GAMEINFORMER

THE WORLD'S #1 COMPUTER & VIDEO GAME MAGAZINE

Niko Bellic Rages In Rockstar's Gritty Take On The American Dream

grand theft auto IV

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THE BIGGEST GAME OF 2007

IN STORES 5.22.07

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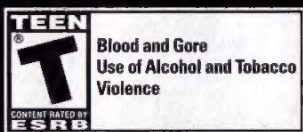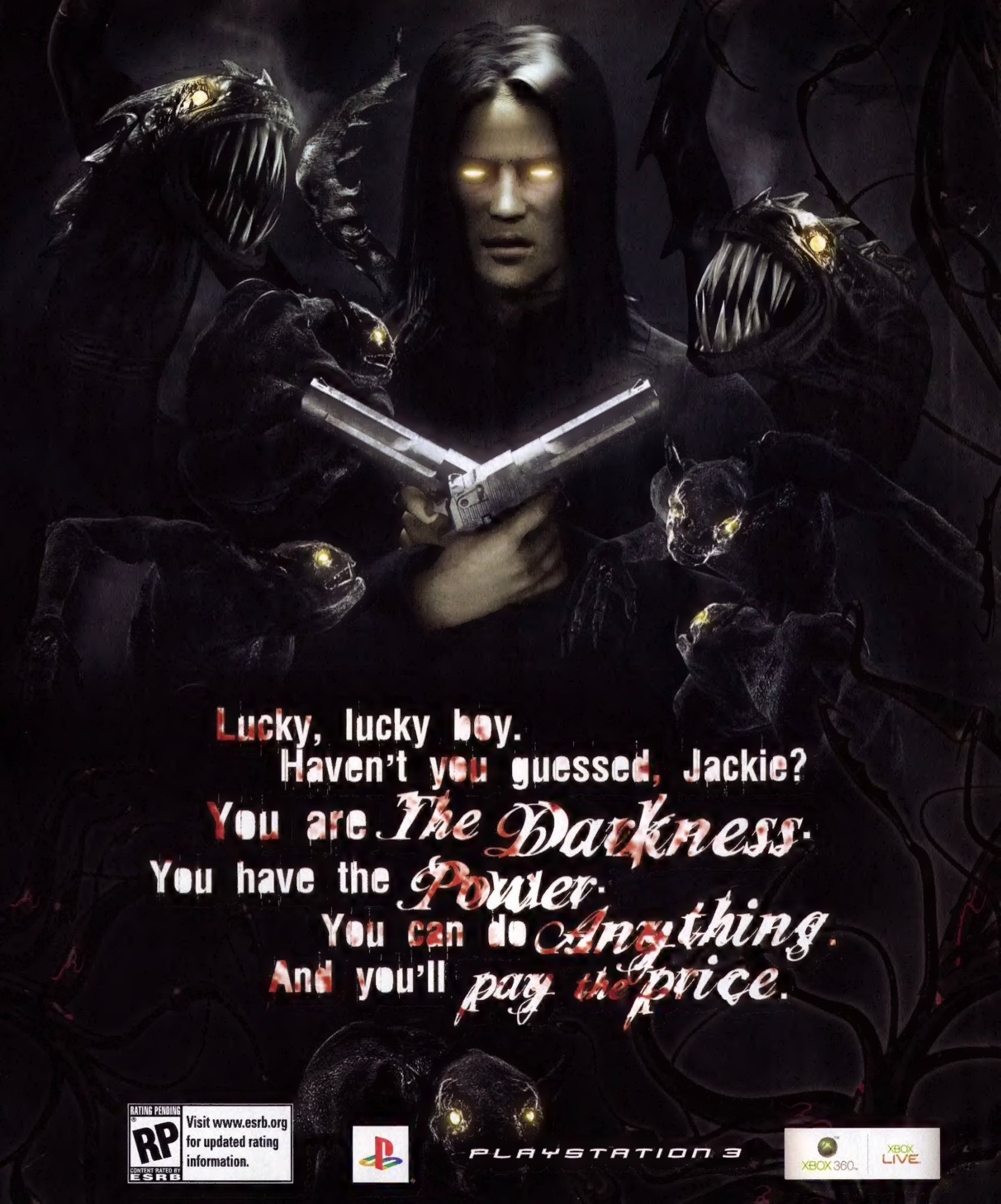
Lucky, lucky boy.
Haven't you guessed, Jackie?
You are *The Darkness*.
You have the *Power*.
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And you'll *pay the price*.
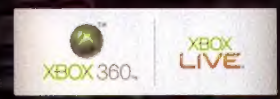
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CONTENTS

The "Guns, Cars, & Sports" Issue

THIS MAN LOVES SHEEP.

AND THAT IS COMPLETELY NORMAL. HE HAS DEVOTED HIS LIFE TO THE HEALTH AND PROTECTION OF THESE TRUSTING, SOFT, SWEET, WOOL-GIVING CREATURES. HE IS A DECENT MAN. SO JUST CALM DOWN, HE HAS A GIRLFRIEND.

KEEP *it* CLEAN.

Old Spice

RED ZONE HYDROWASH BODY WASH

STAFF

People Who Actually Get Paid To Play Video Games

THREE MILLION GAMERS CAN'T BE WRONG

ANDY McNAMARA
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

I find it funny that almost daily I read about how print is dead on some Internet site. It's like they have nothing better to do than belittle their competition, rather than compete.

To the naysayers: Magazines are here to stay, whether the Internet likes it or not. I realize that the reverse is also true; the Internet is a big part of how gamers get their information and discuss the issues of the day. Yet, I see this argument come up often, and I have never quite understood the giant battle between the two.

People ask me how I feel about how the Internet has changed video game reporting, half expecting me to start a grumpy tirade – complete with the "in my day, we walked uphill, both ways, in the snow to get to school" anecdote. This is simply not the case. I think the Internet just gives us more ways to communicate with gamers, and for gamers to communicate with each other, which in the end makes it easier to make a better magazine.

I actually enjoy the avenues that open up to us when creating a magazine. In the early days of Game Informer, we spent a lot of time and effort cramming as much news into an issue as we possibly could. Thankfully, regurgitating every minor press release is no longer our charge. Magazines are about the big picture. This lets us do more in-depth reporting and analysis. We can look at what is and what isn't important to the gamer today, and find the stories that we think are shaping gaming now and for the future.

I think we are accomplishing this goal. As of this issue, Game Informer will send magazines to 3 million gamers. For those of you keeping score at home, that's the biggest video game magazine in the world...and by a wide margin.

And of course, this month we have the biggest story in video games gracing our cover: Grand Theft Auto IV. Game Informer will always have the biggest stories on the biggest games, and I can promise you that we will work harder than ever to make sure that no matter what the Internet says, magazines are still here to report on games unlike anyone else, and before anyone else.

Enjoy the issue.

Andy >> *andy@gameinformer.com*
Handle: The Game Hombre **Expertise:** RPGs, Action/Platform, Driving, First-Person Shooters **Interests:** *24*, Guitar Hero Mastery (Damn You Solos On Expert! Damn You To Hell!), *300*, *Bone* (The Comic, And Take Your Mind Out Of The Gutter) **Dislikes:** Final Fantasy XII Bugging Out And Refusing To Let Me Bring Up The Menu Where You Change Your Gambits And Inventory (And Yes, I Mean That One Where You Do Basically Everything) Two Hours Away From The End **Current Favorite Games:** God Of War II, World Of Warcraft: The Burning Crusade, Guitar Hero II (Xbox 360)

Reiner >> *reiner@gameinformer.com*
Handle: The Raging Gamer **Expertise:** RPGs, Action, First-Person Shooters, Strategy, Sports, Fighting **Interests:** PlayStation 3's Home (BBQs Every Day At My Place!), Randomly Injecting "Bo Knows" And "Where's The Beef" Into Serious Conversations, Patrick Stewart On *Extras* (Funniest Thing Ever!) **Dislikes:** Being A Part Of A Two-Hour Discussion On *The Search For Spock*, The Punisher's New Stars & Stripes Costume, SD Television (Get With The Times, People) **Current Favorite Games:** Grand Theft Auto IV, Ghost Recon Advanced Warfighter 2, God Of War II, Earth Defense Force 2017

Matt >> *matt@gameinformer.com*
Handle: The Original Gamer **Expertise:** First-Person Shooters, Action/Platform, Action/Adventure, Action/Sports **Interests:** Notorious B.I.G. – "Things Done Changed," The O'Jays – "Backstabbers," Steely Dan – "The Royal Scam," Richard Hell And The Voidoids – "Betrayal Takes Two," John Lennon – "How Do You Sleep?" **Dislikes:** That Fall Out Boy Cellphone Commerical With The Jock Dude, Mid-Season *Heroes* Hiatus, High Cholesterol (No More Fast Food…The Ramifications Are Still Sinking In) **Current Favorite Games:** F.E.A.R: First Encounter Assault Recon, Kororinpa: Marble Mania, Gears Of War, God Of War

Kato >> *kato@gameinformer.com*
Handle: The Game Katana **Expertise:** Sports, Racing, Action/Adventure, Action/Platform **Interests:** Pens Staying Put In Pitt, Whistling In Public (People Immediately Get Suspicious), How A Wisconsonite Like Billy Can Support A Minnesota Team (Like Most Of Them, He Wants To Be Minnesotan. Sorry Dude) **Dislikes:** The Remote Control Consortium Keeping Prices High (Are They Controlling The Market? Of Course They Are. They Aren't Called The *Remote Control* Consortium For Nothing) **Current Favorite Games:** All-Pro Football 2K8, DIRT, Stuntman: Ignition, Jam Sessions

Adam >> *adam@gameinformer.com*
Handle: The Alpha Gamer **Expertise:** RPGs, Strategy, First-Person Shooters, Fighting **Interests:** Fantasy Baseball Drafts, Playing Baseball With New And Improved Lung Power, Trolling The Warlock Boards (Note To Locks: You're Still Overpowered), Eating Things That Are Delicious **Dislikes:** When Delicious Things Make My Tummy Asplode, Websites That Don't Work With Firefox (C'mon, Like Anybody Uses IE Any More), Trying To Convince My PS2 To Not Look Horrid On My HDTV **Current Favorite Games:** Command & Conquer 3: Tiberium Wars, S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Shadow Of Chernobyl, World Of Warcraft: The Burning Crusade, Lumines Live

Joe >> *joe@gameinformer.com*
Handle: The Real American Gamer **Expertise:** RPGs, Adventure, Action, Strategy, Puzzle **Interests:** Tearing Through *24* Like A Machine, XKCD, *300*, Hiding Crappy Games (Like Fuzion Frenzy 2) On People's Desks, The Great Game Informer Ban-Off **Dislikes:** Chocobos, Waiting To Conquer The Universe In Spore (My Guys Are Going To Have So Many Mouths), Mrs. Luthor, No New 2D Metroid **Current Favorite Games:** Mass Effect, God Of War II, Final Fantasy XII, Titan Quest: Immortal Throne, Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney, Earth Defense Force 2017

Miller >> *miller@gameinformer.com*
Handle: The Once And Future Gamer **Expertise:** RPGs, Action/Adventure, Fighting, Platform, First-Person Shooters **Interests:** Lunch Negotiations (We'll Never Come Together Until We Learn To Understand Each Other In Multilateral Talks), Jack Bauer's Body Count (He May Very Well Be Considered A Serial Killer In Some Cultures), The Popcorn Fairy (Please Visit Our Office Again!) **Dislikes:** Joe Pushing Fuzion Frenzy 2 Like It's A Drug, Snow Shoveling In March, Tax Preparation (Still Not As Bad As Fuzion Frenzy 2) **Current Favorite Games:** Fallout, Final Fantasy XII, Crackdown, God Of War II, Dig Dug

Bertz >> *mattbertz@gameinformer.com*
Handle: Lord Gamington III **Expertise:** First-Person Shooters, Sports, Action, RPGs, Strategy **Interests:** *300*, Final Episodes Of *The Sopranos*, Andrew Bird's *Armchair Apocrypha*, Pending Ted Leo Concert, St. Patrick's Day Festivities **Dislikes:** Fighting Off Bryan's Sickness, Missing Shane MacGowan Performing From A Wheelchair On St. Patrick's Day, Missing St. Patrick's Day Altogether Due To Bryan's Sickness **Current Favorite Games:** Crackdown, S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Shadow Of Chernobyl, Ghost Recon Advanced Warfighter 2, The Elder Scrolls IV: Shivering Isles

Ben >> *ben@gameinformer.com*
Handle: Your Friendly Neighborhood Gamer **Expertise:** Action/Adventure, Action/RPGs, Platform, Survival Horror, First-Person Shooters **Interests:** Deadpool (Marvel Should Let Me Write Him), *Rome* Season One, *300* (And Seeing It For Free), *Band Of Brothers*, *Arrested Development*, *Extras* **Dislikes:** The Death Of Captain America And The Fact That Reiner Is Happy About It (Get Him, Readers), The Smell Of Lukewarm Ketchup That Has Been Sitting Out All Day, Chad (What A Jerkhead) **Current Favorite Games:** Ratchet & Clank: Size Matters, Crackdown, Castlevania: Portrait Of Ruin, The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion, Splinter Cell: Double Agent

Bryan >> *bryan@gameinformer.com*
Handle: The Gamer's Advocate **Expertise:** Action/Adventure, RPGs, Survival Horror, First-Person Shooters, Rhythm **Interests:** Shamrock Shakes, *300*, Showing The Old-Timers (Kato And Matt) What The Kids Are Listening To, Timing How Long It Takes Until Their Headphones Go Flying Across The Bullpen **Dislikes:** That Flu That's Going Around (Okay, So Maybe I Started It), The Fact That I Curse Every PSP I Touch, That *Extras* Is Ending **Current Favorite Games:** Super Paper Mario, LittleBigPlanet, Kororinpa: Marble Mania, The Legend Of Zelda: Twilight Princess, TMNT 1989 Arcade

1 Billy snuggles up to The Legend of Zelda kingpin Eiji Aonuma at GDC **2** Freelance journalist Scott Jones hangs with Konami PR maestro Marc Franklin **3** Publisher Gamecock welcomes attendees to its GDC party in memorable fashion! Watch for Cirque de Soleil: Dorque coming to a city near you **4** Andy and Bryan max, relax, ill, and chill with LucasArts' Chris Baker and Adam Kahn **5** Jurassic 5 and Ozomatli DJ Cut Chemist spins end-to-end burners at Sony's GDC party **6** Billy with his posse: Konami's Kyoko Fukuhara, Bender/Helper's Adam Fenton, Elebits creator Shingo Mukaitoge (holding Flat Stanley), Bender/Helper's Marisa Gross, and our own Adam! **7** Former GI editor Jay Fitzloff, now of Sandbox Strat, accepts a regal greeting from Sony's Mariam Sughayer **8** Just another day of "work" for Game Informer editor Bryan Vore, pictured here working on a story about PlayStation 3 backwards compatibility
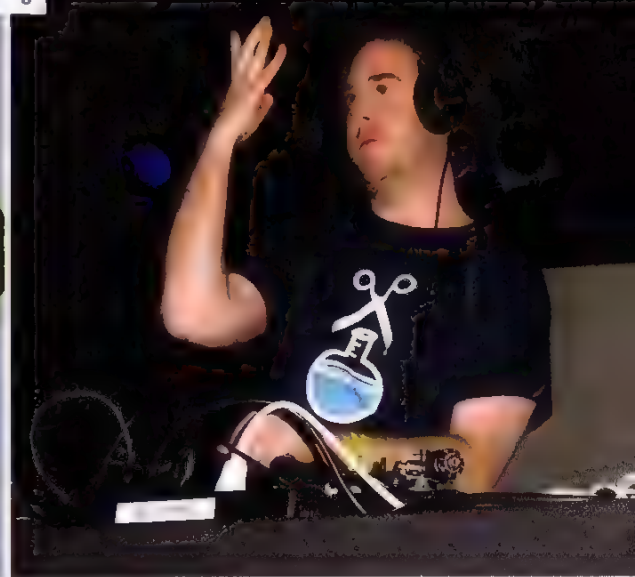
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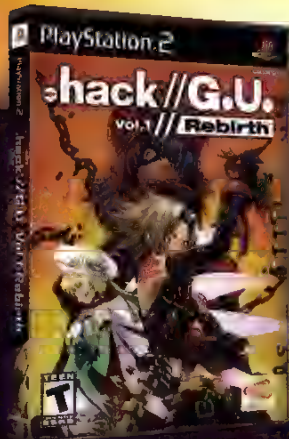
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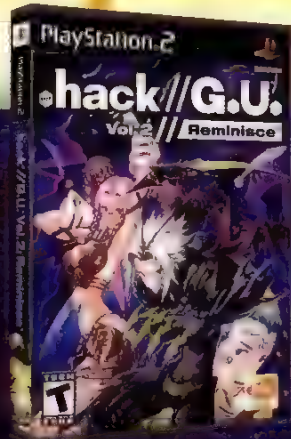
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TO BE A ROCK AND NOT TO ROLL

While, I agree with some of the songs you chose to be in Guitar Hero III, I do feel you missed a song that should have at least made an honorable mention: "Hotel California." It starts with a lengthy guitar riff, and finishes with a faster riff at the end of the song. I highly doubt I'm the only one who wants to rock to The Eagles' classic hit.
Stevie Manning
Via sbcglobal.net

I saw that your top ten about Guitar Hero favored mostly classics. However, one particular band was nowhere to be seen: Lynyrd Skynyrd. Personally, I think it is absurd that a band with an awesome guitar solo in almost every one of their songs ("Free Bird," anyone?) has absolutely no place on your list. I also find it strange that the previous Guitar Heroes haven't already featured Skynyrd.
Andrew Porter
Via hotmail.com

No Stairway!
Anonymous
Via aol.com

■ Here's a little tip if you ever decide to publish your own gaming magazine: There's nothing quite like a top ten list to get people fired up. The gaming community's pervasive love of Guitar Hero led to a massive response to our Guitar Hero III wish list. We just want to say thanks to all of you who sent us complaints, videos, and personal picks (though you would be saddened to see the number of suggestions

for Matchbox 20 and Korn songs). Oh, and to clear up Andrew's point: Lynyrd Skynyrd didn't make the list because "Freebird" was basically the last boss of Guitar Hero II. As to the "No Stairway" rule...well, we think the phrasing there is open to interpretation. You know, sometimes words have two meanings.

THE GREAT PURGE

There was a time when Game Informer devoted the bulk of its pages to actual reviews. Yet over the past few years, I've seen more and more fluff stories and lavish previews creep in. I just received my March issue, and at first I couldn't even find the review section since it was only 11 pages. If you guys are that pressed for space, here's what you can do: cut the industry articles (no one cares), big previews, classic game reviews, Dear GI, the trivia section, and the walkthroughs and cheats. Will people miss those sections? Sure, but you can only publish a finite number of pages – and you're devoting too few to the reviews.
Erin Jeffreys
Via gmail.com

■ Hey, yeah! We've been so stupid all this time, assuming that our readers care about the coolest upcoming titles, the biggest industry happenings, and gaming as a hobby in general. Everyone just wants cold, hard review scores, minus any bothersome context or perspective. Never mind the fact that some months only have a handful of games hitting retail shelves. For those months, we'll just pad the remaining pages with pictures of kittens interacting with everyday objects in humorous ways. Here's the only problem

with this strategy: If we cut the Dear GI section, where would people write to complain about our Sonic and Dragon Ball Z scores?

PROBLEMS UNLOCKED

I want to talk to you about Reiner's opinion piece in issue 167. I think Achievements are a great way to show off to your friends how good you are at games. However, what about cheaters? A friend and I have been known to "cheat" at some Achievements. For example, to get the 10 kills Achievement in Rainbow Six Vegas, we just set up a player match and I let my friend kill me 10 times, and then he let me kill him 10 times. Don't get me wrong, my Gamerscore is over 13,000 and I get most of them honestly (you can't fake beating Call of Duty 2 and 3 on Veteran), but there are plenty of ways you can up your Gamerscore with little effort.
Andre Toro
Via hotmail.com

In issue 167 there was an article called "The X-Factor" that praised the Xbox 360's achievement point system. I agree with this in some ways; it helps prolong single-player games. Achievements can add hours to games in the RPG or Adventure genres. That's not the problem for me. My grievances are with Achievements based in the multiplayer modes of games. For example, in Gears of War there are many points to be gained from defeating opponents online with different weapons and in different ways. Multiplayer games are about cooperation and teamwork, and having these sorts of objectives can break teams apart. I don't know how many times I've been told not to pick up a certain weapon because a player was working on an Achievement, or being accused of stealing a kill when it was better for the team if I finish an enemy off. The bottom line is this: There should be no Achievements in online multiplayer – they discourage teamwork and make the multiplayer experience nothing more than a number game.
Thomas Hurd
Newport Center, VT

JUDGING A BOOK

I have a problem and I hope you friendly Game Informers have an answer for me. I was recently browsing your magazine for the latest and greatest video games, and I noticed that all of your cover stories are titles from some big kahuna LucasArts, Rockstar, EA, and Ubisoft – they seem to get a lot of attention. Why not choose a promising underdog, like BioWare?
Alex MacDonald
Allendale, Michigan

■ A proven never-miss developer like BioWare should hardly be considered an underdog (the developer's Jade Empire appeared on the cover of issue 126), but you bring up a good point. The truth is that we make an effort to spotlight games that may be under most gamers' radars, like BioShock, Dark Sector, or Kane & Lynch. In the grand scheme of things, our covers on high-profile games (like this month's GTA story) may be more memorable, but we still love to throw our support behind lesser-known games that we think will be awesome.

Send your comments to Game Informer Snail Mail: Game Informer Magazine • Attn: Dear GI • 724 North First St., 4th Floor • Minneapolis, MN 55401 Email: deargi@gameinformer.com

12   GAME INFORMER

Stop Poking Me!

Lazy Peons

Quest

Orc Hero Required

Lazy Peons enters play exhausted.

Exhaust Lazy Peons to complete this quest.

Reward: Draw a card.

"Stop poking me!"

DARK PORTAL 103/319

Art by: Steve Ellis

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■ We'll admit that Microsoft's Achievement system isn't perfect, but it is impossible to deny that it is influencing the way we play games. With the PlayStation 3's Home tapping into similar concepts (see our story on page 16), it seems as though they will become a staple of the industry moving forward. Quantifiable rewards, whether they be trophies or a Gamerscore, give gamers additional incentive to fully explore multiple angles of their games. There are still some kinks to iron out, like the ability to cheat and the weight of online components. If the success of Achievements so far is any indication, it is safe to assume that they'll be around for a while, leaving plenty of time for improvement.

ANOTHER HOT BUTTON

In March I read your article about the Columbine game, and it showed me that we – as gamers – are being singled out as second-rate citizens. We seem to have one less right than everyone else: the right of free speech. Although I believe the game was in poor taste, Super Columbine Massacre RPG was meant to provoke discussion about disturbing issues that are still prevalent in our nation. I found it disappointing how easily the game was pulled and how little resistance was offered. It is incredibly frustrating that some people have made it their mission to regulate what games others can make or play based on some misguided notion of moral superiority.

Thomas Ward
Wharton, New Jersey

I am writing in reference to the Super Columbine Massacre RPG article. I feel that, in not truly examining the position against the game, you support the idea that anything is permissible under the label of "art." What comes from that notion are products of this ilk – games that play around with serious issues, trying to shield themselves from criticism under the banner of artistic expression. This specific example of "artistic expression" is no more than somebody getting jollies out of stirring up a ruckus. If this game is trying to promulgate the idea that getting picked on in school justifies mass murder, I feel you owe it to readers to present this point.

Alex Gojkov
Redford, MI

■ The tragic events of Columbine still resonate with many people, which is part of the reason behind the polarized reactions to Danny Ledonne's Super Columbine Massacre RPG. While we can't say whether the decision to pull the game from the Slamdance Guerilla Gamemaker Contest was right or wrong, it seems like there are some misconceptions that should be cleared up. SCMRPG was not created as a commercial title. It was never intended to hit retail shelves. Think of it like an experimental film, intended for a specific audience; the mere fact that the game exists in some form doesn't mean that 8-year-olds will be buying the DS version tomorrow. It should also be noted that SCMRPG attempts to examine the actions of Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, not glorify or justify them. On the other hand, even though the SCMRPG is intended to be a social commentary, what is permissible under that definition will differ from person to person. For many, regardless of intention, the content in any context simply crosses the line.

READER ART
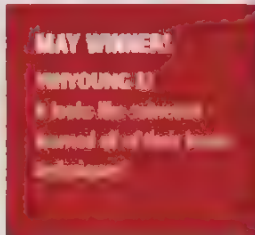
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ZACH SCHEFFLER
No scandal here! Miis don't have any "below the belt" customization options

JASON JENKINS
In addition to their ruthless brutality, barbarians are also known for telling hilarious "your mom" jokes

MARIKO W. GREEN
Whoa! Someone actually liked Godhand enough to draw it! What's next, Bomberman Act Zero art?
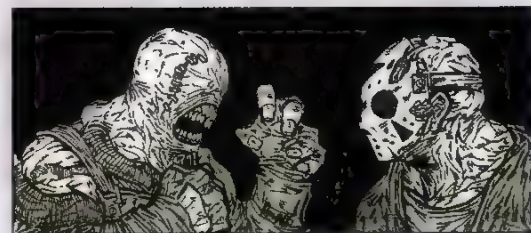
DESMOND NELSON
We are purchasing front row tickets to this fight right now
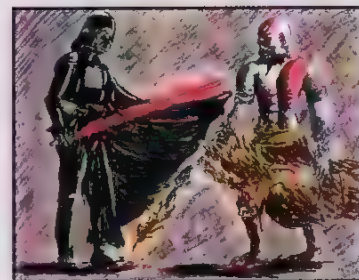
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SONY COMES HOME
PS3 SOCIAL SERVICE THIS FALL

■ Favorite trophies can be displayed in a personal Hall of Fame. Others will be stashed in a below ground storage unit
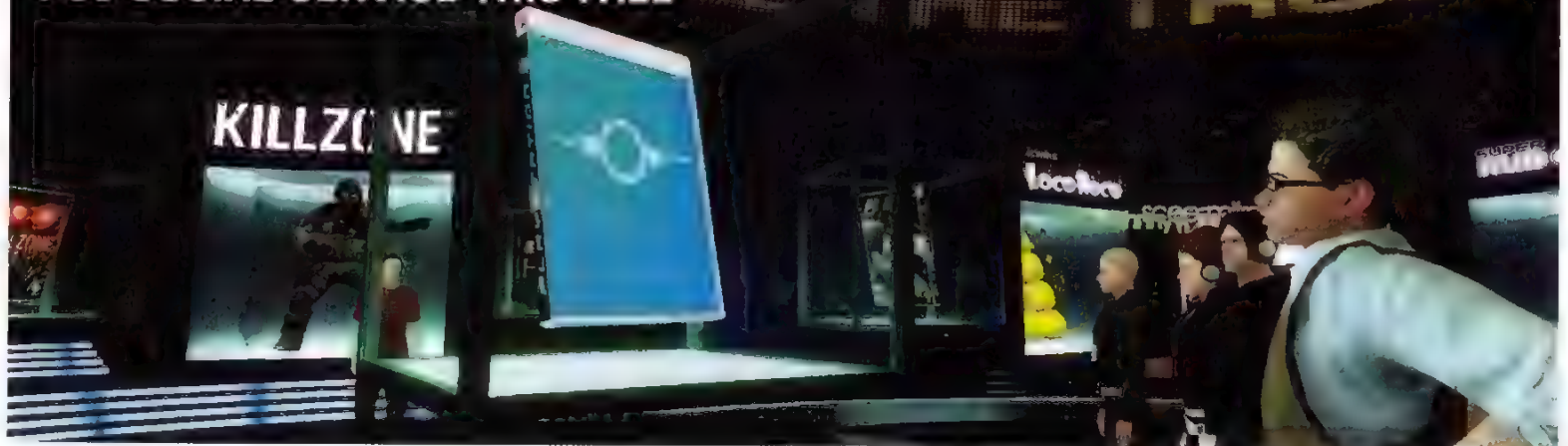
During this year's Game Developers Conference, Sony rallied around its latest vision for the future of gaming. In a keynote address delivered by president of worldwide studios Phil Harrison, the company claimed that video games went through two previous iterations, essentially offline and online. Sony is now trying to take things to the next step with what it is calling Game 3.0, or "The connected device with dynamic content and active connected communities [and] open standards."

The centerpiece of this new philosophy will be a free 3D social networking space called Home. The system will be accessed via a new icon in the cross media bar that connects directly to the Web. Users will first appear in the Central Lounge with a generic character that they can fully customize. In addition to various body and face sliders, players will be able to select from a variety of default clothes, purchased outfits, or duds that come included on game discs (SingsStar and Heavenly Sword shirts were shown as examples).

Players can communicate via text and voice, as well as with selectable phrases and gestures. In the Games Space they'll be able to play a round of pool, bowling, or an arcade game without any separate menu system. To escape the hubbub, users will customize their own private apartments, which they can invite friends over to These spaces can be decorated with a variety of couches, tables, decorations, wallpapers, etc. Again, these items will be a mix of free, paid, and packed in with games. Blank picture frames can be placed on the wall and filled with photos stored on the PS3 hard drive. Users will also be able to play video files on TVs placed in the space. Sony even plans to allow pet creation and customization in future iterations of Home.

The theater space is basically a digital representation of your local AMC. Users can meet up to watch new trailers and videos, and we can see events and premieres kick ing off here as Home picks up steam. Perhaps the biggest potential lies in custom spaces created by gaming compa- nies or brands like Coke, Gap, and NBC. These locations are fully malleable to replicate the inside of a business, show off a new gameplay feature, or pull off whatever companies

want to do to bring visitors in.

In response to Microsoft's Achievements, Sony has cre- ated a trophy system. Every Home user will have their own personal Hall of Fame that they can stock with around a dozen of their crowning accomplishments. Remaining trophies can still be stored and scrolled through in a kind of floating database. Right next to the main Hall of Fame area is massive auditorium that looks a lot like the imperial senate room from the Star Wars prequels. Here every PS3 game available will be displayed so that players can check out the possible trophies they can earn.

Even though the program is totally free, users will have to deal with a barrage of dynamic advertising in posters, banners, and video screens located around the spaces. And there's the additional cost of microtransactions for in-Home items. But it seems like users can invest as little or as many real dollars as they please and still enjoy a large majority of the features. Sony plans a large-scale beta of Home this April, followed by the official release in the fall.

■ Private apartments can be tricked out with physics-enabled objects, themed wallpaper, and framed digital photos from the PS3 hard drive

Game and non-game companies can create custom spaces for users to hang out in. This example area features an interactive driving range, basketball shootout, soccer booth, and boxing ring
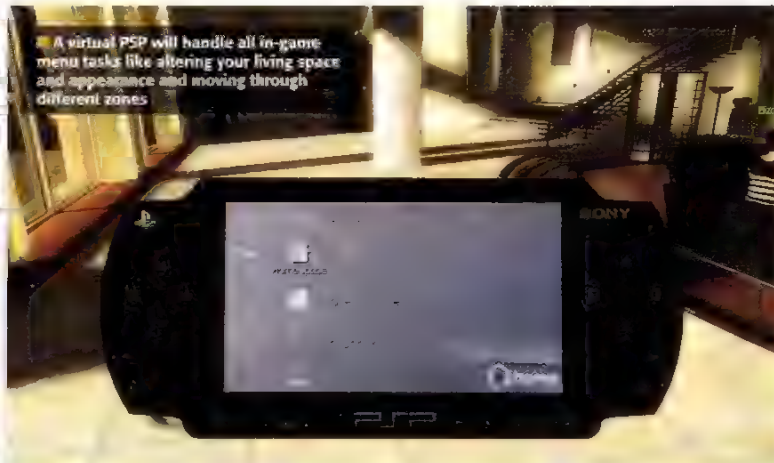
A virtual PSP will handle all in-game menu tasks like altering your living space and appearance and moving through different zones

The Central Lounge is the main public space in Home. Talk with friends and strangers alike with pre-set phrases, a USB keyboard, or voice chat. Ads are everywhere

Character customization is sufficiently deep, enough so that players should be able to create a reasonable likeness of themselves

HOME IMAGE BOUTIQUE

Head

TO FINISH, TO CANCEL

The Games Space allows users to play pickup games like pool and bowling. Downloadable games can be played in stand-up arcade cabinets
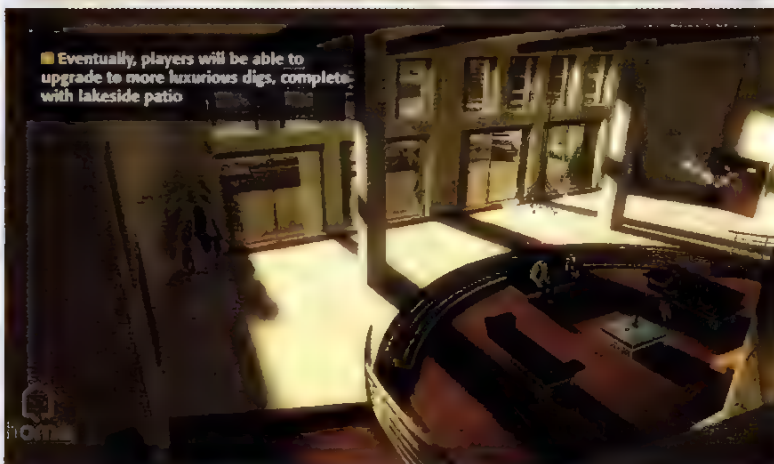
Eventually, players will be able to upgrade to more luxurious digs, complete with lakeside patio

The Home Theater includes constantly updating posters, lobby trailers, and physical spaces where you can watch movies

games

WHERE ARE THEY NOW?
SPRING HASN'T SPRUNG FOR SOME GAMES

With the recent announcements that BioShock is being pushed back into late August and developer The Collective is being taken off Warner Bros. Interactive's Dirty Harry game, we thought we'd update you really quick on some titles that should have been out now or may have just fallen off your radar.

Battlefield: Bad Company (PS3/Xbox 360)

We brought you the first look of the console-only version of the Battlefield franchise last fall. EA and developer DICE hoped we'd all be playing it now, but it's been moved to an unspecified date in 2008.
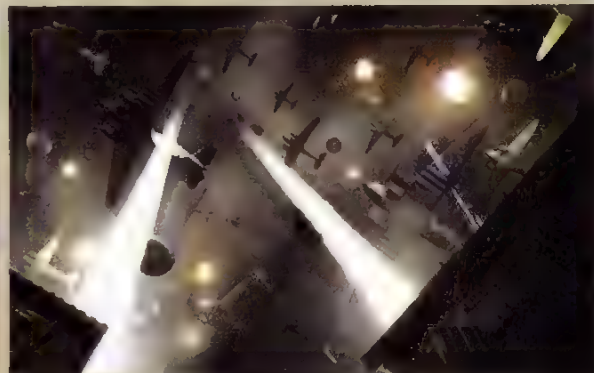
Medal of Honor Airborne (PS3/Xbox 360/PC)

Originally a holiday 2006 title, EA pushed this game into spring of this year, but it's still not out. An EA representative told us more info on Airborne would be coming shortly.

Too Human (Xbox 360)

Silicon Knights isn't known for making release dates, so it's no surprise that even Microsoft representatives don't have a clue when it's going to be out.

Enemy Territories: Quake Wars (PS3/Xbox 360/PC)

Quake Wars was very playable when it was unveiled at the last E3 and Activision said it'd be out before the end of 2006, but the company is now taking an "expect it when you see it" approach. No word if a simultaneous release is planned.

The Legend of Zelda: The Phantom Hourglass (DS)

Nintendo said this gem would be in our hands in 2006 when it was first announced, but our eyes must have been bigger than our brains. The company has just put a "Holiday 2007" sticker on the title.

Gran Turismo 4 Mobile (PSP)

After debuting in 2004, little has been heard about this Sony title. A 2006 release date came and went without a game, and a source at Polyphony told us the title was essentially on the back burner.

"I want barrels of it." It's a late Wednesday afternoon at Greenberg Studios in downtown San Francisco, and 19-year-old gamer Raul* has just unequivocally described his attitude towards blood in a first-person shooter. Sitting before a moderator and among a group of his video gaming peers, Raul hasn't been the most vocal member of this post-release focus group for Ubisoft's Wii title Red Steel, but he is articulate in his opinions. This is exactly what the people behind the proverbial one-way glass wanted. In the end, it's just one comment of many that the research team will field about the game from forums, reviews, and sessions like this one. In that regard, this focus group is very similar to many others that occur for different companies throughout the industry. It's neither the beginning nor the end of the game development process, but simply one part along the way.

*The names of the participants in the focus group have been changed for legal reasons

BEHIND THE GLASS:
GI LOOKS IN ON FOCUS GROUPS

"You're never quite sure if you just happened to get a weird bunch of Splinter Cell fans that nobody agrees with in the Splinter Cell community. So you do have to be careful about using focus groups to make 'either/or' decisions.

– Nicki Snovar, Ubisoft director of consumer knowledge"
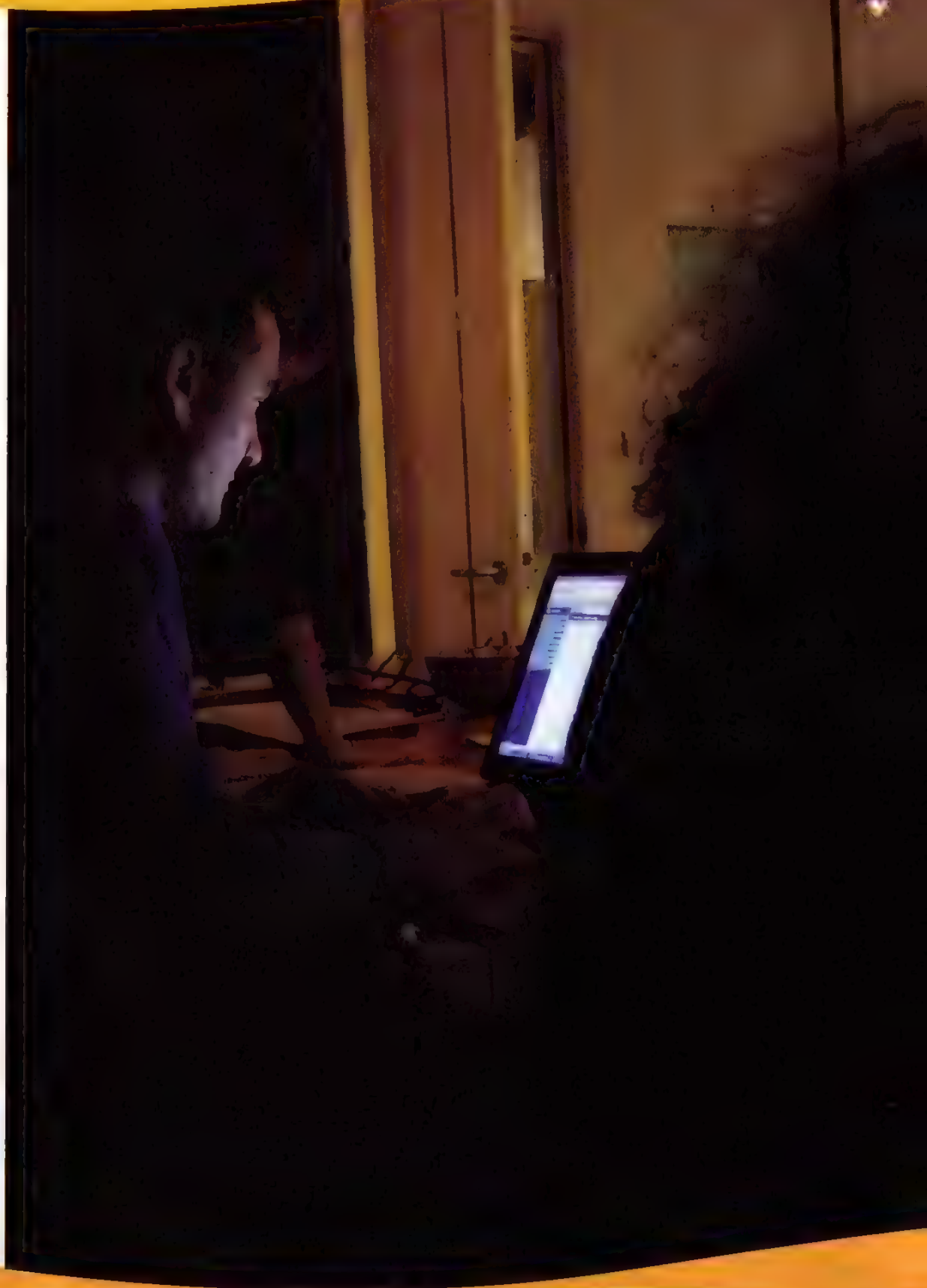
WEIRD SCIENCE

It's easy to fear companies misusing focus groups in order to develop games by marketing and demographic fiat, but in our time watching a focus group in action and in our conversations with research experts in the industry, their power is consciously kept in context. "The point of consumer research isn't to say, 'This is what you should do,'" explains LucasArts director of consumer insights Sean Denny. "Because consumers are great, but they aren't game designers." Denny says that LucasArts often uses focus groups to get a read on specific gameplay mechanics, character design, environments, etc. These one-on-one sessions can start a year out from launch and involve hands-on time with the game or perhaps the showing of a demo video for those times when a playable build isn't yet ready.

Any focus group hinges on the people you recruit for it. "If you don't get the right people, you're wasting your money," says Denny. This much is made clear as we talked to the Red Steel session moderator, Gary Rudman, president of GTR Consulting. Today he's going to oversee two back-to-back sessions. The first, which we sat in on, was comprised of people who hadn't played the game until Ubisoft sent them copies with the instructions that they play it for at least six hours. The second contained those that bought the game on their own.

