Love Songs (1970)

The opening lick in "Layla" might be the most instantly identifiable guitar part in history, thanks in part to a famous '80s TV commercial for *Freedom Rock*, a classic rock CD compilation. Eric Clapton is so well regarded by guitarists his nickname is "God," and he demonstrates his skills all over this seven-minute track. As brilliant as Slowhand's searing leads are, he's nearly upstaged on this track by another guitar legend, Duane Allman of the Allman Brothers, whose soaring slide guitar spars with Clapton throughout, and adds a graceful touch to the stately coda. It's a near perfect Guitar Hero song, even if it was written to steal away the wife of his best friend (Patty Boyd, the wife of the Beatles' George Harrison).



5 "Outshined" – Soundgarden

Album: Badmotorfinger (1991)

Though crucial to the early '90s grunge scene, Soundgarden's real achievement was flying the flag of longhaired, bare-chested dinosaur rock in a decade where alternative music favored sulking over guitar solos. While pretty-boy singer Chris Cornell scored all the chicks, bearded caveman guitarist Kim Thayil laid down the heaviest riffs this side of Black Sabbath, dragging '70s rock kicking and screaming into the modern era. "Outshined" features some of his best rhythm and lead work, as he stomps all over the track like a woolly mammoth. Even now, it sounds like sweat, cheap beer, and flannel. Bonus points for coining the term "feeling Minnesota," an emotion we live with every day. Sigh.



6 "Wanted Dead or Alive" – Bon Jovi

Album: Slippery When Wet (1986)

You might not know it now, but Bon Jovi pretty much ruled the Earth for a couple years in the late '80s. "Wanted Dead or Alive," off their blockbuster album *Slippery When Wet*, takes the hoary guitarist-as-gunslinger metaphor to ridiculously brilliant heights. A live staple for the band to this day, it was a Spaghetti-O's western for a generation of pop-metal fans drunk on Bud Light and Aquanet. Throughout the song, guitarist Ritchie Sambora displays the chops that got him in Heather Locklear's pants, dispensing crunching power chords, smokin' solos, and Spanish-flavored acoustic work in proper measure. A crucial Guitar Hero track, to be sure.



7 "One-Armed Scissor" – At the Drive-In

Album: Relationship of Command (2000)

Led by be-afro'ed frontmen Cedric Bixler and Omar Rodriguez (who later formed Mars Volta), At The Drive-In took lessons learned from early '90s post-hardcore artists like Fugazi and Jawbox, and created a new, barnstorming breed of emo-punk. Their major label debut, *Relationship of Command*, was hugely influential on a ton of bands that have 500,000+ Myspace friends, and "One-Armed Scissor" perfectly captures the things that made ATDI great: careening energy, anthemic choruses, and complex timing riffs played with machine-tuned chops. This song has it all, from delicate picking to churning rhythm work.



8 "Cult of Personality" – Living Colour

Album: Vivid (1988)

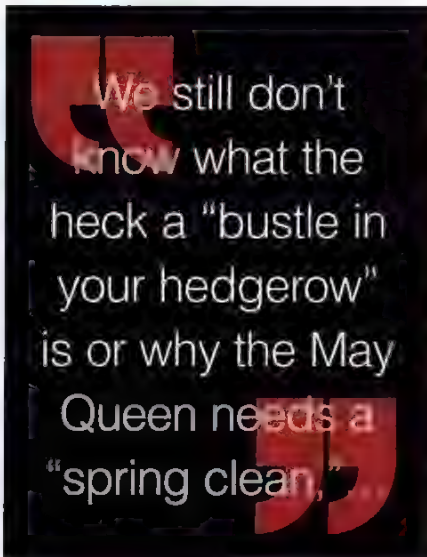
An oddity in the world of '80s metal not only for being African-American, but also for their refined chops and soulful songwriting, Living Colour broke into the mainstream with "Cult of Personality," a scorching rock track built on a monstrous, off-kilter rhythm riff. Lead guitarist Vernon Reid, whose background included work with left-field jazz icons Ronald Shannon Jackson and John Zorn, was a technical powerhouse, and he delivers a brain-bending solo on this track. Reid's mix of metal velocity, strange modal tonalities, and good old-fashioned whammy bar abuse seem ideal for Guitar Hero, and we'd jump at the chance to get to wrap our hands around this scorcher.



9 "12:51" – The Strokes

Album: Room on Fire (2003)

New York heroes the Strokes hit the mainstream in the early part of the decade with a sleek, precise take on new wave. Although their instant success and wealthy backgrounds rankled indie kinds (the acidic punk website Buddyhead dubbed them "four-car garage rock"), the band's catchy songs won them legions of converts. Although "Last Night" off their debut album was a bigger hit, "12:51" from the follow-up seems like a perfect match for Guitar Hero, with its infectious melody and flashy, laser-light show guitar lines (yes, that's a guitar, not a keyboard). This coolly hip song rocks without breaking a sweat or a smile.



10 "Venus" – Television

Album: Marquee Moon (1977)

Led by swanlike dandy Tom Verlaine, Television stood out in the early NYC punk scene like a rose growing in the sewer. Although not commercially successful, Verlaine and co-lead guitarist Richard Lloyd redefined electric guitar playing for a generation of underground artists, and their influence can be heard in everything from Sonic Youth to Modest Mouse. "Venus," from their classic debut *Marquee Moon*, features tightly cascading spirals of lead guitar, as elegant as modern architecture. Television proves some guitar heroes prefer cardigans to spandex.



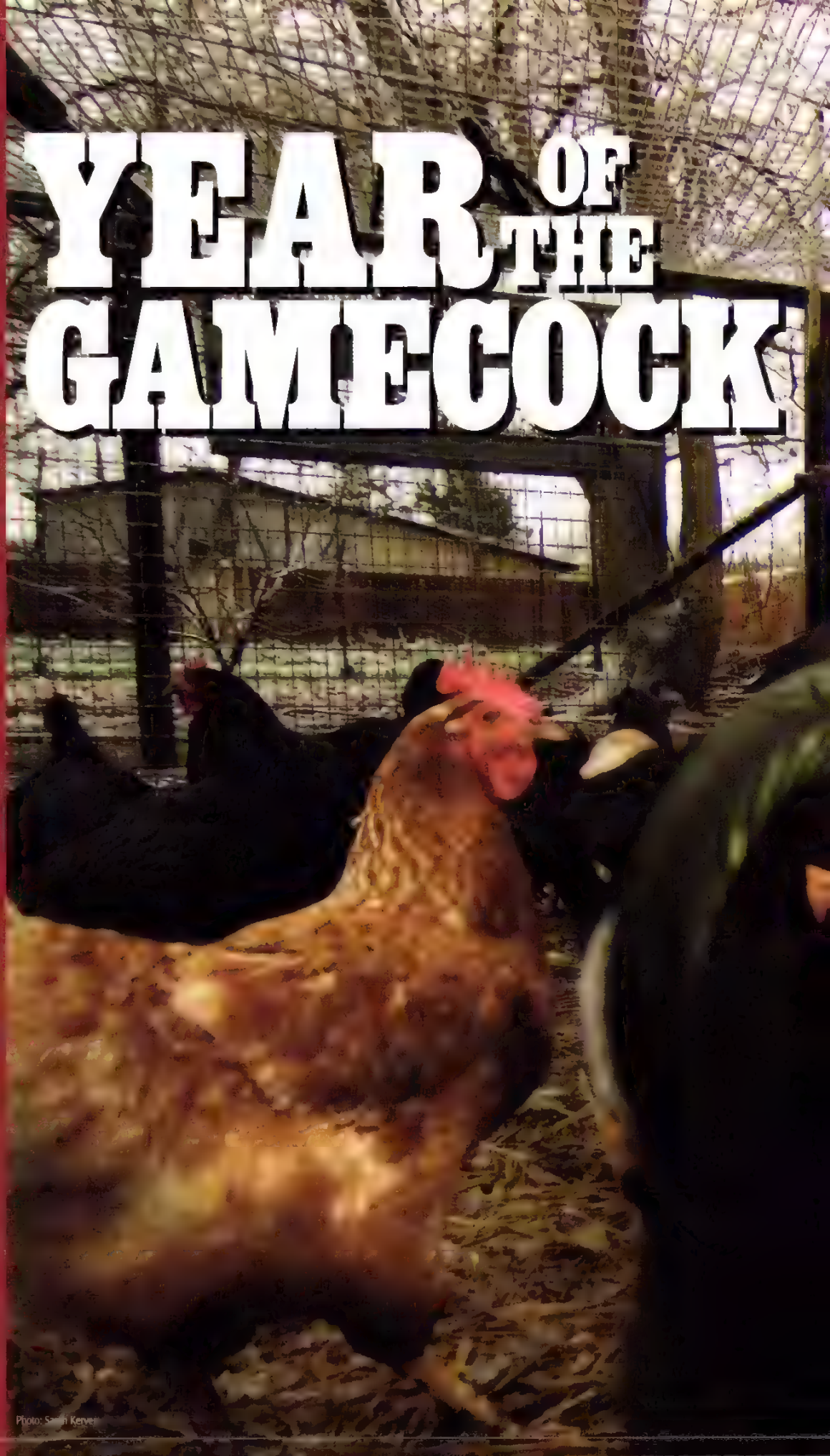
HONORABLE MENTIONS

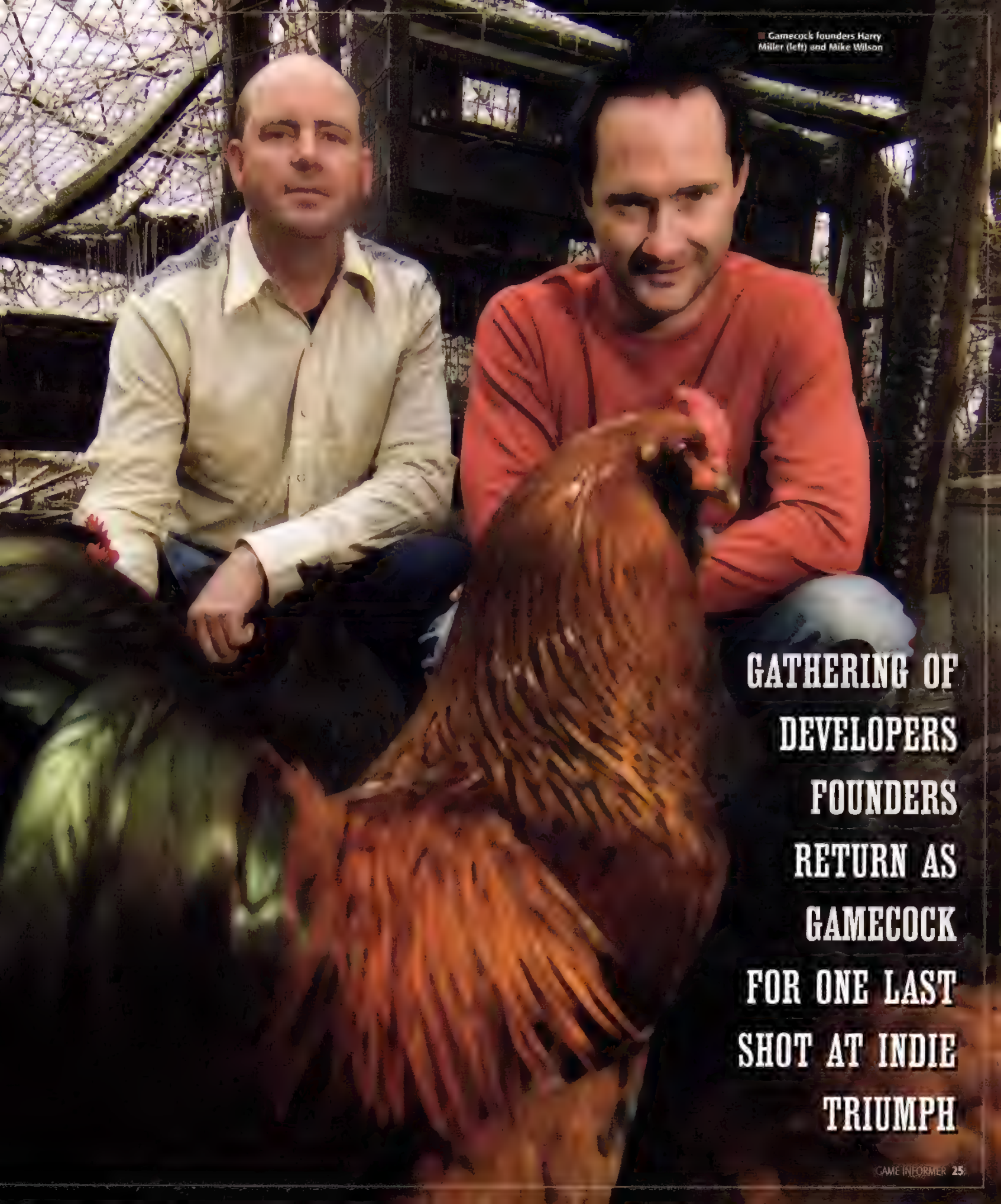
- "Eruption" – Van Halen
- "Raining Blood" – Slayer
- "Foolin'" – Def Leppard
- "Fabricoh" – Archers of Loaf
- "Helicopter" – Bloc Party
- "The One I Love" – REM
- "We're Not Gonna Take It" – Twisted Sister
- "My Sharona" – The Knack
- "Epic" – Faith No More
- "Let's Go Crazy" – Prince
- "Airbag" – Radiohead
- "Police Truck" – Dead Kennedys
- "Cherub Rock" – Smashing Pumpkins
- "Mississippi Queen" – Mountain
- "Aenima" – Tool
- "White Wedding" – Billy Idol
- "This Charming Man" – The Smiths
- "Float On" – Modest Mouse

In August 2001, Mike Wilson and Harry Miller left the U.S. gaming industry with the intention of never coming back. In just over three years they had built, grown, sold, and departed their publishing company, Gathering of Developers. It had been founded to change the landscape of indie game publishing with a low overhead, an innovative method for selecting titles, and a "developers first" mentality. The sale of the company to Take-Two Interactive in 2000 felt like a betrayal of core principles in the founders' eyes. But, due to several mounting pressures, it could not be helped. Working within the inevitable bureaucratic processes that came with a publicly traded company slowly chipped away at the independent-minded duo that last year. And the sudden and unexpected death of their friend and business partner Doug Myres shattered whatever was holding the publisher together. Wilson and Miller asked that their Dallas office be dissolved, but not before shipping their last big hit, Max Payne. Almost six years later, the partners have reunited to form Gamecock. They're not out to change the gaming world this time, but they just might have found the key to do things their way — and make some great games in the process.



YEAR OF THE GAMECOCK





Gamecock founders Harry Miller (left) and Mike Wilson

**GATHERING OF
DEVELOPERS
FOUNDERS
RETURN AS
GAMECOCK
FOR ONE LAST
SHOT AT INDIE
TRIUMPH**

PRE-GATHERING OF DEVELOPERS

Mike Wilson and Harry Miller first met while working at the Dial-up Wide Area Network Gaming Operation, better known as DWANGO, in 1995. The early gaming network based out of Houston was known for its online multiplayer support of Doom. The two became quick friends, but Mike's new job as VP of marketing at id Software complicated things. "Well, it was nice knowing you, but now that you're moving to Dallas I probably won't see you much anymore, so good luck in the future," Miller remembers. "Wow, was I wrong."

It wasn't long before Miller moved to Dallas as well to become CEO of a new developer named Ritual (then known as Hipnotic Interactive). Around that time, Wilson left id after the company decided that it didn't want to self-publish anymore, and he helped found Ion Storm, another Dallas-based developer. The Texan CEOs kept in close contact and shared battle stories that come with shaping up a new development house. During this time, the first thoughts of the Gathering of Developers strategy started to simmer. The original plan for Ion Storm, according to Wilson, was to develop and publish their own games. However, the hype built up around the studio was too much to pass up for one major publisher.

"Somewhere in between leaving id and starting at Ion Storm I took a four-day vacation and it had turned into a seven-title deal with Eidos," says Wilson. With the independent vision he had for the company now out of reach, Wilson started to consider his options. It wasn't long before he started having conversations with Miller about what eventually would become Gathering of Developers. The two wanted to start a publishing company that catered to small developers and avoided all of the red tape of a large corporation. But even the best ideas need a healthy infusion of cash to get off of the ground. Fortunately, they had an open ear with Take-Two founder Ryan Brant.

GOD OPENS FOR BUSINESS

"[Brant] wrote us a check for \$5 million to start our company, and that was bigger than [Take-Two's] whole IPO at the time," says Wilson. "They weren't even listed on NASDAQ. He knew that all they needed was some content, and he really bet the farm on us." That kind of money always has strings attached, however, and Miller and Wilson had to make some concessions that would eventually come back to haunt them.

Take-Two got a partial stake in the company, North American distribution rights, and all of the console rights, which meant that GOD would only be releasing games on PC. Additionally, Miller and Wilson offered partial ownership to the five developers who got on board with GOD on the ground floor: Epic, 3D Realms, Terminal Reality, Pop Top, and Ritual.

Members of these studios would serve on GOD's development board, which would help to find potential leads on up-and-coming developers and the games they were working on. Once GOD decided on a game to publish, they made it a point to trust the developer's instincts and stayed hands-off during production. Developers got to keep the rights to their intellectual property (still a rarity in the industry) and were given healthy royalty rates that increased at certain sales milestones. Miller and Wilson also made sure that GOD remained small (around 12 people before selling to Take-Two) to keep overhead low and allow them to pounce on new games with little red tape.

GOD debuted in 1998 and published its first hit, Railroad Tycoon II, within a matter of several months. Pop Top's train strategy game took off, selling over a million copies and seemingly proving that the concept was golden. But titles were sparse after that and games released throughout the next year failed to have much of an impact. GOD was signing games like Tropic, Stronghold, and Max Payne, but they were running out of money very quickly. In May of 2000, Take-Two bought Gathering of Developers for \$30 million.

THE GODGAMES ERA

"It was a pure heartbreak," recalls Miller. "We did not want to sell. But it was a reality of the times. When it happened it was

devastating to us." GOD remained in Texas throughout the transition and changed its name to GodGames officially. The first string of titles released like KISS Psycho Circus and Heavy Metal F.A.K.K. 2 didn't do much to strengthen Take-Two's faith in letting Miller and Wilson do things their way.

"When we sold that was right around the time they were becoming a big company and they just kind of couldn't help themselves from putting all of these bureaucratic processes in place and taking the reason Harry and I were there out," Wilson says. While GodGames' release of Tropic and Serious Sam in the spring of 2001 renewed some faith in the publishing label, the duo was slowly losing the passion that pushed them to start the company in the first place. Then the unthinkable happened.

Doug Myres, an original Gathering of Developers founder, died suddenly and unexpectedly in May of 2001 from asthma. Myres was only 36. "You just don't think of asthma as that kind of thing, but we learned unfortunately that it happens to a lot of people when they develop it late," Wilson says. "Doug was our best friend and partner and when he passed away it was just the last straw. We were like, 'Okay, we're not going to waste any time doing something we don't really care about.'"

GodGames shipped their biggest game, Max Payne, in late July along with an announcement of the closure of their Texas offices and the departure of the founding team. Take-Two transitioned the label to New York and brought most of the remaining lineup to market over the next year.

Wilson took part of the GodGames team to Austin to start an entirely DVD-based magazine called *SubstanceTV* that covered documentaries, music, and video games. Miller went to Hong Kong to work with En-Tranz Entertainment, an MMO-focused game publishing company, and brought some GodGames people along with him as well. He ended up living in Hong Kong for the next two years. But Miller returned

to the States for a number of reasons entirely unrelated to the gaming business. "Early 2003 SARS hit Hong Kong," Miller says. "My son was due in late July/early August and SARS was in full effect. The whole city was dressed in plastic bags and face masks. So [my wife and I] decided it was probably not a good idea to stay there. It was time to come back."

GATHERING REDUX

When Miller returned to the U.S. he took some time off to raise his family, and found that his old friend was now back with Take-Two. After seven issues *SubstanceTV* never really gained a foothold, so Wilson moved on to produce a documentary titled *Burning Man: Beyond Black Rock*. Around the same time (January 2003), then-CEO of Take-Two Kelly Sumner was appointed president of GodGames (yet again rebranded simply as "Gathering") and sought out Wilson to help revitalize the PC label.

Upon returning to Take-Two, Wilson soon found out why he was taken back into the fold. It turns out that titles like Max Payne, Mafia, and Stronghold that Wilson and Miller had signed before their departure had made a decent chunk of change. "Kelly told me when I went back, 'Yeah, you guys did \$100 million [that first year] and then it did \$250 million [the next year], and now we're shooting for \$400 million,'" Wilson says. "I was like 'holy s—!'"

The surprises didn't end there. When Wilson met with accounting, he found out that almost all of the GOD titles at least turned some profit, "even KISS and Blair Witch, the ones we thought were huge disasters."

From 2003 to 2005 Gathering brought out several games in the Vietnam series, Tropic 2: Pirate Cove, Railroad Tycoon 3, and the infamous Guy Game. But Wilson still had trouble working within a corporate structure. "Unfortunately, I wasn't able to deliver much from the Take-Two side with that new

Hail to the Chimp

► PLATFORM NEXT-GEN CONSOLES ► STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION GAME (MULTIPLAYER TBA) ► PUBLISHER GAMECOCK.
► DEVELOPER WIDELOAD GAMES ► RELEASE SPRING 2008

CONCEPT:

Hail to the Chimp is a mix of beat 'em up, party game, and – believe it or not – Halo. The story is based around the animal kingdom's move towards democracy after the lion king is scandalously deposed. What follows is a series of non-stop brawls with every candidate vying for the powerful clam vote – the most populous voting segment – via the animal version of CNN. The game features both online and offline play with several maps and game types like Kind of the Hill and Territories. Ten playable characters are planned including a monkey, hippo, and octopus. Any two of these characters can team up temporarily to use a super move unique to every distinct animal combination. WideLoad CEO Alex Seropian says that older gamers shouldn't be thrown off by the kiddie veneer. "For the first time we have a multiplayer game that has enough depth for the hardcore gamer while being accessible to anyone," Seropian says. "There's humor on all levels – it may be an E-rated game, but like a good family movie there will be jokes only the adults will get."

WHERE DO YOU KNOW

WIDELOAD FROM?

Stubbs the Zombie in Rebel Without a Pulse. CEO Alex Seropian founded and lead Bungie, worked on Halo.

WHY GAMECOCK SIGNED IT:

"The idea is that we are in the game business and we're here to have fun – in the games that we're a part of and the style that we do business – so this game is right up our alley," says Miller.

Gathering label. They thought they wanted me to come back and do it, but when it came down to actually signing those deals with the developers...they had gotten accustomed to controlling everything." By early 2005, the Gathering label was phased out and Wilson focused on finishing the Burning Man documentary, which debuted that November at the AFI Film Festival.

THE RISE OF GAMECOCK

Later that year Miller and Wilson started to get the gaming bug again. The two began tossing around concepts and the idea of forming a new independent publishing outfit slowly gained momentum. "After we left the industry and were able to come back and look at the positives and negatives of what happened, we realized there were a lot more positives than negatives," said Miller. "That and a new cycle coming with the [advent of] next-gen consoles, it just felt like this was the right time."

"I'm not doing this because I need a job," Wilson said. "I'm doing this because I think it's a really good idea. I miss the industry. I miss the developers. It's a great business. I didn't feel that way when I left. I felt like I never wanted to do it again because of what I had just been through. But given some retrospect and doing stuff in other entertainment businesses, this one's pretty damn good."

Miller and Wilson had learned from the previous structuring problems that led to the sale of GOD. This time they would hit the pavement for 18 months searching for funding with absolutely zero ties to the gaming industry. "We wanted enough money to have a good lineup and really do a proper marketing job and be a real publisher and not a little publisher," said Wilson. "Finding money that wasn't from a game publisher was really hard. Venture capitalists sniff around in this industry, but they don't bet on entertainment. So we kept

knocking on doors until we found the right people."

Once they secured enough funding, the duo has been quietly signing games since last August under the new banner of Gamecock. With the newfound freedom to control all business tactics, Miller and Wilson now feel like they can finally deliver on the promise GOD made to developers nine years ago. And several of them have been patiently waiting for this moment.

Gamecock's starting lineup includes Fury, Mushroom Men, Hero, Hail to the Chimp, and Insecticide. The genres range from MMO to beat 'em up to adventure to action to dungeon crawler. The combined experience of these developers includes team members from such well-known franchises as Halo, Gears of War, and classic LucasArts adventure games like Day of the Tentacle. Miller and Wilson still use a tried and true mix of gut instinct and a network of trusted friends in the gaming industry to decide on their lineup.

"[Developers] know if we do greenlight anybody's game we're going to give them a great deal," Wilson said. "That hasn't changed. It's still a very developer-friendly, high-royalties-with-high-sales type deal. We still are going to brand the developers first. Not just to be nice. We happen to think that's the smart way to go for gamers to be able to figure out who their favorite developers are. Just like you have your favorite band or author or whatever. I don't think most people have a favorite book publishing company or record company. Nobody goes, 'Man, Universal Pictures rock! I cannot wait for the next Universal movie.'"

The "developer first" mentality is actually one of the main reasons behind the new company's unusual title. "We don't even care if anybody knows it's our game, to be honest. That's the basic idea of calling the company something goofy like Gamecock," Wilson said. "One, we [want to] remember that it's not our brand that matters and, two, we want to have fun and lighten up the industry a little bit, because it's just

such a bloody serious business when it's supposed to be about games and fun."

But what do Gamecock's developers think of the publisher's philosophy? "We've spoken to all the majors. First of all, unless they can see a game like yours in the marketplace, they can't figure out how to do a sales projection, so it's hard to get a greenlight," says Auran CEO Tony Hilliam, developer of Fury. "Next, if you convince them you know what you're doing and they give you the greenlight, then they ask you for the IP ownership and 75 percent of all the revenues. It just doesn't make sense for us as we've taken all the risk to date. Finding Mike and Harry was a godsend. They let us keep the IP and they let us keep the majority of the revenues (because we are doing all the funding and taking most of the risk). On top of that, these guys really know their games, and they can spot when something is new and exciting. So in the end it was a no-brainer to sign up with them."

Both men are confident that Gamecock can fill a niche that larger publishers can't maneuver in simply due to the daunting sales targets they have to hit to feed the corporate machine. "We take more chances because we're a smaller group," said Miller. "Our overhead's very low. We can make very healthy profits off a game that big companies can't because the margins don't fit into their schedule. At the same time, we have titles that are going for a very broad audience. We'll be competing in that regard as well."

Only time will tell if Gamecock's strategy will succeed in the end. As their first titles hit the market this winter, Miller and Wilson will finally get that chance to prove their long-simmering ideas in the real world. And gamers will be the final judge. "It's not a crusade this time to change the industry, it's more like taking advantage of the fact that it can't change," said Wilson. "But certainly if we do well we do have a chance to make a real impact." ■ ■ ■



Fury

PLATFORM PC

STYLE MASSIVELY MULTIPLAYER ONLINE
ROLE PLAYING GAME

PUBLISHER GAMECOCK

DEVELOPER AURAN

RELEASE WINTER 2007

WHERE DO YOU KNOW AURAN FROM?

The Trainz Railroad Simulator
series and Dark Reign.

WHY GAMECOCK SIGNED IT:

Miller feels like there is plenty of room for MMOs that cater specifically to the competitive player. "When I'm in [an MMO] I usually just want to do PvP."

CONCEPT:

Mix one part FPS and one part MMORPG and you'll have Fury. "We felt that creating 'another MMO' was not going to be the best way to get a million or more customers," says Auran CEO Tony Hilliam. "We decided to find a new niche that we could really dominate, and that was when we revived an old design we had had about an arena-based combat game." Fury has the fantasy look of an MMO and features auto-targeting for spells and attacks, but the PvP has more in common with deathmatch battles than anything you'll see in World of Warcraft. Players rise through the four schools of Life, Death, Growth, and Decay to unlock almost 400 different abilities in this completely class-free progression system. However, instead of "learning" new powers, characters will "remember" lost abilities from previous lives. Trials will take the place of traditional MMO quests, where players will unlock memories by killing a certain number of enemies with a certain spell or something of that nature – almost like Xbox Live Achievements. When characters die there will be no penalty or trip to the graveyard, they'll simply respawn according to the rules of the match.



Hero

PLATFORM NEXT-GEN CONSOLE AND PC

STYLE 1 OR 2-PLAYER ACTION (MULTIPLAYER TBA)

PUBLISHER GAMECOCK

DEVELOPER FIREFLY STUDIOS

RELEASE WINTER 2008

CONCEPT:

Hero is a self-described arcade-style dungeon crawler featuring drop-in co-op. Players will level up, follow skill trees, and nab plenty of loot, but the game "doesn't have any backpack fiddling or talking to innkeepers." Plot details are scarce at this point. Apparently, the titular hero is paid to do a simple subterranean task that turns into a massive dungeon romp. Firefly is shooting to make this environment come alive, "[We] give citizens jobs and needs that they attend to, have warring factions, and a good backstory that makes the player feel they are in a real place rather than just an abstract concept," says Hero's lead designer Simon Bradbury. Combat incorporates standard melee, ranged, and magic attacks, but what makes this different from the standard hack and slash is the new "close combat" feature. "This is a kind of street fighting style that the player can make a strategic switch to at any time, should the going get tough and they find themselves surrounded by monsters," Bradbury says. "This not only opens up more skills to choose and master, but the timing of combat mode switching gives the combat a really fresh feel."



WHERE DO YOU KNOW FIREFLY FROM?

The Stronghold PC strategy series.

WHY GAMECOCK SIGNED IT:

Miller says he enjoys dungeon crawlers, but always gets bored with them halfway through. When Firefly pitched the game he was shocked. "All the things I don't like were things they were changing or improving upon," says Miller. "I just kept hearing myself go 'Yeah, yeah, oh yeah.'"



Insecticide

PLATFORM HANDHELD AND PC

STYLE 1 OR 2-PLAYER ACTION (MULTIPLAYER TBA)

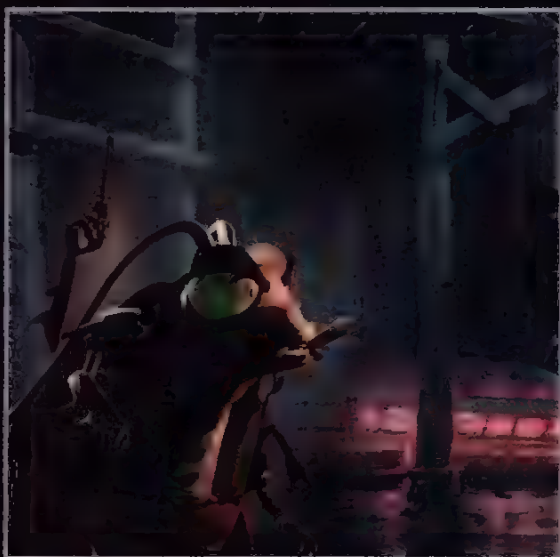
PUBLISHER GAMECOCK

DEVELOPER CRACKPOT ENTERTAINMENT

RELEASE WINTER 2007

CONCEPT

Set in a noir-tinged metropolitan futurescape where anthropomorphic insects rule, *Insecticide* is a detective story that follows Chrys Liszt and her partner Roachy Caruthers as they investigate a murder at a powerful and mysterious soda company. The team must use a mix of third-person shooting skills and investigative techniques to work their way through a plot that eventually becomes much deeper than a simple murder. Crackpot president and co-chief creative officer Michael Levine explains this unique mix of action and classic adventure. "Too many games today run 'at 11' the entire game – compelling entertainment needs pacing, great characters, and stories and worlds, along with great gameplay. Just like any great action detective movie, we plan to have intense action moments, but slower-paced investigative modes as well." At least two players will be able to team up to take down enemies in special co-op missions.



WHERE DO YOU KNOW CRACKPOT FROM?

Some of the team comes from the LucasArts adventure era. We're talking *Day of the Tentacle*, *Sam & Max Hit the Road*, *Full Throttle*, *Grim Fandango*, and *Curse of Monkey Island*.

WHY GAMECOCK SIGNED IT:

Miller is excited about the world of *Insecticide* and interested in the way the game is laid out (it will be split into two downloadable episodes for the PC version). "[There's] something about the small, quick, story-based jump in," he says.

Mushroom Men

- ▶ PLATFORM NEXT-GEN CONSOLE AND HANDHELD
- ▶ STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION (MULTIPLAYER TRN)
- ▶ PUBLISHER GAMECOCK
- ▶ DEVELOPER RED FLY STUDIOS
- ▶ RELEASE SPRING 2008

WHERE DO YOU KNOW RED FLY FROM?

Team members have worked on titles like *Gears of War*, *Star Wars Galaxies*, *Thief: Deadly Shadows*, and *Deus Ex: Invisible War*

WHY GAMECOCK SIGNED IT:

Miller enjoys the tone of the world, and likens it to "the idea of *Earthworm Jim* and *Abe's Oddysee*."

CONCEPT:

The game begins when a strange comet passes Earth, depositing some kind of green dust on the planet. Humans notice no effect, but right under their noses mushrooms, cacti, kudzu, and other small organisms start running around and causing trouble. Players take on the role of a three-inch-tall Mushroom Man as he makes his way through everyday environments like tool sheds, fireplaces, and an old VW bus, that seem fantastical through shroom-colored glasses. Choose among a speedy Scout, a slow but strong Heavy, and a "spore-powered" Sage to take on insects, lizards, and rival shroom factions by combining random items. "Grab a clothespin, a paperclip, and a rubber band and see what happens," says Red Fly Creative Director/CEO Dan Borth. "Replace the paperclip with a lit firecracker and see how things change."



LOOSE TALK

Hot Gaming Gossip

EA NOT READY FOR THE WII?

Although mega-publisher Electronic Arts was front and center at the Wii launch with two games, Loose Talk has heard that some within the company are angry that the publisher didn't do more to support the en-vogue platform. There has even been some talk within EA that suggests that the publisher was somewhat blind-sided by the system's success.



PS3 LOSES UNREAL EXCLUSIVE

When Epic showed off Unreal Tournament 2007 at Sony's E3 press conference two years ago, many thought it was a good omen for the PS3. Now, however, Loose Talk has learned that Sony's system does not in fact have the exclusive on the game's release. Unreal Tournament 2007 will also show up day and date for the PC and Xbox 360.



INDIANA JONES' SABBATICAL

For the first time in his life, Indiana Jones won't be there to save the day. The fedora-wearing hero's latest video game adventure (and his first for the next-gen consoles) is now being pushed out from its original 2007 release. Delays in the movie are to blame.



360 PRICE DROP SOONER RATHER THAN LATER?

Two industry analysts, Michael Goodman of the Yankee Group and Colin Sebastian of Lazard Capital Markets, have speculated recently that the price of the Xbox 360 will drop by \$100 before Christmas.

NEW 360 ON THE WAY?

The Mercury News' Dean Takahashi has claimed that Microsoft is readying a new version of the Xbox 360. This edition, codenamed Zephyr, would feature an HDMI port and a 120 GB hard drive – although it is not known if the HDD would be sold separately. Loose Talk has heard its own rumors about this new Xbox 360, and we were expecting its announcement during CES, which did not end up happening.

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

NAME THAT GAME

Test Your Sight

Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, but sometimes a company's lawyers don't always see it that way. This game appeared on the Odyssey 2. However, Atari, who then had the exclusive home-release rights to Pac-Man, sued and won to cease production of this title because it felt it was too similar to Pac-Man. This is despite the fact that this month's game differed from Namco's classic title in that it had things such as a maze creator and random mazes.

(Answer on page 34)



report

GI INVESTIGATES:
ARE YOUR
DOWNLOADED
GAMES SAFE?

➤ XBOX 360

If you're ever unlucky enough to have to send in your Xbox 360 for repair, Microsoft will always tell you to keep your hard drive. This keeps your downloaded games safe, allowing you to just snap your old hard drive onto your fixed console once it is sent back to you.

Should something more sinister befall you, and your hard drive itself is broken and you have to buy an all-new console, getting back what is rightfully yours is simple. After you recover your gamer profile on the new console and you enter Xbox Live Marketplace, the stuff you've previously bought and downloaded will be marked and available for free download.

This latter situation could become routine if Microsoft finally decides to release new, larger 360 hard drives as expected, and people abandon their original hard drives.

➤ PLAYSTATION 3

Getting back your downloads from the PlayStation Store is just as easy as it is on the Xbox 360.

Unlike the Xbox Live Marketplace, you do not recover items by clicking on that item's listing in the Store. Instead, look up in the upper-right corner of your screen once you are in the Store. Next to your shopping basket you can see a tab labeled Download List. From here you'll see a list of what you've downloaded, and these items will be available to you to reclaim free of charge. During this process you won't actually go into your virtual wallet, so there is no danger of accidentally paying for something a second time.

Items are paired to your PlayStation Store account, so in our test we were also able to call up our downloads on a separate PS3.

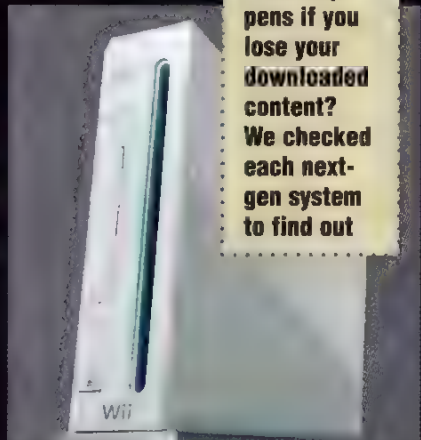
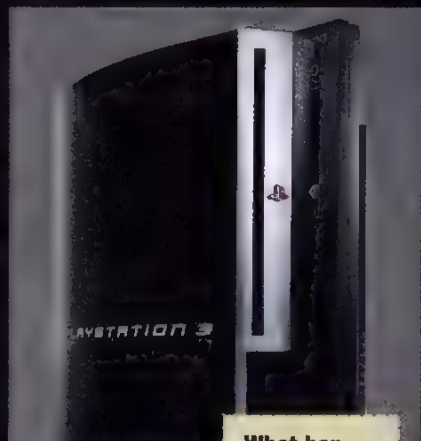
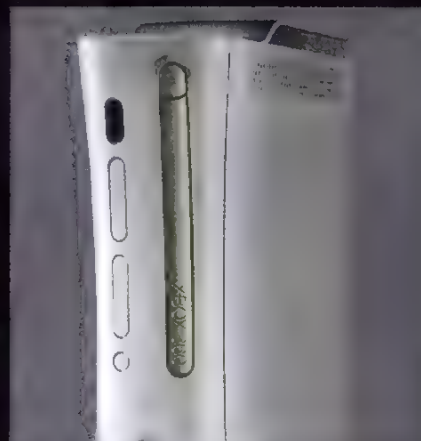
➤ Wii

Getting the system's Wi-Fi to work may be a pain in the ass, but at least regaining your downloads isn't.

Head into the Virtual Console portion of the Wii Shopping channel. From here, in the lower-right side of the screen there will be an option to look at the titles you've already downloaded. All you have to do is choose to re-download your games for free.

Unfortunately, Nintendo specifically states that neither your account nor downloads can be transferred between two units – something we tested also. So if your Wii gets stolen, you are truly S.O.L.

Now that all three consoles have embraced downloadable content, gamers are spending hard-earned cash left and right. But we all know that bad things do indeed happen to good people. Stupid kid brothers will "accidentally" erase the copy of Geometry Wars you bought for 400 points on Xbox Live Arcade. Or perhaps your system goes on the fritz, and you're waiting for it to come back from the shop. What happens to all the goodies you've already bought online? With these and other questions in mind, Game Informer tested each of the next-gen consoles to ensure that once you buy and download a game, it remains yours.



