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WORLD EXCLUSIVE

FALLOUT 3

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ISSUE 171

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JULY 2007

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CONTENTS
The "No Mutants Allowed" Issue

features

ALTERNATE REALITY GAMES
A mixture of various media, ARGs have been gaining popularity. But what are these odd things, really? Are they websites with obtuse clues, or is there more to it? We answer all these questions and more in this in-depth look at the phenomenon.
22
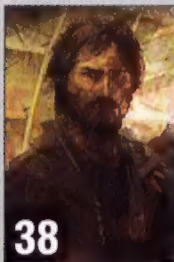
CHANGING THE GAME
We all love disaster movies like *War of the Worlds* and *Aliens*, but no one's really done right by this genre in the gaming space. The people behind Earth No More want to be the first to do so, and maybe change the way games are made while they're at it.
38

ROCK BAND
The brilliant minds behind Guitar Hero's massive success are ready to talk about their next project: a co-op music game that lifts the genre to the next level. Developer Harmonix and its newfound alliance with MTV and Viacom are the next larger-than-life supergroup, and we have all the details inside.
62

cover story

52 FALLOUT 3

No, this isn't the late great Black Isle Studios' triumphant return. In some ways, it's even better: proven next-gen RPG developer Bethesda and its crew of self-proclaimed Fallout nerds are finally ready to pull back the curtain on the rebirth of this storied franchise. We have the world-exclusive first look at the direction this post-apocalyptic, tongue-in-cheek, open-ended role-playing game is taking. We think that you'll be as excited as we are once you lay eyes on these luscious details and images.

departments

12 STAFF
Read the team's latest favorites

14 GI SPY
Silly pictures of our life and times

16 DEAR GI
Your chance to fire back at us!

20 CONNECT
Where news, talk, and technology collide

44 INTERVIEW
We have an extra-large direct interview with Sony Computer Entertainment's president of worldwide studios, Phil Harrison. What more is there to say?

48 GEAR
Geeky gadget stuff for the masses

50 OPINION
E. Daniel Arey, industry veteran and president and CEO of VisionArey Entertainment, talks about new control schemes and what they mean to gaming

51 CALENDAR
Get hip to this month's happenings

70 PREVIEWS
Riddick is back! Get the good word on his move to next-gen systems, Tom Clancy's EndWar, Project Gotham Racing 4, and more in this month's preview section

92 REVIEWS
Game of the Month: Odin Sphere for PlayStation 2

108 CHARTS
Retail Sales Data and the GI editors' Top 10 Games

110 SECRET ACCESS
Codes, strategies, and passwords

112 CLASSIC GI
Reliving gaming's greatest moments

115 ONLINE
See what's happening at Game Informer Online

116 GAME OVER
The end...or is it?

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STAFF

People Who Actually Get Paid To Play Video Games

ROCK OPERA

ANDY McNAMARA
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Like the rest of the world, I just can't stop playing Guitar Hero. It's so amazingly addictive. Not only can it draw a crowd at a party, but there is something to be said for turning it up to obscene levels when you have the house all to yourself – striking the classic rock pose by propping your foot up on the nearest ottoman (or monitor, as I like to call it) and rocking out like you have never rocked out before. Of course, you must complete the package with head-banging, tongue-waggling, and classic metal hand gestures.

Like the artists whose music shot the game into super-stardom, the companies behind the magic are experiencing their own rock star tale. The game's developer, Harmonix, and the game's publisher, Red Octane, have since split. Red Octane – along with the Guitar Hero name – has joined forces with Activision. Television giant MTV/Viacom went out and picked up the developer Harmonix. If this isn't a VH1 special in the making, I don't know what is.

Activision and Red Octane handed the reigns of Guitar Hero over to Neversoft, the developer best known for its massive hit Tony Hawk's Pro Skater. MTV and Harmonix teamed up to create a new property in Rock Band (see page 62 for our exclusive hands-on look).

All these developments just beg the question: are we experiencing the classic rock break-up where the lead singer and the band break up, and neither are ever the same again? Or will this split create two new supergroups that give gamers even more ways to rock their socks off?

We will know the answer to all these questions and more (I've always wanted to say that) once these two games battle it out later this year in a classic East Coast (Harmonix) vs. West Coast (Neversoft) showdown. Let's just hope we don't lose talent like Biggie and Tupac in the process.

Andy >> *andy@gameinformer.com*
Handle: The Game Hombre **Expertise:** RPGs, Action/Platform, Driving, First-Person Shooters **Interests:** Dreaming Of The New Guitar Hero And Rock Band Songs, The Police Reunion Tour (Now If I Could Get The Archers Of Loaf To Reunite), Samsung's Blackjack, Muse **Dislikes:** The Passing Of Kurt Vonnegut (He Was One Of My Favorite Writers Ever And The World Is Worse Off Without Him), The Ending Of *Heroes*, Blizzard's Relentless Quest To Make Shaman The Most Worthless Class In The Game (So Say-eth The Enhancement Shaman Who Wants Equal Footing In PVP) **Current Favorite Games:** World Of Warcraft, Call Of Duty 4, Pokémon Diamond, Guitar Hero II On Xbox 360

Reiner >> *reiner@gameinformer.com*
Handle: The Raging Gamer **Expertise:** RPGs, Action, First-Person Shooters, Strategy, Sports, Fighting **Interests:** Breaking 30K Gamerscore, *Deep Storm* By Lincoln Child, Pursuing A Pilot's License (Thank You For Flying Air Reiner), Ladder Golf (A Game So Good That It's Gotten Me Outside For The First Time In 15 Years), My Wife Getting Addicted To Guitar Hero **Dislikes:** Publishers Still Shunning Summer For Game Releases (Hello! People Buy Games Year-Round!), The Underwhelming Graphics In The Halo 3 Beta **Current Favorite Games:** Grand Theft Auto IV, Forza Motorsport 2, Spider-Man 3, Earth Defense Force 2017, Brothers In Arms: Hell's Highway

Matt >> *matt@gameinformer.com*
Handle: The Original Gamer **Expertise:** First-Person Shooters, Action/Platform, Action/Adventure, Action/Sports **Interests:** Going To Seoul, Korea, Nintendo DS (I Probably Would Have Hanged Myself In The Plane Bathroom Without It), Summertime, Joni Mitchell, *The Tourmaline* By Paul Park, Korean BBQ **Dislikes:** 15-Hour Flights, Storms, Sitting Next To Crazy Militia Members On Planes, Staying Awake For 30+ Hours In A Row **Current Favorite Games:** Tetris DS, Brain Age: Train Your Brain In Minutes A Day, New Super Mario Bros., Hot Shots Tennis

Kato >> *kato@gameinformer.com*
Handle: The Game Katana **Expertise:** Sports, Racing, Action/Adventure, Action/Platform **Interests:** The Alec Baldwin School Of Parenting (Tell It Like It Is, My Man!), Hamentashins, *Lesbian Wednesdays* – The Original Title Of Arctic Monkey's *Favorite Worst Nightmare*, Amy Winehouse, Paris Hilton Going To Jail (She Could Use A Good Shiv) **Dislikes:** Braun Shavers (Where's The German Engineering?), Maroon 5 (First They Sound Like Supertramp, Now Disco. What's Next? Bread?) **Current Favorite Games:** Brothers In Arms: Hell's Highway, NCAA Football 08, Uncharted: Drake's Fortune, Pain, TimeShift, Fallout 3

Adam >> *adam@gameinformer.com*
Handle: The Alpha Gamer **Expertise:** RPGs, Strategy, First-Person Shooters, Fighting **Interests:** iPods That Actually Work, Running A Raid That Actually Downs Bosses (No Scrubs Allowed Here!), Seeing How Far I Can Push Joe, When MMO Community Managers Tell The Trolls To Shove It **Dislikes:** Wiping On Maiden (Seriously, Healers, Wake Up), Looking Up Hopelessly From Fourth Place (C'mon, Twinkies!), Subwoofers, Crappy Teamspeak Codecs **Current Favorite Games:** The Lord Of The Rings Online: Shadows Of Angmar, World Of Warcraft, Catan, Deus Ex, Diablo II, StarCraft II (World Of StarCraft? As If)

Joe >> *joe@gameinformer.com*
Handle: The Real American Gamer **Expertise:** RPGs, Adventure, Action, Strategy, Puzzle **Interests:** The StarCraft II Announcement (My Life For Aiur!), Romantic Zombedies, Getting The 24 Monkey Off My Back, *Veronica Mars'* Cancellation (Take That, Everyone Who Recommended It To Me!) **Dislikes:** Cleveland Spielbergs, No More *Gilmore Girls* (So What If I Watched? Wanna Fight About It?), The "Fight" Between Peter And Sylar (I Waited All Season For That!?) **Current Favorite Games:** Odin Sphere, The Lord Of The Rings Online: Shadows Of Angmar, Star Wars Knights Of The Old Republic II: The Sith Lords, God Of War: Chains Of Olympus

Miller >> *miller@gameinformer.com*
Handle: The Once And Future Gamer **Expertise:** RPGs, Action/Adventure, Platform, First-Person Shooters, Music, Puzzle **Interests:** Jim And Pam's First Date, The Rock Band Drums (Once You Start Down The Drum Path, Forever Will It Dominate Your Destiny), The Newly Beefed Up Assault Rifle **Dislikes:** Long Waits For TV On DVD From This Season, How Similar All The Airports Begin To Look After Awhile, The Insidious Parasitic Alien Force In My Backyard That Masquerades As Common Ferns **Current Favorite Games:** Fallout 3, Rock Band, Halo 3, Marvel: Ultimate Alliance, Tomb Raider Anniversary, Puzzle Quest: Challenge Of The Warlords

Bertz >> *mattbertz@gameinformer.com*
Handle: Lord Garrington III **Expertise:** First-Person Shooters, Sports, Action, RPGs, Strategy **Interests:** Adrian Peterson: Newest Minnesota Viking, Randy Moss Shunning Green Bay (Suck It, Cheeseheads!), 1st Annual Game Informer Paintball Competition (Primary Target: Ben), Miller Vs. Amy McNamara: Eat-Off 2007 **Dislikes:** Halo 3 Graphics (Come On, Microsoft, It's Your Flagship Title!), Ben's Brick Tamland Impressions, Having Comcast Yet Still Not Receiving NFL Network (It's Craptastic!), Mass Effect Delay **Current Favorite Games:** Guitar Hero II, GRAW 2, Rainbow Six Vegas, NCAA Football 08

Ben >> *ben@gameinformer.com*
Handle: Your Friendly Neighborhood Gamer **Expertise:** Action/Adventure, Action/RPGs, Platform, Survival Horror, First-Person Shooters **Interests:** Chocolate Fountains, Writing Deadpool (I'm Serious, It Would Be Great), Asking People "So You're Still Fighting This Guy?" **Dislikes:** Andrew J. Baker For Rubbing It In, Readers Featuring Me In Their Write In Captions Last Month, The Thomas Jane Incident (I Asked One Question!), Being Hassled About All My Good Questions **Current Favorite Games:** Final Fantasy XII, Spider-Man 3, Metroid Prime 3: Corruption, Brothers In Arms: Hell's Highway, Rock Band, The Elder Scrolls IV: Shivering Isles

Bryan >> *bryan@gameinformer.com*
Handle: The Gamer's Advocate **Expertise:** Action/Adventure, RPGs, Survival Horror, First-Person Shooters, Rhythm **Interests:** Frank Miller's Will Eisner's *The Spirit*, Getting My Hands On Rock Band (Damn You, Limits Of Time And Space), Nick's New Middle Name "Balls On Ice," Defeating Ben (Of Course Thomas Jane Was In *The Punisher* Before *Arrested Development*) **Dislikes:** The Phrase "Does That Make Sense?", Miller's Cheap Bat Tactics At The End Of Double Dragon **Current Favorite Games:** Rock Band, The Chronicles Of Riddick: Assault On Dark Athena, Rayman Raving Rabbids 2, Beautiful Katamari

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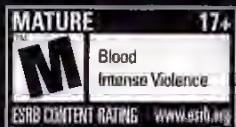
GISPY

1 Adam gets that crazy look in his eye whenever Flagship's Bill Roper and EA's Andrew Wong come to town 2 Jon Heder takes some time off from playing Napoleon Dynamite in every movie he's ever made to get some free stuff at a Halo 3 party in Hollywood 3 When Bryan and Billy whipped out the GI Spy cam, somehow Ubisoft's entire PR team appeared out of the woodwork 4 Kato and Miller join EA's Brooke Cahalane, Tyrone Miller, and Abby Topolsky for a breathtaking view of the local warehouses 5 Miller teaches Harmonix's Mike Dornbrock, Alex Rigopulos, Daniel Sussman, Tracy Rosenthal-Newsom, and Helen McWilliams about the centerpiece of every rock wardrobe: the polo shirt 6 Kato learns a new secret handshake from Colin Bennett, a gamer who scored access to Sony's San Diego event 7 Reiner hangs with THQ's Craig Mitchell, Dave Adams, and comic book legend Joe Madureira 8 Everyone knows that Joe gets to keep the hands of those unfortunate enough to wander into his lair. We guess Ubisoft's Adrian Lacey didn't get the memo

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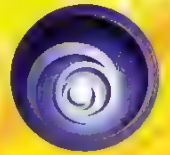
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UBISOFT

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I love your magazine! This is my son, Blade. He's two years old, and he loves your magazine, too!
Jesse Nunez
Via Email

■ Okay, everybody at once: "Awwwww!" What a sharp kid! Even if he can't read, he still knows how to assume the standard magazine-reading position.

A LITTLE EARLY

I just wanted to preemptively email you about your score for The Lord of the Rings Online: Shadows of Angmar. I'll be mad if this game gets a good score. I bought it several days ago, and it's essentially a rip-off of WoW.
David Hickenbottom
Via yahoo.com

■ Huh. Every month we get letters from readers who disagree with our scores, but this is the first time anyone has complained without even knowing what the game got. We're kind of at a loss for words. Wait, no we're not! We've got lots of words in the (quite positive) review on page 105. Check it out and see why we disagree with David.

GROW SOME FOOTBALLS

After reading your article on All-Pro Football 2K8, I realized something that has been wrong with Madden games. Even though EA Sports has the NFL license, they are limited to what they can do. You mentioned restrictions like toned-down injuries and the removal of trash talking. Rather than actually playing football, we've been playing a watered-down, family-friendly version. It's like we're watching *Scarface*, but it's been edited for the Disney Channel. This is the main reason I think that All-Pro Football 2K8 will smash Madden; it's recapturing the essence of what it means to play football, even if all the names aren't familiar.
Romell Meeks
Chicago, IL

■ We're glad you're looking forward to 2K's new game, but predicting its dominance over longtime leader Madden is a bit premature. Remember that not everyone is playing for the sheer love of the game. A large portion of gamers enjoy guiding their favorite team – with an accurate roster – to the Super Bowl. Even though 2K8 is missing that aspect, its stable of legendary players could make up lost ground. Hopefully it's enough to recapture a fan base after the series' hiatus. For a more in-depth look at the game, turn to our preview on page 82.

NETHACK > .HACK

I was pleased to see your Mod World article plugging Nethack in a recent issue. It always pains me when younger gamers haven't even heard of this classic. I've been playing off and on for 15 years, and I have yet to ascend (win). While I'm sure this says something about my skills, a single game that can remain entertaining for the span of several console generations is worthy of attention. Hack on!
Syndney Ashcraft
Via email

■ It's true that Nethack is one of the classic dungeon crawlers. Even more impressive than the fact that people are still playing the original is that the core design concepts are still being used – even recent DS games like Pokémon Mystery Dungeon and Izuna The Unemployed Ninja. In those cases, the problem is that the gameplay is a little less charming when it's a blatant copy of a 20-year-old ASCII game. If games are going to copy from Roguelikes (the general term for this kind of dungeon crawler), why can't they follow Nethack's example and implement character classes like Archaeologist, Caveman, and Tourist? Bulbasaur just doesn't cut it.

UNSURPRISING RESPONSE

I really want to put my two cents in about what Anthony Jacobs said in issue 170 about women being less capable gamers than men. Generalizing all girl gamers based on only his girlfriend is not only idiotic, but plain ignorant. I, being a female gamer, love games no matter how complex the controller setup. Just because his girlfriend can't deal with more than three buttons doesn't mean that other girls can't. Since she's with him, though, she might not be too bright.
Becca Dobbs
Via hotmail

Dear Mr. Jacobs: My male friends will not play against me unless I am drunk; it is the only chance they have of fragging me. Maybe you should try that every once in a while. It sounds like you desperately need to be fragged.
"Typhoid Erin"
via yahoo.com

I am a 27-year-old female who is – and has been for decades now – an avid gamer. Morrowind, Grand Theft Auto, Soul Calibur, Mortal Kombat, Castlevania, Legend of Zelda, and all my other favorite games…imagine my surprise when I learned I was incapable of playing them! Thank you, Mr. Anthony Jacob Jr., for showing me the error of my gaming ways. Also, thanks for the laugh.
Christin Reid
Via gmail.com

I am a girl, and I've been gaming ever since I was five. So I would like to say a few things in response to Anthony Jacobs: Yes, I am a girl (in case you missed that part). Yes, I do play video games. Yes, I'm probably better than you.
Veronica Eckl
Via gmail.com

GOING INTO SHAAK

In your Star Wars: The Force Unleashed article you guys said that Shaak Ti is one of your enemies in the game. I hate to break it to you, but if you watch the deleted scenes for Episode III, then you'll know that General Grievous kills Shaak Ti. Someone at LucasArts needs to do their research.
Ian Schlueter
Via aol.com

■ Good point, Ian. A quick glance at Starwars.com gives the current official story behind Shaak Ti's fate: "She was in the Jedi Temple the night that Darth Vader descended upon the sanctuary with a phalanx of clone troopers…Shaak Ti was believed to be killed in the onslaught." It seems that since the scene depicting Shaak Ti's death never made it into the final cut of the movie, it isn't considered canon. In other words, it never happened. Why anyone would cut that awesome scene from a movie and leave the "I love you" "No, I love you!" exchange in is beyond any of us.
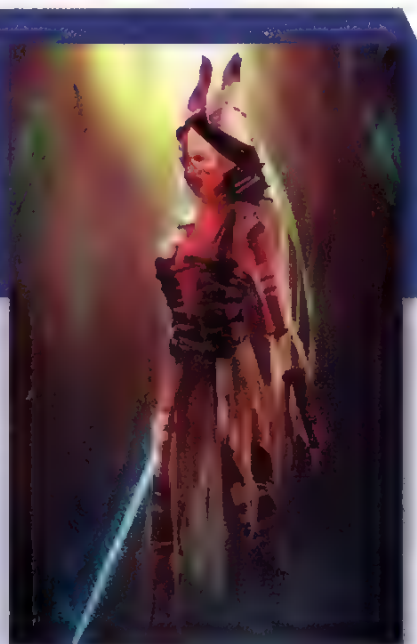
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16 GAME INFORMER

In the words of Scott Bakula in *Quantum Leap*: "Oh, boy!" The sheer volume of female gamers who wrote in to express their shock and disbelief at Mr. Jacobs' comments was overwhelming. The letters systematically and hilariously tore the argument apart so well, we're starting to think that we should print something ignorant and inflammatory in every issue. Did you know that elephants are 10 times smarter than the average teenager?

GRAND THEFT ALIENS

Randy Pitchford, with his "we're all just stealing from *Aliens*" comment, summed up what I suspected all along: The vast majority of developers, especially American developers, lack any real creative vision. It shouldn't be that hard to come up with themes or ideas that are different and original. Maybe, if these companies start employing people who have artistic ambitions instead of focusing all their efforts on physics and dull realism, we wouldn't have a glut of games we've seen too many times before

Erin Hoffman
St. Paul, MN

We're going to let you in on a little secret: Media is influenced by other media. This sharing of ideas helps to refine them and move them forward, both as entertainment and as art. Some elements of popular games may be familiar, but it is unfair to accuse developers of lacking vision. Perhaps there are certain mechanics you've seen before, but if you can't see that every game has something that makes it unique, then you just aren't looking hard enough. Oh, and before you generalize about American developers, remember that for every Okami or Shadow of the Colossus, there's a handful of Dynasty Warriors and Tales Of games.

LEFT BEHIND

I own an Xbox and a PlayStation 2, but I've been searching game stores recently only to find a lack of new releases for these systems. Why aren't developers coming out with more Xbox and PS2 games? I'm a huge Final Fantasy fan, and I was incredibly disappointed to find out Final Fantasy XIII will only be on the PS3. I'm starting to feel like all developers care about is making games for the newer consoles, leaving their last-gen supporters behind.

Leah Houser
New Brighton, PA

Welcome to last-gen. Population: You. Most developers actually are focused primarily on games for newer consoles. As the next-gen hardware from Sony, Microsoft, and Nintendo gains momentum, you can expect to see support for the old models drop off entirely. The GameCube and Xbox are already effectively dead, and while the PS2 is currently supported by a few solid new games (like God of War II and Odin Sphere), it won't be long until we don't even see ports of crappy licensed games on these consoles. Don't feel bad – it happens with every generational transition. Unfortunately, if history holds true, the only solution to your problem is to save up and get with the times...or just play PS2 and Xbox games for the rest of your life.

READER ART

Enter the Game Informer Reader Art Contest. All you need to do is draw, paint, scratch, spit, or carve the best darn art you can think of and send it to us. Please include your name, phone number, and return address. If you're the monthly winner, we'll feature your work in GI and you'll receive a video game prize from the Game Informer vault. All entries become the property of Game Informer and can't be returned.

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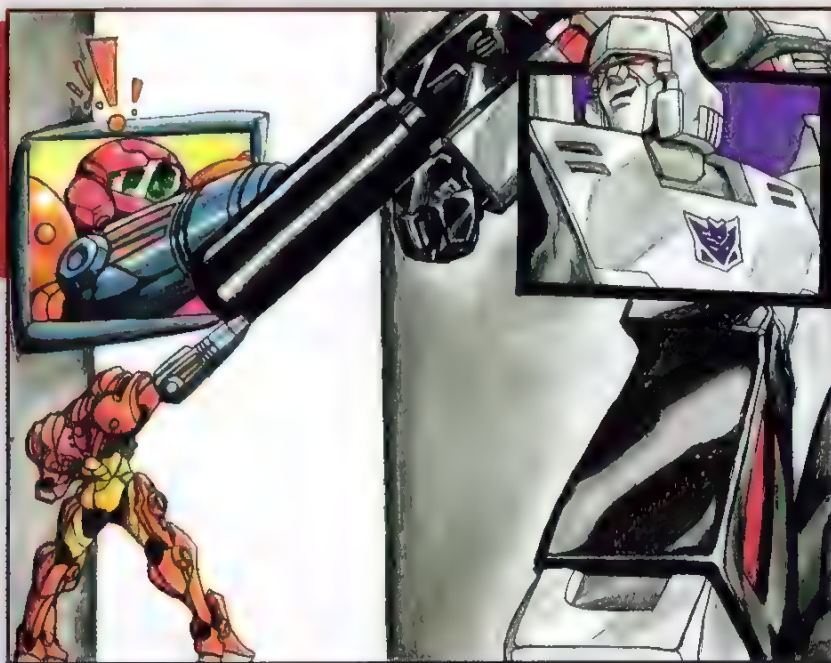
IZZAT AL-JUMAIE
This would be a great postcard. "Greetings from a destroyed wasteland!"

MICHELLE FRASER
Even the less glamorous parts of video games deserve some art!
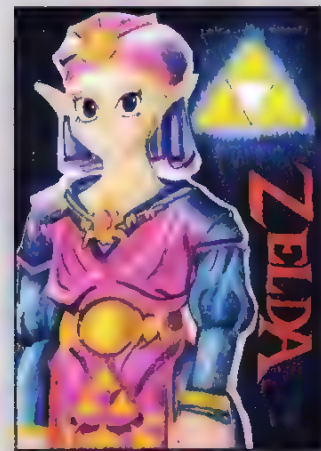
PAUL ANDLER
You know who's way cooler than Zelda? Sheik. That guy could totally beat Zelda in a fight!
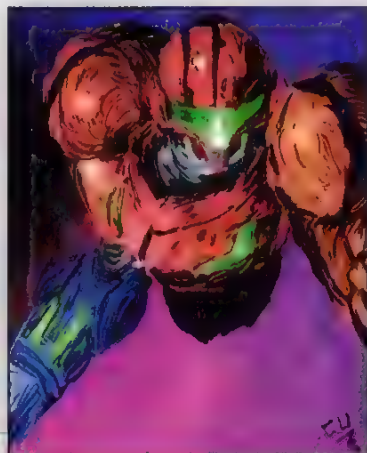
CALEB UPAH
DaVinci's long-lost "Bounty Hunter From Space"
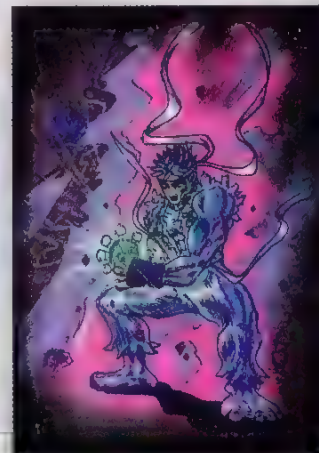
PATRICK TOSA
Wait a second...isn't Ryu supposed to be the good guy?

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STARCRAFT II UNVEILED

BLIZZARD DISHES RTS DETAILS

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StarCraft is big everywhere, but in South Korea it's a national obsession. Professional gamers who are good at the game are treated like idols. So when Blizzard held the Blizzard Worldwide Invitational 2007 tournament in South Korea – an event so big it was held in the Olypmic Gymnastic Stadium and even included concerts by pop acts – Game Informer was there to see the festivites and catch the unveiling of StarCraft II.

Blizzard showed off a trailer for the game and talked at length about its philosophy. StarCraft II will contain the franchise's three factions: Terran, Zerg, and Protoss. The single-player story takes place four years after the Brood War expansion pack, and all of the factions' main characters will be included, with Blizzard saying that the mysterious Xel'Naga race will be key to the plot.

Rob Pardo, vice president of game design, says that large-scale battles with mass armies will be the focus of StarCraft II, so there will be no hero units or selection limit. These battles will feature as many as 300 units onscreen

■ Protoss Colussus units sweep out these ground forces with ease

■ When Zerglings attack

THE WEAPONS OF WAR

■ Protoss Immortal tank units possess a strong force shield that only activates when hit by powerful attacks

Blizzard says that it is evaluating all the units from the original StarCraft, and has yet to determine which ones will be brought forward into the sequel. Some will even be changed. For example, the old Protoss Zealot unit is returning, but it now has the ability to charge across the map and quickly close distances between its foes. Here's a brief selection of just some of the new units that Blizzard unveiled at the event. The company says that it doesn't just want to create new units and copy them across each faction; instead, it wants to keep abilities distinct.

PROTOSS
Blizzard's event showed off more new Protoss units than for any of the other factions, and what they showed was pretty impressive.

Stalker
This ground unit can attack air and ground units and also warp across short distances to locations within its line of sight.

Phoenix
Befitting its name, the Phoenix is a fast airborne scout/combat unit. It has the unique overload attack that fires on all nearby foes. However, this renders the unit temporarily helpless afterward, making the timing on these overload attacks key.

Colossus
This tall, spider-like unit has giant legs that enable it to move over other units and terrain features. It also has a powerful sweep beam designed for taking out large swaths of weaker ground units.

Warp Ray
This ship has a laser weapon that inflicts increasing damage the longer it strikes a target. Best used against heavily armored targets.

Immortal
This slow tank unit possesses a powerful force field that only activates under heavy fire. Consequently, this unit is weak to less powerful forces like Zerglings or Terran Reapers.