Not only are potential focus group participants filtered to make sure they meet desired criteria (whether that be casual vs. hardcore gamer, age, gaming history, etc.), but Rudman says that there is an additional vetting process just before the group starts. He likes to ask these potential panel members about something that's currently pissing them off. "If they can't communicate one of those things, or their answer is a downward glance with a shrug, or is so obnoxious that they keep interrupting, then those are the people I might not take into the session." Rudman says he always over-recruits. Today he expects to meet with up nine kids before finding six that are suitable. The others will be paid for their time and dismissed.

Then again, this pre-screening process doesn't always weed out the weirdos. One Ubisoft research member told us a story about a time when a guy in a Tom Clancy focus group started freaking out that he was seeing ghosts. It turned out that some of the faces of the Ubisoft employees behind the one-way mirror were being illuminated by the blue glow of their LCD laptops and were faintly visible on the other side. Not fazed by this guy claiming he was seeing ghosts, the moderator of the session told him nonchalantly, "Yes, you're right. We're here to talk about Ghost Recon."

The moderator is an important part of the process. Publishers go outside to third parties at offsite premises in order to maintain some objectivity. For Denny, he says you can never underestimate the power of the Force. "You bring a Star Wars fan to our office, and it might be a little biased or skewed. They see the statue of Yoda when they walk in and that's pretty much it. If they knew that George Lucas was behind the screen, they might not say, 'That's no good.' I'd rather hear the bad news than not."

In Ubisoft's case, they've had Rudman sub-contract a focus group facility on his own, and even have the facility recruit the people for the groups according to the specs that Ubisoft has outlined. Nicki Shovar, Ubisoft's director of consumer knowledge, says these kinds of small details are important. "Even for us to do the interviewing allows for bias to happen."

Publishers may pay for the services of moderators like Rudman (who will also write up a final report regarding the focus group sessions for Ubisoft), but he is far from a company stooge. He always tells those chosen for the groups he "has nothing to do with the stuff they see today." "The important thing I'm going to explain to

▶ **The use of the sword – or lack thereof – in the Red Steel focus group was an important point**

them is that I'm looking for them to be brutally honest," he says.

As the session starts, it's clear that Rudman and the researchers at Ubisoft have culled the right people to deliver the honesty they are looking for. The five gamers that have been chosen represent a mix of gamers at different ages, and as a group their conversations throughout the afternoon make the session feel more like a bunch of friends talking about gaming and not as if they are participating in a study.

One of the first topics of conversation Rudman brings up is the Wii itself. The console holds an interesting significance in the proceedings. Due to the way you play games on the Wii, the panel's opinions of Red Steel are clearly tied to what they think of the system itself. Angela, a 25-year-old admitted Nintendo fan thinks that "anything that gets us closer to the Star Trek Holodeck is cool," while the aforementioned Raul doesn't want to move around like a 5-year-old. Sixteen-year-old Darrell voices a similar thought. "I actually have to move my lazy ass to play."

These opinions of the Wii appear to color Red Steel, but Shovar and her associates aren't sure how relevant they are. They point out that since so few people actually have the system, it's not only likely that these are hardcore early adopters, but perhaps not even Nintendo knows much about the demographics of the Wii's

owners at this early stage in the platform's life. Rudman points out that trying to find the right Wii owners to fill two groups – on a Wednesday night even, adds Shovar – is like looking for a needle in a haystack. At the same time, it's currently no longer the system's launch period, and the expectations of the gamers like those in the group may have already grown. In her estimation, Shovar believes that a good mix of gamers can't be found for any title that sells less than a million copies.

As the panel starts discussing Red Steel itself and the opinions are flying fast, it's clear that Rudman is crucial to the proceedings. Sometimes he pushes for clarification of a point, other times he makes sure the outspoken members of the group don't drown the others out. Shovar says that there's always one person who portrays him or herself as an expert (people may even defer to those with a high-falutin' British accent!), and this time's not an exception. Mark, at 19, fits this bill. Very specific in his observations, at times Mark would threaten to take over the conversation, but his affability made him non-threatening. Once he even mugged for us behind the mirror, fixing his hair with a comic touch while he knew we were watching.

A possible danger in focus groups, particularly with strong characters like Mark, is "groupthink." During the course of the session, several times Rudman had the panel write down their one-word impressions of a topic before it was discussed. This helped solidify each person's opinion before it could possibly be influenced by the discussion of someone else's ideas. For this panel, groupthink doesn't seem to be a problem, even for Darrell and Angela, who weren't as loud as Mark or 26-year-old techie Andy, but whose opinions were respected among their peers nonetheless.

Rudman starts asking them specific questions about Red Steel. What did they think of the setting? Did they use the spare enemy or stop time feature? Does it have the qualities that a shooter should have? No punches

are pulled in the ensuing answers, but what's more interesting is when the gamers express something deeper about their time with the game. Angela liked the seemingly mundane task of shooting barrels because "It's the one thing I have control over that they are not making me do." On the other hand, almost everyone in the panel wished there was more blood – not just for gore's sake, but because they felt it was a touch of realism that the genre demanded. Someone even points out how there's dripping blood on the game's cover.

Although the group discusses the game's controls, this aspect of a title is usually handled differently in pre-release focus groups. Sean Denny says LucasArts videotapes these one-on-one sessions in order to provide an extra dimension of feedback. "We can watch their hands on the controller, and we can see their facial expressions, and we actually have them verbalize and talk out loud – which is a little weird at first. It's that sort of ongoing verbal dialogue we ask people for so we can understand their thought

Discussion Guide

gtr consulting

I. Ground Rules

- Welcome/Ground Rules
  - ✓ Welcome and introduction
  - ✓ Explanation of confidentiality of viewing facility and videotaping
  - ✓ Explanation that even friends disagree with one another—looking for debate and different opinions
  - ✓ No wrong answers, looking for honest opinions.
  - ✓ Looking for brutal honesty about what shown from "experts"
  - ✓ Moderator has nothing to do with what exposed so won't hurt feelings if like/dislike

II. Introduction & Warm Up (10 Min)

- Introductions
  - ✓ Name, age, grade/job
    - – What are some of your favorite video games?
    - – What are some of your favorite shooter games? Why?
      - – What are the qualities that a shooter must have? Explain
    - – What are some of your favorite action games? Why?
      - – What are the qualities that an action game must have? Explain
    - – How would you differentiate a shooter game from an action game?

(Moderator will write down key elements on shooter/action games in order to use them for part IV)

This eight-page document was the backbone of the focus group session, although it was not slavishly followed. At times moderator Gary Rudman strayed from the document as he saw fit

Focus groups testing out gameplay concepts are usually one-on-one sessions video-taped for additional feedback

process of, 'You know, I want to use the Force, but the control scheme is such that I don't know how to use the Force.' We need that level of detail so the team can go back and balance to make it as accessible as possible."

At various times in the Red Steel focus group, the knives come out and the feedback gets negative. Ugly, even. But finding a bunch of gamers to say something bad about a game isn't hard. What's more valuable is the panel's concrete ideas of what would have made the game better. You should be able to use your sword at all times, not just when the game lets you. "Why?" Rudman asks. "Well, you know," answers Andy, "Why are lightsabers still popular, man?" Raul says it would make him "excited," while Darrell expands, "It's like you're the freakin' Highlander or something." A better story, more environmental interactivity, improved controls, and of course, more blood are all targeted as some necessary improvements.

As the session ends, we're particularly interested to find out what the researchers thought about some of the more negative comments in the

More meaningful environmental interactivity is one thing that all the members of our focus group asked for

session. They were totally unfazed. In fact, during the focus group the team behind the mirror would often laugh out loud at a comment. Rudman is used to this. "Once you go down a negative path, it's pretty hard to go back because people are paid to come in here and be critical. We always say, 'When you come out of a focus group session, and you feel like your product doesn't suck, you've done very well, because [this age group] is very critical.'"

In many ways, this has been a typical focus group in that it's just data that can be interpreted and used in a variety of ways. There are even contradictory statements those in the group have made which have to be reconciled. "You don't want polling," says Shovar. "You never want to be counting people in a focus group. 'Well, three of the guys didn't like it and three did.' You are only seeing one group. In order to analyze this, and I hesitate to even use that word because you don't do that in qualitative [study], you wait until you've finished everything and see what are the patterns. What are the things, that after we see it, are: 'These are things that we can act on.' You're never quite sure if you just happened to get a weird bunch of Splinter Cell fans that nobody agrees with in the Splinter Cell community. So you do have to be careful about using focus groups to make 'either/or' decisions." Shovar tells us that any info taken from this session will be augmented by the company's play-test lab in Montreal, comments taken from forums, and a wealth of other data as the future of the franchise is contemplated.

As we prepare to leave the facility, the Ubisoft team is getting ready for the next session. A buffet of Thai food has been set up and people help themselves as Rudman enters the room and begins to discuss changes to the question sheet the team has prepared in advance to tweak how this next panel is approached. There is talk about adding new questions to see how the focus group's recommendations for improvements would differ if Red Steel were approached as an action game and not a shooter, but some think this is unnecessary. We reach the lobby and see a dozen or so kids waiting to be vetted by Rudman for the next session, talking about video games as is natural. It's just another Wednesday night. ■ ■ ■

the top 10 video game weapons

If playing video games has taught us anything, it's that in the year 20XX robots from the future will most likely try to enslave mankind. To be prepared for this event, the GI office has been collecting and blueprinting the ultimate video game arsenal. These are the top ten weapons we want at our sides when the decisive hour is at hand. Viva La Resistance!

1 Zero-Point Energy Field Manipulator (Half-Life 2)

The thing that made the Gravity Gun so awesome was Valve's incredible physics. You could spend hours just playing with Dog and this gun, and for a game where the premise is about you shooting dudes, that says a lot about a gun. Then Valve made it even better: By the end of Half-life 2 the Gravity Gun is so super-powered that everything is a weapon, and this is the only gun you need.
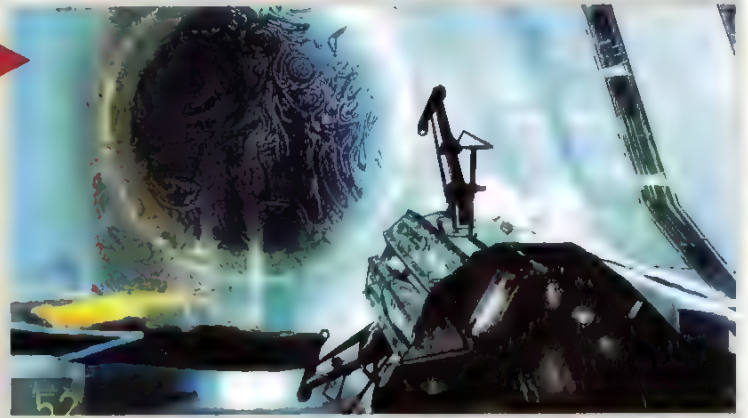
2 BFG (Doom)

Ah, the "Bio Force Gun." Wait a minute, that's not what it stands for (stupid Doom movie)! Doom had a lot of weapons that changed the face of gaming, like the chainsaw and the double-barreled shotgun, but this big freakin' gun tops them all. As Samuel L. Jackson would say, "when you absolutely, positively have to kill every last [gentleman] in the room, accept no substitutes."

3 Metal Blades (Mega Man 2)

Metal Blades were so powerful and energy efficient that after you got them you literally stopped using the normal mega buster. What was the point? Several of the robot masters went down easily with the blades, and even Metal Man himself couldn't take more than one shot from his own weapon. We haven't seen a Mega Man weapon since that was this imbalanced and fun.

4 Lightsaber (Jedi Knight II: Jedi Outcast)

Sorry, fans of the Halo 2 Energy Sword, but the lightsaber was here first and it's still cooler. We fondly remember the first time we fired up the lightsaber in Jedi Knight II. Spending the opening levels without it only made tearing through those first waves of stormtroopers all the more enjoyable. Sure, we'd seen the lightsaber before in other games, but this was the first time we really felt like we were using it.

5 Sheepinator (Ratchet and Clank: Going Commando)

We'd also take the Morph-O-Ray or the Qwack-O-Ray. We picked the Sheepinator because it turns enemies into sheep, and sheep are stupid, making this weapon insulting as well as funny. As an added bonus, the Sheepinator gave us some hilarious commercials. The Concrete Donkey from Worms 3D and the Shark Gun from Armed and Dangerous get honorable mentions here for adding creative comedy to a killing tool.

6 Hyper Beam (Super Metroid)

During the final fight with Mother Brain, all of Samus' weapons are replaced with the Hyper Beam. Any reservations you might have had about losing all your firepower are quickly dispelled the second you unload the new weapon on Mother Brain and watch her reel back, howling in pain. Up until the Hyper Beam, we hadn't played a game that made us afraid of our own power.

7 Cerebral Bore (Turok 2: Seeds of Evil)

The Cerebral Bore attached itself to enemies' heads and drilled into their skulls. The resulting pop of blood and brain matter was a truly gratifying experience. You may have cursed Turok 2 during that long trek to find the next save station, but when you got your hands on the Cerebral Bore, the time began to fly.

8 Blades of Chaos (God of War)

Kratos' blades are what distinguish him from other action heroes. They give him range and add a distinct visual style to his combat. Imagine if Kratos had just used a sword like Dante. Actually, you did get the option to use a sword later in the game, but you might not remember it, because you probably didn't use it. The reasons for that are the Blades of Chaos.

9 Spread Gun (Contra)

Like some kind of insanely wide shotgun, the Spread gun was a Contra player's greatest asset, capable of turning even a mediocre player into a one-man army. It didn't matter if you were playing with your best friend, when you saw that friendly flying S float across the screen, it was every man for himself to get it first.
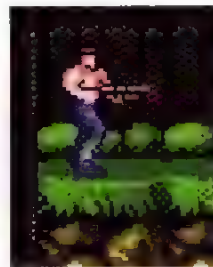
10 Laptop Gun (Perfect Dark)

Sure, there were more powerful weapons in the game, but there was nothing more satisfying than setting up a transforming turret next to the body armor and waiting for a buddy to walk into it. With the ability to function as a machine gun or a bullet-spewing trap, the laptop gun is a little more diverse, so it just barely edges out the proximity mines from GoldenEye.
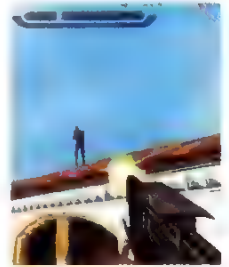
NINTENDO NIXES ONLINE FOR 07

Recently the president of SNK revealed that Nintendo is restricting companies from adding online functionality to their Wii games – whether on the Virtual Console or regular retail titles – until after 2007. Nintendo itself has only one online title announced, and that is Pokémon Battle Revolution.

FF XIII NOT PS3 EXCLUSIVE?

Talking to a French newspaper, Sony France president Georges Fornay hinted that the PS3 exclusivity of Final Fantasy XIII may be in danger. "As far as Final Fantasy XIII goes, I can tell you that the exclusivity is in discussion." Also worth mentioning is that Square Enix just filed for a trademark for something called "Final Fantasy Haeresis XIII."

MICROSOFT IN MOTION

Which one of these is not like the other? With motion sensing being used by both Nintendo and Sony, Microsoft's Xbox 360 hasn't jumped on the bandwagon. However, rumors have been circulating that the company is developing its own answer to the motion sensing movement. Whether this sees the light of day or is just a test run remains to be seen.

NEW KATAMARI?

A rumor has sprung up that Namco has a PS3, Xbox 360, and Wii title called Beautiful Katamari in the works, as well as a console version of Warhammer: Mark of Chaos. Both will supposedly come out this fall.

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

NAME THAT GAME
Test Your Sight

You probably won't guess this game, but it's hilarious anyway. Coming out for the ZX Spectrum by Sinclair in the U.K. (perhaps you've seen British developers talk up this system and wondered what they were going on about) in 1985, this compilation of games was self-effacingly bad. It contained five of the worst titles submitted to publisher/developer Firebird: Fido, Fido2, Puppy Power, Race Ace, Fruitmachine, and Weasel Willy. Despite its own advertising telling consumers it wasn't worth it, this game cassette sold – likely because it was only £2.50.

PS3 RUMBLES ON
SONY/IMMERSION KISS & MAKE UP

After a few rounds of boxing between their lawyers, Sony and Immersion Corporation have resolved their patent dispute and formed a new agreement to deliver Immersion's rumble technology in "PlayStation format products." The deal doesn't specifically mention the PS3, but that feature is conspicuously absent from the new system's controllers. As part of the deal, Sony will pay Immersion $22.5 million over three years – not including the $97.2 million owed due to the original patent lawsuit.

VISTA GOES LIVE
CROSS-PLATFORM PLAY IN JUNE

Microsoft has announced details regarding Games for Windows Live – Vista PC's version of Xbox 360's Xbox Live – that will launch on May 8th alongside the PC version of Halo 2. Games for Windows Live enables cross-platform play with the 360, as well as chat between the two systems and a unified Gamerscore and Achievement list. Cross-platform play will not be available until June when Shadowrun (shown) comes out.

Like Xbox Live, Windows Live will come in two different forms – Silver and Gold. Silver is free and gives you online play and unifies your Gamerscore, Gamertag, and profile, and also includes a friends list, chat, and single-player Achievements. Gold costs $49.95 a year ($7.99 a month or $19.99 for three) unless you already have a Gold membership on Xbox Live, which you can use. It encompasses the features of Silver while adding cross-platform multiplayer play, TrueSkill matchmaking, and multiplayer Achievements. Regular multiplayer does not require a membership.

THE GOOD, THE BAD, THE UGLY

When You Want Your News Categorized With A Sarcastic Editorial Spin

QUOTE

I'VE HAD DINNER WITH [MR. KUTARAGI] MORE TIMES THAN I'VE HAD DINNER WITH MY WIFE, AND THAT'S NOT REALLY HEALTHY.

– Sony CEO Howard Stringer on how he's tried to improve his personal relationship with Ken Kutaragi

GOOD

At GDC, Electronic Arts announced its new project with Guitar Hero developer Harmonix. The pair have agreed to a deal where EA will publish the MTV-branded title. The game is believed to incorporate similar principles as the Guitar Hero franchise, except encompassing a full band.

BAD?

New Line Cinema has gained the rights to make a movie out of Epic's Gears of War title. Lead designer Cliff Bleszinski will act as the film's executive producer, and Stuart Beattie (Collateral) will write the picture. Here's hoping he can come up with something better than "You can't stop the train!"
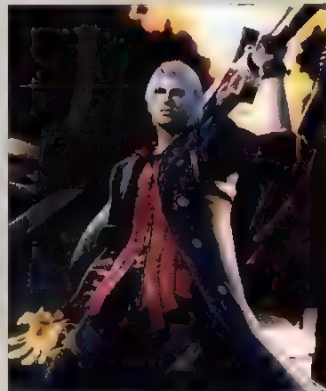
GOOD

As part of its new multiplatform approach, Capcom has confirmed that Devil May Cry 4 is coming to the Xbox 360 and PC – not just the PS3. Don't worry, Sony fans. Afrika is still PS3 exclusive!

BAD
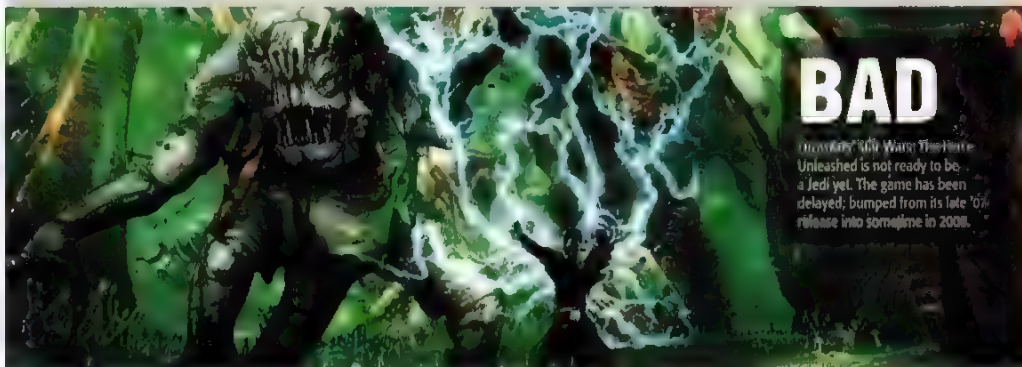
LucasArts' Star Wars: The Force Unleashed is not ready to be a Jedi yet. The game has been delayed; bumped from its late '07 release into sometime in 2008.
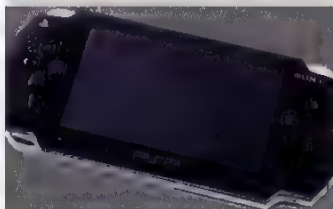
GOOD

For the first time UK Sony executive Ray Maguire has confirmed the widely believed plan to release a redesigned PSP. Maguire characterized the new PSP as smaller and lighter, but said the handheld's screen size would remain the same. No word on whether the system would come down in price, although Sony has coincided a price-drop with a redesign in the past.

GOOD

The size limit for Xbox Live Arcade games has been raised from 50MB to 150MB. In conjunction with this increase, a new 512MB memory unit is on sale for $49.99 for Core System owners without a hard drive. The existing 64MB unit will drop down to $29.99.

Konami's Castlevania: Symphony of the Night started the trend of larger Xbox Live Arcade games
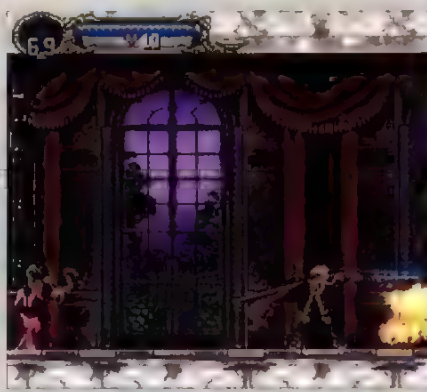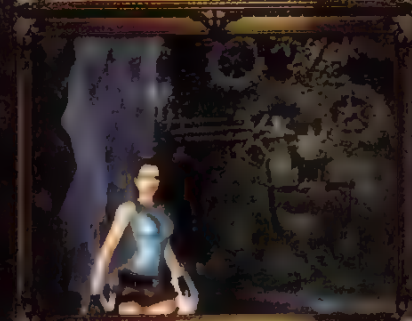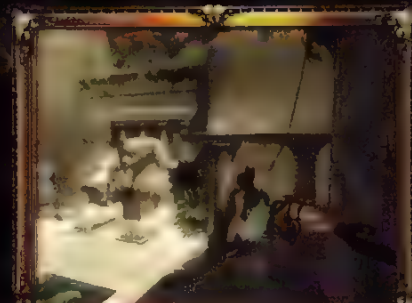
Life After Warcraft

What's Your Next MMO?

Maybe your guild is banging on the doors of Illidan's Black Temple but you're growing tired of the raiding treadmill. Perhaps end-game dungeons require more effort to clear than you're willing to put in, or the latest round of clearly unnecessary nerfs to your class crossed the line. Maybe you're just sick of World of Warcraft in general. So what's next?

PC

Warhammer Online: Age of Reckoning

PUBLISHER ELECTRONIC ARTS > **DEVELOPER** EA MYTHIC > **RELEASE** WINTER

The clashes in Warhammer occur on several levels. You'll fight over objectives in the public world, compete in instanced battlefields with balanced teams, and even mount large-scale invasions of enemy territory with the eventual goal of conquering your foes' capitol city. The way that public zones are structured, with the PvP objectives located away from the more PvE-oriented content, should hopefully keep the griefing under control. EA Mythic is also talking about allowing players to level solely through PvP conflict, eliminating the need to grind dumb scripted AI mobs to get to the good stuff.

Compete

Action

Most MMOs stick with the EverQuest style of combat, where behind-the-scenes dice rolls take the place of manually dodging and striking with your character. However, there are several promising projects in the works that abandon that for a more visceral feel. Check these out if MMOs are too hands-off for your tastes.

TABULA RASA

Lord British's new project for Korean publisher NCsoft is truly unique. An action-oriented combat model that lets players physically dodge incoming projectiles and a heavily instancing-based design make Tabula Rasa a great one to watch if you're interested in something new and different.

HUXLEY

Available in July for PC as well as September on 360, Huxley is attempting to combine the persistent world of an MMO with the team-based shooting action of Counter Strike. We'll know whether Korean developer/publisher Webzen pulls it off any better than PlanetSide soon enough.

FURY

New publisher Gamecock is taking MMOs in a new direction: deathmatch-style arena combat. Fury gives players a classless progressions system to customize their characters as they see fit, and aims to kick the pants off of WoW's arena and battlegrounds systems by making PvP the focus of the game.

GODS & HEROES: ROME RISING

Greco-Roman mythology is the perfect setting for this action-based MMO from Perpetual Entertainment and SOE. Recruiting and training a squad of soldiers to fight with you against creatures strange and magical is a major selling point here, and promises to make soloing a very viable play style despite the online nature of the game.
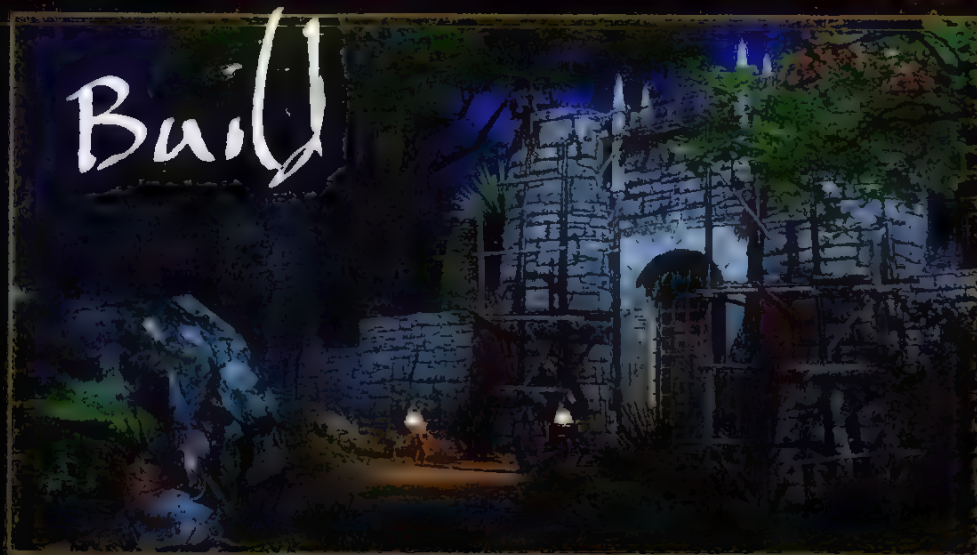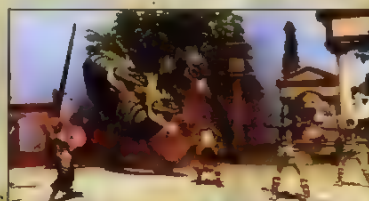
Build

Age of Conan:
Hyborian Adventures

PUBLISHER EIDOS INTERACTIVE/FUNCOM **> DEVELOPER** FUNCOM
> RELEASE SUMMER (PC), TBA (360)

Out on the frontier you can build up towns that have the most skilled blacksmiths, the richest merchants, and the strongest guards – all of whom owe allegiance to the heroes that made it all possible (that's you). NPC enemies will build up their own towns and send out raiding parties, so you have to protect them as well. If you're wondering why you would care about any of this, Age of Conan also features siege and formation warfare: large-scale conflicts where the wealth and power to get others to fight for you can be worth more than individual skill in battle. Furthermore, you can build towns in the Border Kingdoms that are centers for PvP action, and give out guild-wide buffs to those who can conquer and hold the most territory.

Explore

PC

The Lord of the Rings Online:
Shadows of Angmar

PUBLISHER MIDWAY **> DEVELOPER** TURBINE **> RELEASE** APRIL 24

We've all gotten a giggle out of passing over a zone line in WoW and dinging a level off of the exploration XP. What if you got a title and access to a brand new talent for doing that as well? The Lord of the Rings Online has a feature that rewards players for accomplishing "Deeds" that does just that. Of course, you'll unlock these achievements via a variety of derring-do, be it the aforementioned exploration, committing genocidal atrocities against the monsters in a certain region, or completing a difficult instanced dungeon. This is the most direct assault on WoW's core gameplay that we've seen. We'll find out very soon whether Turbine can keep Blizzard on its toes when LOTRO releases at the end of April.

These games have been announced as works-in-progress, but no further details have been made available. Still, the subject matter is intriguing enough to warrant a mention.

Incognito

WARHAMMER 40,000
THQ recently announced that it is working with developer Vigil on an MMO based on this Games Workshop license. The idea of being able to roleplay an Inquisitor is delicious.

WARHAMMER 40,000

MARVEL UNIVERSE ONLINE
Microsoft is publishing this next project from City of Heroes developer Cryptic Studios. Prepare for the heroic adventures of xXWoolvereneXx and Magneetoo_Roolz whenever this launches.

MARVEL

DC COMICS MMO
Sony Online Entertainment's foray into comic-based gaming comes with the artistic stylings of Jim Lee rendered by Unreal Engine 3.

SOE SONY ONLINE ENTERTAINMENT

STAR TREK ONLINE
Perpetual Entertainment is working on the iconic license, but no publisher is announced yet. Redshirts will surely need to be nerfed; nobody will want to form an away team without at least one!

TOP TEN
Lists...Everybody Loves Lists...

Top Ten Facts About Kratos

10 Kratos actually made High Overlord Saurfang's life bar move

9 Kratos and Master Chief are not friends. As a corollary, he does not want to be *your* friend

8 Next-gen starts when Kratos says it starts

7 Kratos can bench press himself

6 When Kratos kills Ridley, he stays dead

5 Cersei Lannister would have been dead four books ago if Kratos bothered with reading

4 Kratos does not need 299 extra dudes to hold back the thousand nations of the Persian Empire

3 Kratos' Princess is not in another castle

2 Roundhouse kicks are like candy to Kratos

1 He murdered the freakin' *god of war*

Name That Game Answer: Don't Buy This

games

WHOLE LOTTA HALO 3
STEP UP TO LEGENDARY

Any Halo 3 news is good news, and Microsoft has just revealed the contents of its limited-quantity Halo 3 Legendary and Limited Edition package sets to go along with the standard $59.99 version.

Legendary Edition ($129.99)

• Miniature replica Spartan Helmet

• Bonus disc containing "Making of" documentary with several high-definition featurettes and a high-def audio-visual calibration tool

• Original Halo 3 storyboard art from Lee Wilson

• A second bonus disc exclusive to the Legendary Edition that looks back at the story of the first two Halo games as told through re-mastered cutscenes with commentary, a "Day in the Life at Bungie" featurette, and exclusive *Red vs. Blue* and *This Spartan Life* machinima content

Limited Edition ($69.99)

• Metal collector's case

• First bonus disc from the Legendary Edition

• Halo fiction and art book featuring never-before-seen art and story, as well as info on the series' species and factions
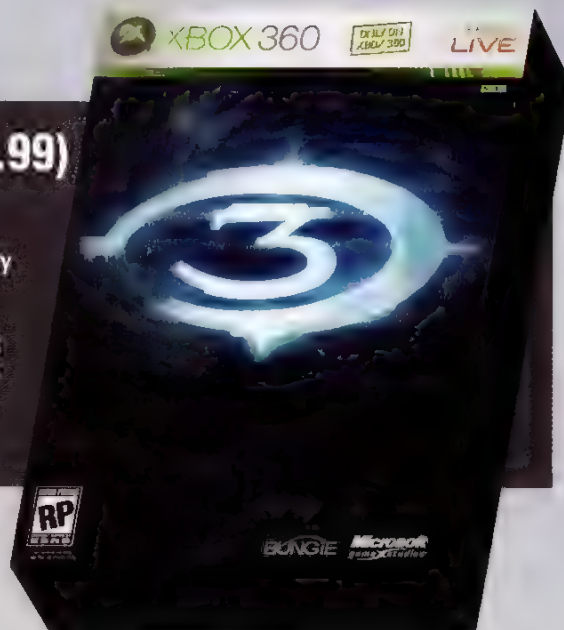
TALK TO YOUR FRIEND. SOMETHING WILL STICK.
ABOVETHEINFLUENCE.COM

RANDY PITCHFORD

CEO, GEARBOX SOFTWARE

>> Texas-based Gearbox Software has worked with some of the biggest franchises in the business. After the success of Brothers in Arms, the company is working on a game based on Ridley Scott's *Aliens*. We recently spoke with CEO Randy Pitchford about the company's present and future. <<

Talk about the next-generation Brothers in Arms.
Brothers in Arms: Hell's Highway is the next game. Hopefully, it will come out this year, but we're going to ship something we're proud of. The Brothers in Arms games are about a particular squad, the 502nd parachute infantry regiment of the 101st Airborne. After Normandy, they go back to England and sleep it off and regroup. Their next assignment is an Allied plan in the fall of 1944 called Operation Market Garden. What they did is take every single paratrooper and they dropped them in Holland along this road that goes straight [between] France and Germany. The paratroopers were supposed to hold this corridor, and then they were going to race this armored division right through to Berlin and end the war by Christmas. Unfortunately, the Germans were there and there were a lot of them. Their response is to crush this corridor the Allies were trying to create.
In Normandy, this squad captured Carentan, the

Could you talk about it in broader terms?
I'll give you a little bit. If you're anything like me, you've seen the first two movies many times.

And we've seen the other ones once.
Exactly. There's a reason for that. For us, the core fantasy is all about that time period. In my opinion, the fulfillment of that fantasy, to actually be a participant has not actually happened yet. I thought the Aliens vs. Predator games were fun, but there has not been anything that's really let me feel like I'm there with those guys, living the life of a colonial marine.

Aliens has a great ambiance for a shooter and has a great mythology, but it also seems to lend itself to a very tight, old-school corridor-based experience. Recently, shooters have really been opening things up beyond that design template. How do you deal with that?
I think it's a fantasy to be in the squad, to be in

How do you balance these big projects being an independent developer?
We've always had multiple teams. We have what I call "preproduction units" — guys like the direction, producer, art director, lead designer, and lead engineer. You get that five-man team in there and they can do a lot. You can develop that concept with that five-man team and know if you've got something that's worth investing in. You don't have to build a game and spend 10 million bucks before you realize there's something that's worth investing in.

You're using Unreal Engine 3 for Brothers in Arms and Aliens. You've worked with a lot of engines before, how do you rate Unreal 3?
We're probably the only developer on the planet that's worked directly with the Halo engine, with Half-Life and Source, and Unreal Engine 3. A lot of people like to beat Epic up right now because they're winning, but I love it. Unreal Engine 3 is a huge value. It would cost me so much more to build

> ## I've worked on a few science fiction shooters...we're all just stealing from Aliens.

junction point of the invasion beaches where the Allied forces could regroup. Carentan was kind of like the Death Star, if you relate it to *Star Wars*. It was a big victory. Well, Market Garden is like *The Empire Strikes Back* — it's not a good day for the Allies. It's really kind of a dark situation, and it's difficult for Baker, the guy that's the hero in the Brothers in Arms story. These guys are in a strategic loss, but they've got to find some sort of moral victory.

The other big project you have going on is the *Aliens* game. What's your vision for the project?
I've worked on a few science fiction shooters — I did the PC version of Halo; I worked on Duke Nukem. We're all just stealing from *Aliens*. The drop ship in Halo, the walls of any alien scene in Duke, the facehuggers — this whole industry is stealing from *Aliens*. I'm as guilty as anyone. We made a list of interesting IP that would be cool to work with and *Aliens* was at the top of the list. Then, we had this meeting with Sega, and they asked, "You wouldn't be interested in the Aliens franchise, would you?" I said, "You've got to be kidding me." Eventually, the deal got put together. There's been a brief announcement that we're doing it, [but] I'm going to disappoint you because I'm not going to reveal much.

one of those corridors in the movie. But, if we limited ourselves to that, I think we'd be doing a disservice to the brand and to how far this fantasy can be taken. In the second movie, there were some key, fundamental questions that were behind the plot and those questions have never really been answered.

So you'll be branching off into some additional story content?
We're pretty ambitious with this one. There are a lot of people involved, a lot of the people that helped create *Aliens*. Two people on the project had a meeting with Ridley Scott and he broke out his book of sketches for the original storyboards for *Alien*. I was really mad that I wasn't at this meeting! It sounded like one of those life experience things — Ridley breaks out this book, blows the dust off it, and starts explaining what he was thinking about when he was dreaming this stuff up. Even going into backstory details in his mind and answers to questions that any fan of the series has had, but no one knows the answers except the creator. I'm a bit jealous that I'm not down in the trenches on *Aliens*. But the guys that are — they're amazing. They're better than me.

that kind of technology on my own. Sure, we could do it, and a lot of people can and they want to prove they can. I don't care; I want to make games, I don't want to make tech.

Anything more you'd like to let us know about?
Sure. We started out [making] PC games and console games. But I love handheld games. I've got a DS and a PSP and I play the s— out of them. We said, "How can we learn about these platforms?" So, we worked with the Shanghai Ubisoft studio and they did a good job bringing Brothers in Arms to the PSP. That taught us something about the PSP. Also, DS is really interesting, and we want to think about what our brand means on the DS. But, beyond that, we think that handhelds are really cool places to invent new things that have never been done before. I can take a huge risk and do something crazy on a handheld and — at the end of the day — it only cost me one or two million bucks. So, we started getting into handheld stuff now, and that's really cool. I want to see more original stuff on the PSP and I'd like to contribute to that. I also think there are certain types of games that are underrepresented on the DS. Pretty soon we're going to be announcing some new stuff.

gearbox

SOFTWARE

Photo: Don Netzer

READY TO MAKE HISTORY

Randy Pitchford has helped build Gearbox into one of the industry's most respected independent developers

GAME INFORMER **35**

PC SHOWDOWN!

GI REFEREES THE BATTLE OF THE BIG RIGS

We're starting to round up the best in monster gaming PC hardware, and this is the first litter we could get our grubby little hands on. We even ran these puppies through PC and 3D Mark software. Maybe you can choose between these two beauties, because we hate having to make decisions of the heart.

ALIENWARE AREA-51 7500

Alienware's gaming rig can be configured for nearly a third the price of the Omen, but for each dollar you shave you're cutting out performance. Ours cost $4,988 and scored a little lower than the Omen on the 3DMark05 and PCMark05 benchmarks (11709 and 8940 respectively),. Like the Voodoo, the Area-51's video cards are DirectX 10 compliant, so you can play upcoming games like Crysis in all their glory. Though it scored lower, the Alienware wins out due to its superior design. Unlike the loud Voodoo, this liquid-cooled monster kept quiet under its Alien-themed cocoon.
Starting at $2,199.00 • www.alienware.com

VOODOO OMEN

The Omen is built for speed and power. Its Quad Core processors reportedly provide 70 percent more processing power than Intel's dual core processors. This pricey beast can be configured with ATI Crossfire or nVidia SLI graphics cards. Our Omen unit (with SLI) tested well in 3DMark05 and PCMark05, scoring 16174 in the former and 9965 in the latter. This monster's impressive performance is tempered by its obnoxiously loud liquid intercooler, which sounds like a gurgling Coca-Cola plant. The perforated case, while a spectacular view in the dark, doesn't help dampen the sound either. Does the future have to sound like a swamp cooler?
Starting at $5,800.00 • www.voodoopc.com

SPLIT FISH FRAG FX CONTROLLER

Maybe now PC gamers will stop complaining and play Call of Duty on PS3. Okay, that probably won't happen, but the Frag FX does offer a mouse-friendly layout for FPS fans. The Frag FX is comfortable, smooth, and offers enough ways for players to adjust the sensitivity as long as you can find a stable place to rest the mouse pad. We didn't get to test the motion sensing, but we're sure there are plenty of people out there who will prefer this to a standard controller when playing Resistance.

$59.99 (corded PS3), $69.99 (Bluetooth PS3) • www.splitfish.com

HORI FIGHTING STICK 3

Aptly titled the Fighting Stick 3, this is an arcade stick for your PS3. Virtua Fighter fans, rejoice! You finally have a fighting stick worth using. The Fighting Stick 3 has a three meter cord and three individual turbo settings for every button. This seems to be the stick to get, since Sega's arcade stick will cost you well over a hundred dollars to import.
$49.99 • www.hori.jp/us/

THE LOST ROOM

Maybe you saw *The Lost Room* when the Sci Fi Channel ran it as a miniseries. If so, you know why should own this. If you didn't, then here is your chance to check out this cool show. The production values aren't super high (this is a TV miniseries after all), but we love the premise about a key that unlocks any door into a mysterious motel room. Here's hoping we get a full-on series.
$19.98 • www.lionsgate.com

FINAL FANTASY VII: ADVENT CHILDREN LIMITED EDITION COLLECTOR'S SET

Here's a set for the nerds. These are the same collector's discs that have been out for awhile, but now they come packed with 10 Final Fantasy postcards, the 100-page movie script, and a 72-page novel that may not be award winning, but provides information about events that didn't happen in the movie.
$39.99 • www.sonypictures.com

SABERTOOTH GAMES UFS COLLECTIBLE CARD GAME

It can be hard to jump into the middle of CCGs and TCGs, but maybe you will make an exception for the Universal Fighting System as it features your favorite fighters from games like Soul Calibur, Street Fighter, King of Fighters, and Samurai Showdown. And the best part about the card using the same system is that you can now act out that Chun Li vs. Ivy fan fiction you have been writing for years.
$9.99 (starter decks) $3.49 (booster packs)
www.sabertoothgames.com

ELECTRIC-SPIN GOLF LAUNCHPAD

Tired of having to go outside and breathe fresh air when you golf? The Golf Launchpad uses a multitude of sensors that measure the speed, path, and angle of your swing and transfer your movements into the game. We found that this process wasn't always spot on, but it was better than we expected. Clubs and compatible games such as Tiger Woods PGA Tour and Hot Shots Golf Fore! sold separately.
$249.00 (PC/Mac), $199.00 (PS2) • www.electricspin.com

THE FUTURE OF THE MMOS

BY JACK EMMERT
CHIEF CREATIVE OFFICER,
CRYPTIC STUDIOS

The future of massively multiplayer games is once again in the forefront of many discussions I've had at conferences. The success of World of Warcraft has forced the video game industry to re-analyze the MMORPG genre. At last the MMORPG market has the breakout, mass-market hit that it's always needed.