What happens if you lose your downloaded content? We checked each next-gen system to find out

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MATURE 17+

M

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Drug Reference
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SPRING 2007

Wii

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TOP FIVES

Favorites From Industry Pros And GI Readers

DEVELOPER

KEVIN FRANE
Producer, Sega
(Shining Force EXA)

READER

SHARNA WILTZ
Chicago, IL



1 **The Legend of Zelda** - NES

2 **Chrono Trigger** - SNES

3 **Final Fantasy X** - PS2

4 **Metroid** - NES

5 **Final Fantasy VI** - SNES

1 **Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas** - PS2

2 **Shenmue 2** - Xbox

5 **Grand Theft Auto: Vice City** - PS2

4 **Hunter: the Reckoning** - Xbox

5 **Jade Empire** - Xbox

Send Top Fives and a photo of yourself to:

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(attach digital picture)

TOP TEN

Lists...Everybody Loves Lists...

Top 10 Yoda Lines That You've Never Heard

- 10 When 900-years-old you reach, relief, Preparation H spells
- 9 Make me look fat, does this blouse?
- 8 That's what she said
- 7 A million republic credits, you may have already won
- 6 Applebees. Old Navy Performance Fleece. U2. A Jedi craves not these things
- 5 Begin with my pants, you will
- 4 In the basket, it puts the lotion
- 3 Begun, this pillow fight has!
- 2 Fear leads to suffer...wait...fear leads to hate...no, wrong that is
- 1 Murder, she wrote

Name That Game Answer: K.C. Munchkin!

SHROUDED
IN SADNESS

Wii'S SURVIVAL HORROR

Nintendo's Wii console is known for its all-ages appeal, but when a game promises that it has 10 different endings – and they are all sad – you know that things just got a little darker. *Sadness* is a 2008 Wii title co-developed by Frontline and Nibris in Poland, and it will bring survival horror to gamers like they've never experienced before.

Set in pre-WWI Eastern Europe, *Sadness* puts you in the shoes of Maria – a woman who has to protect her narcoleptic son Alexander after their train derailed in the countryside. Their subsequent adventures are based on Slavic legends, and become even more bizarre, especially when Alexander starts acting...odd.

Of course, you'll manipulate objects, fight, and interact with the environment via the Wii remote and nunchuk attachment. Using these controls you'll also have to protect Alexander via commands, as he has been blinded in the train crash. Even though he has lost one of his senses, his state of mind bears watching, as it will give you clues as to what's going around you. Given that Maria won't command a chock-full inventory during the game, utilizing everything you can will be vital.

The developers say that the early game length estimate is around 15 hours, and with 10 different endings there will be plenty of *Sadness* to go around.



■ Players will use the Wii remote for a wide range of in-game actions. For instance, a downward-flinching motion (upper right) can be used for attacks (right). As a woman of limited resources, the game's main character Maria will have to make good use of mundane objects such as her torch (above)





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Costume Police

Game Informer held the first annual "Oh Snap!" insult competition and let the winners go after some of the most well-known (and worst-dressed) celebrities in gaming. You won't believe how much they go there.



★ TOP COPS ★



GRAMZON
Bringer of Fire



CYAN BRODDERICK
Author



SPRINKLES MERRYWEATHER
Plumber



EMILY WALPOLE
Stylist



ANDREI VOROBEV
Comedian



CAPT'N GRAYBEARD ORANGEBEARD
Pirate



BOBBY BRUCE
Painter



TAMMY ARMSTRONG
5th Grader



RONNY THE FLUFFER



AMY ARNOLD
Diva

GITAROO MAN

BRODDERICK: They're called accessories, honey. They're supposed to pull an outfit together, not BE the outfit.

VOROBEV: Elton John's secret son.

WALPOLE: Gitaroo's look says it all – his grandmother bought him this outfit for Christmas and his mother made him wear it to school. As a result, Darth Vader cut off his left hand and now he's forced to wear a Power Glove. Gitaroo Man swears revenge.

THE FLUFFER: F—ing bulls—, I'm not going to rip on Gitaroo Man.

BRUCE: Wait a minute... They made a Captain EO game?



CAMMY

GRAMZON: Are those camouflage panty hose or are her legs molding?

VOROBEV: Two words: Cammy toe.

ARNOLD: With those luscious tree trunk thighs I would suggest some loose fitting pants, not clothes that accent your fabulous, bootylicious self

THE FLUFFER: Sergeant Slaughter looks good after the sex change operation.

MERRYWEATHER: The phrase 'if you've got it, flaunt it' wasn't referring to plague lesions, honey



TINGLE

THE FLUFFER: I'm not sure what's worse. That he's wearing a one-piece body suit, or that he put on his underwear last.

BRODDERICK: You know you're in trouble when you look like this and Santa Claus won't even let you in the door.

ARMSTRONG: What is that belt even holding up? Certainly not his dignity.

WALPOLE: Link wants his clothes back.

BRUCE: What time is it? Time for you to prance to the gym.

WHO WORE IT BEST?

GI asked 100 people at a Salt Lake City Arby's Drive-Thru



NINJA GAIDEN

58%

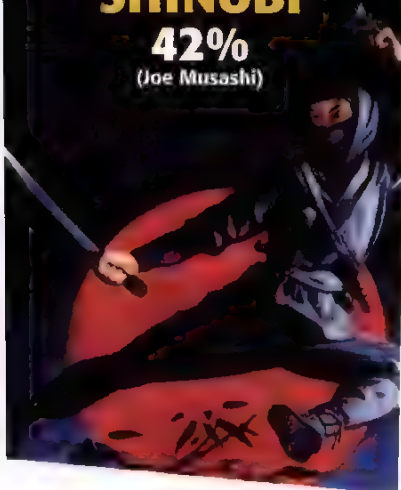
(Ryu Hayabusa)

Hayabusa, going sleeveless on the CBS Early Show in NYC. Musashi, keeping it traditional at a Beverly Hills luncheon.

SHINOBI

42%

(Joe Musashi)



BAD DUDES

ARNOLD: Wonder Twin powers, activate! Shape of... mullet men! Form of... breakdancing gloves!

WALPOLE: This is what men who beat their husbands wear.

ORANGEBEARD: Are you a bad enough dude to rescue these fashion disasters? Even Frank Stallone wouldn't rock these outfits, fellas.

BRUCE: There's only one thing more powerful than Ralph Macchio - that's two Ralph Macchios!

BRODDERICK: This must have been just before the slap fight.



CAPTAIN FALCON

ARMSTRONG: Captain Falcon may think he's Captain Fabulous, but it would take more than a few Captain Morgans to get the ladies to fall for his shtick.

WALPOLE: "Taxi!!! Take me to Planet Fashion immediately!"

BRODDERICK: That's an awfully tiny gun at his hip. Good thing most people will be too distracted by the nipple buttons to notice.

ORANGEBEARD: Never trust a proctologist who dresses like this.

GRAMZON: What's a man compensating for when his little sports car can hit the finish line in ten seconds flat?

VOLDO

ARNOLD: Madonna did this years ago, END IT!

GRAMZON: Who called Satan's gardener?

MERRYWEATHER: That is soooooo Battle Arena Toshinden ago!

ORANGEBEARD: Mike Piazza's nut cup really completes this look.

THE FLUFFER: Actually, I don't see what's wrong with this.

TIDUS

ARMSTRONG: If you're going to start sewing your own clothes, start with something simple - like a cape. Also, be sure you aren't asleep.

GRAMZON: So that's where my basketball hoop went.

ORANGEBEARD: I'm not sure about Meg Ryan's new look.

ARNOLD: Kns Kross is coming back! One pant leg up and one down...Jump, Jump!

MERRYWEATHER: It's like twelve bad outfits in one.



CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

1992 Learning The Tune

Rigopulos attends graduate school at MIT as a member of the Computer Music Group in the school's prestigious Media Lab.

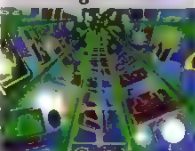
1995 The First Gig

Along with Eran Egozy, a fellow MIT graduate, Rigopulos starts Harmonix, a company devoted to creating new, computer-based music interfaces.

1998 Digital Shredding

The company releases its first product, *The Axe: Titans of Classic Rock*. The program allowed users to improvise over famous rock songs using a keyboard, mouse, or joystick.

2001 Catching the Beat



Now focused on gaming, Harmonix releases *Frequency* for the PlayStation 2. The techno-oriented rhythm game wins much praise from critics, but sells poorly.

2002 The Remix

Harmonix releases *Amplitude* for PS2, a follow-up to *Frequency*. While the game improves on *Frequency* in many respects, it does not fare any better at retail.

2003 Sing Out!



In partnership with Japanese publisher Konami, Harmonix scores its first hit, the singing title *Karaoke Revolution*. They go on to do three sequels of the title for Konami before parting ways.

2005 Charting Big



Along with peripheral maker/publisher RedOctane, Harmonix hits the big time with the word-of-mouth smash *Guitar Hero*.

2006 Another Smash

Striking quickly, Harmonix continues its success with a stellar sequel to *Guitar Hero*, adding bass and guitar co-op play, among other features.

2006 Going Big 2006

Harmonix, still riding the wave of *Guitar Hero*'s success, is acquired by MTV, where it will help revive the TV giant's games division.

ALEX RIGOPULOS

PRESIDENT AND CEO/HARMONIX

>> Harmonix, which made amazing PS2 music titles like *Frequency*, is enjoying the breakout success of *Guitar Hero* and *Guitar Hero II*. We sat down with company founder Alex Rigopulos to learn how the company has evolved over the years, and where it's headed in the future thanks to a new partnership with MTV. <<

Was Harmonix originally intended to be a game company?

When we started the company, we weren't thinking about video games at all. We considered ourselves an interactive music company. We wanted to solve the problem that we felt needed solving in the world. Making and playing music is this profoundly joyful experience. Tragically, very few people ever get access to that pleasure that comes from music making. Just about everybody tries at some point in their life, whether that's piano lessons as a kid or guitar as a teen. But almost all those people quit after six months because it's just too damn hard. We felt that we needed to invent new ways to let people who are not musicians have access to that very unique pleasure that comes from music making.

How did you transition into gaming?

We had been doing these interactive music projects for years. We were learning a lot of interesting lessons, but there was no business there. Then, something huge happened that altered the trajectory of our company. These new music games appeared in Japan—the early games like *PaRappa the Rapper*, *BeatMania*, and *Dance Dance Revolution*. It was like the light bulb going off. Video games were the

realized this was getting bigger than you imagined?

It was sometime last winter. When we shipped *Guitar Hero*, we'd been playing it and felt that it was our best game, but we'd been so jaded... In all our prior experience with games, there'd be a big [sales] spike at Christmas and then the floor falls out. In the case of *Guitar Hero*, the sales kept growing every month after the holidays, which was very unusual. We started to see things on YouTube, people videotaping themselves playing the game and posting the videos. It was starting to take on that feel of a phenomenon. That was the point when we realized that we had something special.

Do you think that the rock soundtrack helped it be more successful than *Amplitude* and *Frequency*, which focused more on techno and dance music?

It was a number of factors coming together. One is that, for the first time, we got to combine the lessons [we learned] from *Frequency* and *Karaoke Revolution*. From *Karaoke*, we learned a way of positioning a concept for a game that was immediately understandable and appealing. But, [with *Guitar Hero*] we were actually able to infuse the

What's the one song or band you'd really love to get in *Guitar Hero II* that you didn't?

I would say the number one requested band that everyone is always begging for is *AC/DC*. It's such a natural fit.

You've recently been acquired by MTV. You just had your biggest success as an independent; why did you decide to become part of a bigger company?

With the success of *Guitar Hero*, we had gotten to a point where we could start doing the sorts of things we'd been trying to do for years. To do that right was going to require a powerful partner. MTV had been looking for the right opportunity to move into the video game space, but they didn't want to get into fighting games or sports games or other things that didn't really resonate with their brand. I think, with Harmonix, they saw a real opportunity to move into the space and do something important.

Now that Activision and Neversoft are doing *Guitar Hero III*, what's the future for Harmonix?

We have a number of new things in the works that are beyond the scope of *Guitar Hero* that we're

[We] are developing products that allow people to consume their music not just as passive listeners, but as active participants.

media through which we could accomplish what we were trying to do as a company. So, we redirected the company to focus on music games exclusively and started building the first prototype of what was to become *Frequency*. [We] brought it to Sony and they got excited about it.

Frequency and Amplitude got great reviews across the board, but probably weren't the breakout hits that you'd hoped for.

Not at all. Those games won all kinds of awards, got great reviews, and we sort of had this youthful naïveté about it. We thought we had an addictive game and a big publisher, so of course these games are going to be successful. Then, they went out the door and sold quite terribly. That was a humbling experience for us, because we learned that it's not enough to make a really addictive game. You need to make a game that is superficially attractive to someone that hasn't even tried it yet.... The problem with *Frequency* and *Amplitude* was that you look at a screenshot and read a description of the games and you'd still have no idea of what the game was.

Guitar Hero has become a pop culture phenomenon. Was there a moment when you

hyper-addictive gameplay that we had created with the earlier games. Furthermore, exactly as you said, *Frequency* and *Amplitude* were underground music—it wasn't mass-market music. Adding a rock soundtrack made a huge difference. The final thing is the controller. When you put that controller in your hand, it really adds to the suspension of disbelief you have when you're playing. All those factors together, as well as what I sense as a sort of general widespread resurgence of the popularity of rock in this country, all combined [to make *Guitar Hero* a hit].

How difficult is it to deal with the licensing of music for these games?

For *Guitar Hero*, it was tremendously difficult because no one had heard of RedOctane or Harmonix. Getting the record companies and the music publishers to give us the time of day was pretty challenging. Fortunately, we were able to assemble a soundtrack we were proud of. The second time around, many of the bands that wouldn't return our phone calls the first time suddenly had an interest.

excited about. [Online] is an area of great interest to us.

Do you see the evolution of music games moving towards people actually creating music as opposed to just mimicking it?

Yes. That is our roots, actual musical creativity as opposed to just performance. Ideas about ways that we might integrate that into gaming are something that's been brewing here for many years and it's definitely somewhere I'd like to take it.

What's the future for Harmonix?

Well, speaking very generally, the direction I see the world headed in is one where music gaming becomes just a natural extension of what music entertainment is. Five years from now, when a new album comes out by your favorite artist, playing with that music in the context of an interactive experience is going to be a natural way you expect to consume that music. A big part of Harmonix's long-term plan is developing products that allow people to consume their music not just as passive listeners but as active participants in the music making. We're trying to implement that idea on a large scale over the next five years.

THE MUSIC MAN

■ Harmonix's Alex Rigopulos is leading the company's efforts to change the face of music video games

peripherals

Wii REMOTE CHARGE STATION

Manufacturer: Nyko
Website: www.nyko.com
List Price: \$29.99

Since Nintendo doesn't seem interested in making rechargeable Wii remote batteries, we have to look elsewhere. A couple of other companies have some similar things in the works, but we like these Nyko batteries. The base station holds up to two remotes at once, and the batteries are reported to offer up to 25 hours of gameplay. As an added bonus, the back of the battery is a rubberized grip, so you can stop listening to your friends whine about how the remote keeps slipping out of their hands when they play tennis.



etc.

SUPER MULTI BLUE PLAYER BH100

Manufacturer: LG **Website:** www.lge.com
List Price: \$1,199
 HD-DVD? Blu-ray? Who can decide anymore? Certainly the movie industry can't, so why should you have to? The BH100 supports both formats, and it will upscale all your standard DVDs to a 1080i resolution. With all these movies to watch, who has time to make decisions?

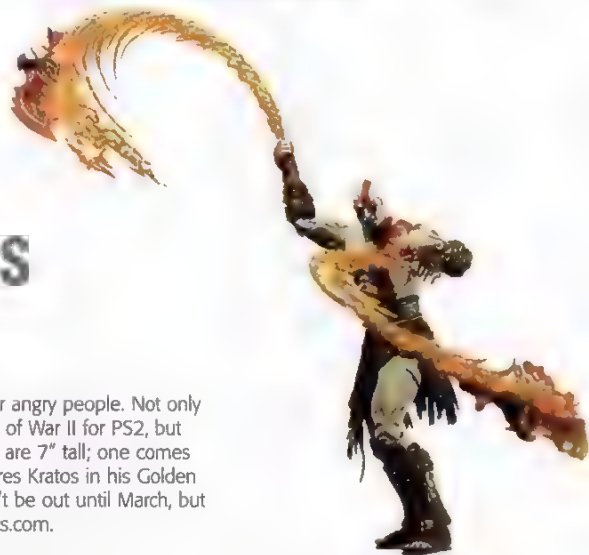


toys

GOD OF WAR KRATOS FIGURES

Manufacturer: NECA
Website: www.necaonline.com
List Price: \$14.99

Looks like March is going to be a good month for angry people. Not only will Sony be releasing their hotly anticipated God of War II for PS2, but NECA will launch two Kratos figures. Both figures are 7" tall; one comes with sweeping chains of fire, and the other features Kratos in his Golden Fleece Armor from GOW II. These bad boys won't be out until March, but you can preorder them at www.cornerstorecomics.com.



peripherals

CORDLESS PS3 MEDIABOARD

Manufacturer: Logitech **Website:** www.logitech.com **List Price:** \$79.99

Who actually likes the cellphone-like text entering system on the PS3? For crying out loud it's ridiculous. Thank goodness for Logitech. With the MediaBoard you can easily communicate with the PlayStation Network. Not only is this board lightweight and cordless, but since it comes with a built-in touchpad you won't need to buy an extra mouse.



tech

iPhone

Manufacturer: Apple
Website: www.apple.com/iphone
List Price: \$499.99 (4GB)
\$599.99 (8GB)

An 8GB iPod = \$250. A smartphone with GSM technology and Bluetooth = \$300. A mobile internet-ready computer that runs OS X = \$700. Getting all that on one sleek new device = pricelene – well, actually it's \$600 and includes a two-year contract with Cingular, but that's still a pretty good deal. Everyone's talking about Apple's new gadget and we understand why. We cannot wait to check out its "revolutionary" new touch screen for ourselves when it launches this June.



pc

ULTRASHARP 2707WFP

Manufacturer: Dell **Website:** www.dell.com **List Price:** \$1,399
We've been liking Dell's monitors recently, and the 2707WFP is the hottest one yet. The 27-inch monitor and sweet adjustable stand look almost like a sci-fi sculpture, but you'll be admiring its pixels more. Dell's Tru color technology offers up 92% of the color gamut, meaning HD games and movies look amazing on its 1920 x 1200 screen.



tech

2.1 CORDLESS SPEAKER SYSTEM

Manufacturer: Klipsch **Website:** www.klipsch.com
List Price: \$1,200

The CS-700 provides a fantastic 2.1-channel surround sound experience, but that's not what makes it cool. What makes it cool is that it's also wireless. This whole system includes a wireless 200-watt subwoofer, a DVD player, FM tuner, and probably its most exciting feature is the ability to wirelessly transmit to other Klipsch's RoomGroove music streamers to create a wire-free, multi-room speaker system.

STRATEGY ON A



AN ALL-NEW RTS FROM CHRIS TAYLOR

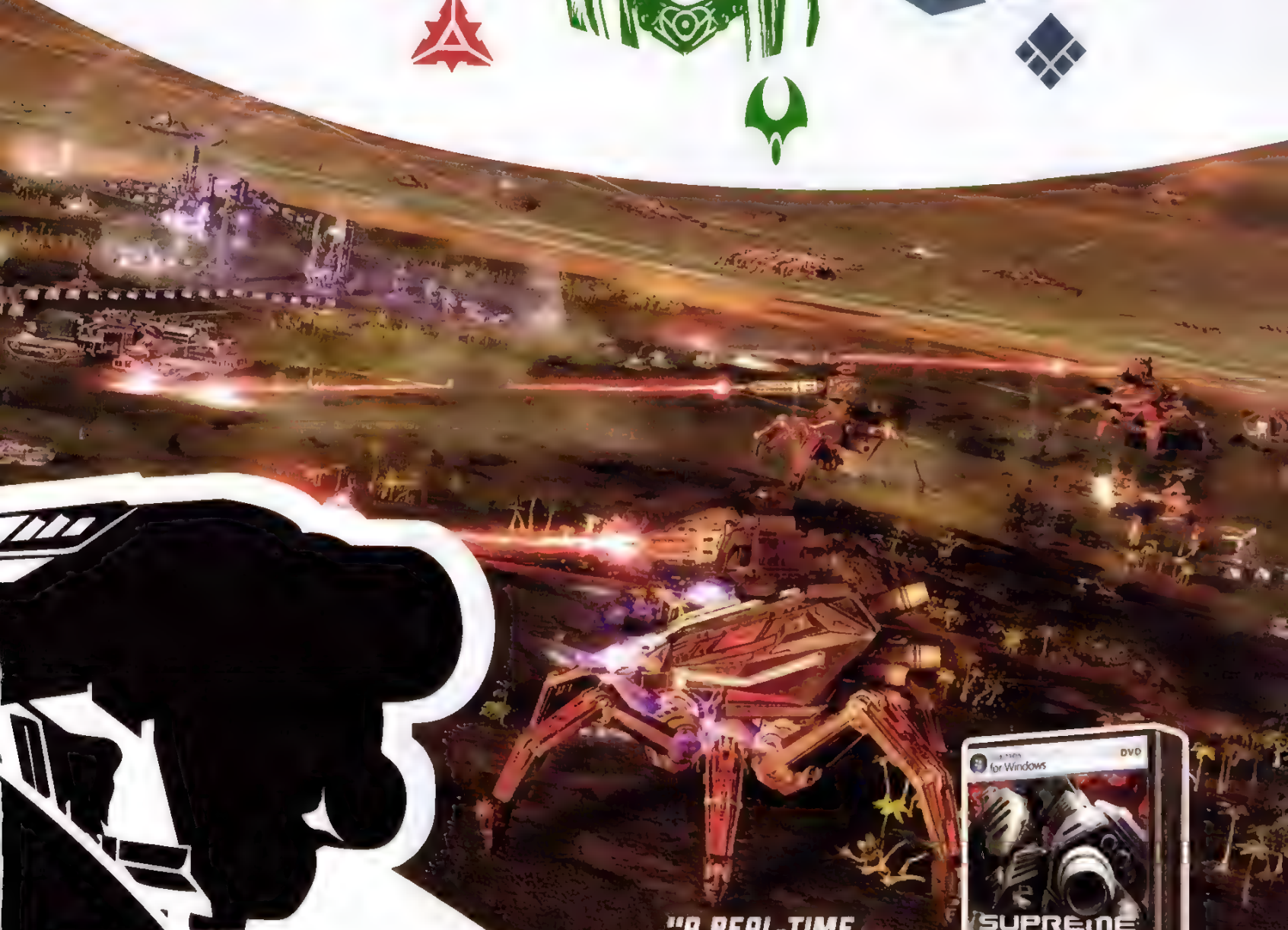
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GALACTIC SCALE



"A REAL-TIME
STRATEGY EXPERIENCE
LIKE NONE BEFORE"

PC GAMER



THE X-FACTOR

ARE XBOX 360'S ACHIEVEMENTS THE SECRET TO WINNING THE CONSOLE WAR?



Achievement unlocked



BY ANDY REINER,
EXECUTIVE EDITOR,
GAME INFORMER

The landscape of gaming is changing. The perception of gamers being unmotivated, basement-dwelling introverts really doesn't stick any more. That's not to say that the couch will no longer be a gamer's best friend, but the consoles of today are delivering experiences that push these once-titled armchair sloths to be social, competitive, and even physical. It's a different era. It's a time where we get our daily exercise from games that utilize motion-based technology. It's a time where we make new friends within a game's online community. And believe it or not, it's a time where a set of numbers could win the console war.

Like a ninja in the brush, Xbox 360's Achievement Points are quickly and ever so quietly having a great effect over where the consumer dollar goes in this next-gen battle. In a nutshell, Achievement Points are marks of excellence that gamers can earn by completing specific tasks in the games they play. For example, in the game Call of Duty 3, players can earn 100 Achievement Points for completing a level without firing a shot. In Rainbow Six Vegas you can earn 60 Points for completing all of the Terrorist Hunt missions in co-op play. As Gears of War's producer Cliffy B puts it, Achievements are "nerd cred."

At first glance, these points would appear to have no value. You can't cash them in. They don't affect the games you play. They would appear to exist simply to measure the size of each gamer's ego. True enough, part of the allure surrounding Achievements has to do with puffing your chest up and showing the gaming community how skilled you are. I've spent many hours looking through the points that other players have racked up. Just by looking at the points, I can separate hardcore gamers from casual, see what genres specific players prefer, and break down skill levels. For instance, one player may have only earned 200-plus points in Gears of War, which

is mostly dedicated to completing the game on the casual difficulty. On the other hand, you may find someone who has close to 1,000 points, and has snagged the highly coveted points for killing 10,000 players online.

The key words that need to be expressed are "highly coveted." When someone on your friend list achieves such a feat, you want to earn it as well. It's very similar to wanting to beat the high score in an arcade game, or more currently, to obtain the rare items in a game like World of Warcraft. I have many friends who have spent weeks of their life questing in WoW for a new sword that, oddly enough, isn't nearly as powerful as their current weapon. They want it simply because it's rare. Gaming today is very much about status, and how you measure up against other players.

To some people, Achievement Points may seem like a bunch of meaningless numbers, but to the people that truly understand what they are, and what value they actually have, they've become a game in themselves. Players are logging extra time into games just to raise their Gamerscore. A game that someone might have beaten and shelved in a day could conceivably be played for weeks depending on how diverse and difficult its Achievements are to earn. Achievement Points are not just there for status, they add longevity to games.

So how exactly could all of this affect the console battle? One key area is software sales. Multi-system releases like Madden and Grand Theft Auto hold more weight on Xbox 360 simply because the Achievement Points add value to them. You get more out of these games on Xbox 360 from the challenges and sense of accomplishment that these Points add. Rushing for 200 yards in a game on PlayStation 3 does nothing for you. If you do this on Xbox 360, you raise your Gamerscore by 100. If a game is identical on both Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3, there's no reason

why gamers who own both systems shouldn't choose it for Xbox 360. It's just common sense that you want more bang for your buck.

Questing to unlock new Achievements is an addiction. I spent over five hours in Rainbow Six Vegas just to add the "kill 10 players in online matches without dying" mark to my profile. I've also found myself compelled to earn the Achievement in Dig Dug for clearing out all of the dirt on a level. Achievements definitely change the way you play your games.

They are also playing a large role in whether or not people invest in other consoles. Would you believe that people would rather play Open Season on Xbox 360 than The Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess on Wii simply because Open Season gets them points? It's happening more than you would think. Gamers are going out and purchasing games that they normally wouldn't even think of touching.

Achievements have become a large part of what next-gen gaming is all about. Sony and Nintendo need to implement similar systems to make their consoles attractive to the entire gaming nation. There's a chance that Achievements could be a fad that eventually disappears, but as someone who finds himself hopelessly addicted to these digits, and finds himself competing with friends for the most points, I only see them having a larger role in the future of games. What would happen if Microsoft eventually decided to reward players for milestones with free arcade games or coupons for in-store purchases?

Our instinct to show off our skills is a powerful one, and Achievements perfectly play to this. Sony and Nintendo would be wise to learn from Microsoft's innovations or risk losing the console war. ■■■

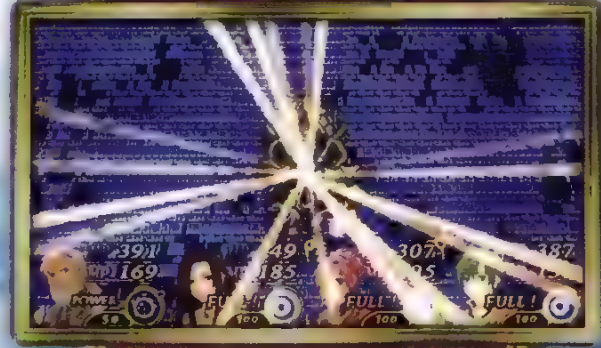
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Achievements have become a large part of what next-gen gaming is all about.

The Legend of Heroes™ III Song of the Ocean™



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Language
Mild Fantasy Violence
Use of Alcohol



PlayStation® Portable



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TMNT - 03/23

march

01

RIVER TRIUMPHANT STATUS

Most people wore off *Firefly* as a silly western in space. Those people need to be logged. As this statue illustrates, this show was so much more. It was one of TV's finest shows, and also one of 2005's brightest points in cinema. This statue releases today for roughly 100 smackers.



05

GAME DEVELOPER'S CONFERENCE 07

Given how dull this convention is, we decided to spice things up this year. We're going to debut *Programmers Gone Wild!* Our camera crew will be on hand to catch the coders of the gaming nation doing the most outrageous things! The craziest programmer will win a diamond studded necklace that says "100110".

06

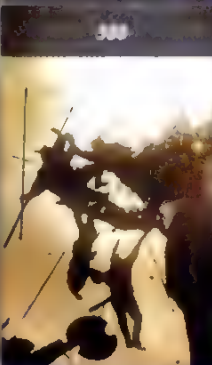
NEW RELEASES

- Amoral Core 4 - PS2
- CSI 4: Hard Evidence - PS2
- Def Jam Fight for NY - PS2
- Ghost Recon Advanced Warfighter 2 - PS2, Xbox
- Hard Rock Casino - PS2
- Major League Baseball 2K7 - PS2, Xbox, PSP, DS
- Mario Party
- NBA Street
- Homerun - PS2
- Play My Way - PS2

07

NEW RELEASES

- Abolition - Xbox
- Nobis - Xbox
- Sheriff - PC
- STALKER - Xbox
- Champion - PC
- Star Queen - Xbox
- Throne - PC
- TMNT - 360, Wii, PS2, PSP, DS, PC
- Two Worlds - PC
- Valhalla Knights - PSP
- Wario: Master of Disguise - DS



09

Frank Miller's amazing comic book *300* comes to the big screen today. To make sure that you get a seat at the premiere, we recommend wearing a costume that reflects the designs in the comic. This means a bed sheet, a broom on your head, and no underwear. Man, those Spartans sure loved to let 'em dangle!

10

WORLDS OF AMANO

Yoshitaka Amano's amazing art is collected at last in this book. We all know his work from *Final Fantasy*, but he's done so much more. This book spans across over 30 years of his work and features many never-before-seen images.



11

PlayStation 2



God of War II - 03/13

13

NEW RELEASES

- Dungeons & Dragons: Heroes - PC
- U2 Rattle and Hum - PS2
- God of War II - PS2
- Prince of Persia - Wii
- Spectrobes - DS
- Splinter Cell: Double Agent - PS2



Prince of Persia - 03/13

16



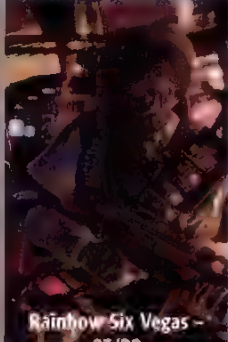
FINAL FANTASY XII PLAY ARTS
More plastic for the RPG nerd



19

NEW RELEASES

- After Burner: Black Falcon - PSP
- Blazing Angels: Squadrons of WWI - Wii
- Command & Conquer 3: Tiberium Wars - PC
- Custom Robo Arena - DS
- Dragon Ball Z: Hakuonaru Densetsu - DS
- Dragon Ball Z: Shin Budokai Another Road - PSP
- The Godfather - PS3



Rainbow Six Vegas - 03/20

20

NEW RELEASES

- Black & White 2 - Wii, DS
- Puzzle Quest: Challenge of the Warlords - PSP, DS
- Rainbow Six Vegas - PS3
- Shining Force EXA - PS2
- Virtua Tennis 3 - PS3

21

SHADOW OF THE COLOSSUS COLLECTIBLE EXPLOSION!

This month, games are in for a real treat. Not only is the collector's highly coveted Shadow of the Colossus statue finally getting a sequel, a *Sono* will be live-inch PVC.



23

Those crazy purple mutant mutants have crawled out of their sewer and are running amok in theaters today. *TMNT* has a chance to be cool, but will most certainly fail if it doesn't have Casey Jones in it.



27

NEW RELEASES

- Burnout 5 - PS3, Xbox
- Burnout Dominator - PSP
- Chromium: The Great Wall of China - Wii
- Dance Dance Revolution Universe - 360
- Diogenes of Sinope - PS3
- FEAR - PS3



Burnout Dominator - 03/27

28

WRITE A LETTER TO MARY DEE WILLIAMS DAY

This holiday is pretty self-explanatory. Grab a notebook and send some kind words to the world's greatest actor and the finest scribe this side of Tom Selleck. Remember, as real people, Billy Dee Williams can't read.



I'M STILL HOLDING OUT FOR THE LADIES MAN SEQUEL

30

Talking dinosaurs, subservient frogs, and time travel await in Disney's latest CG comedy. Meet the Robinsons. And no, this is not the CG remake of *The Graduate*. Although we're sure that Mrs. Robinson would be all over that T-Rex.

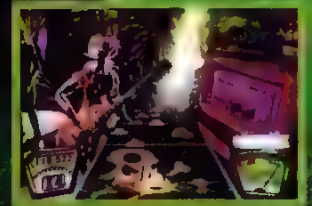


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PlayStation.2



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STAR WARS

THE FORCE UNLEASHED



THE JEDI ARE ON THE RUN, AND THE DARK SIDE BECKONS. GAME INFORMER TAKES A WORLD-EXCLUSIVE FIRST LOOK AT THE EVENTS BETWEEN EPISODES III AND IV.

"I AM YOUR FATHER."

SPOKEN ON A RICKETY PLATFORM IN THE BOWELS OF CLOUD CITY, THESE WORDS ARE AMONG THE MOST SURPRISING AND ENDURING IN CINEMATIC HISTORY. IN FACT, THE REVELATION IS SO PROMINENT AND SHOCKING THAT MANY VIEWERS HAVE OVERLOOKED THE SIGNIFICANCE OF WHAT DARTH VADER SAYS TO LUKE ALMOST IMMEDIATELY AFTERWARDS: "YOU CAN DESTROY THE EMPEROR. HE HAS FORESEEN THIS. IT IS YOUR DESTINY." SOME MAY SAY THAT THIS IS AN EMPTY PROMISE MEANT TO SWAY THE YOUNG JEDI, BUT THERE IS MUCH MORE UNDERNEATH THE SURFACE. DARTH VADER IS NOT THE SUBSERVIENT, LOYAL APPRENTICE HE APPEARS TO BE. ANAKIN SKYWALKER WAS SLYLY MANIPULATED INTO ASSUMING THE MANTLE OF A SITH LORD. HE WAS USED LIKE A PAWN, AND HE KNOWS IT. WHAT IF DARTH VADER'S WORDS WERE ACTUALLY HIS ATTEMPT TO RECRUIT LUKE TO ASSIST IN EXACTING HIS REVENGE? IT WOULD MEAN THAT THE APPRENTICE OF DARTH SIDIOUS HAD BEEN SEARCHING FOR A WAY TO

FULFILL THE SITH TRADITION AND TAKE HIS MASTER'S PLACE. THAT SCENARIO LEADS TO ANOTHER INTERESTING QUESTION: WAS DARTH VADER'S OFFER TO LUKE THE FIRST ATTEMPT TO OVERTHROW THE EMPEROR? AS GAMERS WILL LEARN IN LUCASARTS' UPCOMING TITLE STAR WARS: THE FORCE UNLEASHED, THE ANSWER IS NO. POSITIONED AS THE NEXT TRUE CHAPTER IN THE STAR WARS SAGA, THIS TITLE PUTS PLAYERS IN THE MYSTERIOUS ROLE OF DARTH VADER'S FIRST APPRENTICE AS HE DEVELOPS HIS POWERS AND TRAINS TO ASSASSINATE THE MOST POWERFUL FIGURE IN THE GALAXY.

PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION (MULTIPLAYER TBA)

> PUBLISHER LUCASARTS

> DEVELOPER LUCASARTS

> RELEASE NOVEMBER

The release of *Star Wars Episode III: Revenge of the Sith* was one of the most important moments in *Star Wars* history. Most viewers were simply excited to finally witness the legendary fall of Anakin Skywalker, but the film also had a significant impact on the path *Star Wars* as a whole will follow in the future. With the prequel trilogy concluded and its conflicts resolved, the way is now clear to explore the events of a mysterious and previously off-limits era: the 20 years between Episode III and Episode IV. It is during this fertile time period that the development team at LucasArts has decided to set the game that will shape *Star Wars* in the next generation of gaming.

Star Wars games that aren't official companions to the films typically place players in roles of powerful characters, like Kyle Katarn and Wedge Antilles, who are often on the sidelines of the real action. In that respect, *The Force Unleashed* is a bit different. It is true that players will control an original character, but the missions of Darth Vader's secret apprentice won't be peripheral distractions; they will define this era in the galaxy.

Project lead Haden Blackman explains: "We've told great stories in the past, but a lot of those dealt with time periods or characters that – as cool as they were – are ancillary to the *Star Wars* core. We're firmly rooted right in the saga. This is the next chapter."

When Blackman refers to *The Force Unleashed* as "the next chapter," he isn't just pointing to the fact that this is the next *Star Wars* game that will hit the market. Because the title will be so pivotal in materializing facts about this untapped portion of the timeline, it is being given treatment typically only afforded to the movies. "The marketing and licensing behind this is everything you would expect from one of the films," Blackman reveals. "Hasbro will be making a toy line – there'll even be a comic book and a novel."

This level of exposure isn't surprising when one considers the vast potential of the game's storyline. The Jedi are on the run, and while Vader was responsible for the destruction of the core of the Order, there are remnants that need to be obliterated in all corners of known space. Most of the Apprentice's missions will involve assassinating these characters, though it is clear from the start that Vader has his own hidden plans for his student. Since killing Jedi would be a good thing in the Emperor's eyes, there is only one plausible reason for Vader to keep the Apprentice's existence a secret: revenge.

"We really wanted to tell the right story and make the right game for the next generation of LucasArts," Blackman tells us. "We took a lot of time up front honing in on different possibilities, and we were really afforded that opportunity to spend many months exploring many options. *Star Wars* is very rich, and there were many directions we could have gone." The characters and scenario were even developed in collaboration with George Lucas himself. "We went back and forth with him on our concepts," says Blackman. "He was instrumental in helping us to create specific types of characters for the game that fit within the *Star Wars* myths."

The premise alone is enough to get any *Star Wars* fan salivating, but it isn't the core of the game. The story only

finer details in our look at the next-gen Indiana Jones in issue 158. In essence, it is a system that allows the developers to avoid using pre-scripted events and animations by instilling all characters with the ability to assess the surroundings and react to them. If a Stormtrooper is sliding off a slanting walkway, he will be able to grab the edge and – depending on his individual strength – pull himself up. If another Stormtrooper falls while the first is hanging, he may grab on to his ally's ankle, only to send them both plummeting.

It doesn't take much effort to envision how these kinds of reactions open up possibilities through the use of the

"THE GAME IS ABOUT KICKING SOMEONE'S ASS WITH THE FORCE"
– HADEN BLACKMAN, PROJECT LEAD

serves as a vehicle to drive the action, and it is in that action that this title will distinguish itself and redefine the way we view the Force. The central philosophy of how the game will feel as you play it is summed up by its name: *The Force Unleashed* will put the Force in your control like never before. "What it means is the Force over-the-top, amped up, and completely out of control," Blackman conveys.

Gamers are not strangers to the wide array of powers the Force imparts, having been treated to the abilities in a variety of forms in previous games. Blackman is quick to emphasize that while terms like Force Push may be familiar, the implementation and the aftermath are unique: "We're able to explore different applications for the Force and reinterpret Force powers," he explains. "Force Push in other games might send a Stormtrooper back a few feet. In *The Force Unleashed*, it will look like he got hit with a cannonball."