Mothership
Fittingly, the Protoss faction can only have one of these, and they are completely badass. It can warp in to a location and create a localized black hole that will destroy flying enemy units. It can also release a Time Bomb that slows down anything that enters its radius. In the demo we saw, missiles that entered the Time Bomb slowed and fell to the ground harmlessly. Finally, the Planet Cracker attack rains down lasers on targets below.

TERRAN
Not much was shown of the Terran faction, although Blizzard did show an infantry unit called the Reaper that will join the iconic Marines and Firebats. The Reapers' jetpacks should make them effective base raiders.

ZERG
Nydus Worms
Giant sand worms that come out of the ground like those in *Dune* to form the Nydus Canals that StarCraft players know.

Banelings
Zerglings can morph into these land-bound Scourge-like units that make powerful explosive suicide runs on enemy ground targets.

at once. Resource management is important, and early assaults will be possible with more tech tree options available early on. In a demo of the game, Blizzard talked about the title's countering system using some of StarCraft II's new units (see sidebar for more), and the company says that terrain bonuses are being modified so that units not only get an attack bump for attacks from higher ground, but they will also be shielded by the maps' fog of war.

The most telling element of the presentation was how philosophically close StarCraft II stays to its predecessor. From the many returning units to the onscreen UI itself, this is one apple that doesn't fall far from the tree. This is unsurprising given the decade-long popularity and competitive scene surrounding the original, but the extensive similarities are nonetheless striking.

Blizzard says that the beta program, as the company has done for its other games, will be closed to the public and invitation only. As for StarCraft's final release date, the company is – of course – leaving that up in the air.

alternate reality gaming

You stand on a street corner. You are waiting for a call, careful to keep the pay-phone beside you within reach. To everyone else, it looks like you're loitering, but you know there are hundreds – maybe thousands – of people depending on your ability to take this call, respond appropriately, and record the information. You're playing a game, but one that isn't tethered to a controller and a TV screen – one that spans multiple media formats and stretches into the real world. The phone rings, and you answer. "Don't hang up," utters a voice on the other end of the line. "If you really are who I think you are, I must tell you something."

Talking to mysterious strangers by picking up pre-designated pay phones is a task normally reserved for the hero in a mystery/suspense movie. Though it would certainly seem at home on the silver screen, the scene just described is taken from a different source: a relatively new kind of experience called an alternate reality game. This one in particular may even be familiar to video gamers; it's called ilovebees, and was created by 42 Entertainment as a way to promote Halo 2. Alternate reality games (or ARGs) are designed to be story-based entertainment experiences that push the boundaries of how people think about, collect, share, and apply information. They weave together all sorts of media from the real and virtual worlds and meld them into a mixture of narrative and puzzle-solving that is unlike anything else out there.

"Traditionally, stories would be told through one medium. A film would exist as a film. A book would exist as a book," explains Michael Smith, CEO of Mind Candy, the company behind the ARG Perplex City. He continues: "Now, the Internet and new forms of technology are enabling storytellers to tell their stories not through one medium, but through every conceivable form of media." In essence, ARGs belong to a new breed of game that is on the cutting edge of technology, born on the World Wide Web, and communicating with players through any and all means available. Of course, it's not always as easy as just picking up the phone.

THIS IS NOT A GAME

A term established by ARG The Beast, the phrase "This is not a game" refers to an aesthetic in which the game and its designers never acknowledge its status as a form of entertainment. In other words, all in-game characters and events are treated as though they are real. While this approach has advantages, it isn't a standard for all ARGs. It can add to the sense of drama and immersion for the player, but also cuts the designers off from options like holding live events promoting their project.

ARG Explained

In the simplest terms, an ARG is like a treasure hunt. It tells a story, but the pieces of the story are scattered around the world, and it is up to a vast community of players to assemble them. These fragments can be found in an incredible variety of forms: e-mails, websites, video and audio files, phone calls, letters, books, movies, text messages, and more. Alone, a piece of information – like a seemingly random number – might not appear significant. However, when that number is shared with other players and compared to the rest of the evidence, it becomes a serial number, GPS coordinates, the solution to an equation, or something else that guides players further down the rabbit hole.

This technique is what Jordan Weisman, chief creative officer at 42 Entertainment (and originator of the ARG genre as it exists today) calls a distributed narrative. "We first write a story, create all the 'evidence' that would exist had the story taken place, and then throw out the story and hide all the shards (the evidence) around the physical and digital world."

While unearthing these pieces ultimately constitutes the "game" segment of an ARG, watching the story unfold is a major

incentive for players. Since this happens in a non-linear fashion, it also gives the designers a lot of freedom to fill in gaps along the way. Unlike a video game, where the experience is out of the developer's hands once the product hits retail shelves, the team behind an ARG is running a live game. As players solve puzzles and interact with the game, the design team is on hand to react to the actions of the community. In that way, the players are not just passively observing a story; they are shaping it. Alex Lieu, vice president of creative development at 42 Entertainment, gives an example of this concept in action during the Last Call Poker project: "We had a fictitious character trapped in a burning building, and players had to use information they had uncovered and maps they had found to, on a live phone call, navigate the character out of there safely. We were prepared to have that character perish in the fire, get shot, or get out of there. Our players are essentially determining what's going to happen…and not via voting like *American Idol*."

This kind of player interaction is important, but it is also the duty of the people behind the curtain to maintain a narrative. "On one hand, ARGs are responsive, adapting to the players," says Adrian Hon, director of play at Mind Candy. "On the other hand, the designers have an idea where they want the story to go. They know some things that will happen, they know who is going to die." It is this interplay between a sense of direction and a sense of freedom that is so engaging about ARGs. Players know they are participating in something with a purpose, but they also know they aren't powerless to influence events along the way.

THE COLLECTIBLE PUZZLE CARD GAME

PERPLEXCITY

WWW.PERPLEXCITY.COM

"THE PUZZLE ... NG UP ... INTERA... ... N OF TH... ...ian

The Receda Cube (right) was the buried treasure and ultimate goal for players of Perplex City. It was found by Andrew Darley (left), who also won a $200,000 prize. This competitive angle added an interesting dynamic to the Perplex City community

Beastly Beginnings

Alternate reality games in their current form can be traced back to a single project: The Beast. Created by Weisman and his team at Microsoft (Elan Lee, Sean Stewart, Todd Lubson, and Vic Bonnilla), The Beast was part of campaign in 2001 to promote the Steven Spielberg film *A.I.* "For some time, I had been thinking about a narrative structure that was organic to the web, rather then the linear or branched structures that had been ported to the web," recalls Weisman. "Looking at what we do on the web every day, which is look through a ton of crap trying to find the piece of information we care about, I likened that to an archeologist that goes through a lot of dirt looking for a shard of pottery, but if they find enough pottery then they can not only reconstruct the pot, but the civilization that created it."

The plot of The Beast, as with many ARGs, is difficult to summarize because of its vast and segmented nature. Set in the year 2142 in the *A.I.* universe, it dealt with the murder of a man named Evan Chan aboard his boat. The puzzles and story, contained mainly on a series of connected web sites, attracted thousands of players. Many of these users coalesced into a single Yahoo group, known as the Cloudmakers. If The Beast set the standard for how ARGs were designed, the Cloudmakers set the standard for how they were played. Through an established network of involved and intelligent participants, the group rose to the challenge of the game with surprising dedication.

Adrian Hon, who created the Cloudmakers' definitive guide to The Beast as a player before being hired by Mind Candy, summarizes the game's impact: "There were other games that pretended to be real. There were other games to use different media. But The Beast was the first to get it really right."

■ Michael Smith (top) and Adrian Hon (bottom) of Mind Candy

MASQUERADE

The Beast may have been the first full ARG experience, but because of the nature of the genre, there are myriad influences that shaped early ARGs and continue to have an impact. One example is the book Masquerade *by Kit Williams, which contains beautiful painted pictures imbedded with clues. These clues, when put together properly, pointed players to the location of a treasure (a golden hare) in the real world. The book was published in 1979, so the search is long over, but the global treasure hunt it started has several conceptual similarities to ARGs. "I just thought it was the coolest thing ever," recalls Smith. "I didn't have any chance at ever finding the treasure, but I loved the idea."*

Puzzling

In the six years since The Beast ran, ARGs haven't drastically changed. Technology has evolved, but the games themselves still focus on scouring the real and digital world for clues. But how do players find these clues? The answer is through a lot of work. You don't just go to a web site and see "click here for clue!" flashing in bright letters. The key information in an ARG is typically uncovered as players solve puzzles. In video game terms, it's similar to the Myst series; you experiment, collect data from the world around you, and solve problems of varying difficulty. However, since ARGs are intended for multiple players as opposed to one, the puzzles are more complex. Instead of locked doors, an ARG might present its audience with military-grade cipher, or require dozens of people to work in concert to relay information quickly.

The idea is that a large user base with a variety of skill sets can cooperatively tackle tasks that would be too complicated for a single player. "There's this amazing group of distributed people, ranging from Egyptian scholars to mathematicians to code experts, so just about anything out there can be cracked," Smith reveals. "Or if it can't be cracked in the community, they usually know other people they can rely on. We have to be quite clever about how we construct our more complex problems to slow them down."

One example of this philosophy, taken from Perplex City, is particularly interesting. A character in the universe, Violet, needed admission to a restricted library. Since she

TOO FAR

As a part of the ARG experience, sometimes the game designers hire real-world actors to interact with the community, including talking over the phone and meeting in person. Early on, before the rules of the genre were clearly defined, this caused some confusion among the players. "Some of the actors got followed home, and they had to explain to players that they didn't actually know anything about the game," reveals Hon. "People know now that when the character gets into the taxi, you don't follow them."

wasn't a published author, however, she was denied access. To circumvent the problem, the community banded together and actually published a book in her name. Far from a basement operation, the players organized a stable of contributing writers and artists, making the work a reality and allowing the story to continue. Even though you won't find the book (entitled *Tales From the Third Planet*) at your local retailer, it is possible to purchase a physical copy of the book online via Lulu (www.lulu.com).

The pay phone example used earlier from ilovebees is another instance that required the collective effort of multiple players. Weisman gave us the rundown of how exactly this event unfolded: "[Players] had become used to finding the location of Axons (payphones) and making sure that an audience member was there to answer them and enter the proper code, but when a random audience member answered a phone and was given a code instead, and then instructed to transmit that code to another random person within five minutes so that they could enter it – they were totally taken by surprise. But only a week later they had built an inventive network of IRC channels and cell phones that allowed totally random audience members to pass the codes across the United States from random phone to random phone without missing a beat."

As interesting as these stories are, it is important to keep in mind that not all puzzles in an ARG need to be group efforts. In fact, it is more of a progression, where audience members do work individually and share the results so the community can solve more involved problems. You may find a street address embedded in the source code of a seemingly innocuous web page, but if you don't live in that area, you'd need to reach out into the community to find someone else willing to investigate. Depending on how involved you want to be in the game, it can be a solitary hobby, or you can participate in the hive mind and immerse yourself in the minutiae of the experience.

■ These are screens from the ilovebees site. On first glance, it is impossible to see how this is connected to Halo 2. After the ARG players dug in, the pieces fell into place
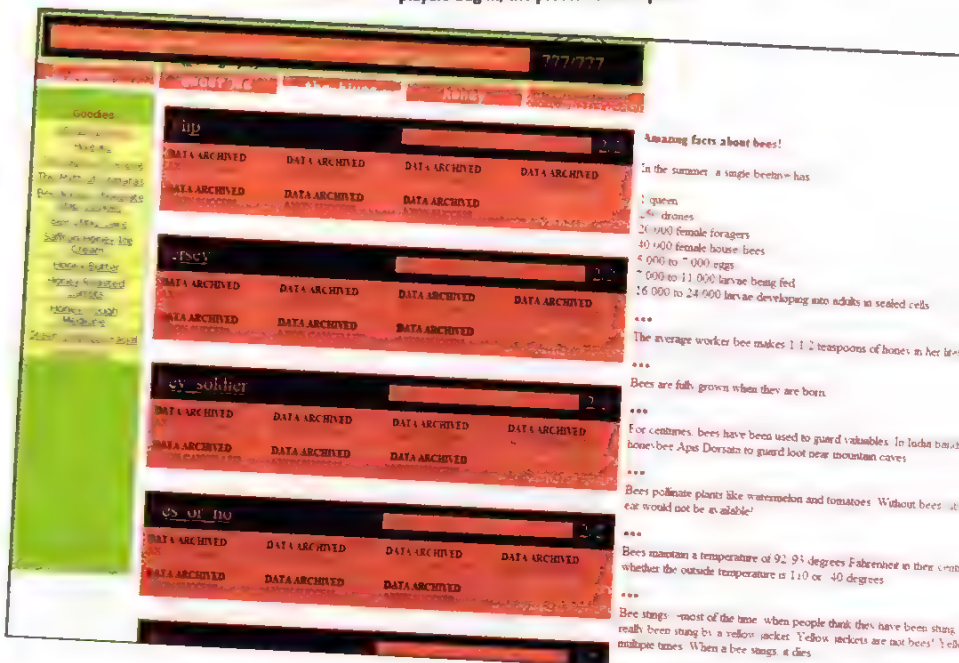
> *There's this amazing group of distributed people, ranging from Egyptian scholars to mathematicians to code experts, so just about anything out there can be cracked.*
>
> — MICHAEL SMITH
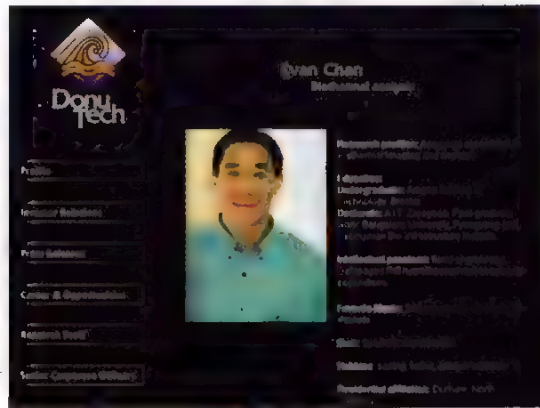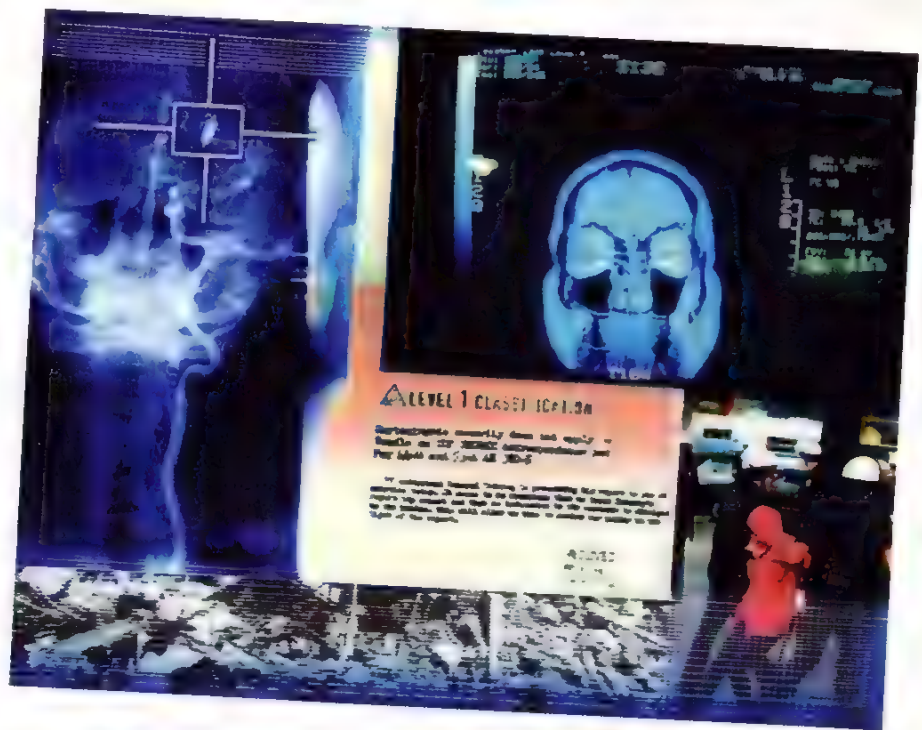
■ ARGs are typically free to play. Electronic Arts' episodic pay-to-play ARG, Majestic, only lasted for a few installments

■ Fictional murder victim Evan Chan had a website that players of The Beast (created for the film *A.I.*) uncoverd
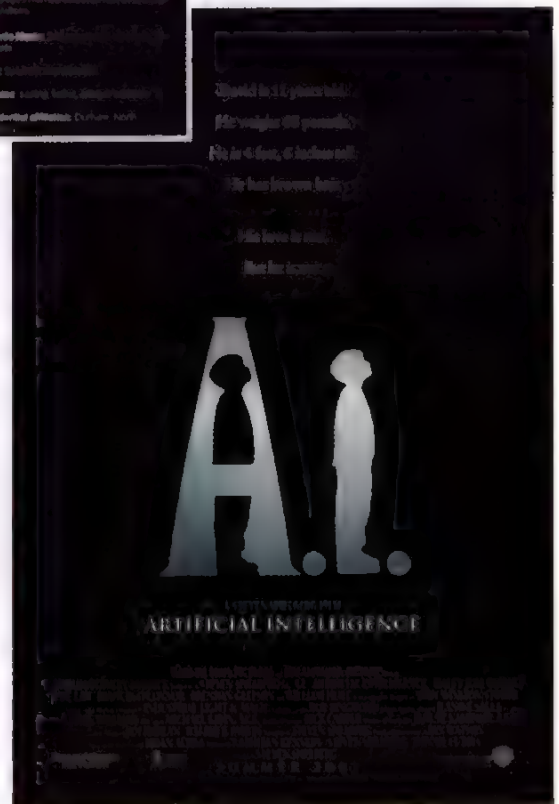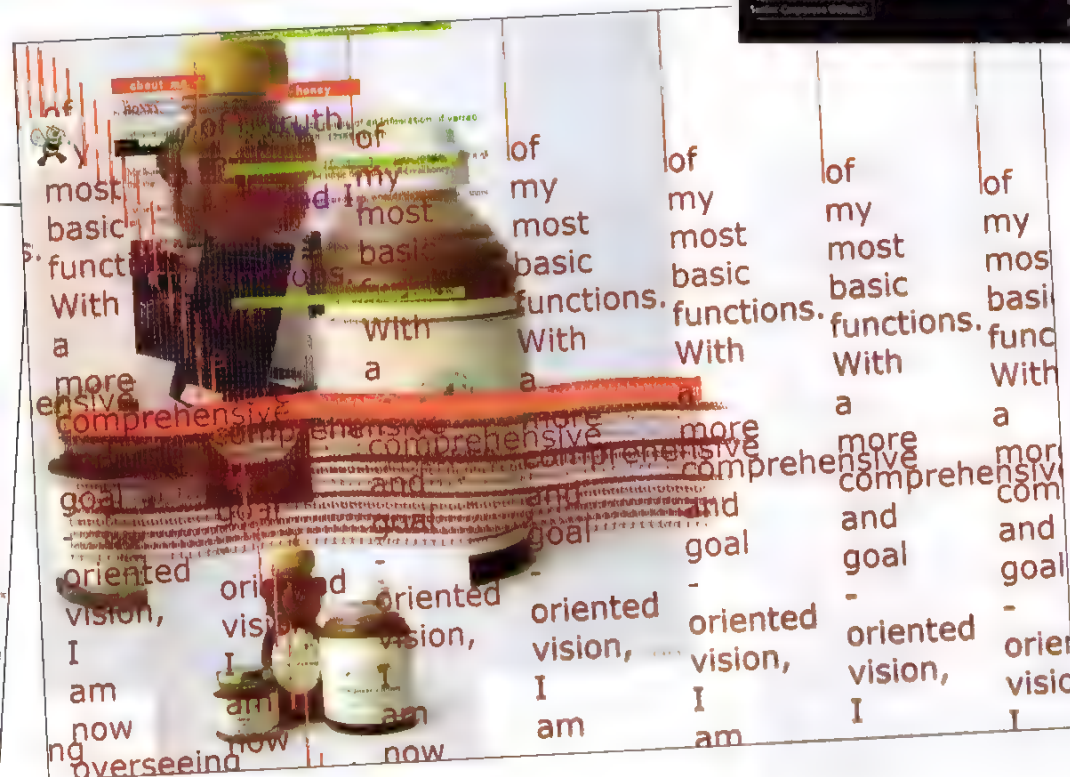
The word 'viral' has actually been banned in our office. In fact, there's a fine for using it.

—ALEX LIEU

Infectious

There is another key element that has influenced the popularity and success of ARGs, though it has little to do with the process of playing the games: marketing. Ever since The Beast and its A.I. connection, there has been a perception of ARGs as parts of advertising campaigns rather than stand-alone experiences. Halo 2 had ilovebees. Popular TV shows like *Heroes* and *Lost* have their own ARGs. Even Perplex City, though not tied to another property, monetizes itself through the sale of card packs. There is no question that this kind of viral marketing is beneficial for the games and their partners, but to see ARGs as nothing more than glorified commercials is to sell the genre short.

"The word 'viral' has actually been banned in our office. In fact, there's a fine for using it," laughs Alex Lieu, vice president of creative development at 42 Entertainment. "Lately, I've been on a rampage to ban the word 'marketing' from what we do also. What we really focus on — the idea

the company was founded on — is that we create entertainment experiences. It's why the word 'entertainment' is in our company name."

ARGs are far more than mere promotions. Tie-ins can help to raise awareness or capitalize on an already existent fanbase, but that alone is not enough for an ARG to be successful. The story needs to be engaging, the puzzles need to be challenging, and the players need to be rewarded. In short, regardless of what products an ARG might be connected to, quality is still the deciding factor. "The smartest way to ensure you have an audience is to create a compelling and intriguing story and experience," Smith asserts. "That's certainly my philosophy — to create an amazing product that will spread on its own merits."

Given the advances in media and technology in recent years, the ARG experience promises to become even richer with time. Unbound by a single format and able to rely on a diverse player
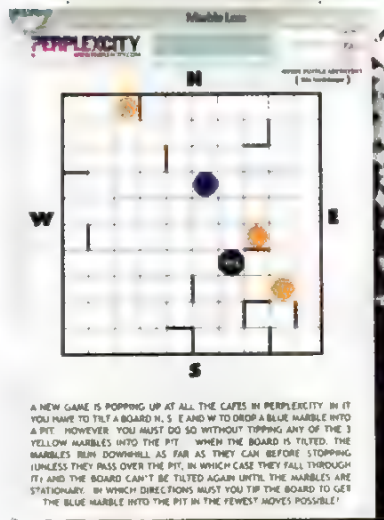
knowledge base, these projects have the potential to appeal to players spanning an unprecedented number of demographics. Whether it's music, games, books, or television, an ARG has the ability to infiltrate all sorts of media and tap into the enthusiasm of these communities around the world.

"The fact that everything is possible, and that anything that people can see, hold, or interact with becomes a canvas we can use to tell a story…that's the best of all worlds for us," states Lieu. "Really, that's what differentiates the entertainment experience of tomorrow from the entertainment experience of today." Or, as Weisman succinctly puts it: "The concept is that we really only develop for one platform: the globe." ■ ■ ■

Go to Game Informer Online to check out our complete Q&A with ARG legend Jordan Weisman, plus an interview with the Perplex City Season One winner Andrew Darley

If you're interested in checking out the ARG phenomenon for yourself, you'll need a place to start. One option is Mind Candy's Perplex City Season Two, which will officially kick off soon (the new cards are already available). Alternately, if you're anxious to get right into deciphering, you can check out 42 Entertainment's Year Zero, a series of websites tied to the Nine Inch Nails album of the same name. To get a wider sample of ARG offerings out there, we recommend a visit to the Alternate Reality Gaming Network (www.argn.com). Get out there and join the hive mind!

■ Nine Inch Nails' new album, *Year Zero*, has an accompanying ARG. These are just two of its several websites

■ Alex Lieu (top) and Jordan Weisman (bottom) of 42 Entertainment

LOOSE TALK

Hot Gaming Gossip
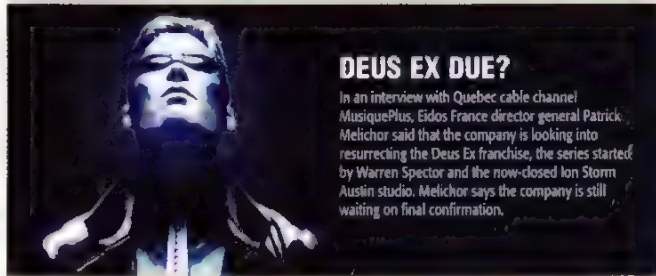
DEUS EX DUE?

In an interview with Quebec cable channel MusiquePlus, Eidos France director general Patrick Melichor said that the company is looking into resurrecting the Deus Ex franchise, the series started by Warren Spector and the now-closed Ion Storm Austin studio. Melichor says the company is still waiting on final confirmation.

MADDEN CURSES VICTIM BEFORE COVER?

Nobody knows which NFL player is going to be featured on Madden NFL 09 next year, but we can tell you one who isn't: Brady Quinn. Loose Talk has heard that the Cleveland QB, who famously fell from being a top three pick to going 22nd in this April's NFL draft, angered EA Sports by skipping a pre-draft event hosted by the publisher to which he had previously committed.

■ Fight Night

EA'S KNOCKOUT KING GOES FOR ANOTHER K.O.

Kudo Tsunoda from EA has made quite a name for himself by resurrecting the Knockout Kings boxing franchise as Fight Night. Loose Talk has heard that Tsunoda and company are taking on a new fighting game franchise at the Chicago studio that will be due early next year. No word as to whether the studio will continue to work on Fight Night and Def Jam.
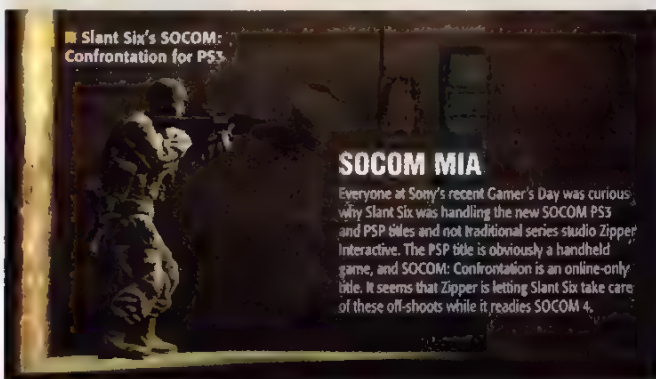
■ Slant Six's SOCOM: Confrontation for PS3

SOCOM MIA

Everyone at Sony's recent Gamer's Day was curious why Slant Six was handling the new SOCOM PS3 and PSP titles and not traditional series studio Zipper Interactive. The PSP title is obviously a handheld game, and SOCOM: Confrontation is an online-only title. It seems that Zipper is letting Slant Six take care of these off-shoots while it readies SOCOM 4.

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

NAME THAT GAME

Test Your Sight

Thanks to Vince McMahon's greedy ego, it's easy to forget that the WWE (and the licensed THQ games) wasn't always the only wrestling event in town. A few years ago, Acclaim – of all companies – had a wrestling series that produced three games. Featuring heroes like Hulk Hogan, Andre the Giant, and Rowdy Roddy Piper, this franchise brought wrestling fans back to the glory days.

(Answer on page 33)

THE INEVITABLE ENCORE
GUITAR HERO GOES BACK TO THE '80s

Even with the hairspray, lipstick, and tight jeans (we're talking about the guys), believe it or not, the '80s rocked. And if something rocks, you can bet Guitar Hero is on top of it, cranking it to 11. Co-publisher Activision is tuning up its guitars in preparation for Guitar Hero Encore: Rocks the '80s, which will come in mid-July.

The game contains 30 songs, '80s-themed venues, unlockable guitars, and more. It will only be available for the PlayStation 2. Although Activision hasn't said anything on the topic, it will be interesting to see if these songs will eventually be made available on Xbox Live Marketplace – and for what price.