It was only a few years ago that the industry was eager for that game. EverQuest and Dark Age of Camelot had subscription bases of well over 200,000, but these games were still considered niche. Nevertheless, EQ and Dark Age were both exceedingly profitable and promised even more, if only the games could appeal beyond hardcore players.

At first, Sims Online seemed poised to grab the attention of hardcore and the more numerous casual gamers. Obviously, Sims was an enormously popular IP; every expansion sold millions of copies. But Sims Online didn't sell well. The next sure-fire hit was supposed to be Star Wars Galaxies. I'm not entirely sure that its sales numbers weren't well over a million, but the game didn't retain enough customers to top or even match EQ. Publishers canceled numerous other products (Mythica) or the games simply didn't appeal (Earth and Beyond). The industry discovered that replicating the success of an EQ was a daunting task, let alone tapping into the mass market.

Then came 2004. In April, the little known City of Heroes launched to much acclaim and phenomenal sales. After numerous MMORPG failures and disappointments, City of Heroes seemed to prove that another MMORPG game could, in fact, succeed. And if CoH opened the door to further possibilities in MMORPGs, then World of Warcraft came into the house and partied all night. No PC game has dominated the market like WoW. Ever. Suddenly, the MMORPG genre was center stage.

Many had assumed that the MMORPG had to break out of its stale game mechanics ("phat lewt",

"grinding") in order to appeal to the mass market. But WoW proved this assumption entirely wrong. While CoH eschewed some of the complicated game mechanics of other games, WoW embraced them. WoW wasn't so much an innovation as much an iteration. It was simply a more polished version of EQ's tried-and-true formulas.

WoW, however, did do one thing that no other game had. According to what I've heard and read, Blizzard spent between $50 and $70 million on development alone. Most MMORPG's had been developed on only a fraction of this. Because of Blizzard's history of success, they can draw upon an almost unlimited well of funds.

But almost no other developer is in this situation. And almost no publisher wants to spend $50 to $70 million on development. Unless one can positively deliver over a million subscribers – something that only WoW has managed to do – the publisher won't make back their money for quite some time.

So here's the impasse: customers are expecting MMORPGs to possess content and quality similar to WoW's, but publishers can't invest that kind of money. I was discussing a potential MMORPG with a publisher. They provided us with a budget. When I told them the game that we could deliver for that price, immediately the publisher compared it to WoW and found our content lacking. I explained that WoW cost much more and thus had more content. From their perspective, the game couldn't compete with WoW so the publisher declined to continue conversations.

Cost is the number one issue of MMORPG development. This is where we are going to see the MMORPG market begin to bifurcate along two lines.

First, people wanting WoW-level success are going to explore new financial models. Publishers and developers alike are going to borrow a lot of expertise from Hollywood in order to fund big projects. The typical publisher/developer relationship had been that the publisher would give their own money to the developer in order to make a game.

> **Cost is the number one issue of MMORPG development. This is where we are going to see the MMORPG market begin to bifurcate along two lines.**

Now, even the publisher is concerned about such a huge monetary outlay. Other players will be invited to the table to bear the financial risk.

As part of this, I believe that a lot of publishers will start eschewing independent developers in favor of internal teams. Why pay a developer a royalty when you can keep 100 percent of the money yourself? Most publishers would prefer to hire people with previous MMORPG experience and rely upon that in order to make a game. Over the past five years, a pool of people who have been part of some reasonably successful MMORPGs has developed. This is a pool many publishers can draw from.

Second, a healthy niche market will slowly develop. These are MMORPGs that don't try to compete with WoW, but rather aim for more modest subscription numbers. These products will capitalize on either IP's with devoted fanbases (World of Darkness) or extremely focused genres (Pirates of the Burning Seas). Both types of products deliver a certain sales amount because of their specific appeal, but might not have the upside of a WoW. These sorts of games will be done mostly by independent developers backed by venture capitalists and private equity. Outside investors appreciate the regular income stream that a MMORPG with even as a little as 100,000 subscribers can deliver.

These two developments will take several years to shake out. In the short term, I think we'll see a boom/bust cycle similar to that of five years ago. A number of people will leap into the fray because of WoW's success just as many did in response to EQ. Most, however, will fail to meet the lofty goals promised to investors and publishers. These games will either be canceled or drift along with minimal success. The eagerness for MMORPGs will subside and then stabilize. At least until Blizzard comes out with World of Starcraft. . ■ ■ ■

sun	mon	tue	wed	thur	fri	sat

may

01

NEW RELEASES
- The Darkness – PS3, 360
- Forza Motorsport 2 – 360
- GoPets – DS
- Marvel Trading Card Game – DS
- Sega Rally Evo – 360
- Tenchu Z – 360

Tenchu Z – 05/01

04

Spider-Man 3 is everywhere today. It opens in theaters and will be released on every video game machine known to man (maybe even Gizmondo).
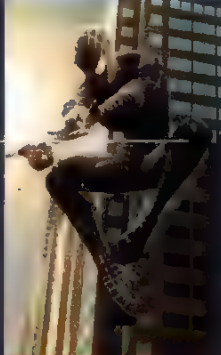
Lair – 05/08

08

NEW RELEASES
- Command & Conquer 3: Tiberium Wars – 360
- Death Jr. & the Science Fair of Doom – DS
- Driver 76 – PSP
- Halo 2 – PC
- Infernal – PC
- Lair – PS3

09

COUNTDOWN BEGINS
It would appear that the reign of the weekly comic stories is upon us. Hot off of the heels of DC's amazing 52 series, Countdown begins at issue 51 and counts down each week. All sources point toward Jimmy Olsen biting the big one in this first issue.

11

28 Weeks Later slides into cineplexes today. Looks like Sandra Bullock couldn't stay off the sauce. She's back in rehab! Oh wait...This is a zombie movie? Sandra Bullock couldn't fight off zombies! What were they thinking?

28 WEEKS LATER

15

NEW RELEASES
- Code Lyoko – DS
- Legend of the Dragon – PSP
- Resident Evil 4 – PC
- Saints Row – PS3
- Shrek the Third – 360, Wii, PS2, PSP, DS
- The Sims: Pet Stories – PC
- Touch the Dead – DS
- Two Worlds – 360, PC

16

WORLD WAR HULK STARTS
During Civil War, the Hulk was off conquering another planet. He also got his jiggy on with an alien and is expecting a child soon. Now that his interstellar vacation is done, the big green goliath is coming back to Earth with his new alien army in tow. Let the battle begin!

18

Of all the blockbuster movies listed on this page, which one will reap the most from the box office? Our money is on today's release, *Shrek the Third*. Why? Because it has Eddie Murphy (a.k.a. money), fart jokes, boogers, and talking cats. Plus, when has Cameron Diaz ever been in a bad movie?

©2007 Dreamworks

Odin Sphere – 05/22

The Valkyries suffered many casualties... ...including Griselda, our Commander.

22

NEW RELEASES
- Dawn of Mana – PS2
- Diner Dash – PSP, DS
- Naruto: Ninja Council 3 – DS
- Odin Sphere – PS2
- Pirates of the Caribbean: At World's End – PS3, 360, Wii, PS2, PSP, DS, PC
- Pirates of the Caribbean: Curse of the Black Pearl – Blu-ray
- Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest – Blu-ray

Dawn of Mana – 05/22

25

Pirates of the Caribbean: At World's End walks the theatrical plank today. Given the title, we have a feeling that this movie is either about global warming or robots enslaving/nuking humanity. Either way, we can't wait to see Orlando Bloom with that cute little 'stache.

©2007 Disney

Mario Party 8 – 05/29

29

NEW RELEASES
- Alien Syndrome – Wii, PSP
- Dungeons & Dragons Tactics – PSP
- Etrian Odyssey – DS
- LA Street Racing – PC
- Mario Party 8 – Wii
- Surf's Up – PS3, 360, Wii, PS2, PSP, DS, PC
- Tomb Raider: Anniversary Edition – PS2, PC

Surf's Up – 05/29

grand theft auto IV

LET THE
NEXT GENERATION
BEGIN

PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360
> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION
(MULTIPLAYER TBA)
> **PUBLISHER** ROCKSTAR
> **DEVELOPER** ROCKSTAR NORTH
> **RELEASE** OCTOBER 16

"Life is complicated. I killed people. Smuggled people. Sold people. Perhaps here, things will be different." These words, tellingly and optimistically spoken by Grand Theft Auto IV's protagonist, Niko Bellic, don't just speak of a tarnished soul that sees opportunity in a new city. They point directly toward the future of this series.

Like Bellic, Grand Theft Auto is traveling to a place where many people have gone to find the so-called "American Dream." Some people call it the Capital of the World. Others have learned that it is the City That Never Sleeps. No matter what you call it, New York City is a place where anything can happen. It is the biggest stage in the world, and the perfect place to usher in the next step for the series.

This new entry marks a number of dramatic changes for the series, but it isn't Grand Theft Auto merging with the real world. New York City doesn't exist in this universe, and it likely never will. The Big Apple is simply being used as an inspirational blueprint for the re-creation of Liberty City, a place some gamers have gotten to know better than their hometowns. While the original Liberty City took many visual cues from New York City, this dramatic reinvention of the fictional metropolis seeks to capture the feel of the world's greatest city like never before.

Despite its incredibly large stature, the next installment in the series has remained one of the best kept secrets in the world. Rumors have swirled and speculation has been raised, but nothing that you've heard or read is even close to the truth. Some people thought Grand Theft Auto IV was going to become a massively multiplayer experience; others were certain the game would take place across the entire world. A few misinformed souls even thought the next iteration would be set in space. The truth of the matter, however, is that it's going back to the city that made this series a phenomenon.

The new Liberty City is a bustling metropolis that is dense on the streets and intimidating vertically. Many of New York City's iconic sights find new homes here, and may look strikingly similar, but are twisted to fit into the Grand Theft Auto world. The MetLife building now bears the name Getalife, the Statue of Liberty is now the Statue of Happiness, and DUMBO (Down Under the Manhattan Bridge Overpass) is called BOABO (Beneath the Offramp of the Algonquin Bridge Overpass).

"We live here," notes the game's vice president of creative Dan Houser. "We've been here for a number of years. Even the guys in Scotland spend lots of time here with us. It was an environment we felt had never been done to the level we were envisioning it in a video game. From looking at all of the locations, this was the one that really stood out to us, and really had that impact. It has all of these iconic things that you couldn't put into a game before."

Within Grand Theft Auto IV, Rockstar North has recreated four of the five boroughs that make up New York City, as well as a section of New Jersey. It's a smaller geographical mass than San Andreas, but not an inch of this world is wasted or dedicated to vast stretches of country or desert. It's a tightly packed metropolis that captures the eye with its decades of world-class architecture, sun-blocking towers, and extraordinary walks of life. In the GTA universe, Brooklyn has been transformed to Broker, Manhattan has mutated into Algonquin,

Queens is now Dukes, The Bronx is Bohan, and New Jersey has become Alderney.

"It's not the full city," injects Houser. "It's an approximation thereof. We make a city that feels like the real thing, but is perfectly tuned for gameplay in the broadest sense. The world is not designed to be a video game. We are trying to make a video game that feels like the world, but still plays like a video game."

The design of the city and the missions that unfold within it are designed hand-in-hand and complement each other perfectly. Everything in this world is here for a reason, whether it's directly tied to gameplay or simply there to create atmosphere.

"We are trying to give the city next-generation life. Trying to give it the feeling of being there. The feeling of – which to us is always a big part of a Grand Theft Auto game – walking the streets or driving them slowly, watching the life go by, trying to make that a lot more engaging," says Houser. "We are trying to make this something that is more fun, more believable, more alive than it's ever been. That's something we've done a huge amount of work on. To give lots of varied behaviors to the pedestrians, make them more context-sensitive, more dependant on the environment. Something that we've done bits of in the past, and really blow that out. When you see the streets, and see that this person's smoking, another person is on the phone, and this other person is sitting on a bench, it looks amazing. It feels a lot more real than just a lot of people walking down the street."

The new Liberty City is modeled directly after New York City

THE HUSTLE & BUSTLE
OF A THRIVING METROPOLIS

This city is brought to life with an amazing level of realism. Sunlight glistens beautifully off of glasswork, illuminates the intricate detailing of century old brick, and even reveals just how realistic an ordinary bag of trash can look. As the sun begins to set, the city takes on a whole different appearance. Buildings that were once eye-popping attractions slowly become ominous obelisks. As any New Yorker will tell you, there's a big difference between New York during the day and New York at night. Liberty City will perfectly capture this quality.

Even the texturing of the Algonquin streets, which are filled with crater-like potholes and occasional glimpses of the brick used in a world gone by, are greatly varied in design and something that you can't tear your eye from. The visual

makeup of the city "was something we could capture real well and really understand the minute aspects of its personality," adds Houser. "Trying to put that into a video game is something that we think is unique to the video game medium. It was a way that we could capture some aspects of the experience of living here that you couldn't put into a film, you couldn't put into a TV show, and you couldn't put into a book – because you are actually wandering about and meeting some of the freaks that you meet on the streets here. And that's what it's all about – meeting the same kind of freaks you'd meet on the streets, the angry yuppies you'd met there. A big part of New York life is walking around the streets and meeting lunatics. That's something

A big part of the game is delivering story in new ways and allowing the player to plot their own destiny
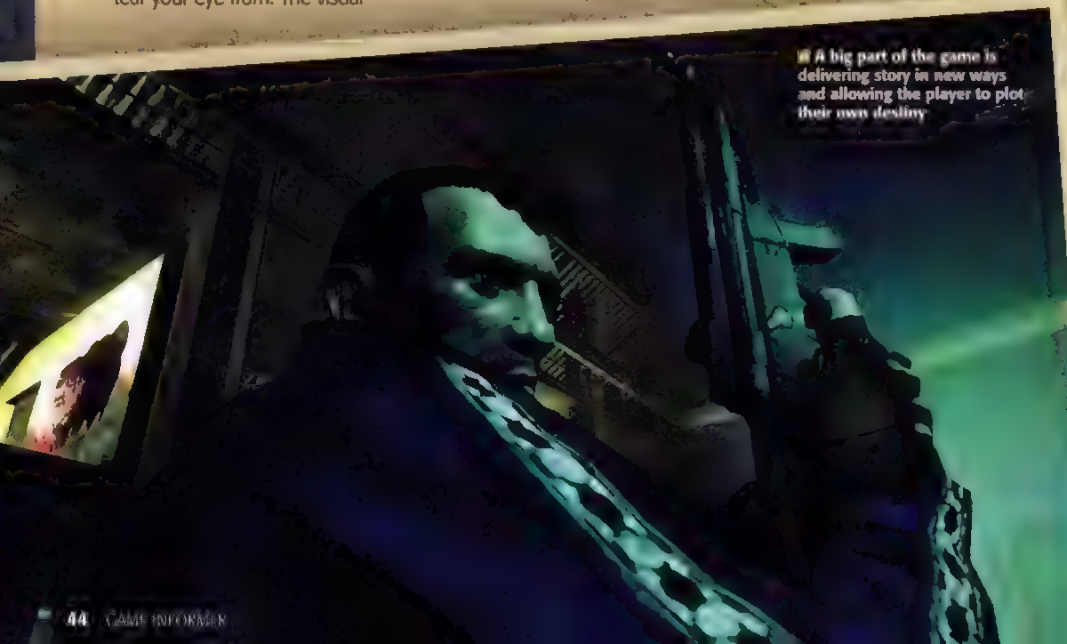
that we definitely tried to put into the game. We are trying to give it that life and difference between the neighborhoods and the difference between the kinds of people. We are trying to capture that Capital of the World aspect of New York. There are lots of non-American characters in the game."

One of these foreigners is Niko Bellic. His home is in Eastern Europe, and he likely may never have traveled to Liberty City if it wasn't for his cousin Roman. With life not working out in the homeland, "Bellic turns up in Liberty City because he's been receiving emails from his cousin Roman, that read like: 'I live this amazing life, it's the American Dream come true. I have two women. I have four hot tubs. I have fifteen sports cars,'"

Grand Theft Auto IV is a story seen through the eyes of Niko Bellic – an Eastern European immigrant who has come to Liberty City to live the American Dream

A big part of New York life is walking around the streets and meeting lunatics. That's something that we definitely tried to put into the game.

— *Dan Houser*
vice president of creative

Houser elaborates. "And [Bellic] believes it." His bid to flee his past for what he thought would be the greener pastures of America couldn't be further from the truth. Roman has been lying to him. He isn't rich. He isn't popular. And he's actually in a load of trouble. He lied to his cousin to hide his own failures in life.

While he may make you contemplate strangling your own flesh and blood, Roman is the only person that you know in America. He serves as one of your main friends, motivations, and connections at the start of the game. Unlike San Andreas, players won't get a chance to see Bellic in his homeland. You will see his life unfold from the moment that he steps into Liberty City. And given

Roman's situation, you have your work cut out for you right off the bat.

"Roman is heavily in debt. Lots of criminals are trying to get heavy with him," comments Houser. "Niko is a tough character. Roman is more of a friendly buffoon. He needs your support, and equally Roman is a high energy optimist that will try to make things happen. It seems like a good dynamic, but they are constantly bickering. Early on it seems like your motivation is to simply make a go of it in a new world, and then we discover, as the game unfolds, that maybe Niko has been avoiding other problems at home."

When the sun goes down, you may not want to be found in certain parts of the city. You'll definitely see shifts in the people that walk the streets

The detailing of the city goes well beyond anything that we've seen in a game before

One of our biggest goals early in development is that it should feel different than any other game. It shouldn't be 'Oh here's a really good looking, but stiff character.'

JUST ANOTHER ORDINARY DAY

The demo we were fortunate enough to see, running on an Xbox 360, begins with Bellic standing inside of the taxi depot that Roman runs out of the borough of Broker in a converted industrial garage. The game's newfound graphical muscle dances across the screen. Roman's desk is cluttered with garbage and paperwork, the walls desperately need a new coat of paint, and the windows of the depot appear to never have been cleaned. The sun is shining brightly outside, but you wouldn't know it from the light that is passing through the windows – a dirty, yellowish hue that barely gives off enough illumination for operations to be conducted. The only life that this office has is a radio belting out music in ear-piercing mono, and Bellic, standing tall, confident, and ready for action.

While Bellic could do his cousin a favor by tidying up the place, he has other business to take care of. As he leaves the office, you feel the weight behind each step he makes. Variations in the terrain are met with realistic changes in the walking animation. As Bellic turns and maneuvers his body in different ways on his walk, you can see that his movements are fueled by an incredible physics engine.

"The physics are going to be pretty amazing,"

Houser interjects. "We are trying, like all things with this game, to push the physics forward. Physics is an area where games can get much better. If you are into third-person action games, physics need to be amazing. The feeling of controlling your character needs to be amazing. The feeling of running around that environment, climbing over things, needs to be a lot more than it has been. The animations can't feel canned and predictable. One of our biggest goals early in development is that it should feel different than any other game. It shouldn't be 'Oh here's a really good looking, but stiff character.'"

Bellic is anything but stiff, and it would appear that he isn't the most sensitive or honest lad around, either. His walk concludes at a brownstone. Despite the two people – friends, possibly neighbors – having a conversation on the stoop next door, Bellic pushes the door open – again a motion fueled by the sense of weight and a realistic accompanying animation. It becomes obvious that this isn't Bellic's house, as he quickly clings to a wall and pulls out a pistol. One quick look around the corner reveals that the living room, furnished in '70s browns and greens, is not occupied. Bellic slowly slides into the room with his pistol drawn high

■ Many of Niko's activities revolve around being a criminal, being an Eastern European in a new place, and Liberty City itself

and pointed to a well-lit kitchen. With one leg stepping over the other in a strafing motion, he then sees that the kitchen is clear as well. There's nobody in this small house. The urgency in his steps intensifies, and he pushes his way through the back door.

Once on the street, he makes a beeline for a parked car – a beautifully detailed and finely polished red four-door that appears to be the primary mode of transportation for one of Broker's successful families. Instead of trying the handle to see if the car is unlocked, Bellic smashes in the window with his elbow. The glass tumbles on the street and seat as Bellic unlocks the door from the inside. A master of hotwiring, he has the car roaring in a second flat. As he drives to his next destination, Houser points out that the all the vehicles in the game also feature new physics. The camera angle behind the car is noticeably closer than it has been in any other Grand Theft Auto. Not only does this bring out better detail in the vehicles, it allows players to see more of the verticality of the city.

After fussing with the radio stations and finding a calming melody for his drive, Bellic cautiously navigates a section of the BOABO, arriving at a dockside area with an amazing view of downtown Liberty and its skyline. At the dock, the squawks of pigeons and the rustling of waves drown out the horns and chatter of the city's residents, and you can almost sense that Bellic is calmed by the change in scenery. After walking directly over to the water, which looks completely lifelike, he puts a leg up onto a broken concrete wall and pulls out his cell phone. This action brings up a magnified view of the phone onto the HUD. The options presented on the phone's LCD are Phonebook, Messages, Organizer, and Camera. After selecting Phonebook, Bellic is faced with another set of options: City Contact, Docks Friend, and Cab Contact. We're not sure who Bellic ends up calling, but after a brief conversation, he informs the man on the other end of the line to meet him at the docks.

'I live this amazing life, it's the American Dream come true. I have two women. I have four hot tubs. I have fifteen sports cars,' and [Bellic] believes it.

You really get a sense of how real this world is when you see a new car in front of a decades-old apartment

A NEW LEVEL OF FREEDOM

"In all previous GTA games you might have felt like a slave," opines Houser. "You are ordered by people to do things. Now, there's still going to be an element of that because you are an underling that people tell what to do for large parts of the game, but you can also choose how you want to spend your time. I want to hang out with him and her. I want to go and see this guy because he always has fun things to do. Call him up and maybe you can hang with him. Maybe he'll answer. That's a fun way of navigating the story and navigating the world and your time in it. You have a lot of choice over what you want to do."

Storytelling is a huge focus in this next installment, and it will be reflected through the various ways you can interact with the city and its denizens. According to Houser, Rockstar North is giving people more freedom, more choice, and more sense of control over their destiny. The game still follows a narrative path, but it's quite different in its structure. "The story is told in a number of different ways," adds Houser. "But we've tried to replicate as many ways possible that you engage with people. There's talking [in person], cell phones, and a bunch of other ways of giving the player information. We are trying to use that kind of stuff to give you back story or front story, or to explain character motivation."

"You still meet people, get missions by them, do the missions, and if you do well they will help you. Or they may stab you in the back. We tried to provide more diversity to the missions. We tried to provide certain choices about the missions. We've tried to give branches that maybe give you a critical choice, new ways of interacting with characters, and new ways of interacting with the world. It's a different kind of experience."

In previous Grand Theft Auto titles, the goal was always very clear cut. You start out small and work your way up to the top. Bellic's story isn't a rags-to-riches tale, nor is it rags-to-rags. It's rags to somewhere in

This Liberty City isn't about real estate and big money. It's about survival

between – leaving a world of imagination as to where his actions will bring him – especially with Rockstar hinting heavily at the idea of players plotting their own destiny. When asked about this, Houser points out that "you are just one fish in a big pond of other fish. New York motivation isn't just about turning up here and becoming the king. That's an impossible goal."

Over the last console generation, Grand Theft Auto has become a series of period pieces. Vice City was set in the '80s, and San Andreas took place in the '90s. Not since GTA III, a game also featuring Liberty City, has Rockstar North approached a contemporary piece. In Grand Theft Auto IV, we are stepping into Liberty City as seen in 2007. It's a bigger city, and a different age. These are both things that could have a huge effect on the way that you approach your criminal activities.

"From conversations we had with a lot of crime experts and a lot of ex-policeman, we learned that it's very hard to be a criminal nowadays," Houser says with a smile. "The glory days of that stuff are over. That was something that we definitely tried to capture in the story and the experience of the game. People are constantly getting arrested. The police are a heavy presence."

MORE THAN YOU WOULD EXPECT

In terms of scale, this GTA experience shouldn't be much different than San Andreas'. The only noticeable difference is that players won't be able to pilot airplanes. "There are no planes, because it's just a city," adds Houser. "Apart from the fact that {the vehicles] are similar. We want it to feel realistic and gritty. [Bellic] is not going to be riding a unicycle or rollerblading. We are giving choice and variety that feels right for that character. We're not suddenly saying there are no motorbikes. We are keeping all of that stuff. It's the same range and diversity that we had, but to fit the character."

Speaking of elements of the game that bring out the realism of the character, Houser admits that Rockstar North is approaching the recruitment of voice actors in a different way. Reading between the lines, this likely means less familiar voices, and more voices that fit the desired attitude of the characters. Bellic's deep Eastern European accent fits his gritty exterior, and the chatter heard in the streets just screams New York.

The same thought process is being applied to the soundtrack and radio stations. "We've raided the past heavily," Houser admits. "We are going to get some great music that works with the 2007 Liberty City. We've set the benchmark for game soundtracks in the past, and I don't think we've been surpassed in that; I think we've done some really

> You are just one fish in a big pond of other fish. New York motivation isn't just about turning up here and becoming the king. That's an impossible goal.

Rockstar wouldn't reveal details surrounding the targeting system just yet, but Houser did admit that it is something that they are working very hard on, and that they feel they've found the sweet spot with it
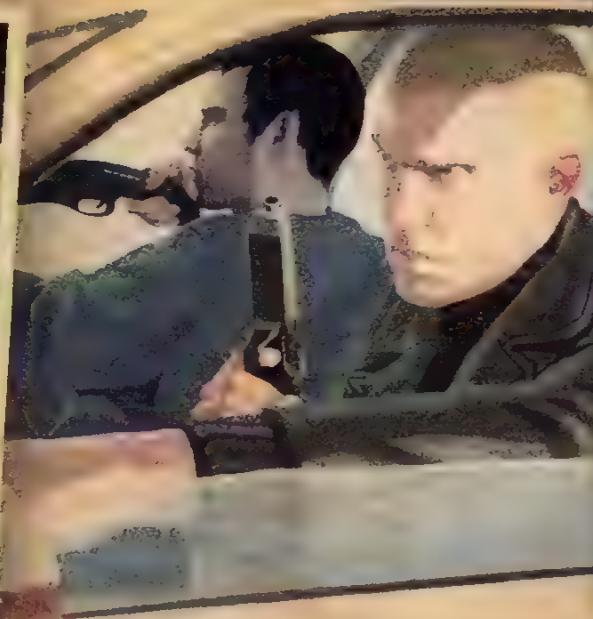
amazing stuff. I think we are going to do something wicked this time. We're pretty confident on that. It's a great way of giving you, the player, part of the experience in a way that no other medium can. You can have songs that fit your mood. I want this music to be hardcore because I am in a hardcore mood. Going out for a date with a girl, so I need something more romantic. We pick tracks that fit the tempo of the game. It's not a pedal-to-the-metal racing game. It's an urban cruising gangster game. We pick music that we think works with that kind of experience. It's got to be of a certain tempo or a certain feel no matter what genre it's in. The debate that goes into every single track you would not believe. There are a large number of music fans that pick this stuff."

With more realistic tones accompanying the visuals, it's easy to think that this GTA experience will abandon the series' trademark humor for more serious content. It will certainly feel like more of a realistic experience, but the humor will still be fully intact. Whether you are listening to advertisements on the radio, hear someone mumble something on the street, or read a billboard, Liberty City will still be a wild place. The same team, with the same sense of humor, is bringing this game to life.

This is something that even now, Houser finds amazing. "Some people talk about it like it's a franchise. I think of it as a series of games made by the same people. Since GTA III, we still have exactly the same people. We've added some great people on top of that, but it's the same two lead programmers, same physics guy, same producer, same executive producer, same writer, same audio guys, same designers. They are all in place. No one's left.

"That's what is so exciting. And what's been such a great experience for everyone involved in working on these games is that we managed to develop it as a core group together. We haven't lost any of the key talent. They've added great people in there. That kind of consistency has given everyone confidence in working with each other, and an understanding of what we are trying to do, and an

ambition that I don't think is matched anywhere else. Where people come and people go, and the franchise lives on. The franchise is the people who make this game – it's this core group of people. I think that's something that sets us apart from a lot of places."

It's that and the fact that the team is trying things that no one has with video games. Grand Theft Auto brought new definition to the action genre, and showed us that not every decision that the player makes has to be linear and tied to a path. With Grand Theft Auto IV, the team is finding new ways to approach storytelling, movement, and the level of interaction the player has within the world. This tight-knit team continues to improve with each new product it touches. Some of the content is amusing, like being able to call a woman for a date. And some of its achievements simply blow your mind, such as its load times. After an initial loading sequence, the game will never load again – even when you transition between interior and exterior locations.

Rather than outsourcing the technology that Rockstar North utilizes, Rockstar as a whole has set up a studio of programmers in San Diego that does nothing but work on the company's proprietary technologies. The engine of note is called R.A.G.E. (Rockstar Advanced Game Engine). You already got a brief taste of it with Table Tennis, and will get a much larger dose when Grand Theft Auto IV hits the streets on Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3 on October 16.

Both versions of the game will likely be identical, but Rockstar has confirmed that downloadable content will be exclusive to the Xbox 360 version. This content is said to be sizeable, and when asked about whether or not we would see this impressive new take on Liberty City living on past one game Houser grins and says one thing: "episodic content."

Like all of the Grand Theft Autos that have come before this one, the experience is largely for the single player. The game will have multiplayer,

however. "Yes, there will be some," Houser comments. "It's not going to be a massively multiplayer online game, but we are trying to make something that is interesting, fun, and progressive, and goes nicely alongside the single-player game."

It's been in development for over three years, and Houser isn't shy about admitting that this has been a lengthy experience already. "We knew to do something at this scale would take a very long time. Just to make graphics like that is very time consuming. The assets are big and heavy."

Whether it changes the face of gaming again like it did in the previous generation remains to be seen, but Rockstar North knows exactly where this series needs to go next, and is running that extra mile to get it there and make it a new experience yet again.

Houser equates the leap that this installment is making to that which the series made between the first Grand Theft Auto and Grand Theft Auto III. This is a huge step to make – something that we really haven't witnessed yet on the next-generation machines.

"Everyone always says, 'Books tell you something, movies show you something, and games let you do something.' [That is why games] were more interesting," says Houser. "And that was why games were going to take over. Games let you be somewhere. That's an amazing quality. That is something you just can't get from any other medium. The chance to exist in this fantasy world, be it Liberty City, be it Mars, or wherever, I think is a really interesting side of what games are going to offer as an artistic medium and as an entertainment medium. What we tried to do this time was massively enhance the experience of being there. Completely transform it so that the way the story unfolds, the way you deal with characters, the way the world behaves, the things that you can do, all of them give you this reason why you might want to be there and this sensation of living in this world." ■ ■ ■

THE RETURN OF

ALL-PRO FOOTBALL 2K8

THE COMEBACK KID

They don't call the NFL the "No Fun League" for nothing. Whether it's touching the QB or showing off your personality in a touchdown celebration, the league is likely against it. Nobody knows this better than gamers. By approaching Electronic Arts with an exclusive licensing deal, the NFL has shut down what once was a fun and beneficial rivalry between EA and NFL 2K5 developer Visual Concepts. "Get over it," says Jeff Thomas, VC's vice president of sports development, because there's no looking back.

That's not to say, however, that the NFL's decision didn't have a sizable effect on the company. "I don't know if that was black Friday, Thursday, or whatever day of the week it was," Jeff offers, "but it was definitely a huge impact for us." In fact, it was a while before Visual Concepts got over it themselves. The deal forced a span of forced introspection in late 2004. Jeff laughs as he remembers that period. "Holy crap, what are we going to do now?"

It was during this time that every possibility was laid on the table and examined. A few obscure football organizations called up the company and wanted it to make a football game based on their leagues. Another idea was to continue the NFL 2K5 develop-

ment line and quickly put out a game to compete with Midway's Blitz: The League. By the end of 2005, Electronic Arts had sown up exclusive deals with the NCAA and Arena Football League, effectively shutting the licensing door on Visual Concepts.

But the more that EA seemingly cornered the company, the clearer VC's focus became. "We always kept football in our hearts," declares Jeff. "Football has always been active at VC on some level."

Sitting in the modest office of Visual Concepts president Greg Thomas (Jeff's brother) in the company's newly decked out building in Marin County, California, it's hard to imagine that the people who brought us the NFL 2K franchise would ever not

be involved in football. Thinking back, Greg doesn't deny that getting to where they are now was hard. "That was a rough time. We had to reset. We had to really think about everything we were going to do. Everyone here thought about it. We had so many meetings. It all came back to one thing. It's all about the game of football."

It was then that the team realized that the goal of any football game — whether it has a license or not — is to represent the sport and its fans with high quality gameplay. The importance of timing, as is the case with any pivotal situation, is key. And despite all appearances, Visual Concepts' timing was good.

PUTTING THE "I" IN "TEAM"

"Reality kind of sunk in," Jeff explains. "We looked at what we had here at VC and said, 'You know what? I think we need to concentrate on next-gen.' It took us this long to do something that was compelling." Of course, the next generation of consoles is an advantage for any company, but instead of putting out a football product to coincide with the launch of the Xbox 360 or even PlayStation 3, the team decided to dig as deep into these new systems as they could. "I want to provide something that feels like, 'This is the way next-generation games should play.'"

How do you get to the core of a realistic football experience when it is so completely tied to the NFL teams we know so well? Go

beyond the teams themselves. All-Pro Football 2K8 aims to take the ultimate team sport and turn its focus onto the individual players. This is done by highlighting the separation in skill among players and translating that onto the field.

An important part of making individual players stand out is by getting away from the normal 0-100 attribute system we've seen in most sports games. Instead, players will be separated into tiers, with everyone having icons associated with them. These represent the positive and negative traits that define who they are on the field, such as a mobile QB who is a fumbler. Superstars also possess separate special abilities such as being good at fourth-quarter comebacks. These will give them further personality and differentiate them from the regular players. However,

even the lower-ranked players will have key skills that will come in handy.

Gamers will build their team from a pool of players. Here is where you can play GM and mold the team to your liking. Because you don't have to wonder about the difference between an 80- or 81-rated wide receiver, you have a better idea how to combine these individuals to shape your team's playing philosophy as well as its overall strengths and weaknesses. Once play begins, you can create and exploit mismatches among players and tailor your game plan to your strengths. This will be immediately evident when you take the game online. Here you can create multiple teams and pick which one gives you the best chance of winning when matched up against your opponent's own creations.

WHAT ARE LEGENDS MADE OF?

It's a poorly kept secret that All-Pro Football will feature NFL legends, who circumvent the league's exclusive licensing deal simply because they are retired. Visual Concepts wouldn't say anything on this topic, although it certainly didn't deny that NFL legends are in the picture. We have an understanding that they will be included in some way, but the developer just isn't willing to divulge the details yet.

"PLAY THE GAME AND SHUT UP"

JEFF THOMAS
VICE PRESIDENT OF
SPORTS DEVELOPMENT

■ Visual Concepts promises that CPU opponents will use more play disguises, audibles, and other such trickery

By making the player aware of the prowess of individual football players and the strategies behind utilizing them, the game actually makes its teams stronger than they might have been if they had been ruled by the NFL license. Because the team isn't bound by trying to recreate how the Patriots play (which games rarely do right) or whether the third-string linebacker has an acceleration rating of 73 or 70, it lets you create and exploit the differences among teams.

A NEW DOWN & DISTANCE

All-Pro's lack of traditional player ratings isn't the only way it will break with convention. Although the developer wouldn't go into detail about the game's league structure, we know that there won't be a franchise mode. No guiding your team through multiple years or drafting for the future. Also missing are first-person football and The Crib. This is disappointing – and rival Madden got slammed for its feature pullback when it switched over to the new generation, but Jeff is adamant in the developer's approach. "You have to pick some things and focus. The idea of this game is not to encompass every feature in every football game."

Likewise, although the game will feature a number of customization features for your team, including

options beyond the standard package for online play, you won't be able to recreate NFL teams or players. "I've decided a long time ago we're not doing that," says Jeff. "[That option] is not in the game, and people gotta be aware of that right now. It's not NFL poseur. There's going to be a backlash, I know that. And you know what? Play the game and shut up."

Although seemingly confrontational, his insistence brings out an important point about this game. Instead of banking on familiar territory, Visual Concepts is staking this game's fortunes on showing you what it thinks has been missing from football games in the past – including its own.

"I look at the AI on [NFL] 2K5 now and go, 'Wow, the AI was just stupid. It did stupid things a lot.'" says Jeff. The CPU AI will now make full use of its playbooks, players, and pay more attention to how you play the game – things that were noticeably absent from NFL 2K5. Defenses utilize different formation shells (which you can also use) in order to confuse you. So you might come up to the line of scrimmage and see the defense in a three-deep zone when they are actually running something entirely different.

A more startling example of the strides APF makes is in the running game, where CPU backs have been taught to see holes and cutback lanes to prevent them from running into the backs of their blockers.

In fact, the team has an AI test they call "AI or Abe I?" named after Abe Navarro, their producer. Navarro starts running plays with his hands hidden from view. The test is to see if a bystander can correctly guess whether the play they are seeing is the computer or Abe himself. The team's gotten the CPU to mimic human tendencies to the point that nobody's gotten more than three out of five right, and president Greg Thomas went a laughable zero for five.

Perhaps more important than getting your CPU opponent to play correctly, however, is the work being done to make sure your own players respond to your commands. "I want to give them what they want when they press that button," says Jeff, expressing the frustration of gamers the world over when their wide-open receiver can't even move his hands a couple of inches to adjust to the oncoming ball or a defensive back isn't able to swat the ball even though you've put him in the right position.

A key component to stemming this disbelief is refining the game's animation system. We've seen early footage of some of APF's animations, and it's clear that some of the bad transitions between player movements from the past have been cleaned up, leaving very fluid play – even on complicated matters such as the interaction between the offensive and defensive lines. A good example of the game's

Improved AI, animations, and collision will make line play more realistic

blending of AI and animations is in your QB's ability to throw the ball while he's getting tackled. The resulting toss will be subject to all kinds of variables to determine how bad of a throw it is, but giving the player the option to follow-through with a throw or tuck the ball before it's released shows a lot of confidence in the gameplay.

OUTSIDE THE LINES

As much as the NFL license benefits a football game, Visual Concepts is going out of its way to make use of those areas that the NFL restricts. In tandem with the game's refined animation system, injuries will now occur in real time. We've seen plays where a guy lands funny and gets his head twisted or he lands on his arm the wrong way producing an injury. Previously, the NFL wouldn't allow this because it didn't like directly associating violent hits with players getting injured. This includes major concussions produced after particularly jarring blows and being able to throw late hits. To be clear, All-Pro is not an over-the-top, Blitz-style game; but football is a violent sport, and the team is trying to represent this faithfully without NFL restrictions.

Another area the game can expand on is the actual on-field speech that goes on during a game, whether that's trash talking between players or dialogue between a coach and a QB. The NFL and the Players' Association don't allow for specific dialogue to be assigned to players because it doesn't want to put words in Peyton Manning's mouth, for example. Of course, All-Pro doesn't have to worry about that, so you'll see players and coaches talking to each other complete with full lip-synching. This won't be a constant element of All-Pro Football, but it will be a key element of the game's overall presentation – an area in which Visual Concepts' work is well regarded.

Will it all work? Can you sell a non-licensed football game to a country that is obsessed with the NFL? As confident as the team at Visual Concepts is, those are the million dollar questions that nobody can answer right now. "We're not sure how everyone's going to take it," admits Greg. "This, to me, is people looking for their football fix. They may also buy Madden, but it's about playing the best one." ■ ■ ■
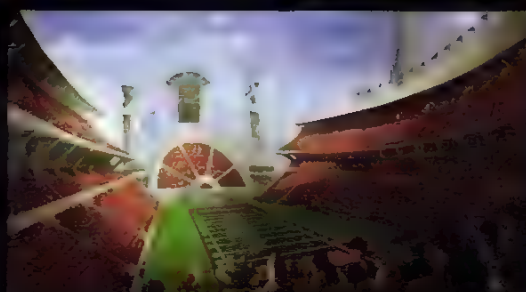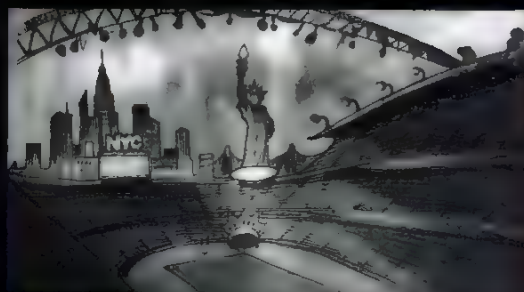
THE STADIUMS

Instead of showing boring fly-bys of steel girders in NFL stadiums, All-Pro's digs are stylized to the hilt. Each team (with names like the Rhinos, Iron Men, Cobras, etc.) will feature their own theme that comes through in the architecture and in events such as touchdown celebrations. The Rhinos' stadium, for example, has an animatronic Rhino that bursts out of the stands. Fans in the crowd will consist of 64 different models complete with 64 different animations. Presentation cutscenes will even zoom in on these fan models. Weather will also be a big part of the stadium experience, right down to creating more slippery playing conditions.