The key to producing this sort of visceral impact lies in the convergence of certain innovative technologies that transform the world around the Apprentice into a playground ripe for manipulation through the Force. The first of these is called Euphoria, developed in a partnership between LucasArts and Natural Motion. Because Euphoria is a tool being shared across all of LucasArts' titles, we already discussed many of its



SECRET IDENTITY

While the protagonist is ambiguously referred to as "the Apprentice" on these pages, he won't be a name-it-yourself entity known only by his title (e.g. the Exile in *Knights of the Old Republic II*). "He will be established as a distinct character and have a name – it just isn't one we can release at this time," Blackman assures us.

Force. Imagine using Force Push to knock out the support from a scaffold, then watching a dozen Stormtroopers tumble down, clutching for their lives on the way. Even if they find a grip, you could just use Force Grasp to pluck them off and send them careening into their downed compatriots.

Euphoria is not only used to make the death of Imperial clones more humorous—it also enhances enemies' ability to react to the player's actions. In one demonstration, a Stormtrooper pursues the Apprentice, who has an infinite supply of crates to throw for purposes of the demo. As the boxes fly toward the foe, he defends himself realistically depending on the direction of the threat. If it is high, he ducks. If it hits his feet, he stumbles and trips. If the crate is unavoidable, he shields himself with his arms and deflects it. Enemies will struggle to keep their balance, try to correct their orientation while falling, and brace for impact. "It does infuse the characters with life," muses Blackman. "They have a self-preservation instinct. They have a central nervous system that reacts realistically."

Once the characters that inhabit the world behave in a believable fashion, the next step is to ensure that the environment itself responds in ways that appear natural. For this purpose, another advancement called Digital Molecular Matter (created by Pixelux) is being implemented in *The Force Unleashed*. In short, this technology allows the developers to simulate the way different materials behave in the real world. DMM was the centerpiece of LucasArts' presentation at E3 2006, illustrating how properties like durability and friction can be adjusted for objects to define their interactions with other objects.

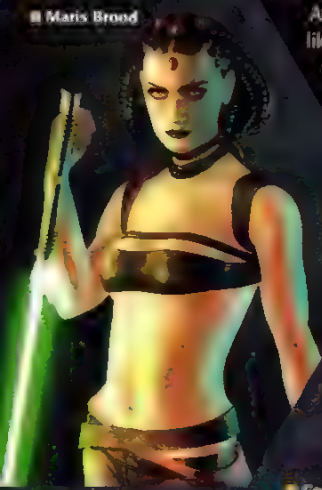
Picture the Sith protagonist picking up a Gungan and throwing him into a stone pillar. Previously, developers might have used an art-swap to make it appear that the pillar was damaged, or a pre-animated sequence showing it breaking apart. In *The Force Unleashed*, that stone pillar is infused with realistic attributes that respond to objects accordingly. It might slowly wobble and tumble if you throw a Gungan into it, or completely shatter when hit by an AT-ST cockpit. If the pillar is metal, you may only see a dent. If it is made of wood, it will explode into splinters. Regardless of the material, once it's broken, the Apprentice will be able to use the Force on the broken pieces to use them as he sees fit.

At first, it may only seem like icing on the cake to have an environment that reacts in this way. Wood breaking naturally versus pre-scripted still results in

■ According to LucasArts, the screens on these pages are actual shots from the game. The fighting wasn't this dynamic when we saw it, but with the resources of U.M. at its disposal, the team could pull it off.



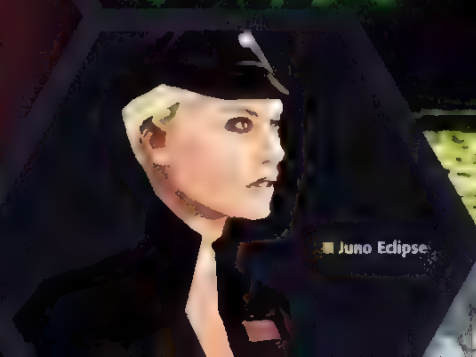
■ Maris Brood



■ General Kal



■ Juno Eclipse





broken wood, and a Stormtrooper with a falling animation still meets the same end as one who hangs on for a few seconds before losing his grip. However, gaming isn't always about achieving an end; some of the greatest games are memorable not because of their goals, but because of the compelling paths to achieve them. Euphoria and DMM combine to provide the groundwork for simulation-based scenarios in the gameplay, and the Force is the player's key to accessing everything that entails. "The game is about kicking someone's ass with the Force," says Blackman. "From the first time you pick up the controller to when you put it down, you're doing that in constantly more inventive ways."

Considering players start the game as a Sith apprentice, from the outset they will be equipped with a stable of Force powers with which to explore various gameplay avenues. Force Push has already been mentioned, as has Force Grip (which is essentially telekinesis). The Apprentice also possesses abilities that seem more in line with his sinister side, like Force Lightning and a new power called Force Repulse, which sends out a destructive shockwave that blasts everything in range.

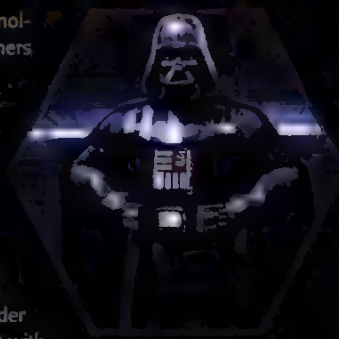
Each power (along with your standard saber swing) is mapped to a specific face button or trigger on the controller, so there will be no cumbersome menu management interfering with the Apprentice's ability to wreak havoc. This setup (similar to Midway's 2004 title, *Psi-Ops*) allows all powers to be effortlessly executed and easily linked into ruthless combinations. After all, it's fun to smash a droid into a wall, but it's more fun to follow that up by throwing your lightsaber into its head.

How the various powers can be used in conjunction with each other has played a major role in their implementation, and is key to making the Force feel more raw and unbridled than before. Players can fill a foe with a charge using Force Lightning, then throw him into a group of enemies like an electrical bomb. By using Force Push at the same time as a lightsaber slash, you can send a creature flying like a softball — though they might not stay in one piece. All told, the team estimates there will be around two dozen ways to combine powers.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 55 >>

THE DARTH VADER GAME

At E3 2006, LucasArts showcased much of the technology to be used in *The Force Unleashed*, though gamers didn't know the game by that title at the time. In fact, due to some concept art featuring Darth Vader adorning the booth, many speculated that there was a game in the works starring the iconic masked villain himself. We now know that this isn't the case; the art was made to display the game's concept for the Force and to highlight the fact that Vader would have an important part in the story. However, even though he isn't the star of *The Force Unleashed*, the question of whether Darth Vader would be a playable character in the game was met with an encouragingly vague response: "There's a pat answer for this...let me see if I can remember it," laughs Blackman. "Darth Vader plays a prominent role in the game, and that's all we can say at this point." It is, of course, not sure sounds like there's a carefully guarded secret about playable Darth Vader that no one's willing to talk about yet.



■ In this screenshot you can see the Euphoria and Digital Molecular Matter technologies in full effect.



■ Not all Jedi battles will be one-on-one duels. In this scene, Shaak Ti has a little help.

33 CONTINUED FROM PAGE 53

"Every step of the way we want players to be reminded that they are Jedi," Blackman insists. "Every time you get into a fight, I want the player to think 'I know I'm going to destroy these guys, but how am I going to do it?'"

This statement raises the question of how the Apprentice's powers are going to be regulated. Special abilities are usually the player's trump card, and therefore limited to judicious use. However, because the entire concept behind *The Force Unleashed* is constantly witnessing the devastating effects of the Force, there are fewer restrictions than one might expect. Specifics are still being finalized, but there will probably be a Force meter that depletes with each power usage. This meter will recharge at such a fast rate that some powers, like Force Push, effectively have unlimited use. More powerful talents, like Repulse, will drain the meter faster and can't be used repeatedly.

Not all Force powers will be things the player needs to actively initiate. For instance, the Apprentice will have a passive ability that allows him to deflect blaster shots. It isn't foolproof, since some shots will get through, but a certain percentage will be automatically deflected with the lightsaber. Throughout the course of the game, this power can be upgraded to the point that a percentage of deflected shots will actually be reflected back on an enemy. "We don't want players to have to think about doing things that Jedi seem to do innately," Blackman admits. "Like deflecting blaster fire and even opening doors. A Jedi doesn't walk up to a door and press a button; he waves his hand and it opens!"

As the Apprentice's affinity with the Force increases, players will be able to upgrade almost any other ability, active or passive. For instance, Force Push can eventually be charged for greater power, and Force Lightning will become stronger and chain to more foes. Players will start out as a skilled Sith, but by the end of the game you'll need to have powers that can rival your master's – and ultimately even his master's.

"We are looking at the Apprentice like a Jedi superhero," Blackman tells us. Even so, he's not immortal, and the team has been concentrating on creating foes that would be believable challenges for players. A couple of Stormtroopers may be great fodder for your powers, but they aren't likely to take down a Sith. "I'd believe that a Rancor could mess up a Jedi," Blackman reveals. "Or sheer numbers, like in the arena on Geonosis from Episode II." After all, Jedi (and their darker Sith counterparts) are among the most powerful beings in the galaxy – it would be lame if a few shocks from an R2 unit could take one out.

Of course, the most intimidating foes the Apprentice will encounter are the rogue Jedi hiding throughout the galaxy. Performing his master's bidding, the Apprentice will travel to locations drawn from the entire Star Wars galaxy, including Expanded Universe texts, previous games, and new ones made specifically for *The Force Unleashed*. The junk planet Raxus Prime appears, and is rife with opportunity to ling salvage around with the Force. The crystal moon called Haroon is a new area that will be the backdrop for a pivotal plot point, and the planet world of Felucia (where the blue Twi'lek Aayla Secura met her fate)

provides a Dagobah-like atmosphere teeming with life.

The Apprentice will not be venturing to these planets by himself. As is customary for any Star Wars story, the hero is accompanied in his adventures by a handful of loyal companions. One is a protocol droid, and another is an Imperial pilot/love interest named Juno Eclipse. "Going to story meetings with George, we learned that it's important to have the range of characters one sees in a Star Wars movie," elaborates Blackman. "A love interest is one of them. Rather than use existing characters to fill that role, we wanted to create a new one."

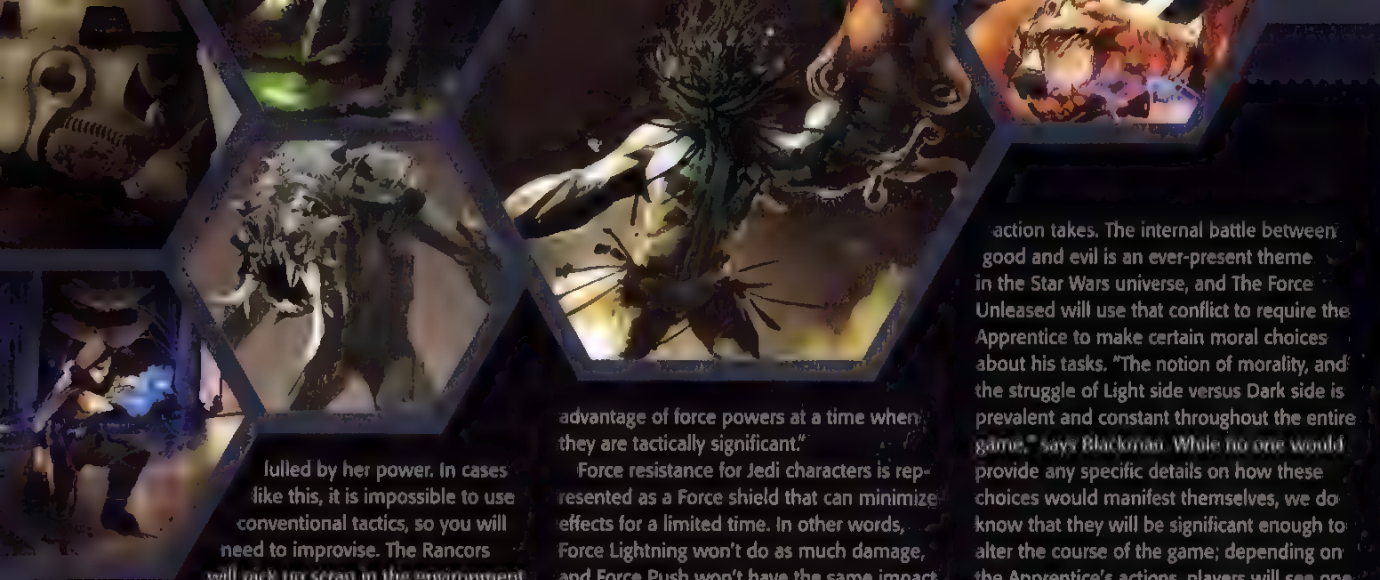
Many of the Apprentice's Jedi foes will also be original characters. Not many previously established Jedi survived the purge, but that doesn't mean players aren't in for a challenge. One of the new faces is General Kota, a hard-boiled, militaristic Jedi. Another is Maris Brood, who wields two short lightsabers that appear to be modeled after tonfa. Exactly how these encounters will play out is still unknown, but we were given an idea of the basic philosophy behind them. "A Jedi isn't going to follow the old boss pattern of being invulnerable until he does a special move that leaves him exhausted for four seconds," Blackman emphasizes. "We're not building the game like that."

This point is illustrated well in the one boss fight we do know about, which pits players against Clone War hero Shaak Ti. This character was originally going to be killed in Episode III (as can be seen in a deleted scene), but she ends up escaping the execution of Order 66. When the Apprentice encounters her, she is surrounded by Rancors that have been



AND THEN THERE WERE NONE

Some of the Jedi that the Apprentice will hunt down during the game are recognizable movie characters, like Shaak Ti, while others were created specifically for this project, like General Kota. Who else is still around for the Apprentice to kill? There are a handful of Force-using characters (many from Expanded Universe content) that are still alive at the end of Episode III, and therefore potential targets. Some of the coolest are Quinlan Vos, Ferus Olin, The Dark Woman, and Asajj Ventress.



lulled by her power. In cases like this, it is impossible to use conventional tactics, so you will need to improvise. The Rancors will pick up scrap in the environment and hurl it at you; the trick is to get to the objects before they can. If you can use Force Grip to hit a Rancor with large rocks and debris, the beast will be dazed long enough for you to gain some ground. The idea isn't to get close enough to hack away with a lightsaber, but rather to make the monster change tactics. At close range, the Rancor is left with no option but to grab you, then stuff you into its maw and swallow. Thankfully, Rancors don't chew well, and once you are in its stomach triggering Force Repulse will send a shockwave through the hulking creature's body, tearing it apart from the inside and leaving Shaak Ti without her support – and the Apprentice ready to strike.

Here fighting becomes a battle of wits as the two warriors duel and use the Force to win. Jedi-versus-Jedi combat in *The Force Unleashed* is handled differently than when the Apprentice is taking on regular foes, since trained Jedi would not be as susceptible to the powers of the Force. "We don't want Jedi characters to be able to be defeated by constantly spamming Force Push," says Blackman. "We have mechanics in place that allows you to take

advantage of force powers at a time when they are tactically significant."

Force resistance for Jedi characters is represented as a Force shield that can minimize effects for a limited time. In other words, Force Lightning won't do as much damage, and Force Push won't have the same impact if used while the shield is up. The trick is that the only way to deplete the shield is by strategically using your powers so you wear your opponent down while keeping your Force meter high enough that once the shield is down, you can take full advantage of the vulnerability.

With the framework and mechanics already in place for two Jedi clashing, does that mean that we'll be able to unleash the Force in multiplayer? "There is a multiplayer component," Blackman confirms. "We love the idea of Jedi-versus-Jedi combat, and all of the simulation-based things, like destructible environments will carry over to the multiplayer." We were informed that the core components of the multiplayer are already up and running, but at the moment the focus is on tuning the Force powers and making sure the single-player experience lives up to its potential.

Contrary to what it may seem so far, the single-player campaign isn't solely about carving up Jedi until you're strong enough to take out the Emperor. Not only will the story twist and turn, but the choices the player makes will also affect the direction the

action takes. The internal battle between good and evil is an ever-present theme in the Star Wars universe, and *The Force Unleashed* will use that conflict to require the Apprentice to make certain moral choices about his tasks. "The notion of morality, and the struggle of Light side versus Dark side is prevalent and constant throughout the entire game," says Blackman. While no one would provide any specific details on how these choices would manifest themselves, we do know that they will be significant enough to alter the course of the game; depending on the Apprentice's actions, players will see one of several endings.

This approach could present some problems from a canonical perspective. If this is the next official chapter in the Star Wars saga, how can there be multiple outcomes? Or even further sequels? "Ideally, we'd love for all of the endings to make sense and feed into a sequel," Blackman clarifies. "But because there is going to be a novel and a comic, there will be an ending selected as the 'right' one for the sake of the continuity." Even if the Apprentice may not officially succeed in his attempt to kill Palpatine, that doesn't mean it isn't one of the possible outcomes of the game.

No matter the choices you make, some things about *The Force Unleashed* will remain unchanged. When you finish the game, you will have a deeper understanding of Darth Vader and how these events impact his behavior in the original trilogy. But even more than the story elements, you will have a unique experience with the Force that puts its full power on display. In Blackman's words: "You're going to see the Force bigger and badder and cooler than ever before." ■■■■

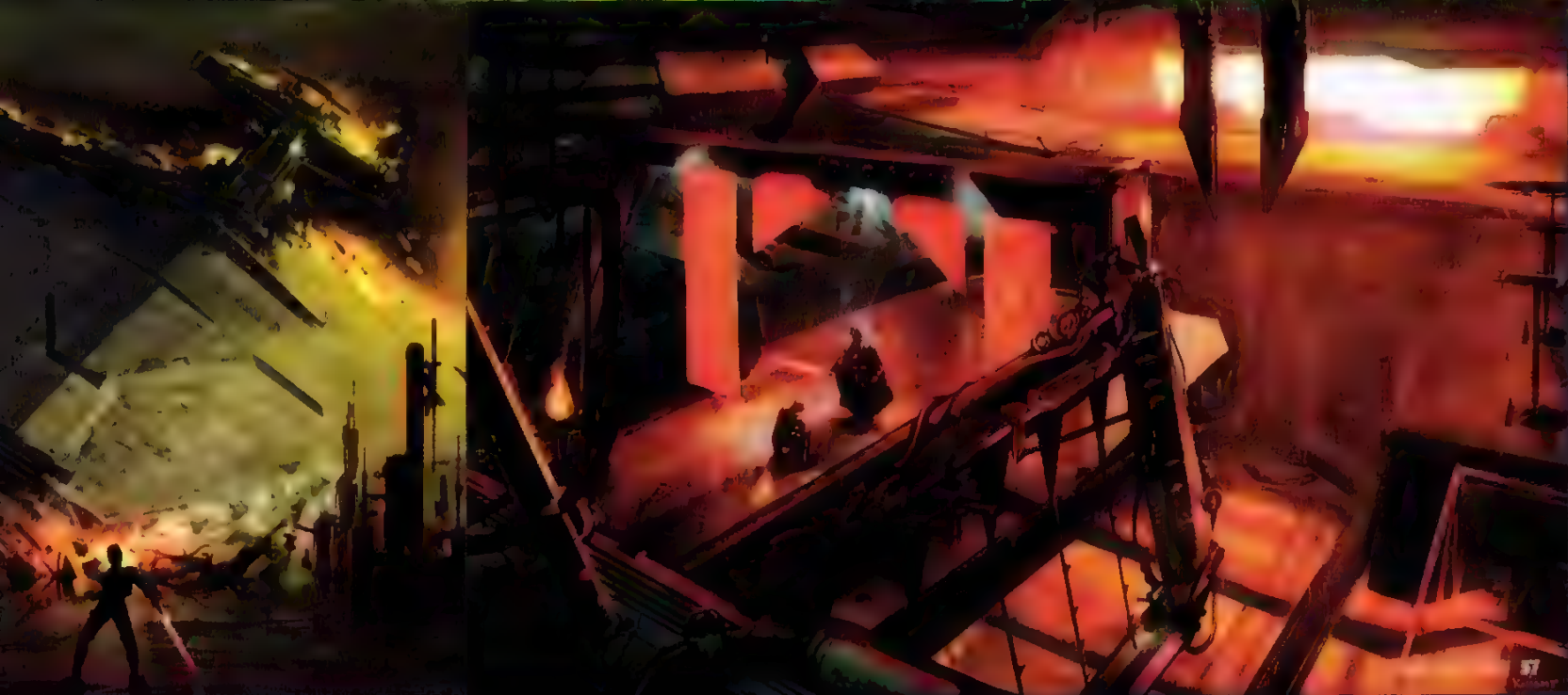


THE SPREAD OF THE SITH

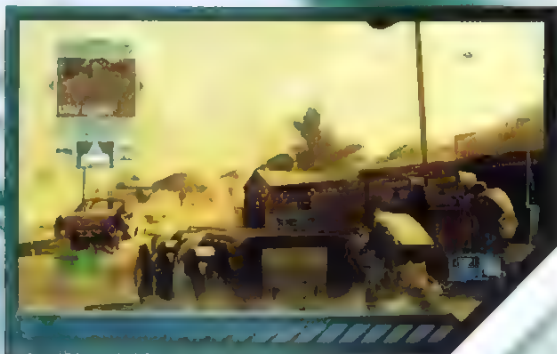
All of the features described on these pages refer specifically to the PS3 and Xbox 360 versions of *The Force Unleashed*. Games of the same name will also be released on the PS2, PSP, and DS. They will follow the same story, but utilize different mechanics geared toward each of the specific consoles. The PS2 and PSP entries are being done by Krome Studios (makers of *Ty the Tasmanian Tiger*), while the one for DS will be done by n-Space (which developed *Geist* for GameCube). When asked about the game on the Wii, a representative for LucasArts said that the possibility isn't being ruled out. Even if that version does happen, it probably wouldn't be "the lightsaber game" that gamers have been eagerly awaiting since the Wii was first announced.



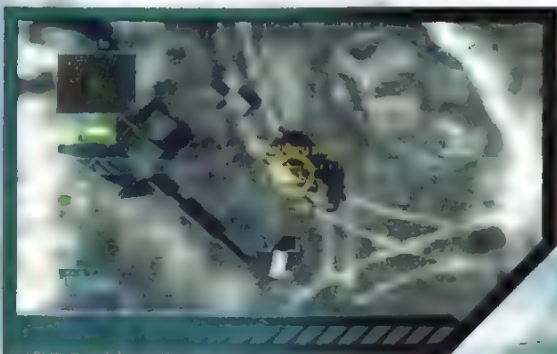
■ This screen depicts the powered-up version of Fortea Lightning



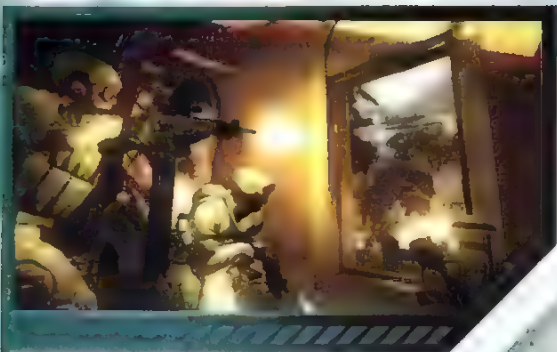
ARMED TO THE TEETH. WIRED TO THE EYES.
ADVANCED TO THE CORE.



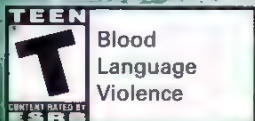
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Tom Clancy's

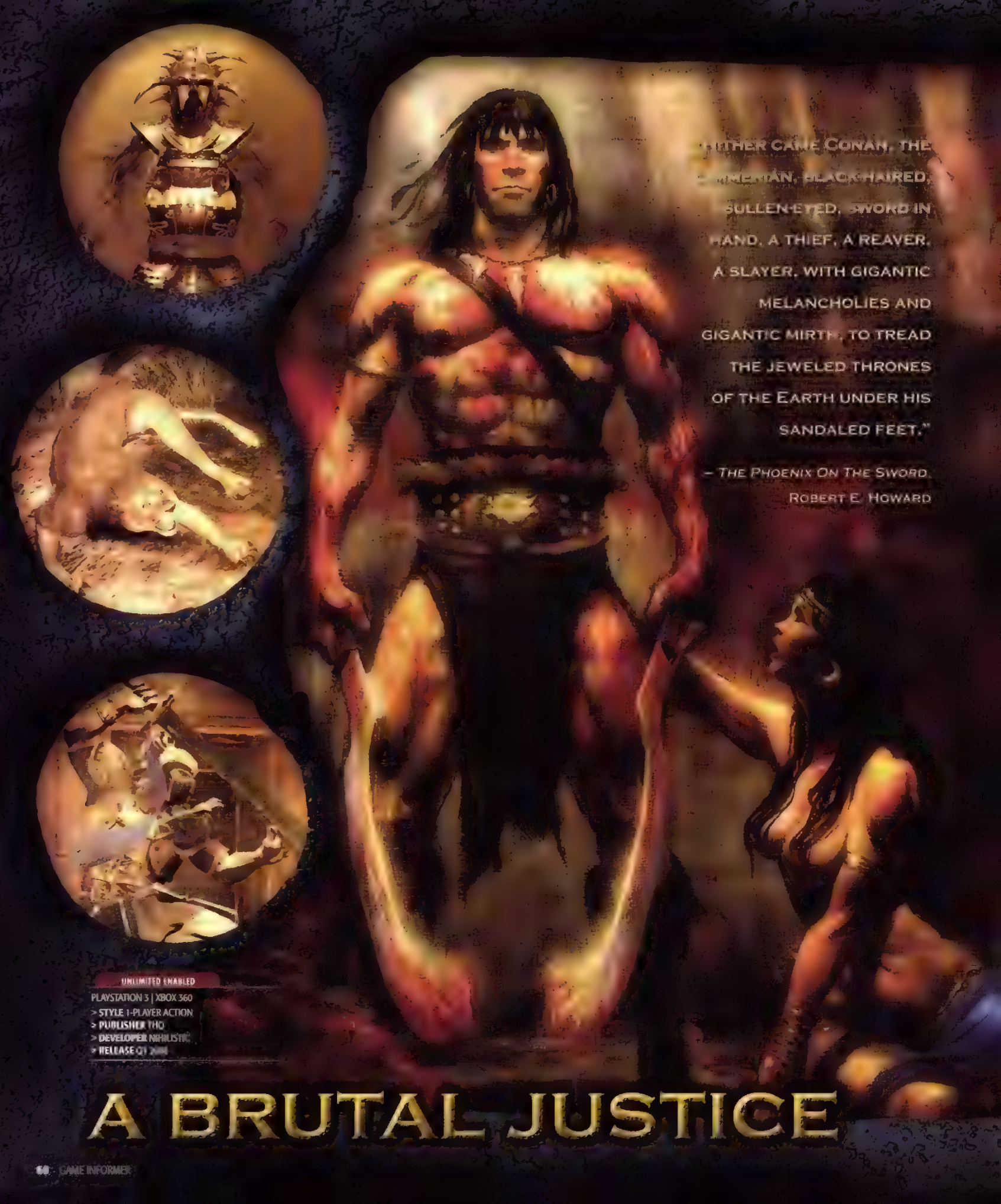
GHOST RECON

ADVANCED WARFIGHTER

IN STORES MARCH 2007



UBISOFT



"NEITHER CAME CONAN, THE
CANNIBAL, BLACK-HAIRED,
SULLEN-EYED, SWORD-IN-
HAND, A THIEF, A REAVER,
A SLAYER, WITH GIGANTIC
MELANCHOLIES AND
GIGANTIC MIRTH, TO TREAD
THE JEWELLED THRONES
OF THE EARTH UNDER HIS
SANDALED FEET."

— THE PHOENIX ON THE SWORD,
ROBERT E. HOWARD

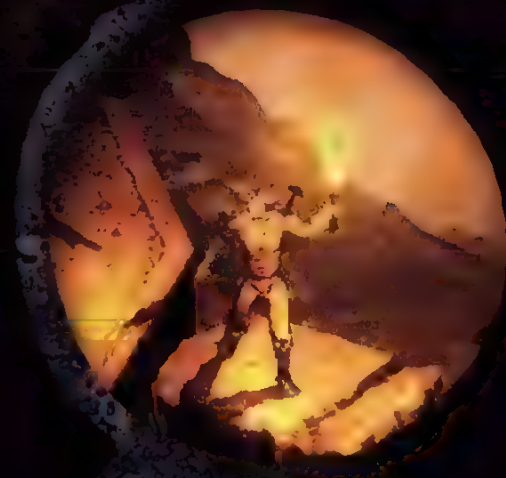
UNLIMITED ENABLED

- PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360
- > STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION
- > PUBLISHER THQ
- > DEVELOPER Nihilistic
- > RELEASE Q1 2008

A BRUTAL JUSTICE

CONAN

OVER TWENTY YEARS BEFORE TOLKIEN'S LORD OF THE RINGS BEGAN TO ENTRANCE READERS AROUND THE WORLD, A YOUNG TEXAN AUTHOR HAD A DIFFERENT STORY TO TELL — A TALE OF BLOODY WARS, ANCIENT MAGIC, LIBIDINOUS FEMALES, AND A DARK HERO WHO CONQUERED THEM ALL. IF TOLKIEN BIRTHED HIGH FANTASY WITH HIS HOBBITS AND MAGIC RINGS, THEN ROBERT E. HOWARD MUST BE CREDITED WITH ITS BLACK SHEEP OF A BROTHER — THE PULP ADVENTURES OF THE SWORD AND SORCERY GENRE GREW FROM HOWARD'S IMAGINATION, AND HIS MOST FAMOUS CHARACTER WOULD BE ITS STANDARD-BEARER. CONAN THE BARBARIAN BECAME IN HIS NUMEROUS STORIES A THIEF, A KING, A PIRATE, AND A LOVER. BUT THROUGH IT ALL HE WAS A SAVAGE AND TERRIFYING BEAST OF A WARRIOR, AND IT IS IN THAT ROLE ABOVE ALL THE OTHERS THAT CONAN WILL BE CHARGING INTO THE LATEST GENERATION OF GAMING.





Surprisingly, there's not one but two games currently in development with the Conan name attached to them. Not to be confused, this latest title by developer Nihilistic and its publishing partner THQ is a totally separate project from Funcom's upcoming MMO. Unlike that online title, this new title is premiering for the first time in these pages – a single-player, story-driven adventure where players adopt the role of Conan himself.

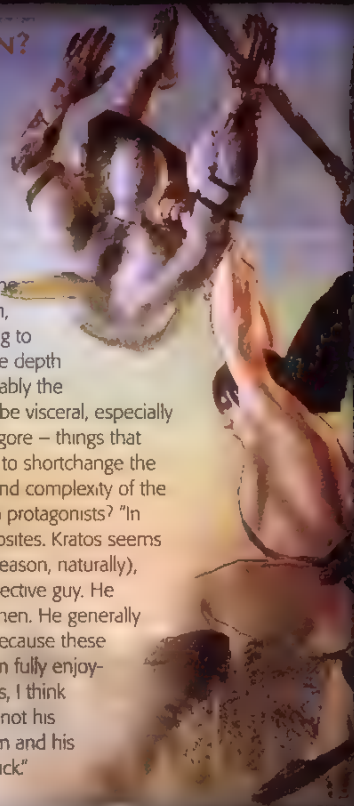
This most recently revealed Conan game delves deep into the character and mythology that make Howard's original stories so engrossing. The Hyborian world was half fantasy and half reality – a fictional history of an Earth before our own histories took up the pen. This conceit allowed Howard to craft nations and places with strange names that still had an air

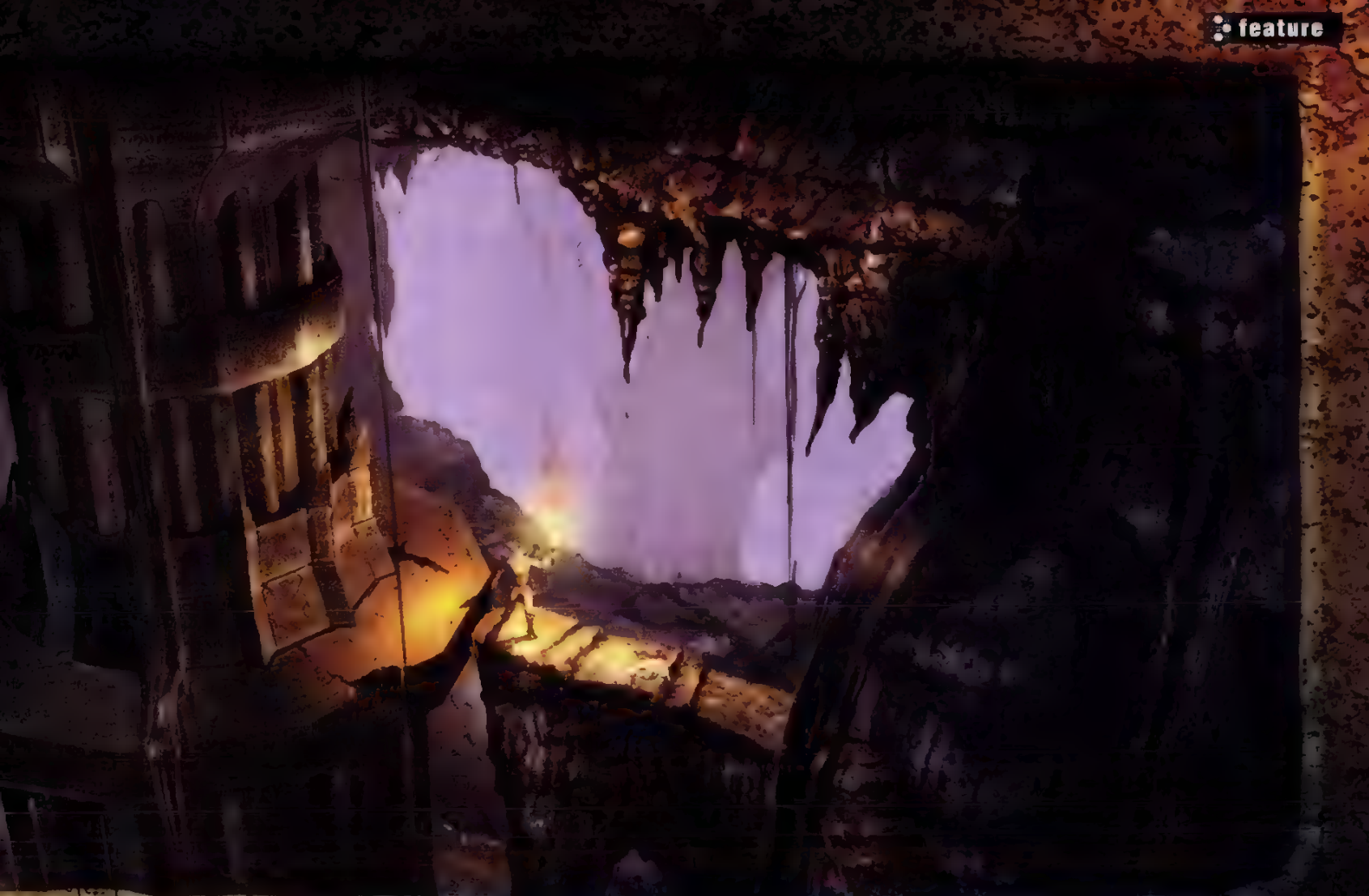
of familiarity to them – many of the peoples of Hyboria drew striking resemblances to the Greeks, Egyptians, Norse, and other ancient people that his readers were already familiar with. Conan was a character that emerged out of the northern lands – a hulking fighter with little patience for polite society and quibbling legal systems. The game of Conan is set some years after his descent into the south, when he is at the height of his fury and power, but before the period of his reign over the kingdom of Aquilonia that occurred in later tales. While details of the story remain a tightly guarded secret by Nihilistic, they bugged enough to reveal that this would be a classic Conan tale of retribution – someone's ticked him off, and Conan will pile up heaps of bodies to pursue his own brutal justice on the matter.

Thankfully, Nihilistic was far more forthcoming on the locus of the game, a deep and complex new combat system that is designed to shred the line that separates traditional

A FAIR COMPARISON?

We asked project director Robert Huebner about the almost unavoidable comparisons to Sony's blockbuster game. He had this to say: "God of War was a cool game and did a good job of giving a really visceral combat experience with a fairly limited set of player fight tactics. The combat, especially with the chain blades, was very flashy and fun, but not as deep as what we are trying to achieve here. A better example of the depth of combat we're shooting for is probably the Ninja Gaiden series. We still want to be visceral, especially when it comes to killing moves and gore – things that are very Conan – but we don't want to shortchange the player when it comes to the depth and complexity of the combat rules set." And as for the two protagonists? "In terms of attitude, they are polar opposites. Kratos seems very somber or morose (with good reason, naturally), but Conan is really not a very introspective guy. He absolutely loves life, power, and women. He generally doesn't kill from anger or rage, but because these people are trying to prevent him from fully enjoying life as he sees fit. In Conan's eyes, I think all the carnage and violence is really not his fault; his victims just got between him and his women, gold, freedom...take your pick."





third-person action games from the more complex and interesting move-sets of a one-on-one martial arts game. Lead gameplay programmer Mark Cooke explains: "We really feel like Conan's combo set is more comparable to a single character from a fighting game like Tekken or Virtua Fighter than it is to action games in this genre." Over 100 unique fighting moves will become accessible to gamers through the course of the adventure, each unlocking in response to players who take the time to do more than simply button mash.

Conan will begin the game with a single sword as his constant companion. While the weapon he uses will change throughout the game, he will always have one central weapon that can't be lost – in many cases a huge one-handed broadsword. Unlike similar titles, however, the permanent weapon he carries is only one option among all the other blades, cudgels, spears, and staves that he comes across in the game. In total there are over 20 unique instruments of war at a player's disposal. This not only includes weapons left on racks or on the ground, but every weapon utilized by any enemy in the game is wieldable as well. "As opposed to switching between the many different weapons that are available to Conan via menu systems, he executes combos that literally rip the

weapons from his enemy's hands, switching him from one weapon style to the other," combat animation designer David Gardner tells us. By playing through the game, it is apparent right away that Conan splits his fighting style into three main sets. The first is the sweeping strikes of a two-handed approach. In this mode, Conan might cleave a whole crew of attackers in one wide swipe of a giant axe or clear the space around him by spinning a heavy pole-arm spear. Conan's second weapon set allows for dual wielding with a blade in each hand, Conan shifts into a more agile and quick stance, striking out with fast stabs and slashes. Finally, a one-handed style encourages heavy strikes and lots of hand-to-hand grappling, while a variation on the one-handed style allows for the use of a stolen shield or torch. Each of the three major weapon sets has their own full tree of attacks. Defeated enemies reward a form of experience points, and these points in turn can be used to buy that next combat move in your favorite weapon style. However, only by mastering an early move in a given weapon set will the next even open up for purchase, meaning that players will have to choose how to specialize their character to reach the highest tier of a given set.

This focus on encouraging variety in the player's attacks and movements is mirrored

in Nihilistic's approach to AI. Designed originally as a one-versus-one fighting mechanic, all the characters that players fight, whether alone or in a group, will study your repetition of certain attacks and adjust both their blocking and attacking behavior in response. Consequently, that particular behind-the-back lopping off of heads move you like so much will work great the first few times it's tried, but will quickly fail as enemies respond by protecting up high and slashing low at your legs. In practice, what we saw of this system seemed to show itself off best in single combat with an enemy captain, where calculated attacks on both sides made for some intense combat. Larger crowds of enemies still had that annoying habit of milling around in a lazy circle while Conan stood at its center, taking apart the fighters one by one – a potential dilemma that the team still has plenty of time to rectify before the game enters public consumption.