Interestingly, Harmonix developed this expansion pack. Before releasing Guitar Hero II, Harmonix was bought by MTV (and is now doing Rock Band – see page 62 for more), while original Guitar Hero publisher RedOctane was purchased by Activision – who is putting out Guitar Hero III by the end of the year courtesy of Tony Hawk developer Neversoft. It's confusing, we know. It's like trying to figure out which member of Poison is actually a dude.

SWIPIN' THE SONG LIST

Here are fourteen of the thirty songs slated for Guitar Hero: Rocks the 80s. RedOctane says that it also has some exclusive songs (i.e. you won't see them in competing game Rock Band) up its sleeve.

- 18 and Life – Skid Row
- Bathroom Wall – Faster Pussycat
- Heat of the Moment – Asia
- Holy Diver – Dio
- I Ran – Flock of Seagulls (original artist track)
- I Wanna Rock – Twisted Sister (original artist track)
- I Want Candy – Bow Wow Wow
- Lonely is the Night – Billy Squire
- Metal Health – Quiet Riot
- Nothing But a Good Time – Poison
- Play With Me – Extreme
- Round and Round – Ratt
- Shakin' – Eddie Money
- Synchronicity II – Police (original artist track)

THE HEADLINE BAND

New details have also come out for Guitar Hero III. The next-generation versions come with a Gibson Les Paul guitar, while the PS2 edition has a Gibson Kramer guitar. Both are wireless. GH III will also feature real rock venues, online play, and a "multiplayer action-inspired battle mode."

- Barracuda – Heart
- Cherub Rock – Smashing Pumpkins (original artist track)
- Cult of Personality – Living Colour (original artist track)
- Knights of Cydonia – Muse (original artist track)
- My Name is Jonas – Weezer (original artist track)
- Paint it Black – The Rolling Stones (original artist track)
- Rock and Roll All Nite – Kiss
- Sabotage – Beastie Boys (original artist track)
- School's Out – Alice Cooper
- Slow Ride – Fog Hat
- The Metal – Tenacious D (original artist track)

CAN DRAMA BE A GAME GENRE?

The video game industry is faced with a number of difficult questions and many ways to look at them. In Game Informer's debate section, we attempt to analyze these scenarios from different angles. Like a typical debate club, our editors have been assigned to defend a position whether or not it agrees with their personal views. In this edition, we discuss the viability of less violent, more drama-focused games in the mainstream market.

PRO

CONFLICT AND VIOLENCE ARE ALWAYS going to be a big part of games. Even before pictures were flashing on screens, we've had thousands of years of games that emulated warfare – a little chess anyone? There's a basic human instinct to observe cause and effect, and it just so happens that the various forms of beating someone senseless are a great study in the concept. But can games offer anything else, free of the boundaries of violence or even competition? Is there a place in the market for an interactive romantic comedy, or a tense political thriller, minus the need for boss fights against fire-breathing dragons? Perhaps for the first time, the hardware on the market offers the freedom to create lifelike emotion, realistic movement and faces, and production values that rival Hollywood films. A widening market of consumers includes a spread of both women and older adults – audiences that have traditionally opted for less violent fare in their entertainment choices. And if those growing audiences want to join us poor souls raised from boyhood on first person shooters and martial arts tournaments, the more the merrier – Halo and Mortal Kombat aren't going anywhere. But just like this summer's theaters will have *Transformers* and *Spider-Man 3* sharing space with *Knocked Up* and *Ocean's 13*, is it so hard to believe that games might offer similar variety? We're certainly not the movie industry, nor are we just like books, theater, or music. But like those very different mediums, games are just as capable now of communicating heartfelt relationships, terse arguments, and sidesplitting comedy. Unlike other media, games are now able to do so within an interactive context that includes branching story paths and artificially intelligent characters that react to your actions in real time. Knowing that, the question seems less about whether drama can become a viable genre, and more about when it's going to take off.—**MILLER**

CON

ANYONE WHO DENIES THE IMPORTANCE of story in video games is an idiot. A compelling plot adds context to the gameplay and makes the experience more immersive for the user – but dramatic sequences are not enough to hold a game together. I appreciate the occasional title that forsakes the standard space marine or barbarian to explore more mature themes, but titles like these can never cohere into a mainstream genre. Without the requirements of quick thinking, dexterity, and precision, what's left? Dialogue, cutscenes, and a lot of left analog stick movement. It might be interactive, but can you call it a game? What we've seen from these "drama games" so far – even the good ones like Phoenix Wright and Indigo Prophecy – is simple gameplay used as a vehicle to tell a story. By sacrificing solid mechanics in favor of plot exploration, these games effectively turn their back on the interactivity that makes video games unique as a medium. Drama can give significance to on-screen action, but can't replace it. I'll use my favorite boss fight as an example: the battle against The End in Metal Gear Solid 3. Even in a series renowned for its rich, complex narrative, it's the gameplay that makes this fight memorable – it's the fact that you feel hunted, hiding for your life and taking any shot you can get. The whole set-up involving an ancient sniper is just an excuse to make the player utilize those game mechanics. Without them, your only real participation would be advancing text boxes. No matter how compelling the tale a game tells, that kind of minimal interaction can't compete with the big dogs for mainstream attention in an entertainment medium built on the concept of active participation.—**JOE**

BUST OUT THE BIG LUMBER.

THE BIGS

EXCITEMENT. ACTION. DRAMA. THIS IS THE BIGGEST GAME IN TOWN.

Welcome to the Bigs. Where pastime meets primetime with epic arcade baseball action! Stadiums literally explode with intensity and drama! Crank it up with a "Power-up" feature that helps you launch tape measure, seat-seeking missiles. Or play the Rookie Challenge mode that lets you guide a player from spring training rook all the way to World Series megawatt MVP!

2K BEATS: Jane's Addiction, Motorhead, Fu Manchu, Primus, Killing Joke, Rollins Band, White Zombie, Primus, Satellite Party, Screaming Trees and The Stooges

WWW.2KSPORTS.COM/THEBIGS

SONY SHOWS OFF UPCOMING SLATE

CROTEAM GETS SERIOUS

Serious Sam developer Croteam is teaming up with Gamecock for a next-gen/PC title using the studio's Serious Engine 3. The game isn't expected until 2009.

THE NINTENDO MONOLITH

Nintendo has bought 80 percent of Xenosaga and Baten Kaitos (shown) developer Monolith Software. Although the Xenosaga series ended sooner than expected, hopefully this move gives the Wii some good RPG content.

FINAL FANTASY VERSUS

The Final Fantasy universe continues to spin off in different directions, this time as a fighting game for PSP called Final Fantasy Dissidia. At SquareEnix's recent event in Japan it showed a trailer for the title that featured Sephiroth and Zidane duking it out. No release date was given for Dissidia.

PS3 HAS STRANGLEHOLD ON COLLECTOR'S EDITION

Midway's Stranglehold is finally coming out this summer for the PS3, 360, and PC. PS3 owners who want to put down an additional $10 for the Collector's Edition will get a bonus – a copy of the seminal film *Hard Boiled* on the same Blu-ray disc as the game itself.

ESA'S NEW HEAD CHEESE

The ESA has announced that Mike Gallagher (former assistant secretary of commerce for communications and chief telecommunications and policy advisor to the Bush administration) will take over from president Doug Lowenstein.

■ SOCOM: Confrontation

PAIN

This PlayStation Network title debuted at the event, and features human-based Burnout-like carnage where you launch one of four characters from a stationary catapult at an environment full of stuff to crash into. Of course, your score is determined by how much mayhem you cause. Pain will have a number of single-player and multiplayer modes. The game's price hasn't been determined yet, although Sony says that additional environments and other content will be available after its holiday release. Fellow Network titles High Velocity Bowling, Go! Puzzle, and Super Stardust HD were also in attendance.

■ Pain   ■ Super Stardust HD

SYPHON FILTER: LOGAN'S SHADOW

Syphon Filter: Dark Mirror was one of our favorite PSP titles last year, and Gabe is back this fall in Syphon Filter: Logan's Shadow. The game's plot accuses Gabe's longtime partner Lian Xing of being a double agent after she goes missing. Logan's Shadow adds underwater combat, blind fire from cover, new melee actions, and interactive God of War-like moments to Gabe's arsenal.

■ Syphon Filter: Logan's Shadow   ■ Syphon Filter: Logan's Shadow

NEW & OLD MIX AT SONY GAMER'S DAY

Sony invited us to its state-of-the-art, $6 million motion-capture studio near San Diego to let us get some hands-on time with a selection of first and third-party PS3 and PSP titles. LittleBigPlanet, Lair, Heavenly Sword, Warhawk, Eye of Judgement, Ratchet & Clank Future: Tools of Destruction, Uncharted: Drake's Fortune, TimeShift, Devil May Cry 4, and more were at hand. Along with the games, Sony made a couple of announcements, including news that Warhawk will be available via both download on the PlayStation Network and at retail. The copy on store shelves (which doesn't have a price yet) will, however, include a Bluetooth headset.

After running through a demonstration showing how the studio uses 88 cameras for its motion-capture process in series such as SOCOM, Sony unveiled two new games for the franchise. SOCOM: Confrontation represents a departure for the series because the Slant Six-developed title is online only (it will be available in stores and online). Sony showed off some very early footage of the 32-player title, and the game features different choosable international special forces units, customizable appearances (including for clans), Sixaxis functionality, and more. Downloads are planned after its November release, including new modes, units, weapons, etc.

SOCOM: Tactical Strike

Slant Six (who worked on parts of Syphon Filter: Dark Mirror) is also handling the PSP title SOCOM: Tactical Strike. This October game is also new territory for the series because it's more like Brothers in Arms than an FPS. Your SEALs are split into alpha and bravo pairs, and you must strategically deploy them with a variety of commands. Suppressing and barrage fire, order queues, unit-specific abilities, customized loadouts and upgrades, and more will be at your disposal in either the single or the multiplayer (Ad-Hoc or Infrastructure) modes.

For a preview of God of War: Chains of Olympus, check out our coverage on page 77.

FOLKLORE

This game was called Monster Kingdom: Unknown Realms at Tokyo Game Show last year, and is developed by Genji: Days of the Blade's Game Republic. The action/RPG has you battling and absorbing the magical powers of 105 creatures (at times using the Sixaxis motion controls), which are then used in battle accompanied by some cool visual affects. No release date has been given for Folklore.

Folklore

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

Top 10 Video Game Fixtures To Add When Remodeling Your House

10 Green pipe leading to a coin-filled basement

9 NPCs. They don't move or make good conversation, but they fool robbers into thinking someone's home

8 Dozens of breakable boxes with goodies inside

7 The Dark World/Twilight Realm. This one could be tricky

6 An enemy spawn point positioned directly over a spike pit. Hours of entertainment that puts a home theater to shame

5 Miniboss room, preferably guarding the master bedroom

4 Sniping points surrounding the high-probability snack theft areas

3 A jungle level (this is a must)

2 Save points for when you're about to do something stupid

1 Bottomless pits

Name That Game Answer: Legends of Wrestling

Jump in.

DANIEL VASQUEZ
GEARS OF WAR SHARPSHOOTER

As a new feature, Game Informer will be scouring the leaderboards in search of top gamers to find the best of the best, uncovering the person behind the handle, and learning his or her strategies. So, if you get a pesky message over Xbox Live or PlayStation Network from GameInformerMag, please don't delete it. You could be the next featured gamer.

Handle: Vaca 27
Age: 20
Hometown: Aurora, Illinois

> "Sometimes I wouldn't sleep at all just to stay on top."

n the month of April, there was no one better at Warzone mode in Gears of War than Vaca 27. The dedicated fanatic, whose real name is Daniel Vasquez, has slain more COG and Locust horde than most of us can imagine.

Not surprisingly, Vasquez had to invest a little time to get there. "Yeah, there was a lot of practice involved," he says. "Many days I'd only get four hours of sleep. Sometimes I wouldn't sleep at all just to stay on top." He has even taken some time off of work to participate in the Gears of War 2007 Global Xbox Live Tournament.

Vasquez has to get up in the wee hours of the morning to make it to his laser operator job at 6:00a.m. Though this duty may sound potentially awesome, he describes it as relatively mundane. "I have to make sure the letters and graphics on credit card applications are aligned, and that the application fits in the envelope," he says. "I make around 70,000 to 80,000 applications a day."

His favorite match type, Warzone, is basically a standard deathmatch mode with the ability to resurrect fallen teammates. Vasquez favors this mode because he feels that the competition is the strongest. The sniper rifle is his weapon of choice due to his penchant for headshots, and he loves the map War Machine for its advantageous sniping locations.

So what is it about Gears of War that inspired his dedication? "I knew since the beginning it was going to be a big hit, and I love first-person shooter games," Vasquez says. "But I wouldn't call myself an expert yet. There are a lot of good players out there that I would like to face. Once I beat the best players, then I can call myself an expert."

The modest gamer recommends that players spend plenty of time in player matches before entering the cutthroat ranked games. He also stresses the importance of practicing with all of the weapons instead of just focusing on one in order to be prepared for any situation. But most of all, Vasquez says, "Don't let the trash talk get to you!" ■ ■ ■

changing the game
3d realms bets big on new ip

ScubaVenture

3 D Realms got its start in the shareware market almost 20 years ago as Apogee. Best known for its premier character, Duke Nukem, and the legendary delays since his last appearance (see sidebar), 3D Realms has been lending its development expertise to hand-selected projects off and on since the early '90s. Wolfenstein 3D, Descent (before it was sold to Interplay), Max Payne, and Prey all came to life with the help of 3D Realms -- both financially and creatively. The strange thing is, with the exception of Prey, you won't see their name on any of the game boxes. So how will a company with this low of a profile become what it calls "the Jerry Bruckheimer of the game industry?"

"We generally don't mind staying behind the scenes, and really that's probably the best way for us to handle things," says Scott Miller, 3D Realms co-founder and head of the company's Projects division. "Generally how it works

is either we'll approach a team with an idea or they'll approach us and we end up reworking their idea, trying to blend in all of the things that we learned over the years. We're really trying to focus on having a gameplay hook, a storytelling hook, and a technology hook — just trying to have these epic games."

Aside from the creative back and forth that 3D Realms enjoys with the developers it works with, the company also provides funding to get these projects off the ground. This in turn allows up-and-coming developers to bypass the traditional publishing model. "When you're working with a publisher, generally the publisher has full ownership and you're just kind of treated as a contractor," Miller says. The standard 3D Realms Project deal is a 50/50 IP split on the game in development. "That way the team is really motivated and everyone has ownership in it," Miller says. "And when people have ownership in something they're going to do their best work." But how did

3D Realms carve out this Hollywood equivalent of the "producer" role in the first place?

The seeds of 3D Realms Projects started back in the early '90s when co-founders Scott Miller and George Broussard saw some interesting games coming out of Softdisk. It turns out that they were created by John Carmack, John Romero, and several other key members of the team who would later form id. Apogee was able to get the team to create Commander Keen for them during off-hours at Softdisk. Needless to say, Softdisk wasn't pleased that another publisher had a game made at its offices. In order to avoid legal entanglements, it was agreed that id would get to keep the Commander Keen IP, but they

would have to make 12 more games for Softdisk.

During this tenure, id developed a 3D engine and implemented it in games like Catacomb 3D and Hovertank. Miller saw the potential in the jump to 3D and asked id to make a 3D title for his company. "Unfortunately, they could not devote the time to pursue such a game because of their ongoing commitment to Softdisk," Miller says. "Recognizing that a 3D game needed to be made for shareware while the iron was hot, I proposed the following deal to id: Apogee would secretly make a game for Softdisk and put the

id logo on it, and this would give id the time they need to make a 3D game for Apogee to release. This is exactly what happened, Apogee made a game called ScubaVenture, which went to Softdisk, and id made Wolfenstein 3D for us."

Wolfenstein 3D went down in FPS history and boosted both id and Apogee to high-profile status. The windfall allowed Broussard to focus on bringing the Duke Nukem franchise to 3D while Miller searched out a new promising game to bring into the fold. The company got together with Parallax and started work on Descent. Partway through development, however, rising costs forced 3D Realms to sell its stake in the game off to Interplay, effectively cutting off 3D Realms'

chance at a repeat performance. Descent ended up being one of Interplay's top titles.

After Duke Nukem 3D exploded onto the scene in 1996, 3D Realms searched out a new project. It had previously worked with Finnish developer Remedy on a racing game called Death Rally and the team was anxious to make another title. One game called Dark Justice caught their eye. "It was sort of top-down isometric kind of 3D game where the ceilings were gone and you just saw [the character] walking around in rooms and shooting," Miller remembers. He saw potential, but had some different ideas with the direction. "'We want to do what we did with Duke Nukem and focus on a lead central character,'" Miller said to the Remedy team. "So we developed the character of Max Payne, went full 3D, went with a whole modern day New York story. Basically, we were really involved with the design of the game and helped them shape what became Max Payne."

Samuli Syvahuoko, co-founder of Remedy, reflects on 3D Realms' input on Max Payne. "I still recall when Scott Miller visited Finland in the late '90s. We were playing around with an idea that the bullets in the game would actually be modeled and they'd physically fly out of the guns, as opposed to weapons being instant-hit (like they used to be). To demonstrate to Scott that the bullets were actually flying in the air, the game was slowed down. When Scott saw this effect, he immediately thought it needed to be incorporated into the core gameplay somehow. And after a while, bullet-time was born."

Remedy and 3D Realms split IP ownership and royalties 50/50. Both companies made tens of millions off of the series and eventually sold the rights to Take-Two for $48 million. Syvahuoko

■ Max Payne

went off to found mobile games company Fathammer in 2000, and 3D Realms started looking again for a new project. Human Head approached the company, interested in working with them somehow. "We had previously worked on [Prey] in the '90s and it was just kind of sitting dead for us," Miller says. "We decided to resurrect it and [Human Head] liked the idea so we handed over all of our design materials. Not only that, but we decided to rework the design for how the game had been brought up to that date, which was back in 2001." Prey met with critical success and sold over a million units worldwide.

After selling Fathammer in 2006, Samuli Syvahuoko got back into console and PC gaming with his new company, Recoil Games, and pitched 3D Realms on what eventually became Earth No More, a game based on disaster genre films (see page 40). Syvahuoko says the reason he wanted to work with 3D Realms again was because of their attitude towards design and free-flowing creative structure. "It all came down to a decade-old relationship of mutual trust and respect," Syvahuoko says. "If you have two very creative and professional parties working together seamlessly, you are bound to achieve great results."

Starting with Earth No More, 3D Realms is taking their Projects division to the next level. "In the past, we've only focused on working with one outside

developer at a time," Miller says. "Now we're deciding that there's really no reason why we only have to work with one external team." Three other unannounced projects are in the works, and the company hopes to have up to eight total when they're running at full steam.

Though finding developers interested in the Projects system hasn't been all that tricky. The lure of creative control, IP ownership, and bargaining power when it comes time to shop the game to publishers is tough to deny. Miller also points out that most of the developers 3D Realms has worked with have gone on to great independent success. "[It's] like Remedy with Max Payne, now they're a fully independent studio that can call their own shots and develop their own projects," Miller says. "They've now got a super high profile deal with

Microsoft [for Alan Wake – Ed.] and had they not worked with us and gone the normal route of trying to get work with publishers, I really doubt that would have happened."

But 3D Realms' focus on new IPs and smaller developers doesn't mean they're opposed to revisit past franchises. After all, don't they still share the rights to Prey with Human Head? "Yeah, there's definitely a hint there," Miller says. "I can't announce anything now, but, yeah, you're on the right trail."

■ Wolfenstein 3D

EL	SCORE	LIVES	HEALTH	AMMO
	500	3		100%	29

■ Descent

ALWAYS BET ON DUKE

New IPs and fresh ideas are great and all, but what about that other project? You know, the one that's been in development for over a decade now. Should gamers be concerned that all of this 3D Realms Projects business is taking away resources from the much-maligned Duke Nukem Forever? "No, not at all because basically this company is co-owned by two people, myself and George Broussard," says Scott Miller. "George Broussard is Mr. Duke Nukem. That's really his project. I don't have much to do with that and he doesn't have much to do with all of the external projects that I work on."

Since we're on the subject anyway, how is the good Duke doing these days? "Anything I say now is going to be like 'Yeah, I'll believe it when I see it,'" says Miller. "So there's really nothing I can say now that's going to appease anyone or convince anyone or anything like that. We are absolutely the first to admit that this project is an industry joke at this time. There's no doubt about it. We're kind of a victim of our past success. Because we were so successful in the past, in a way it kind of gave us too much time to try and make the perfect game. But in the last year internally we've done a lot of new things, brought in a lot of new experienced people, and refocused the project. From an outsider's point of view, even though I'm inside the company, I can say that there's a light at the end of the tunnel finally. I'm not going to give any sort of release date or anything, but this thing is moving quickly forward. Obviously, no game is worth any sort of wait like this, but this game's going to make people happy for sure."

For now, check out these screens of how the game looks today. The lower image previously appeared on the web about the size of a postage stamp in a 3D Realms job posting, and the upper has never been seen outside of the company before. This is the largest 3D Realms would allow the screens to appear in print.

The ensemble cast is a key element of Earth No More

earth no more
disaster done right

PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360 | PC
> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION (MULTIPLAYER TBA)
> **PUBLISHER** TBA
> **DEVELOPER** RECOIL GAMES/3D REALMS
> **RELEASE** 2009

" ...now humankind must face the results of its foolishness "

– 3D Realms' Scott Miller

Picture some of the big disaster movies and thrillers in recent film history. *Aliens, War of the Worlds, Terminator 2, 28 Days Later, The Thing*. All of these movies are linked by epic action, major threats to humanity, and ensemble casts that may not always get along due to the extreme circumstances. At this point in gaming, there really hasn't been a sufficient counterpart to this genre. Newly formed developer Recoil Games (run by the co-founder of Remedy) is out to change that with the help of 3D Realms and their revamped Projects program.

Earth No More opens in a small New England town recently quarantined due to a mysterious outbreak. Poisonous red vines have been spreading quickly, simultaneously strangling and terraforming the environment, not to mention mutating nearby plant and animal life. The developers are saying right up front that this so-called spore isn't from outer space; in fact, they're trying to stay far away from sci-fi clichés. "[The spore] is the result of man's ongoing and abusive tampering with nature herself," says 3D Realms co-founder Scott Miller. "Just as when man discovered the power of the atom, we had a choice to use that power for good or otherwise. Sadly, man always chooses 'otherwise.' It is using that same blueprint that the spore came about, and now humankind must face the results of its foolishness."

The lead character happens to be at this ground zero along with four other characters that he will team up with along the way. "The primary thrust of gameplay surrounds the nucleus of this human interaction, which is the ensemble cast," says creative director Raphael van Lierop. "Each character in our cast is fully realized, with their own back-stories, personalities, motivations, and secrets. Each character brings their own perspective to the experience, and a lot of the gameplay and storytelling is driven by the conflict that arises when these personalities and perspectives clash. Each cast member has their own arc, and nobody will be unchanged by the events that unfold during the game. So you'll get to see real character growth, something that is core to enjoying a book or movie, but

something we rarely get to see in a game."

With all of this interaction and dialogue, it's easy to assume that you'll be staring at a lot of cutscenes. But Earth No More will have none of them – at least not in a traditional sense. The game will utilize a conversation mechanic that will supposedly rival Mass Effect. "We are developing a truly interactive dialogue system that lets you either remain passive to group conversations or participate as much as you want, and with whomever you want," Miller says. If you let the conversations run their course without any input, however, you will suffer some unspecified consequences in the following levels.

The development team is specifically moving away from what

they call the "lone hero," while also avoiding a squad-based direction. Players will work alongside allies in a manner more along the lines of Half-Life 2 rather than Rainbow Six, with everything from puzzle solving to attacks. "We're going to design almost every weapon in the game to where it's going to have a sort of collaborative mode to it," says Miller. One gun called the Linker works like a reverse proton pack from *Ghostbusters*. Players are encouraged to cross the streams and focus attacks together to gain extra attack power against more imposing enemies. Another possible scenario has one character carrying a charging device that strengthens the weapons of those around him. This person won't be able to equip a weapon himself, so he'll have to

It takes plenty of cooperation with your AI teammates to make it through the spore-infested streets

Early effects of the spore...
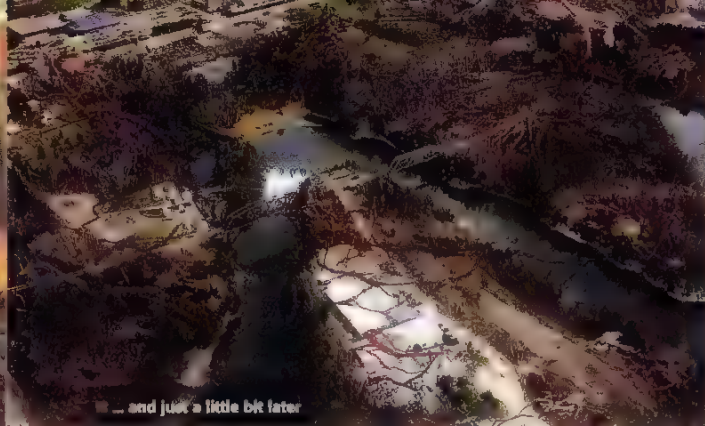
... and just a little bit later

rely on others to protect him.

The good guys aren't the only ones who can team up, however. Enemies are being designed to complement each other's skills as well. For example, a certain plant enemy will shoot out poisonous spores that hook into you and are more of an annoyance than anything else Later on, however, these spores will also serve as a tracking beacon that will help other enemies sniff out your position. Another bird-type enemy is relatively weak on its own, but it has the ability to call in reinforcements. The developers want every enemy to somehow gain an advantage by grouping with another. "We're going to develop as many [of these relationships] as we can, several dozen, to where

one enemy on its own is sort of dangerous, but two or even three enemies in combination becomes really, really tough," Miller says.

This doesn't even figure in the most dangerous enemy of all – one controlled by another player. In addition to the ability to play through the entire campaign via online co-op, Earth No More will allow players to jump into others' games posing as an enemy. "The idea is that as smart as we make computer AI, human [intelligence] is still more unpredictable and might be able to come up with more clever tactics than what we can come up with," Miller says. "You might run into an area where there are three enemies and you won't know that one of them is controlled by a human. Suddenly

this human-controlled opponent might start doing things that are totally unpredictable based on how you've seen these enemies react before."

You can go after specific friends or just jump into a general queue that will drop you into a random game instantly as a Stalker. Players can only enter parts of the game that they've already beaten themselves, and will earn Achievements and Home trophies for taking down heroes. After dying as a Stalker, you'll be thrown into another person's game in what will hopefully be a smooth transition. Up to two Stalkers at a time will only be able to encroach on certain areas of a player's game so you don't have to worry about people interfering with key story scenes or boss battles. Plus, you can just turn the Stalker feature off if you'd like. Standard multiplayer deathmatch modes will also be available, pitting survivors against spore-

Expect to see plenty of national landmarks throughout the course of the game

infected enemies, though we don't know much more than that at this point.

Recoil and 3D Realms admit that they're talking about Earth No More a little earlier than the industry standard, but it's all part of the plan. "Most games probably announce with 18 months of release I imagine, at the worst two years. We're announcing this I guess maybe a year early, but I'm not really too worried about

Courtesy of Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment

it," Miller says. "Our plan is to kind of go quiet for the next year and not keep beating people over the head with something that's still so far out, but I think it still is exciting to let people know what's coming." ■ ■ ■

Earth No More will run on Unreal Engine 3

Ball Park
BRAND

HUNGER GETS
WHAT HUNGER WANTS

THE GOOD, THE BAD, THE UGLY

When You Want Your News Categorized With A Sarcastic Editorial Spin

QUOTE

I COULD MAKE HALO. IT'S NOT THAT I COULDN'T DESIGN THAT GAME. IT'S
JUST THAT I CHOOSE NOT TO. ONE THING ABOUT MY GAME DESIGN IS THAT I
NEVER TRY TO LOOK FOR WHAT PEOPLE WANT AND THEN TRY TO MAKE THAT
GAME DESIGN.