UNLIMITED ENABLED

XBOX 360

Forza Motorsport 2

> STYLE 1-PLAYER RACING (UP TO 8-PLAYER VIA XBOX LIVE) > PUBLISHER MICROSOFT > DEVELOPER TURN 10 STUDIOS > RELEASE MAY

PAINTER PARADISE

Look closely and you can actually see your reflection in the taillight

You want to talk numbers for a minute? Forza 2 boasts some impressive stats. More than 300 licensed cars, 45 tracks across 12 environments, and upwards of three hours of licensed music. But if numbers aren't enough to get your heart pumping, take another look at these screens. Forza 2 looks good, and there are plenty of reasons for this. More numbers, too: 60 frames per second with 2x full-screen anti-aliasing, high-dynamic-range lighting, and 720p. But wait, don't fall asleep. You're not in math class, and Forza 2 promises to play as true to life as it looks.

One area where Forza 2 is trying to raise the bar is in car customization. "In the original Forza Motorsport, we thought 400-plus layers would be sufficient," game director Dan Greenawalt told us. "However, after we saw the level of artistry in the community, we realized that there is a class of artist out there that could use 4,000-plus." Players can also take

their visual sets and apply them to any car in their garage, or they can lock it to a specific car and take that car to sell in an online auction.

Car damage also returns to Forza 2. "If you crash, your car will run differently depending on the damage," Greenawalt tells us. "If your bumper gets knocked off, it will stay on the track for the rest of the race and add another degree of difficulty and realism – no mysterious vanishing parts in Forza Motorsport 2." And this level of realism extends to Forza 2's physics engine that has to run at a whopping 360 fps to keep pace with these cars and helps give them a more realistic feel.

You can play with seven other people online or hop on Forza Motorsport 2 TV and get tips by watching the best racers in the world in what Greenawalt says "is like watching a virtual customized car show." It's hard to believe that we are on the cusp of getting our hands on this promising racer. ■ ■ ■

A nice example of
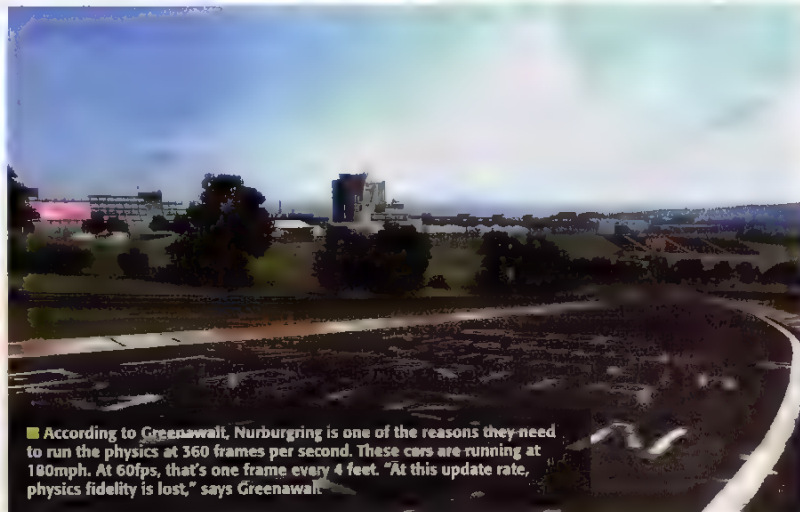
According to Greenawalt, Nurburgring is one of the reasons they need to run the physics at 360 frames per second. These cars are running at 180mph. At 60fps, that's one frame every 4 feet. "At this update rate, physics fidelity is lost," says Greenawalt.

IN CARS

We still don't know Forza 2's complete list of cars, but it will consist of over 300 vehicles from more than 50 of the world's top manufactures including Audi, BMW, Lotus, Jaguar, and Porsche. But there are plenty that we already know about and can't wait to drive. You could dip these babies in pink paint and plaster our face on the side with a word bubble that says "I love unicorns," and we'd still drive them.

■ Porsche brings 13 sports cars to the table. Highlights include the 911 Turbo the 1979 cars be and the 1987 Porsche 959

■ There will be 15 different models from Ferrari including the 2004 Ferrari F430, which happens to be one of developer Dan Greenawalt's favorite cars. His favorite track? Sebring

■ Of course, our favorite is the Lamborghini Murcielago, but Lamborghini's Italian cousin, Maserati is new to Forza 2 with its 2004 MC12 and the 2006 Gransport

■ No, trust us, you couldn't afford the insurance on this

WHO WOULD ACTUALLY DO THIS?

If you want the ultimate setup you can hook up 4 Xboxes with 4 copies of the game to 4 TVs to get a wider view of the track (one TV can even function as a rearview mirror). Or you could collect 6 Xboxes, games, and TVs for a full 360° view of the action. We don't know who can even afford this ridiculous set up, but we want to party at their house.

■ Johnny Mowlem from the Risi Competizione team practices, in between heats, off the track at the American LeMans Series at Sebring in March. They ended up winning the event

Warhawk

> **STYLE** UP TO 32-PLAYER VIA PLAYSTATION NETWORK > **PUBLISHER** SONY COMPUTER ENTERTAINMENT > **DEVELOPER** INCOGNITO > **RELEASE** FALL

YEP, IT'S JUST MULTIPLAYER

There have been plenty of rumors flying around about this game ever since its showing back at E3. Sony is at least putting some of them to rest now. Warhawk is most definitely an exclusively online multiplayer game. Absolutely no single-player campaign is included. What Sony still hasn't decided on, however, is if the game will be all boxed up at retail or if it will only be available via download from the PlayStation Store. Either way, we got some good hands-on time with the latest direction Warhawk is headed.

The one playable map took place in a bombed out city with plenty of room for driving and flying vehicles about. Players take either the Eucadian or Chernovan side and can fully customize the look of their character. They'll be able to charge in on foot with over 20 weapons to choose between ranging from machine guns to rocket launchers to flamethrowers. Additionally, players can man several different kinds of turrets to get a leg up on other soldiers or even the odds against a tank.

A mix of ground and air vehicles are spread around the bases ripe for the taking. Those looking for a speedy ride can jump in a jeep with buddy riding shotgun and another in the back handling turret duties. Others may go for the tank just for the sheer firepower. To take to the skies, you'll want a

warhawk or nemesis. Here you'll be able to unleash homing missiles, electric blasts, remote controlled missiles, and even try some sneaky cloaked maneuvers. Motion controls are optional on all vehicle types so you can flip it off for jeeps and on for planes, for example. For the most part, either control option works smoothly, and transitioning in and out of vehicles is seamless.

The final game will include 25 maps and standard modes like team deathmatch, capture the flag, and territories. A unique mode called Zone encourages players to control more of the map to earn more resources. Loads of rewards, badges, medals, ribbons, and rankings will help the world know about your mad skills. And just because Warhawk is all multiplayer doesn't mean you can't share a match on the same PS3 with a friend. All he or she has to do is hit the start button with an extra controller any time during the middle of a match and the screen will immediately split to accommodate both of you.

Warhawk's lack of single-player may be a disappointment, but hopefully it will help multiplayer be the best that it can be. Though it still has a ways to go, the potential for out-of-control vehicular combat is positively there. We'll definitely be keeping an eye on this one as it progresses. ■ ■ ■

"This is a battle I do not think we can win"

■ Warhawks are great at air-to-ground attacks... as long as you don't hover in one place for too long

■ Dogfights can get quite intense

■ Enlisting a buddy to man the turret is essential for staying alive in heavily infested areas

"I think that was a jeep at some point"

Cluster bombs are weak individually, but they cast a wide net

Bridges serve as excellent choke points for action

Stuntman: Ignition

> STYLE 1 OR 2-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 8-PLAYER VIA PLAYSTATION NETWORK OR XBOX LIVE)
> PUBLISHER THQ **> DEVELOPER** PARADIGM ENTERTAINMENT **> RELEASE** SUMMER

STOP, DROP, AND ROLL

The repetitive nature of the first Stuntman game put out by Atari in 2002 made you want to smash your head through your windshield. Now that the game is in the hands of developer Paradigm and publisher THQ, changes have been made to keep the series' high-octane thrills intact without the hassle of load times or an overly strict difficulty level.

At the recent THQ Gamers' Day, we got plenty of hands-on time with the game, and found that this sequel does indeed run leaner and meaner than its predecessor. Whereas the first game required you to hit time gates in order to keep progressing through a scene, Ignition (while still having time gates) is based on a five-strike system. Miss a time gate or a major stunt and you'll be charged a strike.

Despite this more forgiving setup, don't think for a second that the series' love of fast-paced, gonzo driving stunts has been reigned in at all. Quite the contrary. The first of the game's six movies is *Aftershock*, which is a natural disaster flick complete with a towering inferno of spewing lava, earthquake fissures, and a few surprising moments.

We struggled a bit initially with the first scene (each film contains about six scenes), but it was immediately evident that the more forgiving star system made the flow of the game simply more fun. Another key factor in this is the fact that you can now string together moves for big combo bonuses. Because you can earn these extra points by getting into close calls, bumping traffic, going airborne, or drifting around corners, you can in effect create your own stunts in-between the actions you have to perform for your director.

As in the first Stuntman, you'll get to see a trailer of your stunts once you finish all the scenes for a movie. Depending on how well you do, you can also win Stuntman awards. Another new tweak to the original is the game's overall pacing, which opens up your next movie earlier than before. This way you can jump to another scene and come back to one that might be giving you trouble. Online play will separate the joes from the pros, although THQ isn't saying much about this portion of the game other than to say that this mode will incorporate both competitive and co-op play. ■ ■ ■

■ Unlike the first Stuntman, Ignition hopes to balance difficulty and fun

IGNITION IN OVERDRIVE

Set in a San Francisco-esque town of docks and hills, some of the scenes in *Overdrive* can get pretty technical, requiring you to floor your car backwards under a passing semi and whip it around 180 degrees once on the other side

Aftershock features more gonzo action than the first Stuntman

As you can see, Manhunt 2 is every bit as grim as the original

Syringes are one of the new single-use weapons

You'll have access to guns much earlier in the game than in the first Manhunt

Manhunt 2

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION > **PUBLISHER** ROCKSTAR GAMES
> **DEVELOPER** ROCKSTAR LONDON (PS2, PSP), ROCKSTAR TORONTO (Wii)
> **RELEASE** SUMMER

SLIPPING INTO DARKNESS
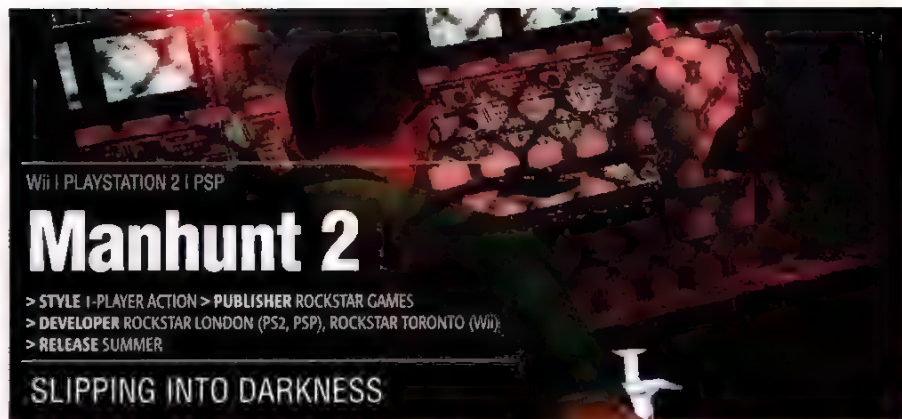
Manhunt is one of the most underappreciated games of the PS2 generation, a dark and brutal exploration of violence that brought Rockstar's uncompromising vision into the stealth genre. More serious in tone than the satirical Grand Theft Auto series, the game wasn't an enormous blockbuster, but did earn a sizeable cult of fans. These fans will be pleased to learn that Manhunt is returning, with a surprising twist.

First off, this game is not a sequel, at least not in the traditional sense. Although much of the gameplay (as well as the emphasis on bloody violence) is still intact, the plot and characters are completely new, with no crossovers with the original saga of death row inmate James Earl Cash.

Our new protagonist, scientist Dr. Daniel Lamb, is a much different man than Cash. In fact, he's not a criminal at all, but rather a family man working on a top secret neurological weapons program. After funding for the risky program is pulled, Lambs' boss, Dr. Pickman, takes the program underground. Lamb, a true believer, volunteers to be a test patient against the protests of his wife. Sadly, this decision is a tragic one. After the experiment, Daniel suffers from intense psychosis and paranoia. This eventually leads him to a cell in the Dixmore Hospital for the Criminally Insane, which is in reality a front for Pickman – a place to dispose of the project's "mistakes." Six years pass, and Daniel begins having trouble remembering if his old life was real or just another feverish dream. The days pass slowly, until the night when an electrical storm cripples the hospital's security system, opening the cells. Daniel and his unstable friend Leo take this opportunity to escape, embarking on a quest to uncover the events of their past.

While the plot is new, the gameplay closely resembles the original Manhunt, as does the gritty digital video look of the graphics. As before, stealth is key to success, and staying alive is more matter of wits and misdirection than brawn. A meter shows when you are covered in shadow and safe from discovery, allowing you to distract guards by tapping on walls or throwing small objects (this time, you can even chuck a decapitated head for extra emphasis). After that, it's a matter of sneaking behind your prey and performing one of three levels of executions. Of course, there are new, even more gruesome executions this time around, and some new weapons like syringes and pens ripe for the jabbing. Rockstar has also added environmental executions for times when you don't have a weapon in your inventory. For example, we saw Lamb use a simple desk phone to strangle a man to death. Unfortunately, no details were given about how the Wii version will play, but you can use your imagination.

Rockstar has opened up other areas of the gameplay as well, especially exploration. You can now climb up and down, allowing you to access higher or lower areas as in The Warriors. You can also crawl through tight corridors or vents. One other intriguing addition we noted was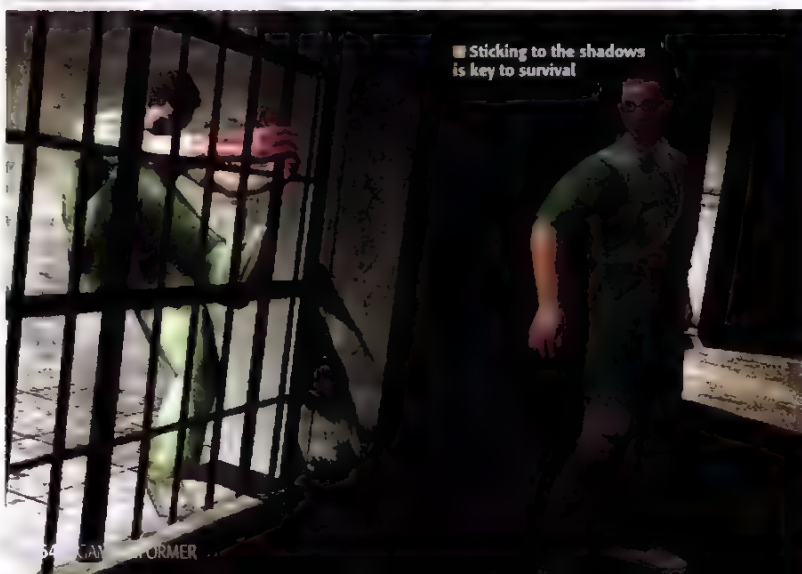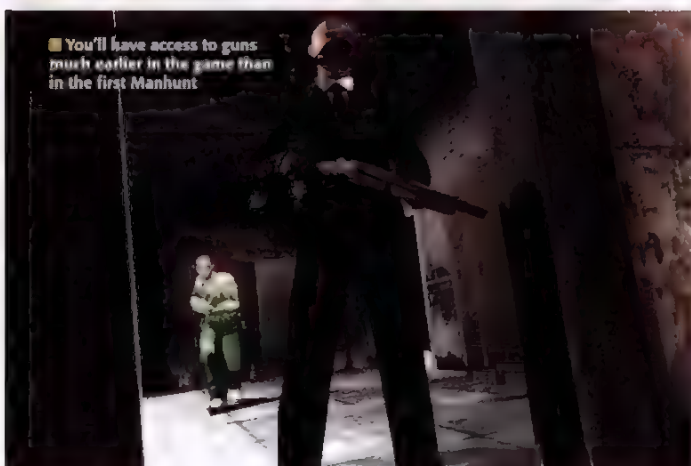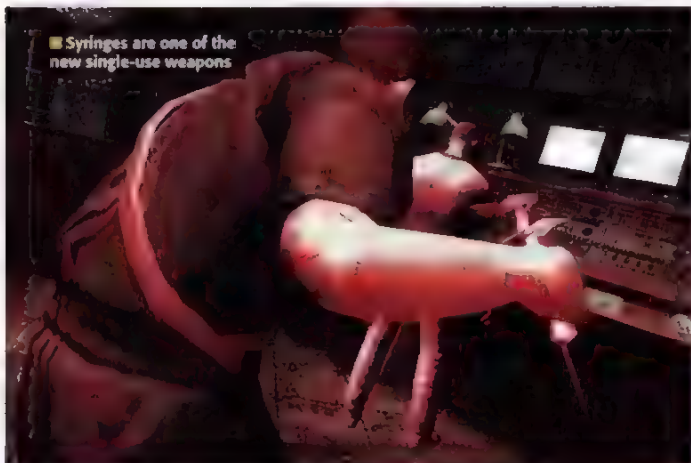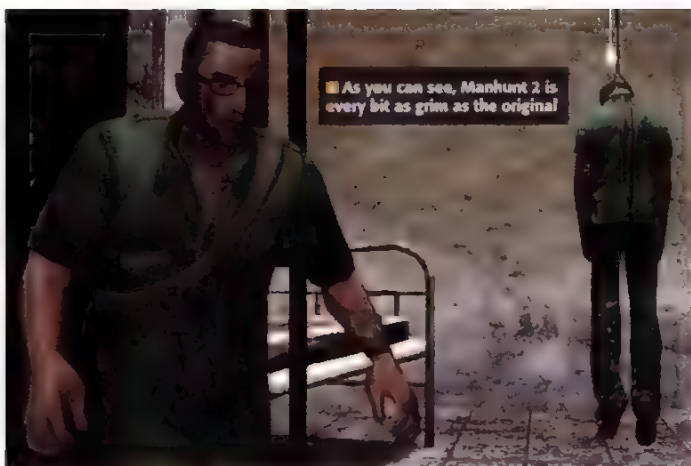 the ability to cloak the sound of your movements under noises made by NPCs. In one instance, we were able to smash a brothel window without alerting the guards by timing it perfectly with the groans of a man getting a particularly strenuous lap dance (the game is rated M, by the way).

Although our time with the game was brief, our first impressions of Manhunt 2 were extremely positive. If anything, this sequel's relationship with violence is even more complex, forcing us to look at why we're so drawn to horror and gore. Lamb is a more reluctant murderer than Cash; after his first kill you'll see him throw up in shame. While it will likely be a rough ride for the weak of stomach, Manhunt 2 looks to be a strong entry in a unique series. ■ ■ ■

Sticking to the shadows is key to survival

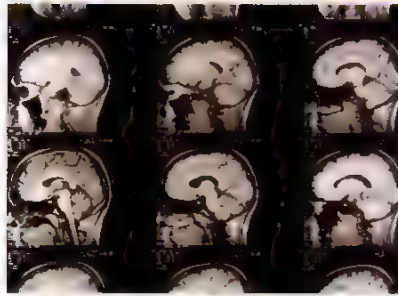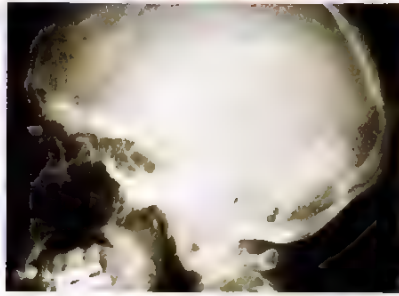There are new types of executions, including some that use environmental objects instead of weapons.

Unlike James Earl Cash, Daniel Lamb is a reluctant killer

New abilities include climbing over walls and crawling

As before, combat with groups of enemies is to be avoided at all costs
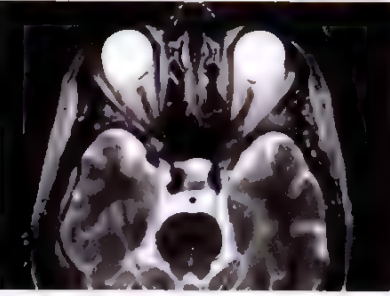
Players can alter facial expressions, wave, and smack each other using the Sixaxis

PLAYSTATION 3

LittleBigPlanet

> **STYLE** 1 TO 4-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 4-PLAYER VIA PLAYSTATION NETWORK) > **PUBLISHER** SONY COMPUTER ENTERTAINMENT > **DEVELOPER** MEDIA MOLECULE > **RELEASE** EARLY 2008

SACK OF FUN

Sony's only new game revelation coming out of the recent Game Developers Conference, LittleBigPlanet, supported its renewed focus on community, which was spearheaded by the announcement of Home (see page 16). The game comes courtesy of Media Molecule, a new company founded by the team that made indie hit Ragdoll Kung Fu. In LBP, users will create custom stages using a streamlined level editor and upload them to the PlayStation Network, where other users can play and rate them.

Players start out with a cutesy character (dubbed "sackboy" by the developers) and can browse through a simple interface to select objects to place in the environment. The editing menu is tethered to your character by some kind of neon rope, and after you decide on a size and shape you can drop the item anywhere you like. In the demo at Sony's GDC keynote, the developers produced a simple wooden block, attached a metal cog to the front of it, and began running atop the spinning gear to show how the physics are instantly implemented. Players can also make stickers out of any image file on the PS3 hard drive and slap them on any surface whether it be hard, soft, textured -- even a flowing piece of cloth.

After demonstrating the creation system, Media Molecule proceeded to play through a fully completed level with four players. Characters had a variety of costumes ranging from an Evil Knievel daredevil jumpsuit to a Chinese dragon headdress.

In the garden-themed level, players had to work together to clear physics-based puzzles but also competed to collect the most yellow sponges. The motley crew navigated seesaws, clambered through a pile of burlap sacks, and grabbed onto a giant spinning gear to fling themselves over a high wall. At one point, they came across a soccer ball too big to jump over and demonstrated three different methods for getting past it. One character rolled an orange over and used it as an extra platform to jump up. Another character pushed the soccer ball forward, grabbed onto the side of it while it was moving, and used the momentum to fling himself over the top of it. The last sackboy used a similar, yet more difficult, tactic on a smaller orange to launch himself completely over the soccer ball. Next, they all nabbed some

jetpacks, snapped up a heavy shell, and dropped it onto a lever to open a door. The icing on the cake was when the four of them jumped onto one large skateboard and caught some big air off a steep ramp.

Players can publish created levels such as this and keep track of comments left by other users, play counts, and rankings. If you'd like to check out what other people are making, you'll be able to search content by user rankings, tag words, and length of time the level has been posted. Users who like each other's work can also be team up on created stages if they choose.

Let your creative juices flow this fall when a demo of LittleBigPlanet appears on the PlayStation Network, and watch for the full boxed version in early 2008. ■ ■ ■

Snapshots can be taken at any time during gameplay

Sony used The Go! Team's "Get It Together" as backing music for the demo

Mario will spend plenty of this game airborne

SMB3 airships FTW!

Larger planets simulate more traditional platforming
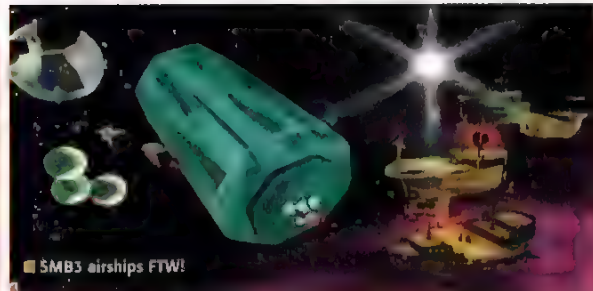
Wii

Super Mario Galaxy

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION > **PUBLISHER** NINTENDO > **DEVELOPER** NINTENDO > **RELEASE** 2007

GLOBE TROTTTING

At the recent Game Developers Conference, Nintendo's Shigeru Miyamoto spoke primarily about his game design philosophy. But those present also caught a fresh glimpse of a crucial title in this year's Wii lineup: Super Mario Galaxy.

Before presenting an all-new trailer for the title, Miyamoto addressed the question of what actually happened to Mario 128, a game that was only shown in video form back in 2000. In this old clip, exactly 128 Marios scampered around on a giant circular platform and tossed blocks (and each other) off of the edge into a bottomless pit. During Miyamoto's GDC speech, he explained that Mario 128 was only a concept meant to show off the GameCube's power. But that doesn't mean he didn't store away some of the ideas for later. Miyamoto cited Pikmin as the way he was able to incorporate a multitude of creatures into gameplay, and he's now using Super Mario Galaxy to realize the concept of navigating spherical environments.

The following trailer showed off a number of varied environments hovering in outer space. Smaller platforms resembled asteroids, grassy rocks, koopa shells, Yoshi eggs, carved wooden handles, UFOs, thick chunks of glass and metal, and a tube of platforms held together by cosmic energy. We even caught a glimpse of several airships straight out of Super Mario Bros. 3 floating around in the background. However, several massive stretches of land hinted that Mario won't just constantly be zipping through space. A fire planet resembled more traditional plumber platforming as Mario navigated metal structures jutting out of a sea of lava and launched himself out of an erupting volcano. Several larger, atmosphere-encased worlds also appeared, with one showing Mario swimming underwater while dodging a big chomping fish.

How will players navigate these spread out environments? The most common method of travel was a star-shaped springboard that sent Mario soaring like Superman. We also saw the plumber ride a growing, twisted vine and float around on a wispy flower. In one scene, Mario ran around on a red apple, stomped on a wooden peg, and a worm sprung out of the side providing a bridge to the next apple.

Enemies were relatively few in number, but a few classics did make a brief appearance, including Bullet Bills, Thwomps, Bob-ombs, and Wigglers (those angry caterpillar dudes). New baddies included bouncing blue slimes and spinning robotic tops. At one point, a dinosaur hybrid piranha plant big enough to be a boss broke out of a large egg and charged after Mario.

Super Mario Galaxy appears to be coming along nicely, but without any new playable content we'll have to reserve judgment. Who knows when Nintendo is planning on springing this inevitable blockbuster upon the gaming world? Even though "this year" could mean anywhere between now and December, we're betting that Nintendo is saving this one for the holidays. ■ ■ ■

Finally out of the pipe, Petey goes apes---

■ In some respects, specials are almost easier to pull off on the Wii

Wii

Mortal Kombat: Armageddon

> **STYLE** 1 TO 4-PLAYER FIGHTING > **PUBLISHER** MIDWAY > **DEVELOPER** MIDWAY > **RELEASE** MAY

BLOOD AND DISMEMBERMENT ON THE FAMILY CONSOLE

It may be difficult to picture how something as twitch as Mortal Kombat would utilize motion-sensing controls effectively. Fortunately, we can stop wondering since Midway gave us some hands-on time with the Wii version of this fighter. Rather than trying to make every punch and kick correspond to the remote and nunchuk, the team has decided to only use motion-based moves for special attacks and Fatalities.

To prevent accidental activation of motion-based moves, players must hold down the B button during the entire span of the attack to "record" it. As you can see from the screenshots, players will direct the remote away and towards for attacks like Johnny Cage's slide kick or Scorpion's hook shot. Moving down and up will activate teleport moves, and drawing a half-circle shape in the air activates projectiles like Sub-Zero's freeze shot. Once a special is completed successfully, a subtle confirmation sound emanates from the remote speaker. Character movement and jumping

is handled by the nunchuk analog stick, and standard punches and kicks are tied to the d-pad. A new training mode encourages players to pull off a chain of specials without mistakes, and in turn helps to learn the new control scheme. The system works surprisingly well at this point, and it's quite simple to pick up and play.

Armageddon's mix and match Fatality system is also completely motion-based. Players will push the controllers forward and pull upward to rip off an opponent's head or spread the controllers apart to dismember arms. It's especially fun to twist the controllers to perform a neck snap. Motion controls extend to the extra modes as well. The Shaolin Monks-style Konquest mode plays a lot like the main game, and the cart-based Motor Kombat utilizes Excite Truck's brand of tilt steering. All in all, Armageddon Wii looks like it could be a good way for the "mature" gamer to kick off those summer months on Nintendo's little wholesome console. ■ ■ ■

UNLIMITED ENABLED

NINTENDO DS

Touch the Dead

> **STYLE** 1 OR 2-PLAYER ACTION (2-PLAYER VIA WIRELESS) > **PUBLISHER** EIDOS
> **DEVELOPER** DREAM ON STUDIOS > **RELEASE** MAY

REACH OUT AND TOUCH SOMEONE

We're not sure where to even start with the name of Eidos' new rail shooter, so we're going to just leave the jokes to your imagination. Even if its moniker elicits some snickers, Touch the Dead has some fun gameplay to make up for it. Combining the old school vibe of a light gun shooter with the technology afforded by the DS, Touch the Dead looks like it should deliver a unique experience when it releases this spring.

We played through the first three levels of this zombie-thon, and were impressed with some of the subtle techniques that managed to transform a simple rail shooter into a challenging action game. As an escaped prison inmate, the game opens as your cell door swings wide, and a seemingly open path to escape lies before you. It's not long before you find out where everybody has gone – they've all become zombies! Now there's a surprise. Movement is almost totally automated except for occasional branching paths that you choose by shooting in one direction or another. Weapon fire is a simple act of touching the screen where you'd like to aim, and reloading involves sweeping the stylus across from your inventory to the gun. Strategy comes in timing your reloads to match the ebb and flow of zombies that seem so intent on devouring you. There's also the need to score enough decapitations, leg losses, and arm severs in each level to boost your health before another round begins. You'll also pick up new weapons as you go, from shotguns to crowbars. While we didn't get a chance to check it out this month, the game also supports two-player cooperative play in case all those

undead are too much for you to handle all alone.

We're curious if the game continues to get more complex as the levels continue. As it is, the sections we played revealed no small amount of challenge, and the simple gameplay seemed like it should be a quality addition to the growing library of adult-oriented DS games. ■ ■ ■

SETTING THE MOOD

A box can say a lot about a game, and the folks behind Touch the Dead wanted to make a good first impression. For their box cover, Eidos hired on Arthur Suydam, most recently popularized for his art on the Marvel Zombies comic series. We shot some questions to him about his box cover for the new game, and you can read his responses in this month's Unlimited.

■ The cockpit view is truly a thrilling experience

■ The slow-mo in replays has to be seen. We'll give you a hint why: it's awesome

PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360 | PC

DIRT

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER RACING (UP TO 12-PLAYER VIA XBOX LIVE OR PS3 ONLINE)
> **PUBLISHER** CODEMASTERS > **DEVELOPER** CODEMASTERS > **RELEASE** JUNE

PLAYING DIRTY

The Colin McRae Rally series may be on its sixth entry, with nearly 7 million units sold in Europe alone, but Codemasters is hoping that for its American audience this newest entry – simply titled Dirt – will be considered version one. The series, which is a monster in Europe, has failed to reach a similar status in the U.S. With the jump onto the next-gen platforms hopefully things will begin to change, and Dirt will be an excellent entry point for newcomers.

For those who did play it, Colin McRae was long considered the definitive rally racer. Dirt doesn't look like it will change that. If anything, Dirt will expand on what the franchise is known for. No longer is this just a point-to-point rally racer. Now you can race against up to 11 competitors in a more diverse selection of rally modes.

We got our hands on the game and saw some of the game's career pyramid of 11 tiers and 66 championship challenges playable across five different difficulties. Add to this some time trials and a robust online mode, and Dirt is bound to keep even the most skilled racers busy for a while.

The first thing we noticed about Dirt was how good it looked. Graphically, the game is a gem. The water effects for a car as it slides around a rain-soaked corner look great. Individual blades of grass are modeled and cast a real shadow, which might just sound like technical gaming speak, but trust us: Once you whip around a corner and see the dirt clumps flying between the grass blades, you'll appreciate it.

Even with graphics this good, the thing that impressed us the most was the damage and physics systems. Dirt uses what Codemaster's called soft models on their cars, so damage is calculated in real time and applied to the car's model instead of just rotating through damage models like some games. The results are apparent. You could crash into a pole ten times and slight variations in speed and angle would result in ten different car damage looks.

The damage system has a direct impact on how you race. You can actually feel the wheels pulling you in different directions if your axel is bent. Of course, we really had to try to damage our car since we are such natural racers...alright, we rolled within the first lap. The difficulty you are on will change how much the damage affects your performance. In the amateur difficulty, car damage will hardly change the car's handling, but while playing pro, real-world rules apply. We're pretty excited to get our hands on the finished version of this game; thankfully June is just around the corner. ■ ■ ■
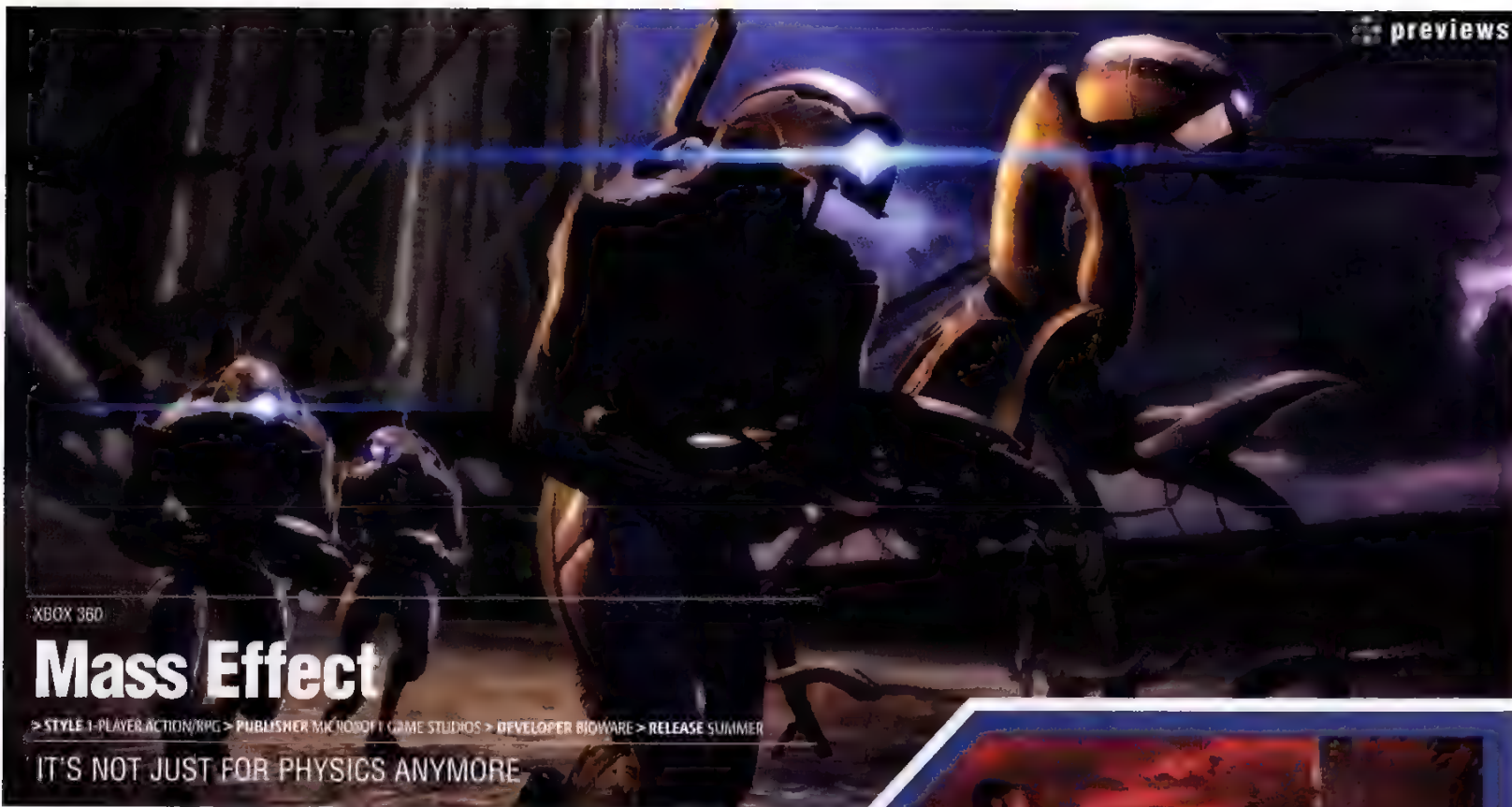
XBOX 360

Mass Effect

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION/RPG > PUBLISHER MICROSOFT GAME STUDIOS > DEVELOPER BIOWARE > RELEASE SUMMER

IT'S NOT JUST FOR PHYSICS ANYMORE

After discovering a long-lost piece of alien technology on Mars, humanity was thrust into the spotlight, attracting the attention of alien races from hundreds of planets. Now that humans have advanced their civilization by using the artifact, they are ready to take a more active role in the intergalactic scene. This is how players come to control Commander Shepard, the protagonist of Mass Effect and the only human ever to have a shot at joining the elite force of peacekeepers called Specter.

Like BioWare's past titles, morality will play an important role in Mass Effect, though not in a stereotypical battle between good and evil. Players shape Shepard's personality through his actions, but those situations won't give rise to diametrical options like "Help the widow" versus "Poison the widow's only surviving son." Instead, you will decide which lines Shepard is or isn't willing to cross when the safety of the universe is on the line. Is it acceptable to threaten or injure someone with crucial information, or is a more friendly solution possible? This is what has led to Shepard being referred to by BioWare as "Jack Bauer in space." In the same way

the hero of 24 will bend the rules for the greater good, players may have to use some questionable methods of persuasion to get the job done.

Even though interacting with other creatures comes with the territory, Shepard and his crew aren't a bunch of nancy-pants diplomats. The majority of Mass Effect's gameplay will be strategic gunplay mixing the combat styles of turn-based RPGs (like Knights of the Old Republic) and tactical shooters (like Full Spectrum Warrior). The battles can be fluid if you prefer a more action-oriented approach, or you can pause the game, giving you time to issue commands and catch your breath. Regardless of which method you choose, the array of customizable skills, weapons, and armor should ensure that the formula stays fresh as you explore the hundreds of available planets.

Mass Effect is unquestionably one of the heavy hitters in the Xbox 360 lineup, and every new bit of information reinforces that fact. With the game drawing close to release, players will soon find themselves in a pivotal role, shaping how humans will be perceived by other beings throughout the cosmos. ■ ■ ■

THE GOOD SHEPARD

While Commander Shepard may look the same in these screens, BioWare continues to emphasize that the character will be customizable in many ways. In addition to choosing Shepard's gender, you will be able to select one of six classes at the outset, ranging from the gun-oriented Soldier class to the Adept – a caster that uses abilities similar to Force powers. Players can also assign a backstory to the Commander that will have ripples later in the game. We still haven't seen much in terms of altering Shepard's physical appearance, but in light of the impressive depth of the gameplay options, this cosmetic angle will just be a nice perk.
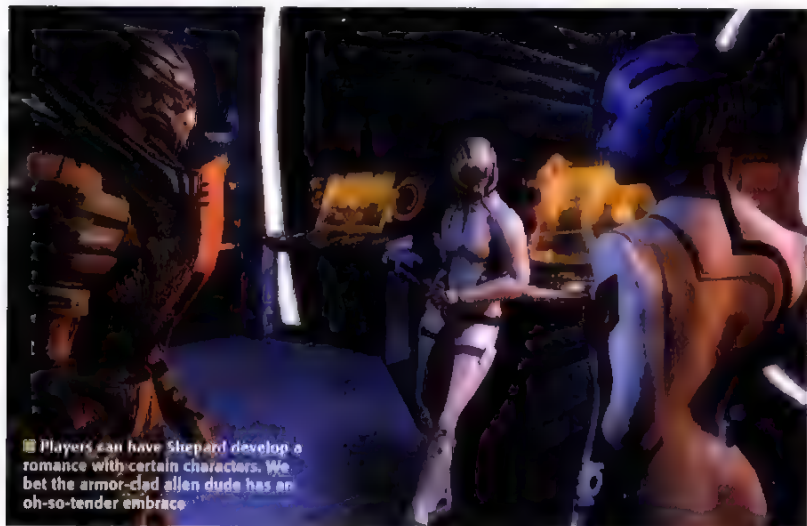
■ Players can have Shepard develop a romance with certain characters. We bet the armor-clad alien dude has an oh-so-tender embrace

■ Even though combat is real-time, Mass Effect won't have twitchy gunplay

PLAYSTATION 3

Final Fantasy Versus XIII

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION/RPG > **PUBLISHER** SQUARE ENIX > **DEVELOPER** SQUARE ENIX > **RELEASE** 2008

NAME RECOGNITION

When anticipation for a game climbs, it's usually because new screens, information, or concepts have been explained, thus giving gamers an idea what to look forward to. Final Fantasy Versus XIII doesn't need to bother with that - the mere fact that this game exists is enough to get anyone excited.

Carrying the Final Fantasy name and being developed by the team responsible for Kingdom Hearts, Versus XIII will be a companion game to Final Fantasy XIII. They are set in the same universe, but they tell two distinct stories in different ways. Versus XIII will focus on darker themes, and rely on action-based gameplay.

In terms of concrete information, Square Enix is keeping quiet, but there is still plenty of room for speculation. Our guess is that the main boss will be somewhat androgynous, and one or more of the characters could have spiky hair. This is also a high probability the clothing will have zippers in improbable or impractical locations, and that swords will be a large part of the gameplay. You heard it here first! ■ ■ ■

What's the purpose of a pygmy Chihuahua?

I'm an accessory. Like a chic handbag, a vintage necklace, or...

A pair of socks?

No, not a pair of socks. I would think you'd understand, being so stylized yourself.

PLAYSTATION 3

Final Fantasy XIII

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ROLE-PLAYING GAME > **PUBLISHER** SQUARE ENIX
> **DEVELOPER** SQUARE ENIX > **RELEASE** 2008

LIGHTNING, CLOUD, AND SQUALL

It may seem a little early to start talking about Final Fantasy XIII, especially since plenty of gamers still have their hands full with Yiazmat and Zodiark in FF XII. Even so, tidbits have started trickling out regarding the next entry in this powerhouse franchise.