Regardless, take apart those fighters you will. Fully embracing the harsh brutality of Howard's original tales, Conan definitely doesn't pull his punches. Included in the combat system is a complex limb-specific mechanic, one in which players can target individual attacks to take off legs, arms, and heads. On the 360, the control scheme to enact these vicious attacks should be familiar



to most action gamers X and Y perform light and heavy attacks, respectively. B performs some variation on a grab or grappling move, and the A button jumps. What sets Conan apart from other games with that same familiar control layout is the depth of combos and context sensitive interactions that are available to players. Mark Cooke showed us one example combo that will be useful as a transfer between the one-handed and dual-wielding weapon sets. "Conan approaches a Stygian Footman with a one-handed sword. He delivers a quick slash followed by ramming the Stygian brutally with his shoulder. He then rips the weapon out of the stunned Stygian's hand, which instantly switches the player into

dual wield weapon mode, continuing his combo by delivering another quick slash. Finally, Conan throws the sword he just stole from the Stygian and impales his victim through the chest, sending him flying to his death off of a cliff."

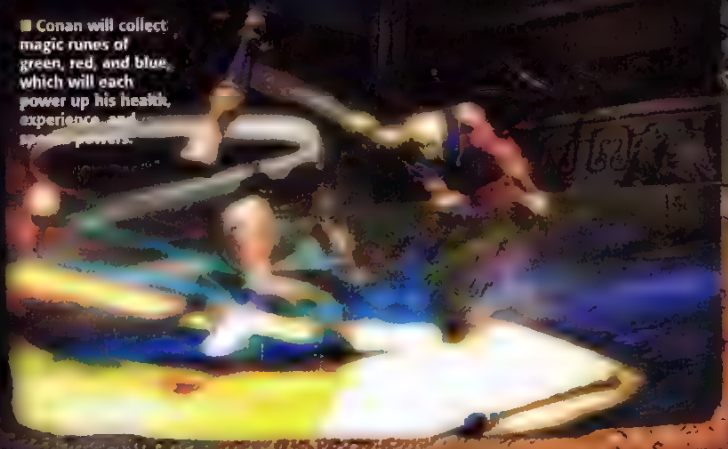
In addition to rapid button-pressing combos, Conan will take another cue from fighting games by having certain attacks altered by holding down the button instead of quick-pressing, as well as being able to steer the direction of an attack with the left stick and dodge with a quick twitch of the right. "Some recent action games lock players to their targets once they start an attack-combo against them," Cooke tells us. "In Conan, if a player wants to turn around in the middle of a combo and punch the enemy in the face who is sneaking up from behind, he or she can." To round out the barbarian's arsenal, the bumpers will control some mysterious special powers – a feature that the team at Nihilistic was hesitant to detail. However, they were too excited about

the still unfinished magic-like powers to not hint at their functionality. As anyone who has read the original Conan adventures is well aware, the character was perhaps the first in popular fiction to popularize the idea of a "berserk rage." To reflect this trait, one of the bumpers will trigger a fury mode, where Conan will strike harder, move faster, jump higher, and kill with greater ease.

It doesn't take more than a glance at the screens in these pages to recognize that Conan will be fully embracing his right to a Mature rating. It's an approach to the subject that the team thinks is a given if they want to be true to the character's roots. Unlike the bleached-clean fantasy that would follow in its footsteps in later years, Howard's Conan stories had no lack of gore and brutality. As a character, Conan would frequently mutilate the objects of his ire in shocking bursts of anger, and nihilistic feels that communicating that savagery is key to getting

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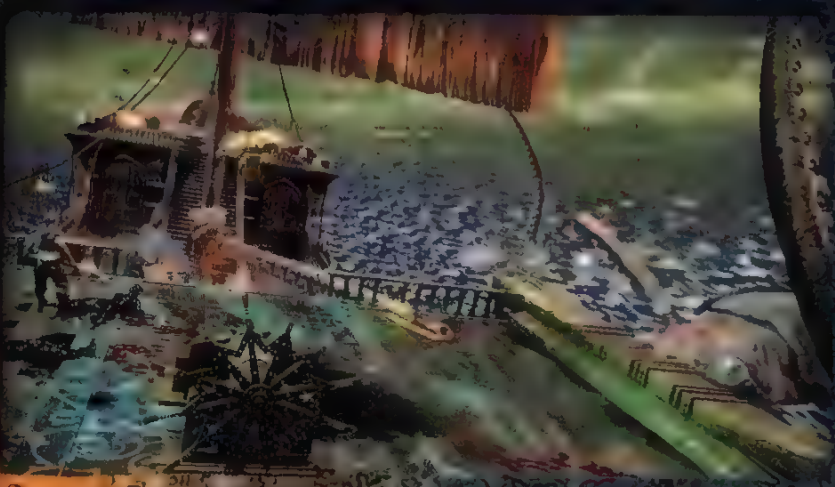
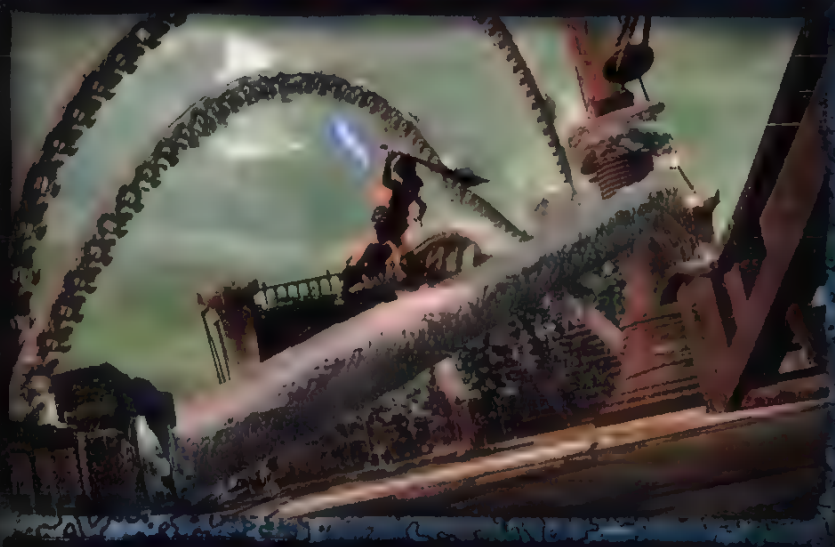
■ Not to disappoint fans of the movies, but this new game is way much based on the original fiction by Robert E. Howard rather than the Schwarzenegger vehicles of the 1980s.



■ Conan will collect magic runes of green, red, and blue, which will each power up his health, experience, and special powers.



■ Players can expect plenty of epic boss fights fit to challenge Conan's frenzied rages



■ The art style of the game is heavily influenced by the oil-painted book covers that Frank Frazetta completed for the Conan reprints of the 1960s.



CONTINUED FROM PAGE 64

across the feel of the world, even if the degree of violence might seem too much for some players. "The M rating is largely due to the brutality that we knew the game would need to faithfully execute a Conan action-adventure, fighting style game," design director Steve Thoms tells us. "Conan is ruthless, aggressive and powerful. All of those elements will come out in the game." Their willingness to include adult-oriented content also extends beyond the realms of blood and violence. While Nihilistic is carefully avoiding any overt sexual encounters, nudity will be as common in the new game as it was in the

original lusty stories. While the submissive and helpless females of Howard's mythology might seem out of date to more modern sensibilities, there's no doubt in the mind of the developer that those same characters are central to telling new tale within that politically incorrect world.

During our day at Nihilistic, we were lucky enough to see much of the gameplay that the team had described to us up and running in several locations throughout the game world. There are 24 missions in the game, split up between six major locations spread across the breadth of Hyboria. One of the earliest in the game involves Conan cutting a swath of death through the African-like savannah of Kushi. The

mission opens as Kushites storm Conan's ship and kidnap his female companion. Unwilling to leave her behind, Conan strikes back and invades their village. As he makes his way up a bluff, giant tigers stalk him, and he torches the buildings of the savage inhabitants as he goes. Later in the game, we were shown a level in the Egyptian-flavored country of Stygia, where Conan scales the walls of an ancient keep in pursuit of vengeance against the sorceress who dwells within.

Our favorite level showed off one of the massive boss fights in the game. While traveling between two of his destinations, Conan's ship is attacked by a giant squid. During the course of the battle, Conan's shipmates are grabbed by

■ Conan will feature multiple difficulties for fans that truly wish to master the combat system





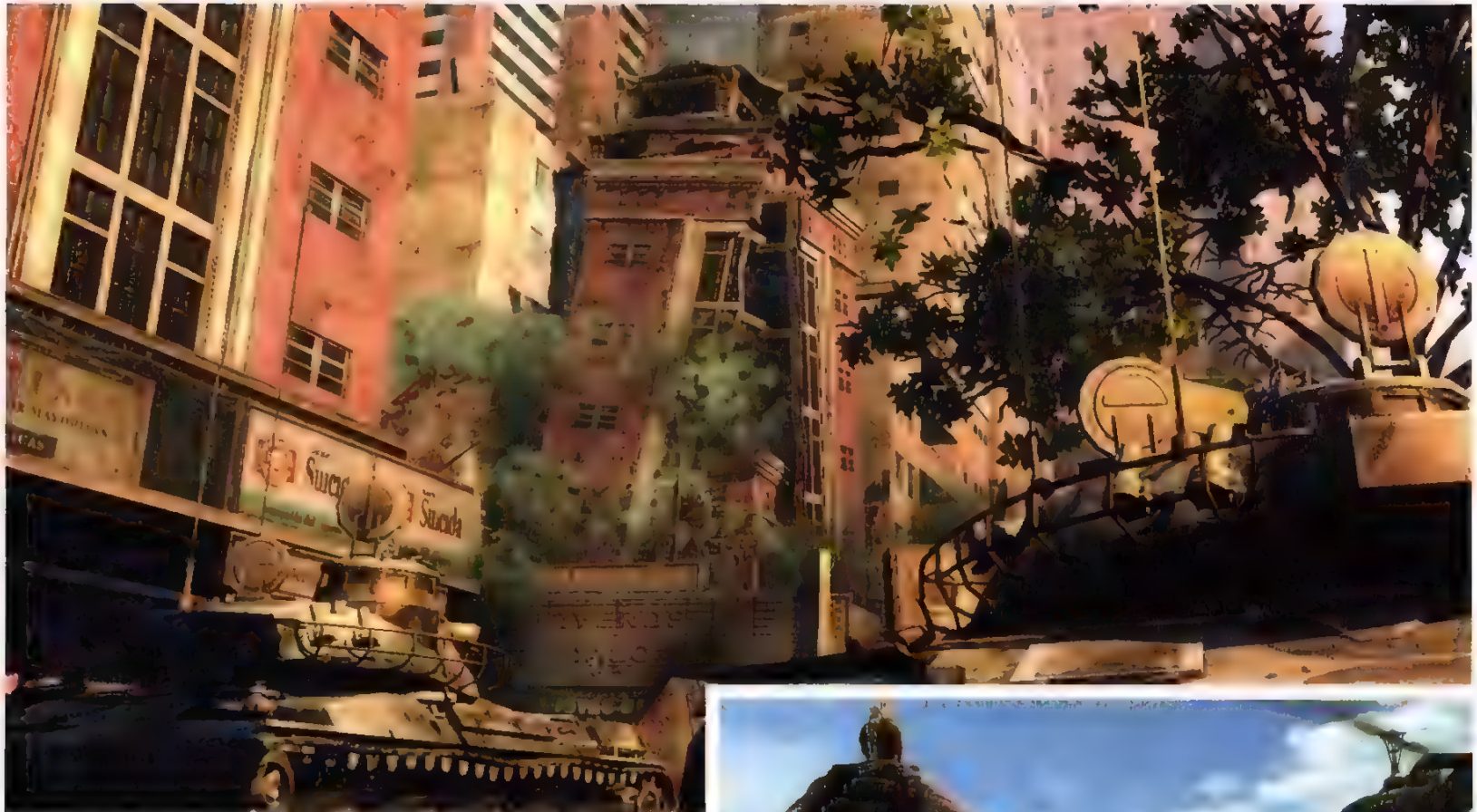
■ Not only will using particular moves open up later ones on the purchasing tree, but lambasting Conan with the use of a finer move will make it more powerful.



■ "Our biggest source of inspiration for the animation style of Conan is the animated feature *Tarzan*," lead animator Leo Martinez explains. "Our goal is to make sure that Conan's strength is embodied in every frame of the animation."

the huge kraken and spewed with a madness-inducing ink. When they fall back to the deck, their insanity sends them charging against Conan, even while the barbarian tries to strike off the tentacled limbs that are trying to pull down the mast and capsize the entire vessel. Later, the squid heaves its heavy form onto the ship's deck. We're not sure how the whole thing ends, but if our years of gaming tell us anything it's that you don't put a giant central eye on a boss monster for nothing.

While Conan's first solo adventure on this next generation of gaming hardware takes a great deal of inspiration from other popular action titles of the last few years, it's hard to fault it for being true to the pulp action and fighting that is the root of so much of fantasy gaming. With some remarkable animation work melding with the unique approach to Conan's engrossing combat system, there's tremendous potential for the barbarian to become a star again. Simultaneously, the danger of blending in with the dozens of other action games coming in 2007 looms high. By early next year, when the game releases, we should be able to find out whether Conan can emerge from his own ancient mythos and prove why he deserves the title of the first and greatest hero of the genre he helped invent. ■■■



XBOX 360

Mercenaries 2: World in Flames

> **STYLE** 1 OR 2-PLAYER ACTION (ONLINE MULTIPLAYER TBA) > **PUBLISHER** TBD > **DEVELOPER** PANDEMIC
> **RELEASE** SUMMER

SOLDIERS OF FORTUNE

Mercenaries 2 was a standout surprise at last year's E3. Taking the already fun ideas of its first game, Pandemic is advancing the scope and style of the Mercenaries brand with some massive upgrades to the existing formula. This time, Venezuela has erupted into a war zone, and everyone wants in on the action. You, as the unscrupulous hired gun, get to try and turn the tide in the direction of the highest bidder.

The new cooperative mode is perhaps the most exciting addition to the formula, allowing either split-screen or online friends to partner up and cause the most damage possible. Not unlike the newly releasing Crackdown, Mercenaries 2 will reward clever cooperative problem solving. One player might airlift the other into a trouble spot by helicopter, or both players might sneak in on opposite sides of a secure area so that one

can distract the enemy while the other completes an objective.

Beyond exciting options for playing with a buddy, we've gleaned a few other new details about this hotly anticipated follow-up. A wide range of cool vehicles are all useable wherever you find them in the world. The multiple tank types lead the way with their explosive firepower; the Mantis Battle Tank has the full spread of weaponry from a 105mm rifled cannon to a .50 cal machine gun, while the La Rana Tank sports a 20mm rotary cannon to mow down enemy infantry. For those more interested in an attack from above, the Endriago helicopter with its mini-gun and rocket pods shouldn't disappoint. Even the seas aren't safe from enterprising mercenaries, since the Omen speedboat is equipped with both forward and rear-mounted machine gun turrets. Tack on army jeeps, motorcycles, and a weaponized



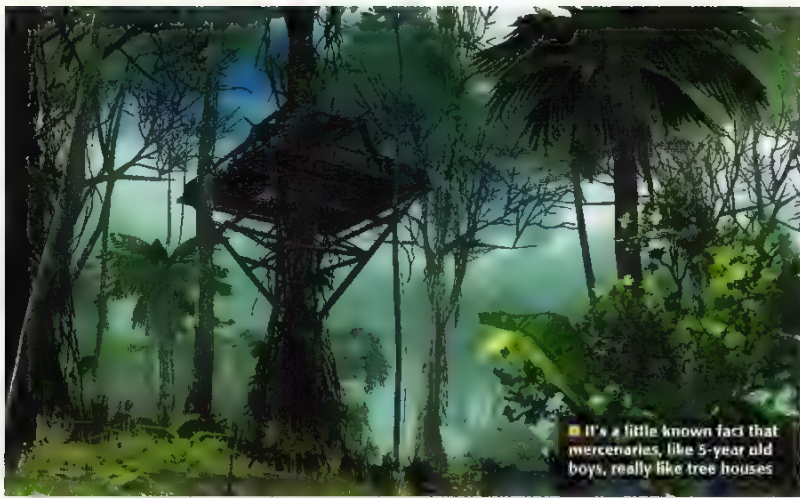
dune buggy, and the vehicle portion of World in Flames shouldn't disappoint.

We've also heard that in addition to the guerilla fighters and oil company clients that have already been revealed, the game will include a take on modern pirates, presumably as another group to join up with. Whoever your employer, the game has also added the ability to capture and/or rescue people from dangerous situations. On the technical side, Pandemic has taken full advantage of next-gen graphical options to make the entire game world viewable from any location — no fog effects will create an artificial draw distance as you drive and fly around the wartorn battle zone.

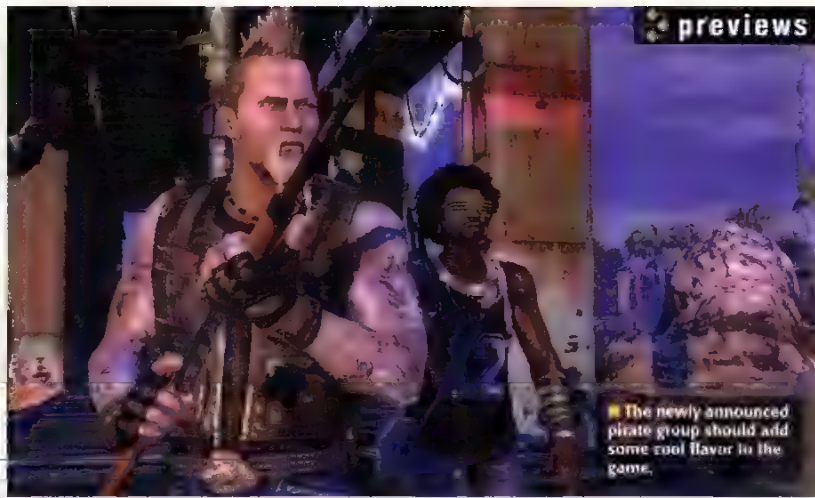
Embracing its role as a no-holds-barred



catharsis of explosions and freedom, Mercenaries 2 is on track to provide an escapist thrill to surmount even its most ambitious competitors. It shouldn't be too long until we can get our hands on an early version of the game so we can let you know if the game plays as fun as it looks. ■ ■ ■



■ It's a little known fact that mercenaries, like 5-year old boys, really like tree houses



previews

■ The newly announced pirate group should add some cool flavor to the game.



■ "You wanna see where I put my Tweety Bird tattoo?"



■ The game deals with the issue of private military organizations fighting in an oil rich nation over legal rights to the resource, thereby totally divorcing it from any real world problems the world is currently facing



■ "If you strike me down, my mohawk shall become more powerful then you could possibly imagine."



PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360 | PC

Ghost Recon Advanced Warfighter 2

► STEEL HEAVEN EDITION (UP TO 16 PEOPLE) ► PLAYSTATION NETWORK AND XBOX LIVE ► NUMBER UNUSUAL ► DEVELOPER RED STORM ENTERTAINMENT / WEISOFT PARIS ► RELEASE MARCH

GRAW! SEE IT'S STILL FUN TO SAY



■ The MULE is tough, but it can't take damage forever.



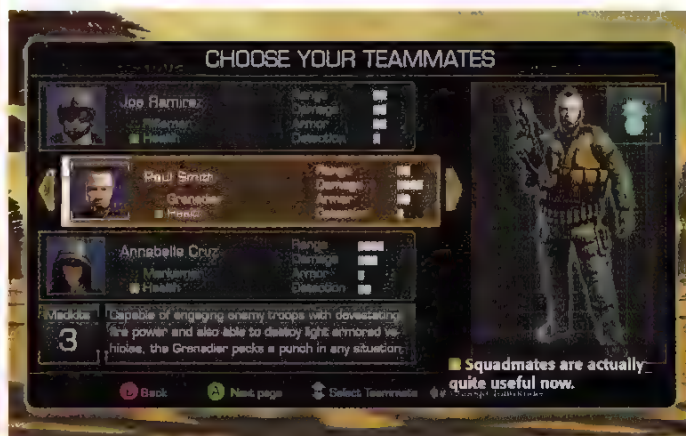
Captain Scott Mitchell is turning into some kind of extreme quasi-futuristic version of Jack Bauer – except if he had a show it would be called 72 instead of 24. The Ghost Squad leader is thrust into another three-day conflict almost immediately after the end of the first game. We got the chance to play both single and multi-player elements since our cover story last December, and are happy to say that things are coming along nicely.

GRAW 2 begins with a kiss-ass jeep driver lauding Scott's achievements from the first game to catch players up on the story. A brief series of VR missions refamiliarizes the GRAW control scheme and introduces a few new concepts. Here the developers show off the new time-lapse mechanic. Near the beginning of the first mission the instructor tweaks a few settings, causing the sun to dart to a new point in the sky and light and shadow to dance and

stretch beautifully across the environment. This is likely the only time we'll see such a drastic change in lighting, but the normal gradual movement of the sun will only help sell the realism in the rest of the game.

The new full command view is surprisingly more than a cosmetic upgrade when put into practice. Holding down the right bumper on the Xbox 360 will bring up the blue-tinged view from one of your squadmates. You can't move the character directly, but you can look around and click on a destination for the squad. We used this tactic to sandwich a group of enemies in between Scott and the Ghost Squad, and proceeded to tear them apart with great efficiency.

This hands-on approach works great for flying drones and the new MULE as well. Instead of only being able to select destinations on the overworld map when moving the drone, players can now enjoy a





When free running goes horribly wrong



full-screen top-down view. Here it's easy to swoop down, scan for some trademark red diamond enemy targets, and fly out of firing range. The MULE works smoothly as well, serving as a controllable form of mobile cover that's also a full-scale armory. This allows players to switch freely back and forth between assault rifles, rocket launchers, sniper rifles, and the like with ease. No more scrounging for lame enemy guns when you're done blowing up tanks with the rocket launcher.

Weapon selection is now handled with a quick press of the A button combined with the d-pad instead

of the dumby menu scrolling of the first game. One new weapon at your disposal, the satchel charge, provides a nice stealthy alternative to blowing up armored vehicles. Rather than blasting tanks with rockets from afar, players can sneak up to them, toss a charge under the chassis, run off, and detonate it at will. Magnificent explosions ensue.

Multplayer returns with new maps and six new co-op stages. You'll be able to fight in such locations as a train station, a rocky nature area, warehouses, a flooded village, and even the Panama Canal. Classic team and solo outings return, including

Elimination, Territory, Objective, and Battle. Just like before, a slew of achievements will lure players into marathon face-offs. Whether you're trying to get 500 kills or win an hour-long co-op Defend match, GRAW 2 allows players to track their progress towards completing multiplayer achievements via an in-game menu.

Despite a few bugs present in our preview disc, GRAW 2's new gameplay elements and exceptional graphical polish has us pretty darn excited. Luckily for gamers, Scott Mitchell will be coming off R&R very soon. ■■■■



Beautiful explosions are fast becoming a GRAW trademark



The new full drone controls are a huge improvement



See how fat your ass looks in those pants using full command view!

God of War II

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION > **PUBLISHER** SONY COMPUTER ENTERTAINMENT
> **DEVELOPER** SONY COMPUTER ENTERTAINMENT SANTA MONICA
> **RELEASE** MARCH 13

COLOSSAL COMBAT

Before the release of the original *God of War*, many gamers got their first taste of the battle system with a one-level demo that stopped just short of a fight with a giant Hydra. Now that *God of War II* is only weeks away, this sequel will also have a demo to give players a sense of the bone-crunching action – but this time, there won't be any skipping out on the boss fight.

These screens show the opening moments of *God of War II*, culminating in the battle against one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World: the Colossus of Rhodes. Judging from the visible physical damage on the giant golem's limbs and face, it is clear that Kratos will have to break this foe apart piece by piece. How and why Kratos gets sucked into this fight is still a mystery, but we'll have all of the details for you next month in our full review.

While you're waiting to play the game, you can get yourself psyched up with this little piece of info: Sony has revealed that, like the first *God of War*, *GoW II* will be packed with DVD-caliber special features. The extras on the second bonus disc include (but aren't limited to) behind-the-scenes featurettes, concept art, and a rundown of levels that didn't make it into the final version of the game. Here's hoping that buried somewhere in those goodies is another 800-number with Kratos on the other end of the line. His voice sounds so...bestial.

All conversations with fictional characters aside, we can't wait to get our hands on this mythical bloodbath to see what dark purpose is driving Kratos forward in his newest adventure. If the pictures of the Colossus of Rhodes are any indication, the boss battles are bound to be bigger and more intense than ever. If the team is able to up the ante on the over-the-top combat, we might just chain the PS2 controller to our wrists so we never have to let go. ■■■



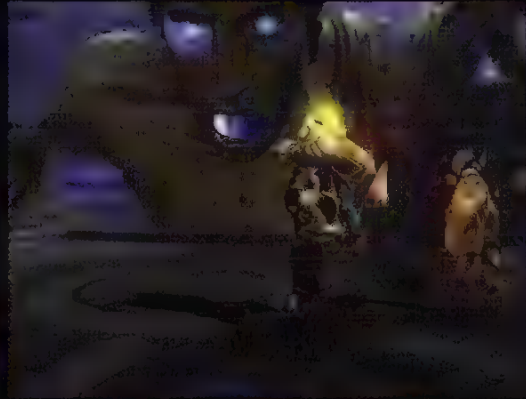
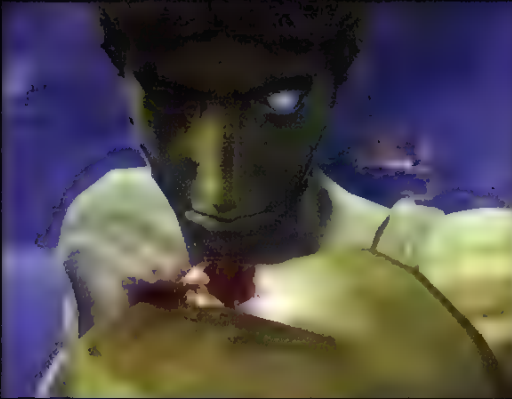
GREECE: THE MUSICAL

The plot details of *God of War II* have remained a closely guarded secret, but we got some early teasers in the form of a track listing for the official *GoW II* soundtrack.

Songs with names like "The Death of Kratos," "An Audience with Cronos," and "The Battle for Olympus" demonstrate that there are definitely going to be some twists and turns along the way.

1. God of War II-Main Titles
2. The Glory of Sparta
3. The Way of the Gods
4. Colossus of Rhodes
5. The Bathhouse
6. Death of Kratos
7. The End Begins
8. Typhon Mountain
9. Waking the Sleeping Giant
10. Battle for the Skies
11. Exploring the Isle
12. The Isle of Creation
13. The Summit of Sacrifice
14. An Audience with Cronos
15. The Barbarian King Returns
16. Bog of Lost Souls
17. Battle in the Bog
18. Crossing the Lowlands
19. Atlas
20. Palace of the Fates
21. Phoenix Rising
22. Ashen Spire
23. Athena
24. The Battle for Olympus
25. Blood of Destiny
26. Junkie XL Colossus Remix

■ This move looks like it might be part of a new timed button-press sequence



■ "Gimme five, bro!"



■ At some point early on, Kratos has his godly armor stripped from him



PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360 | PC

Frontlines: Fuel of War

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION (MULTIPLAYER TBA) > **PUBLISHER** THQ > **DEVELOPER** KAOS STUDIOS > **RELEASE** FALL

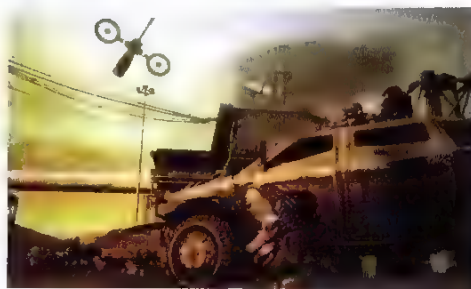
KNOW YOUR ROLE

Though we just took an inside look at Frontlines in last month's issue, some new info has surfaced that warrants a second glance. Most notably, publisher THQ announced that the title is coming to PlayStation 3 along with the Xbox 360 and PC. Beyond that, developer Kaos decided to let us in on some new multiplayer details that make Frontlines sound better than ever.

The core of Frontlines' signature multiplayer is in utilizing teamwork to achieve objectives and move the front-line forward. From what Kaos tells us about its internal multiplayer testing, that design is already working beautifully. "Inherent teamwork' is an extremely noticeable change to people's playstyle that emerges from the Frontlines game

mechanic," observes Dave Votyпка, design director at Kaos. "Because it takes a coordinated effort of offense and defense in order to control several objectives at once – which is required to move the front forward and push the enemy back – players quickly realize this and begin to make conscious choices to coordinate efforts between teammates." In other words, it doesn't matter how "133t" your skills with a sniper rifle are; you're going to lose to the team with stronger strategy and teamwork.

Frontlines multiplayer also has gamers choosing Roles and Loadouts that determine what equipment and abilities they'll have access to on the battlefield. These will evolve during the course of a single match. "Character growth is more about specializing and achieving new military equipment rather than core stats," explains Votyпка. "Each time you spawn, you have the choice of which Loadout (collection of weapons) to use, and



which Role (weapon or technology specializations) to pair with your Loadout. It is within the Roles that the upgrading takes place." This way, you'll be able to choose what's needed at that particular time – like spawning with a rocket launcher when enemy vehicles threaten your base – as well as evolve your skills according to your preferred playstyle.

With at least 32 players in a match (Kaos wouldn't confirm more than that, but kept teasing us with hints at "32+ players"), Frontlines is poised to step up to the level of Rainbow Six Vegas and Gears of War on the next-gen stage. Kaos' pedigree (Battlefield 1942: Desert Combat, Battlefield 2) has us bouncing in anticipation of seeing how it stacks up. ■ ■ ■

THE FOUR ROLES

Check out what the four roles are capable of, direct from Kaos' Votyпка:

- **GROUND SUPPORT:**
Specializes in armor support & base defense. Includes repair abilities (both passive and active), as well as deployable stationary guns such as mini-guns, sentry guns, and even a rail gun type weapon that's deadly against enemy armor.
- **AIR SUPPORT:**
As you might guess, specializes in calling in communicating with mission command to call in air strikes from above. Precision strikes, cluster bombs, and the rank three abilities of controllable gunships and a "Mother of All Bombs" (MOAB) type ordinance.
- **DRONE TECH:**
Specializes in remote-controlled drones that provide both reconnaissance and offensive capabilities as this role ranks up. This includes Net-centric data sharing about enemy positions, as well as the incognito power of being able to attack or defend an area without putting yourself in the line of fire.
- **COUNTERMEASURES/ ELECTRONIC WARFARE:**
With strong abilities in both defense and offense, this role can bring enemy technology to its knees. Because of its powering down drones, vehicles, deployable weaponry, and even preventing air strikes in a targeted area at top rank, this Role player is often a team's best friend.



GAMEINFORMER

■ Sometimes vehicles are most useful as cover



■ Multi-occupancy vehicles? But of course!

PS3 AHoy!

What does a \$600 console get you in terms of gameplay? Kaos has the answers. "The PS3's Sixaxis controller allows us to try some very cool things in areas like helicopter controls, player movement, aiming, and even with object interaction," reveals Votypka. "On the PS3 side, we have the technology to hit the same intense level of combat and teamwork as on our other platforms, including the VOIP communication and high 32-plus player counts," adds managing director Frank DeLise. So that \$600 machine basically gets you the same game plus some motion-sensing stuff - here's hoping that it's implemented better than we've seen so far on PS3.

■ The character models look as good as anything we've seen to date.



■ Surely nobody would fight a bloody war over oil



PLAYSTATION 3

Heavenly Sword

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION > **PUBLISHER** SONY COMPUTER ENTERTAINMENT > **DEVELOPER** NINJA THEORY
 > **RELEASE** JUNE 2007

SICK AS HELL

It's probably a good thing that God of War II is coming out on PS2; it wouldn't want the competition from this game on the PS3. Okay, so you're tired of hearing Heavenly Sword compared to God of War, and that's fair because Heavenly Sword is really its own game. Its story is standard fantasy fare: It's up to the main character, Nariko, to take up the Heavenly Sword and avenge the deaths of her clan.

Visually, Nariko might be hot enough to cook bacon. Her hair twirls around her as she spins like a tornado of death, and her clothing flaps along in the breeze. The environments are built to match. Tables, chairs, and pottery will shatter and splinter as enemies are thrown into them. Unlike most games, all the little pieces remain to clutter the battlefield, leaving a general sense that war just happened.

Nariko has an extensive list of combos

and reversals at her disposal. She breaks legs and kicks enemies across the battlefield. She jumps on enemies' heads and snaps their necks with her legs before sending them into the air and slicing them apart with her sword. The game isn't gory, and that's fine because it has its own brand of brutality. In one move, Nariko grabs an enemy with her chained hook blades (one of her weapon's many forms) and then whips them at a group of enemies or twirls them around in a spin attack. Nariko can also pick up the enemies' weapons and use them as deadly projectiles, but weapons aren't the only things she can throw. Nariko can pick up several items lying around the environment and take out chains of enemies with one carefully aimed shot. You will actually have some limited control over whatever you throw, and the camera switches to a behind-the-projectile view and

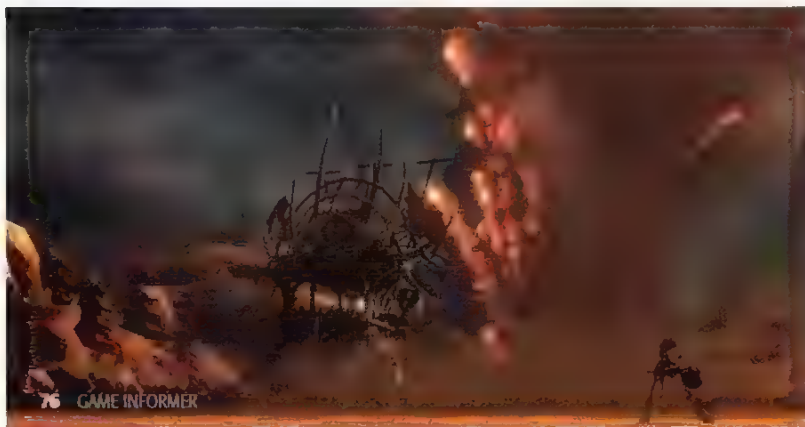


even follows its path.

There is some strategy to which weapon you choose to use. Some enemies are easier to take out with the sword, but there are some pretty cool combos and nifty ways to kill guys with the chained hooks too. A meter measures your successful combos and attacks, and when it is full Nariko can unleash a powerful and very artsy special attack. And speaking of artsy, the camera angles are cinematic and add to the game's visual flare.

The enemies can be pretty vicious, especially as wave after wave of troops continue to increase in number. Your foes seem to attack better in groups, and will provide a formidable challenge. The one boss battle we've seen ended in a timed button pressing minigame, and we suspect that this will be a standard feature throughout the game.

So will Heavenly Sword make us forget about that other game? Well, probably not, but at least we'll have another exciting action game to look forward to this year. ■ ■ ■



CRACKDOWN



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Sexual Themes
Strong Language
Use of Drugs

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XBOX 360

Guitar Hero II

> STYLE 1 OR 2-PLAYER MUSIC > PUBLISHER REDOCTANE > DEVELOPER HARMONIX > RELEASE MARCH

NEW SONGS IN LESS THAN A YEAR

See that list over there. That's all the new songs available on this version of Guitar Hero II. All right. Now that we have the most important information out of the way, let's continue. The above songs will be sprinkled throughout the normal setlist or the store to bring the total tally to 74 tracks. But what does this mean for everyone who couldn't resist the PlayStation 2 version this holiday season? "We do have some plans that will keep all of the PS2 owners very happy," assures associate producer Ted Lange.

In addition to the new batch of included songs, Harmonix has also opened the door for downloadable tracks. These will be located in the actual in-game store for maximum impulse buying potential. We downloaded a sample track called "Rodgort" (Trogdor spelled backwards) and barely had to wait before we were playing Strong Bad's ode to dragons. RedOctane says it will probably do a mix of single song downloads and bundles of tracks, but won't confirm packages or prices specifically. Themes and picture packs will also be available.

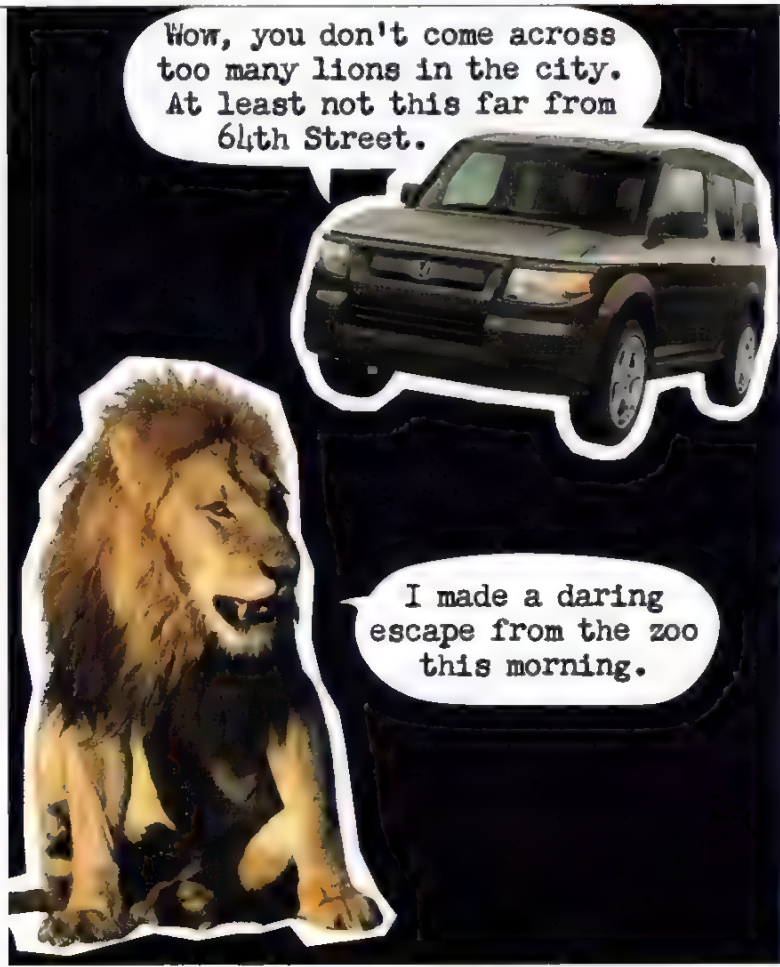
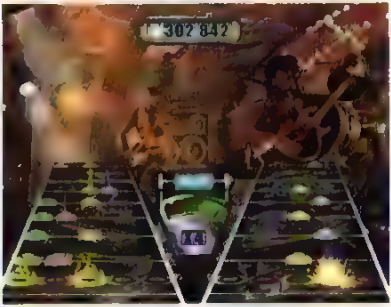
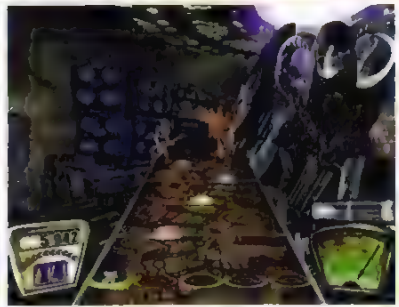
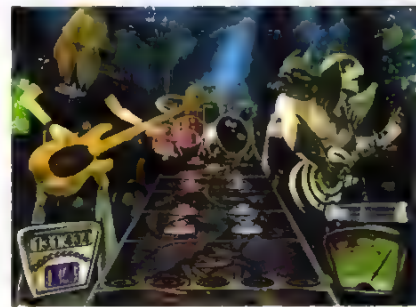
As reported previously, the new Gibson X-plorer controller is disappointingly wired. It turns out this is more due to red tape than anything else. "Yeah, Microsoft is holding tight to their wireless components. We are currently talking to them about letting us make a wireless guitar controller," confirms Lange.