– Nintendo's Shigeru Miyamoto on how to find out people what they want
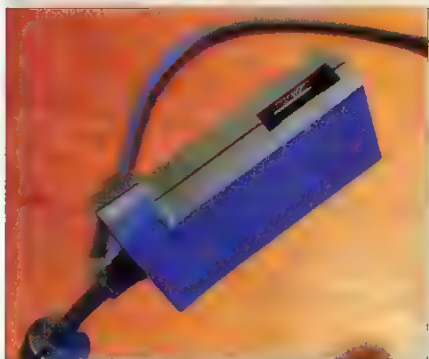
GOOD

For those of you who've purchased an Xbox 360 Elite and need a trans-
fer cable to bring over your non-movie data from your previous 360
hard drive, Microsoft's web site is offering to send you a free cable.

GOOD

Gaming legend and space flight enthusiast Richard Garriott recently took famed astrophysicist
Stephen Hawking (who is normally wheelchair-bound due to ALS) up into the atmosphere
aboard the Vomit Comet, a plane that simulates what it's like to float around in zero gravity.

UGLY

After Sony Online Entertainment
acquired Vanguard creator Sigil
Games, around half of the company's
staff was fired in the parking lot. Jeff
Butler, Sigil's president, will remain
to head up a help project. Other
remaining staff will move over to
SOE – look out.
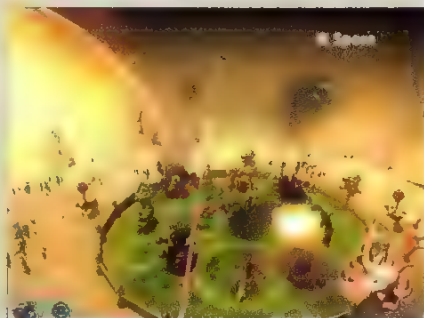
BAD

EA's Spore has been delayed indefinitely, while the PS3 version of
THQ's Saints Row has been canned entirely. The only good news out
of this is that THQ says that developer Volition has begun work on a
Saints Row sequel which will appear simultaneously on both the Xbox
360 and PS3.

TECMO BOWL ™

GOOD

After years of hinting, Tecmo finally revealed that both
Tecmo Bowl and Rygar are making a return. The infamous
football game is set to appear in 2008 for unknown
platforms, while Rygar and his diskarmor shield swing into
action on the Wii. For more on the classic Tecmo Bowl,
check out Classic GI on page 112.

GOOD

It's sad to bid adieu to the creator of the
PlayStation, Ken Kutagari, who is retiring as
chairman and group CEO of Sony Computer
Entertainment. But let's face it – they guy has
become a liability with his crazy comments.
Taking over his spot is current president
Kaz Hirai, while Kutaragi remains as a
senior technology advisor. Oh, as if in a last
hurrah, Kutaragi has already started talking
about PlayStations 4, 5, and 6. D'oh! We're
going to miss you Ken, you crazy Japanese
executive you.

THE
GLOBAL
PERSPECTIVE

PLAYSTATION 3

As the head of Sony's worldwide studios, Phil Harrison is spearheading the company's next-gen software strategy, including the Home online service

PHIL HARRISON

PRESIDENT, WORLDWIDE STUDIOS, SONY COMPUTER ENTERTAINMENT

>> Coming from a background in garage development, Phil Harrison has risen through the ranks to become one of the key players in Sony's PlayStation empire. As head of the company's worldwide studios, Harrison is responsible for shaping Sony's in-house software on all its platforms. <<

PSP has entered the market and established an installed base, but software sales are not strong. What do developers need to do to create PSP content that's more compelling?
Well, whether you're talking about PS2, PS3, PSP, or any platform, it's to play to the strengths that the technology has and the differences that that technology represents to the consumer. I think we've done that successfully in some titles and those have proven to be very successful. We can always do more to exploit the portable nature of PSP; we can do more to exploit the mobile, Wi-Fi, web connectivity of the machine. You can look at titles that have done that very well – Monster Hunter Portable in Japan is a great example. This is a title that has really taken advantage of what PSP is about, and it sold over one million units. I wouldn't agree that the software sales have been unsatisfactory, but I do agree that we can always do more to take advantage of the machine's capabilities.

You're beta testing the Home online service right now. Will it have all the features that

But I think clearly the functions of communication between users are what people love. That's not necessarily a surprise, but we'll look to increasing the sophistication of the methods of communication.

Do you expect Home to be launched sometime this year?
We have said that, if the beta trial is successful, that the service will go live in October. I'm only two weeks into that beta period right now, but nothing has changed our outlook.

One area in which Sony has succeeded in the past is platform exclusives. But recently, many traditional PlayStation exclusives have gone to Xbox 360 as well – Virtua Fighter, Grand Theft Auto, and Devil May Cry, for example. Is there anything you can do to combat this trend, or is the era of exclusives coming to an end?
Well, from a third-party exclusive point of view, that doesn't fall under my remit, because I'm looking after Worldwide Studios and our first-party output.

different titles. What we did at GDC was announce that we were taking large portions of that technology base that were easy to support and sharing that with our third parties, in a program we call PlayStation Edge, which is taking the highest performing low-level libraries that we have on the platform and making them available for all developers.

PlayStation 3 has been positioned as a very powerful, high-end machine. One problem you have right now is that we haven't seen any games thus far that look like they couldn't be done on Xbox 360. When do you think we'll see games hit the market that showcase the PS3 over and above what the 360 can do?
Well, I would take exception to your analysis. I think we do have titles that illustrate the point of difference that PS3 brings, both in terms of gameplay and underlying game technology. There are things we're demonstrating onscreen in games like MotorStorm, Resistance: Fall of Man, and Formula 1 that cannot be done on any other system. All three of those

I hope that LittleBigPlanet and Home will be recognized for their little steps in the right direction.

have been talked about and shown so far when it launches?
And some more. We're obviously in a beta trial right now, so it's very difficult for me to make very definitive statements. Part of the purpose of a beta trial is to work with an extended audience of real users in the community to find out what works and what doesn't, what they like and don't like. Some things that we thought were really important have resonated less strongly with users and the inverse – things we hadn't considered important the users love . We're starting to see some really valuable feedback from the user base. We're very pleased with the progress so far and the way the technology and infrastructure is scaling out. I think by the time we get to September, we'll be able to make some definitive statements as to exactly the content that's going to be in the deployed service day one.

Could you give an example of something you thought would be important but has been ignored by the users? Or vice versa, something you thought was a minor detail but they are really excited about?
It's too early to really share those details. I don't mean to evade your question, but I don't think we've gotten all the answers we're looking for yet.

But, obviously, I'm looking at the platform as an entire portfolio. And yes, I'm always concerned to make sure that consumers can buy the best games and get the best game experiences to validate their system purchase. [But] as long as the games they get are great, [consumers] don't care if they are third-party or first-party…. What I do believe is that the investments we have made in Worldwide Studios globally – U.S., Europe, and Japan – will yield the best quality software and the highest quality experiences that are clearly going to be exclusive to the platform…. We have a larger platform-dedicated development resource than our competitors combined. So all of that goes towards the fact that the best games with the best technology are coming exclusively to [Sony] platforms.

You'd announced that Sony was going to share technology and resources between all their worldwide studios for PS3 development. To what scale is that occuring right now?
Every game on PS3 has some degree of shared technology internally. There are no games that are islands in our portfolio. We have a common online functionality, we have a common sound engine, we have a common graphics engine, we have a common low-level rendering, which are used variously by

are launch window titles. Now, it's always dangerous to judge any system by its launch lineup…. You only have to go back to the games that launched PlayStation 1 and PlayStation 2. If you took those few dozen titles and analyzed them, you would never have imagined that either of those formats would have gone on to sell over 100 million units each.

From an American gamer's perspective, more and more of your triple-A titles are coming from the U.S. and Europe, where in the past, more of them came from Japan. Does that represent a shift of power within Sony?
I think that it was a conscious strategy to build strong development organizations in every geographical area of operations. Because – as we've seen with the music business and the film business – locally produced repertoire accounts for a large percentage of local sales. If you look at the music business in France, about 75 percent of the records sold in France are from French artists. And, although the games industry is probably more global than any other form of entertainment, in order to grow the industry, we have to create local entertainment experiences. That doesn't mean we've de-emphasized Japan. We have this reasonably successful billion-dollar IP called Gran Turismo that you might be familiar

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Well, it's obviously a big deal when the founder and creator of the business decides to retire. That's a moment you can't ignore in an organization's history. But when we started Sony Computer Entertainment, we could fit the entire company in a boardroom in order to have a meeting. There are now over 5,000 people in the company worldwide, and it's a very different beast than it was when he started. Clearly, he's put in place a management team he felt comfortable with taking the business forward. When he stepped up to the position of chairman last year, he really took an active decision to move away from day-to-day management of the operations of the business. So, from that point of view, it's not really a significant change to my working life. I'll miss the opportunity to interact with him and to work with him. He's an incredibly stimulating and demanding person to work for. But he's still going to be around; I don't think we'll escape him that easily. [Laughs] I hope you quote that as a "laugh" at the end!

Your announcement of LittleBigPlanet caused a lot of excitement. How much emphasis do you place on this more casual, online gaming category moving forward for Sony over the next five years?
I think it's going to be – not just for Sony, but for the industry – one of the primary movers of our business. The idea of empowering the audience of gamers and allowing them to create, express, and share their creativity with other users is going to be an incredibly core part of the growth of our industry. I'm absolutely convinced of this. I don't think in 10 years from now we'll recognize the business we're in. But I hope that LittleBigPlanet and Home will be recognized for their little steps in the right direction. Did you see the GDC presentation [on LittleBigPlanet]? One of the incredible things was that you were in a room full of 5,000 game developers…and we actually had to stop for about 30 seconds while people were clapping. To get that kind of unprompted, emotional outpouring for me validated the entire strategy.

I think that the Wii taps into some of the desires from consumers that LittleBigPlanet does – a smaller, but unique gaming experience. Were you surprised at how successful the Wii has been so far?
Nintendo clearly knows what they are doing. Whenever Nintendo introduces a platform, the world takes notice. There's no denying that. But I think the question is will the gameplay mechanics they've introduced stand the test of time? I don't mean that as some sort of veiled criticism; it's just a question mark. I'm interested in seeing how that goes, because we have experimented with some of those game mechanics ourselves with EyeToy – and social gaming with Buzz and SingStar.

Right now, you're behind both Wii and 360 in North America. When do you think you'll start turning the corner in terms of installed base and how will you do that?
Well, in terms of gaining ground on installed base, we've seen the growth in the March sales. PS3 was the only console to have an increase in sales. We're very happy with the momentum we have globally. We're still in a situation where our supply chain, from factory to warehouse to retail, is not full. We'd like to have more units in the marketplace than we currently have. But we're happy with the way we're starting out. Clearly, we have a long way to go.

The continued success of PS2 is amazing. Are you worried it's stealing momentum from PS3? Is there such a thing as a PS2 that's "too successful" for Sony?

[Laughs] I'm laughing on two counts, one because it's a funny question and two because I remember being asked the same thing when we launched PS2. Sixty percent of the sales of PSone happened after the introduction of PS2 in Japan. So we believe that PS2 has a very strong few years ahead of it. It's by no means a surprise to us. PSone continued to be the world's number-one selling console for two or three Christmases after the introduction of PS2. The market moves to new demographics and more price-conscious consumers and also geographically to more developing game markets.

So, in your mind, it's a fairly separate set of consumers.
I don't believe anyone walks into a game store with $600 in their pocket and wonders what console to buy.

Since E3 of last year, Sony has taken a few hits in the press. Do you think you've been treated fairly in the press?
I can never answer that question, because there are times when obviously I think we haven't been treated fairly. But, other times, I think we have been responsible for setting expectations a little too high and letting our enthusiasm for the business get ahead of us sometimes.

What was your reaction to the announcement of the Xbox 360 Elite package? Do you see it as a threat to PS3 or a vindication of your higher-end strategy?
Well, I was surprised that it did not include an HD-DVD player functionality in the machine as standard. So I guess that says a fair amount about how our friends at Microsoft view the HD-DVD/Blu-ray disc movie value and contribution that is made to these consoles. Just this week, analysts are saying that Blu-ray disc as a movie format is going to be strong in influencing PS3 hardware sales. We're like, "Yeah, we know – that's why we put it in there." It was the same with electing to put DVD in PS2. It was perhaps not so meaningful day one, but it got stronger as a contributor to the decision to purchase as the format went on. I think the same will happen with Blu-ray disc.

If you had to assign Sony a letter grade based on how you've executed on the PS3 so far, what would that grade be and why?
[Pause] That's a great question. Sorry, we're all out of time! [Laughs] If you were to ask me that same question in the middle of 2000 or early in 1996, and I choose those dates carefully because that was just a few months after lauch of PSone and the launch of PS2, my answer would probably be the same. Which is: could do better, will do better.

But so far, would you say and A? B? C?
Can I use plus and minus?

Sure.
Well, what criteria would you ask me to analyze the launch by?

Not necessarily just the launch, but just the overall performance in terms of hardware, software, marketing – an overall grade thus far.
If it's everything including what the platform represents for the future and the value and achievement from a technical point of view, I can't give us anything less than an A. Now in terms of what that means for the future, I think we are delivering an incredible piece of technology into people's homes that will become validated through software and services for the next number of years. That's when things get really exciting.

As a follow-up, what would you say for a grade in terms of communicating your plans and hopes for the PlayStation 3 to your audience?
I think there was a period from E3 2006 through to October 2006 when we didn't do a good enough job. But I believe that what we're seeing now with great communication about the forthcoming software lineup, delivering on our promise of frequent, free firmware updates, and what we're doing with our online services have more than made up for that period.

> ## We believe that PS2 has a very strong few years ahead of it. It's by no means a surprise to us.

PHIL HARRISON
CONTINUED...
(from page 45)

with. That's obviously a major force in the market whenever that title is shipping. Any iteration of the Gran Turismo franchise has become a global event. Our Everybody's Golf series, known as Hot Shots in the States, has been very successful. And a title that is coming out in 2008, called Shirokishi [a.k.a. White Knight Story], which is an amazing RPG [with] very rich and deep online features, I think will be a global hit as well.

But it does seem that we aren't getting as many new IPs from Japan lately. Is that more of a timing issue?
I think it's partly that and partly taste and preference changes around the world. If you were asking me this question from a Japanese perspective, you would be referring to games like Shirokishi, Genji, and Everybody's Golf. I think we've been very fortunate, however, to have these big IPs coming out of the U.S. and Europe, certainly what the U.S. has achieved with SOCOM, with Ratchet & Clank, with Jak & Daxter, with Resistance: Fall of Man. We've had phenomenal success in the action category. In Europe, [we've been] recently more focused on social gaming categories like SingStar and EyeToy, all $100-200 million franchises – but MotorStorm came out of Europe as well.

Mr. Kutaragi has announced that he's stepping down from his day-to-day role at Sony. How much does that affect you?

SOUND OFF!

BATTLE OF THE SPEAKER SYSTEMS

A great sound system can spell the difference between knowing where your enemies are at all times and getting knifed from behind (noob!!) in a multiplayer match. Check out our picks for the best 5.1 and 2.1 speaker setups.

WHO NEEDS 5.1...
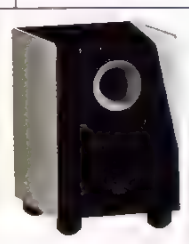
...WHEN TWO SPEAKERS SOUND THIS GOOD?

JBL WIRELESS CONTROL 2.4G & CSS10

PRO Bass sounds great on these speakers. Of course, price might be a problem for some, but you may not need to buy the subwoofer depending on the setup you want.
CON The treble is a little soft, and the sound feels limited at louder volumes, but worst of all is that the sound isn't very clean and the wireless range isn't very good.
$349.99 (2.4G) $429.00 (CSS10) • www.jbl.com
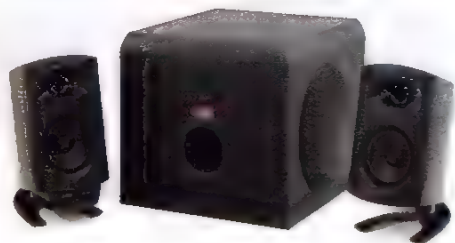
KLIPSCH PROMEDIA ULTRA 2.1

PRO The Ultra is quick and easy to install, and the speaker sound is crisp and clear throughout play.
CON This sub occasionally sounds a little distorted and rumbly, and the system also lacks a control pod or remote.
$179.99 • www.klipsch.com

LOGITECH X-540

PRO The X-540's most impressive feat is that it sounds this good and is this cheap. If you are working on a budget these are the speakers to get. The well-designed control pod only helps the X540's case.
CON Some of the treble output wasn't very strong, and while these sound great loud, the quieter effects feel a little flat.
$99.99 • www.logitech.com

ALTEC LANSING FX5051

PRO Good strong bass is almost overpowering. The individual speakers are very sleek and small, and produce strong overall surround sound.
CON These speakers do produce a slightly audible hiss when nothing else is going on; it's not terribly annoying, but it's there. Also, the control pod is a little confusing.
$249.95 • www.alteclansing.com

CREATIVE GIGAWORKS PROGAMER G550W

PRO Loud and in charge, these bad boys have enough kick to make your ears bleed, and to top it all off the wireless rear speakers will keep the cords from cluttering your room.
CON Not much to complain about here. The design is a little basic, and we didn't like the control pod much. For the price these should really have some kind of digital input.
$399.99 • www.creative.com

MICROSOFT RAZOR RECLUSA

We wanted to review this board a few months ago in our keyboard roundup, but it wasn't able to make it to the party. Still, with the Reclusa's nice backlit keys, comfortable padded wrist pad, two USB ports, and slew of customizable keys, this would have made a formidable addition. We just wish it had some headphone and microphone jacks and the keys had a little more grip to them.

$69.95 • www.microsoft.com/hardware

HELLBOY ANIMATED: BLOOD & IRON

Real Hellboy fans know that Abe isn't the high-pitched cake-boy found in the movie. In fact, real Hellboy fans know that the comic series is a creative look at humanity's dark history intermixed with its even darker legends. That's why real Hellboy fans might appreciate this animated film staring to vocal talents from the movie: Ron Perlman, Selma Blair, and John Hurt. Hellboy creator Mike Mignola even had some input on the film.

$19.98 • www.anchorbayentertainment.com
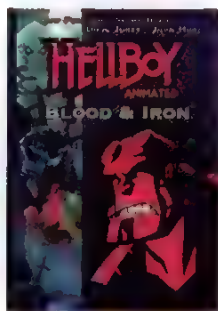
WETA LIMITED THE RAYGUNS:
DR GRORDBORT'S INFALLIBLE AETHER OSCILLATORS

Emulating the best in antiquated science fiction, Weta (yeah, the guys behind *The Lord of the Rings* and *King Kong's* special effects) have crafted some truly desirable conversation pieces. Starting in June with The Goliathon 83 Infinity Beam Projector, you will be able to purchase these beauties. The F.M.O.M Industries Wave Disrupter Gun and ManMelter 3600 ZX are to follow in July and August. These are perfect for your next trip to some far-flung space planet filled with giant war-waging bugs.

$690.00 • www.wetanz.com/holics

ATI RADEON HD 2900 XT

ATI's first DirectX 10-compatible video card is finally on the market, and its reception has been lukewarm at best. Though this card can compete with Nvidia's GeForce 8800 GTS in performance, it does so at a roughly $75 higher price. Furthermore, the noise output from the unit's fan is loud enough to be intrusive. While this isn't a bad card, we'd recommend avoiding this card until some refinements can be made given the strength of the rival Nvidia 8800 series.

$429.99 • ati.amd.com
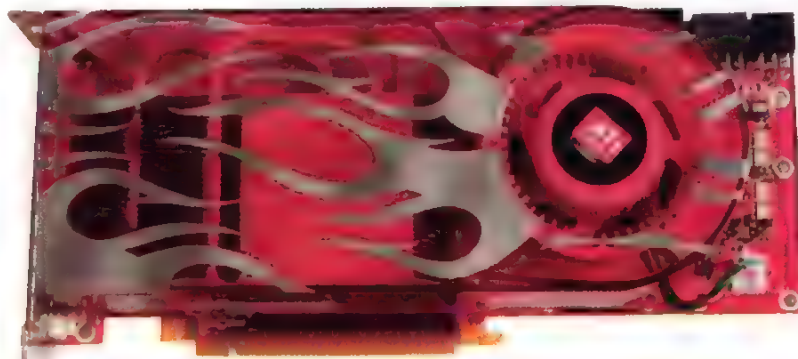
STAR WARS POCKETMODEL TCG

For thousands of years people have been playing cards with normal flat cards. Boring! Finally, Wizkids has come along with an interesting new twist to the trading card game formula, previously seen in Pirates of the Barbary Coast. With Pocketmodels, you punch pieces out of a durable styrene board and then build your own fleet of model Star Wars ships. Each pack comes with four to six buildable ships, six game cards, and two mini dice.

$4.99 per pack • www.wizkidsgames.com

*Final product may vary slightly from image shown

THE BATTLE FOR CONTROL

NEW CONTROLLERS ARE OPENING THE HORIZONS OF GAMING DESIGN

BY E. DANIEL AREY
PRESIDENT AND CCO,
VISIONAREY ENTERTAINMENT

There's an old saying, "Control your own destiny, or someone will control it for you." Who said that? Was it Buddha? Tony Robbins? Jack Welch? Well, whoever it was, they were right on the money when it comes to the games industry. Just when Sony and Microsoft were gearing up their vast corporate machines to dazzle us with more horsepower, more polys, more particles, and more everything this next console generation, Nintendo decided to have its own little party on the side – which became a party everyone wanted to attend.

The Wii shocked us all with its radical innovation and utter refusal to play the "bigger, faster" game. It was little, it was cute (I love that commercial!) and it focused on something novel.. the player. More to the point, it focused on the controller, and this brilliant point of attack was the secret to its success.

After all, how many times can you really press the same old button configuration over and over and feel something new? In fact, how many times has the average player pushed those trusty X, O, A, or B buttons during their gaming career? Well, I decided to find out. One Orange County statistician estimates that the average 15-year old game veteran has pressed a controller button over 18,670,000 times! That's a lot of cheese for one lab rat.

Tracking a player using God of War PS2, they registered the average input at approximately 88 button presses per minute. That's 88 x 60 minutes x 12 hours, or a grand total of 63,360 button taps to complete the game. Pavlov's dog, eat your heart out! For fun, I decided to extrapolate that crazy number for all the games I've ever played – say approximately a conservative 16 games per year to completion (not including party and screw-around games). The number came out to 1,013,760 button taps every year. My thumb's getting sore just thinking about it. And since I've been vigorously beating on my controllers since the Atari 2600 days, that gives me a grand total of 26,357,760 button taps. To put this into perspective, if I began in Los Angeles, CA, and I moved eastward a mere 4.5 feet for every button pressed over the years, I would have completely circumnavigated the world by now.

As I began to research this issue in depth, I came to realize that interface fatigue was at the core of many gamers' lowered interest levels and score rating reductions. Yes, the games themselves may be lacking, but so was how people played them. I mean, how many new ideas are there left for unique inputs to the same old standard controller?

Going back to the Wii's new controllers, obviously people were reacting to the new input innovation. It was fresh! It was different! In the last few years it's no accident that games with unique input devices have been at the top of the positive reviews, buzzing word of mouth, and top sales. Games like Nintendogs, Brain Age, Guitar Hero, SingStar, and of course games like Wii Sports and Zelda: Twilight Princess are just a few of the examples of hits that relied on new ways for gamers to play. There are many more such opportunities out there, and we game designers and developers need to add industrial design to our repertoire.

For example, who said that FPS games (a huge genre) must suffer through terrible controls when translated to the console joystick? Who made that rule? Remember Virtua Cop? Why can't the consoles actually lead a genre in control systems instead of being a weak imitator? FPS players deserve better, and they'd love you to death for solving the issue.

I know, I know, new controllers aren't a new idea – the Namco NeoCon, Mattel Power Glove, and DK Bongos are just a few examples that come to mind. But what's different about this new breed of controllers is that they are sparking new game ideas from the controller itself, and not the other way around. And this influx of innovation is coming at a time when the audience in clamoring for something more. Unique controllers are beginning to offer radically different experiences, and these can go far beyond the simple button mashing rote action which we have all grown maybe a little too accustomed to.

I teach a class in Game Design at USC's

> ...it's no accident that games with unique input devices have been at the top of the positive reviews, buzzing word of mouth, and top sales.

School of Cinematic Arts, and I am amazed at the innovation in control specs my students are often proposing. (Some I can't even talk about yet – you'll see them later this year coming out of the USC Game Innovation Lab). One game prototype at USC had a table with sensors and a projector overhead shining the game screen down onto the table. As you physically grabbed the table, the sensors registered the tilt and sent the projected objects "sliding" across the tabletop. Imagine a digital party game of Hungry, Hungry Hippos! It was lots of fun, and all because it offered a unique way to play. Even more innovative controller interface concepts are on the horizon. NeuroSky is developing a biofeedback game device using EEG readings of concentration, relaxation, and anxiety as an interface. Imagine a wizard game where your actual mind powers activated spells. One way or another, it's coming.

However, new control schemes for novelty are not the answer. What we want to see are more innovative control ideas in tandem with great execution. Games like Loco Roco, Elite Beat Agents, Okami, and others are pointing the way to a crop of fresh, new control experiences for the future.

Simply put, new control specs (in this case, the tactile and audible experience) offer a whole new level of relating to games, and as a game designer, that's great. It expands my opportunities for play. It helps make games more physically engaging and emotionally powerful. It gets past the old button mashing hardcore trap. It opens new doors to new ideas, and it makes games not only fun to play, but fun to make as well. Don't get me wrong, I'm not saying button games don't have their place – just ask any hardcore GoW, Madden, or Soul Calibur fan. But I am saying that, as developers, we need to encourage and invest in even more interface risk. ■ ■ ■

E. Daniel Arey is a 20-year veteran of the games industry. He was senior designer and creative director at Naughty Dog for 10 years, and is currently president and CCO of VisionArey Entertainment

If you work in the industry and would like to share your opinion, contact senior editor Matt Helgeson at matt@gameinformer.com

sun	mon	tue	wed	thur	fri	sat

Vampire Rain – 07/03

03

NEW RELEASES
- Dead Reefs – PC
- Eye Toy Play 3 – PS2
- Guitar Hits – PSP
- Riviera – PSP
- Vampire Rain – 360
- Worms 2: Open Warfare – PSP, DS

04

Transformers opens in theaters today. Nerds' dreams have finally been answered... unless the dream involves seeing Grimlock on the big screen. The Dinobot was heard to remark: "Grimlock destroy Michael Bay! Spike, tell everyone no see stupid movie!"

06

NEW AVENGERS/ TRANSFORMERS
We realize that this is the most ridiculous team up ever, but for some reason, our inner fanboys are totally cool with it. What's not to love? Doctor Doom teams up with Megatron! Optimus Prime is painted with the same colors as Captain America's costume! Okay, maybe this is a bit stupid.
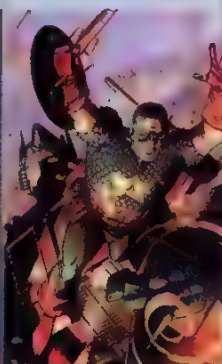
Project Sylpheed – 07/10

10

NEW RELEASES
- Alien Syndrome – Wii, PSP
- AniMales – DS
- Project Sylpheed – 360

11

E3
The new and improved Electronic Entertainment Expo begins today. No one really knows what to expect from this show. We do, however, have one inner-office bet in place. How long will it take for Cliffy B to be mistaken as a singer in a boy band and thrown out of the show?