Set in a divided land, tensions are running high between the inhabitants of a lower world and an upper world – a theme that should be familiar to Final Fantasy fans. The protagonist, a woman named Lightning, is believed to be an instrumental force of change, though whether she is a destroyer or unifier remains to be seen. What we do know is that she uses a combination of high technology and magic to become an incredibly powerful warrior.

Following the example set by Final Fantasy XII, Square Enix has confirmed that the battles in FF XIII will once again happen in real-time. It seems like the random encounters of years past are now gone for good. However, some things will never change; summoned monsters are returning, and fans that missed certain classic creatures in FF XII will be happy to know that Shiva is among them. The summons will be useful beyond just showing up for a one-off attack. For instance, Shiva has the ability to transform into a motorcycle, which suggests that she may play a large role outside of battle as well. If Bahamut transforms into a Segway, this could be the best game ever.

Due to its enormous popularity, every time a new detail about Final Fantasy is revealed, it is scrutinized several times over. The series hasn't let us down yet (no, not even with FF VIII. Stuff it, haters!), and it hasn't been revealed how these aspects will combine and interact with the game's other elements. It's just too bad that we'll have to wait until next year before all our questions are answered. ■ ■ ■

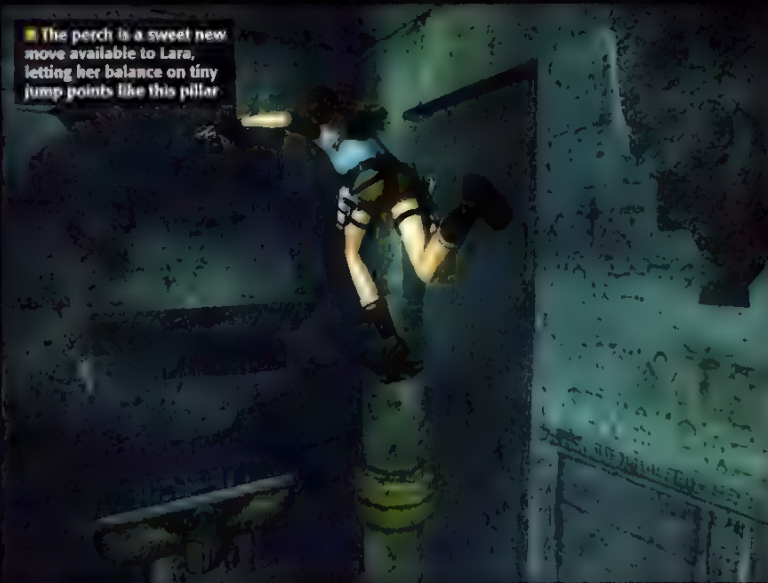> Hold up there, Napoleon. I'm more than stylish. I'm also crazy versatile.

> I'm versatile, too. I can wear a funny hat or a little leather jacket.

elementandfriends.com

Element
SC

SC model shown. ©2006 American Honda Motor Co., Inc.

The perch is a sweet new move available to Lara, letting her balance on tiny jump points like this pillar

PLAYSTATION 2

Tomb Raider: Anniversary

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

THE RIGHT WAY TO REMAKE

New details continue to emerge about Eidos' upcoming remake of the original Tomb Raider, and everything we hear indicates that the game is on track to deliver exactly what most fans want – a faithful adaptation of the story and situations of the original, with brand new puzzles, fights and graphics that have more in common with the recent Tomb Raider: Legend. This month we got a detailed look at the third major area of the game: Egypt.

Familiar locales within these levels remain almost entirely the same. Nostalgic players will recall puzzling over the Cat Temple, the Obelisk, and the imposing form of the Giant Sphinx. In each of these locations, you'll encounter familiar objectives from the original in order to progress. If you needed to pull the switch above a particular gate, you may still need to do that. However, the path to that switch has been completely redesigned to take advantage of Lara's newer move set and the physics-based environmental interactions that made

Lara enters the world of wall running

...the remake. Notice a difference?

Legend's brainteasers so interesting.

Level design is now significantly less linear, with more paths to a given objective than before. Fans may also be surprised to find themselves in a number of outdoor locations that they previously remembered as caves. In fact, all of the "new" outdoor locations are exactly as they were originally meant to be – but most players of the original assumed that the game was almost entirely underground due to the muted gray and black "ceilings" on the original PlayStation. With those draw distance limitations lifted, players can look up into the sky and spy distant features across a giant open space. From crocodiles to cat mummies, all the enemies have received their own upgrades, enabling complex AI and shifting attack behaviors. From a technical side, the 200 polygon mummies of the original game now clock in at 3,300 polygons.

Lara's acrobatic and combat repertoire continues to expand to meet the new challenges facing her. The coolest new move we saw this month was the perch, which allowed Lara to hop between the tiny tops of pillars and balance there. The grappling hook mechanic from Legend now also allows her to attach to points on a wall, then push off and run the length of the vertical surface. Finally, a new adrenaline system promises to spice up combat by allowing for special dodging counters when an enemy attacks. With a correctly timed button press, Lara will leap to the side and fire off a one hit kill at close range, offering a more elegant approach to combat than the frantic pistol firing previously required.

The more we see of Anniversary, the more we find ourselves wishing that the game was making its way to next-gen systems. But wishing doesn't make it so, and we'll have to content ourselves with a PlayStation 2 exclusive for the time being. In the meantime, that version looks plenty beautiful on its own – a point gamers will be able to determine for themselves soon. Tomb Raider Anniversary is slated for release this June. ■ ■ ■

■ Transforming into big pixel Mario is a great way to load up on experience
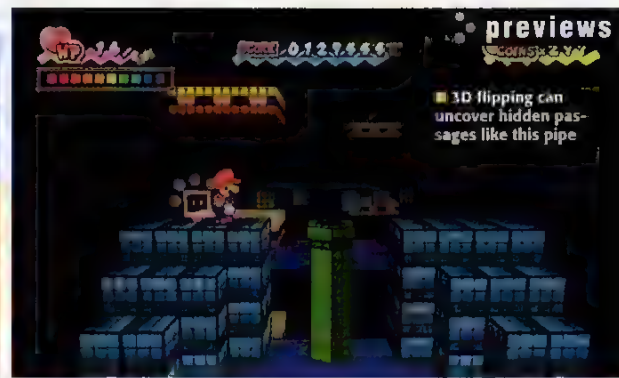
■ 3D flipping can uncover hidden passages like this pipe

■ Enemies inside boxes can follow you in and out of 3D

Wii

Super Paper Mario

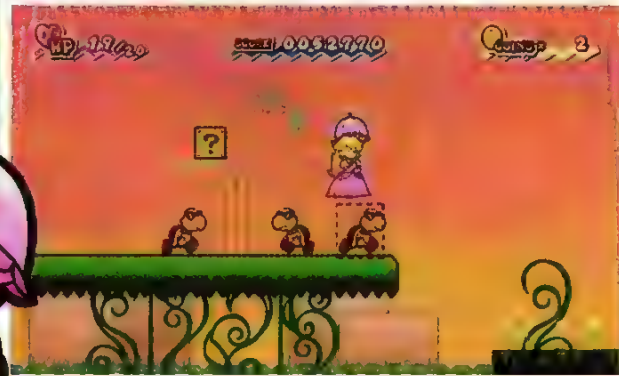> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION/RPG > **PUBLISHER** NINTENDO > **DEVELOPER** INTELLIGENT SYSTEMS > **RELEASE** APRIL 9
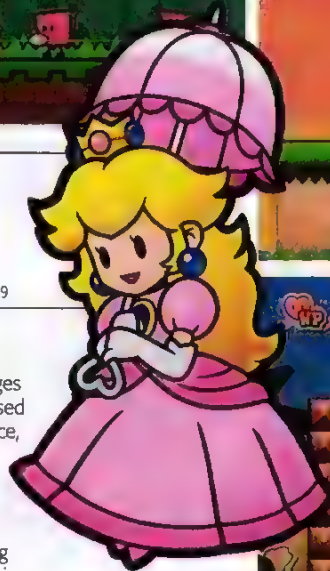
PLUMBING FROM A NEW ANGLE

When Super Paper Mario was quietly announced at E3 last year, details were sparse. It was listed as a GameCube title at the time, and was nowhere to be seen on the show floor. Fortunately, Mario has changed teams over to the Wii just like that *other* Nintendo game with the guy in green tights. We played through several early stages of this 2D/3D, platformer/RPG to find out just what this genre-bending game is all about.

SPM begins with Peach getting hypnotized into marrying Bowser by the evil Count Bleck. [WTF!? – *Ed.*] This unholy union, combined with a forbidden book called the Dark Prognosticus, creates a dark rift that threatens the world. After at least half an hour of nonstop dialogue scrolling across the screen, players can finally control Mario and get rolling.

The primary goal of the game is to collect eight "pure hearts" to fight off Bleck and his minions. All of the worlds are connected to a hub town called Flipside. Here players can interact with boxy citizens, purchase items from shops, and craft new recipes at the bakery. Worlds are split into four stages (like 1-1, 1-2, etc.) and appear to be based around standard platforming at first glance, but soon players gain the ability to flip the level into 3D. This adds an entirely new dimension to the gameplay, revealing hidden pipes, secret paths, and concealed items. Instead of zooming through stages like they may have done in New Super Mario Bros., players will have to take a more deliberate pace in order not to miss crucial pieces of a puzzle or the game's loads of secrets.

Just because the game is more action-based this time around doesn't mean that fans of the series will be robbed of RPG elements. Every time you jump on an enemy, damage points will appear above his head and kills will add to your total experience. If you kick a koopa shell you can even earn experience multipliers if it clocks several enemies in a row. Items found in question mark boxes and other out of the way places will give Mario various advantages in battle, and most utilize the Wii remote in interesting ways. The fire power-up has to be charged by shaking the controller and will target and fry every enemy in Mario's direct line of sight. Other power-up charges include contextual button pressing and drawing circles around several targets.

Mario won't be the only character you'll control on this adventure. Peach and Bowser will eventually join the cause and offer a nice change of pace. Though neither of them can flip to 3D, Peach has the ability to float over large chasms and Bowser uses his trademark flame breath. Mario also enlists familiars called Pixls to perform offensive, defensive, and puzzle-solving maneuvers. Tippi, a butterfly-shaped sprite, will serve as the silent plumber's voice and also provide information about most anything onscreen. Players simply switch from holding the Wii remote NES-style (as the game is predominantly played) to pointing it at whatever they want to know about. Other Pixls allow Mario to grab and toss objects and enemies, set bombs, or become extremely skinny to slip through narrow passages.

This promising title will already be in stores by the time you read this, so be sure to check out Game Informer Online for our full review. ■ ■ ■
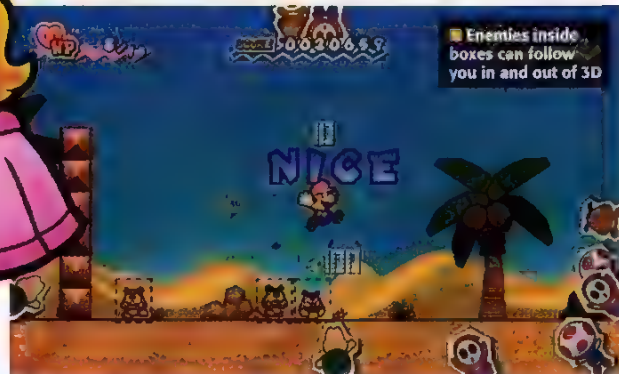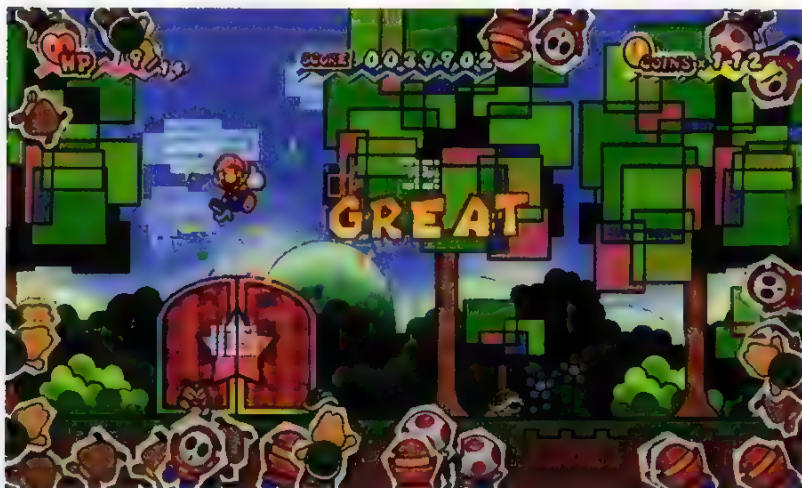
■ This guy is as harmless as a kitten in 3D mode

EVEN THE NOBLEST OF SUPER HEROES™ HAS A DARK SIDE. UNLEASH IT.

Sacred 2: Fallen Angel

The original Sacred managed to scare up some buzz among the Diablo hack n' slash set in 2004. Now developer Ascaron is hoping to gain even more ground with the sequel as it moves to full 3D. Players will choose from six character types including the winged Seraphim shown here. Most of the characters h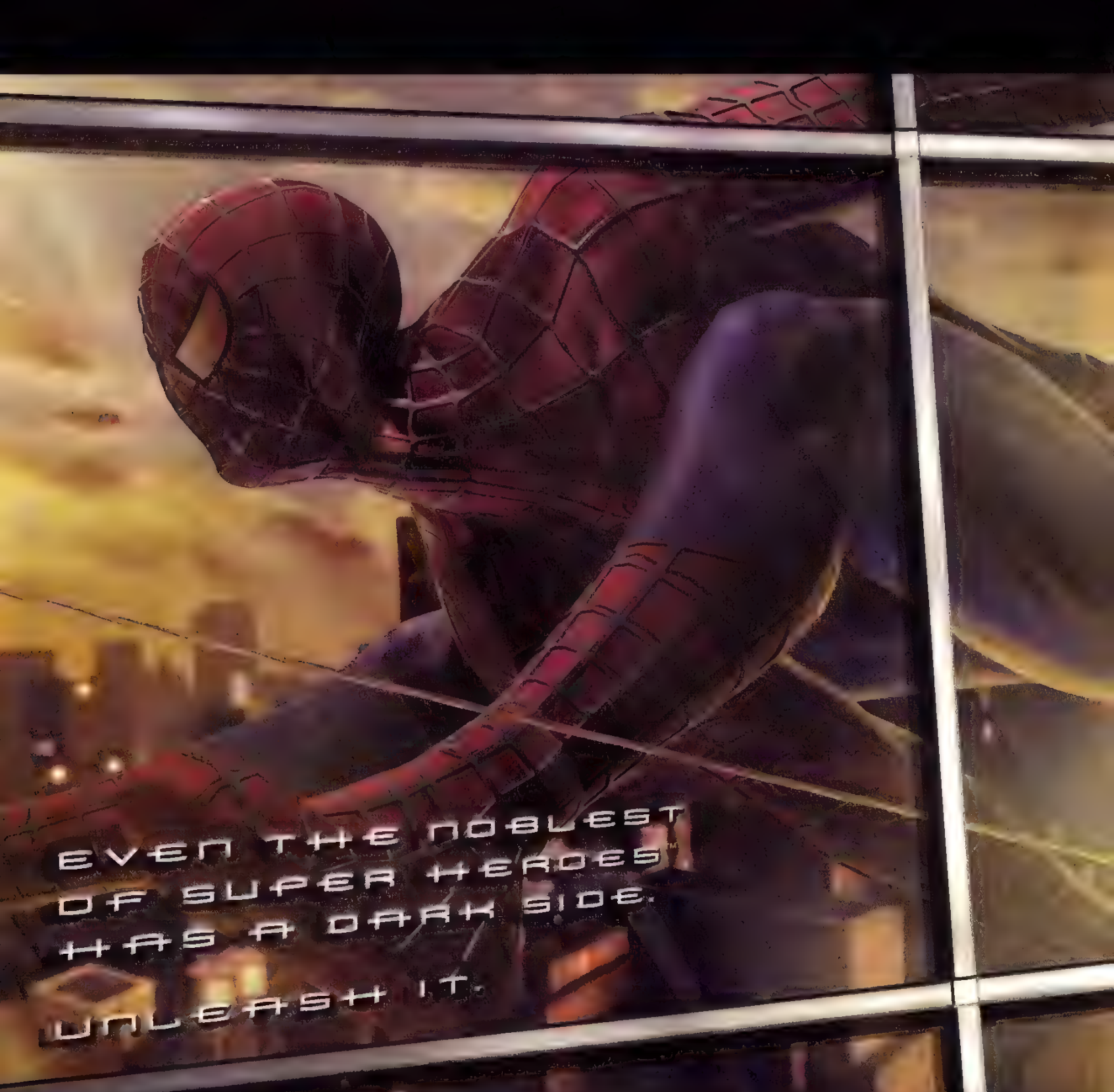ave a light or shadow path and their own 30-hour quest. Friends can team up for two-player co-op on one Xbox 360 or bring it up to four over Xbox Live. Those who prefer competition can duke it out in the PVP or PVE arena mode in hopes of nabbing a prime leaderboard slot. Ascaron is shooting for an early 2008 release and expects to announce a publisher soon.
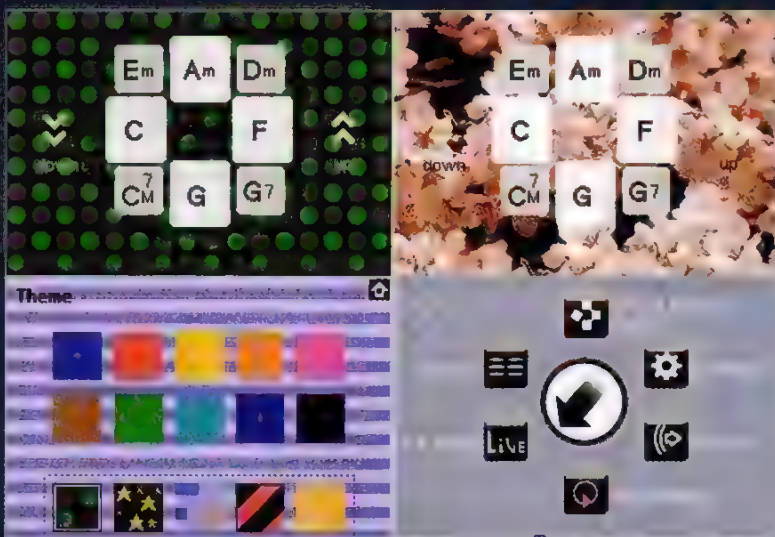
Jam Sessions

Stop pretending you are a guitar hero and actually become one. Ubisoft is bringing over Plato's Japanese title Hiite Utaeru DS Guitar M-06 this June as Jam Sessions. The game turns your DS into a virtual guitar, letting you strum on the touch screen and activate one of seven chords using the d-pad and left shoulder button. Different chords can be mapped however you want them, and guitar effects can be added as well. Ubisoft says that a selection of songs and their chords will be included in the game (along with a tutorial), but the beauty of Jam Sessions is that you can make up your own songs however you like.

Infernal

Anyone remember In Nomine, the Steve Jackson pen & paper RPG that had players fighting a secret war on Earth between the forces of Heaven and Hell? No? Well, it was never very popular – the setting was crazy awesome, but the rule system made 2nd Edition D&D look like a finely tuned and balanced masterpiece. The point is, though, that Infernal has a similar (and similarly sweet-sounding) setting, which has players controlling a fallen angel working for Satan. The gun-slinging gameplay is fairly standard third-person action fare, but some special demonic powers spice up the shooting and allow for some interesting puzzles. Look for this to hit a PC near you on May 8, courtesy of Eidos and developer Playlogic.
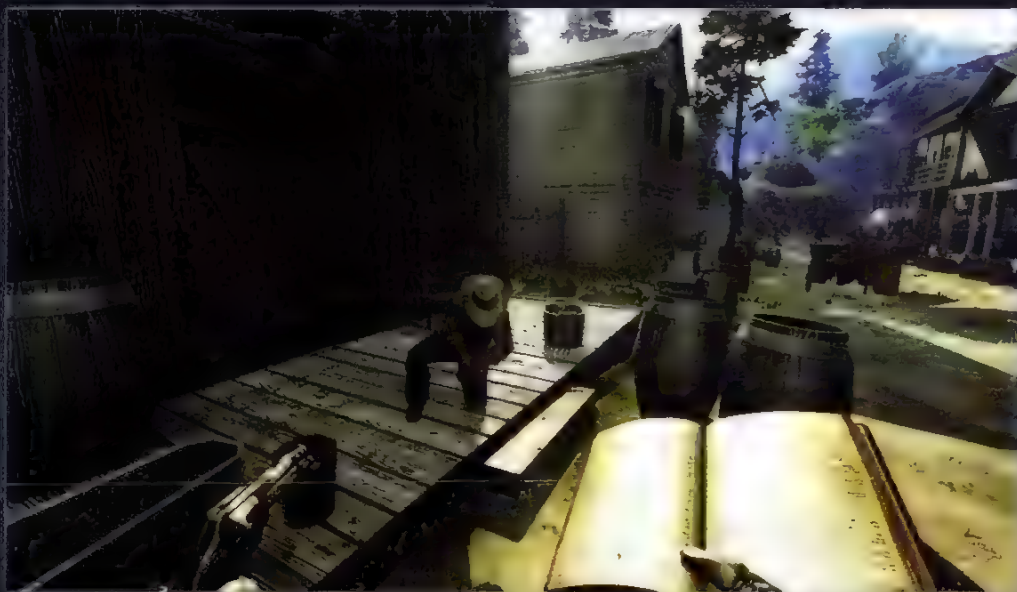
XBOX 360 | PC

Call of Juarez

Originally scheduled to ship for PC last fall, Ubisoft delayed the U.S. release of Call of Juarez to its current summer release date. Recently, the publisher announced that the game will also ship in Xbox 360 and DirectX 10 for Windows Vista flavors as well. Aside from being entertaining to say ("Juarez" just rolls off the tongue!), Call of Juarez also offers entertainment in the form of playing two characters – one hunting the other – on their linked path through the Wild West. The FPS action looks like you'd expect, with the exception of the hunted character's use of a whip to navigate portions of the environment and the hunter's ability to independently control his two pistols at the same time. The suspense-filled story, however, is the game's biggest selling point – and we can't speak to that until we have the full version in our hands.
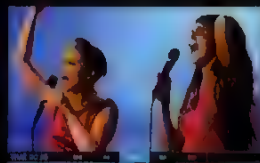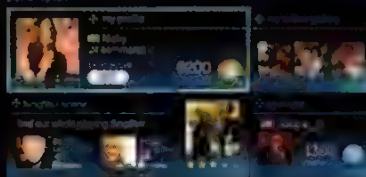
PLAYSTATION 3

SingStar

Even as Sony is pumping their latest SingStar PS2 game out to market, (see this month's review on page 86), it's already busy hyping the upcoming PS3 version of its popular karaoke game. Tapping into the online capabilities of the PS3, aspiring singers will be able to download an array of new songs/videos in addition to the approximately 30 songs that will ship on the disc. Of course, these songs won't be free, but they should offer a fun way to expand the content of the game. Uploads are an equally fun addition, since you'll be able to post your videos and (groan) audio clips for the rest of the world to enjoy. The trademarked "SingStore" will be organized so you can explore your favorite genre and albums, and will also allow viewing of preview clips before you buy. Europe will get to start singing as soon as June, but it looks as if U.S. gamers won't be able to take to the stage until sometime this fall.

MULTI

82

TMNT

PS3

65

F.E.A.R.: First Encounter Assault Recon

Wii

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Prince of Persia: Rival Swords

XBOX 360

91

Earth Defense Force 2017

GAME INFORMER
GAME OF THE MONTH

Ghost Recon Advanced Warfighter 2

The Ghosts are back, and this time the stakes are raised higher than ever before. Mexican revolutionaries are amassing on the U.S. border, and these gun-toting rebels aren't backing down from a clash with the U.S. military. Combining its amazing single-player campaign with another stellar multiplayer offering, Ghost Recon Advanced Warfighter once again proves its worth as a tactical shooter.

90

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

THE SCORING SYSTEM

10 Outstanding. A truly elite title that is nearly perfect in every way. This score is given out rarely and indicates a game that cannot be missed.

9 Superb. Just shy of gaming nirvana, this score is a high recommendation because the game reviewed is head-and-shoulders above its competition.

8 Very Good. Innovative, but perhaps not the right choice for everyone. This score indicates that there are many good things to be had, but arguably so.

7 Average. The game's features may work, but are nothing that even casual players haven't seen before. A decent game from beginning to end.

6 Limited Appeal. Although there may be fans of games receiving this score, many will be left yearning for a more rewarding game experience.

5 Passable. It may be obvious that the game has lots of potential, but its most engaging features could be undeniably flawed or not integrated into the experience.

4 Bad. While some things may work as planned, the majority of this title either malfunctions to varying degrees or it is so dull that the game falls short as a whole.

3 Painful. If there is anything that's redeeming in a game of this caliber, it's buried beneath agonizing gameplay and uneven execution in its features or theme.

2 Broken. Basically unplayable. This game is so insufficient in execution that any value would be derived in extremely small quantities, if at all.

1 Admiral Ackbar. It's a trap!

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

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

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

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

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

> **Replay Value**

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

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

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

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

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

PC

93

Titan Quest: Immortal Throne

HANDHELD

3RD SPITFIRE

96

M.A.C.H.

92

PC GAME OF THE MONTH

Command & Conquer 3:
Tiberium Wars

Nothing says "stfu noob" like a grip of Mammoth Tanks barreling through your opponent's base. Well, actually, an Ion Cannon blast to the heart of your enemy's infrastructure is a pretty good way to serve up a big steaming cup of "stfu." And, now that we think about it, reanimating the husks of fallen Avatar walkers with engineers and using them to literally rip apart the enemy's tank brigade gets across the fact that your opponent is, in fact, a little "nublet" who needs to "l2p." All this and more awaits you in Command & Conquer 3.

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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.

EC	Content suitable for persons ages 3 and older	**M**	Content suitable for persons 17 ages and older
E	Content suitable for persons ages 6 and older	**AO**	Content suitable only for adults.
E10+	Content suitable for persons ages 10 and older	**RP**	Product is awaiting final rating.
T	Content suitable for persons ages 13 and older		

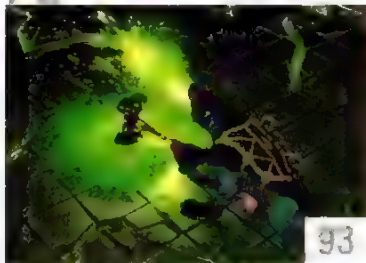**For our newer readers, here is a glossary of terms and acronyms that commonly appear in the magazine. Video game veterans should move along (these aren't the droids you are looking for).**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

fat cosplay – For your own good, never enter this term into an Internet image search

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

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

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

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

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

frontend – A game's menus and options

GBA – Game Boy Advance

GC – GameCube

HDTV – High Definition Television

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

normal mapping – A graphical technique in which a hi-res skin containing 3D information, revealed by light reflecting off the surface, is wrapped around a low-res model

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

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

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

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

PS2 – Sony PlayStation 2

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

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

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

shooter – A term we use for games like Ikaruga and Gradius

sports – A term we use for games like Madden NFL

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

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

> **Concept:** Zip through the rooftops of NYC in a relaunch of one of the most popular kids' licenses in history

> **Graphics:** Great art and animation, particularly on the heroes, but the environments are a little bland

> **Sound:** Seriously, Raphael: If you say "Here's Johnny!" one more time, I'm going to throw you off this building

> **Playability:** When you make controls this simple and straight-forward, it almost takes some of the fun away

> **Entertainment:** Fun platforming for several hours, but lacking the barest hint of a real challenge – and where's my four-player co-op?

> **Replay Value:** Moderately Low

XBOX 360 | WII | PLAYSTATION 2 | GAMECUBE

TMNT

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION/PLATFORM > **PUBLISHER** UBISOFT
> **DEVELOPER** UBISOFT MONTREAL > **RELEASE** MARCH 20 > **ESRB** E10+

NOW WITH 100% LESS COWABUNGA

As licensed games based on kid-targeted properties go, I could use a few more games like TMNT. By using the game engine behind Prince of Persia, Ubisoft sacrificed the possibility of four-player cooperative play and instead got some sweet platforming out of the deal. The result is the best Turtles game in years, which admittedly is kind of like saying you just got the best punch in the gut you've had in years. Nonetheless, TMNT entertains pretty consistently, delivering fast-paced thrills but almost no genuine challenge.

Whether jumping from rooftop to rooftop or throwing down with the Foot, there's a speed and excitement to Ubisoft's inaugural run at the Turtles that is as fun as it is frantic. The lack of puzzles or complexity in the platforming has one big benefit – there's a constant drive of forward movement that fits these ninja warriors like a glove. While it's definitely a bummer that you'll never be able to plug in and play co-op with a friend, players do eventually gain the ability to switch between the different brothers to take advantage of some unique skills, such as Michelangelo's nunchuck copter. At other times, you can tag in one of the other warriors with a quick button press, who will jump up to help fling you past wide gaps, reach high ledges, or take out a bunch of enemies at once. Each character also has his own combat and move set, and the animation and art on each of the heroes is one of the game highlights. There's a strange separation between the excellent

character art and animation on the turtles and the occasionally sloppy environments, but the level design is straightforward and zips by so fast that you might not notice.

Combat suffers under the yoke of too many enemies with too little intelligence. I know there's a perception that this style of combat is fun for younger gamers, but it's hard for me to believe anybody really prefers endless waves of the same enemy over more complex interactions. The boss fights aren't much better, where without fail you're up against some monster who repeats the same attack over and over. At least the Turtles look pretty sweet as they're taking out the baddies, and even if the fights aren't stellar they're always over pretty quick.

A nice variety of levels, some of the trademark Turtles humor, and a story that defies expectation (and credulity) round out the main game. A number of unlockable extras include some amusing videos as well as VR style challenge maps for a little added action. Through it all, the folks at Ubisoft Montreal get across the action and speed that has always made these characters fun. Because of that, even though the levels are ridiculously easy, I think even more experienced gamers could enjoy themselves as I did. TMNT is about as simple as they come, but then again, so was Vanilla Ice's "Ninja Rap", and you remember how the world ate that one up.—**MILLER**

■ Partner moves are about as close as you'll get to seeing multiple characters onscreen at once

■ Each character has their own unique special move

■ The Foot Ninja are back, minus Shredder
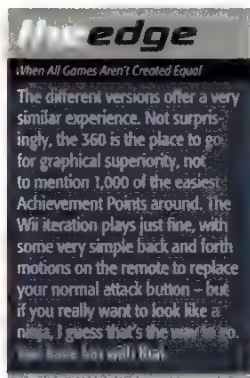
The different versions offer a very similar experience. Not surprisingly, the 360 is the place to go for graphical superiority, not to mention 1,000 of the easiest Achievement Points around. The Wii iteration plays just fine, with some very simple back and forth motions on the remote to replace your normal attack button – but if you really want to look like a ninja, I guess that's the way to go. Too bad I'm no fun that.

■ Platforming is extremely fast, and the highlight of the game

Prince of Persia and TMNT may not seem like the most likely of bedfellows, but it turns out that harrowing, cliff-hanging excitement is exactly what the pizza-munching reptilians needed. Scurrying up walls and bouncing across rooftops is nothing new per se, but the speed and finesse with which these mutants accomplish these acrobatic feats is. It's platforming in fast-forward. With rock solid controls backing these actions, TMNT could have easily been a platforming giant, but it plummets from grace through unimaginative cookie-cutter level designs. The great gameplay just doesn't have an impact when the stages bore you to death. The game even goes to great lengths to kill your sense of exploration by laying out a breadcrumb trail. The combat system only lacks your inner fanboy even harder. The tag-team moves look great, but the majority of your time is spent mindlessly pressing buttons against the dumbest AI known to man. As a child of the '80s, TMNT is in my DNA, but with sub-par releases like this, my enthusiasm continues to dwindle.—**REINER**

PLAYSTATION 2

Medal of Honor: Vanguard

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION > **PUBLISHER** ELECTRONIC ARTS
> **DEVELOPER** EA LA > **RELEASE** MARCH 27 > **ESRB** T

CASHING OUT

If Vanguard is any indication, EA is hoping that Medal of Honor has a little bit more nerd cred left that can be turned into dollars. Sure, the upcoming MoH: Airborne for next-gen consoles might revitalize this sagging series, but this entry in the franchise is a perfect example of what gaming purists hate about the EA/Activision publishing model. There is nothing at all here to recommend, unless you just can't get enough of clearing bombed-out houses of Nazis and doing the old MG-42 fish-in-a-barrel dance.

Even this decrepit design wouldn't be so bad if it came in better packaging. Unfortunately, Vanguard manages to tack crappy controls onto ancient concepts. The list of offenses in this arena is topped by the fact that your avatar stops moving when you go into the ironsights view. This basically means that you're forced to shoot from the hip in anything but a very static combat situation, and it breaks the flow of the game to pieces. A large part of what makes a first-person shooter fun and intense is the pacing, and that moronic decision prevents Vanguard from building up much of either.

Though you can get used to the sub-par controls, there's still no real reason to play Vanguard, from the uninspired level design to the tired subject matter. Sure, it works on a basic level in that you shoot Nazis and they fall down. Beyond that, there isn't much here to enjoy.—**ADAM**

BOTTOM LINE **6**

> **Concept:** "Hey, what can we do to make this World War II shooter as innovation-free as possible?"

> **Graphics:** There were PS2 games three years ago that looked better than this

> **Sound:** Automatic weapons, squad chatter, explosions, and an orchestral score. You expected something else?

> **Playability:** Congratulations, EA, on screwing up the aiming system you tried to rip off from Call of Duty

> **Entertainment:** It's not like it's tough to find a good World War II shooter these days. Why play this crappy one?

> **Replay Value:** Low

GENERATION **4**

Wii

While the PS2 version is mediocre and boring, the Wii edition of Vanguard is terrible. You have the choice of two equally horrid control methods, neither of which give anywhere near the responsiveness or sensitivity needed to adapt to anything but the most basic of combat situations. I'd seriously rather play with the Classic controller using the Goldeneye scheme, but that's not an option. Do not play this game on the Wii if you enjoy things that are fun.

Second Opinion **7**

Vanguard doesn't stack up to the twitch play of a PC shooter, but once again it delivers a modicum of action. The usual hit detection issue included, it's clear that a new direction for the series is needed to make it more than just a Nazi shooting gallery. Up next for the franchise? We hear it's an account of the 33rd Latrine division, who faced some of the dirtiest and nastiest action of WWII.—**KATO**

PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360

Virtua Tennis 3

> **STYLE** 1 TO 4-PLAYER SPORTS (UP TO 4-PLAYER VIA XBOX LIVE) > **PUBLISHER** SEGA
> **DEVELOPER** AM3 (PS3), SUMO (XBOX 360) > **RELEASE** MARCH 20 > **ESRB** E

I'M MAD LIKE MCENROE

I'm sure Sega fans are getting their white shorts dirty in anticipation of the series' return, but it's hard for me to understand what all the hubbub is about. When you cling so slavishly to the norm like this, you'll have to forgive me for not throwing a parade.

I like the career structure of VT 3 and how you juggle minigames, practice matches, and tournaments with needing sufficient rest to replenish your stamina. The minigames are a nice change of pace, and I like how they level up differently for your forehand and backhand. Unfortunately, even the respite of fun in the Avalanche (where you have to pick up rolling fruit while dodging giant tennis balls) and Curling minigames is not enough to bolster the flawed gameplay.

I dislike how tennis games such as this one have player movement and shot direction on the same analog stick. This can make running in one direction and hitting the ball in the opposite direction difficult -- something it's not hard to do in real-life tennis. I also found that your character will freeze when you're trying to preload your shot and move at the same time. Having movement on the left analog stick and a free analog swing on the right could clear this up (think Fight Night), as well as make the tennis more realistic.

Virtua Tennis 3 is a perfectly serviceable tennis game (pun intended) that fails to provide a big enough splash to make it anything else than just another tennis title. Next time I hope it won't take Sega seven years to come out with the same game.—**KATO**

BOTTOM LINE **7**

> **Concept:** I know this game has lots of Europeans you don't know, but does it have to be this anonymous?

> **Graphics:** The cutscene models are really good, and the on-court animations are smooth

> **Sound:** You can always add your own grunting if you don't like the muzak

> **Playability:** A tennis game using both analog sticks could clear up some gameplay issues

> **Entertainment:** Even the outrageous minigames get old, which doesn't bode well for this game

> **Replay Value:** Moderate

edge

When All Games Aren't Created Equal

If cruising for a partner with fuzzy balls on the Internet is your thing, then you're going to want to get the Xbox 360 version since the PS3 edition doesn't have online play. If being a voyeur is your thing, you can even watch your friends go love to love via VT TV! Additionally, the PS3's Sixaxis controls are about as uninspiring and worthless as you can get.

■ All the minigames are based on the real-life experiences of pros like Tim Henman

Second Opinion **8**

I'm a huge tennis fan, and I've always loved Virtua Tennis. However, it pains me to note just how little progression this series has made over the years. The main career mode is – save for some slight alterations and new minigames – largely identical to that of Virtua Tennis 2. The calendar-based career rolls out painfully slowly as you methodically raise your rank and train your character. Too often, you've got nothing to do except the same old minigames over and over. Your ranking doesn't seem to account for any of the big pros you've beaten, which makes progression feel extremely arbitrary. All this said, the basic gameplay is still excellent and even more fluid thanks to the improved animation. I'll keep coming back for the great tennis action, but I can't help but think that this could have been so much more.—**MATT**

PLAYSTATION 3

F.E.A.R.: First Encounter Assault Recon

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 8-PLAYER VIA PLAYSTATION NETWORK) > **PUBLISHER** SIERRA > **DEVELOPER** DAY 1 STUDIOS/MONOLITH PRODUCTIONS > **RELEASE** APRIL 24 > **ESRB** M

FEAR NO EVIL

I was very excited to get a chance to play F.E.A.R., which was one of those wildly acclaimed games that I somehow avoided playing on PC and Xbox 360. Although the basis of this PS3 port (the original PC title) is now a couple years old, I'm pleased to report that F.E.A.R.'s taut gameplay can still hold its own with the best of the genre.

Since I imagine many of the people that play this on PS3, like myself, will be approaching this game for the first time, here are the basics: You are a special forces soldier tasked with tracking down Paxton Fettel, a madman who controls a battalion of genetically engineered super-soldiers with his mind. Along the way, you'll uncover a dark conspiracy involving the government, a large corporation, and a scary little girl that appears to you in visions. Of course, there's much more to this than meets the eye.

In practice, F.E.A.R. plays out as a finely tuned shooter that distinguishes itself by the copious use of slow-motion shooters á la Max Payne and fairly by-the-numbers scare tactics. The good news is that this is one of the most fun games to run and gun in that I've played in ages. While the control is dead-on, F.E.A.R. really comes alive because of its enemy AI, which is quite simply

some of the best I've ever seen. These super-soldiers are extremely canny, and will pursue, flank, and take cover with ruthless efficiency. All this makes for a single-player campaign that feels as fluid and engaging as a multiplayer bout. Thankfully, once you master the AI, there are human opponents to be had in the solid if not spectacular online component.

However, a few major flaws keep this from being a genre-busting title on par with Half-Life 2 or Halo. For one, the level designs are, at times, downright horrid. Even though almost the entire game takes place in staid industrial and office buildings, the map layouts are mind-bogglingly confusing for no apparent reason. You'll oftentimes spend as much time wandering around lost as you will shooting. Also, for all the emphasis placed on the scary aspects of this game, I didn't really feel that the plot or writing was on par with the excellently conceived gameplay. Despite its cinematic pretensions, F.E.A.R. succeeds largely on good old fashioned gunplay, and I'm more than okay with that.—**MATT**
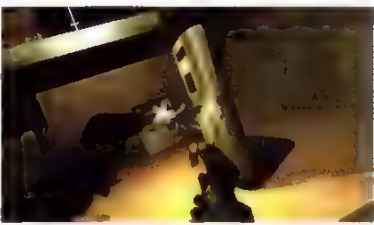
> **BOTTOM LINE** **8.25**

> **Concept:** Take on hordes of genetically engineered super-soldiers and one creepy little girl

> **Graphics:** While it features no major improvements over the Xbox 360 or PC versions, it's a nice, clean-looking FPS for PS3

> **Sound:** I don't often knock a game for poor mixing, but some irritating sound effects were way too loud. In addition, some of the phone message audio was nearly incomprehensible

> **Playability:** While the Sixaxis isn't the greatest for FPS, this game plays fast and furious with no major headaches

> **Entertainment:** A damn fine shooter that doesn't totally fulfill the promise of its premise. Still, given the PS3 library right now, this is almost mandatory for action fans

> **Replay Value:** Moderately High

Second Opinion 7.75

With as many great shooters as there are these days, it's rare to marvel at the steps an AI will take in order to send you back to your last checkpoint. F.E.A.R. is full of those moments. Add in some creepy little girls and some grisly pools of blood, and you've got a pretty tight thriller. Sadly, level design is a positive drag, halting the momentum of the slow mo fights and psych-out horror moments by running you in lazy circles of corridors. Graphics deliver remarkable lighting and textures, but on cookie-cutter tilesets that are too square and straight to draw the eye. Even so, the fights are quite a sight to behold, and that's what should bring you to this party in the first place.—**MILLER**

PLAYSTATION 3

The Godfather: The Don's Edition

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION/RACING > **PUBLISHER** ELECTRONIC ARTS > **DEVELOPER** EA REDWOOD SHORES
> **RELEASE** MARCH 20 > **ESRB** M

YET ANOTHER OFFER YOU CAN'T REFUSE

As long as they keep making new systems, EA is apparently dead set making sure that its game based on the legendary Godfather films makes an appearance. I've played various versions of what is largely the same game on PlayStation 2, Xbox, PSP, Xbox 360, and now the PS3. Each time I play it, I can see that some effort has been made to enhance the game. This time around, there are some new contract hits and rival strongholds to capture, made easier by a new weapons system which utilizes a selection wheel similar to that of Ratchet & Clank's. The PS3's Sixaxis controller is used to make grapple moves more visceral, as you can swing your opponents around for vicious smashes with the controller's motion sensing functions.