Even though the new controller includes a headset jack, Guitar Hero II will not support online multiplayer. But online leaderboards (separated by difficulty) will determine the real god of all guitar heroes ■■■■



NEW SONGS

- "Possum Kingdom" — Toadies (original track)
- "Salvation" — Rancid
- "Life Wasted" — Pearl Jam
- "Billion Dollar Babies" — Alice Cooper
- "Hush" — Deep Purple
- "Rock and Roll Hoochie Koo" — Rick Deminger
- "Dead!" — My Chemical Romance (original track)
- "The Trooper" — Iron Maiden
- (Bonus Unlocks)**
- "Drink Up" — Dunge of Sell
- "Kicked to the Curb" — Noble Rot



Wow, you don't come across too many lions in the city. At least not this far from 64th Street.



I made a daring escape from the zoo this morning.



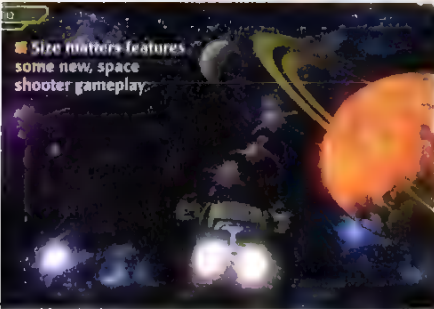
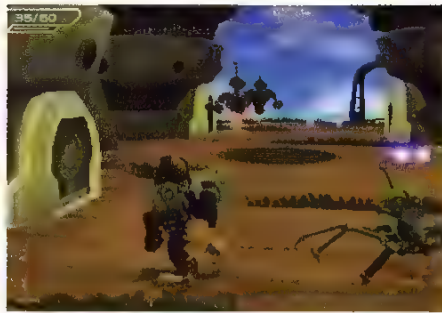
You're a lion on the lamb.



I'm going to ignore that...I need someone to help me learn the ropes of city life.



■ The game's targeting works well on the PSP



■ Size matters features some new, space shooter gameplay.



PSP

Ratchet & Clank: Size Matters

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION/PLATFORM (UP TO 4-PLAYER VIA AD HOC OR INFRASTRUCTURE)
 > **PUBLISHER** SONY COMPUTER ENTERTAINMENT > **DEVELOPER** HIGH IMPACT GAMES
 > **RELEASE** FEBRUARY 13

SONY'S DYNAMIC DUO GET SMALL

For our money, Sony's Ratchet & Clank series is one of the finest platforming franchises ever. For this reason, we've been very excited about the duo's first appearance on the PSP, which is releasing very soon. While not all console games can make the transition to a handheld platform, the high quality of Sony's Dexter gives us reason to hope.

Based on our experience with a fairly polished build of the game, this hope is well placed. Developer High Impact Games, which includes many veterans from Insomniac, has done a great job of recreating the colorful visuals and refined gameplay of the console games. While the lack of a second analog means no FPS-style control option, the traditional R&C mechanics work just fine without it.

The single-player saga follows our heroes through creatively designed

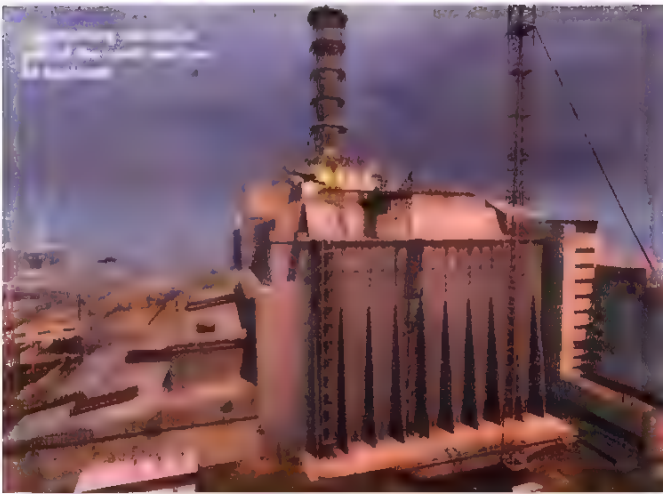
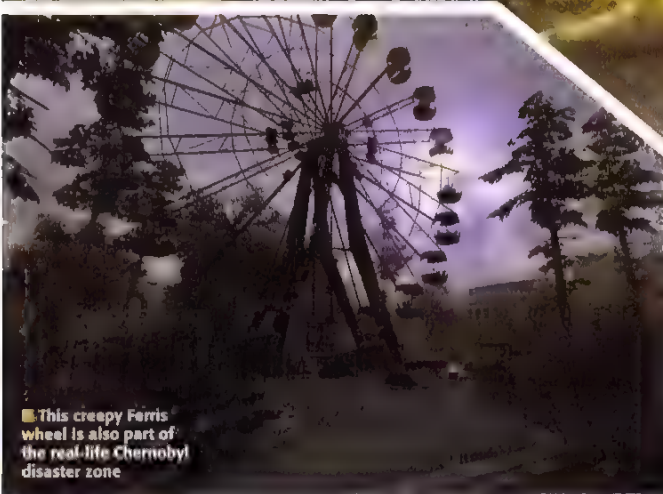
levels on a quest to save a young girl named Luna from some evil robots. New twists include some space-shooter style solo Clank levels and new weapons that can swarm bees at enemies or make plants grow into bomb spawns or platforms.

In keeping with Deadlocked, the last game in the series, Size Matters puts a big emphasis on multiplayer. Up to four players can duke it out in traditional modes like deathmatch, team deathmatch, and capture the flag. A more interesting new mode is the Iron Lombax Challenge, which has level specific goals like loading cows into a giant meat truck or collecting power cells for your team. Of course, even the good old deathmatch isn't exactly "traditional" when you add this game's over-the-top weapons to the mix, so expect this to be one of the multiplayer highlights of 2007 on PSP. ■ ■ ■

I'm an SC — a new kind of Element, designed for the concrete jungle. I know the city inside and out. I'm your guy.

Great. The first thing we need to do is find a drugstore. I need some conditioner or my mane is going to get all frizzy.

elementandfriends.com



PC

S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Shadow of Chernobyl

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 32-PLAYER VIA INTERNET OR LAN) > **PUBLISHER** THQ > **DEVELOPER** GSC GAMEWORLD
> **RELEASE** MARCH

FOR REAL THIS TIME

It says something about S.T.A.L.K.E.R.'s vast potential that we're still excited about it after four years of unfulfilled promises and numerous delays.

Publisher THQ recently sent us a playable copy of the game, and it's definitely in the home stretch of development. We're ready to take THQ at its word that S.T.A.L.K.E.R. will be spinning in your drives on or around the announced March release date.

The game's main selling point (and reportedly the reason for its amazingly long development time) is the A-Life system. This feature is touted as giving S.T.A.L.K.E.R.'s enormous 300 square kilometer world a truly functional economy and structure of NPC interactions. If THQ's promises pan out, the Chernobyl area depicted here could put *The Elder Scrolls* to shame in terms of emergent gameplay possibilities and meaningful player freedom.

Unfortunately, crash bugs and limited implementation in our build prevented us from seeing A-Life in action, but that's why this software hasn't been released yet.

Aside from A-Life, the element that has us most excited is the tactical freedom in any given situation. Stealthy, diplomatic, Rambo-style, or more creative approaches will pay off bigtime during your playtime with S.T.A.L.K.E.R. The availability of interesting powers via radiation-born artifacts only adds more options. Forty to sixty hours of gameplay (according to THQ)

and seven possible endings mean that you'll have plenty of opportunity to try out different tacks.

Graphically, S.T.A.L.K.E.R. is no longer the belle of the ball. It's certainly not ugly, but three years of delays and new releases by the rest of the gaming industry have robbed this title of its cutting-edge status. And, frankly, the nuts-and-bolts action gameplay isn't anything special beyond the obvious entertainment value of a well-executed first-person shooter. Likewise, what we know of the multiplayer side of the game isn't very interesting — a small twist on capture-the-flag and some deathmatching aren't going to convince anyone of a purchase. However, if the single-player quest delivers on its many promises, this will be a unique and immersive adventure that we'll gladly sink our teeth into. ■ ■ ■



PC GAME OF THE YEAR

COMPANY of HEROES



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Command intelligent troops who use teamwork and seek their own cover.

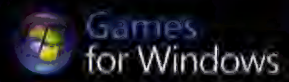
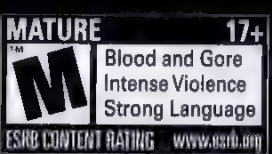


Use the full arsenal of WWII weaponry as you lead Able Company in epic D Day battles.

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XBOX 360

Rainbow Six Vegas: Players' Pack

> STYLE 1 TO 4-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 16-PLAYER VIA XBOX LIVE) > PUBLISHER UBISOFT > DEVELOPER UBISOFT MONTREAL
> RELEASE MARCH

WHAT HAPPENS IN VEGAS... HAPPENS IN VEGAS AGAIN

Their MP5 barrels may still be smoking from gunning down noobs on Xbox Live, but rabid Rainbow Sixers can already look forward to new Vegas-based gun-fights with a downloadable multiplayer expansion pack due in March.

This second helping of RSV ammo offers two new multiplayer game modes. In Assassination mode, a team of attackers must move in and eliminate a VIP while the defenders coordinate a protection scheme as they move the target to an extraction zone. The other new mode, Total Conquest, also stresses teamwork, as you must secure and control the three mobile radar installations scattered across the map for more time than your opponents. These new modes are playable via all of the traditional RSV maps

as well as the new ones.

Speaking of new maps, the download features 10 more hot zones, each compatible with every multiplayer mode. Many of these locales, like the Red Lotus casino and Neon Graveyard, tie into the Vegas experience. One blast from the past is also included: the Presidio map from Rainbow Six 3.

Ubisoft said no plans were in place to add new weapons, gadgets, or armor accessories to the expansion pack, but we wouldn't be surprised to see some new toys on the horizon in the future. We've also got our fingers crossed for Ubisoft to add some new achievable ranks to its Elite Character Creation system. Keep your eyes wide open and prepare to fire some short, controlled bursts sometime in March. ■■■



Bravo Team must not have found the safeties on their guns.



The night manager from Wendy's goes on the offensive.



PLAYSTATION 2

Dawn of Mana

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



A NEW DAWN

The Mana games may not be runaway successes like Square Enix's flagship franchises, but they still hold many happy memories for RPG fans stretching back to the 16-bit era. Now that the series is being revived through the World of Mana project, those dedicated old-school fans will be surprised at the changes in store for the newest entry, Dawn of Mana.

Coming this spring exclusively to PS2, Dawn of Mana appears to be more action-oriented than its predecessors. Taking place in a fully 3D environment, the story puts players in control of a boy named Elmy and his childhood friend Faye as they fight against an army that has invaded their homeland. The centerpiece of the gameplay is Elmy's weapon — a whip. This tool is not only used for attacks, but also to grab onto objects and manipulate the environment to wipe out your enemies. To facilitate this kind of action, the game will be using a physics engine that allows for items and monsters to be flung around and crashed into each other. This approach will have better rewards than just jumping into the fray and mashing buttons, like more beneficial medals dropping after kills.

This new style is a far cry from the more traditional action/RPG format

associated with the Mana series, but the unique mixture of story and combat could prove to be an interesting new direction. After all, when it comes to resurrecting respected games, no one does it better (or more frequently) than Square Enix. ■■■

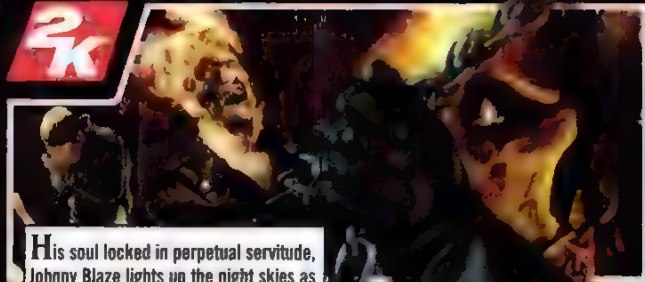


Elmy's whip allows him to attack foes above and below him.

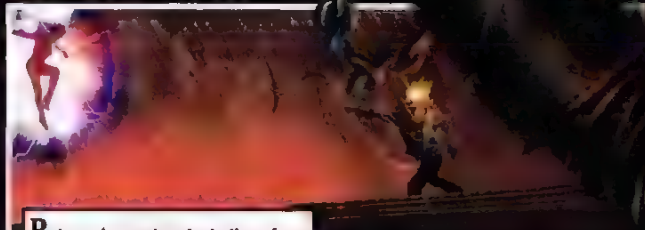
GHOST RIDER

THE VIDEO GAME

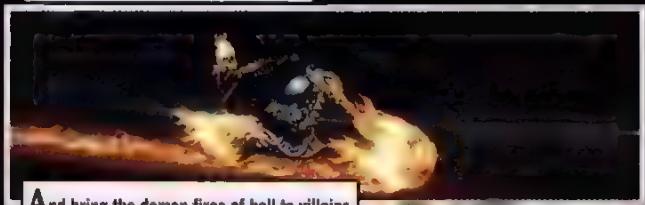
2K



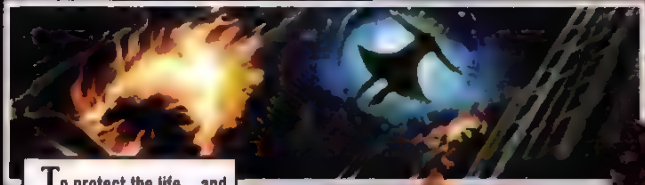
His soul locked in perpetual servitude, Johnny Blaze lights up the night skies as his alter ego, the Ghost Rider.



But now he must protect others from experiencing his hell on earth.



And bring the demon fires of hell to villains like Blackheart, Vengeance and Scarecrow...



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



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TEEN
T
 CONTENT RATED BY
ESRB

Alcohol Reference
 Blood and Gore
 Mild Suggestive Themes
 Violence



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The game has a good lineup of pros, including Andy Roddick



PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360

Virtua Tennis 3

> **STYLE** 1 TO 4-PLAYER SPORTS (UP TO 4-PLAYER VIA XBOX LIVE) > **PUBLISHER** SEGA > **DEVELOPER** AM3 (PLAYSTATION 3), SUMO (XBOX 360) > **RELEASE** MARCH 20

CHARGING THE NET

Although it's lost some ground to the excellent Top Spin series in recent years, Sega's Virtua Tennis is still considered the premier tennis game of all time by many fans of the sport. Now, the franchise is moving onto the powerful next-gen systems and hopes to recapture its world title. We've been lucky enough to get our hands on a very polished, playable build of the game, and have been running it through its paces ever since.

Based on what we've seen, your opinion about Virtua Tennis as a whole will be a strong indicator of how you feel about this third entry. Simply put, it doesn't really seem like much has changed. From the menus to

the on-court action, nearly every aspect of the game is reminiscent of the past versions of the game.

Your career, which can be played as a custom-created male or female, works off a large global map and calendar system. As a pro, you rise through the ranks by taking part in training at the tennis academy, entering tournaments, or improving your stats via Virtua Tennis's trademark minigames. Although some are repeated, like Pin Bowling, it seems that a good deal of the development effort on Virtua Tennis 3 has gone into creating new contests. Many are adaptations of past contests, like Prize Defender, in which you must protect vari-



ous items from the ball machines instead of breaking them. That said, there's definitely some creativity at play, especially in strange events like Feeding Time, where you hit the ball at large spoils to keep hungry alligators from consuming the meat on the court, or Avalanche, which has you dodging gigantic tennis balls while catching as many apples falling down an incline as possible.

Otherwise, it's the same highly competent racket action you expect. The control scheme is the same, with a two-click serve and face buttons for flat, slice, and top spin returns. Despite the lack of innovation, Virtua Tennis's gameplay has always been its strongest aspect, and we're happy that the control is as tight and responsive as we expect. While it won't blow you away visually, the character models transition between animations very fluidly, which adds to the responsive feel. Both ver-

sions of the game play similarly, but only the Xbox 360 edition will feature online play. The PS3 Virtua Tennis hopes to overcome this deficit by including special Sixaxis control.

The roster of pros is also very impressive, featuring some of the best-known players in the world. Most important is the inclusion of the game's two most dominant and compelling players, Roger Federer and Rafael Nadal. Unfortunately, the structure of the career mode somewhat diminishes the impact of the pros, as they are unceremoniously dumped into low-level tournaments early in your progression, rather than being something that you build your way up to. Also, your world ranking doesn't seem to take into account the quality of your opponents. For example, even after being undefeated through four individual tournaments, defeating Federer, Nadal, and Andy Roddick, and a doubles title with Federer as my partner, I was still only ranked 246 in the world. Strange.

We'll have to see if Virtua Tennis can win back some of the fans that enjoyed Top Spin's more realistic vision of pro tennis. The gameplay is definitely there — now Sega just needs to fine-tune the overall experience. ■ ■ ■



Only the 360 version features online multiplayer

Formula One Championship Edition

> **STYLE** 1 OR 2-PLAYER RACING (UP TO 11-PLAYER VIA PLAYSTATION NETWORK) > **PUBLISHER** SONY COMPUTER ENTERTAINMENT > **DEVELOPER** STUDIO LIVERPOOL > **RELEASE** LATE FEBRUARY

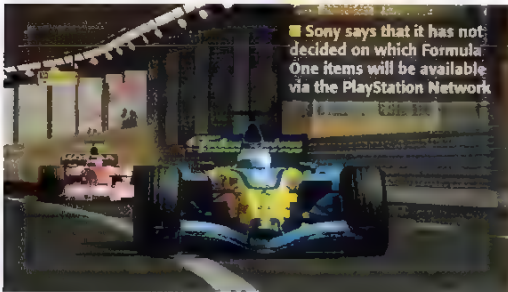
A FORMULA FOR SUCCESS?

It's certainly not unusual for a system to appear with a clutch of racing titles by its side. It's also not out of the ordinary for a Formula One game to come and go without leaving so much as a skid mark on the video game landscape in the U.S. PlayStation 3's Formula One Championship Edition won't change the world, but racing fans should be heartened by the fact that for once, this isn't the bare bones racer that usually comes and goes in the early life of a new console.

Perhaps the most exciting aspect of this game – for both hardcore and casual racers – is the optional evaluation process that happens before races. This consists of a series of laps you'll run before qualifying that will help tune the car to the way you race. This evaluation covers areas like your car's suspension, downforce, balance, and camber. These are adjusted to your liking after you race a few trial laps. In this evaluation you'll also get to test out what your car's going to feel like with worn tires and a half

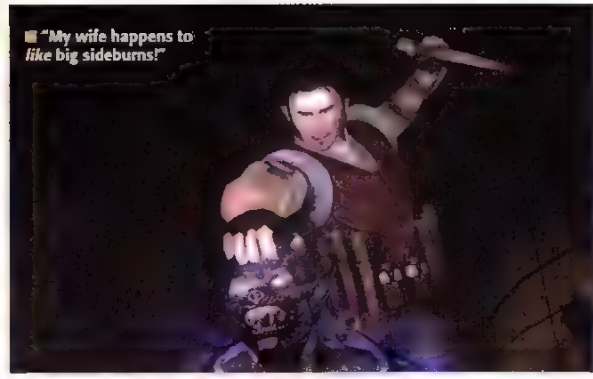
tank of gas (which results in a lighter, more skittish car). Formula One's career mode spans five seasons, and starts out with your created character participating in racing trials to garner a contract as either a first or second racer for various teams. From here you can participate in a full slate of timed practice, qualifying, and evaluation sessions before the race actually begins. Formula One titles are usually known for being fairly unforgiving, but we found that this title seems to straddle the

line between being too easy and too difficult. One thing the game offers that helps in navigating those hairpin turns at high speeds is a real-time turn indicator. Instead of informing you of an approaching sharp turn like in most racing games, Championship Edition's turn indicators will change colors depending on how you're handling the turn as you drive. If you've got a good grip on everything, it'll stay green. Go in too fast, and it'll tell you you're in trouble by quickly turning from green to yellow to red as you get more and more out of control. Maybe casual PlayStation 3 fans will take notice of this Formula One title because of the graphics, sense of speed, or the 11-player online multiplayer. But perhaps they'll keep playing because this game seems to be a well-rounded title balanced for racers of all stripes. ■ ■ ■





■ Harker's gauntlet defends against attacks and can also reflect deadly sunlight at vampires



■ "My wife happens to like big sideburns!"



PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360

Harker

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION (MULTIPLAYER TBA) > PUBLISHER TBA > DEVELOPER THE COLLECTIVE > RELEASE 2008

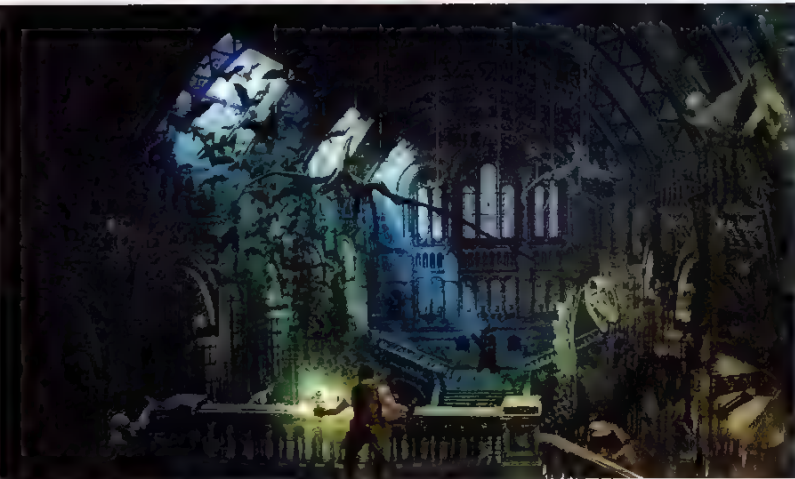
DRACULA FOR THE BUFFY GENERATION

The story of Dracula never gets old. Fortunately for developer The Collective, the licensing rights did. The Collective is free to pillage Bram Stoker's gothic tale from the public domain, but that doesn't mean gamers will see a strict retelling in game form. Senior producer Nigel Cook says that Harker is more "inspired" by the novel than anything else.

"We are still keeping the key characters and the same era, while introducing new storylines and plots," Cook reveals. "The biggest change is Jonathan Harker. In the book Harker is a timid solicitor who is in the wrong place at the wrong time. Our version of Harker is a man fueled with vengeance who is driven to punish and execute vampires to purge the bloodlines."

Harker is very much focused on visceral melee combat, but don't expect to take down waves of enemies at a time.

"Vampires in our game are not simply fodder types that can be killed with a single shot or blow," assures Cook. "Alone, or in small groups of two to five, vampires are intelligent creatures that adapt their behaviors using group AI. They are resilient and will do all they can to survive as Harker inflicts a series of what we call 'punisher' moves that essentially break down and weaken the vampires, eventually incapacitating them enough to go in for an 'execution' move to finish them off." Stronger vampires even have the ability to transform into a demonic "feral" state as they get low on health to perform more damaging attacks.



Players will have many classic vampire killing tools at their disposal aside from fisticuffs: wooden stakes, crossbows, crosses, holy water, swords, knives, and guns. Environmental hazards like sunlight, spikes, and even an old wine press serve as handy methods of dispatching bloodsuckers.

The reason Harker has such a vendetta against vampires is that one of them (cough, Dracula, cough) put his wife, Mina, in a coma. The only way to break the curse is to take to

the streets of Victorian Europe and kill the one that did it. But Jonathan isn't alone on his quest. Just like in the book, Mina's friend Lucy is bitten and transformed into a vampire that must be defeated – much to the chagrin of her three suitors. At least one of them, cowboy Quincey Morris, will be playable in parts of the game, while Dr. John Seward and (assumedly) Arthur Holmwood will assist in the quest somehow. Van Helsing hasn't been confirmed yet, but Renfield will be reimagined as a scientist that succumbs to vampirism over time rather than an insane asylum inmate.

Harker will use an upgraded version of The Collective's Slayer engine, which was coincidentally first implemented on their Buffy the Vampire Slayer game. The 2002 Xbox title gained a reputation for being a surprisingly good licensed title, and serves as an inspiration for the team this time around. "For Harker, we are building upon this foundation in a way that still provides a unique set of combat features and challenges, some of which weren't technically possible for us to offer players before, and makes the whole experience far more intense and scary," says Cook.

While Harker is being developed for PlayStation 3 and Xbox 360, The Collective isn't counting Nintendo out just yet. "We are also exploring the possibility of developing it on the Wii console, with the Wii controllers becoming the player's personal vampire killing tools," teases Cook. ■ ■ ■



■ Transylvania Vineyards had one off year

XBOX 360

Monster Madness: Battle for Suburbia

> **STYLE** 1 TO 4-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 16-PLAYER VIA XBOX LIVE) > **PUBLISHER** SOUTHPeAK INTERACTIVE
> **DEVELOPER** ARTIFICIAL STUDIOS/IMMERSION SOFTWARE & GRAPHICS > **RELEASE** SPRING 2007

STUPID FUN

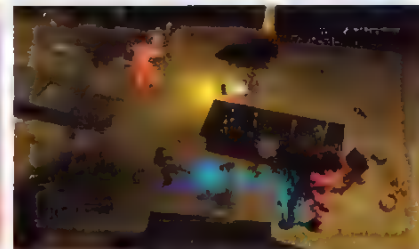
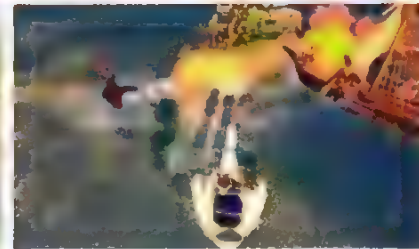
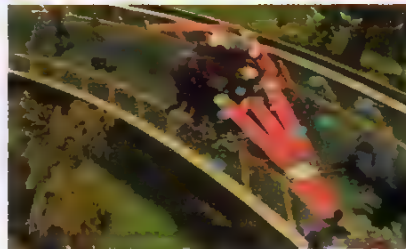
Zack likes Carrie and he is going to tell her during their study time, but their friends keep interrupting. Boring. Then zombies attack. Yay! Look, if you want silly game features like "plot development" look elsewhere. Monster Madness: Battle for Suburbia is all about absurdities, and it can be pretty funny when it tries. Come on – you fight an undead Indian chief in Zach's backyard in the first level!

Monster Madness harkens back to the arcade games of old when all that you and your buddies wanted to do was fight off lots and lots of enemies. To that end, up to three friends can jump in and play with you at any time. The game has an isometric, top-down perspective, and almost any object from the environment can be grabbed and used as a weapon. Each character has their own specialties and is better at using certain weapons, but you can also buy and create new weapons or items by collecting crystals and other

junk that the monsters drop. There are also vehicles that the characters can pilot such as hovercrafts, mechs, and UFOs.

If you don't like playing with your buddies, you can always play against them. Aside from the offline four-player deathmatch, if you connect to Xbox Live you can jump into 16-player deathmatch, capture the flag, or king of the hill games. The multiplayer is very fast and can get pretty frantic, but watch out for deathtraps.

The biggest problem we faced when playing the early version was the camera. Even in the single-player game, you can't move the camera around manually. The game has obviously been designed with multiplayer in mind, but it would be nice if the camera were tweaked a little more before the game launches sometime later this year. Still, any game that lets you use missile launchers, shotguns, and chainsaws to kill werewolves, mummies, vampires, and zombies can't be too bad. Right? ■ ■ ■



you disappoint me



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PLAYSTATION 3

Turok

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 16-PLAYER VIA XBOX LIVE OR PLAYSTATION NETWORK)
 > PUBLISHER BUENA VISTA GAMES > DEVELOPER PROPAGANDA GAMES > RELEASE FALL

HUNTER OR HUNTED?

It's been several years since we last had a visit from the famed dinosaur hunter, but that wait is nearing an end with the looming arrival of Propaganda's reinvention of Turok. A lot has happened with the title since we visited the development studio last year, so we pulled studio general manager Josh Holmes away from his game long enough this month to ask him a little bit about how the title is progressing.

"What we've really been focusing on is tuning and polishing the core experience, and making sure we're really paying off the combat and shooting experience with dinosaurs and humans -- being able to use the dinosaurs as weapons and all the luring that we had put out there as our big key features," Holmes tells us. This new, darker Turok plays as a first-person action title with strong ties to everything from survival/horror to stealth games. As Joseph Turok, you'll be in unfamiliar territory on an alien planet -- forced to juggle the assaulting armies of

a dangerous former comrade and the prehistoric threats that are native to the landscape. As a central aspect of gameplay, Propaganda is integrating a complex luring mechanic into the mix, whereby players can attract the life-threatening attentions of a dinosaur and send it headlong into a group of human foes. With the combination of these dangerous

creatures and an array of gritty futuristic weaponry, Turok is offered a chance to survive the otherwise impossible odds stacked against him.

While giant guns, explosions, and roaring T-Rexes certainly form a big part of the action, the team is also spending a lot of time trying to give players some options for those who prefer subtlety. Holmes explains that every level is being built with the idea of including small stealth pockets -- areas where players can best utilize their knife or bow and arrow combo to silently drop the enemy. "With the quiet kill system, we want to make sure you've got those strategic choices in gameplay," Holmes continues. "There's a lot of work that's gone into the stealth system on the AI side, making sure the AI has dynamic and intelligent responses to all the things you're doing in the world."

In addition to stealth actions, the game makers at Propaganda want to assure that when the bullets are gone and the fight is down to hand versus claw, the player still has options. "One of



The game will include a vehicle component, but it's still undecided how much Turok will actually be driving them himself





■ The bloodthirsty dinosaurs of Turok will maul you in up-close melee attacks that feel as much part of a zombie flick as a dinosaur flick

the things we're really trying to do is make it so that not only can the dinos initiate mauling and melee attacks with you, but that you're actually able to engage them in a similar fashion to finish them off." This newly announced approach seems to imply some up close and personal final kills, no doubt involving cool techniques like mounting dinosaurs to get near enough for a killing strike.

The multiplayer component also continues to progress, with the announcement that the game will include at the very least 16 player matches. Unlike a standard deathmatch, the online competitions in Turok will include a new element – that of the furious dinosaurs that will randomly move through multiplayer stages. Like in single-player, gamers will be able to draw those giant reptiles out to tear their opponents to pieces. "You get these fundamental choices – you might have an area that you can move through quickly on the ground, but it's infested with dinosaurs, but then you've got these raised ledges that are elevated from the ground and therefore safe from the dinosaurs, but of course they're exposing you to enemy fire," Holmes explains. It's innovative approaches to gameplay like this that may elevate Turok from the standard fare of shooters coming our way in the upcoming months. Of course, only time will tell if the dino hunter is ready for the big leagues once again. ■ ■ ■



■ Large explosions and sounds can be used to lure prehistoric beasts towards enemies, or away from you



■ Turok games have always been well known for their interesting weapons, and this one will be no exception

SPACE IS INFINITE.



ROGUE GALAXY™

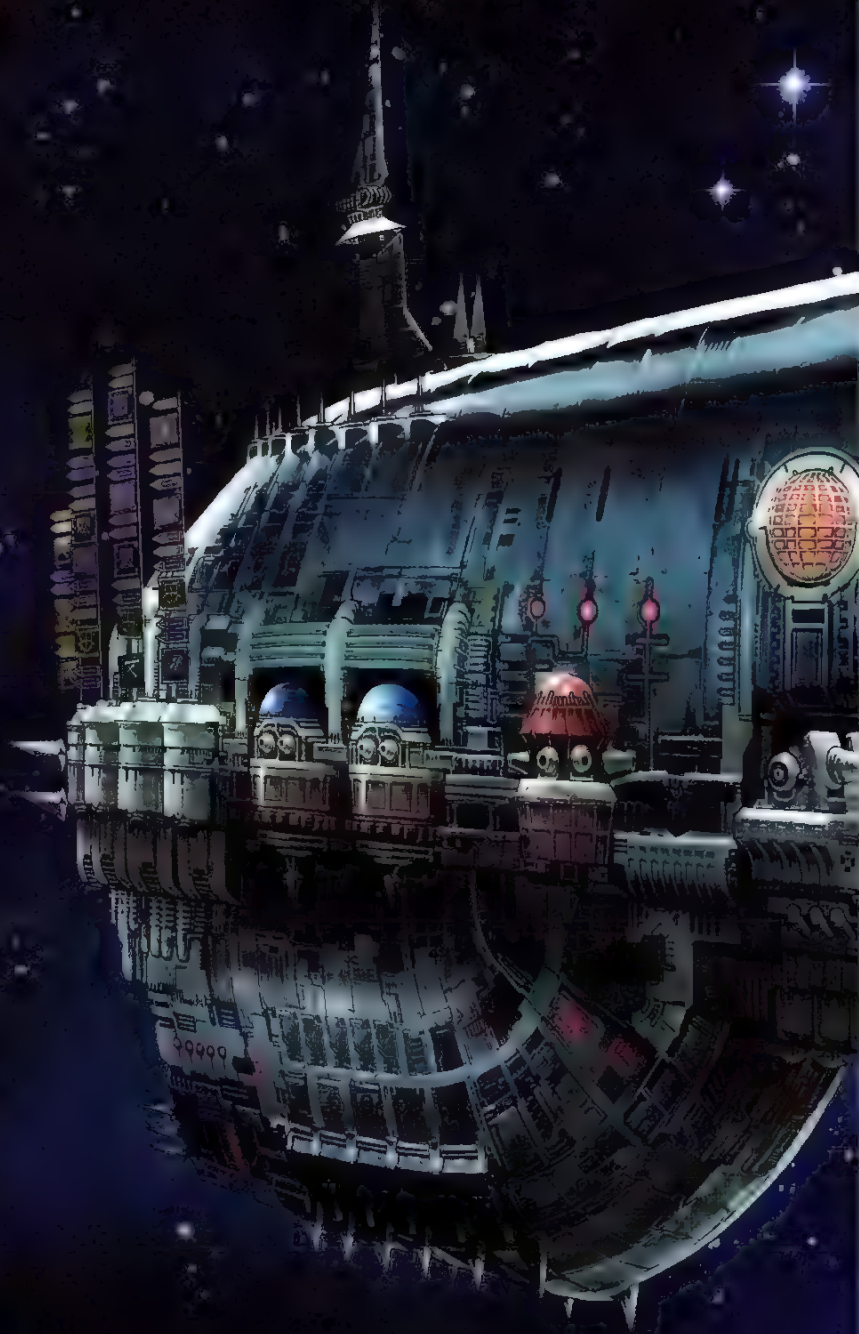
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GAME INFORMER



Blood
Crude Humor
Mild Language
Mild Suggestive Themes
Use of Alcohol and Tobacco
Violence

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SPACE IS INFINITE.







PlayStation 2



LIVE IN YOUR WORLD.
PLAY IN OURS.

THE TREASURES AREN'T.





XBOX 360

Rayman Raving Rabbids

Rayman's adventure on the Wii was our second favorite Wii launch title, and now Ubisoft's insane minigame compilation is heading to the 360. The Rabbids have invaded and, in gladiatorial style, Rayman must fight back and foil the plans of his rodent captors. The Wii version seemed to have been built specifically with Nintendo's controller in mind, so we're curious to know how Rayman will be slamming outhouse doors with plungers, hammer throwing cows, and squeezing carrot juice into the face of an oncoming army of Rabbids with the 360's more traditional control scheme. Guess we'll all find out when the game ships this March.



Wii

Legend of the Dragon

You're probably not familiar with this cartoon series yet, but you will be soon. Later this year, Legend of the Dragon will follow in the footsteps of franchises like Dragon Ball Z and Naruto by climbing into the cel-shaded fighting arena. Developed by Danish company The Game Factory, Legend of the Dragon will feature 19 playable characters from the children's TV show, many of which can transform into animals from the zodiac. How (or if) the game will utilize the Wii's motion-sensing abilities is still unknown, so younger gamers should stay on the lookout for more details in the coming months.



Wii

Cooking Mama: Cook Off

Cooking Mama made a stir on the DS with its unique gameplay mechanic and concept. The brand new Wii sequel turns up the heat by adding in two-player cook-offs and a whole new control style designed to utilize the Wii remote. To mash up potatoes, you'll hold the remote vertically and smash down; to fry something you'll hold the remote like the handle of the pan. The 250 ingredients can be used to make 55 different meals, which will alter in appearance as you cook them - leave something on the stove too long and it will burn. Majesco should have this strange addition to the Wii library on your table by the middle of the year.



Wii

Escape from Bug Island

If you didn't figure it out from the name, publisher Eidos is going for a campy, *Evil Dead* sort of vibe for this Wii title. Players will wield a variety of common implements like baseball bats and hatchets in a hack n' slash quest to get away from the bugs. Unfortunately, tank controls for movement (think original *Resident Evil*) and decidedly last-gen graphics make *Escape from Bug Island* less than a sure thing. The recent Japanese release wasn't very well-received, either, but Eidos is hoping that some minor fixes and improvements will save it from the bargain bin when it releases stateside this spring.



PSP

M.A.C.H.

While we're a little confused why this game needs to be an acronym (Modified Air Combat Heroes? What does that mean?), we're willing to give it the benefit of the doubt since it's going to deliver some arcade style jet racing and fighting on our PSP. Once the world's militaries adopt the unmanned jet approach to warfare in 2049, all those scarf-wearing pilots find themselves out of a job. In response, they form a league to blow each other up for sport. Good thinking, guys! There will be plenty of unlockable planes and upgrades. Players can also take on their friends in eight-person multiplayer matches. Vivendi should be bringing M.A.C.H. in for a landing in a matter of weeks.



PSP

Crazy Taxi: Fare Wars

Sega is resurrecting its beloved *Crazy Taxi* franchise on Sony's PSP in a game subtitled *Fare Wars*, set to be released in the third quarter of 2007. Essentially, it's an enhanced compilation of the first two games in the series, one of which (*Crazy Taxi 2*) was only released on the ill-fated Dreamcast. The single-player component of both games will remain largely the same, save for some new tunes and visual enhancements. Thankfully, new multiplayer features will allow you to play with or against friends via an ad-hoc connection, and even steal a rival's fare through a new passenger-stealing mechanic. Although an all-new title would have been preferable, these are two great games that will be a welcome addition to the PSP library.



NINTENDO DS

Cookie & Cream

When this From-developed game first appeared on the PlayStation 2, its dual-analog play was a breath of fresh air. And guess what? Now that Agatec is bringing it over to the Nintendo DS, it's strangely still is. *Cookie & Cream* has players controlling two characters at once. On one screen you'll move and platform your way through eight worlds and many stages, while the touch screen is used simultaneously to clear obstacles, solve puzzles, and defeat the bosses that get in your way. Just like the original, you can play with a friend on the same unit or via Wi-Fi/Wireless. Scheduled to hit shelves in the spring, *Cookie & Cream* will also include nine minigames. There's no "cookie" in teamwork, but there should be, because they're tasty.



NINTENDO DS

Cake Mania

We see a lot of interesting press releases from game companies in this line of work, but this is the first time anybody has promised us "over 80 fast-paced levels of baking." We're not sure what that means, but Majesco's *Cake Mania* promises to show us when it comes out sometime in the next couple of months. As newly graduated chef, Jill, you must revive your grandparents' failed bakery by catering to ever more complicated cake orders from demanding customers. You'll actually decorate the confections yourself with the stylus and purchase upgrades like frosting machines. Have we ever told you how much we like frosting? No? Oh, man. Where to begin?





REVIEWS

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XBOX 360



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Crackdown



NBA Street Homecourt

Never, ever forget where you came from. The career mode in EA's latest NBA Street masterpiece, Homecourt, wistfully looks back at the local courts that NBA stars came from. Of course, serving up vicious jams in the face of said heroes is also important in this first next-gen treatment in the over-the-top basketball franchise. B-ball players may not know how to brawl or throw a punch, but this game will show you that smooth ankle-breaking moves, refined Gamebreakers, and nasty dunks will always be a sight to see.