13

Now that actor Daniel Radcliffe is 30 years old, the struggle against the actor from *Quiz Show* seems to have lost its child-like innocence. Then again, so has Hermione. *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* casts a spell on theatergoers today.

Tales of the World: Radiant Mythology – 07/17

17

NEW RELEASES
- Corvette Evolution GT – DS
- Final Fantasy II – PSP
- Hot Shots Tennis – PS2
- Jam Sessions – DS
- Moto GP 2007 – 360
- NCAA Football 08 – 360, PS3, PS2
- Super Collapse 3 – PSP, DS
- Suzuki Superbikes – DS
- Tales of the World: Radiant Mythology – PSP
- Virtua Tennis 5 – 360

18

HALO: UPRISING
This comic picks up right where Halo 2 left off. If you were wondering what was going to happen next, you are going to have to read this comic to find out. With famed scribe Brian Michael Bendis at the writing helm, this comic will likely sell out in seconds flat. Get to your comic store early, Halo fans.

21

12-INCH LARA CROFT TOY
A new toy based on video games' favorite spelunker isn't necessarily exciting news, but what if we told you that this shapely plastic actually talked? That's right, this Lara Croft sculpt is that much closer to being real!!!

Shin Megami Tensei: Persona 3 – 07/24

24
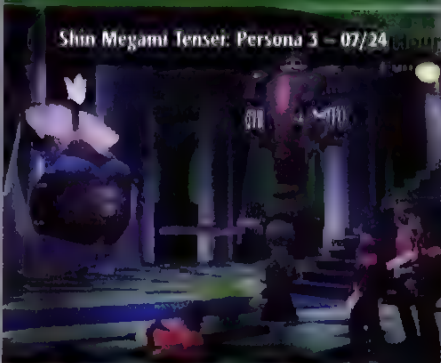
NEW RELEASES
- Dynasty Warriors: Fighter's Battalion – DS
- NASCAR 08 – 360, PS3, PS2
- Shin Megami Tensei: Persona 3 – PS2

09:36
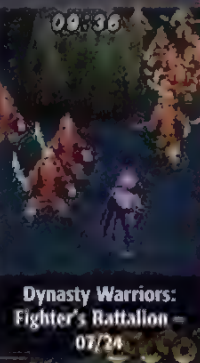
Dynasty Warriors: Fighter's Battalion – 07/24

27

Instead of watching *The Simpsons* on TV for free, now you can pay to see this wacky family in theaters starting today. Spoiler alert: Homer says "D'oh!"

28

CLASSIC GAMING EXPO
If you are a gamer, then you owe it to yourself to attend this expo. Once again held in San Francisco, this two-day show always delivers. It's a great stroll down memory lane and a great place for collectors. There's also a good chance that you will meet many of the forefathers of gaming at this show.

31

NEW RELEASES
- Fisherman's Club – DS
- Lair – PS3

Lair – 07/31

NCAA Football 08 – 07/17

july

FALLOUT 3

The world above is gone, annihilated centuries ago in one brief radiation-filled flash, leaving you safely
tucked out your bad existence behind a massive metal gate. At least that's what you believed until just now,
when it became clear that your father – the only family you have in the world – disappeared from the
vault without warning or explanation. So now you stand before that imposing portal, the great bolts that held
it in place sliding free from their moorings, ready to pursue him into the wastes. With a shudder, the breach
slides open before you. Having never seen the glare of sun, the world beyond appears first in a haze and slides
slowly into focus as you step out onto real soil for the first time. A shattered land lies spread out before
you, the ancient husks of crumpled cars brooding beneath the midday sun, ruined and forgotten buildings dotting
the ground out to the horizon. But as dead as the world appears, life has survived – normal humans struggling
as much against irradiated food and drink as the mutated monstrosities that roam the wasteland. Even 200 years
after that civilization-ending holocaust, you and all the others who were left behind live under the perpetual
threat of Fallout.

INTO THE WASTELAND

Hunger for a new Fallout game began years ago, and deepened when the team that brought gamers the original masterpiece disbanded. One of the great PC gaming franchises was left in limbo, without anyone there to bring it to a new generation of players. When Bethesda bought the rights to the franchise in 2004, many were overjoyed that their favorite RPG developer would be reviving the series. Some Fallout fans immediately decried the move, sure from the start that Bethesda would change too much about their beloved series. Meanwhile, the folks at Bethesda quietly began to craft early concept art, research the original games, and brainstorm story and gameplay ideas. Now, after years of work, with the full force of their studio focused on the project, the team that brought us The Elder Scrolls

IV: Oblivion is ready to reveal their vision of the Fallout universe. "The spirit of Fallout – we've missed it. We've wanted to see it in games again," executive producer Todd Howard tells us. "It's humbling and exciting all at once to be the group that makes that game."

We got the chance to visit Howard and the rest of his team at their studio in Maryland. Ushered into a giant movie theater with enough seats for dozens of people, Howard sat in a booth high to our left as he played through a demo of the game while we watched on the massive screen. The nearly hour-long walkthrough (detailed in the narrative segments on these pages) revealed technology in stellar shape for a title that is over a year away from release. With almost no technical hiccups, the demo revealed how

characters are crafted, the flow of combat, the structure of morality and questing, and wide stretches of the land upon which the game is set. As longtime players and fans of both Fallout and the Elder Scrolls franchise, that one hour as we sat in rapt attention made one thing abundantly clear. This is the best of both of those franchises, without any compromises, and with enough amazing new details to excite even the most jaded or skeptical RPG enthusiast. "Differences between how we approach this and how we approach The Elder Scrolls are pretty huge," Howard assures us. "It's its own game. We don't assume anything we did in Elder Scrolls fits."

"In Fallout 3, you start the game at birth," lead designer Emil Pagliarulo details. "In the original Fallout game, your character had been born in a
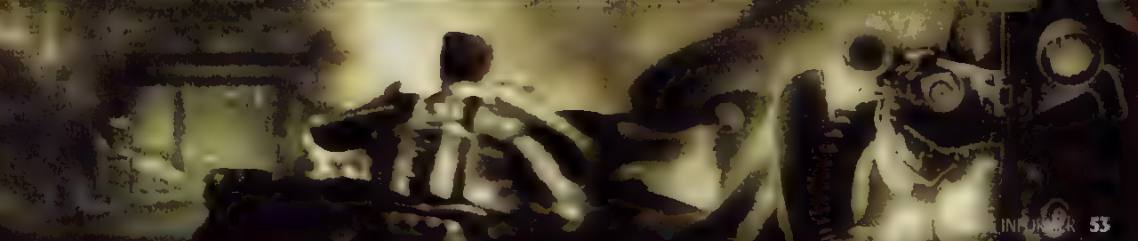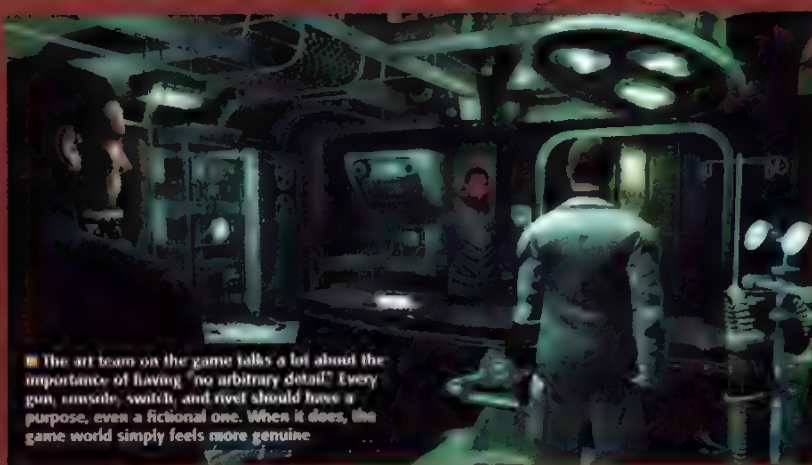
The art team on the game talks a lot about the importance of having "no arbitrary detail." Every gun, console, switch, and rivet should have a purpose, even a fictional one. When it does, the game world simply feels more genuine
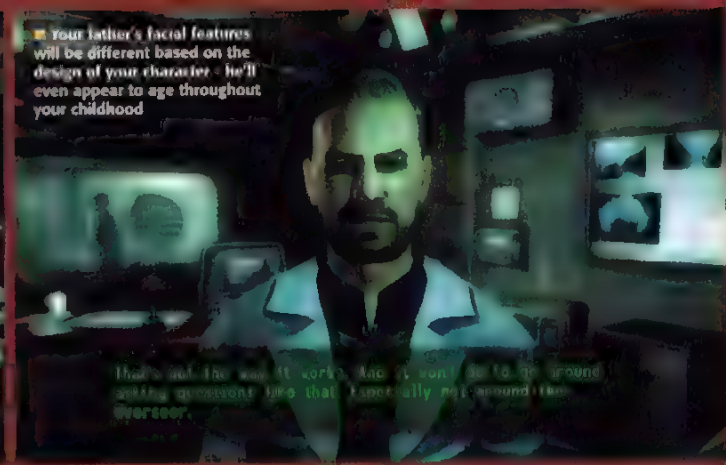
Your father's facial features will be different based on the design of your character - he'll even appear to age throughout your childhood

As you travel, weapons will degrade with use, or may be damaged directly by attacks. As you find new armaments, you can use the scrap from your old beat-up arsenal to add to the new

In the wastes beyond Vault 101, a dusty wind blows as the sun beats down on your pale skin. In the ruins of the forgotten town below, you chance upon a stashed rifle and some drugs in a tattered satchel. Not far away, near a broken children's swingset, you find a still-functional water faucet. Taking a sip, you're alarmed as your personal radiation meter begins to climb. A sound turns you around. Two impossibly large ants crawl toward you. Thinking quickly, you target one of the broken down cars near where the mutated insects are passing. A few shots find its engine, one of those old nuclear generators, and the ants and car alike disappear into a small mushroom cloud. Your radiation detector begins its ominous tick.

Vault. We wanted the player to experience that process." As your mother dies during childbirth, your masked father lifts you up to where the other vault dwellers can analyze you with a DNA scanner – one that will reveal how you will look when you grow older. Here, you are given the chance to choose your gender, body type, ethnicity, facial structure, and physique. All the classic elements of character creation with a huge amount of detail are present, but with more realistic facial options than were available in Oblivion. Once satisfied, your father will remove his mask, and his ethnicity and facial features will reflect your own – not a perfect match, but a clear familial link that reveals your parentage. From there, the early hours of the game will check in throughout the long years of childhood in the vault, reinforcing the prison-like environs of your home.

While still a baby, your father will give you a small infant-style cardboard book. As you flip through its pages, which is cleverly titled "You're Special!", you'll choose the baseline stats for each of your seven primary aptitudes. A brief stop as a toddler teaches you to walk, familiarizing you with movement controls. At age 10, you are gifted with a BB gun and your Pip-Boy 3000, a wrist-mounted computer that will serve as your menu system throughout the game. At 16, you'll

"There's destruction everywhere. Destruction requires a great deal of randomness," lead producer Gavin Carter relays. "So one of the things we're playing with is how we apply decals to the world – not only when you shoot things, but we can actually apply very large decals to any kind of arbitrary geometry"

The sign above the gate reads: "Megaton." The robot outside doesn't judge you a threat, and instead barks an advertisement for the local watering hole as the doors grate open. Inside stands the town sheriff, a stuffy fellow named Lucas Simms. Never a fan of authority, you dismiss his commands to stay out of trouble in his town and descend to the strange sight below. A massive undetonated bomb sits in a crater at the center of town, apparently the settlement's namesake. Some insane religious zealot kneels at its base, espousing the bomb as a miraculous sign from God. You push past him and head to the bar.

take your G.O.A.T. (Generalized Occupational Aptitude Test), where your answers to various questions will help determine an initial layout of skills and traits. Finally, at age 19, your father escapes and you pursue him into the world beyond. Sometime before the Vault's door opens, you're offered one last chance to alter the character you've crafted throughout childhood.

Whatever your choices, every aspect of character creation is based firmly in the S.P.E.C.I.A.L. system that was utilized in the original Fallout games. Of your 14 skills, you can tag three of them to grow at a faster rate as you level up. Every other level, you can choose a perk, a special talent that may give you small bonuses in certain situations. Traits give pluses and minuses that may change your style of play. It's impossible to create a maxed-out superhero – each facet of character creation is set up to force careful choices about the path you want your character to take through life.

Most of your experience points in the game come from completing quests – grinding for experience just isn't that useful. Whether you use guns, stealth, or diplomacy to complete those missions is a choice left to you

From the beginning, Fallout 3 can be played in either a first-person camera view, or panned back to an over-the-shoulder third person angle not unlike the one offered in Resident Evil 4. In contrast to Oblivion's floaty and disconnected third-person option, the approach in Fallout 3 has been more focused. "We found with our previous stuff that if we have a third-person mode at all, then people like to play in it," Howard tells us. "So we spent a lot more time on that mode so you can play the whole game that way if you want." From either camera angle, players will be able to observe the amazing attention to detail on everything from wrinkles in characters' clothing to rough textures on the ruined stonework of

THE PIP-BOY 3000

"We joke that this thing has more pixel shaders running on it than Oblivion did. We really wanted it to feel like this old beat up, retro device that you have strapped to your wrist," explains Todd Howard. The Pip-Boy 3000 is as close to a menu system that Fallout 3 has to offer. Three red buttons on the wrist-mounted device are your tabs between the major screens. The first is your character's stat page, where you can check skills, health, and other personal details. The second button pulls up an inventory of items, and also includes the option to repair damaged items or scavenge old ones for parts. The third button is a data screen – here you'll find maps, quest logs, photos, and the like. Beyond that, the Pip-Boy also serves as a sort of radio. Detecting radio signals being broadcast across the wasteland, you'll be able to tune in any of the surviving radio stations. Some broadcasts will occasionally reveal new quests. Other times, the radio stations serve as a way to listen to the 20-some 1940s and '50s tunes that Bethesda has licensed.

Unlike Oblivion, Fallout 3 does not scale your encounters to fit your current level. Wander into a dangerous zone alone, and you shouldn't be surprised when that Super Mutant beats your head in.

■ Extensive visual effects like this use of depth of field put Fallout 3 in a whole new graphical category from Bethesda's previous work

Beatrix Montgomery's Bar. Tinny, t-based, ancient pre-war music blares from a transistor radio. Beyond the local riffraff in the corner you spy an impeccable businessman, the kind of man that looks like he might know something about your father. As it turns out, he doesn't. But Mister Burke, as he calls himself, does have a job that might net you a little money to survive on out here. He'd like to get rid of Megaton — something about "a blight on the burgeoning urban landscape." He's got a fusion pulse charge that could arm the live and ticking bomb at the center of town. It's not as if this town has done anything for you yet. Sure, your father might disapprove. But he's not here right now. You take the charge and head back outside. The radio croons: "I'm in love with a wonderful guy!"

old structures. This is an evolved version of the engine that ran the graphics of Oblivion, but everything from the animation of monsters to the dramatic lighting of different environments has been designed from the ground up for the ruined landscapes of the Fallout universe.

Once outside of the Vault, the focus of the game becomes finding a way to survive in the barren wilderness of the outside world. Water is a precious commodity, even though it is also one of the primary sources of radiation you'll encounter; every sip must be judged against how many rads it's likely to introduce into your body. Food, weaponry, and ammo are in short supply, so there's a constant need to ration and improvise new ways to confront obstacles. Hungry and malformed beasts wander the world, and you'll have

to find a way to either avoid them or take them down for good.

To do so, most players will find themselves taking advantage of the innovative combat system that Bethesda has developed for the game. The Vault-Tec Assisted Targeting System (V.A.T.S.) is what assures that this first-person game so chock full of guns doesn't become an FPS. "We don't want to be rewarding twitch play," Howard says. "It's not an action game. It's a role-playing game." While you'll certainly be able to tackle enemies in real time first-person shooting, V.A.T.S. lets players pause time and select a target at their leisure. Once targeted, a zoomed-in view of that enemy will show all the places you could aim to hit the creature, and the percentage chance you'll succeed. This percentage is based on distance, enemy defense,

his cover, as well as your ability with the weapon at hand, among other factors. Just like in the original Fallout, you'll have a set number of action points, largely based on your agility score. Every combat move you make will deplete this supply, at which point those AP will begin to regenerate in real time at a rate that also corresponds with your agility. Once you complete all your actions in V.A.T.S. you can continue to attack in real time, but this will dramatically slow the recharge of your action points, thereby encouraging tactical targeting over constant twitch shooting. As for those specific targets, which area you aim for will have a profound effect on your foe. Hit the arm of a super mutant, and he may not swing that massive cudgel at you with quite the same force as before. Shoot off the antenna of a mutated giant ant, and he'll go crazy and

■ You'll be able to hire followers who might help you out in a fight, but it's definitely not a party-based game. And for fans that are curious, Bethesda hesitantly confirms there will be a dog in the game, but they're reticent to speak on the subject for now

■ The V.A.T.S. combat system keeps the game firmly grounded in the tactical decision-making of good RPGs

may attack his brethren.

Also in keeping with the tradition of Fallout, violence and death can and will be disturbingly brutal. If your aimed shot is about to result in a dramatic near miss, the sickening crunch of an exploding head, or any other cinematic moment, the scene will play out in slow motion, with the camera zooming in and circling around the bullet as it whizzes through the air only to tear into a grotesque mutant's leg as it explodes in a haze of blood.

In addition to an array of ranged weapons, you'll also have access to melee weapons like the super sledge (a giant hammer) and the ripper (a weaponized chainsaw). These tools of war will function under the same V.A.T.S. system, allowing for gory close range slow-motion kills as you shred those enemies foolish enough to get close. Not shy about embracing the bloody source material,

With the charge set, you descend into the ruined Metro subway lines below ground. Dust motes float slowly through shafts of light from the surface above. You march off in the direction of your pre-determined meeting place with Mister Burke, far away from Megaton. Rounding a corner, you're greeted by a hail of gunfire. A massive beast of a mutant stands beyond, armed with a rusted Chinese assault rifle, dwarfed by its too-large hands. In the fight that follows, you take some hits, but nothing a stimpack won't fix. In the corridor beyond, two more mutants pace, grunting back and forth to each other. Unwilling to risk another open battle, you sneak to a nearby passage and the security terminal housed within. Hacking the computer is simple enough, and a security bot emerges from its cocooned pod — unused these last two centuries. Rolling out onto the main platform, its tin can voice intones: "Tickets, please!" As the mutants outside laugh and threaten to tear its puny metal arms off, the bot decides they must not have tickets, and opens fire with its laser cannon.

Like in the original Fallout, the opening cinematic of Fallout 3 (of which this is a screen shot) will include music from the classic '40s and '50s band, The Ink Spots. The ironic song choice: "I Don't Want To Set the World on Fire"

Emerging from the Metro into the ruins of the old capital city of a dead nation, it only takes moments to realize you're in over your head. A swarm of mutants crawl across the old marble stonework, and your scavenged rifle just isn't going to cut it. Squeezing off a few shots, you know you're in deep trouble, when suddenly across the street more shots begin to ring out. Their powered armor gleaming, a squad of knight-like soldiers begins to drop your would-be killers. Approaching your unwitting saviors, one of them peeks out from her metal shell to declaim your stupidity for coming here, and offers for you to come along as she and her fellow Brotherhood of Steel members clear out more mutants. They're heading your way, so why not?

Bethesda is very open in its declaration that Fallout 3 will most definitely not be fit for children. Meanwhile, your foes are certainly not content to sit still and eat your bullets. "We've revamped the entire AI system from Oblivion to give us better gameplay with guns," lead producer Gavin Carter tells us. "We've altered the whole pathfinding system so the NPCs are much more knowledgeable about their surroundings. They can take cover, catch you in flanking maneuvers, and mainly react more realistically with their environments."

With such clever adversaries, your foes aren't the only ones who'll be forced to deal with injury and pain. An intricate health system details the many problems your character will have to confront on his journey. Like most role-playing games, you will have a set amount of hit points that go down as you take damage. Food or soda will help improve your hit points slightly, and stimpacks (a sort of injection) can be a big help. As mentioned before, water can also give a boost. Sometimes the only way to completely fill up on health is to drink from some fixed water source repeatedly, like a toilet bowl in a forgotten subway station. However, when you go to drink, you'll be able to see both its health benefits and radiation level. Without medicating to reduce radiation, it will continue to rise until it begins to handicap stats and eventually kill you.

Beyond juggling health and radiation, you'll also need to watch out for personal injury to different body parts. You're not the only one making targeted shots; your enemies will be aiming for particular weak

THE BEHEMOTH

Here you can see the layers of work that go into producing a single enemy in Fallout 3.

High resolution model used to define basic structures.

Modeling of subsurface veins and blemishes, painted on in 3D

A texture pass for muscles and bone structure

A similar image with veins removed to aid in texture layering

Final image

The Fatman is a handheld nuclear catapult. We'll say that again in case you missed it. In Fallout 3, you'll have access to a handheld nuclear catapult.

After a running firefight through roofless buildings punctuated by blasts of laser fire and intermittent explosions, you finally find yourself near your destination, the Galaxy News Radio Building. Before you can enter, you're thrown back as a huge building crumbles nearby. From its wreckage saunters a behemoth of a mutant — a giant by any definition. As the soldiers you're with desperately unload, you see a fallen body nearby with a strange device in its hands. Picking it up, you recognize it for what it is — a Fatman. Arming this portable nuclear catapult, the tiny bomb slides into place with a ding that sounds disturbingly like a diner lunch bell. As the giant mutant turns its eyes on you, you pull the trigger, and the bomb hurtles over to the beast's feet. The creature crashes down in a cloud of nuclear fallout. Slipping away from the surviving soldiers, you enter the nearby tower and climb to the top. Up above, you emerge onto a wide balcony. "It's about time," Mister Burke says, and hands you the detonator. In the distance, you can see the town. There's no turning back after this. The money's not really that good, now that you think about it. You press the button anyway...

points on your body as well. That means you may end up with a broken leg or a shattered arm. One might drastically slow you down, while the other will almost certainly make your once true marksmanship waver and fail. Conceivably, enough water and stimpacks could get your health back up to normal, but no amount of liquid is going to fix a broken bone. For these injuries, either beef up on your surgery skill or expect to make some long and painful treks back to the nearest town doctor.

While the simplest path to an objective is often through violence, Bethesda is committed to offering options that will fit anyone's play style, whether that means sneaking past dangerous foes or talking your way through to a solution. As with the original Fallout, a karma system is in place that will vacillate back and forth based on your actions. Ethical dilemmas are a big part of the Fallout universe, and sometimes one evil act may serve a greater common good. Your place on the karmic scale will shift in response to your decisions, and different titles will be applied as you gain levels based on your current karma. In fact, many of the 360 version's Achievements will be about acquiring these different titles as you progress – getting all the Achievements is almost impossible in just one playthrough, particularly due to the nature of quests in Fallout 3.

Like Oblivion, Fallout 3 offers tremendous freedom in what actions and missions you want to take on. However, unlike Oblivion, a single character can't be all things to all people. Where your battle mage in Oblivion might have simultaneously been the heroic Champion of Cyrodiil and the sadistic leader of the Dark Brotherhood, the quests you'll encounter in Fallout 3 will offer complicated choices that take you down one path or another. If you make one choice, it may close off an entire branch of missions from ever becoming available. However, because of that one decision, an entirely new series of missions will emerge that the other option would never have revealed. Subsequent playthroughs of Fallout 3 with different choices may very well completely change the path of the story. One avenue might have you taking up the insidious role of a slaver, while more righteous choices will have a town greeting you as a hero even upon your initial arrival since they've heard of your beneficent deeds. "Even within the quests we're trying to be careful to not just have the good path and the evil path, because a big part of Fallout is shades of gray," Pagliarulo informs us. With a less concrete questing path, you'll often find yourself swept up into tasks rather than being offered a

formalized mission from some distressed townsperson -- but you'll always have choices about how to proceed, or whether you want to participate in the event at all. "It's more about how you handle these different situations, and less which ones did you do and in what order," Howard explains.

The environmental backdrop through which you'll be making all of these choices is a detailed reinvention of the universe exhibited in the old games. "In our process of envisioning what Fallout 3 should look like, we started by going back to the first Fallout. There's a lot of great raw material to look at there," explains Istvan Pely, lead artist on the project. "Now we have so much more to work with. You're there, and you're seeing everything in a greater amount of detail. So we're going to town on that. Every single detail – just fleshing it out to a level of realism and quality that will overwhelm people in terms of making them feel like they're really there."

The location of the game world is in some ways a familiar setting for studio members at the Maryland-based Bethesda studio. Washington, D.C. and its environs offer a dramatic backdrop to the post-nuclear adventure of Fallout 3. In the alternate history of the Fallout universe, many things were different in the years after World War II – a terrifying series of events led to the war in 2077 that wiped out most of civilization. In 2277, as you emerge from Vault 101, the world has had a hard time recovering, and few places are able to communicate the fall from decadence like a trip through the crumpled remnants of the Jefferson memorial, or spying the chipped and battered rock that remains of the Washington monument. A large central hub called Rivet City is based in and around the remains of a crashed aircraft carrier, while outlying settlements like the town of Megaton serve as other remote bastions of life. The sprawling remains of the underground Metro line and sewer ways interconnect much of the game world. The map as a whole is only slightly smaller in size than the land area you were able to explore in Oblivion. While the land mass is still huge, and seemingly endless quests abound, the harsh conditions in this post-apocalyptic land mean there are actually fewer individual characters to interact with.

"With Fallout, the number of NPCs is reduced. We're in the hundreds instead of the thousands," explains Howard. Consequently, the development team has been able to breathe more life into individuals as they move through their

Fallout 3 has a more defined narrative structure than many previous Bethesda games. You'll play your character as he or she progresses from level one to a cap of 20, and after dozens of hours of play you will reach a definitive end to the story. That end, however, may be any one of many – nine to twelve unique endings are planned, based on your actions throughout the game

daily lives. "For us it's about making better characters – making NPCs that you're invested in," Pagliarulo adds. The Radiant AI system of Oblivion takes its next steps forward in the game, as NPCs attempt to interact in meaningful ways with the game world. Characters who know each other won't just engage in generic small talk – they may address each other by name, and talk about things that matter to them as individuals." Lucas Simms, the sheriff of Megaton, he has a son. If you see him walk up to his son and have a conversation, you would hear that the stuff that he says is particularly tailored to his son," Pagliarulo tells us. With the mention of Simms' son, the question of the presence of children in a game this violent must be addressed. In answer, Bethesda

confidently assures us that kids will be found throughout Fallout 3 – but how they live and (more controversially) die within the game world is yet to be revealed. For both children and adults, you can expect far more voice talent this time around, with fewer characters that make you think: "Didn't I just hear this guy in the last town I was in?" That broader cast is being led by the inimitable Liam Neeson, who stars as the lost father at the root of your quest into the post-apocalyptic surface world.

Feature sets and questing structures aside, there's much more to Fallout than iterating off of a great rule set from an old computer game. At its core, the Fallout universe appealed to mature gamers for its juxtaposition of the realities of war and death against

a dark humor that delights in the ironies of a once perfect civilization ravaged by their own destructive tendencies. It's a complex world without simple answers. Heroism and villainy seem to carry more weight in a land so near extinction. Simply put, Bethesda gets it. From the emulation of the '40s propaganda posters to the impossible moral decisions placed before players, Fallout 3 is a role-playing game in the truest interpretation. of the genre. It's about choices and conse- quences, characters and story, survival and sacrifice. And, after what seems now an excruciatingly short time seeing the game in action, it's about a long, long wait until the autumn of 2008. ■■■

"War. War Never Changes."