While this is all fine and good, it still doesn't solve the problems I have with the game as a whole, which remain largely the same. Although it's fun to see alternate perspectives on some of the movies' key events, this title really fails to deliver the

complex, emotionally resonant familial saga of the films. This is at least partially due to the absence of Al Pacino, whose portrayal of Michael Corleone was crucial to the success of the films. Perhaps it would have been better to eschew the films' self-serious vibe altogether and try to deliver an over-the-top gangster action flick, but that's not what the developers did. If you're judging this strictly as a GTA, open-world game, it also falls short. The combat, while improved, isn't particularly compelling and neither are the sluggish driving sequences. While there are many side activities to do, these quickly become repetitive and tedious, due in large part to the fact that this city doesn't really feel alive in the way that the worlds of GTA do.

Judging by the sales figures, a lot of people have already enjoyed this game. It's quite possible that many more will on PS3, but for me The Godfather's uninspired craftsmanship falls short of being a truly compelling game experience.—**MATT**

> **BOTTOM LINE** **7.5**

> **Concept:** The Godfather is ported to another system, with minimal enhancements

> **Graphics:** It looks great, but graphics have never been this game's problem

> **Sound:** The period score is effective and includes some of the iconic film music. The voicework is generally of a very high quality as well

> **Playability:** The new weapon select wheel is a welcome addition, and the targeting seems somewhat improved

> **Entertainment:** It's got all the "bullet points" that make for an engaging open world game, but The Godfather feels uninspired and often tedious

> **Replay Value:** Moderately Low

Second Opinion 7.75

The Godfather is one of my all-time favorite novels – and I heard they made a movie some time ago that was moderately popular. Needless to say, when EA announced the video game, I was ...completely uninterested. After all, I didn't need some GTA clone to muck up this legendary IP. Maybe I overreacted. This PS3 game looks like the PS2 version, the lock-on is questionable (why can't anyone get that right?), and the missions are not very original, but I still had fun extorting businesses and leveling up my character through the Godfather storyline. Does this title live up to the name? Hell no. Is it decent fan fun regardless? Yeah, sure.—**BEN**

PLAYSTATION 2

Grand Theft Auto: Vice City Stories

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION > PUBLISHER ROCKSTAR GAMES > DEVELOPER ROCKSTAR LEEDS/ROCKSTAR NORTH > RELEASE MARCH 6 > ESRB M

TOO PERFECT A PORT?

Right or wrong, I have a different standard for PS2 games than those I play on the PSP. The wide variety of excellent titles available on the PS2 combine better control options and graphical muscle to allow for a gaming experience that is a step above its handheld cousin. For that reason, it's a little hard for me to smile and nod when a game for the PSP receives what amounts to a direct port to the larger home console. While Vice City Stories has all the requisite ingredients to be a smash hit, (the most important of which is the name Grand Theft Auto in the title), the game itself falls below expectations.

Vic Vance and the story of his fall into criminality has a more serious tone than previous entries in the GTA franchise, with supporting characters that engage in spousal abuse, rampant drug use, and any number of other despicable crimes. This is by no means out of character for the series, but its treatment here has slightly less satirical edge than before – not to its benefit. With that said, there are still plenty of politically incorrect laughs to be had from the radio DJs and the random denizens of the city.

Gameplay flows like most of the earlier GTA games, minus almost all the cool additions enacted in San Andreas. The inability to climb fences is the most noticeable absence in the control scheme, and the inflexible targeting mechanic is just as frustrating as ever. On the bright side, there are often multiple missions available at any given time, while property acquisition and management are great additions to the formula. Between upgrading your various businesses and attending to the story missions, there's a lot to keep busy with, and the game does a good job of breaking up the action so you rarely get bored with the same thing repeating over and over.

Graphically, Vice City could certainly use some cleanup. While the PSP was able to hide some of the glaring flaws, the larger TV screen connected to your PS2 will reveal a world of muddy textures and blocky characters. Several years ago, this may have been the standard, but not anymore.

Luckily, the audio production is still top notch. Some satisfying voice work from the main characters is eclipsed by the radio personalities that bring life and humor to the world. And, as always, the soundtrack is phenomenal, even if some of the tunes are a little lesser known.

One of the greatest joys of Vice City Stories lies in returning to the sun-drenched glamour of a 1980s beach city. Players of the original Vice City should get a kick out of visiting old haunts and rediscovering the city. While this latest entry is definitely a step back for the series, it still has most of the hallmarks of solid action and inappropriate behavior that have always been so much fun in the series. Even so, Vice City Stories serves as definitive evidence that it's time for something new.—**MILLER**

> **Concept:** Return to the '80s in this port of the PSP crime simulator

> **Graphics:** Poor texture work and overall quality makes this look worse than GTA should at this point

> **Sound:** A fantastic soundtrack and high-quality voiceovers have never been a problem for the series, and that's still true

> **Playability:** Easy to pick up and have fun, but the gun targeting needs an upgrade

> **Entertainment:** It's not even close to the best this franchise has offered, but it's still a fantastic way to indulge in a little make-believe violence

> **Replay Value:** Moderate

Second Opinion 8.25

I'm immersed in a story about the seedier elements of the criminal underworld in a time period ripe for snarky pop cultural satire, and in a city where muzzle flashes and neon light up the night. I feel like I've come home to the greatest game from five years ago. Even the newly added empire building elements – where you acquire as well as upgrade various businesses – are a great addition that I want to see again. This entry has all of GTA's trademark writing and humor, and this series still has some of the best soundtracks out there. Of course, sometimes it's hard to come home. GTA's Achilles heels of constant pop-up and poor targeting are possibly the worst we've seen with this entry, and the big screen does nothing for these PSP graphics. Also, the lack of the RPG elements and climbable environments remind me why I moved to San Andreas. Still, if you are a fan of the series who didn't get to play this on PSP, you might as well enjoy this appetizer before the GTA IV feast later this year.—**BEN**

The new "Safe Driving" mode responsible decision just kidding

Targeting problems really hurt this edition

PLAYSTATION 2

Meet the Robinsons

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION
> **PUBLISHER** DISNEY INTERACTIVE STUDIOS
> **DEVELOPER** AVALANCHE SOFTWARE
> **RELEASE** MARCH 27 > **ESRB** E10+

| BOTTOM LINE | 7 |

Meet the Robinsons does everything you'd expect out of a licensed game, and no more. It's a good thing, then, that our expectations of a movie-licensed product have risen so high. It uses the film's art assets to good effect, puts you in control of the main character on a quest to run around collecting stuff while completing various challenges, and has rough spots here and there. You'll collect gadgets that enable the solution to the puzzles you encounter, and contextual hurdling, leaping, and climbing takes the place of a jump button. The clumsy ripoff of Zelda gameplay will be a great time for younger folks obsessed with the movie, and a reasonably competent but entirely by-the-numbers platformer to more seasoned gamers.—**ADAM**

PLAYSTATION 2

Singstar Pop

> **STYLE** 1 TO 8 PLAYER MUSIC
> **PUBLISHER** SONY COMPUTER ENTERTAINMENT
> **DEVELOPER** SONY COMPUTER ENTERTAINMENT EUROPE > **RELEASE** APRIL 3 > **ESRB** E10+

| BOTTOM LINE | 8 |

Nothing if not appropriately named, the second PS2 Singstar game delivers chart toppers like Snow Patrol, Ashlee Simpson, U2, and 3 Doors Down right beside classic tunes from The Clash, Cyndi Lauper, and Whitney Houston. While you're probably not equipped to hit the high note in A-Ha's "Take On Me," Singstar does a good job of making you have a good time while you try, with the full videos of all the songs running in the background and amusing playback options that allow you to robotize your voice or add reverb and vibrato. The scoring system is a little iffy, but if you're playing for numbers, you may be missing the point. With a more sing-able and fun song list than its predecessor, this installment gives its competitor a good reason to televise the revolution a little better.—**MILLER**
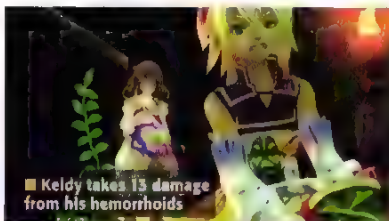
Dawn of Mana

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION > **PUBLISHER** SQUARE ENIX
> **DEVELOPER** SQUARE ENIX > **RELEASE** MAY 22 > **ESRB** T

TAKE IT LIKE A MANA

I have a lot of fondness and respect for the Mana series. It helped define the whole action/RPG genre, and there was a time when Secret of Mana spent several consecutive months in my SNES. I wish I could say that Dawn of Mana is a return to form after years of side-stories and rehashes, but I can't. It further dilutes the Mana name with loads of mediocre combat and barely a trace of the role-playing elements that once made it popular.

The greater focus on action isn't an entirely lost cause, since the gameplay manages to integrate cool concepts beyond mashing the square button. The key is the main character's versatile weapon, which can be used as a sword, slingshot, or grappling rope. Every area is full of logs, rocks, and various exploding vegetables that can be tossed at enemies, sending them into a panic. Then you kill them. It's possible to take them out by just bullying through, but the rewards (like more power, health, and magic) are much greater if you use the environment wisely.
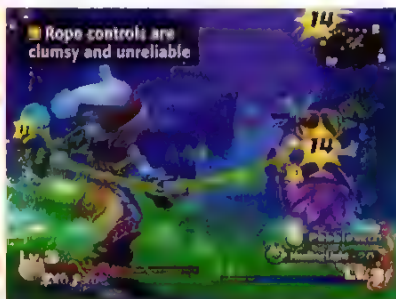
It may sound promising, but this emphasis on scattered junk is where Dawn of Mana hits its biggest hurdle. Sending a mixed signal, the game says it's important to use objects, but makes it difficult and frustrating to do so. The controls are laughably uncooperative. Whether you're using the rope to throw objects or just bumping them around with your sword, wrestling with the physics is far more challenging than any foe.

If you don't stress out too much about optimizing your performance (which is useless anyway since you lose all your power-ups after each level), the action delivers some casual entertainment. That's pretty much all there is, though; any remnants of the role-playing genre have been wiped away except for the story. Sure, you use magic and swords in a fantasy world, but the character progression and powering up is pretty much non-existent.

A more refined targeting system and better control over the objects could have made Dawn of Mana something special, but in its current state it feels like several promising ideas held together by purely functional mechanics. It may not be the follow-up that fans of the Mana franchise have been hoping for, but cool visuals and an interesting story elevate it above the level of an everyday mindless button-masher.—**JOE**

By believing, it will come. The setting of the stars The Dawn of Mana

■ Keldy takes 13 damage from his hemorrhoids

■ Bonk. Slash. Repeat.

■ Rope controls are clumsy and unreliable

BOTTOM LINE 7

> **Concept:** Mana goes 3D for the first time, but leaves its RPG luggage behind

> **Graphics:** The environments are pretty bland, but the characters and enemies look great and are well designed

> **Sound:** The music is actually good. I cannot say the same for the voice acting

> **Playability:** Cluttered. Every single button does something important, and two different lock-ons (one for enemies and one for objects) add to the confusion

> **Entertainment:** Knocking stuff around can be fun, but the action never draws you in

> **Replay Value:** Moderate

Second Opinion 7

If a well-realized art style could dictate the quality of a game, Dawn of Mana would be our Game of the Month. Since it takes a little more than that to make me tip my hat, I have to warn Mana fans to prepare for a disappointment. A combat system that requires you to scare all your enemies before you have a hope of taking them down is bad enough, but why do I have to start over with level advancement and spell acquisition when I beat a chapter? There are a number of other poor design decisions here, from a camera panned too close to poor level layout, not to mention an awkward targeting mechanic. It's enough to make me question a studio I usually swear by. High production values pull this game up to average, but it's awfully close to missing even that mark.—**MILLER**
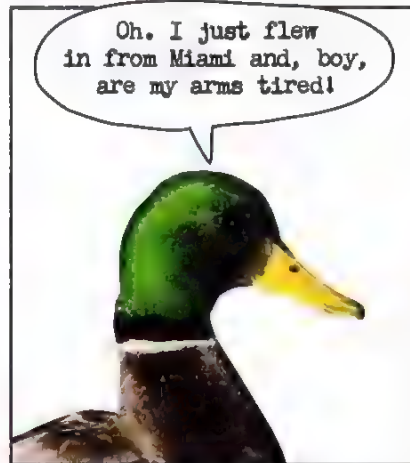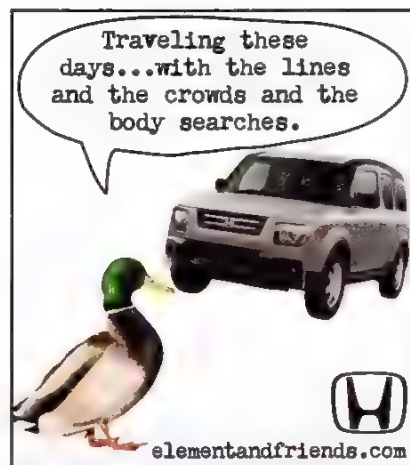
Prince of Persia:
Rival Swords

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION/PLATFORM > **PUBLISHER** UBISOFT > **DEVELOPER** UBISOFT MONTREAL
> **RELEASE** APRIL 3 > **ESRB** T

A ROSE BY ANY OTHER NAME

Make no mistake – this is not the next-generation Prince you've been waiting for. In fact, it's not a new game at all; Rival Swords is an almost exact port of Two Thrones. What is new is the way you'll be controlling the young royal as he makes those death-defying leaps between columns and ledges. The Wii remote has been well utilized to deliver smooth gameplay, and I can't think of any way the team could have mapped the controls better. With that said, the precision and speed of a quick button press is a much better fit for the unique style of the Prince than this alternative – a frenzied swinging of your arms that makes you look a little more like a kindergartener dancing than a badass sword-wielder.

While this is the first game for the franchise on the Wii, Rival Swords is the third game of a larger series – if you only own a Wii, you owe it to yourself to track down the first two games on GameCube so you can play them first. In this installment, those zany Sands of Time are causing trouble again, and the Prince develops something of a split personality as the sands begin to transform him into a

dark version of himself. The story leads to one of the most satisfying conclusions to a game series that I've encountered, as the story of all three games is tied up into a relatively perfect little bow.

I'd hazard to say that the platforming in this concluding chapter of the Prince's saga is some of the best you'll find, and I didn't have any trouble adjusting to most actions on the Wii remote. Combat, on the other hand, feels pretty haphazard. The one exception to this rule is the stealth oriented speed kills, which actually felt a little easier to pull off than before. Plus, the abrupt slashing cuts you make with the remote during those backstabbing maneuvers are strangely satisfying.

The Wii version looks zero percent better to my eye than the original release of this game, but enthusiasts of the franchise may want to take this for a spin to try out the unique controls. For myself, I believe I'll take my future return trips to Persia sans frantic arm waving.—**MILLER**

Second Opinion 8

If you thought the combat controls in Prince of Persia: The Two Thrones were too responsive and fun, their diminished quality in Rival Swords might be more up your alley. Your wild flailing is hilariously at odds with the Prince's acrobatic grace, so only the timing-based stealth kill moments deliver the thrill of swinging a blade. The other elements that distinguished this title when it first released (a year and a half ago) are still intact, including some great platforming and an intriguing art style. Even with imprecise combat, this is still an excellent game – but the motion-sensing controls do more to derail the experience than enhance it. —**JOE**

■ The motion controlled speed kills are quite sweet

Wii

Cooking Mama: Cook Off

> **STYLE** 1 OR 2-PLAYER ACTION > **PUBLISHER** MAJESCO > **DEVELOPER** OFFICE CREATE > **RELEASE** MARCH 20
> **ESRB** E

■ Here you are grating bread. Can you guess why? It's for a hamburger. Crazy Japanese recipes

■ You can play against a buddy or the computer, and the computer is a cooking fiend

UNDERCOOKED

The female Japanese voice offers me a compliment after I finish chopping my meat to make beef tips in wine sauce. Every step in the recipe always has some advice to accompany it. Mama's English isn't perfect, but that matches the charming and playful tone of the game, and could have been intentional. It's actually amusing. I only wish I could say the same thing about the awkward controls in Cooking Mama.

I can't tell you how frustrating it can be to crack an egg or add the right salt to your popcorn in this game. Given time you do grow into the controls a little, but they are not the only problem this game faces. Another one is being dull. You complete recipes to unlock more recipes. Cooking an item better and getting different medals doesn't earn you anything.

The game is a little more fun if you are playing against a friend. You can also play against the computer and earn items for your kitchen, but you only compete with recipes you have already unlocked in single-player, and the items do nothing to change the gameplay – they just sit around the kitchen.

I kind of wish Cooking Mama had used some real recipes that you could try out in your own home. I don't know how many people would have actually done so, but it would have added a unique sense of validity to the game. As it stands now, the cartoony graphics don't really make you hungry or even make you feel like you actually made food, nor is the game ridiculous enough to give you that silly kind of fun like WarioWare. Any future entry in this series will probably have to go one of those two ways.—**BEN**

Second Opinion 7.25

When the first Cooking Mama came out on DS last year, it offered amusing touch-screen minigames for a cheap $20. The jump to Wii has resulted in a few major changes, but fans of the original should still enjoy it. The motion controls take some getting used to, but ultimately work well after practice. Taking on a friend in versus mode adds a new dimension, and I liked challenging computer controlled "friends" from around the globe for items, even if they are chock full of stereotypes. With a little more depth I think this series could climb out of the budget gutter. As it stands, it's tough to recommend to those outside of the quirky Japanese or foodie set.—**BRYAN**

Minestrone
Open the can!
Hold the Wii Remote vertically and move it toward and away from you. Press the A Button when the meter gets to the yellow part to open the lid.

■ The descriptions aren't always completely helpful
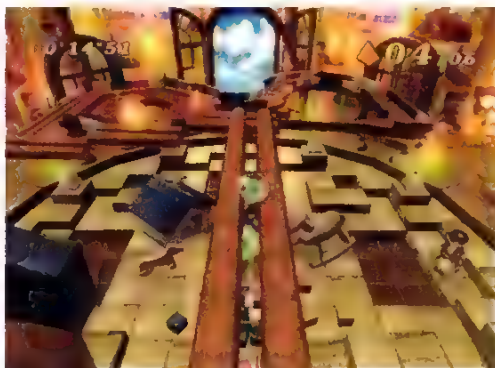
Wii
Kororinpa:
Marble Mania

> **STYLE** 1 OR 2-PLAYER ACTION/PUZZLE > **PUBLISHER** HUDSON
> **DEVELOPER** HUDSON > **RELEASE** MARCH 20 > **ESRB** E

ROLLS WITH THE BEST

With Kororinpa, Hudson has answered Nintendo's call to create games that anyone with hands can play and actually get pretty good at. Sure, we've all seen plenty of marble puzzle games in the past, and Sega already implemented Wii tilt in Super Monkey Ball: Banana Blitz. But the entertaining and challenging level designs, forgiving checkpoint system, and deft controls put the core game a league above recent Monkey Ball offerings.

Environments range from bustling cities to green gardens to a toy box motif. Throughout the course of the game, you'll steer over skinny planks, conveyor belts, and slippery ice. Players can unlock up to 20 different marbles, each with their own stats and sound effects (some of which emit from the Wiimote speaker). Outside of traditional marbles, skilled tilters can use balls based on animals, planets, and sports balls.

The 45 main stages won't take much longer than an afternoon to complete, but there are over a dozen secret stages to unlock and every board has a mirrored version to master as well. Split-screen versus mode is a blast, but it sucks that you can't play online or post your best times to a leaderboard. A level editor would have been cool as well. Too bad Nintendo doesn't have their online structure pulled together yet.

In all, Kororinpa serves as a quick dose of fun. It just needs some more beef to keep players coming back.—**BRYAN**
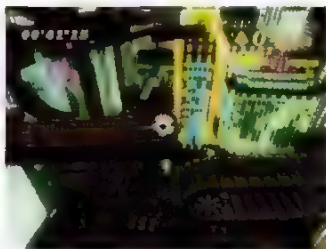
BOTTOM LINE 8

> **Concept:** Roll a marble around with the Wii remote
> **Graphics:** Simple but effective for their purposes
> **Sound:** Music ranges from Celtic to old west piano, and the gassy panda ball will destroy your concentration
> **Playability:** Tilt mechanics are perfectly tuned
> **Entertainment:** Main game is short, yet enjoyable. Versus mode keeps things interesting
> **Replay Value:** Moderately Low

Second Opinion 8.5

At first glance, this looks like little more than Marble Madness meets Super Monkey Ball control. That's pretty accurate, actually. But what that description misses is the fact that this is one damn fine Wii title. It takes a surgeon's hand to navigate this game's dramatic shifts in perspective (I swear MC Escher was on the development team), but the accurate controls keep it from becoming frustrating. Honestly, this is just a better game than any of the Monkey Ball titles, and I sincerely hope you'll check it out.—**MATT**

Wii
The Godfather:
Blackhand Edition

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION
> **PUBLISHER** ELECTRONIC ARTS
> **DEVELOPER** EA REDWOOD SHORES
> **RELEASE** MARCH 20 > **ESRB** M

BOTTOM LINE 6.5

EA seems insistent on releasing an enhanced version of The Godfather on every new system that comes along. But at this rate, I don't see the game reaching epic status until we see a PlayStation 5 or a Wii 3. The new weapon wheel makes firefights less stressful, and adding more missions is never a bad thing, but the basic design of the game remains painfully dull. The uneventful stretches of driving, repetition in interrogations, and simplicity of missions has not improved. The redeveloped skill tree is a step in the right direction, but the sloppy motion-based combat and IR targeting make the game even more painful than it was on the other machines. The Wii version holds up graphically, but its ailing gameplay makes it the worst entry yet.—**REINER**

Wii
Tiger Woods
PGA Tour 07

> **STYLE** 1 TO 4-PLAYER SPORTS
> **PUBLISHER** EA SPORTS
> **DEVELOPER** EA REDWOOD SHORES
> **RELEASE** MARCH 13 > **ESRB** E

BOTTOM LINE 6.5

As Judge Smails said in Caddyshack, "The world needs ditch diggers too." We can't all be Tiger, and this game is a case in point. Lagging well behind the series' standards, the Wii remote has a hard time detecting your backswing. Thus, it's harder to control. There were even times the game putted for me by accident. I do, however, like how the Wii version does away with the need for a power charge button, and the practice swing function is something that should be in all Tiger games. But unfortunately for Tiger, Tecmo's Super Swing Golf remains the best golfer on the Wii, hands down.—**KATO**

Wii
Wing Island

> **STYLE** 1 OR 2-PLAYER ACTION > **PUBLISHER** HUDSON > **DEVELOPER** HUDSON
> **RELEASE** MARCH 20 > **ESRB** E

KEEP WAITING FOR PILOTWINGS

Can someone explain to me why a bunch of bird people would need to use planes? They've got freaking wings for arms! Well, I guess it would be tough to drop fire retardant, carry around logs, pop balloons, or do any of the other extremely mundane tasks in Wing Island without an airplane. Darn.

In addition to the missions mentioned above, players will drop bombs on rock formations and junked ships, throw nets on cows, speed through ring races, photograph whales and trees, and fertilize crops. Occasionally, you'll fly a single plane and enjoy its relatively tight controls. But most of the time you'll steer a fleet of five that just doesn't like to cooperate. Players can switch from a V formation to a cross shape to a single file line with each trading off varying degrees of speed for maneuverability.

Wing Island's method of pointing and twisting the remote to where you want to go simply does not allow for the kind of twitch maneuvering you need for tight corridors. For example, I relied more on luck to complete bombing runs instead of actually looking down with the analog stick, which usually results in a wall crash rather than a successful target drop.

Between missions you have to pay to get your plane repaired, which isn't too big of a deal. Unfortunately, you only make money if you earn a medal in a mission. This means that the log drop mission you just beat after 12 tries will pay out exactly zero dollars if you won by the skin of your teeth. Way to dissuade players from spending money on new parts or planes, Hudson! I should add that there's only one save file for the game. Why does that still happen in this day and age?

In split-screen multiplayer, one person uses a remote while the other hangs on to the nunchuk. You compete to pop the most balloons – or pop the balloons trailing behind your competitor. This is as close as it gets to dogfighting, and it could have been okay if they let you duke it out until someone runs out of balloons. But alas, every match is limited to only a couple of minutes.

To be clear, I have no problem with non-violent flight games. In fact, I loved both Pilotwings games in their day. But Wing Island went down a dark path somewhere in development and somehow killed any potential for fun along the way.—**BRYAN**

BOTTOM LINE 5

> **Concept:** Barf out a Wii flying game that capitalizes on our desire for the long-lost Pilotwings franchise
> **Graphics:** Extremely plain and uninspiring
> **Sound:** Forgettable music. All voices sound like this: "Bee bee bee beeeeee"
> **Playability:** Single plane controls aren't so bad. Formation mechanics are a disaster
> **Entertainment:** Constant frustration mixed with boredom
> **Replay Value:** Low

Second Opinion 5.25

Some people might not like Wing Island because instead of combat flying you'll be crop dusting and delivering cargo. Not me. I'd be fine with a fun game that is all about zipping through a chain of islands, and skimming cliffs while I complete basically mundane flight tasks. That entire description applies to Wing Island... except the adjective "fun." The sub-par visuals, awkward controls, and non-existent flight physics should be enough to ground most flights, but the unbalanced missions and unwieldy formation flying are enough to close the airport. There's a certain thrill in twisting and turning the Wii remote like a paper airplane as you zoom through the sky, but these cutesy characters and their props needed a lot more polish before taking off.—**MILLER**

■ The explosions are so great you'll want a rocket launcher with you at all times
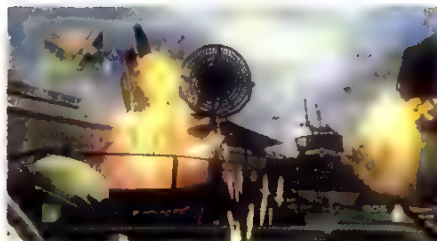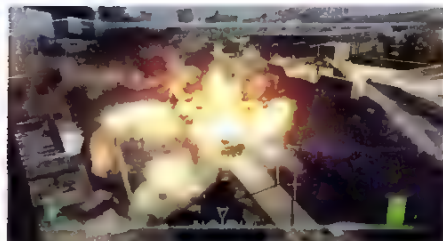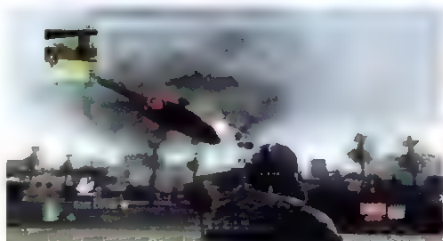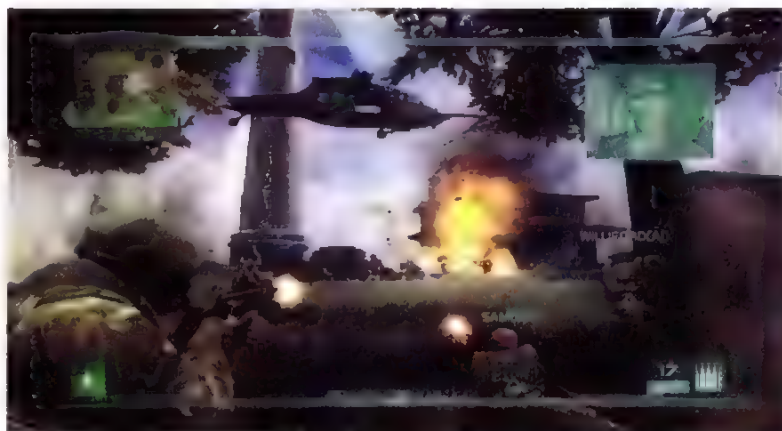
BOTTOM LINE **8.75**

> **Concept:** Keep the Mexicans at bay and out of the United States (the militants, not the immigrants)

> **Graphics:** South of the border has never looked better – before, after, and during the explosive firefights

> **Sound:** Amazing battlefield sound effects are tempered by the cheesy '80s action flick score

> **Playability:** The controls feel slightly less impressive after playing its more-polished cousin, Rainbow Six Vegas

> **Entertainment:** Come for the solid single-player, stay for the amazing multiplayer

> **Replay Value:** High

XBOX 360

Ghost Recon Advanced Warfighter 2

> **STYLE** 1 TO 4-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 16-PLAYER VIA XBOX LIVE) > **PUBLISHER** UBISOFT > **DEVELOPER** RED STORM ENTERTAINMENT/UBISOFT PARIS > **RELEASE** MARCH 8 > **ESRB** T

GAME OF THE MONTH

THE GHOSTS MAKE A BORDER RUN

With the U.S. President secure and the nuke in safe hands as the first episode of GRAW wraps up, you would think Lt. Scott Mitchell and his band of elite infantry would get some well-deserved R&R. But instead of going back to the drawing board after their failed coup, the Mexican revolutionaries are moving straight into their second phase of attack, amassing forces directly across the U.S. border in Juarez. With the Army still playing coy and denying any direct involvement to the build-up, your team of Ghosts must once more take on the role of international janitors to clean up the mess.

Gameplay-wise, GRAW 2 offers a fair share of minor improvements. The high dynamic range lighting gives the sand-swept cities of Mexico yet another layer of stylistic realism and immersion. The new squad selection feature adds tactical thinking to your pre-war plan. Will you choose overwhelming firepower with grenadiers and support soldiers or play it safe by taking a medic? The Cross-com is also vastly improved, as the new version allows you to view the hot zone from the eyes of your squad or support units no matter where they are on the map.

Ghost Recon has always been about great multiplayer, and GRAW 2 keeps the family name intact with a huge selection of maps (some available in night and day modes), dynamic respawn areas that prevent rampant camping, entirely customizable game modes, and a new medic system that gives you the chance to save your teammates in the heat of battle. The new clan system also deserves praise, as it allows you to select custom team names, import logos, choose your team camouflage, find clan matches, and recruit/demote clan members. I would have loved to see a ranking system like those in Battlefield 2 and Rainbow Six Vegas, but it didn't make it into this version of the game.

Ubisoft also includes six great standalone co-op missions for you to engage with your friends. This mode could have been even better if it allowed us to play the single-player campaign in co-op (once again, a feature introduced in RSV), but we're left hoping that Ubisoft offers some follow-up missions via a downloadable expansion pack.

With only one year of development and a handful of improvements to offer, the GRAW 2 single-player campaign plays more like an expansion pack than a full-blown sequel. While it still delivers many riveting combat experiences, they aren't plentiful enough to keep the game from feeling like a step down from its cousin, Rainbow Six Vegas. Enemies still make poor decisions during firefights; when a pile of dead soldiers who have felt the wrath of my sniper rifle lie atop one another, you would think other soldiers would avoid this meat grinder. But no – they foolishly scurry from safe cover locations to join the bloody mound of fallen comrades. The cover system, while still operable, feels clunky now compared to the superior RSV offering. Maybe it's just my weak arm, but the grenade system in GRAW doesn't feel as polished as other Clancy titles. It's not uncommon for me to take out my entire squad as the grenade ricochets off a windowsill or cover point instead of landing by the intended target. It's also a pain to switch out of your primary weapon just to make a quick toss.

While GRAW 2 may have fallen behind the excellent Rainbow Six Vegas, its great multiplayer and explosive single-player storyline still make this game a tour of duty worth taking.—**BERTZ**

■ Your medic can save your less skilled squadmates

Earth Defense Force 2017

> **STYLE** 1 OR 2-PLAYER ACTION > **PUBLISHER** D3 > **DEVELOPER** SANDLOT > **RELEASE** MARCH 20 > **ESRB** T

> It slowly dawned on Hank that he should have fired the nuclear device at the bugs, not the city

5000
5096

THEY CAME FROM SPACE

Alien invaders have descended upon Earth, and it's up to you, a faceless soldier in the Earth Defense Force, to give these unfriendly trespassers a proper rocket-to-the-face welcome. Part *War of the Worlds*, part *Godzilla*, and part *Them!*, Earth Defense Force 2017 latches on to the monstrously farfetched camp of 1950s science-fiction cinema, and embraces the role of a B-grade cult classic with its exciting alien-splattering action, astonishing city-leveling destruction, and hilarious ear-piercing screams.

Outside of "kill them all," the game really doesn't offer up much of a narrative – which is probably a good thing, as I would hate to see a writer attempt to describe how 20-story cyborg dinosaurs, sentient robots, giant acid-spewing ants, and jumping spiders are all part of the same invasion force. The miscellany of aliens is certainly odd, but you would be surprised how well they mesh together on the field of war. As a giant lizard knocks down skyscrapers with the reckless abandon of a kid kicking a can, swarms of ants scurry through the city streets, saucers hover in the sky, and spiders bounce from rooftop to rooftop.

Much like the Serious Sam titles, the only goal that players are tasked with is to blow away all of the enemies in each level. Sure, the game tries to change things up with "protect the sniper team" objectives, but really, the levels just boil down to running around and killing everything that so much as twitches. EDF offers the most basic gameplay

possible. You can run, shoot, jump, and dive roll – all of which are handled exceptionally well. On certain levels you'll also have the chance to pilot a tank, helicopter, mech, and hoverbike – all of these are handled as poorly as possible.

There isn't much to it, but you really won't believe how much fun this silly action game can be. While embodying the highest level of cheese possible in its premise, the visuals are anything but low-budget. Errant missile blasts will send buildings crumbling to the ground. When a robot goes down, you are in for a real treat when you see the explosion that follows. You also can't help but hold your breath when a saucer the size of a football field plummets toward a bustling city.

No online functionality is included, but two players can tackle the entire game through split-screen co-op. The game also boasts longevity in an array of difficulty settings. As the game gets harder, over 150 weapons become available.

Earth Defense Force may not have the serious tones of today's triple-A juggernauts, but its quality gameplay and refreshing premise shows that a B-game can be every bit as entertaining.—**REINER**

> "$@"%!!!

BOTTOM LINE — 8

> **Concept:** 1950s science fiction cheese with a flair for next-generation visuals

> **Graphics:** Lacks creativity in its alien designs, but constantly wows with its crumbling buildings, magnificent explosions, and size of the enemies

> **Sound:** Horrible in a listenable way, but great in that classic sci-fi way

> **Playability:** Simplistic third-person controls with a nice selection of weapons, and nearly uncontrollable vehicles

> **Entertainment:** It delivers 15-plus hours of magnificent alien-abuse and the hankering to watch some classic sci-fi afterwards

> **Replay Value:** Moderate

Second Opinion — 7

Ants! Robots! Spaceships! With intergalactic horrors surrounding you on all sides, the only way to save the city is to destroy it, launching volley after volley of missiles at the enormous invaders. Earth Defense Force perfectly captures the simple joy of obliterating legions of bad guys. I often couldn't even see thanks to the walls of smoke, fire, and bug guts. It's too bad that this package can't offer anything more than these basic thrills; the very concept of Earth Defense Force oozes camp, but the game barely capitalizes on it. Instead, you get arcade-style action with no frills – unless you consider serious camera and collision problems frills. The controls are spotty and the gameplay is shallow, but that doesn't negate the sheer entertainment of picking up a bazooka and eradicating aliens for great justice.—**JOE**
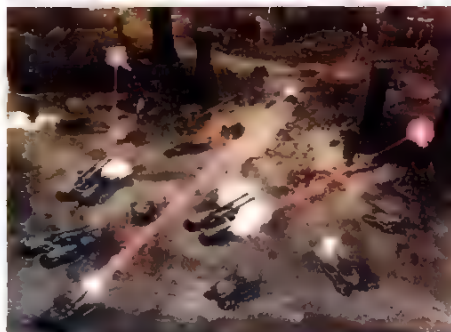
When the battles start raging, C&C 3 looks amazing

The GDI kills Kane again in the campaign...or so it thinks

PC

Command & Conquer 3: Tiberium Wars

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER STRATEGY (UP TO 8-PLAYER VIA INTERNET OR LAN) > **PUBLISHER** ELECTRONIC ARTS > **DEVELOPER** EALA > **RELEASE** MARCH 26 > **ESRB** T

NEW, SHINY, AND EXACTLY THE SAME

Failing innovation, the only way for a game to be truly successful is to execute its old ideas at a high level. This is the path that EA is taking with the Command & Conquer franchise. There's nary a lick of new or unusual gameplay to be found here, but the strength of the C&C legacy and the extremely high level of polish make Tiberium Wars one of the better real-time strategy titles of recent years regardless.

The gameplay of Command & Conquer has always been fast, intense, and micromanagement-heavy. This latest entry in the series is no different; the macro-level strategy here doesn't expand on the timeless tempo dynamic that has dominated RTS play since the genre's inception. You'll counter tanks with bigger tanks or missile infantry, infantry with flamethrowers, and aircraft with SAM units or emplacements. Even the alien Scrin faction is enjoyable to play with but fails to deliver any truly innovative concepts to the genre, though it certainly spices up the classic GDI-Nod conflict and offers something beyond the familiar infantry and tanks. The tools at your disposal are the same ones that you've been

using for years. C&C 3 just makes it very easy (and very, very pretty) to use them.

A match of Tiberium Wars, with the exception of gimmicky single-player missions, is about keeping your opponent off-balance enough that you're able to bring your strategy — whether it's a tank rush, infantry zerg, or game-ending superweapon — to fruition before he can. However, though the experience is nearly identical to what you'll get out of any traditional RTS from Starcraft to Rise of Legends, the timeline is compressed in C&C 3. Building a base is so effortless that the initial setup of a match takes a mere few seconds, and the countdown until somebody gets their superweapon up and running starts right away. There isn't the opportunity for long, drawn-out matches — the Ion Cannon or its Nod and Scrin equivalents ensure that. Consequently, static defenses and turtling strategies are less effective here than in most games.

All this polish in the core gameplay wouldn't add up to much without good content for it to exist on, and C&C 3 has that in spades both online and off.

The three single-player campaigns are enormously lengthy and well-designed, offering literally dozens of hours of premium story-driven missions. The offline campaigns are so well done that this may beat out Warcraft III as my favorite single-player RTS ever, and that's no small feat. Multiplayer comes with its own set of bells and whistles, with tournament support, voicechat, observer modes, and more. It's clear that EA wants this to be "the next big thing" in RTS and has funded it accordingly. The tools are certainly there for a great community to form, should gamers embrace it.
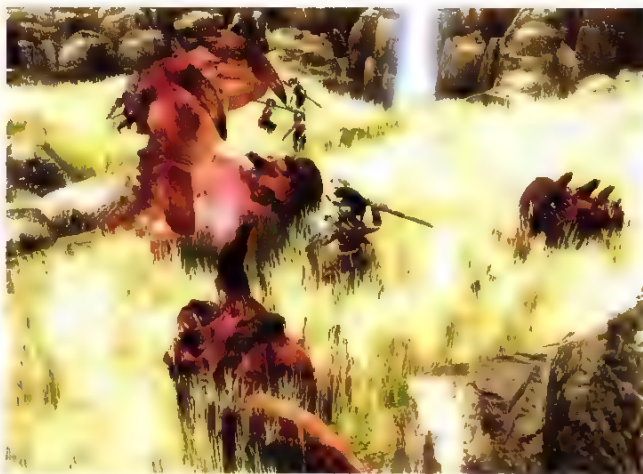
A few minor irritations, most notably queuing up production in multiple buildings, don't do much to mar the overall experience. C&C 3 is a shining example of how fun a five-year-old design can still be if it receives enough polish and tuning.——**ADAM**

The cutscenes are laughable but fun, in a campy sort of way

Landmarks like the Pentagon ground the setting

PC
Titan Quest:
Immortal Throne

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION/RPG (UP TO 6-PLAYER VIA INTERNET OR LAN) > **PUBLISHER** THQ
> **DEVELOPER** IRON LORE STUDIOS > **RELEASE** MARCH 5 > **ESRB** T

GOD OF LOOT

This really is one of those reviews that writes itself. We should all be aware by now that Titan Quest is an excellent game that does Diablo II's legacy justice. Similarly, everyone should know at this point whether or not their brain has that itch that only leveling up and collecting loot can scratch. With those two things in mind, only one issue remains: is Immortal Throne a reasonably competent expansion that adds enough replay to Titan Quest to justify its $30 price tag? The answer, unsurprisingly, is emphatically positive.

The biggest addition is the new Dream mastery. Specializing in this fighting style provides a unique flavor to your character with its hybrid of melee and spellcasting. Dream-based characters even get access to a Nightmare pet for further domination. It's a cool way to build your hero, and worth starting over from level one to experience.

If your existing avatar is just too awesome to give up on, though, the additional content in Immortal Throne is interesting enough to load up that old save file. Why wouldn't you want to travel to Hades for the glory of the gods, see new and exotic monsters, and kill them for their undoubtedly superior drops? A convenient Caravan to store your goods and transfer them between characters is a welcome addition, and powerful Artifact recipes that have you combine specific ingredients to create new, more awesome loot are just icing on the cake.