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

THE SCORING SYSTEM

- 10** Outstanding. A truly elite title that is nearly perfect in every way. This score is given out rarely and indicates a game that cannot be missed.
- 9** Superb. Just shy of gaming nirvana, this score is a high recommendation because the game reviewed is head-and-shoulders above its competition.
- 8** Very Good. Innovative, but perhaps not the right choice for everyone. This score indicates that there are many good things to be had, but arguably so.
- 7** Average. The game's features may work, but are nothing that even casual players haven't seen before. A decent game from beginning to end.
- 6** Limited Appeal. Although there may be fans of games receiving this score, many will be left yearning for a more rewarding game experience.
- 5** Passable. It may be obvious that the game has lots of potential, but its most engaging features could be undeniably flawed or not integrated into the experience.
- 4** Bad. While some things may work as planned, the majority of this title either malfunctions to varying degrees or it is so dull that the game falls short as a whole.
- 3** Painful. If there is anything that's redeeming in a game of this caliber, it's buried beneath agonizing gameplay and uneven execution in its features or theme.
- 2** Broken. Basically unplayable. This game is so insufficient in execution that any value would be derved in extremely small quantities, if at all.
- 1** Figgin' D'arn and the Modal Nodes. Sucks even worse than Matchbox 20.

- > 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.



Maelstrom



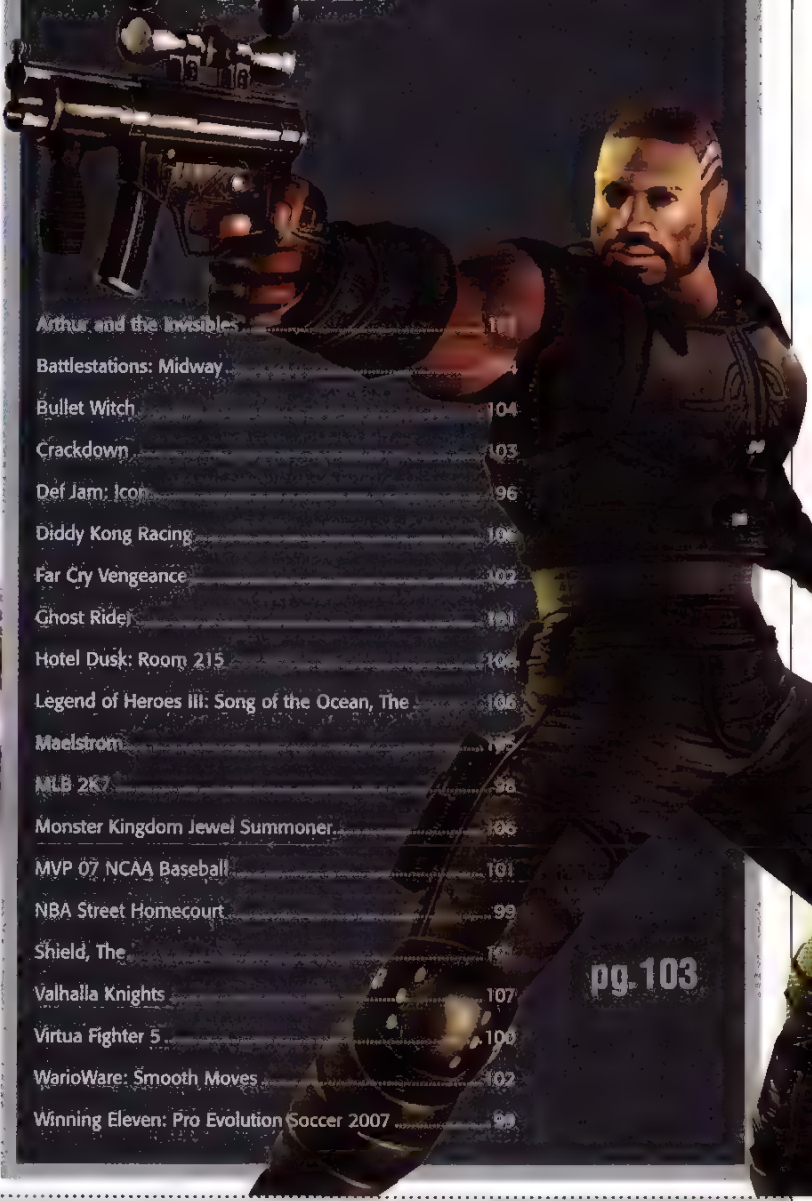
Diddy Kong Racing



NO BURNING CRUSADE?

In order to have a chance at fully experiencing the game's content, we elected to hold our World of Warcraft: The Burning Crusade review until next month. Also, the lack of worthy contenders for PC and Handheld Game of the Month led us to not give out those awards this month.

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the edge

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

C CONTENT RATED BY ESRB CONTENT SUITABLE FOR PERSONS AGES 3 AND OLDER	M MATURE CONTENT SUITABLE FOR PERSONS 17 AGES AND OLDER
E EVERYONE CONTENT SUITABLE FOR PERSONS AGES 6 AND OLDER	A ADULTS ONLY CONTENT SUITABLE ONLY FOR ADULTS
E ESRIB CONTENT SUITABLE FOR PERSONS AGES 10 AND OLDER	RP RATING PENDING PRODUCT IS AWAITING FINAL RATING
T TEEN CONTENT SUITABLE FOR PERSONS AGES 13 AND OLDER	

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

- 1080i** – A resolution specification used for HDTV. 1080i stands for resolution of 1920x1080 pixels. The “i” means that the video is being interlaced.
- 480p** – Progressive scanning, this option (“p”= progressive), creates a picture signal with double the scan lines of a conventional interlaced picture, 480i (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.
- blloom** – An effect that simulates the soft, blurred glow of bright light reflecting off of surfaces.
- board** – A term we use for games like Jeopardy! and Mano Party.
- cel shading** – A technique used to create 3D rendered objects that resemble hand-drawn animation cels.
- Chad/Brad/Evan** – Terms we use for Ben when we are too lazy to remember his real name...or just to be jerks.
- E3** – Electronic Entertainment Expo. The world's largest convention for video games.
- fighting** – A term we use for games like Mortal Kombat and Dead or Alive.
- first-party** – A game made by a console manufacturer's internal development teams exclusively for its own system.
- FMV** – Full Motion Video. Usually refers to an animated CG cutscene.
- FPS** – Frames Per Second. How many animation frames happen in one second. Also used to denote First-Person Shooters like Halo, Doom, and Call of Duty.
- framerate** – The frames of animation used to create the illusion of movement.
- frontend** – A game's menus and options.
- GBA** – Game Boy Advance.
- GC** – GameCUBE.
- HDTV** – High Definition Television.
- infrastructure** – A type of wireless connection that uses the Internet to connect with other players over long distances.
- isometric** – Three-quarters top down view, like StarCraft or Baldur's Gate: Dark Alliance.
- ISP** – Internet Service Provider. The company that provides you with access to the Internet.
- jaggies** – Graphical lines that are jagged when they should be straight.
- LAN** – Local Area Network. Connecting computers or consoles together within a small space to allow communication between them. Provides fast, simultaneous gameplay.
- MMO** – Massively Multiplayer Online. Usually applied to role playing titles, we use this term for games with persistent, multi-user online worlds like EverQuest and World of Warcraft.
- motion blur** – Phantom frames follow an object to give the impression of realistic speed.
- normal mapping** – A graphical technique in which a hi-res skin containing 3D information, revealed by light reflecting off the surface, is wrapped around a low-res model.
- NPC** – Non-Player Character. Those people and creatures you see wandering around in games that are not being controlled by actual humans.
- particle effects** – Things like smoke or sparks created in real-time.
- platform** – A term we use for games like Super Mario and Crash Bandicoot.
- pop-up** – When objects onscreen suddenly appear, typically due to poor draw distance.
- PS2** – Sony PlayStation 2.
- puzzle** – A term we use for games like Tetris and Puyo Puyo.
- racing** – A term we use for games like Gran Turismo and Mario Kart.
- RPG** – Role-Playing Game. A game that involves character-improvement through collecting and spending points. A term we use for games like Final Fantasy and Xenosaga.
- shooter** – A term we use for games like Ikaruga and Gradius.
- sports** – A term we use for games like Madden NFL.
- strategy** – A term we use for games like Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers.
- third-party** – Something made for a console by a company other than the console manufacturer.



The environments are very detailed



Not all of the combat mechanics work as well as they should

BOTTOM LINE **-7.75**

> **Concept:** A reinvention of the popular hip-hop brawler, with a totally new approach to the career mode, music, and gameplay

> **Graphics:** Simply unbelievable. The detailed backgrounds and explosive effects dazzle the eye

> **Sound:** It's certified live street bangers all around. Even better, the music actually figures into the gameplay

> **Playability:** Icon tries to incorporate analog control elements of Fight Night into the brawler, with mixed results

> **Entertainment:** Amazing presentation and flawed gameplay make for a title that shows much promise

> **Replay Value:** Moderately High

PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360

Def Jam: Icon

> **STYLE** 1 OR 2-PLAYER FIGHTING (2-PLAYER VIA PLAYSTATION NETWORK OR XBOX LIVE) > **PUBLISHER** ELECTRONIC ARTS
> **DEVELOPER** EA CHICAGO > **RELEASE** MARCH 6 > **ESRB** M

OH YOU MAD 'CAUSE I'M STYLIN' ON YOU

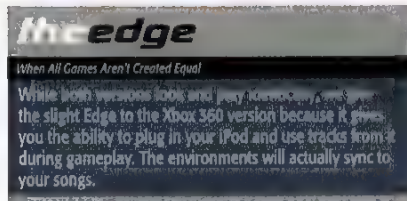
I'll say this about Def Jam Icon: it's definitely a game of rap's present. While the first titles in the series gave some dap to old school legends like Slick Rick, Flavor Flav, and Ice-T, Icon steps to the plate with a roster of current heroes like Young Jeezy, Mike Jones, and Dipset capo Jim Jones. The game's new, revamped career mode also reflects the fundamental truth about hip-hop in 2007: this is a business, and you've got to balance street credibility and good music while managing your assets in an intelligent manner. Throw your hands in the air and wave 'em like you just don't care? Sorry, dude, I'm too busy setting royalty rates and marketing budgets.

Icon puts you in the shoes of a young, up-and-coming record company executive trying to make a name for yourself in the industry. In past games, Def Jam's career mode felt more like window dressing than a real experience, and EA Chicago has gone a long way to adding depth to the "Build a Label" mode. With your home computer and mobile device, you'll have to balance relationships between artists, lawyers, finicky females, and even a few shady politicians as you look to mine platinum and gold on the sales charts. As you advance,

you'll get updates on your progress through actual BET News updates, and see your label's bottom line finances on your computer. It's quite addictive, although the larger cutscenes and story seem to advance the same no matter what decisions you make.

The improved career mode goes hand-in-hand with the game's amazing presentation. The graphics—especially in the detailed environments—are some of the best I've seen in a fighting game to date. The levels also feature a high degree of interactivity, allowing you to trash the arena until it's a flaming pile of rubble. The great soundtrack is also incorporated into gameplay by allowing you to "mix" the soundtrack in real-time, scratching the track until you cause explosions and other pre-scripted events. Learning to use the environment to your advantage is key, as you can easily turn the tide of a match by throwing your opponent into an explosive point, then using your "air DJ" skills to send him flying through the air. I appreciate the fact that EA Chicago tried to do something unique with the music, as it's such a large draw of this franchise.

Unfortunately, the least accomplished part of the Icon is the most important: the gameplay itself. The



developers attempted to incorporate Fight Night-style analog moves into the usual button mashing, to mixed results. While normal attacks are done with the face buttons, grapples, special moves, blocks, and music mixing are all done with the analogs, resulting in a control scheme that sometimes feels muddled and confusing. While it's awesome when you throw your opponent into a wall of speakers, to explode the PA, too often the control feels sluggish and unresponsive—especially the evades, which work approximately half the time. As the difficulty increases, these frustrations mount considerably, making me wonder if there were too many functions assigned to the analog sticks.

In addition, after awhile the recycled environments and repetitive battles start to feel like a chore rather than a reward. While I applaud the risks that were taken with this game, and can see the great potential in this new direction, Def Jam still needs a great deal of polish before it can be one of the premier fighters on the next-gen consoles. Icon will definitely provide you with some exhilarating moments, but there's a lot of unrealized promise here that will hopefully be fulfilled in the next game.—**MATT**

Second Opinion 7.75

Def Jam: Icon could just as easily be titled Suge Knight Simulator 2007. Players sign and promote artists during the day and beat down suckas at night. Character models look exactly like the real life rappers they're based on, and their movements are incredibly lifelike (albeit exaggerated). Stages and the hazards contained therein show off a unique look as they bounce around to the beat, and are fun to destroy throughout the course of the fight. I also found it surprisingly satisfying to perform some mid-fight DJ scratching to switch the song over to my custom track. Despite how fun this fighting system is to explore at first, it eventually becomes "the thing you do to see what happens next in the story." EA's attempt to inject Fight Night into Def Jam doesn't really work in the end. The analog control scheme is slow and unresponsive against more challenging foes, and you really can't get away with not using the HUD. I really liked the unique record label management mechanic, but all of that cash rolling in made it way too easy to buy even the most pimpin' bling.—**BRYAN**



This is the rare fighting game that has a strong story element



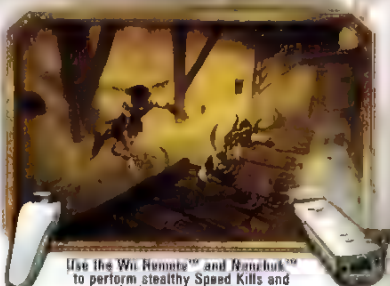
Using the level hazards to your advantage is key to success

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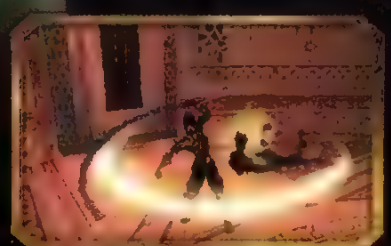
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PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360

Major League Baseball 2K7

> **STYLE** 1 OR 2-PLAYER SPORTS (2-PLAYER VIA XBOX LIVE OR PLAYSTATION NETWORK) > **PUBLISHER** 2K SPORTS
> **DEVELOPER** KUSH GAMES > **RELEASE** MARCH 5 > **ESRB** E

LIFE OF THE GAME

With the winds of change sweeping across the entire league, the upcoming season is shaping up to be one of the most exciting ever. The identities of most of the teams have changed, and thanks to the powerful scent of money, everyone is a likely contender. The San Francisco Giants paid a king's ransom to add Barry Zito to their rotation. The Chicago Cubs are hoping that Alfonso Soriano can earn the team a new nickname other than "Doomat of the National League." The Boston Red Sox forked out an unprecedented \$51.1 million for the exclusive negotiating rights with Seibu Lions star Daisuke Matsuzaka. We even saw the lowly Kansas City Royals open its pocketbook to overpriced free agents.

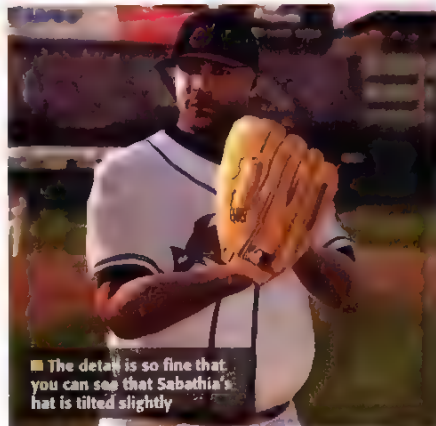
The new face of the league can also be seen in MLB 2K7, thanks to drastically improved graphics. I've always been of the mind that visuals don't really make a game, but in this case they really do. A baseball game has never looked this good, and



you really do gain something by seeing such a high level of visual authenticity. In last year's game, Ichiro appeared to be Caucasian. In this year's game, you'd swear that you were seeing him through a live HD video stream. Developer Kush Games has captured the exact likeness of almost every key player that either steps up to the plate or takes to the mound.

Having a player look exactly right is only the start; most of their motions have been captured as well. When Nomar Garciaparra steps out of the box, he goes through his routine of adjusting both batting gloves. You can't help but feel intimidated by Dontrelle Willis' wild wind up and delivery. You'll also see signature home run celebrations, waggles, and mannerisms. Zoom cams cut in to show the remarkable details on the faces, and replays constantly show off the amazing animations.

The gameplay is built on the same engine as last year. Rather than going back to the drawing board to rework the pitching or batting mechanics, Kush has simply smoothed out the rough edges. This has led to a better playing, yet largely familiar game. Fielders no longer move like drunken bums, the batting motion is less choppy, and the pitch velocity now has some heat behind it. It plays quite well, but it's still a ways away from perfect. Tracking down fly balls feels just right, but I still can't seem to wrap my glove around ground balls. The transition between the pitching view and fielding still leads to disorientation and a pause that would help you get to hard hit grounders. You mostly have to rely on positioning and CPU assistance to get to a screamer. There

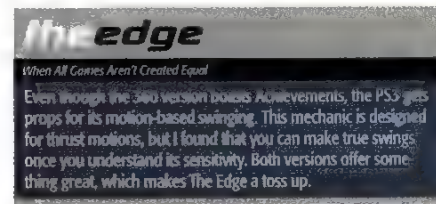


really is nothing to timing hops, either.

On another note, even if you are throwing a gem of a game, your pitcher tires far too quickly. Breaking balls quit falling off of tables mid-game, and you usually are forced to turn to the bullpen — even in low pitch shutouts — around the seventh or eighth inning.

The front end of the game would appear to be excavated from an archeological dig. The Crib is the same from years past, and Franchise mode offers little new other than ticket prices. Online is largely unchanged as well, but this game still boasts one of the best online leagues out there.

MLB 2K7 is certainly a better game, but most of the new content is of the visual variety. I can't stress enough how impressive this aspect of the game is. It captures the look, sound, and feel of the game better than anything that you've seen before. —REINER



BOTTOM LINE **8.5**

> **Concept:** Realism is everything. This year's game hones in on this aspect and hammers it over the fence

> **Graphics:** So lifelike that people will think you are watching a real game. The wind on the jerseys, player details, and animations are some of the best in the biz

> **Sound:** You'll hear fans making comments about players, and the ambient noise is great. Joe Morgan has nothing of interest to say, however

> **Playability:** The same respectable play as last year, with slight changes to batting and fielding

> **Entertainment:** It's a little sloppy in key areas, but it's still an immensely enjoyable play

> **Replay Value:** High

Second Opinion **8.5**

Luckily for baseball fans, 2K Sports has made good use of its third-party exclusivity with Major League Baseball. The developer has taken its solid core of baseball simulation and layered a genuinely next-gen presentation on top for the 2K7 edition. In most cases, player models are impressively close to the athletes' real-life appearances, putting the visuals on par with the best sports games to date. This is the title we've been waiting for to satisfy our digital baseball needs for the current crop of machines. It's not without some flaws — Jon Miller and Joe Morgan are somehow even more painful to listen to than in the real world, mediocre pitchers like Gil Meche are entirely too able to paint the corners, and starters tire far too quickly. However, the franchise is definitely headed in the right direction. —ADAM

PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360

NBA Street Homecourt

> **STYLE** 1 TO 4-PLAYER ACTION/SPORTS (2-PLAYER VIA XBOX LIVE OR PLAYSTATION NETWORK) > **PUBLISHER** EA BIG
> **DEVELOPER** EA CANADA > **RELEASE** FEBRUARY 19 (XBOX 360), MARCH 6 (PS3) > **ESRB** E



BOTTOM LINE 8.75

- > **Concept:** The first next-gen appearance of one of the best non-traditional sports series ever
- > **Graphics:** I'd give the nod to the 360 in terms of visuals, but either way this game features great texturing, character models, and jaw-droppingly smooth animations
- > **Sound:** A great soundtrack featuring some under-the-radar, old-school R&B influenced hip-hop
- > **Playability:** The new dribbling mechanics are superb and the entire gameplay package is tuned to perfection
- > **Entertainment:** With a better career mode, new gameplay depth, and a stellar roster of stars, this street baller outshines its more serious counterparts
- > **Replay Value:** High

Second Opinion 8

EA's Live franchise has been so down in the dumps recently, I'm not joking when I say that this is the best basketball game in the publisher's lineup. And who could argue with that when Homecourt is a fun, fluid, and fast-paced b-ball game that makes you chuckle with its alley oop Honey Jar dunks? One thing that makes this possible is the balancing of the Gamebreakers, which are neither backbreakers nor sure things like in NFL Street. The one hang-up I have is that when I wanted to dunk, numerous times my guys did lay-ups instead. Having separate buttons for shooting and dunks could be an easy fix for this. I personally would have liked more Tiger Woods-like create-a-character customization, but this title delivers for those looking for a good street basketball game. Think of it this way. After getting stung by Live, playing Homecourt is like getting your hands on NBA's old leather ball. —KATO

GIMME THE ROCK!

EA has taken some criticism recently for the declining quality of its sports franchises. However, when the company devotes itself to getting something right, like it has with the Fight Night franchise, it can still deliver some very impressive work. The truth in this statement is evident in NBA Street Homecourt, a dramatic reinvention of the company's popular street ball series.

While the basic control will be familiar to fans, the formula has been overhauled into something more intuitive and complex. Ball handling tricks are now timing sensitive. This allows you to speed up your dribble for a killer crossover, or do a slick hesitation move. You can also string together combos that lead to some ankle-snapping breaks to the basket. Dunking has also been reinvigorated; you can quickly snap the ball off to a teammate, then jump to the basket for a sweet alley oop opportunity. Alternately, you can launch off a teammate's shoulders for impressive jump-off dunks. By letting go of the button at the last possible second, you'll perform an amazing "double dunk", which scores two baskets in succession. Of course, hold it down

too long and you'll get nothing but rim and give up possession.

This sort of risk/reward dynamic has been carried over to the Gamebreakers, which can now turn the tide for either squad. Basically, whoever initiates the sequence docks the opposing team one point. Then, by pulling off tricks, you can build up your meter for a three-point score. However, if they steal the ball, they'll not only win back the point they lost, but score themselves.

This gameplay package is wrapped around a stellar career mode that lets your created player recruit real pros to your team as you travel to a number of real-world courts, many of which are from the hometowns of actual pros. There's a number of different contests, like tournaments, shots-only, and dunks-only games.

While all these features give Homecourt the depth it needs, the real revelation here is something that's hard to describe in words: it just feels right. Although it's certainly challenging, after a few hours of practice you'll be putting LeBron to shame. For a pasty shut-in like myself, that's a fantasy every bit as powerful as anything in Oblivion or Zelda. —MATT



XBOX 360 | PLAYSTATION 2

Winning Eleven: Pro Evolution Soccer 2007

> **STYLE** 1 TO 4-PLAYER SPORTS (360), 1 TO 8-PLAYER (PS2) (UP TO 8-PLAYER VIA PS2 ONLINE OR 2-PLAYER VIA XBOX LIVE) > **PUBLISHER** KONAMI > **DEVELOPER** KONAMI > **RELEASE** FEBRUARY 6 > **ESRB** E

WHAT EVOLUTION?

For this first next-gen installment in the famed soccer series, Konami has taken a page from developer Visual Concepts' book — keep last generation's engine in place and don't make any sudden moves. Xbox 360 owners can be happy that what they are getting is no watered-down version of Winning Eleven, but they are also stuck with a franchise that has changed little in recent years.

One welcome difference in this year from last is that refs call far fewer fouls for contact, instead letting players play through a little bump and run. This is a small change, but a very welcome one, since there are less stoppages in play. A quick start after fouls has also been added to keep things flowing. Beyond that, I found little new, with the Master League career simulator still as deep and dry as ever.

As solid as the 360 edition is, as a longtime player I still prefer the PS2 version. Even on a rain-soaked pitch, it feels faster, and the d-pad controls feel tighter. Of course, if you're new to the franchise or only an occasional player, I don't think you'll have too many complaints while playing on the 360. It even feels comfortable when playing with the analog stick, which is a nod to Konami's work on player animations and physics. Unfortunately, the feature sets between the versions aren't the same. The 360 version does not have all the training options of the PS2 one, which is too bad considering that some might be getting their first taste of the franchise on their 360.

I'm usually not much of a graphics snob, but I think it's an area that Konami needs to invest in (not that the 360 version looks bad). With the soccer itself generating few complaints from me, it's these sort of amenities that the company is going to have to shore up. Because when EA and its FIFA series gets its act together, there will be little room for Winning Eleven unless it learns to wow people from year to year. —KATO



BOTTOM LINE 8

> **Concept:** With soccer balls still being round, there is little here that's different

> **Graphics:** There's not a lot that separates either version graphically

> **Sound:** This must be where British commentators go when they get too "uppity" to commentate golf

> **Playability:** The reduction of fouls, thankfully, means that there are fewer stoppages

> **Entertainment:** Still fundamentally sound, but in dire need of some new ideas

> **Replay Value:** Moderately High

Second Opinion 8

Winning Eleven has rarely looked as good as FIFA, with the possible exception of some excellent animation. Konami's graduation to the next generation maintains that status quo. It also maintains its dominance on the field with better gameplay and more realistic-feeling soccer than its competitor. Beyond comparisons to other soccer efforts, this installment offers more of the same as last year in many regards, so this may be a purchase more for those who want a 360 version of their favorite soccer game than those perennial PS2 players, who may as well stick with last year's effort. In addition, I'm pretty sure it's time for Konami to graduate to some decent licensed music — generic thumpin' beats just don't cut it anymore. —MILLER



BOTTOM LINE 8

> **Concept:** Improve on the greatest 3D fighting game ever made (at least in this reviewer's humble opinion)

> **Graphics:** The character faces look funny at times, but without a doubt the graphics are outstanding

> **Sound:** It's that perfect mix of bad rock anthems that I so enjoy from my fighting games

> **Playability:** It's about as arcade perfect as you can get. Even better if you use a nice joystick to complete the experience

> **Entertainment:** For fans of Virtua Fighter, this sequel delivers, but the lack of online play hurts its long term value

> **Replay Value:** Moderate

Second Opinion **11.5**

The first next-gen installment of the Virtua Fighter franchise has a lot to live up to, and it both does and doesn't meet all the expectations laid on this storied series. The good news is that VF 5 is as tight, polished, and balanced of a release as even the most rabid of fans could ask for. Combat is smooth and fast, and the single-player Quest mode (though admittedly very similar to that of VF 4) is the best single-player experience in the genre. If an iteration on the classic style of fighting games is all you ask, Virtua Fighter 5 will take good care of you. On the other hand, the lack of online play is a sad omission for a PlayStation 3 title, and the basic gameplay formula hasn't changed a bit. Even so, I wouldn't hesitate to recommend to any fighter fan or PS3 owner - it's not often that you see core mechanics as well-implemented as they are here, and that itself makes for a very entertaining game. —ADAM

PLAYSTATION 3

Virtua Fighter 5

> STYLE 1 OR 2-PLAYER FIGHTING > PUBLISHER SEGA > DEVELOPER AM2 > RELEASE FEBRUARY 20 > ESRB T

FAN SERVICE WITHOUT ONLINE SERVICE

It has always been my opinion that the Virtua Fighter series is the most intense and balanced of all the 3D fighters on the market. Its control scheme is intuitive, its pacing perfect, and its depth unmatched. This entry even introduces two new characters in El Blaze and Eileen, who are fine additions to the always growing character list.

That said, I am extremely disappointed with this by-the-numbers port of the fantastic arcade game. It's on PlayStation 3, so having great looking graphics isn't so much of a feat as an expectation.

Outside of delivering on what is expected, VF 5 doesn't do much. While I would be upset if this game didn't have Vs or the Quest mode, the

inclusion of these modes doesn't really put this game over Virtua Fighter 4 Evolution in terms of options.

Even worse, this game doesn't offer an online component. Now generally, I am not one to take a title to the woodshed simply because it lacks the ability to go online, but in the world of fighting games this is absolutely necessary, especially on Sony's new hardware. Now whether Sega or Sony is to blame for the lack of an online component is unknown, but when a game offers a very basic single-player experience like VF 5 does, the online portion is required to let people play this game the way it is intended - against a human opponent either on your couch or online.

Complaints aside, Virtua Fighter 5 is an



This look really needs to catch on with the kids

outstanding fighting game. Customizing your characters is fun, playing against your friends is a blast, and the Quest mode will most certainly pass a lot of hours if you enjoy the Virtua Fighter franchise. While I would love to give this a higher score, its lack of online play and dearth of innovation hurts its entertainment value. Fans will enjoy it, but there isn't much else here. —ANDY



The graphics are simply stunning



The character customization options are surprisingly deep



PLAYSTATION 2

MVP 07 NCAA Baseball

> **STYLE** 1 OR 2-PLAYER SPORTS (2-PLAYER VIA PLAYSTATION 2 ONLINE)
> **PUBLISHER** EA SPORTS > **DEVELOPER** EA CANADA
> **RELEASE** FEBRUARY 6 > **ESRB** E

AS EXCITING AS AN EXAM

After setting the stage last year with a game that turned many non-believers into college baseball fans, Electronic Arts really did nothing to entice players to come back for a second season. There just isn't any depth or liveliness to the experience. It's much like living in Iowa.

The tiny morsels that have been implemented do lead to a better game as a whole, but it's not too far from what was offered last season. The new Rock and Fire pitching mechanic is a nice addition. To hurl a ball toward the plate you must now pull the right analog stick back and then slinging it forward to release the ball. It has a nice feel to it, and demands great concentration from the player. This new system does a better job of mimicking the skill required to paint the corners, and also allows players to guard against stealing by shortening their delivery.

Outside of this, the reminder of the new content is sprinkled to the side. There are more school teams and conferences, some authentic stadiums (but still not enough), and customizable content such as jerseys, teams, and stadiums. The customizable content isn't particularly deep, but I do like how EA implemented all of the Major League fence dimensions into the stadium creation.

The majority of the game remains largely unchanged. It's a solid game, but unlike EA's successful college football game, it doesn't deliver content that draws you into the experience. It's great for multiplayer games, but the barebones season does little to keep players glued. —REINER

BOTTOM LINE 7

> **Concept:** EA's sophomore release shows slight improvements on the field, but the franchise options haven't grown in any way

> **Graphics:** The new stadiums definitely help in giving the visuals some variety. While showcasing fluid animations, the bland texturing is painful on the eyes. The crowds are also eyesores

> **Sound:** Mike Patrick and Kyle Peterson are back and once again quite entertaining. The front-end fight music is festive, but wears on you after a few minutes

> **Playability:** Batting and pitching are handled exceptionally well. Fielding is still a bit rough

> **Entertainment:** Great for online or versus matches, but the fantasy content needs legs

> **Replay Value:** Moderately Low

Second Opinion 7

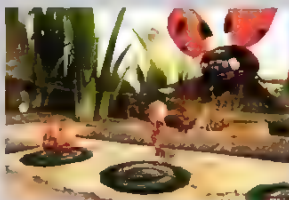
When EA canned the Triple Play franchise and launched MVP, it was a high point for baseball simulation. Analog control and the depth that gamers associate with an EA Sports title took the genre to the next level. Unfortunately, this year's game does nothing at all to improve over previous entries. The Rock and Fire analog pitching is no better or more natural than the golf-swing hurling of the past, and throwing to the bases with the new right stick-based control is decidedly worse. With a Dynasty mode that's no more than a bland series of menus and with none of the personality of actual college baseball, MVP is merely coasting along for 2007. —ADAM

PS2 QUICKIES

PS2

Arthur And The Invisibles

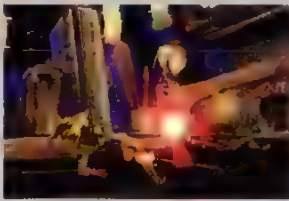
> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION > **PUBLISHER** ATARI
> **DEVELOPER** TRANGES LIBELLULES
> **RELEASE** JANUARY 9 > **ESRB** E10+



BOTTOM LINE 6.75

I was pleasantly surprised with Arthur and the Invisibles. It steals acrobatic fighting and

platforming elements from Price of Persia and contextual button pressing finishers from God of War. Players will also notice decent production values and a good bit of gameplay variety — but Arthur's got a few problems to deal with. Copious amounts of mundane block pushing, light beam aiming, and slashing through weeds really kill the pacing of the game to the point that it feels artificially inflated. And the constant barrage of high-pitched voice work couldn't be more annoying. —BRYAN



PS2

The Shield

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION > **PUBLISHER** ASPYR
> **DEVELOPER** POINT OF VIEW
> **RELEASE** JANUARY 16 > **ESRB** M



BOTTOM LINE 4

I find it easy to list off my problems with The Shield. The story — while it might have made

a decent TV drama — is poorly paced and too action-deprived for a game. During the shooting sections, Vic's head obscures a third of the screen, making this tiresome element even more irksome. Undeared mission objectives leave little leeway for error. Worst of all, the game is glitchy; I phased through a few walls and got gunned down after getting stuck behind some invisible cover. There is even live-action "pom" playing on TVs throughout the game. Wait, actually maybe that last one wasn't so bad. Sadly, even a couple pilated g-strings can't save this bad TV cash-in. —BEN

PLAYSTATION 2

Ghost Rider

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION > **PUBLISHER** 2K GAMES > **DEVELOPER** CLIMAX > **RELEASE** FEBRUARY 13
> **ESRB** T



Some of Ghost Rider's attacks seem directly lifted from Kratos

DUDE OF WAR

BOTTOM LINE 6.75

I cannot stress enough how nakedly Ghost Rider rips off God of War. The controls are exactly the same (with the exception of the slightly different special moves). The upgrade system is nearly identical. The combat feels incredibly similar, except that it's somewhat laggy and less responsive. None of the exceedingly minor variances from the God of War formula make an appreciable difference. Only the Hellbike levels differ in any meaningful way, and those are leagues worse than the shockingly derivative main game anyway.

Ghost Rider's vastly lower stable of enemy types and environments, along with the overall dunkiness and lack of execution present in the combat, make a surprisingly large difference in the game's entertainment value. Slashing my way through hundreds of identical enemies using brawler mechanics that I've seen done better just didn't grab me. Still, I did wreck a whole lot of dudes with some over-the-top attacks, and that's worth something.

Ancillary elements like the terrible bike levels and comic book-styled cutscenes don't factor much into Ghost Rider's entertainment value. It's a decent brawler that doesn't do anything new or interesting, and it stars a skeleton on fire. I'll gladly take it over yet another collect-a-thon platformer. —ADAM

> **Concept:** Like God of War, but with a flaming skeleton on a motorcycle

> **Graphics:** Like God of War, but uglier and less varied

> **Sound:** Like God of War, but with a mere few repetitive background songs

> **Playability:** Like God of War, but less responsive

> **Entertainment:** Unlike God of War, this is totally derivative and dunky in spots, but manages to be passable nonetheless

> **Replay Value:** Low

Second Opinion 5.5

It looks like Spawn finally has someone to keep him company in video game hell. Ghost Rider is about as uninspired as a game can get. Think of it as the Flaming Turd edition of God of War. It plays almost identically, only minus the thrills and any form of compelling content. In all fairness, this game does function quite well. The lightning-quick chain combos are also quite pleasing to the eye. The game just doesn't have a soul. The lifeless level designs, repetitive enemy waves, and miserable motorcycle driving add up to create an experience that is about as much fun as setting your own head on fire. —REINER



Prepare for all-out Hellbike boredom

Wii

WarioWare: Smooth Moves

> **STYLE** 1 TO 12-PLAYER ACTION > **PUBLISHER** NINTENDO > **DEVELOPER** INTELLIGENT SYSTEMS
> **RELEASE** JANUARY 16 > **ESRB** E10+



PLACE TIRED PHALLUS RELATED JOKE HERE

Was the Wii created for WarioWare, or the other way around? The world may never know, but it doesn't take more than a couple minutes to realize how perfect the fit is. The endless waving of the Wii remote that accompanies every part of Smooth Moves makes you feel excited, surprised, and more than a little stupid. It also happens to make you and your friends laugh pretty much non-stop for an hour or two, and that may very well be worth the price of admission.

Let me get my gripes out of the way so I don't have to end on a bad note. This game's short — I mean really short. To "beat" it, we're talking about a couple hours tops. In addition, the little character plotlines take that step beyond ridiculous to be flat out inane. Neither of these complaints, however, should stop you from playing this game.

Like its earlier cousins, this latest WarioWare game tasks

players with a constant string of tiny games, often as simple as one button press or swing of the remote. It's their rapid-fire switch-up that makes the game enjoyable. This time, the Wii allows for a new dynamic — different ways of holding the remote called forms that players switch between for each microgame. Each of these forms is introduced with an amusing *Deep Thoughts* by Jack Handy-style anecdote, and offers even more variety to a game that is already all about the change-up.

While it's fun to trade off turns with a friend, Nintendo has also been kind enough to include some fun multiplayer options. Like *Wii Sports*, you get to use your Mii in the game as well. Most importantly, Smooth Moves offers perhaps the only opportunity you might have to see your dad/girlfriend/uppity roommate act like they have an elephant trunk and do gyrating hula-hoop routines. You have fun with that.—**MILLER**

BOTTOM LINE 7.75

> **Concept:** Make yourself look like an idiot — there's more, but that's the general gist

> **Graphics:** Simple animations and blocky characters serve their purpose, but don't impress

> **Sound:** Frantic music is as constant and non-stop as the microgames themselves

> **Playability:** It's a testament to good design that almost every microgame is so intuitive

> **Entertainment:** Incredibly funny and exciting — for about an hour

> **Replay Value:** Moderately High

Second Opinion 7.5

I love this game's outrageous spectacles and enjoyable bite-size gameplay, but I can't shake the feeling that it was created solely for the purpose of making me look like a fool. Case in point, the game asked me to hold the remote next to my nose to mimic an elephant. Why not just put an flashing sign over my head that reads "loser"? My time with the game was short (you can complete every stage in an hour or two), but I did find myself laughing hysterically over the inventive usages for the remote. The uninspired boss battles hold this Wano back from being one of the best, but the comedic motion-sensing gameplay is worth a look.—**REINER**



Wii

Far Cry Vengeance

> **STYLE** 1 OR 2-PLAYER ACTION > **PUBLISHER** UBISOFT > **DEVELOPER** UBISOFT MONTREAL
> **RELEASE** DECEMBER 12 > **ESRB** M



CRYING ITSELF TO SLEEP

I know the Nintendo party line stresses gameplay over graphics, but taking a majestic title like *Far Cry* and giving it the Wii treatment is like getting your Ferrari tuned up by a guy who normally works on Chevy Impalas. It doesn't make much sense to port a franchise known for its amazing visuals, open-ended action, and dynamic enemy AI to a system lacking the power to achieve any of the above on the scale accomplished by the original game.

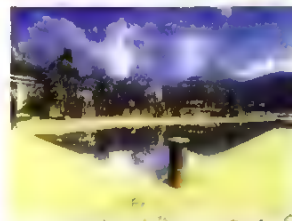
In *Far Cry Vengeance*, we find hero Jack Carver in a familiar situation — chasing the kind of ladies who put him in sticky situations involving guns, mercenaries, and the occasional supernatural bloodbath. This time the culprit is Kade, a saucy minx who sweet-talks Carver into helping her on a heist. The story should be familiar to anyone who played *Far Cry Instincts Evolution* for Xbox, as *Vengeance* borrows heavily from this title.

Graphically, Ubisoft may have been aiming for a hazy tropical aesthetic with *Vengeance*, but it comes off looking more like a blurry vacation picture taken with a disposable camera. Outside of an occasional

Toucan Sam appearance, the jungles feel lifeless, with the only motion being the horrible pop-up foliage that's a product of the laughable draw distance.