ROCK BAND

Twelve years ago, Alex Rigopulos and Eran Egozy founded a company not to create video games, but to explore technology that would allow non-musicians to discover music on a deeper level. Over a decade later, Harmonix is the name behind some of the most well known franchises in gaming – their company virtually synonymous with the music game genre they helped to establish. Critical triumphs Frequency and Amplitude established the familiar falling gem mechanic of later titles, though too few gamers would ever experience those early successes. Karaoke Revolution merged interactive scoring and pitch detection with the fun of singing along (badly) with our favorite tunes. In 2005, surprising its makers as much as it did the rest of the gaming industry, Guitar Hero was born and grew into a cultural phenomenon, bringing in people who had never even considered playing a video game before. With its simple to pick up gameplay, thousands of gamers were suddenly able to live out one element of their long-time rock and roll dreams – to turn the familiar air guitar experience on its head and create the illusion of playing along with the band on a real instrument. Their sequel Guitar Hero II expanded the fantasy to playing with a friend on bass. But what if you had even more control? What happens when all the backing tracks drop away, and you and your friends are the ones bringing music out of the silence? Those are the questions Harmonix wants to answer with its latest project. "We think of Rock Band as this amazing culmination point of the entire history of Harmonix music games," Harmonix co-founder and VP of engineering Eran Egozy explains. "We're taking all our previous concepts and jamming them all together into this colossal experience – a synthesis of everything we've ever done as a company."

The New Album

Rock Band may come out on only one disc, but in many ways it's like four full games in one. A solo guitar, singing, and drumming campaign can each be played independently from start to finish. In addition, a full band game is designed to allow for one huge cooperative playthrough for you and up to three friends – each of you tackling your favorite role. All four of you may be sitting together in a living room somewhere. However, this time, each one of you might be hundreds of miles apart from each other – Rock Band will feature full

support for four-player online play on both 360 and PS3. You can even mix and match. Perhaps you and your brother want to play guitar and drums, but your best friend is away at college with his roommate, and they're up for bass and vocals. Any combination of off and online play will work, and each player can pick their own difficulty setting. A flexible community system will allow you to find bandmates anywhere in the world and hook up. While details remain under wraps, it seems as if the community system will offer some cool surprises

in terms of sharing your band's triumphs with the world.

Gameplay in Rock Band should be immediately familiar to anyone who's played Harmonix's other games. While the franchise names may have passed to other publishers over the years, the original concepts behind those games still belong to Harmonix. Consequently, it won't be hard to find your way when you start, even though several new features now deepen the experience. Many have wondered how a full band game could present all the necessary tracks without cluttering the

The HUD isn't final, but it gives a good idea how the game will handle four-player cooperative band play

Knows   not   what it   means   Knows   not

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TOOLS OF THE TRADE

The four-part rock band includes a guitarist, bassist, drummer, and vocalist. In Rock Band, you can adopt the role of any one of the four, and for the first time Harmonix is creating its own instruments for you to pick between. With Guitar Hero, publishing partner Red Octane took on the task of putting together the peripheral guitar controller. This time, Harmonix is in the driver's seat as much with the hardware as the software.
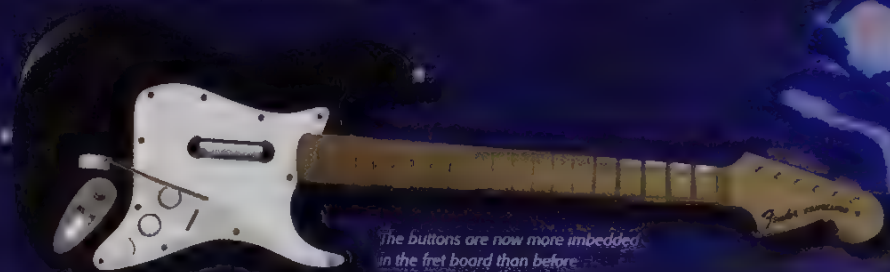
The buttons are now more imbedded in the fret board than before

The GUITAR AND BASS

The new Fender Stratocaster will double as the instrument for both the guitarist and bassist in Rock Band, thus sacrificing some level of authenticity to allow for easier switching between roles in the band. Xbox 360 owners will be happy to know that their X-Plorer guitar controllers they spent so much money on for Guitar Hero II will definitely work for Rock Band. However, it could be tough to not run out and grab the new controller and the new features that go along with it. Through a partnership with Fender Guitars, the Rock Band guitar is an almost exact ¾ replica Strat. At a slight distance, some might not recognize the difference, from its trademark headstock shape to the cutaways in the body to allow for high fret access. Five familiar buttons dominate the lower frets, their colors now only visible on the side of the fret-board. Five new buttons sit high above near the guitar body. While the same colors adorn these buttons, a new feature in the game will allow players to jump to these high frets during certain challenging solo lines and play through those sections using only hammer-ons and pull-offs, freeing you from the required coordination with your strum bar. The signature Fender five-way switch has also been added. By shopping at the in-game store, you'll be able to purchase several virtual effects pedals, such as flange, wah, chorus, or echo. These can then be applied during your song by moving the five-way switch to your desired effect, further personalizing the sound you create. Two of the knobs near the base of the body are now replaced by the Start and Select (Back) buttons, making it easy once again to palm the Select button to deploy star power, like with the original PS2 Guitar Hero controller. All told, it's a remarkably cool and flexible peripheral.

The DRUMS

While Harmonix hadn't finalized every aspect of final drum set, they did have a working prototype that is unlikely to change dramatically before release. For purposes of consistency in laying out the notes, there doesn't appear to be a huge amount of flexibility for moving around the different pads. With that said, they've set up the drums to emulate the traditional set-up of a normal kit. The left-most pad, colored red, is your snare. Moving left from there, the yellow, blue, and green pads share duties as cymbals and toms, although when needed the yellow will almost always double as the high-hat, and the far right green pad serves as the crash cymbal. A set of real wooden drum sticks will ship with the unit, letting you bang away to your heart's content. A firm metal stand holds the unit up, and can be adjusted to your height preference. A lower piece of the stand can be removed so that the whole unit will sit not on the floor, but instead on a nearby coffee table. Below, a single kick pedal introduces the challenge of a third limb in action, completing the set. "If you've played the game for several months, and you're playing on hard or expert, then you're really playing the drums," co-founder Rigopulos excitedly tells us. "We could sit you down at a real drum set and have you start playing. That, as a payoff for playing a video game, is f—ing incredible!"

■ This isn't an exact representation of the drum set – Harmonix should reveal the final design soon. We crafted this picture from memory based on the time we played with the prototype

The MICROPHONE

Nothing too exciting here, other than the fact that Harmonix does plan to release a Rock Band branded mic. Other USB microphones will be supported, but Harmonix will probably not allow the usage of the 360 headset mic – its fidelity just isn't very good. What sets the vocal stylings of Rock Band apart isn't the mic, but the word detection and tapping mechanic built into the gameplay (see p. 67)

Concept mic only

Artist's Rendition

screen. The solution is relatively simple. In the version of the game we saw, the "fret boards" that slowly descend down the screen are now transparent, in order to better show off the exciting visual content behind them. Much like the stage setup of a real band, the guitar and bass tracks flow down the left and right sides of the screen, while the central track is reserved for drums. Flowing from right to left along the top of the screen are the vocal melody and lyrics, very much in the same fashion as we've seen in Karaoke Revolution.

As with previous games, guitarists and bassists will juggle up to five different colored gems as they descend. Newly added are the specially designated solo sections, which can be attempted on the new upper five frets. Fleshing out the customization of the sound provided by the whammy bar, the five-way switch allows for up to five different self-applied effects to the sound. As before, a well-timed tilt of the guitar sends you into some version of star power, but the team hasn't decided yet what to call this powerful overdrive mode.

Vocalists sing along to the rock tunes as they always have. Now, however, a

"Here, there is no background track," Egozy tells us. "If no one plays, it's silent"

The new upper buttons allow players to tackle those insane solo passages with ease – thinner frets and increased hammer-on and pull-off options make it worth the jump

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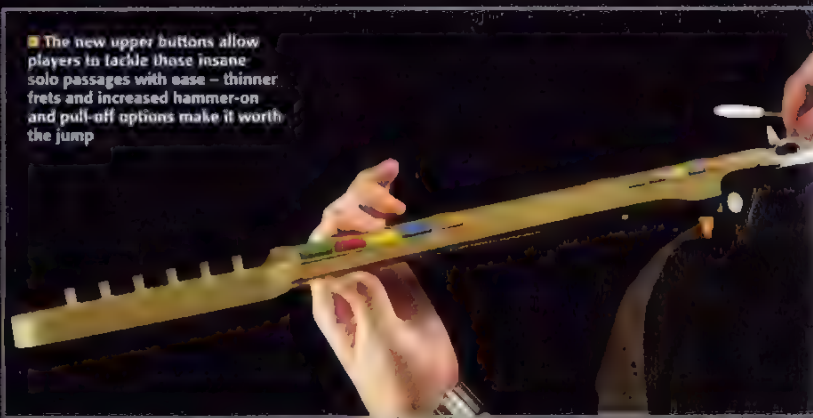
ALL ABOUT THE MUSIC

"The types of songs that we're looking for have a slightly different bent than with Guitar Hero II. For Guitar Hero, it was always about getting songs that people identified as these classic iconic guitar moments," Egozy tells us. "As for Rock Band, that'll still be the case with certain songs, but it's really all about the band, not necessarily what any one player is doing. We're looking for songs that are way more balanced for four players." With the backing of powerhouses like MTV and EA, and an established success story from Guitar Hero, Harmonix has a wealth of advantages behind them in garnering strong song licenses and, perhaps more importantly, the money to purchase them. The songs in the game represent

the full history of rock, from the earliest genesis of '60s tunes to emerging top-of-the-charts hits. We got to play 10 full songs with the full four part band during our visit to Harmonix, but only four of them were finalized licenses that are definitely in the game.

Weezer – Say It Ain't So
    (Original Master Track)
Black Sabbath – Paranoid
The Who – Won't Get Fooled Again
    (Original Master Track)
Nirvana – In Bloom
    (Original Master Track)

These four songs represent a sampling of Harmonix's larger strategy. From the remarkable drum beats in "Won't

Get Fooled Again" to singing along to the drawling tones of Kurt Cobain's melodic lines, there's a focus on genre variety and familiar tunes that you'll recognize and want to play. "Whenever possible, we're going after the original multi-track master recordings," Rigopulos informs us. "We're going after recording artists that have until now really been off limits for video games."

As for the other songs we got to play on our visit, it's fair to say that those on the revealed list definitely aren't the only gigantic names you'll be seeing. Further, Harmonix wants to put a huge focus on downloadable content this time around. From single songs to releasing an entire album from one band, they're hoping to use

Rock Band as a new avenue through which the public can interact with old music they love, and new music they've never heard. "We want to fundamentally change the way people think about music," Egozy theorizes. "Rock Band is going to be used to launch new indie bands. There will be bands who become famous because of the game Rock Band." And while the disc's song list will focus on the various rock traditions, Harmonix is very open to exploring new genres in their downloadable content. Whether that means we'll be seeing country, jazz, blues, pop, or anything else is a question that will be answered only by how successful the game is, and what exactly the fans begin to cry out for.

You'll craft your own band logo, and the individual members of your band will show up in the background of loading screens between songs

The new career modes have a greater narrative component than in Guitar Hero, but how your band's story will play out is yet to be seen

phoneme detector will pick up the individual vowels and consonants that you say. Not only does this encourage getting the words right, but it lets the game offer the required pitch-free speaking and screaming that is so core to rock singing. Build up enough highly judged phrases and you'll get a free-form passage to rock out. If your meter's high enough, singing in these free zones will trigger star power. Beyond that, any band vocalist knows how boring long instrumental solos can get. To address this, the mic doubles as the vocalist's own personal tambourine in many songs. Single note gems will scroll left to be hit at the right moment, and suddenly you're the backup percussionist as you tap away on the mic head. "They might even be cowbell phrases," Egozy hints.

Drums are the only fundamentally new gameplay mechanic in the game, and it's hard to overstate how awesome they are. For as many people who have

wailed on an air guitar, there are just as many who have banged away on the car steering wheel as if they were god's gift to rhythm. For all those wannabe drummers, this is your game. Going far beyond other previous attempts to emulate drumming, the feeling here is remarkably close to the real thing. With drum sticks in hand, you hit each pad in front of you as the corresponding gem descends on screen. In addition to the

four colored gems, a line will often cross underneath all of them that indicates it's time to hit the kick pedal – just like with the gems, you'll hit the pedal at the moment that the descending line reaches the base of the screen. Like every drummer who's ever picked up sticks, you'll have to keep your hands and feet independent, learn the basic patterns of rock drumming, and, as if that weren't enough, learn how to rock

a drum fill. Frequently, as you play, the gems will disappear to be replaced by a free form section. It's your chance to throw down like Animal from the Muppets, or craft your own unique and intricate rhythmic passage. At the end of each drum fill, a special green gem descends on your right. Hit that for the final crash of your fill, and you've just deployed your own version of star power.

Unlike in previous games, with so many players working cooperatively, it would suck if one person's failure brought the whole band down. Instead, if you fail out your track will now go gray, and you won't be able to play any more. However, if your band mates are smart one of them will deploy star power. Instead of giving him or her a huge multiplier, the action will instead pull you and any other failed players back into the song. If you can all reach the end together, in many songs you'll be greeted

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MAXED

by the Big Rock Ending – a huge free-form passage for all the players that ends with a jump-in-the-air guitar-smashing, amp-exploding crash.

Like any good band, you'll want to customize your style to say something about who you are. "For us, this game is about living out rock star fantasies," Rigopulos says. To this end, a brand new character creation system lets you craft your own unique avatar. Each avatar you make will play a particular instrument or sing, so you may make several for your different

runs through the game. You'll set their gender, height, and physique as well as picking a face and hairstyle. Beyond the return of licensed guitars, pedals, and other rock paraphernalia, you'll also now have four themed clothing and accessory stores to outfit your character – Punk, Metal, Goth, and Classic Rock. Mix and match hundreds of pieces of clothing, jewelry, and tattoos from each of the four shops to create your own stand-apart rocker. Finally, a full set of motion-captured stage movements have

been included for each of the four major genres on each instrument – you'll pick one to show off whether your musician rolls like Axl or stands his ground like Clapton. Alternately, in Quick Play mode you can choose between dozens of pre-fab characters that might strike your fancy. Whatever your choice, your band will perform in a hugely expanded array of venues – there are around 40 performance spaces planned right now.

Whether alone or with friends, or online with strangers on the other side

of the country, Rock Band is just a first step to broadening a genre and bringing people closer to the music. "While this is a culmination of 12 years of experience, in another sense it's really just the beginning," Rigopulos opines. "This is the game that we hope can reestablish the context for the music game genre, and serve as the beginning for the next 10 years of music games." The concept of Rock Band is amazing, and having now played it, we know it is just as exciting as we hoped. Even so, it's a level of fun
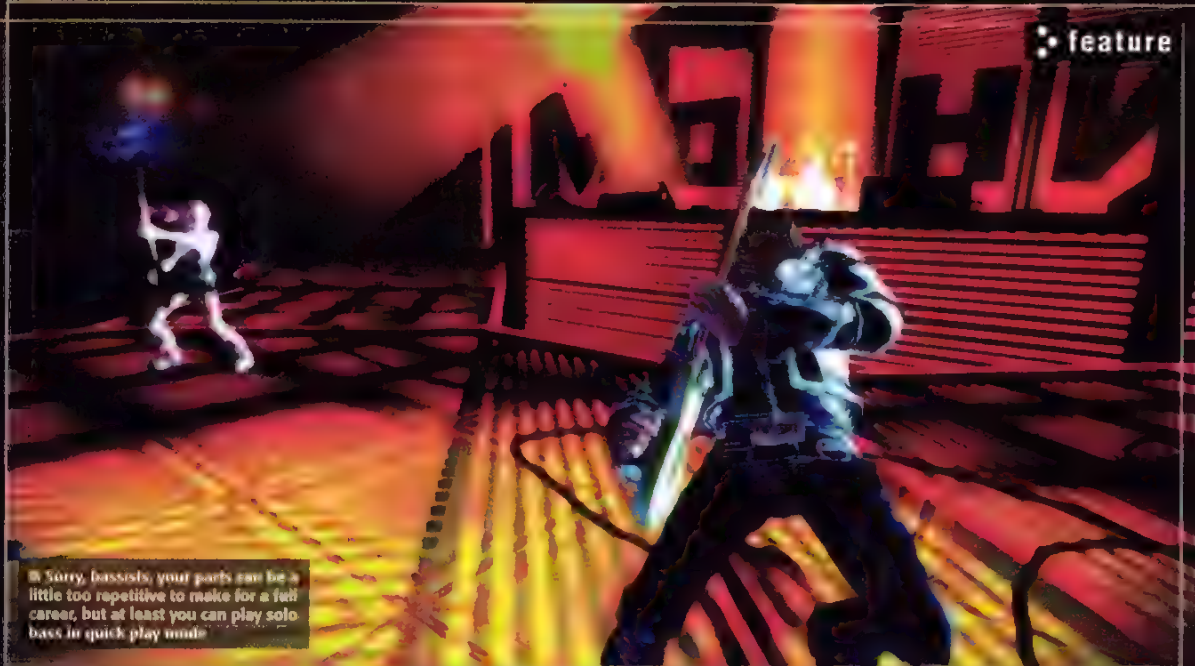
» Sorry, bassists, your parts can be a little too repetitive to make for a full career, but at least you can play solo bass in quick play mode
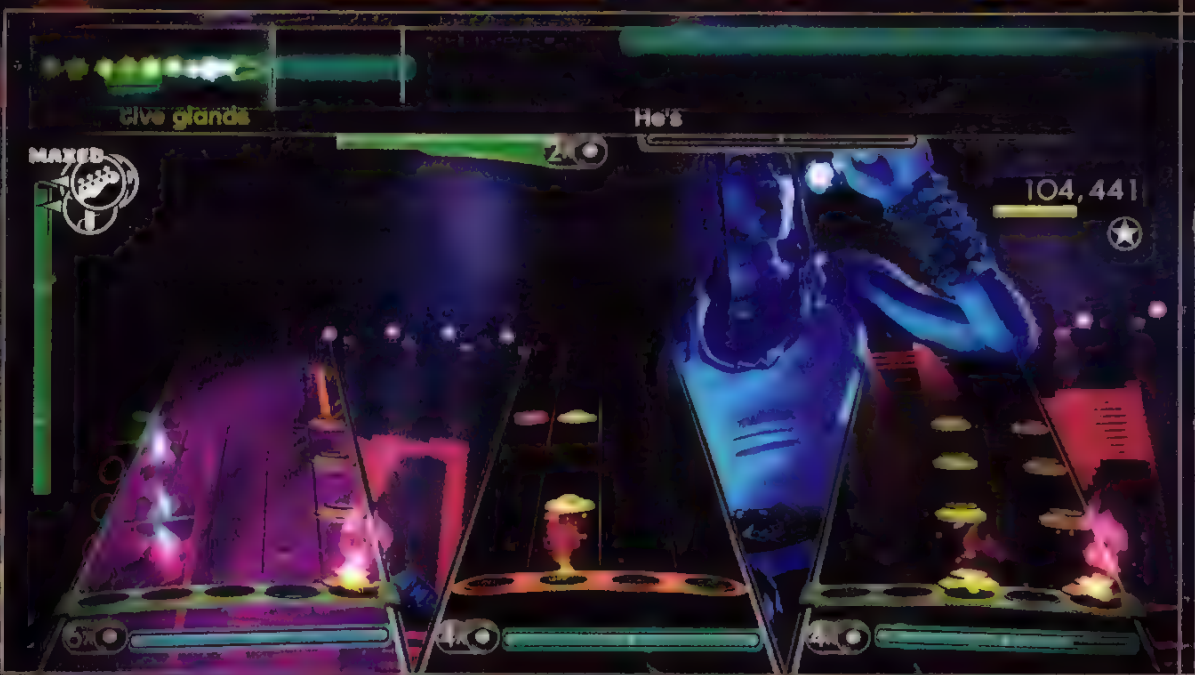
» The peripherals will be unique to each platform: "If we had our druthers, the peripherals would work across all platforms," CEO Alex Rigopulos says. "The tech would work, but there are special circuits that Microsoft requires that other console manufacturers don't"

that's unlikely to come cheap. While no one is willing to talk prices yet, outfitting a full band with peripherals of this quality is a scary concept. Then again, it can be hoped that the spirit of cooperation embodied by the band concept can let friends pool resources and experience Rock Band the way it should be played – with four people. Whatever cost barrier exists, it'll be a hard purchase to turn down. Rock Band has every sign of being the definitive party game experience of 2008. ■ ■ ■
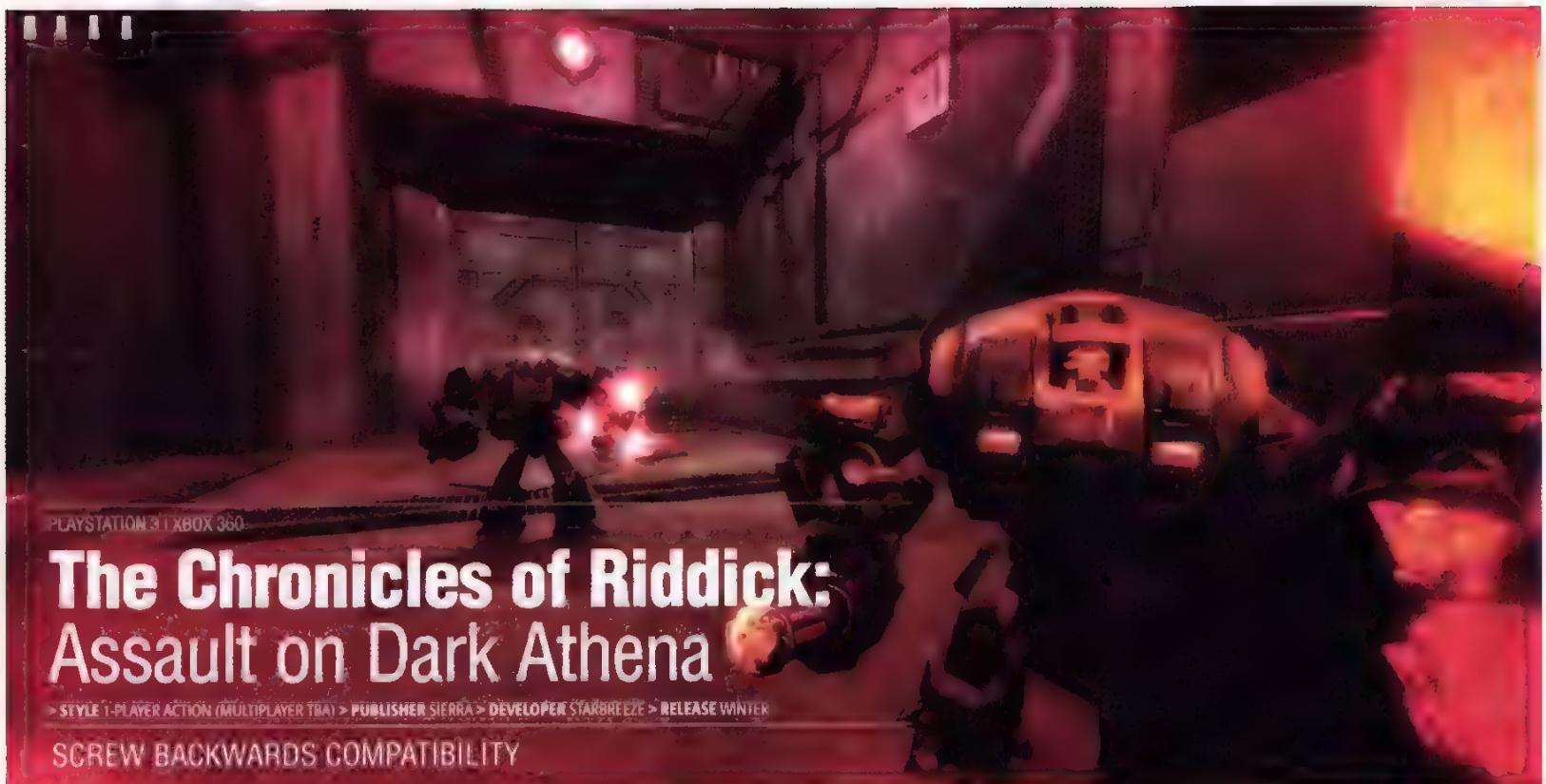
PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360

The Chronicles of Riddick:
Assault on Dark Athena

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION (MULTIPLAYER TBA) > PUBLISHER SIERRA > DEVELOPER STARBREEZE > RELEASE WINTER

SCREW BACKWARDS COMPATIBILITY

The Chronicles of Riddick: Escape from Butcher Bay is one of the most criminal omissions from the Xbox 360 backwards compatibility list. But it may have done some good after all. "Unfortunately, we don't have any control over Microsoft's decision in this regard, and there are some fair reasons why it may not be possible," says lead designer Ian Stevens. "The fact that Escape from Butcher Bay wasn't going to be backwards compatible helped us to decide that we should create Assault on Dark Athena." This revamped version of the original game includes loads of new content, and it will appear on a PlayStation console for the first time.

Every major player from the original game has returned too, including Vin Diesel, Tigon Studios, Starbreeze, Universal Studios, and producer Pete Wanat. "With Assault on Dark Athena we're going back to each and every part of Escape from Butcher Bay and recreating the content," says Stevens. "The actual environments and locations, characters, weapons, the lighting – they're all getting reworked and enhanced."

In addition to the graphical redux, an entirely new chapter is being added that picks up at the end of the first game. After escaping, both Riddick and Johns encounter the Dark Athena, a massive merc ship. Multiplayer will also be included this time around, remedying one of the few complaints about the original game. Though no one is willing to talk details on this feature just yet, we imagine Riddick's mix of gunplay and melee combat will translate well. For everyone who didn't play the PC "Developer's Cut" of Butcher Bay, all of the commentary content will make it into Dark Athena -- probably with some new insights as well.