Immortal Throne's not going to change the way you look at action/RPGs, but it breathes some new life into one of last year's better games. For my money, that's an expansion I can support.—**ADAM**
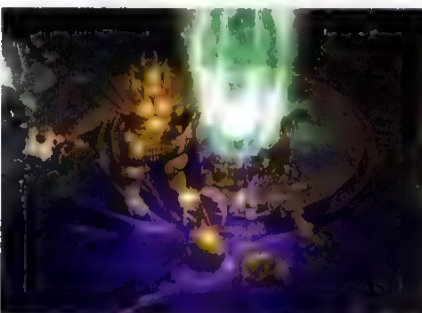
BOTTOM LINE 8

> **Concept:** Ding ding! Here comes the loot train!

> **Graphics:** With the settings cranked, Titan Quest is a damn fine-looking game

> **Sound:** There are still odd technical issues here and there, but the sound still doesn't make a difference one way or the other

> **Playability:** You click on stuff, and it dies. No rough edges get in the way of this elegant design

> **Entertainment:** The best action/RPG in years gets an expansion. What more can you ask for?

> **Replay Value:** Moderately High

Second Opinion 8

Expansion packs are frequently criticized for not adding enough to the base game – often with good cause. The catch with Titan Quest is that if you demand constant innovation and fresh experiences, you probably shouldn't be playing this game in the first place. However, if you want a great Diablo-like mixture of monsters, loot, and leveling, look no further than Immortal Throne. The new Dream mastery adds tons of satisfying new ways to mow through fodder, and the added high-level areas are great venues to humiliate mythological beasts. It may not redefine isometric hack n' slash, but Immortal Throne does exemplify everything that makes the genre so irresistible.—**JOE**

PC
Silverfall

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION/RPG (UP TO 8-PLAYER VIA INTERNET OR LAN) > **PUBLISHER** ATARI > **DEVELOPER** MONTE CRISTO
> **RELEASE** MARCH 27 > **ESRB** T

You can zoom the camera in this close if you don't like viewing the action from a playable angle

UNINSPIRED

I have no patience for knockoff games that can't even get basic concepts right. Now, I'm not someone who hates on everything that isn't a creative masterpiece, but if a game doesn't even attempt to advance the art or even iterate on a previous design, you can bet that it doesn't get any kind of break for getting the little things wrong. Silverfall may allow me to hit things over the head and take their goods, but you need more than that to keep my attention these days.

With a genre as well-trodden as hack n' slash loot-gathering, it takes one of two things to make people care about a game: outstanding execution of familiar concepts or interesting innovation. Silverfall has neither, and consequently is a title doomed before it even ships. The click-fest gameplay doesn't add anything to the Diablo model, and the character progression is inferior to Titan Quest's. The only marginally interesting thing about Silverfall is the party mechanic, and even that is so poorly implemented that it's laughable compared even to Diablo II's mercenaries (after a few patches to that venerable game, anyway).

Silverfall is most notable for its failures in the most simple of areas. The UI is terrible on a number of levels, from the barely-visible health bar to the non-remappable key bindings. The localization is fairly bad, the options menu is bare, and the object occlusion when they're in front of the camera is buggier than it has any right to be. The font used in the majority of the game is hard to read and irritating, for crying out loud! It's sad when the best thing you can say for a game is that it's not broken, but that's about as positive as I can be about Silverfall.—**ADAM**

BOTTOM LINE 6

> **Concept:** "Hey, people sure liked this here Diablo II game! We should make a crappy copy of it!"

> **Graphics:** Note to developers. Cel-shading only works with big, inviting character designs. This is just bland and icky

> **Sound:** As always, iTunes for the win

> **Playability:** Not being able to remap keys is an unforgivable offense. Seriously

> **Entertainment:** You can get your "click-loot-repeat" fix elsewhere, and with more style

> **Replay Value:** Moderate

Second Opinion 6.5

If I can give one piece of advice to potential players of Silverfall, it's this: do not play as a big, nasty troll woman. I did, and I feel I've paid the price. Every time I died I had to watch her run around in a skimpy leather teddy in search of her tombstone. My primary goal was not to push the game's nature or technology agenda, I simply wanted to keep Ugggh's pants on (and buy plenty of life insurance). Seriously though, Silverfall is the very definition of a passable hack n' slash loot grind. Nothing disastrous. Nothing spectacular. It might be worth going through with some dedicated buddies over the Web or LAN-style... if you're already finished with the new Titan Quest expansion, that is.—**BRYAN**

This level would be so much cooler if there were evil carnies to fireball

Caption (top left image):

Caption (top right image): The Zone is so decrepit that it's a shock when you come across something that works

BOTTOM LINE **8.25**

> **Concept:** Survive and thrive in the radioactive wasteland left behind in the wake of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster

> **Graphics:** Technically sound, but the limited color palette wears on you over time

> **Sound:** Ambient chatter doesn't add much when it's in Russian, but directional sound is a huge boon when stalking something

> **Playability:** Thanks for not letting me remap commands to my extra mouse buttons. What is this, 1995?

> **Entertainment:** A lack of focus on either freeform activities or pre-determined scenarios keeps this from living up to its potential.

> **Replay Value:** Moderate

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 GAME WORLD > **RELEASE** MARCH 20 > **ESRB** M

SHOOTING FOR THE MOON

Despite nearly four years of delays, S.T.A.L.K.E.R. still feels unfinished in some respects. This is supposed to be a game about freedom, where the player carves his or her own niche out of the mutant-infested fallout zone around Chernobyl while AI-controlled characters are trying to do the same. This goal was clearly too lofty, but that doesn't mean that the game sucks. Rough edges make frequent unwelcome appearances, but the game is far from broken or boring and transcends its somewhat pedestrian elements at times to become one of the best FPS adventures in years, if only temporarily.

S.T.A.L.K.E.R.'s attempt to fuse open-world gameplay with first-person shooter action is successful, but in a limited way. The critical path leads you through the game's large, open world and clumsily tells a story at the same time. If you shoot things, they fall down. If you talk to someone with a gun pointed at his face, he won't like you much. If you carry too much stuff, you move slower and tire faster. Other than that, though, the depth that we were promised from ear-

lier showings of the game is often missing. Clearing out a bandit camp just means that more will move in after a day or two. The weapons you scavenge off of fallen foes fall neatly into familiar categories like pistol, SMG, or shotgun. S.T.A.L.K.E.R. isn't the revolution that we all hoped it would be. It is, however, a respectable and sometimes excellent first-person adventure.

Though the pie-in-the-sky goals of the game's design are rarely met, when everything is firing on all cylinders, this can be one of the best gaming experiences around. Certain areas and missions do an amazing job of creating the illusion that you're making your own way in this dystopian future. Portions of the critical path feature interesting goals and situations that are a pleasure to explore and complete. The exploration element can take on its own life as you try to navigate the treacherous landscape of radiation, deadly anomalies, dangerous mutants, and other more esoteric hazards to retrieve a rare artifact or just see what's over the next hill. Helping others overcome their goals can even open up whole new paths as they decide to help you out in return – or at least

not open fire on sight any more.

The sandbox that S.T.A.L.K.E.R. drops players into is large, but much of it feels like it's there for no real reason. You'll occasionally receive a contextual non-story mission that sends you out into the wilderness with the goal of killing some nameless bandit or retrieving something from a secret stash, but the generic nature of these tasks quickly becomes tiresome. For the most part, it's just a bunch of trees and grass with no purpose. A minority of zones do break this mold, though, and serve up interesting content to explore, fight, or otherwise experience.

There are a ton of intriguing ideas at play here, but none of them are executed with enough flair to be truly great. You'll likely split your time fairly evenly between cursing the problematic UI and localization, and marveling at the outstanding ambience or frantically trying to shoot or sneak your way out of a jam. If you're willing to slog through some frustrations, you can find some diamonds in S.T.A.L.K.E.R.'s rough that you won't find anywhere else in video gaming.—**ADAM**

Caption (bottom left image): Excellent weather effects add to the already-great ambience

Caption (bottom right image): Using your flashlight is a good way to announce your presence and get shot

Second Opinion 8

S.T.A.L.K.E.R. is a strange beast. Fellow mercenaries speak in Russian until you engage them in dialogue (then they're perfectly understandable), conversation trees appear directly over the characters you are speaking with, and the plot seems scatterbrained at best. But none of these quirks kept the game's ominous atmosphere from pulling me in. From its radiation-poisoned fields filled with mutilated animals to its decrepit scientific facilities being picked over by other scavengers, the haunted landscape of post-fallout Chernobyl is a treat to explore. The game successfully blends RPG pacing with FPS action to create one of the more novel experiences I've come across in years. The player customization feels half-baked, but combat has its own distinct flavor. Firefights tend to take place over longer distances than most games, so patience and accuracy are placed at a premium. Taken as the sum of its parts, S.T.A.L.K.E.R. ultimately offers a unique experience that manages to overcome its minor flaws.—**BERTZ**
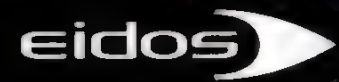
HANDHELD QUICKIES

PSP
M.A.C.H.

BOTTOM LINE 6.5

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION/RACING (UP TO 8-PLAYER VIA AD HOC) > PUBLISHER SIERRA
> DEVELOPER KUJU > RELEASE FEBRUARY 20 > ESRB E10+

While displaying shades of Wipeout in its fast-paced aerial racing and a hint of Twisted Metal in its arena-based dogfighting, M.A.C.H. (Modified Air Combat Heroes) never really reaches impressive heights. The sense of speed is fantastic and the visuals are divine, but the openness of the tracks, cautionary AI opponents, and fact that you really have to go out of your way to wreck serve to suck all of the excitement out of the experience. Having complete customization options for the vehicles is always a bonus (especially for multiplayer), and the array of missions in Challenge mode gives the game unexpected longevity, but this experience doesn't push your skills to the test until you unlock the harder difficulty levels. Up until this point, you might as just well kick in the autopilot.—REINER

NINTENDO DS
Lost In Blue 2

BOTTOM LINE 6.5

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ADVENTURE (UP TO 4-PLAYER VIA WIRELESS) > PUBLISHER KONAMI
> DEVELOPER KONAMI > RELEASE MARCH 20 > ESRB E10+

If you ever escape from a deserted island, odds are you'll never have to deal with the ordeal again. However, that isn't true if you played the original Lost In Blue, because this sequel once again has you fighting for survival in the middle of the ocean. The main characters may be different, but all of the food gathering, fire starting, and exploring is very much the same. A bigger focus on action (like fighting wild animals) and a wider variety of activities make this more enjoyable than the original, but it still failed to make me care about the characters enough to suffer alongside them.—JOE

PSP
Coded Arms: Contagion

BOTTOM LINE 6.75

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 8-PLAYER VIA AD-HOC AND INFRASTRUCTURE) > PUBLISHER KONAMI > DEVELOPER CREAT STUDIOS/KONAMI > RELEASE MARCH 27 > ESRB T

New developer Creat Studios definitely made an effort to improve the second appearance of the PSP's first FPS franchise. A new focus on storytelling leads to some nifty looking cutscenes, and Contagion's eight-player online play is all too rare on the PSP these days. In addition, a slightly improved auto-lock and a variety of control configurations attempt to remedy the first game's flawed gameplay. However, all these improvements can't change the fact that this is nothing more than a cobbled together batch of decade-old FPS conventions and clichés. There's just not much heart and soul in this game, and the stiff mechanics don't work well enough to make you overlook its weaknesses.—MATT
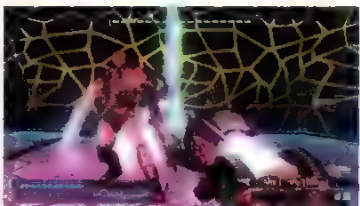
NINTENDO DS

Final Fantasy Fables:
Chocobo Tales

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION/ADVENTURE (UP TO 4-PLAYER VIA WIRELESS, 2-PLAYER VIA NINTENDO WI-FI) > PUBLISHER SQUARE ENIX > DEVELOPER H.A.N.D. > RELEASE APRIL 3 > ESRB E

BOTTOM LINE 6.5

> **Concept:** It's a collect-a-thon, a card battler, and minigame barrage all in one

> **Graphics:** An interesting combination of 2D cutouts and 3D models

> **Sound:** It's almost sad to hear classic Final Fantasy tracks playing under such pointless tasks

> **Playability:** The stylus-only interface works well, and surprisingly few minigames have notable control problems

> **Entertainment:** Chocobos may be adorable, but they are apparently very boring

> **Replay Value:** Moderate

CHOCOBUTT

Not all fairy tales are as light and fluffy as they may appear. In the non-Disney version of Cinderella, the evil stepsisters mutilate their own feet so they'll fit in a glass slipper. At the end of The Little Mermaid, the mermaid dies and the prince marries another woman. Unlike these fables, Chocobo Tales is generally aimed at a young crowd, but with baffling moments that drastically overstep those bounds.

This game strives for a charm similar to last year's Rocket Slime. The characters are quirky, the writing is occasionally funny, and you'll see familiar fairy tales retold with Final Fantasy characters in the leading roles ("The Tortoise and the Hare" becomes "The Adamatoise and the Cactuar"). Even with whimsy coming out the wazoo, Chocobo Tales isn't fun thanks to a tangled web of frustrating concepts.

The meat of the gameplay consists of two connected components: minigames and card battles. If you want to win card battles, you need to play minigames. If you want to unlock more minigames, you need to win card battles. The only problem is that in order to get the best cards, you need to get gold medals in the minigames – many of which require superhuman speed, patience, and/or luck. You can still progress up to a point without them, but eventually you'll need to backtrack to get a better deck. After a few hours, this drains all excitement from the game. My reaction to every activity eventually became "Ugh. What half-baked diversion

do I need to suffer through *now?*"

Card battles break the monotony by injecting some strategy, but they are a pretty pitiful reward for all the effort it takes to get good cards. Even though the visual style is pretty cool, the unskippable animations for each turn make the fights drag on too long. Even if you beat your foe (who is probably standing in your path), the big payoff is gaining access to a handful of new and stupid minigames, which you can also access in multiplayer. If you have any fun playing in that mode, it's solely due to the fact that you are playing with buddies; I'm not giving the game any credit for your ability to make friends.

The plot and the in-game storybooks are a bit too insipid to have the all-ages appeal of Rocket Slime, and the various tasks often require the sure hand of a seasoned gamer. Chocobo Tales hovers in the gray area between the casual gamers and Final Fantasy fans, but is so boring and slow that it can't appeal to either. As for me, I definitely prefer Chocobos when they are being ridden into war, not when they are forced to climb beanstalks and play rhythm games.—JOE

If you get tired of doing repetitive minigames to get a few good cards, there is another option. By using the Nintendo Download Station's game demos, you'll be able to get three exclusive cards that aren't normally available...

NINTENDO DS
Cake Mania

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION/PUZZLE > **PUBLISHER** MAJESCO
> **DEVELOPER** DIGITAL EMBRYO > **RELEASE** MARCH 27 > **ESRB** E

WHO SKIMPED ON THE FROSTING?

Sandlot Games' Cake Mania will have been out on PC for almost a year by the time you read this, but Digital Embryo's port to the DS falls in line with the new trend to bring casual web games to Nintendo's portable. Plus, Majesco now has a sibling for the Cooking Mama series.

One difference from Cooking Mama is the presence of a story, albeit a very thin one. Plucky heroine Jill is out to reopen her grandparents' bakery after a big conglomerate forced them out of their lease. So now she is baking out of her house (and eventually at the beach, in a casino, and at a circus) in an attempt to save up the cash.

Players won't be particularly hands-on with the cakes. You simply get a customer's order, choose one of four cake shapes, wait for it to bake, walk it over to the four-color froster, wait, take it to the decoration table, wait, deliver it to one of the four customers waiting in line, and pick up the cash left behind. All of these movements and actions are smoothly handled by tapping the screen. Up to four customers can be waiting at a time and various character types have different rates at which their patience deteriorates, killing your cash flow.

I had a good time upgrading my equipment and keeping a dozen things rolling at once. There's something satisfying about keeping all of those jerky customers happy, but after a while it's like, "Okay, it's time to make another 100 cakes." Again and again and again! Cake Mania is just a little too barebones for its own good. —**BRYAN**

BOTTOM LINE	**6.5**

> **Concept:** Shrink the PC game down to a portable size

> **Graphics:** You spend the entire game in one kitchen (with a few different skins layered on top) Gears of War this is not

> **Sound:** Enjoy the two or three repeating tracks

> **Playability:** CM's former mouse controls work well on the DS

> **Entertainment:** Baking endless cakes gets addictive, but a lack of variety may turn off some

> **Replay Value:** Moderately Low

Second Opinion | 6

Cake Mania is more of a basic cognitive assessment than a puzzle game. Can you recognize and distinguish various colors and shapes? Do you understand the concept of money? Can you juggle two or more tasks at one time? If you answered "no" to any of those questions (or if you just want to brush up on the basics), then maybe this PC port is a good life exercise. It may seem like fun to stuff hungry people's faces with baked goods, but like a cake filled with gross raspberry goo, the colorful exterior hides something that is not delicious. —**JOE**

PSP
Full Auto 2

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER RACING (UP TO 4-PLAYERS VIA AD HOC) > **PUBLISHER** SEGA
> **DEVELOPER** DEEP FRIED ENTERTAINMENT
> **RELEASE** MARCH 20 > **ESRB** E10+
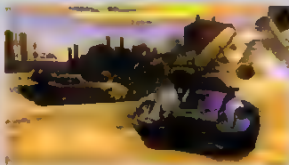
BOTTOM LINE	**7.25**

The PSP version of Full Auto 2 is different enough from its PS3 cousin to warrant calling it a totally different game. The concept is pretty much identical -- race wildly through city streets while gunning down your opponents. The execution of that concept includes all new tracks, cars, story (such as it is), and weapons. You'll now be able to mount those insane tools of destruction on the side of your vehicle as well as the back and front, upping the ammo you pour out in front of you. Targeting has also been automated, a change that I think is actually a good thing for the game. Unfortunately, the physics and control of the cars is pretty terrible, and it really hurts my opinion of the game as a whole. Some ad hoc multiplayer and a strong licensed soundtrack are great additions, but I've encountered much better racers on the PSP. —**MILLER**

NINTENDO DS
Konami Classics Series: Arcade Hits

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION (2 PLAYER VIA WIRELESS) > **PUBLISHER** KONAMI
> **DEVELOPER** KONAMI
> **RELEASE** MARCH 15 > **ESRB** E10+
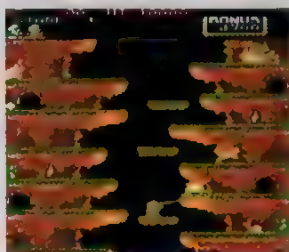
BOTTOM LINE	**7.75**

It's kind of hard to write a review of a classic collection. Half of the time all you really need to do is list the games in the collection. I suppose the highlights here are Gradius and Contra, but they were the only ones I would really want to play at length, and some games, like Track & Field, weren't as fun as I remembered. I'm sure someone will be more excited about the list than I was: Circus Charlie, Roc 'n Rope, Rush'n Attack, Time Pilot, Yie Ar Kung-Fu, and a few more. However, I have to say that the library with history, trivia, and details for each game, as well as galleries of old artwork are a nice addition to this collection. However, I can't recommend this to anyone other than fans of the old games. —**BEN**

PSP
Marvel Trading Card Game

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER BOARD (2-PLAYER VIA AD HOC OR INFRASTRUCTURE) > **PUBLISHER** KONAMI
> **DEVELOPER** KONAMI > **RELEASE** FEBRUARY 27 > **ESRB** T

THE ULTIMATE COLLECTION

It just doesn't feel right to play as Captain America anymore. Color my heart as black as coal, but I like this super soldier better dead. He was just holding U.S. Agent down. Thankfully, with over 1,000 different cards to mix into your deck, there are plenty of ways to put Steve Rogers on ice.

If you are new to this card game, having over 1,000 cards to choose from might seem a bit overwhelming. With a handful of finely designed tutorials walking you through the ins and outs of the game, you should feel like a seasoned veteran by the time you play your first match. It really does a nice job of holding your hand and highlighting what options are available to you next. The game is fairly complex, and depends heavily upon the player's ability to assemble effective decks. No matter how you approach your game plan, the goal of the game is simple: select a hero or villain, and use your deck of cards to defeat the opposing force.

Those who are familiar with the game, and have boxes upon boxes of cards in their possession, will have a harder time getting into this game. The interface is quite slow, and the display just doesn't do a good job of highlighting the cards on the table. You really have to put an extra effort into keeping an eye on what cards are in play, and also exhibit great patience for your opponent (CPU or human) to progress through phases. Purchasing booster packs is certainly cool, and the multiplayer (which supports ad hoc, infrastructure, and PSP to PC connections) is loaded with tournaments and options galore.

If multiplayer isn't your bag, the game also offers separate single-player stories for both the villains and heroes. With top-notch artists illustrating both the cards and story sequences, this game has a nice look to it – it's just a shame that the cards are so small during play.

There's a ton of content here, and even more gameplay to be had. The real card game is easier to play, but collecting all 1,000 cards will cost you a small fortune. This may be a fair trade off if you want to get serious about this game. —**REINER**

BOTTOM LINE	**7.5**

> **Concept:** A digital recreation of Upper Deck's Vs. card game that offers over 1,000 cards, deep online features, and decent functionality

> **Graphics:** Comic art aplenty, but most of the cards are tucked off to the side of the screen. You really have to squint to see the fine details

> **Sound:** The upbeat soundtrack sounds like it should be part of a Spider-Man movie. In other words, it might be a little too epic for a card game

> **Playability:** It's a bit slow for people who play the card game, but it does do a good job of highlighting what can or can't be done

> **Entertainment:** The multiplayer tournament system is fantastic and not having to pay real cash for boosters is a bonus

> **Replay Value:** High

Second Opinion | 6.75

The Vs. card system itself is quite smooth, and this could serve as a decent introduction to it if you want to put in the time. The interface that this video game treatment uses to present these cards is the opposite of smooth – leaving me constantly wondering why the layout was done in the way it is. The tutorials are hard to follow, the deck management tool is tricky to figure out, and the in-game page layout is crowded and confusing. What bugs me the most is that the great character art that should sit center stage is completely marginalized. The presence of both a hero and villain storyline is sweet, as are the flexible multiplayer options, but I'd rather play on a tabletop until someone cleans up all the mess on my screen. —**MILLER**
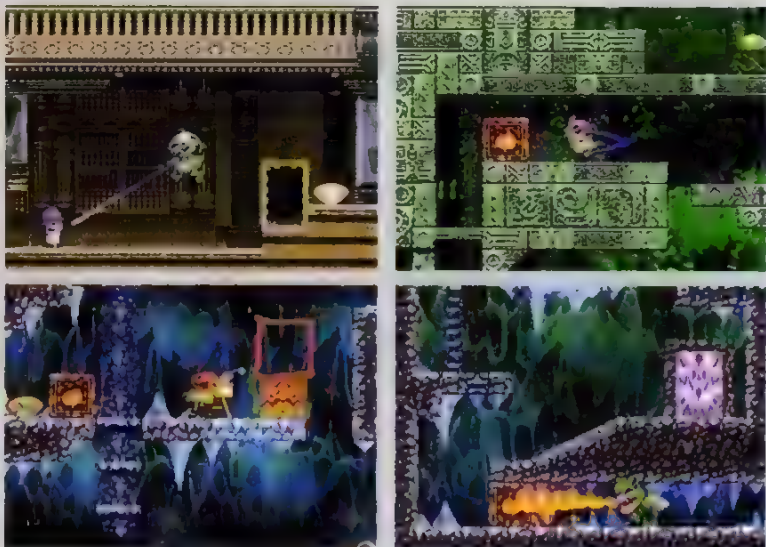
NINTENDO DS
Wario: Master of Disguise

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION > **PUBLISHER** NINTENDO > **DEVELOPER** SUZAK > **RELEASE** MARCH 6 > **ESRB** E10+

SMELL THE PURPLE WIND

The above phrase is actually what Wario tells his rivals upon besting them. You see, Purple Wind is Wario's thief code name, but it's also what he calls his farts. Yes, Wario's love of gas and treasure is well represented here.

The game takes place inside of a TV show that Wario has crashed. Stealing the main character's thieving wand has allowed Wario to change costumes at will for varying attacks and platforming powers. You can use the stylus to draw a dragon tail on his back to breathe fire or make a rectangle with a line through it to become Arty Wario and make blocks out of thin air. Early on this is a pretty quick way to change forms, but as you earn more of the eight total costumes, the input recognition gets a little muddled. For example, there were times when I drew a circle to get the astronaut but made the pirate instead. Despite the interface problems, I enjoyed the variety of powers and felt they were implemented well in the navigation of the stages.

Each of the "episodes" offer a varying level of challenge, and some can take over an hour to complete on the first runthrough. Some puzzles make you scratch notes on a notepad like the old days of Metroid on the NES. Boss battles are plentiful, and it's usually enjoyable deducing what mix of powers to combine to defeat them (even if developer Suzak does give you onscreen hints). Plus, this is probably the first video game in history that requires you to drop poop in a boss' mouth.

Speaking of poop, one of WMOD's minigames requires players to guide falling turds into a toilet. Other tasks include coloring in pictures, connecting the dots, or crushing skittering roaches. These minigames are passable at first, but the fact that you have to complete one every single time you open a chest will have you questioning whether any treasure is worth this constant hassle.—BRYAN

BOTTOM LINE 7.25

> **Concept:** Touchscreen puzzle platforming with minigames bolted on

> **Graphics:** Main characters and bosses have amusing animations, but environments tend to look a little bland

> **Sound:** Lighthearted tunes and standard Wario grunts

> **Playability:** Drawing on Wario to change costumes only gets more clunky as additional outfits are unlocked

> **Entertainment:** Fun puzzle elements get bogged down by over-reliance on touchscreen features

> **Replay Value:** Moderate

Second Opinion 8

Make no mistake – this game is downright frustrating at times. While it may look like an action/platformer, Master of Disguise is heavily weighted towards the exploration and puzzle-solving side of the genre. Switching between Wario's various forms makes for some intriguing solutions, even if it's a bit difficult to get the DS to switch to the correct form. Still, despite my reservations, I kept coming back for more, and found myself wrapped up in navigating this title's obtuse levels. Bonus points for a very humorous script, which kept me in stitches as I slowly unlocked the game's secrets. It's not for everyone, but I have a feeling this will become a cult classic for some hardcore Nintendo fans.—MATT

Call of Duty: Roads to Victory

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 6-PLAYER VIA AD HOC) > **PUBLISHER** ACTIVISION > **DEVELOPER** AMAZE ENTERTAINMENT > **RELEASE** MARCH 20 > **ESRB** T

HONORABLE DISCHARGE

Game publishers seem to have a lot in common with Homer Simpson. Like our lovable buffoon repeatedly sticking his hand into a toaster in hopes of retrieving that half-piece of Pop Tart, suffering electrocution each time, publishers keep burning themselves by shoehorning first-person shooters into the ill-suited PSP. Call of Duty is the latest franchise to be sacrificed to this FPS meat grinder. As you would guess given the PSP's poor track record in the genre, Roads to Victory is more akin to the mediocre Big Red One than to the superb PC and Xbox 360 offerings.

In an effort to navigate around the PSP's lack of a second analog stick, Roads to Victory offers four different control schemes. Each compromises your ability to fight effectively in its own special way, and none of them achieve a comfort level that allows for twitch kills so necessary in FPS games. To correct this problem, developer Amaze entertainment has included an auto-aim supplement, but I found this created just as many headaches as the control scheme. There were times when I wasn't locked on a soldier, yet his head was perfectly lined up along my iron sights. I would pull the trigger, yet he would not go down. Once he was auto-targeted, however, I could shoot aimlessly at him and he would fall.

The controls are hardly the only problem facing this forlorn soldier. Anyone who has played a few WWII shooters will be all too familiar with this cookie-cutter list of tasks: take out anti-air artillery with bomb charges, counter-snipe Nazi snipers so troops can pass through an area, take out a few tanks with a Panzershreck, rinse, and repeat. The level designs are equally predictable for the most part, with narrow corridors to navigate with Nazis waiting around each corner. The only new action this game seems to offer is a Memphis Belle-like level played on board a bomber that has you moving from turret to turret taking out waves of Messerschmitts.

Even the multiplayer doesn't escape this fiasco without suffering from a few shrapnel wounds. You can face off with up to six friends locally in your standard deathmatch, capture the flag, hold the flag, and king of the hill modes, but it lacks any online play. This is a huge sacrifice to make, as online multiplayer is such an integral element to the franchise's success.

Because of the PSP's inability to provide a home for a good shooter, we're willing to give Roads to Victory an honorable discharge. Now if only the publishers would break the habit of recruiting these sorry excuses for soldiers.—BERTZ

BOTTOM LINE 6

> **Concept:** Mortally wound a decorated war veteran by making him serve on the PSP

> **Graphics:** Nothing you haven't seen before

> **Sound:** We've heard prettier gun fire in our days

> **Playability:** FPS controls, as we've come to expect on the PSP, suck

> **Entertainment:** Unless you're starving for a mission, skip this poor excuse for a WWII shooter

> **Replay Value:** Moderate

Second Opinion 6.5

I think everyone knows what they're in for with a PSP version of Call of Duty: crappy controls, bad graphics, smaller environments, and maybe three different facial models. Developer Amaze Entertainment (who specializes in handheld ports) delivers on all fronts. Roads to Victory also features an inordinate amount of turret gameplay, giving players a sweet but brief taste of analog aiming. Despite these gripes, the soul of Call of Duty somehow remains intact here. Hardcore fans may want to breeze through the game on a rental, but everyone else should just wait for the inevitable COD 4.—BRYAN
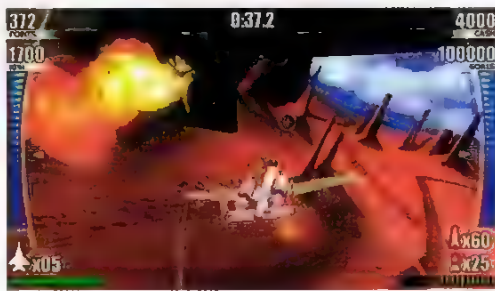
PSP
After Burner: Black Falcon

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 4-PLAYER VIA AD HOC) > **PUBLISHER** SEGA > **DEVELOPER** PLANET MOON > **RELEASE** MARCH 20 > **ESRB** T

DANGER ZONE

After Burner was a big deal back in the day, but it's clear it has already used up most of its gas. Black Falcon clings to its roots, but struggles to keep up with the times.

This game is basically a rail shooter that fakes the sensation of 3D space by letting you move nominally around the screen. You know, kind of like how *Top Gun* is ostensibly about some hot-shot fighter jocks, and pretends that Tom Cruise is.... Well, you know what I'm getting at. Anyway, as much as the gameplay structure puts you in a box, After Burner works pretty well within it. There are over 20 missions to grind through, and the action itself can get pretty hairy at times as both air and ground targets get thrown your way (while remaining pretty smooth). The enemy lock-ons that come up from behind (you evade them by hitting the brakes until they pass) can be particularly devastating if you're not careful. As well as the game hits its core action, its repetitive nature becomes quickly apparent. Online co-op is nice, but the competitive component is less deathmatch with dogfights as it is a game of tag.

So, unless landing on an aircraft carrier and being saluted with the "Mission Accomplished" banner is all you're looking for, you're going to have to search elsewhere for a deeper experience.——**KATO**

BOTTOM LINE 7

> **Concept:** Revive this arcade classic and stay true to its roots And add some Planet Moon humor

> **Graphics:** A little bland, but at least the locales show some interesting details

> **Sound:** The game would hang up occasionally while switching songs, but it's not as obnoxious as the bad music itself

> **Playability:** Fluid flying with all your weapons easily accessible at your fingertips

> **Entertainment:** A rail shooter whose time has pretty much come and gone

> **Replay Value:** Moderate

Second Opinion 7

This reinvention of the classic Sega arcade game sticks close to its roots, perhaps too close While it's got a great feature set, including multiplayer co-op, attractive graphics, and a nice selection of real-world planes that you can customize, After Burner fails to really grab me There's nothing outright wrong with this, but the controls work well enough that I started to wish that it would go off of its linear rail levels and morph into a full-out 3D flight combat game While that might have angered After Burner diehards, I think it would have been a better choice Still, this is solid work by developer Planet Moon.——**MATT**
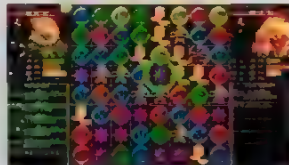

PSP | NINTENDO DS
Puzzle Quest: Challenge of the Warlords

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER PUZZLE (2-PLAYER VIA AD HOC)
> **PUBLISHER** ~~INFINITE INTERACTIVE~~ > **DEVELOPER** INFINITE INTERACTIVE/ VICIOUS CYCLE (PSP), INFINITE INTERACTIVE/ 1ST PLAYABLE (DS)
> **RELEASE** MARCH 20 > **ESRB** E10+

BOTTOM LINE 8.25

You could call this a strategy/puzzle/RPG. You take turns matching up lines of three or more orbs. Each colored orb is worth mana, which you need to cast different spells. There are also experience, gold, and attack orbs and if you don't get those, your opponent will. Then there is the matter of managing your equipment, companions, and captured cities. If I'm making this all sound a little complicated, don't worry, that's because it is. But that's part of this game's charm, and Puzzle Quest does a nice job of slowly introducing you to all these different elements. The AI seems insanely good one minute then misses an obvious attack the next, and the story is completely throwaway, but there is enough gameplay here to keep puzzle fans busy for a long time.——**BEN**

> **Replay Value:** Moderate

NINTENDO DS
Honeycomb Beat

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION
> **PUBLISHER** HUDSON
> **DEVELOPER** HUDSON
> **RELEASE** MARCH 27 > **ESRB** E

BOTTOM LINE 7

I think we've all played this before. You flip one shape – a hexagon here – and all the surrounding shapes flip as well. I use to love playing a game similar to this on my PC back when I was in high school. Not surprisingly, this game doesn't hold the same level of interest for me so many years later. In Evolution mode, you clear rows from a scrolling honeycomb by turning them the same color, and in Puzzle mode you have a set number of turns to make all the hexagons on a set board the same color. I liked puzzle mode the best, but wanted a little more. There is nothing else to this game. I guess you get what you pay for, but even at $20 it would have been nice to see a two-player mode.——**BEN**

NINTENDO DS
Meteos: Disney Magic

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER PUZZLE > **PUBLISHER** Q ENTERTAINMENT > **DEVELOPER** DISNEY INTERACTIVE STUDIOS
> **RELEASE** FEBRUARY 27 > **ESRB** E

MORE BLOCKS, LESS FUN

I'm a huge fan of the original Meteos. The cartridge has never strayed far from my DS (or nowadays my DS Lite) since I bought the thing. What I hadn't realized in the last year and a half is that a substantial portion of my enjoyment of the game stems from the outstanding soundtrack that lends itself so well to each level. Meteos: Disney Magic sports nearly identical gameplay as its predecessor, but the music is so uninspired and bland that even the notable improvements to the bread and butter block-clearing can't make up for it.

This version of Meteos has you holding the DS sideways like a book, which is a very natural way to play the game given the dimensions of the touch screen. This change, and the added ability to slide blocks horizontally as well as vertically, make the gameplay even better than the original's silky-smooth action. Disney Magic also features varied rulesets among its many boards, and a bunch of unlockables and bonus content to give you a reason to keep playing. All of this is great, and on paper you'd think that this spin-off trumps the original in every way. Sadly, that is not the case.

In the first game, the music consisted of brilliant original compositions that fit the tone of each level perfectly, with stings and riffs that played dynamically according to the action onscreen. Here, you get the sense that the Disney machine has ground any creativity into a thin paste between its corporate gears, leaving only bland homogenous pap deemed suitably inoffensive for youthful consumption. In short, it sucks and makes me not want to play the game. If this were an MMORPG I'd just alt-tab and fire up iTunes, but Meteos' design demands an integrated soundscape. Lacking tunes that I enjoy listening to, Disney Magic joins *Highlander 2* and the 1992 Minnesota Twins as sequels that ought to be benched in favor of the original.——**ADAM**
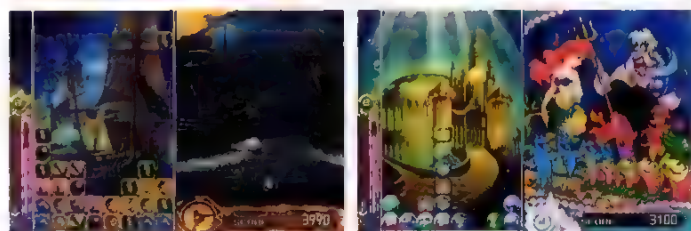
BOTTOM LINE 7.75

> **Concept:** Add in Disney themes to 2005's music-based falling block puzzler

> **Graphics:** Sometimes the falling blocks are animated!

> **Sound:** The music is a huge disappointment; the tunes in the first game are infinitely superior to these uninspired beats

> **Playability:** The sidewise Brain Age-style orientation makes absolute sense

> **Entertainment:** An inferior soundtrack badly hurts this spinoff

> **Replay Value:** Moderate

Second Opinion 7.5

People can look at the latest Meteos in one of two different ways Disney fans are getting a rare treat of good gameplay while the Meteos camp gets a spin-off with ridiculous cartoon skins plastered everywhere. Seriously, it's like if Epic put pretty pink dresses on everybody in Gears of War 2 and gave them rainbow guns. The core gameplay still feels solid, but I was constantly annoyed by the presentation However, the ability to slide blocks horizontally opens up some new puzzle tactics, and I like holding the DS sideways to play After playing Disney Magic I only have one question where's the real Meteos 2?——**BRYAN**
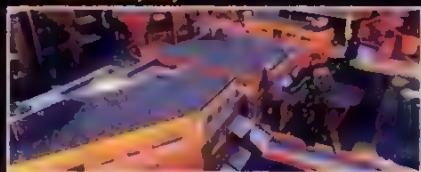
TOP 20

Listings Based Upon NPD Data For February 2007 Based On Units Sold

1 CRACKDOWN (360)

We experienced a crackdown once. It all started one crazy weekend when our girlfriend said "trust me, rub this on it and it won't taste so bitter." We woke up 14 hours later in a South American jungle wearing a stewardess uniform and some ceremonial wedding beads. Is a crackdown the same as a breakdown?

2 WII PLAY (Wii)

Shortly after that we broke up with her. We didn't like the fact that she kept beating us when while we played Wii Play, and she didn't like the fact that all our farts smell like cheese. And by beating us at Wii we mean that she would smash the Wii remote across the side of our face every time we were about to win.

3 DIDDY KONG RACING (DS)

It is probably for the best that we broke up. It was an abusive relationship. She once lost a game of Diddy Kong Racing and took out her frustration by breaking her chair across our knees and then throwing feces at us. Come to think of it, she smelled a little bit like Diddy. Except her breath, which always smelled like bananas. That was what we liked about her. Wait...were we dating a monkey?

4 THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: TWILIGHT PRINCESS (Wii)

Maybe we were too hard on that girl. After all, she was really good at sign language and following simple instructions. Like that time we were playing Zelda and told her to stop chewing on our hair. She really listened to us. And we learned a lot from Zelda, like, how to find the true beauty locked inside hideous people, and how to put up with them otherwise.

5 GUITAR HERO II (PS2)

Baby, we're sorry about that time we almost sold your mother to that carnie. She looks better after the laser hair surgery. Come back to us. We'll even play you a sweet soft love song on Guitar Hero II. Something like "Tonight I'm Gonna Rock You Tonight" by Spinal Tap. Then we can lay in each other's arms. We'll say we love each other, and you can promise not to set us on fire again.