The gameplay also betrays the sensibilities of the original game. *Far Cry* was all about open-ended gameplay — navigating the islands any way you please and trying to outsmart the savvy mercenaries just waiting to lodge a bullet into your skull. With *Vengeance*, we get a linear game designed around walking down dirt paths and shooting the mindless enemies largely unaware of your existence.

To make the bastardization complete, *Vengeance* also trades *Far Cry*'s online multiplayer for a sad split-screen offering. We hope Ubisoft Montreal uses this game as a lesson in rushed development, because *Far Cry Vengeance* is in no way indicative of the studio's talent or the franchise's worth.—**BERTZ**



BOTTOM LINE 4.5

> **Concept:** Take the *Far Cry* franchise, strangle it to death, and release its lifeless corpse on the Wii

> **Graphics:** Steve Wonder isn't missing much with this game

> **Sound:** A plane full of screaming babies sounds better than this playback loop of archived sound effects

> **Playability:** Controls stand up well on the Wii — easily the best part of the game

> **Entertainment:** Feels like going to the Treasure Island Resort after returning from the Bahamas

> **Replay Value:** Low

Second Opinion 4.75

If *Far Cry* is good for one thing, it makes me want a good FPS for the Wii. I can see how the Wii controls make for a great shooter. It just hasn't been pulled off yet. *Far Cry*'s biggest problem isn't its minor control issues, its terrible draw distance, or linear gameplay. The thing really that killed *Far Cry* for me was the AI. Enemies wander off, ignore fallen comrades, and even stare into corners. It makes me sad because I know what could have been.—**BEN**



BOTTOM LINE **8.5**

> Concept: Move over, Robocop! Take a seat, Captain America! Crackdown's super hero-powered crime fighting is addictive and packed with amazing feats

> Graphics: The comic book visual style isn't as striking as you would hope. It's bland, but backed up by some great explosions

> Sound: The soundtrack, which boasts over 100 tracks, isn't as mainstream as GTA, but it fits well with the action. Also, hats off to the Foley artists for the thumping surround sound effects

> Playability: The gameplay fits like a glove, and allows players to perform mighty actions with ease

> Entertainment: It doesn't offer a story or much of a mission structure, but its remarkable gameplay outweighs these shortcomings

> Replay Value: Moderately High



■ Leveling up your powers moves at an incredibly quick pace. Within a matter of hours, you can max out any skill

XBOX 360

Crackdown

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION (2-PLAYER VIA XBOX LIVE) **> PUBLISHER** MICROSOFT
> DEVELOPER REAL TIME WORLDS **> RELEASE** FEBRUARY 20 **> ESRB** M

EXPANDING THE OPEN WORLD GENRE

Crackdown begins with a glorious bang, and continues to produce praiseworthy bedlam until the final bullet is fired. The sound of automatic weaponry is constant, a city block isn't complete without a car smoldering in ruin, and if you are truly lucky, you may see a flaming corpse soaring through the air like a comet twinkling in the night sky. These sights and sounds are fairly common to the open world genre, but Crackdown's adrenaline-charged gameplay paints them in a light that you haven't seen before. It's these larger-than-life thrills that make this game an explosive play.

It starts out with the chaos that you would only see by obtaining a five-star rating in Grand Theft Auto. The game doesn't peacefully begin like most open world games. It's pure insanity. And it's wicked fun. With martial law sweeping across the city, the government has been forced to unveil its top-secret super soldier program. Part Robocop, part Incredible Hulk, you are a genetically enhanced crime fighter designed to take a beating, dish out punishment, and more importantly, evolve to meet the challenge

at hand. Evolution is the key to the thrills that Crackdown delivers. Every bullet that you fire, every car that you lift and throw, and every thug that you splatter on the windshield of your truck has a purpose, as every action rewards the player with experience. From the outset of the game, you are already the strongest person walking the streets of Pacific City. You only become more of a dominating force as the game unfolds. At the beginning, your jumping skill is impressive for a basketball player. After your agility levels rise a few times, you'll be leaping over buildings with a single bound. This system affects everything. Your firearms will become more precise, you'll be able to lift more weight, and certain vehicles will even transform to become more efficient.

The game allows players to assassinate with style. Why would you just fire a rocket launcher blast at a car when you can pick up the car, then fire rocket launcher blasts at it to keep it airborne for seven seconds? Why would you enter a complex from the front door when you can scale the side of the building, then rain hell upon a gang lord from a safe distance? Crackdown's gameplay is over-the-top and crafted remarkably well. You never have to fuss with the controls, and you always feel like you are in



■ Graphical pop-up is rarely seen. Your weapons also connect from amazing distances

complete control of any situation.

The goal of the game—and yes, there is only one goal to complete—is to eliminate all of the major players within each of the gangs. This is an area where Crackdown both excels and fails. It's a great feeling knowing that you have complete freedom to run amok in a vast city, but at the same time, you really don't feel like you are a part of something. The lack of structure definitely hurts the game, but it's not nearly enough to kill it. The excitement that it delivers is far too great to deny. This is a sandbox experience that has an incredibly strong gameplay pulse. If you enjoy spending time with open world games just to see how much insanity you can create, you'll love Crackdown.

This game is great fun for one player, but it also scores high marks for its entertaining co-op play. With a super-powered friend at your side, you can team up and tackle gangs together, or as Joe and I experienced, blow each other away for hours on end. Nothing says friendship like a car to the face. Crackdown isn't a slouch in the Achievement department, either. In fact, I'll go as far to reward this game with the best list of Achievements since Dead Rising. Juggling corpses, vehicular acrobatics, and rampaging are factored in. My favorite is to shoot and kill five gang members in a single jump while airborne.

The experience basically boils down to the Incredible Hulk thrashing about in a kiddie pool. You have so much power and potential, but it's set in a shallow frame. —REIMER

Second Opinion 8.5

Missions have never been my favorite part of open world games. I'd much rather wait on passers-by than escort some bozo to a nightclub, and Crackdown is finally rewarding me for being so easily distracted. I run over thugs, and my driving improves. I beat chumps to death, and I get stronger. This sense of progression is what gives Crackdown its unique identity; everything you do has a purpose, and no destructive impulse is wasted. Approaching the scattered gang kingpins puts your skills to the test no matter how you develop your character, and the fact that you can play the whole game co-op over Xbox Live only adds to your options. My biggest complaint is that when these elements aren't all clicking, Crackdown suffers from its lack of structure. A greater selection of side tasks would have helped, as would a setting with more personality. The world may be visually distinctive, but the three gangs are populated solely by ethnic stereotypes, and there's no biting humor like one might find in GTA. It needs more depth to really make waves, but Crackdown's massive destruction and over-the-top heroics are perfect for pure entertainment. —JOE

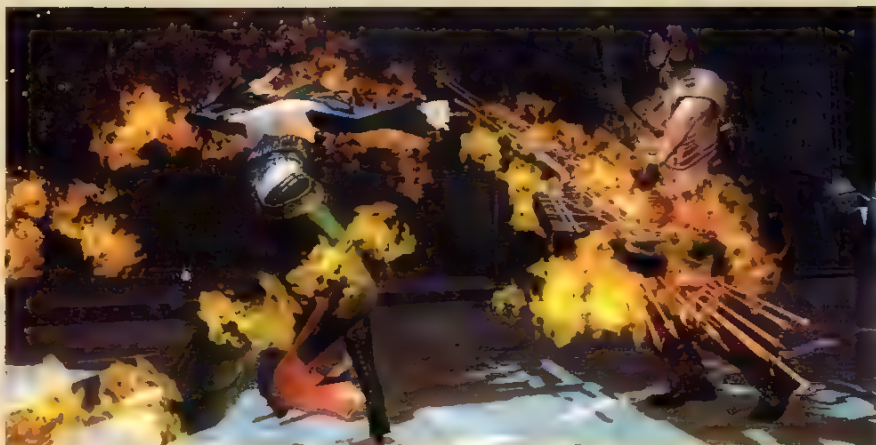


■ The future of laser eye surgery is scary

XBOX 360

Bullet Witch

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION > PUBLISHER ATARI > DEVELOPER CAVIA > RELEASE FEBRUARY 27 > ESRB M



STRANGE BREW

A contingent of disfigured gun-toting ghouls is shooting at me, a giant floating brain is telekinetically whipping cars, and two tanks block any forward progress. Just when my defeat seems unavoidable, a flock of ravens swoops in and tries to tear my enemies apart. While they are distracted, I motion to the sky, which suddenly grows dark and rumbles with electricity. Seconds later, a flash of lightning reduces everything to smoking rubble, leaving me free to resume my unholy hunt.

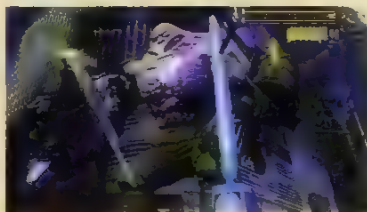
If you pick out a few isolated moments, it is possible to make Bullet Witch sound cool. Scenarios like the one just described do happen during the course of the game, but they aren't representative of the whole experience. A more realistic account of how the game actually proceeds would read something like this: I see some enemies, and I shoot them with my gun. Then I hit a barrier. I run around searching for enemies to shoot so the barrier disappears. Sometimes I fight a boss.

The combination of gunplay and magic has potential, but the way Bullet Witch melds them is extremely uneven. The spell interface is so clunky that it prevents any of your cool powers from naturally flowing into the action, so the gameplay basically

becomes a repetitive gunfest with too few enemy types. When situations arise that let you take advantage of your supemaual abilities, they just seem staged. The aftermath of a lightning strike or meteor shower may look awesome, but these powers are really only practical under specific circumstances.

Occasional spikes of excitement in the otherwise average missions keep Bullet Witch from being a complete waste of time. It's always cool to hurl a piece of wreckage into a group of baddies, and upgrading your gun to include different firing modes adds a little bit of depth to the combat. I can't deny that the enemies look pretty cool, but the levels they inhabit are poorly designed and boring.

With a better magic system and more intuitive combat interface, this game could have delivered a lot of thrills. As it is, there is so much mindless shooting and wandering in Bullet Witch that when you actually are having fun, it feels accidental. —**JOE**



■ This is Maxwell Cougar. Take a good look, because you won't see him again until our Top 10 Dorks of 2007 roundup.

BOTTOM LINE 6.5

> **Concept:** String together a handful of cool moments with a bunch of unremarkable shooting

> **Graphics:** Decent character models and enemy designs, but they seem out of place in the ugly environment

> **Sound:** Alicia's ally, Maxwell Cougar, sounds just as dumb as he looks. Maybe even dumber

> **Playability:** Using magic, the game's big draw, is awkward and unreliable. The gun controls are fairly standard, but work fine

> **Entertainment:** Just barely crosses the threshold of being fun enough to keep playing

> **Replay Value:** Moderately Low

Second Opinion 8

There are witches that mix herbs in cauldrons, and there are witches that summon lightning storms to destroy tanks. For the most part, Bullet Witch embodies the destructive traits of the latter. In a typical battle, you'll see cars flipping down streets, ravens tearing flesh from foes, and blood spewing from three-story giants. The chaos certainly brings about a sadistic grin, but it's too bad that you'll feel like a fool while unleashing hell upon your enemy. The gameplay is as unfriendly as can be, making players struggle with menus just to cast a spell. As frustrating as this is, the one area that will really make you want to see this witch burn is the gunplay. The touchy targeting and lame selection of arms make it impossible to run and gun with effective grace. This game's plot is also an embarrassment to the world of storytelling. Suffice it to say, this witch is a real bitch. —**REINER**



XBOX 360 | PC

Battlestations: Midway

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION/STRATEGY (UP TO 8-PLAYER VIA XBOX LIVE) > PUBLISHER EIDOS > DEVELOPER EIDOS > RELEASE JANUARY 30 > ESRB T

YOU SANK MY BATTLESHIP

Picture this fantasy scenario. You buy Battlestations: Midway, bring it home, throw the disc in, and expect to blow the crap out of some battleships. The game's first three missions start out simply enough with a nice mix of PT boat, destroyer, and fighter plane sections. Then you're suddenly in control of an aircraft carrier with absolutely no clue how to dispatch units, restock planes once they drop their one bomb, or decipher a host of other logistical problems. After fumbling around with the buttons for a while, you gain a slight grasp of what's going on. But by that time, the enemy fleet has taken a huge hole out of your hull and it's game over. In the post-mission status, the game points out that you just wasted 40 minutes of your life.

So you quit to the main menu and decide to give the tutorial a shot. After over an hour of listening to a salty southern commander tell you how to control and direct every vehicle in your fleet, you can then head back into battle. My guess is that most people will be ready for a snack break at this point. With some further practice, devoted gamers will eventually be calling the shots RTS-style via an overhead map, hot swapping direct control among ships, submarines, and planes, and assigning crew members to repair the engine or put out a fire. It's a mix of exciting and overwhelming as you try to maintain what feels like 50 pots boiling over at different times.

Is all of the effort worth it? Not for the cheesy and prevalent cutscenes (will protagonist Henry Walker ever pay his buddy Donald that ten bucks he owes?). But if you like large-scale, lengthy, tension-filled multiplayer matches that will ignite the strategy lobe of your mind, Battlestations: Midway be could nght up your alley. It's much more enjoyable to manage a smaller section of the fleet while your friends control the rest. And it's twice as intense to sink a ship when you know a real person was at the helm. The single player campaign and vehicle-specific bonus missions will get you prepared for this element, I just wish it could stand on its own rather than serve as a glorified boot camp for multiplayer. —**BRYAN**

BOTTOM LINE 6.5

> **Concept:** Fight your way through WWII-era South Pacific from Pearl Harbor to the battle at Midway

> **Graphics:** Ship detail and water effects are impressive. Character models could use some work

> **Sound:** It's no Call of Duty 2

> **Playability:** The steep learning curve will turn many gamers off

> **Entertainment:** Multiplayer is the strongest element here if that's what you're looking for

> **Replay Value:** Moderate

Second Opinion 5.75

When you breathe a sigh of relief as your destroyer sinks to the bottom of the Pacific, the game you're playing probably isn't offering a compelling experience. In fact, I would rather be peeling potatoes in the galleys than deal with the mediocre gameplay offered on the ship deck of this naval sim. After trudging through the 11 training missions, you may decide to go AWOL instead of commanding fighter squadrons, submarines, and battleships in this overwhelming World War II action/strategy hybrid. Multiplayer matches fare much better, as you are only responsible for a smaller section of the fleet, but it still wasn't enough to make me enlist for a second tour of duty. —**BERTZ**





BOTTOM LINE 4

> **Concept:** Make an RTS around crazy ideas like terraforming and temperature, but forget to make the basic RTS functions work

> **Graphics:** This is pretty enough, but you won't need new shorts or anything

> **Sound:** Why do I only hear the battle when I'm zoomed way in?

> **Playability:** The controls are surprisingly awkward for camera movement and unit-ability usage

> **Entertainment:** Dealing with all the bugs and broken elements sucks any fun out of this

> **Replay Value:** Low

Second Opinion 4.25

Looking for the good points in Maelstrom is a lot like looking for a straw in a needle stack. Not only are they hard to find, but you're going to do a lot of intermittent cussing as you search. The gorgeous music, clever terraforming, and unique factions will never be enjoyed by any but the most stubborn and masochistic gamer. Everyone else will disgustingly turn off the game after a few hours with the poorly paced campaign, abysmal troop pathfinding, and unhelpful interface. The visuals aren't going to save the day either—it doesn't look terrible, but other recent RTS games outstrip it by a mile. Even the sound design fails to match the excellent score, with weak voiceover and badly misused battle sound effects. The concept of this RTS had me excited from the moment I first heard about it; the implementation is a letdown from beginning to end.—MILLER

PC

Maelstrom

> **STYLE** 1 PLAYER STRATEGY (UP TO 6-PLAYER VIA INTERNET OR LAN) > **PUBLISHER** CODEMASTERS > **DEVELOPER** KD VISION
 > **RELEASE** FEBRUARY 20 > **ESRB** T

GOTTA WALK BEFORE YOU CAN RUN

Why do game developers keep doing this to me? They show off cool ideas that could bust open a stale genre, and then fail utterly to create a fun game around them. Maelstrom is infuriating in this way. Weather, temperature, and terraforming are all painstakingly modeled to have actual game effects. You can drown the enemy, take advantage of storms or clear skies in different ways, and set things on fire with incendiary weapons. What you can't do is control your units, build a base, or capture resources without dealing with a truly horrific number of bugs and broken implementations.

The most basic command in just about any RTS is the attack-move. This tells your units to move to a location and attack any hostiles they see en route. Sounds simple, right? In pretty much every RTS for the last 10 years, it is—but not in Maelstrom. Groups will often split up and take wildly divergent paths to reach their objectives, which opens your forces up to being picked off piecemeal. Frequently, I watched three out of a dozen or more units engage the enemy while my remaining troops milled about doing nothing despite repeated attack orders. The only way I was able to get any measure of obedience out of my troops was to break them into tiny squads—three or four units apiece—and give each of them new specific attack orders every time their target dropped. As you can probably imagine, this is an incredibly irritating way to play an RTS.

Just to be very clear, I'm not talking about my units being stymied by

blocked paths or weird sight lines. I've logged more hours than I care to think about playing real-time strategy titles; I know very well how to deal with those common problems. These issues go far beyond anything that players could be reasonably expected to compensate for. At times, Maelstrom borders on unplayable.

Maelstrom has other problems beyond the impossibility of controlling your armies (an admittedly insurmountable problem in an RTS). The rules for placing buildings during base construction are inconsistent, and make planning a base layout incredibly difficult. Stealth abilities are horribly implemented; since there's no feedback on units' detection radiuses or your visibility, you can't stay hidden with any degree of reliability. The list of Maelstrom's annoyances, large and small, goes on and on.

The ideas present here—physics modeling of nearly everything onscreen, the use of heat and cold to affect the

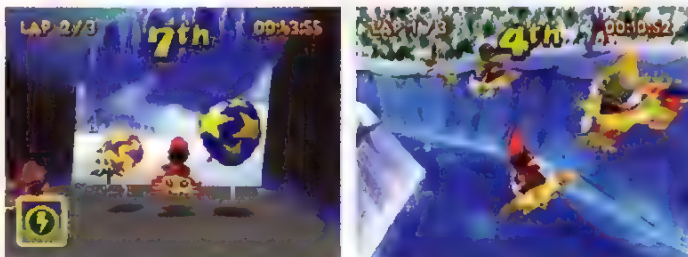
world, even possessing heroes in a third-person action style—are great. I would love to play a competent game that encompasses these creative and unusual concepts. Unfortunately, Maelstrom is not that RTS. There's absolutely no reason to put up with the frustration of doing the simplest of tasks in order to check out the futuristic abilities that you'll eventually command here.—ADAM



NINTENDO DS

Diddy Kong Racing

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER RACING (UP TO 8-PLAYER VIA WIRELESS OR SINGLE CARD DOWNLOAD)
> **PUBLISHER** NINTENDO > **DEVELOPER** RARE > **RELEASE** FEBRUARY 5 > **ESRB** E



BEEN THERE, RACED THAT

This is not just a remake of a forgettable N64 game; it feels like a remake of every kart racing game I can recall. That's not to say that Diddy is incapable of showing you a good time; the little monkey does succeed at delivering a good bit of variety. Unfortunately, none of it has the magic supplied by the much better Mario Kart, and the game starts feeling less like a drive to the finish and more like a time waster.

The best part of Diddy Kong Racing comes in the first hour, when there are consistently new things to see. During this time you're introduced to the three vehicle types you'll be driving: The car does nothing you wouldn't expect, the plane (the most fun of the three) can steer up and down in addition to side to side, and the awkward hovercraft floats around on land or water. In those early minutes you're also getting to explore the island and winning pretty much every race you encounter. The balloon popping game also shows up pretty early — a sort of track-shooter where your magic carpet floats along a prescribed course as you break balloons with your stylus.

The rinse-and-repeat approach that follows is what pulls Diddy Kong Racing down. The races never get more interesting, but they do get pretty hard, and the poorly structured vehicle upgrade system doesn't help matters any. It doesn't become genuinely fast or frantic, and the "adventure" game promise turns out to be a sham that hides a pretty linear progression. Add on the fact that this is a title that very definitely shows its roots as a game from the '90s in terms of visuals and audio, and the whole show comes out as a mediocre pastime for newly minted racing gamers, and not much more. —MILLER



BOTTOM LINE 7

> **Concept:** Race in big lazy circles in this update to the N64 title of the same name

> **Graphics:** You did read N64 in the last line, didn't you?

> **Sound:** Did I mention N64 anywhere recently?

> **Playability:** The simplistic controls usually work okay for the car and plane levels, but that hovercraft could sure use some work

> **Entertainment:** Slow and simplistic, it's hard to imagine spending too much time with a game that's not even close to as fun as the DS Kart racer already on the market

> **Replay Value:** Low



Second Opinion 7.75

Diddy Kong Racing does its best to add some interest to the crotchety old kart-racing genre, a style of game that's pretty much been running on fumes since the PSone/N64 era. To a large degree, it succeeds. While it's nice to have the real-time maps, I'm glad that they actually figured some way to incorporate the touch screen and microphone into gameplay with the novel starting line mechanics. I also like the variety of vehicle types, even if the hovercrafts feel exactly like the cars with worse control. In the end, this is exactly what you expect — well done racing. Still, for me, this entire genre feels a bit stale. —MATT

PSP QUICKIES

PSP

The Legend of Heroes III: Song of the Ocean

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ROLE-PLAYING GAME
> **PUBLISHER** NAMCO BANDAI
> **DEVELOPER** NAMCO BANDAI
> **RELEASE** JANUARY 23 > **ESRB** E 10+



BOTTOM LINE 6

This is the third game in this series I've played in a little over a year, so it's not terribly surprising that The Legend of Heroes III is nearly identical to the other recent entries. The story may be new, but the boring battle system and frustrating quests are all too familiar. Its simplicity is charming at points (especially in the dialogue), but ultimately isn't enough to salvage the whole game. Legend of Heroes III might be worth a look if you liked the last two, but here's the problem: If you played those, you probably don't need your hand held through yet another introductory RPG. —JOE

PSP

Monster Kingdom Jewel Summoner

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ROLE-PLAYING GAME
> **PUBLISHER** ATLUS > **DEVELOPER** GAEA
> **RELEASE** FEBRUARY 13 > **ESRB** T



BOTTOM LINE 6

I couldn't come up with a more generic name for an anime-styled video game than "Monster Kingdom Jewel Summoner" if I tried. Unfortunately, there isn't much here that's any more interesting or novel than the title. The characters, dialogue, and plot are all about as engrossing as run-of-the-mill fanfic, and the battle system is as boring a turn-based snooze-fest as I've seen in years. On the plus side, nothing's really broken or horrible in this RPG, and each of the major heroes has some kind of glancing aesthetic blunder to make fun of. From the biggest faux-hawk in history to tan lines that Itagaki would be ashamed to put on one of his characters, there's at least some shallow amusement to be had by mocking these hapless digital rejects. —ADAM



NINTENDO DS

Hotel Dusk: Room 215

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ADVENTURE > **PUBLISHER** NINTENDO
> **DEVELOPER** CING > **RELEASE** JANUARY 22 > **ESRB** T

PRETTY VAGANT

The same people who brought us Trace Memory developed Hotel Dusk, and although similarly charming at times, this game stumbles in the same way that most adventure titles do.

Oftentimes, it doesn't feel like you are playing the game so much as you are participating in a trial and error laboratory experiment. While solving some of the game's puzzles can provide some warming "eureka!" moments, most of the time the path is so linear that the game isn't as much about challenging your wits as it is about checking basic, low-level brain functions. Getting through it is a lot like walking: Once you put one foot forward the rest sorts itself out without much thought.

Despite its linearity, Hotel Dusk at least advances the genre in its own ways. The touch screen is handy for taking notes, and gamers will enjoy how well the excellent script has been localized. Hell, it's got more personality than 90 percent of games, period. However, two things in particular bug me about Hotel Dusk's design. Some of its game-ending scenarios are too arbitrary to avoid. Also, when you go back in to replay your surprise *faux pas*, the game ignores your saves and sends you back to a further checkpoint, which is annoying, unnecessary, and time consuming.

This game has a hotel full of strangers with secrets, which might just be enough to get you to stick around to hear them all. But perhaps you'll want to skip the hotel's ambiance and go somewhere with fresher towels. —KATO

BOTTOM LINE 7

> **Concept:** A hotel full of dirty little secrets? At least the sheets are clean

> **Graphics:** The art style permits emotive character sketches that stop short of Phoenix Wright-esque exaggeration

> **Sound:** It's a hotel. Of course the music is bad and never-ending

> **Playability:** Can fall into the repetitive trap that plagues most adventure games

> **Entertainment:** The fun wears off, but sometimes you just gotta find out what's going to happen

> **Replay Value:** Low

Second Opinion 6.75

I thought that this game was great... at putting me to sleep. Zing! Okay, that joke was lame. But seriously, this game's repetitive smooth jazzy music and slow dialogue had my eyelids rolling down more than once. Some of the puzzles aren't intuitive, but what really bugged me was that you could say the wrong thing and lose the game five minutes later. I like the idea that your conversations have real consequences, but sometimes you don't know you're getting into trouble. Starved adventure game fans might dig this, but it certainly isn't for everyone. —BEN



PSP

Valhalla Knights

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ROLE-PLAYING GAME (2-PLAYER VIA AD HOC) > **PUBLISHER** XSEED GAMES > **DEVELOPER** MARVELOUS INTERACTIVE
 > **RELEASE** MARCH 6 > **ESRB** E10+



A FAILING GRADE

When you think about it, traditional multiple choice tests offer a certain degree of freedom. Technically, you are free to choose any of the answers presented. Of course, only one is actually correct. Valhalla Knights is constructed in a similar way; it gives players the illusion of choice, but all the while it is smugly checking their actions against some invisible answer key and penalizing them for every misstep.

The game opens with the hero waking up in a small inn with (groan) no memory of the past. The story goes downhill from there. There are quests that comprise the critical path, but the gameplay is really about embarking on various peripheral errands that you take from guilds. Unfortunately, these quests are uniformly stupid; they send you slogging through repetitive areas that you've already seen. Sometimes you'll have to go through the same dungeon three times to complete all the tasks, since you can only do one at a time. They're not really even optional, since you need the rewards like gold and new party members to keep progressing.

The general structure is annoying, but it's really the obtuse design that ensures that every second you

play Valhalla Knights is irritating. If you don't immediately spend your first 500 dollars on a new party member instead of items, you'll run into problems on the very first quest. If you don't level up a certain way (by increasing subclasses as well your main job), you'll never get strong enough to proceed. These are things that are never explained – the player is just left to try and try until they get it right. It's like a grueling 50-hour game of 20 questions.

Any praise I can give Valhalla Knights seems pretty futile in light of its fundamental failings, but I will say that the option to customize your party members is cool, and I like the system for tweaking their combat behaviors. The game also has multiplayer functionality (co-op and versus), but that would require more than one person to think "Hey, I should play some Valhalla Knights," and I'm too much of an optimist to believe that I live in a world like that. —**JOE**



BOTTOM LINE 4.5

> **Concept:** Mash a bunch of boring quests together, but not with much effort

> **Graphics:** Some character designs are neat, but the environments are indistinct and repetitive

> **Sound:** Generic epic fantasy. Actually, that's kind of a cool band name. Their music couldn't be much worse than this: 'Wool: Generic Epic Fantasy Tour '07'

> **Playability:** Apart from rampant camera issues, the simple controls function well

> **Entertainment:** It isn't involving, it isn't clever, and it certainly isn't fun

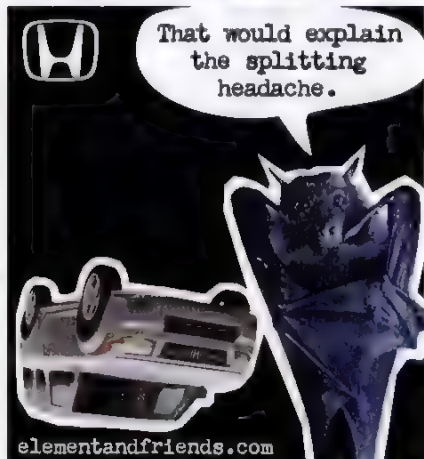
> **Replay Value:** Low

Second Opinion 5.5

Am I swimming too hard against the tide to be so ticked off at the endless flow of tired story and gameplay concepts that make up this forgettable adventure? We're going to keep seeing amnesiac heroes fighting endless experience-grind battles in lifeless fantasy worlds no matter what I say here. But I'm still going to do my part and tell you that this is not worth your time. There are so many great role-playing titles out there these days, this terrible one should never have seen the light of day. The game's moderately interesting party and character upgrade system is not enough to justify the mindless level design and feeble storytelling at its core. If you eat that nasty sludge the cafeteria is serving today, don't be surprised when you get the same tomorrow. The same is true with games. Demand better. —**MILLER**



Your inverted position articulates how your utilitarian, ultra-stylish design is going to turn the automobile world on its head.



elementandfriends.com

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 SC model shown.



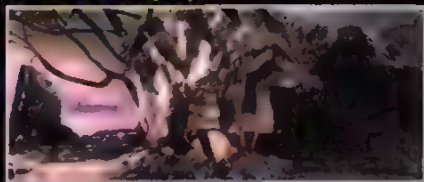
CHARTS

An In-Depth Listing Of The Best Selling Games

TOP 20

Listings Based Upon NPD Data For December 2006 Based On Units Sold

1 GEARS OF WAR (360)



Gears has been on top for a while now. It might be time to start a smear campaign against it. We've heard that in college, Gears used to shoot up with peanut butter. Also we know for a fact that Gears has a criminal record: several unpaid parking tickets. But worst of all, we have it on good authority that when Gears is alone at night, it likes to listen to Phil Collins.

2 MADDEN NFL 07 (PS2)



Hello again, Mr. Madden. We thought we were done with you until August, but like a linebacker with herpes you pop up whenever it's inconvenient. And why do you always have to be in the top five anyway? Why can't you let some of the other kids play? They could be good. Wait! Please don't give us a wedge.

3 GUITAR HERO II (PS2)



Guitar Hero and Zelda trade places this month like a well-choreographed dance. Oh man! Wouldn't that be crazy if games could dance? Well, we know that Guitar Hero is in the band and all, and usually doesn't dance, but if it had to dance with someone it could do worse than a hottie like Zelda.

4 THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: TWILIGHT PRINCESS (GC)



Since Zelda is dancing partners with Guitar Hero, wouldn't it be nice if they started dating? But we imagine that Guitar Hero is the kind of game that can't settle down and eventually starts chasing other, younger games. And one day just stops calling. What a prick.

5 THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: TWILIGHT PRINCESS (WII)

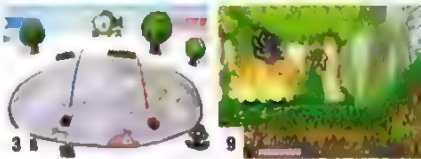


Since Zelda is dancing partners with Guitar Hero, wouldn't it be nice if... whoa, déjà vu. We thought we just wrote a Zelda blurb. Wait a minute! We did just write a Zelda blurb! Well, jeez that one was pretty good. Just look at it. We're not sure we can match the expectations set forth by that previous Zelda blurb. You know what that means. Might as well not even try.

Rank	Title	L. Mo.	System	Score	Release	Price
1	Gears of War	1	360	9.5	11-06	\$61
2	Madden NFL 07	7	PS2	8.25	08-06	\$55
3	Guitar Hero II w/Guitar	4	PS2	9	11-06	\$79
4	The Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess	N/A	GC	10	11-06	\$49
5	The Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess	3	Wii	10	11-06	\$50
6	WWE Smackdown Vs. RAW 2007	5	PS2	8.75	11-06	\$59
7	New Super Mario Bros.	16	DS	9.25	05-06	\$39
8	Call of Duty 3	N/A	360	8.5	11-06	\$40
9	Yoshi's Island DS	18	DS	8.25	11-06	\$30
10	Call of Duty 3	N/A	PS3	8.75	11-06	\$31
11	Final Fantasy XII	2	PS2	9.25	11-06	\$39
12	Nintendogs: Dalmation & Friends	9	DS	N/A	10-06	\$40
13	Tom Clancy's Rainbow Six Vegas	N/A	360	9.5	11-06	\$40
14	Brain Age: Train Your Brain In Minutes a Day	N/A	DS	8.25	04-06	\$40
15	Need for Speed: Carbon	8	PS2	8.5	11-06	\$39
16	Thrillville	N/A	PS2	7.75	11-06	\$39
17	Tony Hawk's Project 8	N/A	PS2	9	11-06	\$43
18	Madden NFL 07	N/A	360	8.25	08-06	\$57
19	NBA Live 07	N/A	PS2	7.5	09-06	\$30
20	Mario Kart DS	N/A	DS	8.5	11-05	\$35

TOP 10 JAPAN

Rank	Title	System
1	Dragon Quest Monsters: Joker	DS
2	Wii Sports	Wii
3	Hajimete No Wii	Wii
4	New Super Mario Bros.	DS
5	Adult Common Sense Training	DS
6	DS Training for Adults: Work Your Brain 2	DS
7	Animal Crossing: Wild World	DS
8	Pokémon Diamond	DS
9	Hoshi No Kirby	DS
10	Pokémon Pearl	DS



TOP 10 EU

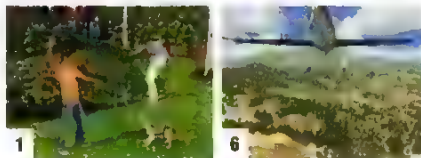
Rank	Title	L. Mo.	System
1	World of Warcraft: The Burning Crusade	N/A	PC
2	The Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess	1	Wii
3	Rainbow Six Vegas	2	360
4	Crackdown	N/A	360
5	Virtua Fighter 5	N/A	PS3
6	Metal Gear Solid: Portable Ops	3	PSP
7	Guitar Hero II	4	PS2
8	Lost Planet: Extreme Condition	6	360
9	Castlevania: Portrait of Ruin	8	DS
10	Marvel: Ultimate Alliance	10	Multi



The Staff's Favorite Picks

TOP 10 PC

Rank	Title	L. Mo.	Price
1	The Sims 2: Pets	2	\$28
2	World Of Warcraft	3	\$22
3	The Sims 2	8	\$39
4	Medieval II: Total War	4	\$47
5	The Sims 2: Glamour Life Stuff	N/A	\$18
6	Flight Simulator X Deluxe	7	\$65
7	The Sims 2: Happy Holiday Stuff	N/A	\$16
8	Battlefield 2142	5	\$44
9	Deal or No Deal	N/A	\$17
10	Cars: Radiator Springs Adventures	N/A	\$18



Based On Monthly Units Sold

REVIEWSARCHIVE

PLAYSTATION 3

Blazing Angels: Squadrons of WWII	7	Feb-07
Call of Duty 3	8.75	Jan-07
Fight Night Round 3	9	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
Sonic the Hedgehog	6.75	Jan-07
Tony Hawk's Project 8	8.75	Jan-07
Unltd Legends: Dark Kingdom	8.25	Jan-07

XBOX 360



Lost Planet: Extreme Condition - Xbox 360 - Feb-07

Call of Duty 3	8.5	Dec-06
College Hoops 2K7	8	Feb-07
Dead or Alive Xtreme 2	7.5	Jan-07
Enchanted Arms	6	Oct-06
Eragon	6.25	Feb-07
F.E.A.R.	8.5	Dec-06
FIFA Soccer 07	7.25	Dec-06
Gears of War	9.5	Dec-06
Godfather, The	7.75	Oct-06
Just Cause	7.25	Oct-06
LEGO Star Wars II: The Original Trilogy	8	Oct-06
Lost Planet: Extreme Condition	8.25	Feb-07
Madden NFL 07	7.75	Oct-06
Marvel: Ultimate Alliance	9.25	Dec-06
NBA 2K7	8.25	Nov-06
NBA Live 07	5.25	Dec-06
NCAA 07 March Madness	7.75	Feb-07
Need for Speed: Carbon	8.5	Dec-06
NHL 07	7.25	Oct-06
NHL 2K7	8.25	Oct-06
Phantasy Star Universe	6	Jan-07
Samurai Warriors 2	6	Nov-06
Sonic the Hedgehog	6.75	Jan-07
Splinter Cell: Double Agent	9	Dec-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 Pinata	8	Jan-07
WWE Smackdown vs. Raw 2007	8.75	Dec-06

Wii

Ant Bully, The	6.5	Feb-07
Call of Duty 3	7.25	Jan-07
Chicken Little: Ace in Action	7.25	Jan-07
Dragonball Z: Budokai Tenkaichi 2	6	Feb-07
Elebits	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
SpongeBob SquarePants: Creature from the Krusty Krab	6.75	Feb-07
Super Monkey Ball: Banana Blitz	6.75	Jan-07
Super Swing Golf	8	Feb-07
Tony Hawk's Downhill Jam	5	Jan-07
Trauma Center: Second Opinion	8.5	Jan-07
Wii Sports	6.5	Jan-07

PLAYSTATION 2

Ant Bully, The	6.5	Feb-07
Ar Tonelico: Melody of Elemia	6.75	Feb-07
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
doHack/G.L. Vol. 1/Rebirth	5.75	Dec-06
Eragon	6.25	Feb-07
Eureka Seven Vol 1: The New Wave	5.25	Oct-06
Family Guy	5.5	Jan-07
Fast and the Furious, The	6	Nov-06
FIFA 07	7.75	Oct-06
Final Fantasy XII	9.25	Nov-06
God Hand	6	Nov-06
Guitar Hero II	9	Dec-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 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
NFL Street 3	7	Feb-07
NHL 07	7.75	Oct-06
NHL 2K7	6.75	Oct-06
Okami	9.5	Oct-06
Phantasy Star Universe	6	Jan-07
Reservoir Dogs	5.75	Jan-07
Rogue Galaxy	9	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: Devil Summoner	7.75	Dec-06
Sims 2: Pets, The	6	Dec-06
SOCOM: U.S. Navy SEALs: Combined Assault	6.5	Jan-07
Sopranos: Road to Respect, The	6	Feb-07
Spy Hunter: Nowhere to Run	3	Nov-06
Star Trek: Encounters	7.25	Jan-07
Tales of the Abyss	7.25	Nov-06
Thrifville	7.75	Dec-06
Tiger Woods PGA Tour 07	8	Nov-06
Tokobot Plus	7.25	Dec-06
Mysteries of the Karakum	8	Oct-06
Valkyrie Profile 2: Simnena	8	Oct-06
WWE Smackdown vs. Raw 2007	8.75	Dec-06

GAMECUBE

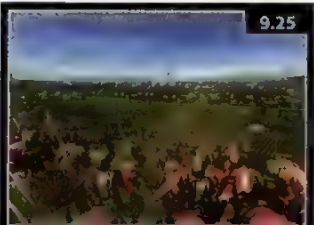
Ant Bully, The	6.5	Feb-07
Baton Kattos Ongins	7	Nov-06
FIFA 07	7.75	Oct-06
Legend of Spyro: A New Beginning, The	7	Nov-06
LEGO Star Wars II: The Original Trilogy	8	Oct-06
Madden NFL 07	8.25	Oct-06
Sims 2: Pets, The	6	Dec-06
Super Monkey Ball Adventure	4.75	Sep-06

XBOX

Capcom Classics Collection Volume 2	7	Dec-06
Destroy All Humans 2	8.5	Nov-06
Eragon	6.25	Feb-07
Family Guy	5.5	Jan-07
FIFA 07	7.75	Oct-06
FlatOut 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
Painkiller: 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
Thrifville	7.75	Dec-06
Tiger Woods PGA Tour 07	8	Nov-06

PC

Age of Empires III: The WarChiefs	7	Dec-06
Ant Bully, The	6.5	Feb-07
Battlefield 2142	8.5	Nov-06
CivCity: Rome	8	Sep-06
Company of Heroes	9	Oct-06
Dark Messiah of Might & Magic	9.25	Dec-06
Dungeon Siege II: Broken World	7.5	Oct-06
F.E.A.R. Extraction Point	8	Dec-06
Gothic 3	5	Feb-07
Just Cause	7.25	Oct-06
Heroes of Annihilated Empires	6	Feb-07
Heroes of Might & Magic V: The War of Fate	8	Feb-07
Lord of the Rings: The Battle for Middle-earth II - Rise of the Witch-King, The	8	Feb-07



Medieval II: Total War - PC - Jan-07

Mage Knight Apocalypse	6	Dec-06
Medieval II: Total War	9.25	Jan-07
Neverwinter Nights 2	8	Dec-06
ParaWorld	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	8	Dec-06
Star Wars Empire at War: Forces of Corruption	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

Brain Boost	6	Feb-07
Beta Wave/Gamma Wave	7.5	Sep-06
Break 'Em All	9	Jan-07
Castlevania: Portrait of Ruin	7.75	Nov-06
Children of Mana	7	Oct-06
Contact	6.5	Oct-06
Cooking Mama	4	Oct-06
Deep Labyrinth	8.25	Oct-06
Dragon Quest Heroes: Rocket Slime	6.75	Dec-06
Elite Beat Agents	8	Dec-06
Final Fantasy III	7.75	Dec-06
Gunpey	5.75	Sep-06
Hi Hi Puffy AmiYum: The Genie and the Amp	7.75	Feb-07
Kirby Squeak Squad	6.25	Feb-07
Konductra	4.5	Dec-06
Mage Knight: Destiny's Soldier	6.5	Nov-06
Mano Hoops 3-on-3	6.5	Oct-06
Mano vs. Donkey Kong 2: March of the Minis	6	Nov-06
MechAssault: Phantom War	7.75	Oct-06
Mega Man ZX	7	Oct-06
Monster House	6	Oct-06
Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney Justice For All	8	Jan-07
Pokémon Mystery Dungeon: Blue Rescue Team	3	Nov-06
Pokémon: Ranger	5	Dec-06
Scurge: Hwe	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: Skies of Deception	8.25	Dec-06



Metal Gear Solid: Portable Ops - PSP - Feb-07

Bounty Hounds	6.25	Nov-06
Death Jr. 2: Root of Evil	8.25	Nov-06
Dungeon Siege: Throne of Agony	8	Jan-07
Dynasty Warriors Vol.2	5	Dec-06
EA Replay	6.75	Dec-06
Every Extend Extra	8.25	Nov-06
Gangs of London	6	Nov-06
Gitaroo Man Lives!	9	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
Killzone: Liberation	7.25	Nov-06
LocoRoco	7.5	Oct-06
Lumines II	9	Dec-06
Medal of Honor Heroes	6.75	Dec-06
Mercury Meltdown	8	Sep-06
Metal Gear Solid: Portable Ops	9	Feb-07
Miami Vice	6.75	Oct-06
Mortal Kombat: Unchained	8	Feb-07
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
SOCOM: U.S. Navy SEALs: Fire Team Bravo 2	7.5	Jan-07
Sonic Rivals	6.75	Feb-07
Spectral Souls	5.5	Nov-06
Star Wars: Lethal Alliance	6.5	Feb-07
Tekken: Dark Resurrection	8.25	Sep-06
Ultimate Ghosts 'n Goblins	7.25	Oct-06
Warhammer: Battle for Atluma	7.5	Feb-07
WTF	7	Nov-06

GAME BOY ADVANCE

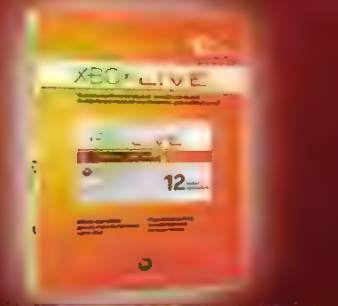
Final Fantasy V Advance	8	Jan-07
Summon Knight: Swordcraft Story 2	7.25	Jan-07
Yggdra Union	7.25	Feb-07

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UNLIMITED ENABLED

Lost Planet: Extreme Condition



Hitting the Target

LOCATING EVERY TARGET MARK IN THE GAME

One of the biggest challenges in the game (and the route to a heap of the Achievement points) involves tracking down and shooting the scattered target marks that fill each level. In a given chapter, these collectible letters together spell a word, anywhere between 5 and 8 characters long. We've listed the locations of the target marks on normal difficulty (what you need for the Achievements) and in the order it makes the most sense to gather them in:

CHAPTER 1: EARTH

T: The first target mark is early in the level, set behind some storage tanks near the archway. After destroying the tanks, you'll see the coin spinning in place.