Starbreeze and Sierra hope to take advantage of the positive reputation Butcher Bay has accumulated over the past several years to introduce it to a new audience. But does this investment in the franchise signal a true sequel in the future? "That's really up to our audience," says Stevens. "If the reaction to Assault on Dark Athena is good, that can only help future possibilities. Your continued support is everything." ■ ■ ■

■ The Dark Athena appears to be sufficiently large enough to keep gamers busy after beating the main game

■ This concept art shows the multiplayer armor pickups, new drone gun, and a flag ripe for the capturing
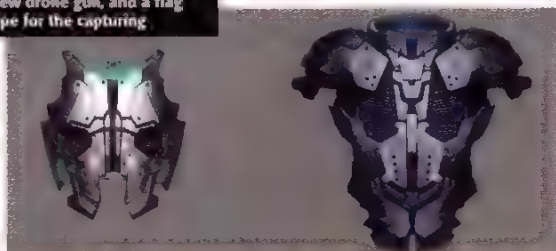
■ The mysterious drone canister appears to have some sort of transformative effect
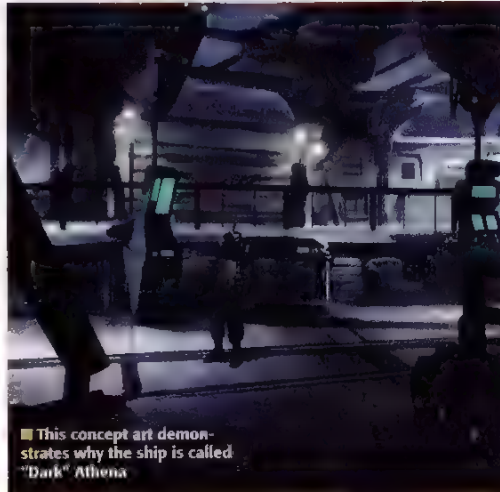
■ This concept art demonstrates why the ship is called "Dark" Athena
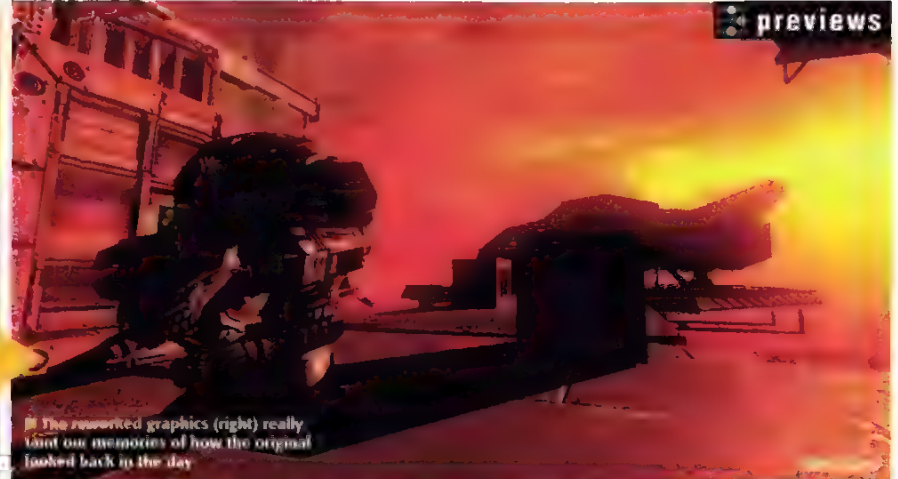
■ The reworked graphics (right) really taint our memories of how the original looked back in the day

LAST-GEN

■ Mark would come to regret that it was Allen's turn to wear the exo-suit that day
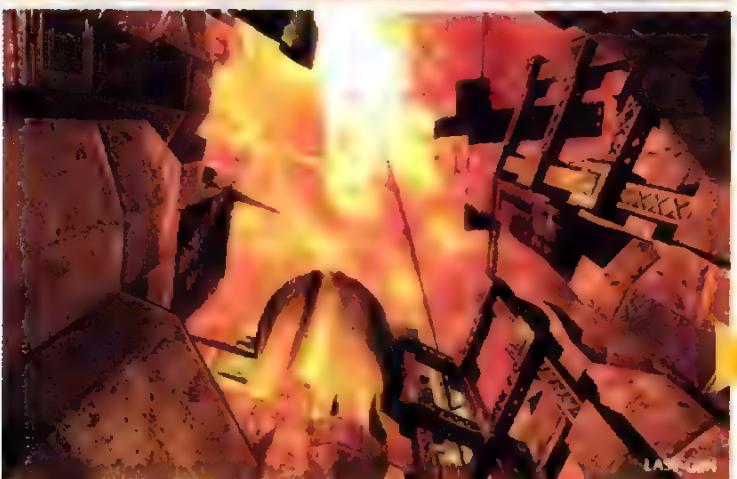
LAST-GEN
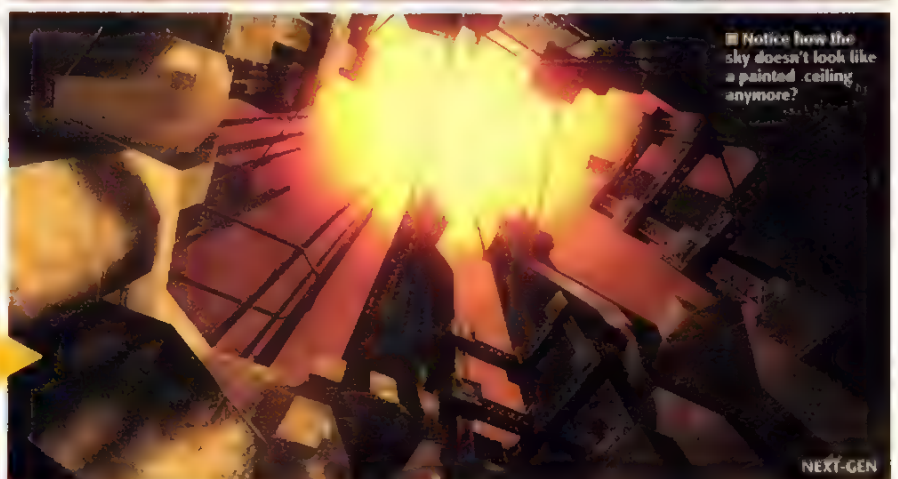
NEXT-GEN

■ Notice how the sky doesn't look like a painted ceiling anymore?

NEXT-GEN
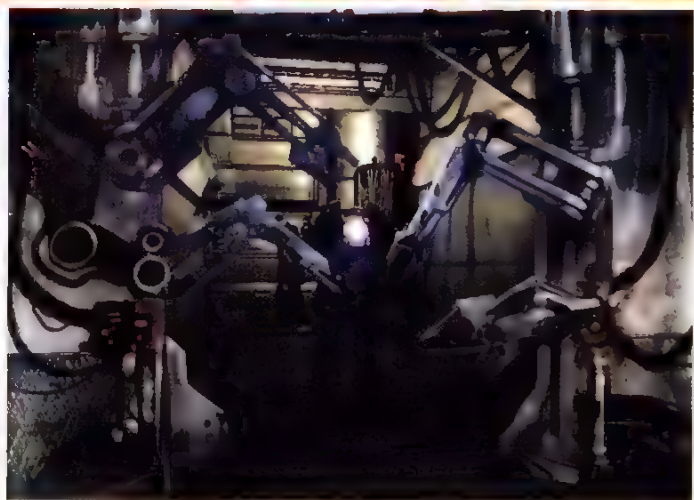
■ The new SCAR weapon stands for Sonic Compressor Air Rifle

Tom Clancy's EndWar

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER STRATEGY (UP TO 12-PLAYER VIA XBOX LIVE)
> **PUBLISHER** UBISOFT > **DEVELOPER** UBISOFT SHANGHAI > **RELEASE** 2008

DOGS OF WAR UNLEASHED
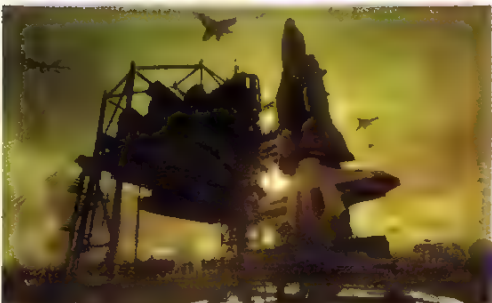
■ The Theater of War screen allows you to observe the development of your campaign and plan attacks

■ The Battle HQ screen is a 3D tactical map inside your command vehicle. You can issue all your commands from this view

The year is 2020. International relations are at a crisis point due to dwindling natural resources, the subsequent stock market crashes, and a new arms race between the United States, the newly formed European Federation, and a re-energized Russian bloc. Matters are sure to get worse as the U.S. prepares to launch its new space station, Freedom Star – a military base capable of deploying troops anywhere in the world within 90 minutes. Welcome to Tom Clancy's latest techno thriller, EndWar.

Whereas the maestro of politically charged military novels has taken a backseat in recent years for the Splinter Cell, Rainbow Six, and Ghost Recon sequels, Tom Clancy is taking a proactive approach with EndWar, consulting with the Ubisoft development team over every major plot point and gameplay element. Ubisoft hopes the result will be a real-time strategy game that brings the frenzied experience of guiding a massive war effort to consoles in a revolutionary and easy-to-use way.

The EndWar campaign begins with a linear prelude, allowing players to participate in the buildup to World War III from the perspective of all three factions. Once the handshakes are traded for hand grenades, players will take control of a customizable army to carve out their careers as military commanders within the North Atlantic theater of war.

Unlike traditional real-time strategy games, EndWar doesn't bother you with petty concerns like political decision-making or resource gathering. Your sole responsibility is to create and maintain a war machine capable of striking your enemy with any means necessary, including tactical nuclear strikes, city sieges, special forces-led sabotage, or straightforward assault. Holding strategic points allows you to accrue command points, which are used in battle to bolster your battalion by calling in reinforcements, collecting valuable intel, or ordering air strikes. If you successfully complete your objective, you will be awarded credits to use between skirmishes to upgrade your army.

Before each battle, commanders handpick the units they wish to deploy. Your choices will include the unique mix of 21st century fighting forces, including rifle and anti-tank platoons, armored vehicles, gunships, and artillery. Units will collect experience with each successful campaign, which in turn can be used to improve precision, speed, range, or the way the unit gains experience. As with all of the Clancy games, the über-deadly arsenals are based on real-world technology being developed today. This includes new instruments of death like satellite strikes, soldier exoskeletons, and high-energy microwave and laser weapons.

EndWar trades in the standard 2D eagle eye perspective for a new commander's eye view, which thrusts you into the thick of the action with your grunts, tanks, and artillery units. Ubisoft claims units will move and attack like trained fighters, meaning you can expect them to use cover, stealth, and real-world tactics while assaulting their target. Using this perspective, you can seamlessly switch views between your varying units on the battlefield or back out to the tactical battle HQ screen, which offers the classic top-down view. Given the console's relative lack of buttons compared to the PC (which has always been the preferred platform for RTS games), Ubisoft has developed a voice command system that will allow you to bark orders at a stream-of-consciousness speed.

As you would expect, one of the main features of the latest Clancy title will be its online mode. The most notable aspect is the persistent online world campaign, where players will determine the outcome of the war together. This campaign, which can last for several days or weeks, will only conclude when one faction controls an overwhelming majority of territories. At this point Ubisoft will initiate another campaign. Online matches will support up to 12 players and feature co-op, allowing teams to divide armies and responsibilities.

Though EndWar sounds promising and the Tom Clancy brand hasn't had a bad debut yet, we're curious to see if the gameplay is truly revolutionary. If the voice commands work well and the combat delivers an immersive experience, this could be the first must-own RTS game ever to grace consoles. ■ ■ ■

The battlefield view brings you the frontline from the eyes of your soldiers
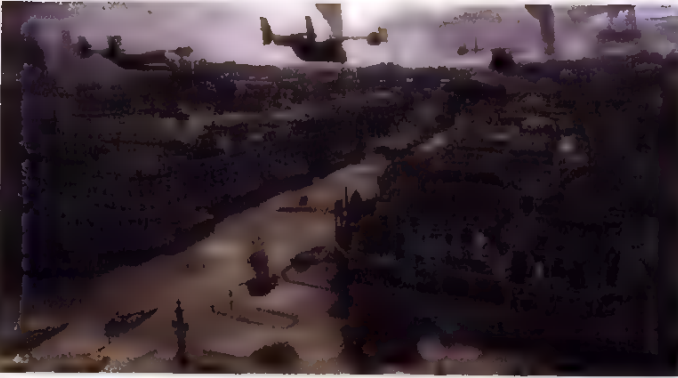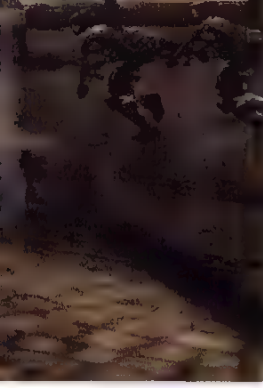
Holding strategic points allows you to collect command points, which can be used for calling in reinforcements or issuing air strikes

XBOX 360

Project Gotham Racing 4

> STYLE 1 OR 2-PLAYER RACING (UP TO 8-PLAYER VIA XBOX LIVE) > PUBLISHER MICROSOFT GAME STUDIOS > DEVELOPER BIZARRE CREATIONS > RELEASE FALL

IN SEARCH OF HIGHER PERFORMANCE

The Project Gotham series has been known as the more bite-sized racer in comparison to the sim-based, serious Forza Motorsport franchise. While the kudos system is something we've all had fun with since developer Bizarre Creations debuted it in Metropolis Street Racer for Dreamcast back in 2001, what the game gives you in quick and intense racing it gave up in sustained depth. For PGR 4, however, the game hopes to turn the corner and deliver both without compromise.

The cornerstone of this PGR is a new career mode. Here your driver won't just be a kudos-based creation making their way

up the menu chain. Instead, your driver will actually cultivate a fan-base that will grow as you have success. Although we have yet to get our hands on the game, an early video of the title showed off new bystander models beside the track that were excitedly jumping around as the cars went by. Bizarre Creations hopes that this new approach to your career will create a more emotional response from gamers in every aspect of the title, bucking the norm where racing games have as much personality as reading the parts catalog for a Chevy Nova down at the local AutoZone. That's not to say that PGR 4 will stray from the Kudos system that put it on the

■ Spontaneous weather effects will separate the men from the boys behind the wheel

THAT NEW CAR SMELL

Microsoft and developer Bizarre Creations haven't revealed the game's vehicle list just yet, but they are promising a host of new rides, including the following:

2004 TVR Sagaris
1965 Chevrolet Corvette Sting Ray
2005 Vanwall GPR V12
1993 Toyota Supra Turbo
2005 Gumpert Apollo
1997 Panoz GTR-1 Coupe
2006 Ferrari 599 GTB Fiorano
1957 Maserati 250F

map. Instead, the feature is being updated, and the AI drivers will take a cue from your stylish driving by being more willing to bust out some sweet moves of their own.

The franchise's change of attitude is occurring on the track as well as off. Project Gotham Racing 4 features a new weather system, allowing a sudden snow or rainstorm to develop during a race. Apart from simply being a cool feature, this could make things interesting if you're a driver with the wrong tires on during a storm. It's unknown if this feature will only be available on certain tracks throughout the game's 10 global locations.

In a genre where drive trains are more the stars of the game than the drivers, it's nice to see this series attempt a slightly different direction instead of the same-old mix of cars and tracks – something that well-established franchises like Gran Turismo and Forza should take heed of. Hopefully, it works to the point of being a foundation for the future. ■ ■ ■

■ AI cars will now be more daring and try to pull of their own Kudos moves

By shooting a missile into the aftermath of a vortex grenade, players can add greatly to the destructive force

PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360

Fracture

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION (MULTIPLAYER TBA) > PUBLISHER LUCASARTS > DEVELOPER DAY 1 STUDIOS > RELEASE 2008

TAKE THAT, MOTHER EARTH!

B lowing things up isn't the only way to destroy them. Instead of blasting a structure apart, what if you could radically alter the very ground underneath it? What if this kind of terrain modification were as easy as throwing a grenade? This is the core gameplay concept behind Fracture, a futuristic third-person shooter from LucasArts and MechAssault developer Day 1 Studios.

Set in the year 2161, the world in Fracture has been ravaged by natural disasters, leaving the face of the planet irrevocably changed. To add to the problem, the U.S. has been split, both geographically and ideologically, into two halves. The west is obsessed with dangerous genetic research, the east with high-tech weapons and cybernetics. As Mason Briggs, a demolitions expert from the east, it is the player's job to use powerful terrain deformation technology to take down the western rebels and end a civil war.

At first glance, Fracture may seem like a familiar shooter, but that can hardly be said once you witness Briggs' grenades in action. By lobbing a tectonic grenade, the earth around the blast rises upward and creates a hill that can be used as cover. Alternately, you might throw a subsonic grenade to make a crater underneath the wall of an enemy base, allowing you to burrow under and launch a surprise attack. There are other types of grenades as well, with effects like creating a tall stone pillar, an explosive tornado, and even a giant boulder to send careening toward your foes.

The important thing to note about terrain deformation is that it isn't a gimmicky tool to be used sparingly. Practically every moment on the battlefield will revolve around your ability to create and adapt to these kinds of environmental changes – especially considering that your enemies will have access to the same technology. This means that a typical battle has the earth twisting and heaving around you, transforming the ground under your feet into both a weapon and a threat.

When most gamers think of LucasArts, their minds are filled with visions of a galaxy far, far away. While the company is certainly proud of that heritage, it also realizes that it is important to promote new gaming properties in addition to leveraging successful licenses. This philosophy led LucasArts to publish Pandemic's Mercenaries in 2005, and it is a driving force behind the partnership with Day 1 that promises to make Fracture a thrilling futuristic adventure that could change the third-person action landscape. ■ ■ ■

In the future, butt-flares are surprisingly fashionable

Deforming the world may have a tactical advantage, but that doesn't mean you can't enjoy the explosions

"Stupid haircut, big guns" isn't the game's official tagline

This is a Hydra: an enemy type equipped with rocket launchers and impressive jumping skills

God of War: Chleans of Olympus

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION > **PUBLISHER** SONY COMPUTER ENTERTAINMENT
> **DEVELOPER** READY AT DAWN > **RELEASE** WINTER

PRE-GOD MODE

Contextual button presses will make a return for spectacular finishes

I f you thought that you would have to wait until God of War III to see Kratos in action again, you're in for a surprise. Following the release of God of War II for PS2, it was revealed that the Ghost of Sparta's adventures will continue much sooner than gamers suspected in the form of the handheld prequel Chains of Olympus.

Created by Ready at Dawn, this PSP title aims to incorporate all aspects of the God of War formula into a portable package. Considering the amazing success the studio had in translating the console experience to PSP with last year's Daxter, gamers should expect another epic and action-packed adventure – only smaller. The key features like flailing blades, powerful magic, and mythological foes are present in full force, with a few added surprises as well. Sony isn't going into specifics just yet, but there will be new weapons, attacks, and puzzles to challenge players.

In a demo shown at a recent Sony event, we got a taste of how Chains of Olympus will measure up to the legacy of its predecessors. Kratos stands atop a fortress in Attica, facing an army of Persian ships. After fighting through swarms of enemies, he blasts oncoming ships with a flaming ballista, then squares off

against a massive Cyclops. Ensuring that the massive scale of bosses in previous games (like the Hydra and the Colossus of Rhodes) isn't lost, Kratos eventually finds himself sinking his blades into an enormous reptile's head that has burst through a wall.

While it looks like a lot of fun, Chains of Olympus isn't exactly shaping up to be the next evolution of the series; we'll have to wait for the inevitable PS3 entry for that. However, it will provide a lot more action along the lines of the first two games, and that alone should be enough to make gamers pay tribute to the gods. Just don't get carried away and sacrifice any goats. ■ ■ ■
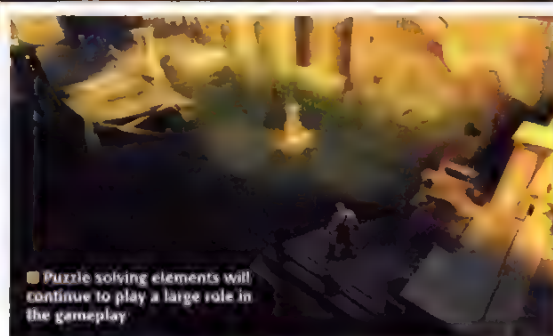
Puzzle solving elements will continue to play a large role in the gameplay
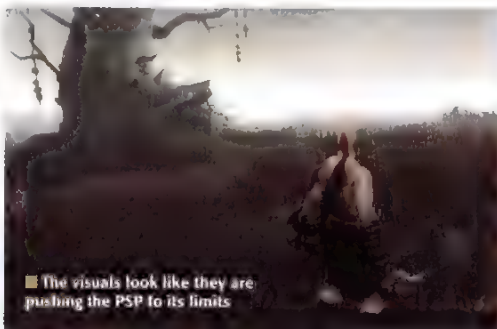
The visuals look like they are pushing the PSP to its limits

SAY WHEN?

As a prequel to the original game, Chains of Olympus occurs during some fertile times in the God of War mythos. It is set after the death of Kratos' family, during his period of servitude to the god Ares. While the exact details of story are still unknown, players can expect to control Kratos during his blood-thirsty conquests prior to his disillusionment with the gods of Olympus.

See those walls on either side of the head? Do you think Kratos might smash some dragon-face into them?

PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360

Tony Hawk's Proving Ground

3 ACTIVISION > DEVELOPER NEVERSOFT > RELEASE FALL

PROVE IT!

Game Informer has been a long-time supporter of the Tony Hawk series. Many a team member has not only played every single iteration, but has inhaled every trick and challenge from beginning to end. And so it is from this perspective that we have to bring up some qualms with the direction this entry is headed, even as we delight in some of the new content.

According to Joel Jewitt, president of Neversoft, the game's creator, Proving Ground "is the largest and most compelling Tony Hawk game ever." After a recent visit to the Neversoft studios to see the game in action, we can easily agree that Proving Ground offers a sea of new content and ways to play Tony Hawk. Unfortunately, we just can't help but get that gnawing feeling in the back of our minds that the series is trying too hard and not finishing up on previous ideas. There were some great pieces to Project 8, but some of the game felt unpolished and we were looking forward to a follow-up that would get the time and care needed to really refine the gameplay and challenges. Instead, the series once again makes a complete change of direction.

To be fair, we haven't played Proving Ground yet (we were only allowed to watch), and hands-on gameplay is the most important factor of any Tony Hawk title. There are also a number of improvements and additions still to be made, so in the end, Neversoft may prove us wrong.

One of the goals of Proving Ground is to make the world more immersive, so the players will take on all the single-player and multiplayer challenges from inside the game. Being able to seamlessly enter a multiplayer game from the career mode is a huge addition and should get more gamers playing online (also, the PlayStation 3 version will support online play this time around).

In the single-player experience, you can explore three different paths – Career, Hardcore, and Rigger. Completing challenges will reward the player with new abilities. For example, you can unlock the new Nail-The-Grab and Nail-The-Manual moves, which are nice twists on last year's Nail-The-Trick maneuver.

The Hardcore route gives players a kick boost that can

> Yes, climbing has returned. Let's hope it's not as frustrating as it was before
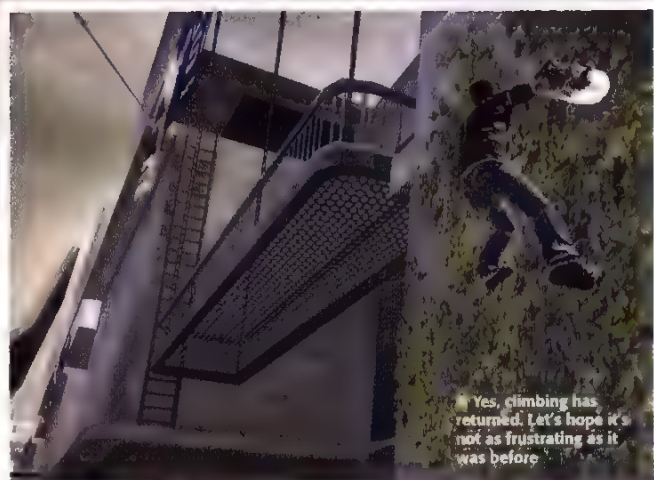
eventually be used to knock people down. The boost seems to be the biggest addition to Proving Ground, as it gives players a new way to keep their speed up, which any Tony Hawk player knows is the secret to big combos.

The Rigger path leads you to new ways to affect the environment, allowing the player to climb objects, and transform and introduce props into the game to make better skating lines.

Taking place in a much more vibrant and realistic world, this Tony Hawk visits some classic skating haunts including Philadelphia, Washington, D.C., and Baltimore. While Tony Hawk's worlds are never truly realistic (and who would want them to be?), the environments do have a very grounded feel this time around. We didn't see any over-the-top environments like amusement parks or car manufacturing plants.

There are also new minigames, including one titled Hawkman, where you have to follow a specific line defined by a long series of dots. Think of it as Pac-Man with a Tony Hawk twist. Since the dots can hover on or above a skate line, it forces the player to do specific maneuvers at certain heights. This mode looks highly addicting and challenging. Also, Proving Grounds introduces a video editor feature, which lets you create your own skate videos. You can set up various cameras for each shoot and then edit the footage before you share it with friends.

While we may have our concerns about polish when it comes to this series, Neversoft has always delivered highly entertaining products. We look forward to all the new innovations in Proving Ground. Let's just hope that Neversoft pays as much attention to the details and the challenges as they do to new twists that they introduce each year. ■ ■ ■

Take pictures of your best tricks

X /take picture

PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360

Skate

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION/SPORTS (UP TO 8-PLAYER VIA PLAYSTATION NETWORK OR XBOX LIVE)
> **PUBLISHER** ELECTRONIC ARTS > **DEVELOPER** EA BLACK BOX > **RELEASE** FALL

GET REAL, TONY

With the Tony Hawk franchise basically melting away the other extreme sports entities, one would think that publishers would shy away from trying to horn in on the market. Does EA actually have a chance? Will the game fare better than the awful Street Sk8ter? With a focus on realism, creativity, and community, Skate could snare a few Tony fans – and gamers who may have given up on the genre altogether.

Take everything you thought you knew about skateboarding games and flush it down the toilet, because with Skate you're starting over. Skate focuses on three major tenets: skating, creating, and sharing. There are no lengthy grind lines, spinning on fire hydrants, and no launching into the air looking for a secret tape. You are meant to feel like you

are performing an actual trick, with most controls mapped to the analog sticks and shoulder buttons. The left stick controls the skater and the direction you want to go, and the right stick handles the board. Gone are the days of magically motoring about on your skateboard.

To ollie, you press down on the analog stick and flick it upward. Do that same movement backwards, and you nollie. Variations on these basic principles allow for heelflips, pop-shuvits, or rotations. You won't earn new tricks as you progress, so each skater will have access to the complete move list from the outset. Although this new-fangled control scheme works quite well, it's obvious that it's going to take practice – and a lot of it.

The meat of the single-player game revolves around completing different challenges. Everything is open-ended, and EA has 10 separate challenge types including racing, jam contests, and skate demonstrations. Your goal is to get famous and get as much magazine coverage as possible. By performing sick tricks in front of photographers, you move

from the back pages to landing your mug on the cover.

Skate will have a separate online progression system where, through competing against your friends, you'll progress from an amateur to a pro. While multiplayer will be there, the community seems to be one of the game's defining elements. As you play, you'll be able to capture approximately 30-45 seconds of video from your replay. Then you can manipulate that footage, add effects, and then upload the video YouTube-style to the game's official website.