Rank	Title	L. Mo.	System	Score	Release	Price
1	Crackdown	N/A	360	8.5	02-07	$60
2	Wii Play	N/A	Wii	7	02-07	$50
3	Diddy Kong Racing	N/A	DS	7	02-07	$32
4	The Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess	5	Wii	10	11-06	$50
5	Guitar Hero II	2	PS2	9.25	11-06	$80
6	Gears of War	3	360	9.5	11-06	$65
7	Lost Planet: Extreme Condition	1	360	8.25	01-07	$64
8	Major League Baseball 2K7	N/A	360	8.5	02-07	$60
9	WarioWare: Smooth Moves	4	Wii	7.75	01-07	$50
10	NBA Street Homecourt	N/A	360	8.75	02-07	$60
11	New Super Mario Bros	10	PS2	9.25	05-06	$35
12	Rainbow Six Vegas	9	360	9.5	11-06	$65
13	Sonic and the Secret Rings	N/A	Wii	5.5	02-07	$49
14	Madden NFL 07	6	PS2	8.25	08-06	$30
15	Mario Kart DS	N/A	PS2	8.5	11-05	$35
16	Resistance: Fall of Man	8	PS3	9.5	11-06	$60
17	MLB 07: The Show	N/A	PS2	8.75	02-07	$40
18	God of War	N/A	PS2	10	03-05	$19
19	Final Fantasy VI Advance	N/A	GBA	9	02-07	$33
20	Brain Age: Train Your Brain in Minutes a Day!	11	DS	8.25	04-06	$20

TOP 10 JAPAN

Rank	Title	System
1	Yoshi's Island DS	DS
2	Monster Hunter Portable 2nd	PSP
3	Professor Layton's Mystery Town	DS
4	Kenka Banchou 2: Full Throttle	PS2
5	Super Robot Taisen W	DS
6	Wii Sports	Wii
7	Gundam Musou	PS3
8	Dragon Quest Monsters Joker	DS
9	Wii Play	Wii
10	DS Training for Adults: Work Your Brain 2	DS

2   3

TOP 10 360
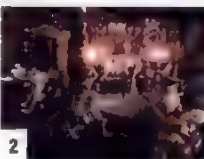
Rank	Title	L. Mo	System
1	God of War II	1	PS2
2	The Elder Scrolls IV: Shivering Isles	2	multi
3	Ghost Recon Advanced Warfighter 2	N/A	360
4	World of Warcraft: The Burning Crusade	3	PC
5	Command & Conquer 3: Tiberium Wars	N/A	PC
6	The Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess	4	Wii
7	Ratchet and Clank: Size Matters	5	PSP
8	Rainbow Six Vegas	7	360
9	Crackdown Rainbow Six Vegas	8	360
10	S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Shadow of Chernobyl	N/A	PC

3   10

The Staff's Favorite Picks

TOP 10 PC

Rank	Title	L. Mo	Price
1	World Of Warcraft: The Burning Crusade	1	$38
2	World Of Warcraft	2	$25
3	The Sims 2: Seasons	N/A	$28
4	Supreme Commander	N/A	$49
5	The Sims 2	4	$41
6	3333 XP Games	6	$10
7	The Sims: Life Stories	N/A	$37
8	The Sims 2: Pets	5	$30
9	Battlefield 2142	8	$42
10	Vanguard: Saga Of Heroes	7	$49

4   9
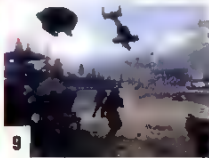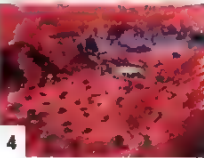
Based On Monthly Units Sold

Source: The NPD Group/NPD Funworld®/TRSTS® • David Riley 516-625-2277

PLAYSTATION 3

Armored Core 4	6.5	Apr-07
Blazing Angels: Squadrons of WWII	7	Feb-07
Call of Duty 3	8.75	Jan-07
Def Jam: Icon	7.75	Mar-07
Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion, The	9.5	Apr-07
Fight Night Round 3	9	Jan-07
Formula One: Champion Edition	8	Apr-07

Virtua Fighter 5 - PS3 - Mar-07

Full Auto 2: Battlelines	7.5	Jan-07
Genji: Days of the Blade	6	Dec-06
Madden NFL 07	7.75	Jan-07
Major League Baseball 2K7	8.5	Mar-07
Marvel: Ultimate Alliance	9.25	Dec-06
Mobile Suit Gundam: Crossfire	3.75	Dec-06
MotorStorm	8	Apr-07
NBA 07	7	Dec-06
NBA 2K7	8	Jan-07
NBA Street Homecourt	8.75	Mar-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
Untold Legends: Dark Kingdom	8.25	Jan-07
Virtua Fighter 5	8	Mar-07

XBOX 360

Armored Core 4	6.5	Apr-07
Battlestations: Midway	6.5	Mar-07
Bullet Witch	6	Mar-07
Call of Duty 3	8.5	Dec-06
College Hoops 2K7	8	Feb-07
Crackdown	8.5	Mar-07
Dance Dance Revolution Universe	7.5	Apr-07
Dead or Alive Xtreme 2	7.5	Jan-07
Def Jam: Icon	7.75	Mar-07
Elder Scrolls IV: Shivering Isles, The	9.5	Apr-07
Eragon	6.25	Feb-07
F.E.A.R.	8.5	Dec-06
FIFA Soccer 07	7.25	Dec-06
Fuzion Frenzy 2	2	Apr-07
Gears of War	9.5	Dec-06
Guitar Hero II	9.25	Apr-07
Lost Planet: Extreme Condition	8.25	Feb-07
Major League Baseball 2K7	8.5	Mar-07
Marvel: Ultimate Alliance	9.25	Dec-06
NBA 2K7	8.25	Nov-06
NBA Live 07	5.25	Dec-06
NBA Street Homecourt	8.75	Mar-07
NCAA 07 March Madness	7.75	Feb-07
Need for Speed: Carbon	8.5	Dec-06
Phantasy Star Universe	6	Jan-07
Samurai Warriors 2	6	Nov-06
Samurai Warriors 2: Empires	4.75	Apr-07
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
UEFA Champions League 2006-2007	7.5	Apr-07
Viva Piñata	8	Jan-07
Winning Eleven Pro Evolution Soccer 2007	8	Mar-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
Far Cry Vengeance	4.5	Mar-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
Sonic and the Secret Rings	5.5	Apr-07
SpongeBob SquarePants Creature from the Krusty Krab	6.75	Feb-07
SSX Blur	8	Apr-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
WarioWare: Smooth Moves	7.75	Mar-07
Wii Play	7	Apr-07
Wii Sports	6.5	Jan-07

PLAYSTATION 2

Ant Bully, The	6.5	Feb-07
Ar Tonelico: Melody of Elemia	6.75	Apr-07
Arena Football: Road to Glory	6.5	Apr-07
Arthur And The Invisibles	6.75	Mar-07
ATV Offroad Fury 4	7.5	Jan-07
Bully	8.5	Dec-06
Burnout Dominator	8	Apr-07
Capcom Classics Collection Volume 2	7	Dec-06
Chulip	3	Apr-07
Destroy All Humans 2	8.5	Nov-06
Dot Hack//G.U. Vol. 1//Rebirth	5.75	Dec-06
Eragon	6.25	Feb-07
Family Guy	5.5	Jan-07
Fast and the Furious, The	6	Nov-06
Final Fantasy XII	9.25	Nov-06
Ghost Rider	6.75	Mar-07
God Hand	6	Nov-06
God of War II	9.75	Apr-07
Guitar Hero II	9	Dec-06
Justice League Heroes	7.25	Dec-06
Legend of Spyro A New Beginning, The	7	Nov-06
Lumines Plus	7.5	Apr-07
Marvel: Ultimate Alliance	9.25	Dec-06
MLB 07: The Show	8.75	Apr-07
Mortal Kombat: Armageddon	8.25	Dec-06
MVP 07 NCAA Baseball	7	Mar-07
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
Phantasy Star Universe	6	Jan-07
Reservoir Dogs	5.75	Jan-07
Rogue Galaxy	9	Jan-07
Samurai Warriors 2	6	Nov-06
Scarface: The World is Yours	8.5	Nov-06
Sega Genesis Collection	8.5	Jan-07
Shield, The	4	Mar-07
Shin Megami Tensei Devil Summoner	7.75	Dec-06
Shining Force EXA	7.5	Apr-07
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
Star Trek Encounters	7.25	Jan-07
Tales of the Abyss	7.25	Nov-06
Thrillville	7.75	Dec-06
Tiger Woods PGA Tour 07	8	Nov-06
Tokobot Plus Mysteries of the Karakuri	7.25	Dec-06
Winning Eleven Pro Evolution Soccer 2007	8	Mar-07
WWE Smackdown vs. Raw 2007	8.75	Dec-06

GAMECUBE

Ant Bully, The	6.5	Feb-07
Baten Kaitos Origins	7	Nov-06
Legend of Spyro A New Beginning, The	7	Nov-06
Sims 2: Pets, The	6	Dec-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
Justice League Heroes	7.25	Dec-06
Legend of Spyro A New Beginning, The	7	Nov-06
Marvel: Ultimate Alliance	9.25	Dec-06
Mortal Kombat: Armageddon	8.25	Dec-06
NBA 2K7	8	Nov-06
NBA Live 07	7.5	Nov-06
Need for Speed: Carbon	8.5	Dec-06
Reservoir Dogs	5.75	Jan-07
Scarface: The World is Yours	8.5	Nov-06
Spy Hunter: Nowhere to Run	3	Nov-06
Thrillville	7.75	Dec-06
Tiger Woods PGA Tour 07	8	Nov-06

PC

Age of Empires III: The Warchiefs	7	Dec-06
Ant Bully, The	6.5	Feb-07
Battlefield 2142	8.5	Nov-06
Battlestations: Midway	6.5	Mar-07
Dark Messiah of Might & Magic	9.25	Dec-06
Elder Scrolls IV: Shivering Isles, The	9.5	Apr-07
F.E.A.R. Extraction Point	8	Dec-06
Gothic 3	5	Feb-07
Heroes of Annihilated Empires	6	Feb-07
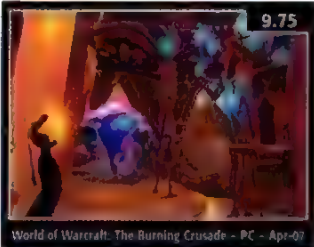
World of Warcraft: The Burning Crusade - PC - Apr-07

9.75

NINTENDO DS

Heroes of Might & Magic V Hammers of Fate	8	Feb-07
Lord of the Rings The Battle for Middle-earth II – Rise of the Witch King, The	8	Feb-07
Maelstrom	4	Mar-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 Railroads!	8	Dec-06
Sims 2: Pets, The	6	Dec-06
Star Wars Empire at War Forces of Corruption	7.5	Dec-06
Supreme Commander	9	Apr-07
Tiger Woods PGA Tour 07	8	Nov-06
Vanguard: Saga of Heroes	7.5	Apr-07
Warhammer 40,000 Dawn of War: Dark Crusade	8.75	Dec-06
World of Warcraft: The Burning Crusade	9.75	Apr-07

Brain Buster Puzzle Pak	8	Apr-07
Diddy Kong Racing	7	Mar-07
Elite Beat Agents	6.75	Dec-06
Final Fantasy III	8	Dec-06
Gunpey	7.75	Dec-06
Hotel Dusk: Room 215	7	Mar-07
Izuna: Legend of the Unemployed Ninja	3.5	Apr-07
Kirby Squeak Squad	7.75	Feb-07
Konductra	6.25	Feb-07
Lunar Knights	8	Apr-07
Mage Knight: Destiny's Soldier	4.5	Dec-06
Magical Starsign	6.5	Nov-06
Mario vs. Donkey Kong 2 March of the Minis	6	Nov-06
Phoenix Wright Ace Attorney Justice For All	8	Jan-07
Pogo Island	6.5	Apr-07
Pokémon Ranger	5	Dec-06
Quickspot	7.5	Apr-07
Scurge: Hive	7.5	Nov-06
Spectrobes	6.5	Apr-07
Touch Detective	6.75	Nov-06
Tioncube	6	Apr-07
Yoshi's Island DS	8.25	Dec-06

PSP

300: March To Glory	6.25	Apr-07
50 Cent Bulletproof G Unit Edition	6.25	Nov-06
Ace Combat X Skies of Deception	8.25	Dec-06
Bounty Hounds	6.25	Nov-06
Capcom Puzzle World	7.5	Apr-07
Chili Con Carnage	7	Apr-07
Death Jr. 2: Root of Evil	8.25	Nov-06

Ratchet & Clank: Size Matters - PSP - Apr-07

9

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
Gurumin: A Monstrous Adventure	7	Apr-07
Killzone: Liberation	7.25	Nov-06
Legend of Heroes III Song of the Ocean, The	6	Mar-07
Lumines II	9	Dec-06
Medal of Honor Heroes	6.75	Dec-06
Metal Gear Solid: Portable Ops	9	Feb-07
Monster Kingdom Jewel Summoner	6	Mar-07
Mortal Kombat: Unchained	8	Feb-07
Power Stone Collection	7.75	Nov-06
Ratchet & Clank: Size Matters	9	Apr-07
Sid Meier's Pirates!	8	Apr-07
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
Valhalla Knights	4.5	Mar-07
Warhammer: Battle for Atluma	7.5	Feb-07
Warriors, The	8.5	Apr-07
WTF	7	Nov-06

GAME BOY ADVANCE

Final Fantasy V Advance	8	Jan-07
Final Fantasy VI Advance	9	Apr-07
Summon Knight: Swordcraft Story 2	7.25	Jan-07
Yggdra Union	7.25	Feb-07

UNLIMITED ENABLED

Command & Conquer 3: Tiberium Wars   PC

We Ask The Designers Our Most Burning Questions

Answered By: Gavin Simon, AI Engineer

What's your recommended build order for each of the three playable factions, and what makes your suggested approach more efficient?

All main production structures in Command & Conquer 3 produce vehicles at a rate of 100 credits worth of Tiberium per second. On average, a Harvester brings in 50 Tiberium per second. Therefore, you should have approximately two Harvesters per production structure to ensure continuous production from that structure. This is the general basis for the build order detailed here.

If the map has several tech structures such as Tiberium Spikes that you are interested in – or important garrisonable structures such as ones by key choke-points – you should get a Barracks (or equivalent) out as quickly as possible. Here's the build order:

Power Plant, Barracks, Refinery, Refinery, War Factory, Refinery, Power Plant, Refinery, War Factory

If you want to skip infantry for now, and get to armor as quickly as possible, start with a Refinery so you can get some income setup right away:

Refinery, Power Plant, Refinery, War Factory, Refinery, Power Plant, Refinery, War Factory

This build order works for any faction, with minor changes in the placement of your Power Plant due to the different power levels each faction's Power Plant yields.

Finally, you'll want to think about expanding very early and setting up your third and fourth Refineries at an expansion field so that you deplete the fields evenly and don't risk running dry. Since you can immediately construct a Surveyor vehicle (or equivalent) for base expansion, early expansions are often viable.

What's the best way to use static defenses in a way that will be worth the time and effort of setting them up?

One of the unique aspects of base building in Command & Conquer 3 is to hold static defenses in your build queue and place them when necessary. Knowing this, try keeping a defensive structure on the ready at all times – specifically, queue up the type that will be the most useful based on your opponent's current army (to counter against infantry, vehicles, or aircraft). If you ever run out of money, such as between Harvester loads, simply cancel your held defense and immediately rebuild it. This will ensure your other production doesn't stall and the window in which you don't have a defense ready is negligible.
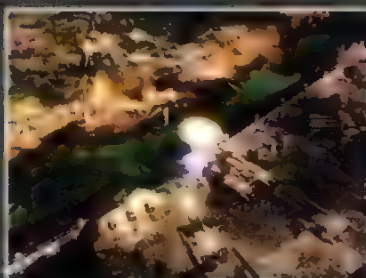
For general placement, unless there is a particular structure you want to defend (such as your Construction Yard or a Superweapon), put your ground-based defenses where your enemy is most likely to be forced to move through. The worst thing that can happen is for defenses to be placed in a location where they will never even be able to fire their weapons. Anti-air defenses are a little different since they're not affected by line of sight and the aircraft they target can approach just as effectively from any side. Therefore these defenses are best placed in the center of your base where they can cover its entire airspace.

What's your favorite sneaky tactic for each of the three factions?

As the GDI, the Juggernaut artillery walker can be used in combination with Sniper Teams (which are cloaked) to bombard targets from extreme range, which can really catch an opponent off guard. If you see an opening and have some Juggernauts anywhere on the map, use the Sharpshooter reinforcement power to drop three veteran Sniper Teams near your target and start the barrage. Make sure your first few volleys count, though, because your opponent will be on the hunt for your Snipers immediately. Consider running them away after your first target is down and keep them stealthed in a corner for a bit before bringing them back for another wave.

As the Brotherhood of Nod, the Flame Tank is one of the deadliest units in the game against structures. Unfortunately it can have problems getting to them with its mediocre speed and short range. Luckily, Nod has the Cloaking Field power, which can help negate all of these shortcomings. Stealth up some Flame Tanks, move them right around all your opponent's forces to your target of choice, and light it up like a Christmas tree.

As the Scrin, the Wormhole power available from the Signal Transmitter is one of the most potentially deadly in the game. All you need is visibility into your opponent's base, easy accomplished with a sacrificial Buzzer or two. Gather a bunch of Annihilator Tripods in your base and put them in aggressive stance. This will guarantee they make full use of all three of their directional lasers to take down your opponent's base as quickly as possible. Warp these into an undefended spot and watch the carnage begin. If you throw in an Assimilator or two (the Scrin counterpart to the Engineer), you can use them to either recover any fallen Tripods immediately or capture the closest enemy structure. If you do the latter, having a powerful Storm Column base defense ready to go is icing on the cake. As soon as you capture an opponent's base, you're free to drop your own base defenses in the area.
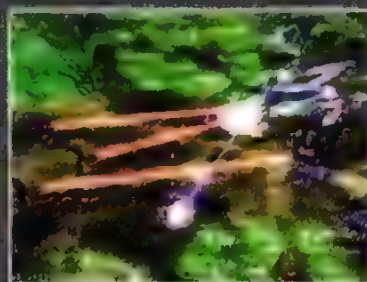
Are there certain combinations of units that cover each other particularly well?

As GDI, Mammoths and Juggernauts are the ultimate late-game armored force. Get your Mammoths set up in the position you want them to be and force your enemy to come to you by shelling them with the Juggernauts from afar.

As Nod, Avatars and Venoms upgraded with laser capacitors make for a deadly force, with the Avatars handling any armor while the Venoms make short work of any infantry and aircraft.

As the Scrin, Devourer Tanks and Stormriders are a great mid-game combo. With their long range and charged up cannons, the Devourers can pop the typically light anti-aircraft vehicles your opponent brings and then reverse-move away while the Stormriders tear up the helpless units left behind.

*For the rest of the Q&A on how to become a master C&C3 player, check out this month's online Unlimited section.*

## Mod World

NETHACK
http://www.nethack.org

It doesn't get a whole lot more historic than NetHack, the modern descendant of Rogue, the ASCII-based dungeon crawler that was spawned on UNIX-based university mainframes back in 1985. The game has grown and evolved over the years, and is still supported by a dedicated group of programmers who lurk in the shadows of the Internet. Knockoffs like the Mystery Dungeon series or Izuna the Unemployed Ninja are kiddie pools compared to the shark-infested (but totally awesome) waters of NetHack. Turn by turn, you descend into the dungeon.

Several graphical interfaces for NetHack exist, but they're for wusses
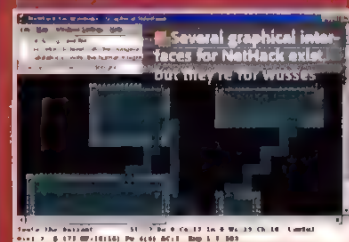
Contending with hunger, encumbrance, and deadly traps can be more engrossing and difficult than fending off the monsters that inhabit the depths. Nearly everything can be done in NetHack, provided you can find the command to do it – for example, there is a whole set of rules governing the inscription of the word "Elbereth" (see Tolkien's writings for its meaning) as a protective ward. NetHack is not for the faint of heart. You'll
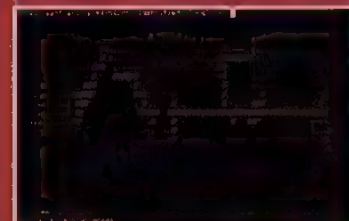
die – repeatedly. You'll read guides on the 'Net, post on message boards, pore over wiki entries, and keep dying. The joke is that your character is erased from your PC as soon as that fateful turn is complete; there's no such thing as a checkpoint in NetHack. You'll just have to suck it up, learn from the experience, and try again. Once you get a handle on the game, though, this little ASCII dungeon simulation can be one of the deepest, richest experiences around.

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!
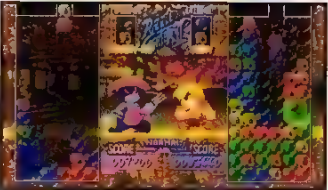
Wii
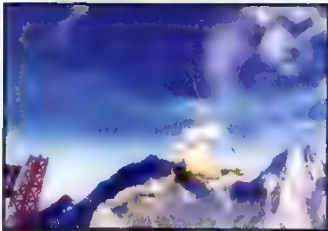
SSX Blur

From the main menu, go into options and then cheats to enter these case sensitive codes.

Unlock All Clothes – ClothShop
All Characters Unlocked – NoHolds
Yeti Costume – WildFur

PSP

Capcom Puzzle World

In Super Buster Bros., at the Select Game screen highlight Tour Mode

Level Select – Hold down on d-pad, press ✕

In Super Puzzle Fighter II Turbo go to the character select screen to unlock these extra characters.

Akuma – Highlight Hsien-Ko, press down, press ✕
Anita – Highlight Donovan, Hold L & R, press ✕
Dan – Highlight Donovan, press down, press ✕
Devilot – Highlight Morrigan, press down, press ✕
Hsien-Ko's Talisman/Sister's Spirit – Highlight Hsien-Ko, Hold L & R, press ✕
Morrigan in Bat Form – Highlight Morrigan, Hold L & R, press ✕

EA Replay

Start up a game of Wing Commander. At the start screen enter the following code.

Invincibility and Stage Select – ✕, O, ✕, □, ✕, □, L, O, R, O, Start

The Warriors

Start up a game of Armies Of The Night then enter the following code.

99 Credits – Up, Up, Down, Down, Left, Right

Without pausing enter the following cheats during gameplay

100% Completion in Story Mode – L, Select, □, Down, L, Right
Complete Current Mission – Down, □, ✕, Select, R, Left
Get Brass Knuckles – O, O, O, L, Select, △
Get Knife – Down, Down, Select, Up, Up, L
Get Machete – L, ✕, R (x2), Select, R
Get Unbreakable Bat – L, L, O, Up, O, Select
Unlimited Health – Up, △, R, Select, ✕, L
Unlimited Rage – □, O, △, Select, ✕, Left
Unlock All Dealers – Right, R, O, ✕, Select, □
Unlock Hand Cuffs Keys – Left, ✕(x2), R, L, Down
Upgrade Flash Capacity – L, ✕, R, L, L, O
Upgrade Stamina – ✕, L, Down, □, Up, ✕

"GI Droid" (location unknown – last seen feeding starving cats in Africa)

Code of the Month PC

Supreme Commander
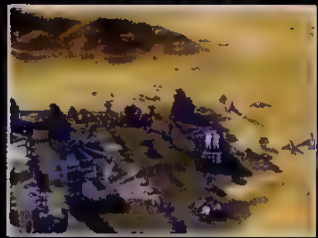
These codes only work in the Skirmish and Multiplayer modes. When setting up a Skirmish/Multiplayer game, make sure the cheats are set to on.

10,000 – CTRL+ALT+B
Copy Selected Unit/Structure – CTRL+SHIFT+C
Delete Selected Unit – CTRL+DELETE
Increase Mass/Energy Capacity by Kill Selected Unit – CTRL+K
Paste Selected Unit/Structure – CTRL+SHIFT+V
Spawn Menu – ALT+F2
Teleport Selected Unit – ALT+T
Toggle Damage Making All Units in the Game Invulnerable – ALT+N
Toggle On/Off Opponent AI – ALT+A

Houlihan Brown
Floyds Knobs, Indiana
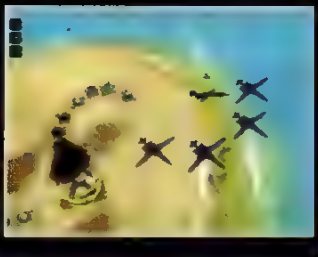
Xbox Live Arcade Spotlight

3D Ultra Minigolf Adventures
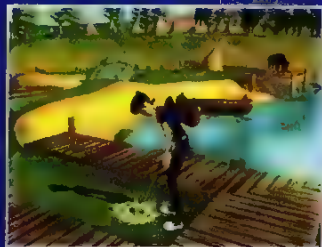
Yeah, well, we weren't blown away by the title either. We changed our minds pretty quickly once we took a run at a few holes in Sierra Online's entertaining take on the iconic American pastime. With crazy levels set in places like the old West or the far reaches of outer space, the environments are always entertaining, and the simple gameplay makes for a great party game atmosphere. Incidentally, if you're of an age that you're just asking that cute girl out for the first time, you may want to spring for the real mini-golf date over powering up your 360 to show her this – your call, but we speak from experience here.

UNLIMITED ENABLED

"WAR. WAR NEVER CHANGES…"

A LOOK BACK AT THE FALLOUT SERIES
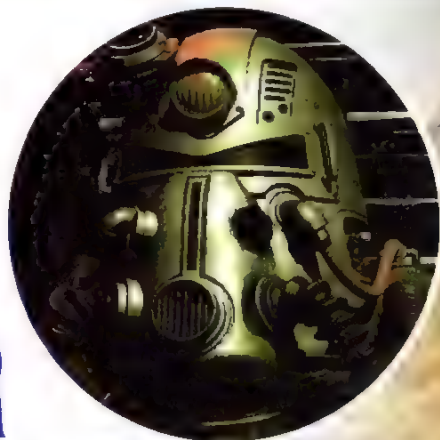
s the dulcet tones of the 1940s hit band The Ink Spots croon their romantic melody from our computer speakers, we see the black and white display of two metal-clad soldiers and an unfortunate man who kneels in front of them. They shoot him in the back of the head, then wave happily to the audience back home as the tune calmly rolls on. We pan back from the screen to see we've been watching a 1950s era TV. It sits in an empty apartment, in a blown out building, in an obliterated city. This was every player's first glance at Fallout, the 1997 role-playing game that helped to set new bars for cinematic storytelling and open-ended decision-making. With anticipation on the rise for Bethesda's announced tackling of Fallout 3, we thought we'd take a look back at this remarkable title and the series it spawned to see if Fallout still holds up 10 years after its release.

The Fallout series has always had some well known voice talent attached to it. The first game included cast members like Richard Dean Anderson, Tony Shalhoub, Richard Moll, and Ron Perlman, who voiced what might now be considered the catchphrase of the franchise: "War. War never changes."

"I always wanted to do a sequel to Wasteland. But we didn't own the trademark – Electronic Arts did," explains Brian Fargo, CEO of inXile Entertainment, the developer of the recent console version of The Bard's Tale. Ten years ago, Fargo held the same position at Interplay, where he helped initiate Fallout. Wasteland had been another post-apocalyptic game produced by Fargo in 1988 for emerging publishing giant EA. Several years later, with Interplay now a direct publishing rival, a sequel was out of the question. Its spiritual successor would come to be called Fallout. Culling inspiration from movies like *Mad Max* and books such as Stephen King's *The Stand* and Robert R. McCammon's *Swan Song*. Fargo began work on a 10-point vision for what Fallout should become. Early on, that concept became a united focus for the major creative voices that would shape the title – Feargus Urquhart, Tim Cain, Leonard Boyarsky, and Jason D. Anderson. "It was definitely a shared vision. It's hard to create great product unless you have a group of people who are passionate about what they're doing," Fargo tells us, crediting such innovations as the retro '50s art style to Boyarsky. "That's the good thing about the creative process. If you get everybody involved at the right levels and let the right ideas rise to the top, you get something greater than any one person could do."

The game that emerged was unlike its contemporary RPGs in more ways than one. Set in a dark prediction of the 22nd century, Fallout playfully satirized that strange era of post-WWII Cold War fears, with its xenophobic bomb shelters and falsely optimistic promises of life after the next great war. Players adopted the role of a vault dweller, one of the lucky survivors who had gotten into a vast underground facility before the nuclear holocaust that devastated the world. When the vault's water chip breaks, someone must venture into the outside world for the first time in years to find a replacement. In the desolate waste that used to be southern California, players could wander in any direction they wanted to complete their quest, and engage in any number of shady and questionable tactics to succeed. "We wanted to have moral ambiguity wherever we could," Fargo relays. "The world is not black and white. So we loved putting people in situations where they're torn as to what to do." One scene in the game allowed gamers to play the local organized crime boss against the police. You could complete several assassinations for the dangerous mob leader, collect the cash, then run to the police and turn over evidence, carefully leaving out your involvement in the killings. Scenes like these were a far cry from the quests that other RPGs were offering at the time. From beginning to end, a focus remained on letting players interact with the world in the way they wanted to, whether that meant heartless violence, careful diplomacy, or artful stealth. However you progressed through this early take on a sandbox RPG world, it became clear that a greater danger than a broken computer component was looming. As a rising mutant threat began to

rear up out of the wastelands, it was the vault dweller that had to step up and find a solution.

Fallout played as a straightforward turn-based RPG. Players were free to wander until combat began, when a regimented action point system would dictate how far someone could move in a turn, and what attacks or other actions they could take. Bearing everything from crowbars and sledgehammers to sniper rifles and plasma pistols, combat rolled forward through visceral descriptions of different attacks scrolling into the lower window and frequent gory death animations. Backing up this smooth combat interface was a character creation and upgrade system specially designed for Fallout – SPECIAL, an acronym that relayed a character's strength, perception, endurance, charisma, intelligence, agility, and luck. A set of point-based skills and special powers called perks rounded out the character, a herald of some of the most popular RPG systems of later years. What many people don't know is how close the game came to using an already popularized RPG system. "We actually had a deal with Steve Jackson Games. We were going to use GURPS [Generic Universal Role-Playing System]," reveals Fargo. "What happened was that we started giving him things to look at, including the famous opening sequence with the Ink Spots and shooting the guy, which we just thought was a wonderful moment." For

Jackson, it was a level of violence he was unwilling to be associated with, and demanded that it be removed. Fargo continues: "That moment defines the title. That is what this title is about. So I said, 'You know what? We're going to cancel the license.' So that's why we just walked away.

As much as we respected Steve Jackson Games and the GURPS system, we just weren't going to compromise the integrity of what we wanted to create with Fallout."

With the success of the first game, it wasn't long before talk of a second title began to surface. To hear Brian Fargo tell it, it was a challenging time at Interplay. "It was a real rough start on that one -- and very frustrating for me." Fargo tells us. "Fallout 2 was very painful to get going." By Fargo's account, the second project began with Cain, Boyarsky, and Anderson beginning work on ideas other than Fallout, such that some of the rank and file members of the original team were thrust into the role of starting a sequel. A few months later, Fargo details that the original design- ers returned, only to scrap most of the work the rest of the team had started on. And only a few months after that, those key develop- ment figures told Fargo they would be leaving to start their own company, Troika, at which point creative control reverted to the team that had first begun work on the sequel. For their part, the founders of Troika have previously been on record as being unable to agree with Interplay about how the team for a sequel would be structured -- they were unhappy with the direction Interplay was going at the time, and ready to pursue their own ventures. Regardless of disagree- ments and splits at the company, Fallout 2 was eventually released to a hungry fan base to largely positive reviews. Some critiques of that second game over the years find fault with discrepancies in the storytelling, and Fargo credits those problems to the rocky beginning the game faced.

If nothing else, Fallout 2 advanced the mythology in an exciting direction, detailing a time peri- od many years after the end of the first game. After being

Fallout had multiple endings, each of which reflected a different play style and approach to the moral conundrums of the game

rejected by the Vault he had saved in the first game, the hero traveled north, there to begin his own settlement. Generations later, when a drought threatens that quiet village, it is the vault dweller's own descendant who is sent out to find a solution. With the now antiquated instruments and apparel of his ancestor, the player sets out as this new hero to find a solution – only to become embroiled in a larger conflict involving the now sinister remnants of the United States government. This second game maintained most of the themes of post-apocalyptic survival and dark humor that the first title had introduced. While it shared many of the

In Fallout 1 and 2, players could recruit a number of characters into their party who would independently act to help out in a fight

same art assets and gameplay, it included even more complicated moral dilemmas, dealing with prostitution, drug use, and contract killing as major elements in the world. With the freedom to explore these and any number of other options, Fallout 2 advanced the concept put forth in its pre- decessor – let the player do what he or she wants. It was a concept that would come to dominate North American RPG design in the coming years.

Other games would follow in the coming

Combat was turn-based and extremely chal- lenging, with enemies that ranged from human raiders to giant super mutants

its way. In mid-2004, Bethesda, creators of the renowned Elder Scrolls franchise, announced it had acquired the rights to cre- ate new Fallout games from the financially troubled Interplay. Details on the game remain under wraps other than hints that the game will utilize an approach similar to Bethesda's The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion. We interviewed Todd Howard, executive producer at Bethesda on Fallout 3, and asked him his thoughts about the original games. "Fallout was the kind of game we love – you make a character you want, and then go do whatever you want. And it rewarded you for doing so. Want to start shooting everyone and play the game that way? Go for it," Howard tells us. "Add to that one of the most unique gameworlds ever con- ceived – the perfect mix of retro-'50s sci- ence-fiction optimism and the harsh after- math of a nuclear war, and you get a game like no other."

As the former head of the company that first began the Fallout franchise, we asked Brian Fargo about his thoughts on Bethesda and their handling of the new game. "There are not that many companies that could take that legacy and run with it. I think they're a great fit for it. I'm glad it ended up there." With the blessing of one of its original creators intact, it remains to be seen exactly what directions Bethesda will take the fan favorite franchise. With such a rabid following invested in the series a full decade after its first release, we questioned Fargo about what makes the games so memora- ble. "To me it was the open world environ- ment, the true sense of cause and effect, the acting was very strong, the writing was adult, the mood was just perfect, it had a great ending – it was the perfect storm of all those things, and there was really noth- ing else like it at the time. It was some- thing unique." ∎ ∎ ∎

Vault 13 was the starting point of the game – a giant underground shelter where survivors of a nuclear holocaust had lived for years

The main character of the second game was a descendant of the original hero, and like his ances- tor begins his mission to save his isolated home

The SPECIAL character system was flexible and well balanced, even if some of the skills seemed to have more value and importance than others

years. Fallout Tactics, developed by a new studio called Micro Forté, focused on a much more strategic approach to the franchise. Fallout: Brotherhood of Steel, an action-oriented approach to the post- nuclear universe, saw a console release in 2004. However, for fans, the most exciting news for the franchise is still on

SNES
PILOTWINGS

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER SIMULATION > **PUBLISHER** NINTENDO > **DEVELOPER** NINTENDO > **RELEASE** 1991

Have you ever dreamed of flying? Do you dare to take the first steps to earn your license? So begins this classic flight simulator that many received packed in with their SNES so many years ago. Pilotwings is probably best known for its liberal use of Mode 7 scaling and rotating. The game isn't true 3D so all the scenery is painted to the ground, but there is a certain charm to this. Like all older games that tried to simulate 3D, the controls take some getting use to, but Pilotwings manages to pull them off better than a lot of those others did, and you get the hang of it in no time. That doesn't mean the game gets easy. In earning your wings you'll get to pilot planes, gliders, jetpacks, and parachute out of the sky. Landing is always the hardest part, and oddly enough nailing the landing is what keeps you coming back. There are only 8 lessons and 2 bonus missions, but retrying the challenges to get better scores is what gives this game some legs. Even after all these years, maybe your dream of flying can come true.
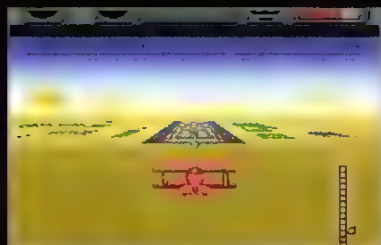
PC
KING'S QUEST VI: HEIR TODAY, GONE TOMORROW

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ADVENTURE > **PUBLISHER** SIERRA > **DEVELOPER** SIERRA > **RELEASE** 1992

If you ever hear people say how they miss the glory days of adventure gaming, King's Quest VI is precisely the kind of title they're pining for. Before Warcraft and The Sims, King's Quest was one of the biggest franchises on the PC. Telling the tale of a young Prince stranded on a cluster of fantastic islands, this entry exemplifies everything that was great about adventure gaming. Unlike some recent adventure games, KQ VI doesn't resort to obtuse inventory puzzles; there is a logical way around everything barring your progression, assuming you can obtain the right items. Throw iceberg lettuce into the boiling pond, use a red scarf to agitate the minotaur, and paint a magical door on the blank castle wall. Intuitive and perfectly paced, this was the final KQ to use the "move, look, take, and talk" interface that was rampant in the early '90s. Thankfully, Vivendi recently released a compilation of the first seven King's Quest titles that runs on Windows XP, so now is a great time to go back and revisit this classic.
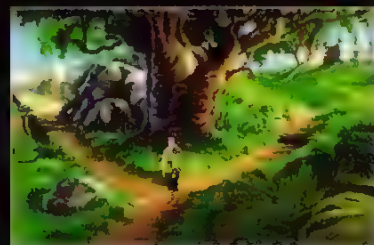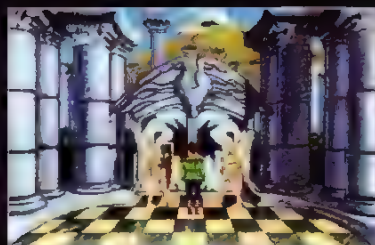
NES
TECMO SUPER BOWL

> **STYLE** 1 OR 2-PLAYER SPORTS > **PUBLISHER** TECMO > **DEVELOPER** TECMO > **RELEASE** 1991

While the original Tecmo Bowl may be remembered as the first great console football title, its successor, Tecmo Super Bowl, is the franchise's crown jewel. TSB was the first football game to incorporate every NFL team, offer a full season of gameplay, allow in-game substitutions, and record a full season's worth of statistics. Do these features sound familiar to you Madden fans? The game brings you back to a golden era of the NFL, when the Patriots and Colts still sucked and players had Mad Libs names like Louis Lipps, Babe Laufenberg, and Ickey Woods. Taking your favorite team through a season is still a blast, even if it essentially boils down to padding stats against the inferior AI. Watching players bounce off bruising running backs like Christian "The Nigerian Nightmare" Okoye and stapling quarterbacks to the turf still hasn't gotten old, even though the gameplay is much more simplistic than current football games. Playing against other humans is even better, which is why so many competitive emulation leagues can be found online. This is the kind of game destined for a rebirth on Xbox Live Arcade or the PlayStation Network. Come on Tecmo, what are you waiting for?
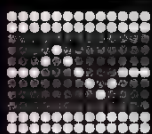
UNLIMITED LAUNCH: APR. 23

ALL-PRO FOOTBALL 2K8

Disenchanted Madden fans and ESPN NFL 2K5 faithful will want to check out our full interview with Visual Concepts president Greg Thomas, where he dishes the knowledge about 2K Sports' newest football title and more.

Fallout Windfall

Miller sits down with Interplay founder and current inXile CEO Brian Fargo to reminisce about the production of the critically acclaimed post-apocalyptic game franchise Fallout.

Start Your Engines

Forza Motorsport 2 game director Dan Greenawalt filled us in with the latest intel on Mircosoft's highly anticipated racer. Read the full interview online.

Touch The Dead

"Who cares about box art," you say? We do, especially when we get the chance to speak briefly with Touch The Dead artist Arthur Suydam, the comic book illustrator best known for his cover work for *Marvel Zombies*.

ALSO ONLINE THIS MONTH:

Game Informer Online travels the world to cover the circuit of gamers' days. Learn all about new game announcements from publishers like Sony, EA, Capcom, and Sony Online Entertainment. Billy and Nick also head to Japan to cover a special event hosted by Square Enix that promises a big reveal. Our fingers are crossed for a new Final Fantasy.

VIDEO GAME TRIVIA

Video game stars aren't all about action – they're also about style. Character designers make sure that our protagonists are wielding the coolest weapons and wearing the hottest duds. Unfortunately, one key accessory is often left out: the hat. Answer the questions below to determine which degrading and humiliating noggin-topper we put on Ben!

1 We all know that Dante's pistols are called Ebony and Ivory, but as an unlockable character in the first Devil May Cry, Sparda's guns also have unique names. What are they?
- **A.** Luce and Ombra
- **B.** Dante and Vergil
- **C.** Mary Kate and Ashley
- **D.** Salvation and Perdition

2 This villain from the SNES classic Chrono Trigger is usually referred to as Magus, but he was born with a different name. What was it?
- **A.** Dalton
- **B.** Janus
- **C.** Schala
- **D.** Gil

3 In Tomb Raider II for the PSone, what is the setting for the first level?
- **A.** Atlantis
- **B.** The canals of Venice
- **C.** The Amazon jungle
- **D.** The Great Wall of China

4 What MMORPG terminology is also the name of the Wanderer's horse in Shadow of the Colossus?
- **A.** Mankrik's Wife
- **B.** Aggro
- **C.** Dot
- **D.** Buff

5 In Metal Gear Solid 3, what is the The Boss' code name among the Cobras, signifying the emotion she carries into battle?
- **A.** The Sorrow
- **B.** The Rage
- **C.** The Joy
- **D.** The Peace

6 What was Sega's not-so-revolutionary technology that, according to the marketing for Sonic the Hedgehog 2, allowed the Genesis to handle the game's extreme speed?
- **A.** Blast Processing
- **B.** Burst Processing
- **C.** Blink Processing
- **D.** Burrito Processing

7 Playing your favorite shows must be better than watching them, right? Which of these current TV programs does not already have a video game adaptation on retail shelves?
- **A.** *Battlestar Galactica*
- **B.** *Lost*
- **C.** *CSI Miami*
- **D.** *24*

8 This screen is taken from what NES game controlled via the Zapper?
- **A.** Hogan's Alley
- **B.** Duck Hunt
- **C.** Gumshoe
- **D.** Operation Wolf

9 Only one of the following games was made by BioWare, the developer known for titles like Jade Empire and Mass Effect. Which one is it?
- **A.** Full Throttle
- **B.** Rise of the Robots
- **C.** MDK2
- **D.** Icewind Dale

10 True or False: Brute Force?
- **A.** False

BREAKDOWN

99.9% of gamers just don't care about Radagast the Brown

7.5 Million ants, all piled up and pressing against your front door, still probably couldn't break it down

4 points is not very many points

18% of your skin is actually made of paper. That's why you are able write on it with pens and markers

80% of this month's Breakdown facts are either made up or inaccurate. This is the one exception

★ Trivia Score & Rank ★
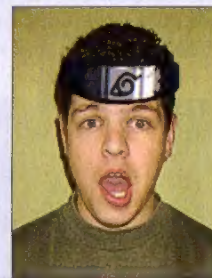
0-1:
Naruto's Headband

2-3:
Mega Man's Dumb Helmet
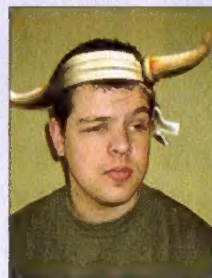
4-5:
ICO Horns
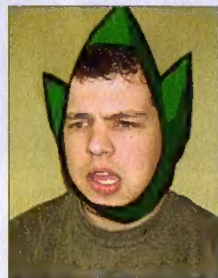
6-7:
Tingle's Unitard

8-9:
Daxter
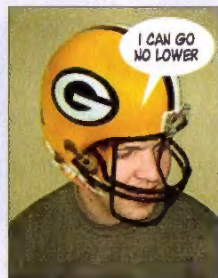
10:
Green Bay Packers Helmet

I CAN GO NO LOWER

Video Game Trivia Answers: 1. A 2. B 3. D 4. B 5. C 6. A 7. B 8. C 9. C 10. A