A: Not long after that you'll come across three fuel tanks. Behind the middle set of tanks you'll find the next mark across from the fence opening.

R: Once you get into the warehouse, go up both stairways and you'll find the mark on the right of the catwalk in the southwestern portion of the warehouse.

E: Later you'll enter a cave. There you can drop down into a hole very close to where there is melting water pouring down. In the hole, it may be hard to see without using the light, but the E mark can be found in the eastern corner.

M: While still in the cave, you'll cross a large stone bridge. You'll want to hop down to a ledge you can see on the right. From there you should be able to spy the H mark underneath the bridge.

CHAPTER 2: STORM

S: Just beyond a stone archway early in the level you can turn left and head slightly north, where a mark can be found on a window ledge.

O: A ruined building partway through this level holds your next goal. When you're almost to the top of that building, you'll find an "O" mark in the opening of the farthest right window of the east side of the building on the second floor from the top.

T: On the main bridge in the level, you'll need to drop down into the first hole you encounter and then head back the way you were coming. Behind some metal bars near the end of the trench, you can shoot your next mark.

M: This out of the way mark is at the far end of the train tunnel, up high and to the left.

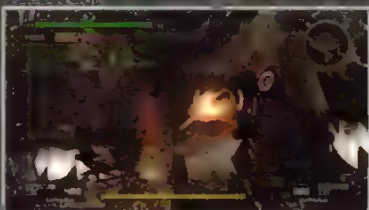
R: Late in the level, not long before the boss fight, you'll find the last mark in the northwestern building that is just before the final main gate. The mark is behind some crates right by the stairs.

CHAPTER 3: MIRAGE

L: The dome-shaped object with the Trilid spawn crater early in the level is

where to anchor up to for your first mark.

R: Right near the Undeep fight, head to the western edge of the barricades on the north side for this mark.



A: Once you get out onto the northern snow plain, follow the western cliff edge until you reach the distant mark.

E: From the eastern Data Post in the plains, the next mark is by the next data post to the north.

M: On the eastern edge of the plains is a big wall with stairs, and the next mark is underneath those stairs.

G: This tricky mark is on top of the tilted thermal plant smokestack.

CHAPTER 4: METEOR

E: In the canyon shaped like a big U, go past the hole into the base and find the mark at the end of the canyon.

O: Once you drop into the dome room of the base, head through the corridor to the south and find the mark on the left.

R: In the crane room, look on the south side behind the crates.

M: Look for the next mark on the cliff edge by the sliding platform - you'll have to look over the edge to find it.

T: Just after you get the GTD-22 you can use it to reach the top of the multi-floor building. From there, the mark is in a niche near the top of the tower.

E: After you leave the tower, look over the edge to the northwest beyond the Data Post to snag that last mark.

CHAPTER 5: AURORA

R: Just after you start the level, find the first mark to the north

along the base of mountain on the left.

R: About halfway up the mountain is a mark in the back of room with a bunch of Genessa.

A: Anchor up to the area above where you find the laser rifle and look on the ledge just beyond the room entrance.

A: Once inside the mountain, rappel to the bottom of the cave and look behind the central rock stairs.

U: Right near the top of the spiraling cave, you can enter a small tunnel and destroy a Raibee. Look on the right side of the tunnel for a U mark.

O: You'll come across a cave room with a big white shaft of light - look in the northeastern corner for your mark.

CHAPTER 6: THUNDER

T: On the first street of the level, get up on the balcony with the data post and shoot the mark on the ledge to the north.

U: Go past the VS on the balcony, and the "U" mark will be found at the first corner on the left side.

N: Just past the stone bridge on the first street, you can shoot a target mark on the building to your west.

H: You'll find the "H" mark underneath the second bridge in the area, on the ground and to the left, although you'll want to take out surrounding enemies first.

D: Right after you enter the factory, jump up onto the blue dumpster and look behind it for the "D" mark.

E: Once you get into the PTX-40A VS, head through the door at the end of that long corridor. Turn around to find the "E" mark above the door.

R: Just beyond a room filled with VS weaponry, before you head in to fight the Green Eye, you can find the "R" mark up around the ceiling of the corridor.

That should get you plenty of achievements, as well as a good idea of how to look for the marks in the last few levels. Still having trouble? We've printed the locations of the last five chapters' target marks in this month's Unlimited section. Log in and complete your collection.



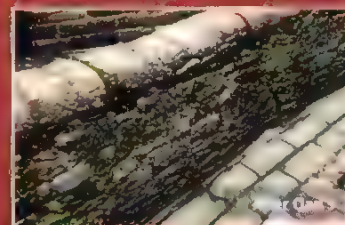
Mod World

THE ELDER SCROLLS IV: OBLIVION

Quest Mods & Texture Packs
<http://devnull.devakm.googlepages.com>



Any time as successful and moddable as Oblivion is pretty much guaranteed to have a huge community dedicated to creating new content and upgrading the existing game. The page listed above is a great starting place to get new mod users up and running with what's available out there. The two major portions of this site - The Oblivion Texture Overhaul and The Oblivion Quest List - directly link to several top-quality add-ons, as well as provide the addresses of several other sites that will help you in your quest to extend your Oblivion's lifespan.




TEXTURES & GRAPHICS

As good as Oblivion looks, there are ways to make it look even better. In particular, Qarl's Texture Pack upgrades tons of textures in the world. The difference is clear, especially when you get up close to the surface of an object. There are other texture packs for various parts of Oblivion, but Qarl's is unusually comprehensive and effective. Other mods are available that range from tweaking the lighting to look more realistic to scaling the vegetation differently to aid immersion.



QUESTS

The Oblivion Quest List will keep you busy for a long, long time. Feral Instinct: Danger Sense by Additive features a fully voice-acted storyline and will grant you the new "Danger Sense" ability. The Legacy by Simyaz includes branching dialogue trees, different endings, and an NPC cohort to help you out. These are just two of the dozens of quest mods readily available for your adventuring needs. You can even rebuild Kvach into a fully operational quest hub!

Code of the Month Tony Hawk's
Downhill Jam

So you're flying down the mountain, wildly shaking the Wii remote in every direction you can think of, pressing buttons without stop, and somehow you still win the race. What's that you say? You'd like a little help for when the game finally starts to get slightly harder? Sure, buddy. We got your back. Downhill Jam may not have been our favorite skateboarding game from last year, but there sure are a lot of cheat codes to help you get to the bottom of the hill in record time. Go into Options, then the Cheat Entry page to put in the following. Once you enter the codes once, you should be able to toggle them off and on whenever you like. Enjoy!

Always Special – POINTHOGGER
Chipmunk Voices – HELLOHELIUM
Demon Skater – EVILCHIMNEYSWEEP
Display Coordinates – DISPLAYCOORDINATES
Especially Large Birds – BIRDBIRDBIRDBIRDBIRD
Extreme Car Crashes – WATCHFORDOORS
First-Person Skater – FIRSTPERSONJAM
Free Boost – OOTBAGHFOREVER
Giganto Skater – IWANNABETALLTALL
Invisible Skater – NOWYOUSEEME
Large Birds – BIRDBIRDBIRDBIRD
Mini Skater – DOWNTHERABBITHOLE
Perfect Manual – TIGHTROPEWALKER
Perfect Rail – LIKETILTINGAPLATE
Perfect Stats – IAMBOB
Power of the Fish! – TONYFISHDOWNHILLJAM
Shadow Skater – CHIMNEYSWEEP
Skate as a Work of Art – FOURLIGHTS
Tiny People – SHRINKTHEPEOPLE
Unlock All Boards and Outfits – RAIDTHEWOODSHED
Unlock All Events – ADVENTURESOFKWANG
Unlock All Movies – FREEBOZZLER
Unlock All Skaters – IMINTERFACING
Unlock Manuals – IMISSMANUALS

Gary Santino
San Francisco, CA



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 prize!

MULTI-SYSTEM

Marvel Ultimate Alliance

Last month we delivered the cheat codes for this massive Marvel team-up. This month, we thought we'd share the cool combination teams you can play for an extra stat boost. When there are more than four characters, you can use whichever four you like

Agents of Shield/+5 to all Resistances – Captain America, Nick Fury, Spider-Woman, Wolverine

Agile Warriors/10% Reduced Energy Cost – Black Panther, Daredevil, Deadpool, Elektra, Spider-Man

Air Force: +15% Max Health – Human Torch, Ms. Marvel, Storm, and Thor

Alternate Identities/+5% Criticals – Ghost Rider (Western), Iron Man (War Machine), Ms. Marvel (Ventura), Spider-Woman (Secret Wars), Thor (Beta Ray Bill)

Assassins/+60% Credit Drop – Blade, Deadpool, Elektra, Wolverine

Avengers /+5% Damage – Captain America, Thor, Iron Man, Spider-Woman, Ms. Marvel
Bad to the Bone/5% Damage Inflicted Goes to Health – Blade, Ghost Rider, Luke Cage, Wolverine

Bruisers /+15 Striking – Thing, Captain America, Luke Cage, Ms. Marvel

Classic Avengers/+15% Damage – Black Panther, Captain America, Iron Man, and Thor

Dark Past/+5% XP – Blade, Elektra, Ghost Rider, Spider-Woman

Defenders/5% Damage inflicted goes to Health – Dr. Strange, Iceman, Luke Cage, Silver Surfer

Double Date/+5 Health Regeneration – Black Panther, Invisible Woman, Mr. Fantastic, Storm

Fantastic Four/+20 Health Per Knockout –

Thing, Invisible Woman, Human Torch, and Mr. Fantastic

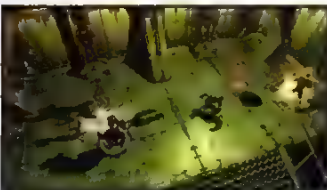
Femme Fatale/+5% Damage – Ms. Marvel, Storm, Invisible Woman, Elektra, Spider-Woman

Flashback/+15% Max Health – Captain America (WWII), Daredevil (Original), Ghost Rider (Original), Iceman (Original), Iron Man (Classic), Ms. Marvel (Original), Wolverine (Classic)

Martial Artists/+15 Striking – Black Panther, Captain America, Daredevil, Nick Fury

Marvel Knights/+6 Body, Strike, and

Focus – Dr. Strange, Daredevil, Luke Cage, Spiderman, Black Panther



Marvel Royalty/+60% Credits Dropped – Black Panther, Dr. Strange, Storm, Thor

Natural Forces/5% Damage inflicted as Health Gain – Thor, Storm, Human Torch, Ice Man

Natural Leaders/+5% XP – Captain America, Dr. Strange, Mr. Fantastic, Nick Fury, Storm

New Avengers/+5% All Resistances – Captain America, Luke Cage, Wolverine, Spider-Man, Spider-Woman, Iron Man

New Fantastic Four/15% Max Energy – Ghost Rider, Luke Cage, Spider-Man, Wolverine

Power Platoon/20% Energy per KO – Silver Surfer, Iron Man, Ms. Marvel, Thor

Raven Ultimates/+6% To All Stats – Silver Surfer, Deadpool, Thing, Invisible Woman, Iceman

Scorchers/+10% Reduced Power Cost – Ghost Rider Human Torch, Storm, Thor

Supernatural/+5 Health Regen – Blade, Dr. Strange, Ghost Rider, Thor

Think Tanks/+15% to Max Health – Iron Man, Spider-Man, Mr. Fantastic, Dr. Strange

Weapon Specialists/+5% Criticals – Blade, Captain America, Deadpool, Elektra, Nick Fury

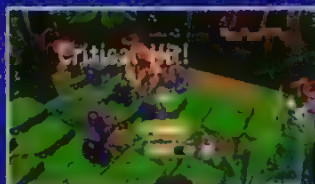
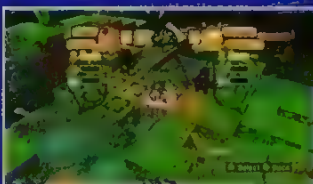
X-Men/+15% Maximum Energy – Colossus, Iceman, Storm, Wolverine

"GI Droid"

(location unknown – last seen blowing a giant hair dryer at the polar ice caps)

Xbox Live Arcade Spotlight

Bugs of War



Ninja Bee already has two successful Live Arcade games under its belt, so we have high hopes for its latest effort, a tactics/strategy game humorously dubbed Bugs of War. Set to release this spring, the grid-based combat system pits some colorful-looking mosquitoes, moths, beetles, and any number of other creepy-crawlies against each other in a battle royale for supremacy of the bug world. The game includes a story-driven campaign or an alternate single-mission structure, both designed for those lonely solo players out there. If you actually have some friends, you can challenge them in either online or local multiplayer matches, where, in addition to pre-made scenarios, you'll be able to test out newly minted levels you design with the level editor that is included with the game. Plus, if Ninja Bee's previous efforts are any indication, there should be some laughs thrown in for good measure.



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A RARE GLIMPSE AT THE PAST

Before the Beginning

Rare actually grew out of another company founded by the Stammers. It was the late '70s and Chris Stamper was going to college at Loughborough University in Leicestershire, UK. While studying for a degree in physics and electronics, Chris decided to build a computer, because back then if you wanted a computer you had to do it yourself. The computer he built was an RCA CDP1802; at the time it was one of the fastest available. Chris' project was a success, and this experience pushed him to pursue a career working with computers.

Chris dropped out of college at the age of 21 and started working for a game manufacturing company, converting old arcade boards into the newest games. At the time the hot game was Galaxian. After two years, Chris got sick of not being in charge, and convinced his younger brother Tim to leave his technical design course. With the help of a few other friends they started Ultimate – Play The Game: a company devoted to making coin-op conversion kits. These kits were used to power up old arcade machines. For example, a kit might make the enemies in a game move faster.

Ultimate also started making a few computer games for systems like the Sinclair Spectrum, and it had some moderate success (such as Jetpack, which sold 330,000 units). But Ultimate was not to last. As the computer gaming market began to wane in the '80s, the Stammers realized that the future of videogames lay in a different breed of computers: machines called home videogame consoles.



Change happens. Even when it's a rare thing, it's still inevitable. Recently, Rare co-founders and brothers Tim and Chris Stamper left the company they started over 20 years ago. Rare was sad to see them go, but the company is now looking to its future under the umbrella of Microsoft Game Studios. Therefore, we thought this would be a good time to look back at the company and what it has given the gaming community these last two decades.

Rising Star

Ultimate could have been termed a success, but the Stammers weren't content to rest on their laurels. The Stammers began developing for the brand new Nintendo Entertainment System. Because of this big change in direction, they thought it best to change their company's image as well. They wanted a name that would show the world how great of a developer they were; they wanted people to know just how special – how rare – their company was. Thus Rareware was born.

Rare produced about 60 games for the NES and Game Boy, from Slalom to Marble Madness, RC Pro-Am to Battletoads. After Rare's success with Donkey Kong Country on the SNES in 1994, Nintendo finally took notice and began investing in the company, allowing Rare to expand. Rare hit its stride during the N64's lifecycle when it produced beloved hits Blast Corps, GoldenEye, the Banjo-Kazooie games, Jet Force Gemini, and Conker's Bad Fur Day. It was also during this period that the company started developing under the simplified name Rare.

The rest is history. Of course, that isn't to say there hasn't been change. Rare is now owned by Microsoft and the Stamper brothers left in late 2006. But the company plows on into its future. What does that future hold? Read our Unlimited interview with production director Simon Farmer for a few hints.



Rare Founders Tim and Chris Stamper

RARE DIGS
This has been Rare's HQ since 1999. Located near Twycross, Leicestershire (a county in central England), this multi-million pound facility took five years to design and build in order to preserve the charm of the local landscape. Previously located in a converted farmhouse, Rare's new grounds are fully landscaped, and the building has a state-of-the-art climate management system and plenty of room for the continually expanding company.



Rare Gems

• R.C. PRO-AM (NES)

U.S. Release Date: February 1988

Unlike other racers of its day, R.C. Pro-Am actually made good use of its isometric top-down view: you were racing remote-controlled vehicles. The game might also be notable for being the first car combat game. Players could not only upgrade their R.C.s with sticky tires and better engines, but they could also acquire missiles and bombs to disable their competition on the track.



• DONKEY KONG COUNTRY (SNES)

U.S. Release Date: November 25, 1994

Rare's games have always tried to use the latest in graphics technology, and this was no exception. Not only was this the game that launched Rare into superstardom, it also received critical acclaim due to its use of pre-framed 3D graphics in a 2D world. This was one of the best-looking SNES games of its day.



• KILLER INSTINCT (ARCADE)

U.S. Release Date: Late 1994

First released in the arcade, this was another Rare game known for its looks. The animated backgrounds were created using state-of-the-art 3D modeling tools. While this wasn't real-time rendering, for the time it gave an unparalleled 3D illusion. The characters in the game were all sprite-based, but it wasn't uncommon at the time for people to believe they were 3D renders.



• BLAST CORPS (N64)

U.S. Release Date: March 26, 1997

With nearly a dozen destructive vehicles and trucks, two out-of-control advanced nuclear warheads, and an entire world's population in need of saving, there's just something manly about Rare's first truly good N64 game. Blast Corps was filled with loads of destruction and many great puzzles, but Rare's greatest accomplishment with this game might have been keeping each of the 50+ levels unique.



• BANJO-KAZOOIE & BANJO-TOOIE (N64)

U.S. Release Date: May 31, 1998 & November 19, 2000

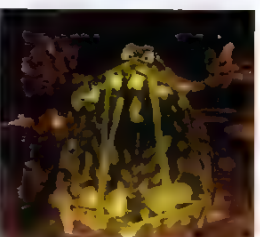
Banjo-Kazooie was originally marketed as the Donkey Kong Country for the N64, and received a fair amount of hype before its release. Both it and its sequel Banjo-Tooie are some of the best platformers for the system. Sure they play exactly like Super Mario 64, but is that really a problem?



• CONKER'S BAD FUR DAY (N64)

U.S. Release Date: March 5, 2001

Not only was Conker a solid platformer at a time when the N64 was going into anaphylactic shock for lack of good games, but it also had some pretty fun television commercials. Actually, mature humor was the game's main selling point. Tired of appearing in tame games like Diddy Kong Racing and his own kiddo GBC title, Conker let it all hang out. For example, to defeat some fire enemies he gets drunk and pees on them. Did we mention the mature humor?



GAMEOGRAPHY

1987

- Slalom - NES
- Wizards & Warriors - NES

1988

- Anticipation - NES
- Jeopardy! - NES
- R.C. Pro-Am - NES
- Wheel of Fortune - NES

1989

- California Games - NES
- Cobra Triangle - NES
- Hollywood Squares - NES
- Ironsword: Wizards & Warriors II - NES
- Jeopardy! Junior Edition - NES
- John Elway's Quarterback - NES
- Jordan Vs. Bird: One on One - NES
- Marble Madness - NES
- Sesame Street 123 - NES
- Sesame Street ABC - NES
- Silent Service - NES
- Taboo - NES
- Wheel of Fortune Junior Edition - NES
- Who Framed Roger Rabbit - NES
- Wizards & Warriors - NES
- World Games - NES
- WWF Wrestlemania - NES

1990

- The Amazing Spider-Man - Game Boy
- Arch Rivals - NES
- Cabal - NES
- Captain Skyhawk - NES
- Double Dare - NES
- Wizards & Warriors X: Fortress of Fear - Game Boy
- Ivan "Ironman" Stewart's Super Off Road - NES
- Jeopardy! 25th Anniversary Edition - NES
- Narc - NES
- A Nightmare on Elm Street - NES
- Pm Bot - NES
- Snake Rattle 'N Roll - NES
- Solar Jetman: Hunt for the Golden Warpship - NES
- Super Glove Ball - NES
- Time Lord - NES
- Wheel of Fortune: Family Edition - NES
- WWF WrestleMania Challenge - NES

1991

- Battletoads - NES, Sega Genesis, Game Boy
- Beetlejuice - NES
- Digger T. Rock: The Legend of the Lost City - NES
- High Speed - NES
- Pirates! - NES
- Sesame Street ABC & 123 - NES
- Sneaky Snakes - Game Boy
- Super R.C. Pro-Am - Game Boy
- WWF Superstars - Game Boy

1992

- Beetlejuice - Game Boy
- Championship Pro-Am - Sega Genesis
- Danny Sullivan's Indy Heat - NES
- R.C. Pro-Am II - NES
- Wizards & Warriors III - NES

1993

- Battletoads - Sega Game Gear
- Battletoads/Double Dragon: The Ultimate Team - NES, Sega Genesis, Super NES, Game Boy
- Battletoads in Battlemaniacs - Super NES
- Battletoads in Ragnarok's World - Game Boy

1994

- Battletoads - Arcade
- Donkey Kong Country - Super NES
- Killer Instinct - Arcade
- Monster Max - Game Boy

1995

- Donkey Kong Country 2: Diddy Kong's Quest - Super NES
- Donkey Kong Land - Game Boy
- Killer Instinct - Super NES, Game Boy

1996

- Donkey Kong Country 3: Dixie Kong's Double Trouble! - Super NES
- Donkey Kong Land 2 - Game Boy
- Ken Griffey Jr.'s Winning Run - Super NES
- Killer Instinct 2 - Arcade
- Killer Instinct Gold - Nintendo 64

1997

- Blast Corps - Nintendo 64
- Diddy Kong Racing - Nintendo 64
- Donkey Kong Land III - Game Boy
- GoldenEye 007 - Nintendo 64

1998

- Banjo-Kazooie - Nintendo 64

1999

- Conker's Pocket Tales - Game Boy Color
- Donkey Kong 64 - Nintendo 64
- Jet Force Gemini - Nintendo 64
- Mickey's Racing Adventure - Game Boy Color

2000

- Banjo-Tooie - Nintendo 64
- Donkey Kong Country - Game Boy Color
- Mickey's Speedway USA - Nintendo 64
- Perfect Dark - Nintendo 64, Game Boy Color

2001

- Conker's Bad Fur Day - Nintendo 64
- Mickey's Speedway USA - Game Boy Color

2002

- Star Fox Adventures - Nintendo GameCube

2003

- Banjo-Kazooie: Grunty's Revenge - Game Boy Advance
- Donkey Kong Country - Game Boy Advance
- Grabbed by the Ghoulies - Xbox

2004

- Donkey Kong Country 2 - Game Boy Advance
- It's Mr. Pants - Game Boy Advance
- Sabre Wulf - Game Boy Advance

2005

- Banjo Pilot - Game Boy Advance
- Conker: Live and Reloaded - Xbox
- Donkey Kong Country 3 - Game Boy Advance
- Kameo: Elements of Power - Xbox 360
- Perfect Dark Zero - Xbox 360

2006

- Viva Piñata - Xbox 360

GREATEST GAME OF ALL TIME

By Shane Seeman

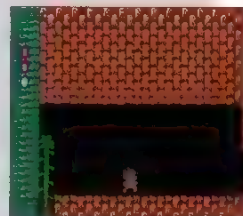


SUPER MARIO BROS. 2

> FORMAT NES
> PUBLISHER NINTENDO

It's official; I am in love with this game. Many players were disappointed with its revamped veggie throwing gameplay, but I prefer this installment. This may very well have been the third game I ever played, and even now I'll pop it in the ol' NES from time to time. The music is wonderful, even on the 1980's TV in my bedroom. For those

of you who don't know, it's kind of ragtime-esque, and it's very memorable. The graphics were wonderful for the time, and it was basically the first game to separate Mario and Luigi as their



own people (Luigi is taller and can jump higher). It introduced Toad and the Princess as playable characters for the first time, and they prove to be good platformers themselves. If you ask me, it had the most realistic graphics in the series' NES lifespan. There are only seven worlds, as opposed to the traditional eight, and only 20 individual, yet expansive, levels. World warping was more easily executed, and the ability to charge jump was added, too. The actual gameplay made huge changes from the original, but this was due to the fact that it was originally "Doki Doki Panic," a Japanese title. The Mario characters were added for the U.S. release. The "real Super Mario Bros. 2" was called "The Lost Levels" in the U.S., when it released on the SNES compilation Super Mario All Stars. The classic enemies such as goombas, koopas, and piranha plants are gone, but they've added a couple of welcome additions (namely, the shyguy, POW block, and bob-omb). You uproot turnips and peppers from the earth and throw them at enemies to kill them, or you could pick up the enemies themselves, and throw them at others. The boss fights are great, but are repeated a few times, with the exception of Birdo in the end of every level. Wart's Castle is larger than Bowser's in the original, and the final battle with Wart (who should totally be in Super Smash Bros. Brawl) proved to be the coolest battle in NES history. The fun level is extremely high, and it's just as fun now as it was the first time I played it. Super Mario Bros. 2 is the Greatest Game of All Time.

THIS MONTH IN GAMING HISTORY

On March 16, 1999 Sony Online Entertainment released EverQuest with modest expectations. By the end of the year, it had surpassed Ultima Online - the leading competitor - in number of subscriptions. The number of social lives ruined



continued to rise until mid-2004. At its peak EverQuest achieved a subscription base of over 500,000, monumental for its time and still a milestone for online games.

UM, YOU FORGOT SOMETHING BIG!

Wondering why a certain double-D agent isn't covered here? Don't worry, we haven't forgotten about Rare's biggest hit. Check back next month when we look back on one of consoles' best FPSs: GoldenEye

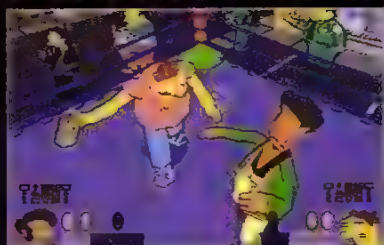


PSONE

THE SIMPSONS WRESTLING

> STYLE 1 OR 2-PLAYER FIGHTING > PUBLISHER ACTIVISION > DEVELOPER BIG APE PRODUCTIONS > RELEASE 2001

Saturday morning cartoons aren't the only ones that get crappy video game treatments. The spectrum of titles related to *The Simpsons* ranges from pretty fun to absolutely terrible, and *The Simpsons Wrestling* helps to weigh down the dullest side of the scale. It lets you choose from a handful of characters from the show (the highlights being Kodos and Kang), then has you mashing your way to victory through a series of slow, unbalanced bouts. To call this a "wrestling" game is overly generous; the fights utilize non-standard rules where dogs, interstellar weapons, and divine wrath are all permissible ways to wear your opponent down. The outlandish combat might not be so ridiculous if all characters were equal, but they aren't. If Ned Flanders has enough time to say his prayer (which is practically guaranteed at the beginning of a match), you've basically lost. Over all of the action is Kent Brockman's insufferable commentary, which is enough to make you thankful for the mindless chatter of real sports announcers. Just like combining cloves and Tom Collins mix in a frozen piecrust, *The Simpsons Wrestling* is a recipe for disaster that even the most devoted fan will despise.

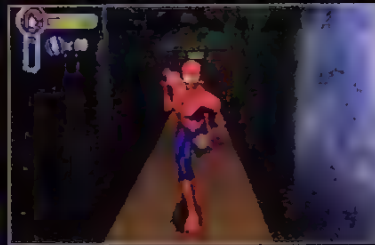


PSONE

SPIDER-MAN

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION > PUBLISHER ACTIVISION > DEVELOPER NEVERSOFT > RELEASE 2000

What may arguably have been the best comic-based videogame when it launched still remains fun today. Given that the *Spider-Man* games have been evolved and processed to almost the same level as a sports franchise, it is surprising how well the original formula still works. There are no open-world environments here and no street-level brawls, but on the rooftops and swinging between buildings is where *Spider-Man* belongs and there is plenty of that. The fighting system is fairly limited; it's almost odd that combat mechanics were ever this simple and still fun. However, the camera is a major villain in this game; it's a pain in tight corridors. But the fun stuff is the fan service. The game is a who's who list of *Spider-Man* villains such as Scorpion, Rhino, Venom, Mysterio, Carnage, and Doctor Octopus. Add to that all the high-profile support characters like Human Torch, The Punisher, and Captain America (hey, when is he going to get his own game?), narration by Stan "The Man" Lee, and unlockable costumes and comic gallery and it's no wonder why fans went nuts over this game half a decade ago. Everyone else can ignore the extras and just have fun with a decent game.



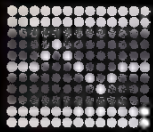
SUPER NINTENDO

F-ZERO

> STYLE 1-PLAYER RACING > PUBLISHER NINTENDO > DEVELOPER NINTENDO > RELEASE 1991

One of only a few early racing games that continues to provide some degree of fun and excitement, *F-Zero* was one of the finest racers to grace Nintendo's sophomore console. Thanks to some Mode 7 graphical effects, this arcade-style futuristic racer laid the groundwork for later similar titles like *Wipeout*, while the focus on insane jumps and action over realism or simulation helped pave the way for the exaggerated speed and crashes of *Burnout* and *Midnight Club*. Four distinct vehicles allow for four matching driving styles, and later tracks offer a challenge for even the most devoted racing fanatic. A memorable high-speed soundtrack keeps the momentum at fever pitch, even if the low-detail track visuals don't amaze the way they once did. If only they'd figured out a way to squeeze in multiplayer, this fan favorite might be even better remembered than it already is.





ONLINE

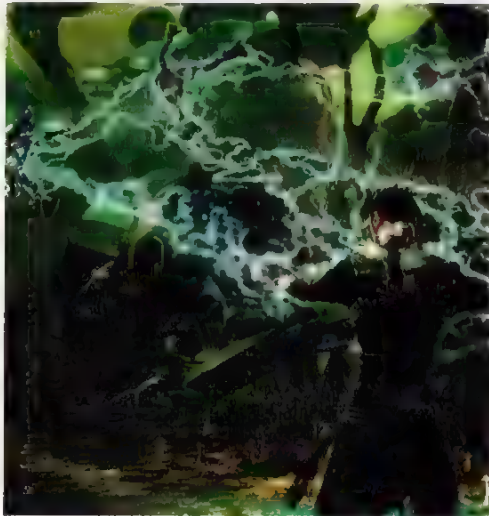
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STAR WARS: THE FORCE UNLEASHED

The Force is strong with you, young Padawan, but you are no Jedi yet. Read the full transcript of our Q&A with project lead Haden Blackman and check out how LucasArts creates new game technology with our pre-visualization video if you wish to gain entrance to the Jedi Academy.



Star Wars Deathmatch

Is Boba Fett more badass than Darth Maul? Could IG-88 take on Chewbacca and win? Does Lando's moustache make him the automatic winner in any competition? Vote on your favorite Star Wars characters to see which stud from a galaxy far, far away rules them all.



Barbarian At The Gate

Conan is back, and this time he's not rocking an Austrian accent. Check out more screenshots of Conan and read our interview with the game's developers.



Rare and Priceless

GI reminisces with Rare production director Simon Farmer about the glory days of GoldenEye 007, Perfect Dark, and Battletoads.



ALSO ONLINE THIS MONTH:

GI Online slips into Solid Snake mode and issues stealth reports live from the Konami press event.



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GAMEOVER

Give Up? Retire?

VIDEO GAME TRIVIA

Guitar fever is sweeping the industry! Guitar Hero II was one of the best-selling games during the holidays, and with the Xbox 360 version on the way it won't be slowing down soon. The idea for the game didn't just happen overnight, though – many other instruments must have been rejected before the developer settled on using a guitar. Answer these trivia questions to discover what lame kind of "hero" you could have become instead.

1 Electronic Arts' Superman Returns has the Man of Steel fighting a variety of dastardly foes, but whom do you confront in the final conflict of the game?

- A. Lex Luthor
- B. Brainiac
- C. Metallo
- D. A bunch of tomatoes



2 In The Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask, how many days was Link living over and over again?

- A. One
- B. Three
- C. Five
- D. Like, a million



3 This is a screen from an off-road racing game featuring the name and likeness of what driving personality?

- A. Colin McRae
- B. Cole Trickle
- C. Dale Earnhardt Jr.
- D. Ivan Stewart



4 Final Fantasy Chronicles for PSone had a slightly misleading name, since one of the two games included wasn't from the Final Fantasy series. What was it?

- A. Chrono Trigger
- B. Secret of Mana
- C. Dragon Warrior VI
- D. Breath of Fire

5 Do you remember the dorks of yesteryear? This dingus is Tom Hansen, and he was the star of the first blatant Resident Evil 4 rip-off. What was that game called?

- A. Cold Fear
- B. Cold Winter
- C. Cold Blood
- D. Zombies!



6 True or False: Anyone who tries to convince you that Sony, Microsoft, or Nintendo are doomed is an idiot.

- A. True
- B. False
- C. What if the person in question is a future version of myself?

7 In Excite Truck, the Diamond cup in Super Excite mode is set in a unique location. Where does this race take place?

- A. The Mushroom Kingdom
- B. Space
- C. 8-bit Land
- D. Atlantis

8 Some games are only memorable for their soundtracks. The mediocre side-scroller X-Kaliber 2097 for SNES prominently featured music by which of these techno groups?

- A. Information Society
- B. Coldcut
- C. 808 State
- D. Psykosonik

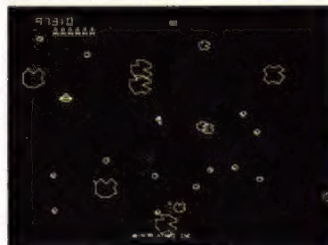


9 The phrase "Wise fwm from your gwave" was made popular among gamers by a digitized voice in what Sega arcade title?

- A. Golden Axe
- B. Alien Syndrome
- C. Altered Beast
- D. Regulus

10 Spacewar is considered by many as the first video game, but it is often overshadowed by its commercially released descendants. What popular arcade title does Spacewar most resemble?

- A. Space Invaders
- B. Asteroids
- C. Arkanoid
- D. Pong



BREAKDOWN

1.8 Million copies of Madden 2007 for PS2 were sold in 2006 according to the NPD, which makes it the best-selling game of the year

0% of gamers should be surprised by the above fact

1,000 GamerPoints = one inch. Assuming that equation is correct, how long is your "GamerScore"?

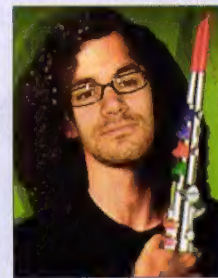
2 Million copies of the three Burger King Xbox/Xbox 360 games have been sold, according to a Microsoft statement. Somewhere, a real game developer is crying

24% of Game Informer editors hum off-key, as we discovered while compiling our Connect Top 10 (see page 22)

★ Trivia Score & Rank ★



0-1:
Asparagus Hero



2-3:
Lite Jazz Hero



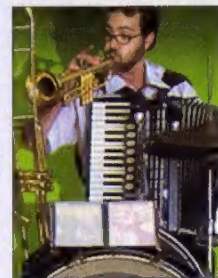
4-5:
Pan Flute Hero



6-7:
Didgeridoo Hero



8-9:
ODD Hero



10:
One Man Band Hero

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-Game Informer

"...plays like a dream..."

-Games Radar

"...has been making us jump in all the right places..."

-GameSpot

"...action packed..."

-IGN

"Capcom has another winner on its hands."

-Hardcore Gamer

"...an action game on full throttle..."

-Play

"Gorgeous graphics..."

-GamePro

"It's an absolute stunner from start to finish..."

-TeamXbox

"...one lean, mean, addictive futuristic shootin' machine."

-Official Xbox Magazine



CAPCOM
lostplanet-thegame.com

STEELBOOK

XBOX
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