Even though EA is trying to infuse realism into skateboarding videogames, the result isn't a dry skating sim. It's still fun, and the sense of accomplishment from grinding a rail or landing after a 360-degree grab is just as rewarding as a million-point combo. EA has a number of challenges with switching up the tried-and-true formula we've grown to love in Tony Hawk games, but from what we've experienced thus far, we have to say that it's on the right track. ■ ■ ■

The government's "Super Sk8ter" project injects pure steez into subjects' bloodstreams

Muscle shirts are not recommended for the man-boobed gentleman
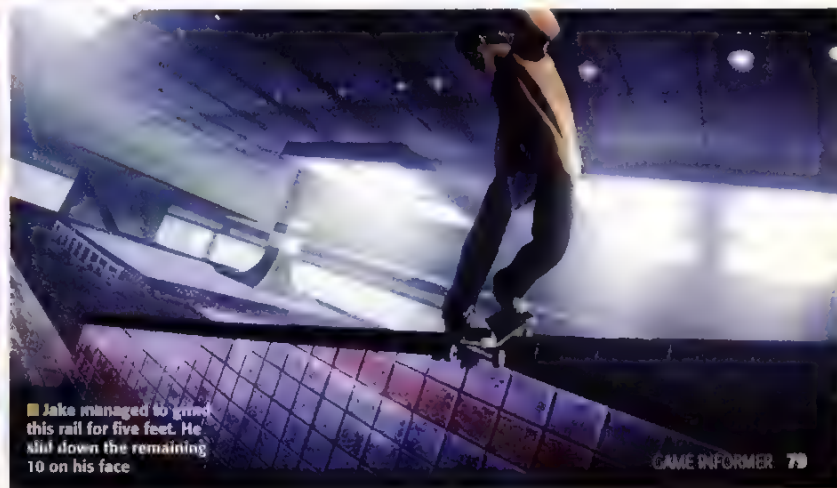
Jake managed to grind this rail for five feet. He slid down the remaining 10 on his face

■ Before the start of each match, players will be able to swap between their Superstar's primary and secondary fighting styles

■ We are still waiting to hear details about the game's online features, but we have been assured that they will be "very robust"

■ Looks like Kane just felt the lasting sting of the sex change suplex
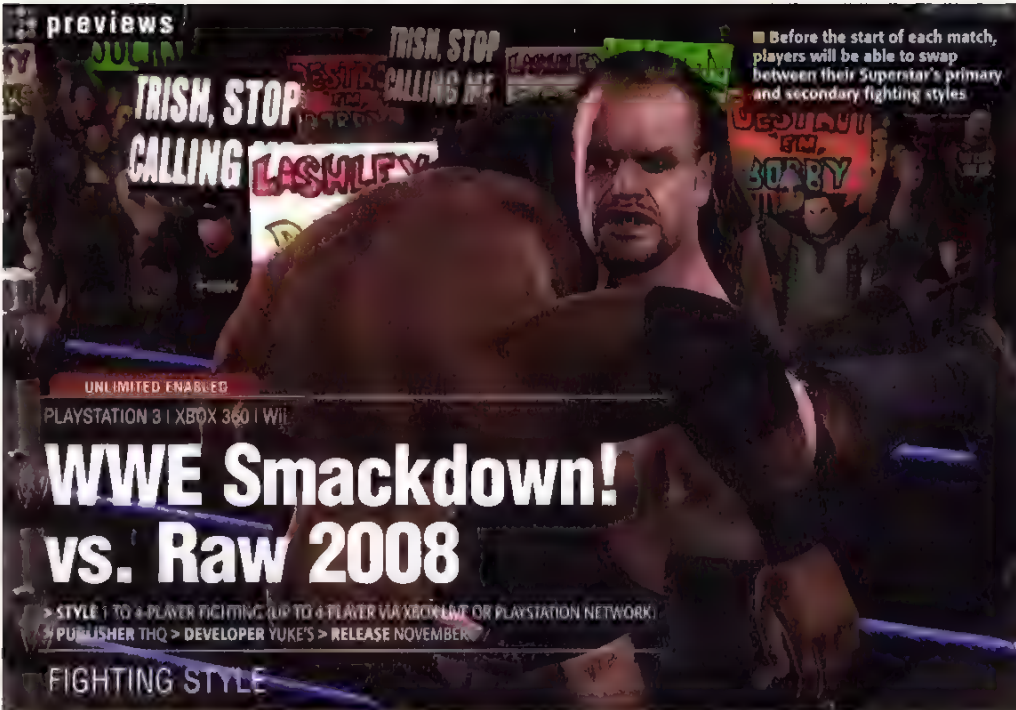
UNLIMITED ENABLED

PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360 | Wii

WWE Smackdown! vs. Raw 2008

> STYLE 1 TO 4-PLAYER FIGHTING (UP TO 4-PLAYER VIA XBOX LIVE OR PLAYSTATION NETWORK)
> PUBLISHER THQ > DEVELOPER YUKE'S > RELEASE NOVEMBER

FIGHTING STYLE

The king of the console wrestling ring returns this year to hold onto its title. Granted, it doesn't have a lot of competition, but that doesn't mean THQ isn't trying to keep its wrestler in top shape. As any coach will tell you, if you want to stay on top you need to have the right moves. The stilted animations of past Smackdown! vs. Raw titles just won't cut it anymore. "SVR 08 will mark the beginning stages of an animation overhaul," THQ's creative manager Bryan Williams tells us. In addition to new grapple and strike animations, Williams states, "Navigational movements will steer clear of the mechanical movements and feet sliding found in past titles in favor of much more fluid and natural motions to create digitized superstars

who will more closely resemble their real life counterparts. I give you my guarantee that SVR 08 will the best animated wrestling title ever released."

So SVR has the moves, but does it have the brain to use them? "I'll be the first to admit that SVR 07 definitely had its fair share of faults and annoyances, chief among them being the AI," acknowledges Williams. "We've earmarked the improvement of our AI as one of our number one priorities." This year also marks the arrival of a new submission system. Instead of using meters and button mashing to overcome your opponent, SVR 08 will have a more natural control scheme that makes use of the right analog stick to apply and relieve

pressure during submissions. With the newly overhauled animations, players will be able to ascertain a wrestler's current submission state, eliminating the need to display that info in a meter. Players under submission won't be helpless; they will be able to use their own right analog stick movement to try and escape their opponent's grasp. "This will create a compelling back and forth tug of war dynamic," says Williams. "The goal of the new Struggle Submission System is to create an intuitive, compelling and, most important of all, fun gaming experience that will replicate the back and forth nature inherent in actual submission style wrestling."

Also new this year, fighters will benefit from eight unique fighting styles: technical, high-flyer, powerhouse, submission artist, hardcore, dirty, showman, and brawler. Each

fighter will be assigned two different styles, but what makes this system even deeper is that each one has a primary and a secondary ability. "For example, the primary ability of the powerhouse fighting style is Rampage Mode, which increases the strength level of powerhouse superstars and also grants them a momentary boost of invulnerability, making them a truly formidable force within the squared circle," notes Williams. The secondary ability of the powerhouse style is something called the Irresistible Force, which allows players to forcefully and aggressively kick out of pinning situations. With all these new moves, SVR 08 shouldn't have any trouble wrestling its way into several players' homes this November. ■ ■ ■
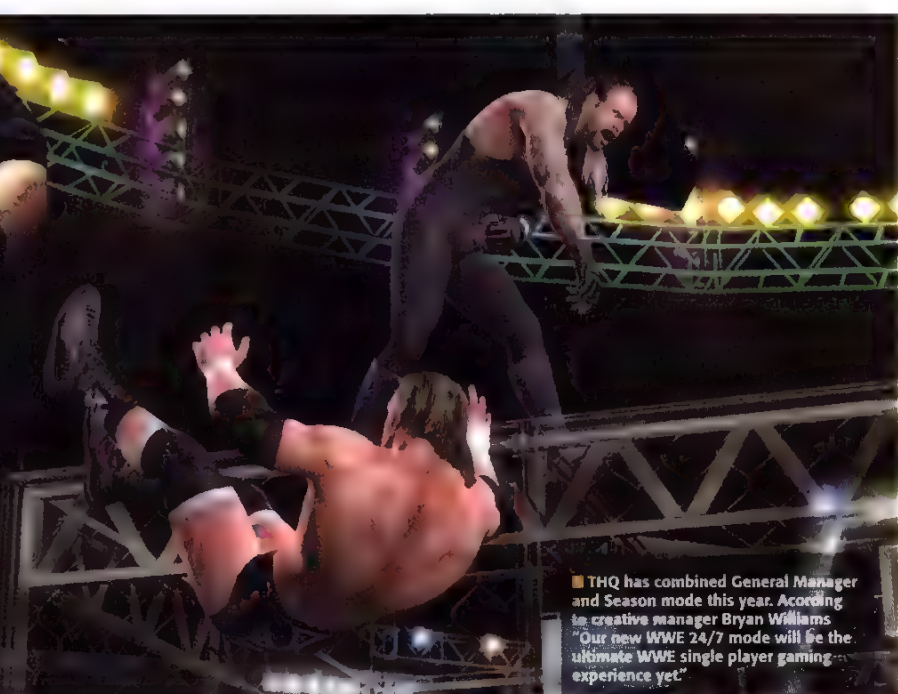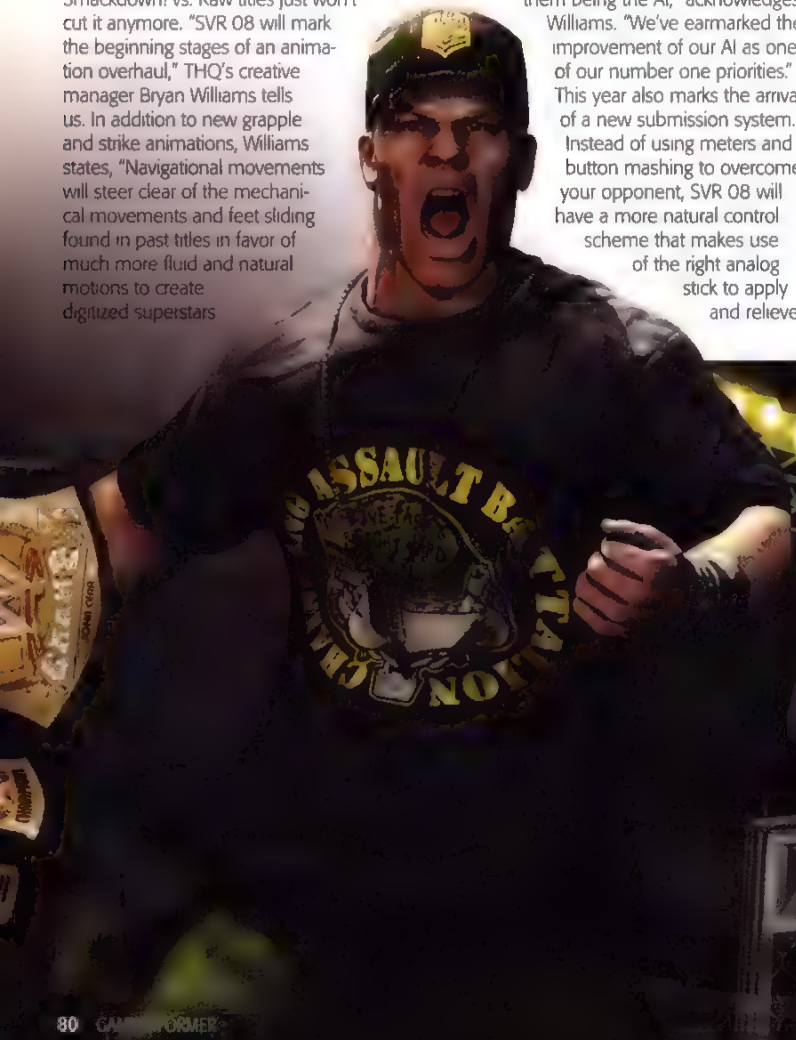
■ THQ has combined General Manager and Season mode this year. According to creative manager Bryan Williams "Our new WWE 24/7 mode will be the ultimate WWE single player gaming experience yet."

Preventing a 10-foot sandwich from toppling over is just as difficult as it seems

Beautiful Katamari

> **STYLE** 1 OR 2-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 4-PLAYER VIA PLAYSTATION NETWORK AND XBOX LIVE)
> **PUBLISHER** NAMCO BANDAI > **DEVELOPER** NAMCO BANDAI > **RELEASE** HOLIDAY

18cm9mm

50cm

Start small, get big. You know the drill

WE'LL ALL ROLL ON

Our oblong-headed friend The Prince is coming to next-gen consoles for the very first time. But that's not the only transition going on here. This will be the first Katamari title to appear on a non-PlayStation console. "At first, we thought it would be interesting to be able to add online play," says producer Hiroshi Igarashi. "Xbox Live was the perfect place for us to achieve this."

Beautiful Katamari will be presented in 720p and is completely free of those annoying load times during the stages. The maximum katamari size players can roll up to in later levels will be bigger than ever, and Namco Bandai promises there will be 50 percent more items to find than past games in the series. The number of onscreen moving objects like people and animals has also increased considerably. Over 50 cousins and new second cousins will be available to play, in addition to a load of new silly presents that can be unearthed.

However, anyone looking for a big changeup in gameplay is out of luck. "While it is true that we have maintained the same structure in terms of one word mechanics, we believe it simply would not be 'Katamari' if we were to make drastic changes to this basic aspect of simply having fun rolling a giant ball around and picking up just about everything in the world with it," Igarashi says.

Katamari's trademark music will undoubtedly be just as ridiculous as ever. Developers are aiming for something more akin to the first game this time around. "We've used sounds with '80s J-pop in mind," Igarashi says. "There is a lot of catchy, upbeat music, as well as slow songs with very unusual lyrics that will even make a Japanese person go, 'What?!'"

The game introduces online multiplayer competition where up to four players can compete to make the biggest katamari, collect the most of a certain item (think the crab stage from the first game), and more unannounced modes. Co-op play will return in basically the same way, though it's only available offline.

Downloadable content is definitely in the works, but Namco Bandai won't elaborate on the details just yet. "While we've made sure to include plenty of enjoyable features for those unable to use the online function, we will guarantee that those with access to online will be able to enjoy the game even more," Igarashi says. "We will be revealing the specifics to this shortly. Stay tuned!" ■ ■ ■

Wii I NINTENDO DS

Rayman Raving Rabbids 2

> **STYLE** 1 TO 4-PLAYER ACTION > **PUBLISHER** UBISOFT > **DEVELOPER** UBISOFT PARIS > **RELEASE** FALL

RABBIDS INVADE EARTH

When you've made a third-party game on Wii that actually competes with Nintendo's offerings, a sequel is a no-brainer. This time around, the Rabbids aren't just coming for Rayman's fantasyland, they've got their sights set on planet Earth. Naturally, these demented tourists want to fit in with the locals, so they'll don parody costumes of several pop culture icons like Spider-Man, Darth Vader, Jack Sparrow, Naruto, Mario, Harry Potter, SpongeBob SquarePants, and more. The minigames are much more multiplayer focused this time around so gamers will now be able to play as any of these costumed Rabbids in addition to Rayman and his bevy of costumes.

We tried out several of the new minigames and can attest that they're just as weird and fun as ever. One has players chomping on carrots, swinging around a long veggie/spit rope, and dropping the loogie into an unsuspecting Rabbid's mug of "worm juice." A baseball game requires you to drum the remote and nunchuk up and down to make a Rabbid run around the bases and then swing the remote like a bat to smack the bunny into homerun territory. A waiter game has you competing to deliver massive toppling sandwiches to a portly Rabbid with a mustache and monocle. Another game involves riding mechanical bulls for points. Here players must emulate the motion instructions onscreen to get the most bucking bounces possible.

Ubisoft is shooting for approximately 60 minigames this time around. Most of them will be completely new, but fan favorites like the music and plunger shooting sequences are returning with a few undisclosed new twists. Thankfully, this sequel will only appear on the Wii and DS this time around instead of getting shoehorned into consoles and control schemes that it wasn't designed for. We're guessing the Paris team got an intimidating visit from our furry white friends on this issue. ■ ■ ■

Parody exceptions should clear Ubisoft from licensed character legal entanglements

26m95cm2mm

10,000

This town is so going to get it

UNLIMITED ENABLED

PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360

All-Pro Football 2K8

> **STYLE** 1 TO 4-PLAYER SPORTS (UP TO 3-PLAYER VIA PLAYSTATION NETWORK OR XBOX LIVE) > **PUBLISHER** 2K SPORTS
> **DEVELOPER** VISUAL CONCEPTS > **RELEASE** SUMMER

THE PROS VERSUS THE JOES

Players say that once the whistle blows and the game starts, everything else – the sore ankles, the bad record, and even the fear that you'll be arrested for running a dog fighting syndicate out of your house in Virginia – disappears for three hours on a Sunday. Game Informer recently put on the pads with an early copy of All-Pro Football 2K8, and we're glad to say that some of our doubts as to how engaging this non-license game could be evaporated quicker than a John Elway pass.

APF's use of over 240 past NFL players is a very effective way to build your team. To start you choose two gold, three silver, and six bronze-tier players. Some may have special icon abilities (like Mr. 3rd Down, Loose Ball Magnet, etc.) and some may not. Either way, you're building a strong foundation of stars who will be your go-to-guys on the field. Any football fan worth their salt will recall a good majority of these players, and best of all, they are as we remember them. Otto Graham never knew a facemask that had more than one bar, and The Snake, Ken Stabler, still has his shaggy do that makes him look like one of Waylon Jennings' cocaine buddies. The rest of your team is filled out with made-up players. You can assign vague attributes to these guys, like choosing whether your cornerbacks, for example, are cover corners, balanced, or run-stoppers.

On the field, superstars make themselves known. In one game we lined up as Joe Montana across from The Fridge – girth, neck roll, and all. Knowing that he could clog up the interior running play we just called, we quickly audibled away from him. Whether it's these kinds of tactical decisions or hearing players talk to each other by name over the Field Pass feature, this isn't just a non-license football game, this is football at the highest level played by its greatest stars.

The evolution of NFL 2K5's gameplay serves APF well, and improvements are evident from the get-go. Defenses are stout in their execution of zone coverage, quick to break on the ball, and responsive to tip balls and easy INTs. Players will be able to use the right stick to help them make tackles. If pushed in the right direction, an otherwise out-of-place defender will reach for an arm tackle or try and slow down the runner until a gang tackle can be made. On offense we've witnessed QBs throwing ducks, receiver's one-handed grabs, and even a high-light reel two-foot toe drag at the back of the endzone. The game is still early and needs the normal tweaks and balancing, but it's clear that developer Visual Concepts hasn't just been sitting on its hands during the prolonged offseason.

What license? In our time with the game, APF's star power and gameplay strength were enough to stop us from worrying about whether the teams where real. Besides, some of the game's 32 stadiums are pretty cool, such as the Detroit Firebirds' Wayne County Stadium, which features a giant red phoenix. You can assign any stadium to your created team, and there are a number of customization features available. To be clear, these are more about tweaking the details of your uniforms, helmets, and accessories such as their stripe patterns, color, numerals, etc. than they are about changing the logos or identity of your team. Still hung up that this isn't the NFL? You won't be for long. ■ ■ ■

Notice the jersey dirt and helmet scuffs. Oh yeah, don't forget Mike Singletary is coming to take your head off
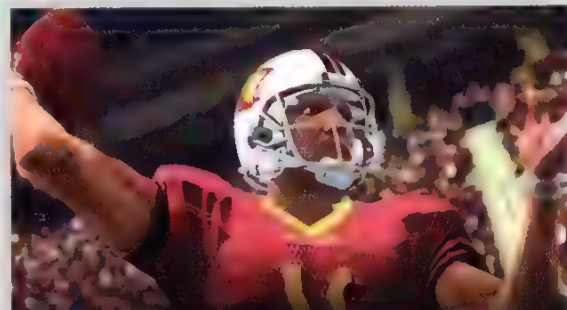
A CAVALCADE OF STARS

When APF 2K8 said it was using legendary players from the past, it wasn't kidding. Here are just a few of the over 240 stars included in the game. For a more complete list, check out Game Informer Online's Unlimited section.

Joe Montana	Johnny Unitas
Jim Marshall	Roger Craig
Jack Youngblood	Korey Stringer
Anthony Munoz	Karl Mecklenburg
Walter Payton	Joe Theismann
Joey Browner	Christian Okoye
Barry Sanders	Steve Tasker
Deacon Jones	William "Refrigerator" Perry
Ronnie Lott	Jerry Rice
Irving Fryar	Dick "Night Train" Lane
Mike Ditka	Brian Bosworth
Gale Sayers	Troy Aikman

PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360 | WII | PLAYSTATION 2 | XBOX | GAMECUBE | PC

Madden NFL 08

> **STYLE** 1 TO 4-PLAYER SPORTS (2-PLAYER VIA PLAYSTATION NETWORK, PS2 ONLINE, OR XBOX LIVE) > **PUBLISHER** EA SPORTS
> **DEVELOPER** EA TIBURON > **RELEASE** AUGUST 14 > **ESRB** E

CHECK DOWN?

A couple years in from its next-gen debut, the Madden series is still trying to find its sweet spot. If it were a new head coach in the NFL, this third year would be put up or shut up time. While there's no chance that Madden is fired if it doesn't take gamers to the promised land, with rival developer Visual Concepts ready to present its own take on football in All-Pro Football 2K8, improvement is needed.

In a very early Xbox 360 build we played, the game felt more responsive than in previous years, and boasted well-implemented new animations and hit stick functionality (which produces some dramatic high and low hits). This seems to be the hallmark of Madden 08 – little changes made to tighten things up with few major offerings. For instance, the pre-play audible system has been streamlined, giving you a few extra precious seconds before the play clock hits zero. Also, the between-play presentation is improved; it no longer just shows players milling about like brain-dead zombies. Finally, the improved player models have thankfully booted the buffed-out kickers.

The game's new on-field features play more to gamers who dig a little deeper into the game, but aren't necessary for those who just pick up and play. An icon system now highlights the big-name players who can make a difference on each team. Players designated as "weapons" will have one of 24 icons under their feet before the snap. Players can garner multiple weapon designations at a time, and

Go low on the hit stick and you can upend Chad Johnson like you've always wanted to. He might still hold onto the ball, however, if he held down the Y button for a possession catch

All day, baby! Weapons like AD will be designated by special icons before the snap

can lose them as their skills change or decline. These icons can be a little distracting while you are setting up before the snap, but they are helpful in seeing where you can engineer mismatches by utilizing your weapons on the field and can be turned off if you find them too bothersome.

One potential advantage you could use involves the new wide receiver controls. These let you take control of a WR during a play and determine what kind of catch they make. Tap the Y button at the correct time and your receiver will try to make an aggressive, dramatic catch. Conversely, holding down the Y button will tell your WR to put a premium on catching and securing the ball after the grab is made. Defenses have a new option to try and corral these dangerous receivers. At the line before a play, you can single out a WR you want your defense to key on. However, in our time with the early build of the game, it

wasn't exactly clear how this changes your defensive coverages -- which can now be assigned to individual members of your defense.

It's hard at this early stage to gauge what the sum effect of these changes will be, and EA isn't talking about that franchise mode just yet. But barring some major surprises, it looks like the 08 installment of Madden will tighten things up and make it simply a more fun experience on the field. This might not sound like much, but the way the franchise has been going recently, it's no small matter. ■ ■ ■

NCAA Football 08

> STYLE 1 TO 4-PLAYER SPORTS (PS3, XBOX 360), 1 TO 8-PLAYER (PS2) (2 PLAYER VIA PLAYSTATION NETWORK OR XBOX LIVE, UP TO 4-PLAYER VIA PS2 ONLINE) > PUBLISHER EA SPORTS > DEVELOPER EA TIBURON > RELEASE JULY 17

THE SCHOOL ROUSER

The game's hub will have alcoves for your trophies and video screens for your saved video replays and pictures

L ast year's NCAA was like that year you take off of college to go hiking in Europe. Okay, maybe absinthe wasn't involved, but the game definitely checked out and wasn't entirely all there. This was no doubt caused by being its first year on the next-gen campus, and for '08 it's already clear that this game isn't going to be making the freshman mistakes of getting lost on the way to class or have its wet laundry thrown out the window.

From the moment you get your hands on the controller, you can feel how NCAA 08 is going to be a different experience. The game is running at 60 frames per second, and it simply looks and feels smoother. Add in nearly 800 new animations, and

NCAA seems to have gotten its act together on the field. In our time with the game we witnessed cool new gang tackles, cut blocks, and some dramatic results using the revamped hit stick, which lets you now choose between going high or low for a tackle. Any big plays you produce on the field will give your player a confidence boost. String enough of these together and the players around him will also start feeling it. Any sweet tackles and jukes you produce within the game can be recorded as a photo or video and played in the main menu lobby. This hub also serves as the trophy case for your rivalry, bowl, and national championship trophies.

Wins on Saturday don't come by accident,

and now you have some in-depth tools for building a dynasty that should make fans of this mode really happy. The recruitment pitches you can make to prospects have expanded from four to fifteen, and the whole process in general is improved. Recruiting a player is now a conversation -- one that ebbs and flows and changes with the players' moods. Every school has been rated in a number of selling points such as TV exposure, fan base, program stability, etc. Talking to a player about these topics and spending time learning what they want is a back and forth process that enables you to vary the intensity of your pitch according to the situation.

If you really want a blue chip recruit, you can make promises to the player involving playing time, redshirting, what kind of season you'll have, and even whether you'll recruit other players at that position. Not only will the player call you on your BS if you try to write checks your butt can't cash, if you break your promises during the season the player might transfer to another school. Your prestige rating will also take a hit. Locating the perfect players for your system is now easier thanks to an excellent new search engine function and a new recruiting board. If you only want to browse receivers with sub 4.4 forty times, simply select this in the search engine.

If Dynasty mode isn't enough to get your wristbands sweaty, the Campus Legend mode finally makes its next-gen appearance. This mode has also received an upgrade over last year's current-gen version. You start out playing for your high school squad during the state tournament. Depending on your performance, you'll get offers from colleges. Picking the right one is important, because you can no longer manipulate the depth chart to make yourself an instant starter. If playing time means a lot to you, maybe you want to sign onto a lower-level school so you're taking snaps from day one. If you do start lower on the depth chart, you can make your way up the ladder by gaining points in practice. The mode's calendar system returns, and it contains optional risk vs. reward night events (like playing basketball with friends, which could result in an injury or a boost in agility). During gameday, the new sim option allows you to fast forward to only those times your character is on the field. You can also choose to go through the mode as an already existing player if you don't want to work your way up the depth chart.

Given the new content, changes, and hopefully a little extra tweaking before release, this NCAA title could be worth staying an extra year in school for. ■ ■ ■

Your Campus Legend character starts out as a man among boys in the high school state tournament

PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360 | Wii | PLAYSTATION 2

FIFA Soccer 08

> **STYLE** 1 TO 7-PLAYER SPORTS (PS3), 1 TO 4-PLAYER (XBOX 360, Wii) 1 TO 8-PLAYER (PS2) (UP TO 10-PLAYER VIA PLAYSTATION NETWORK OR XBOX LIVE, 2-PLAYER VIA WII ONLINE OR PS2 ONLINE) > **PUBLISHER** EA SPORTS > **DEVELOPER** EA CANADA > **RELEASE** SEPTEMBER 25

NEW FEEL FOR FIFA?

Although the FIFA franchise is notorious for changing wildly from year to year, this upcoming installment hopes to build upon 07 as well as make some necessary improvements.

Bolstering the small number of leagues in last year's FIFA, 08 will now include 30 worldwide leagues and 15,000 real-life players. Also, the new Be a Pro feature makes it even more exciting to play as your favorite squad. This mode lets you take control and play as a specific player in one of seven positions. Of course, your camera perspective will change to accommodate your play (including a zoomed-in shaky cam for when you lay on the sprint button). The mode goes so far as to take into account how you play that position. If you aren't good with the ball and try too many dangerous passes, your teammates might be less inclined to give you the ball. Your coach will also give you position tips to help make sure you're effectively performing your role out on the pitch.

Last year's FIFA made some strides with its ball physics, and now the development team wants to extend their work to include the different variables that affect how the ball comes off your foot. This includes what foot a player is better with, how he receives the ball, etc. This is a good idea, but fans of the series know that the franchise hasn't always succeeded in this area, and we hope that player interaction in general is improved. ■ ■ ■

HAND BALLS ARE GOOD

The Wii version of FIFA 08, of course, uses hand motions with the controllers for kicking passing, goalie dives, throw-ins, and special moves. You can play the game with the normal horizontal field or you can use a vertical orientation that is more natural. Also included in the Wii version are three minigames such as table soccer and juggling. Lastly, your Miis can be used for these minigames, and the game even includes a Mii version of star Ronaldinho named Ronald'Mii'nho.

XBOX 360 | PC

Left 4 Dead

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 8-PLAYER VIA INTERNET OR LAN) > **PUBLISHER** VALVE SOFTWARE > **DEVELOPER** VALVE SOFTWARE/TURTLE ROCK STUDIOS > **RELEASE** WINTER

OMG ZOMBIES

■ Though it's first and foremost an action game, Left 4 Dead promises plenty of dramatic moments

They're here to eat your brains, overturn your cars, and kill all the dudes in your base. Zombies, the quintessential menace to life and limb, are once again coming your way courtesy of Counter-Strike and Half-Life creators Valve Software and Turtle Rock Studios. This time, though, the emphasis is on surviving as a team – the game is being developed from the ground up with co-op in mind.

Hordes of the walking dead certainly pose a credible threat in any game, but Turtle Rock is hoping that its hard work in the AI department will pay off with what it's calling an "AI Director." This concept has a behind-the-scenes algorithm responding to the players' actions to create a dynamic zombie experience that recalls the dramatic focus of a horror flick.

Further pushing the envelope in undead interactive storytelling, Left 4 Dead will allow up to four players to control boss monsters with unique abilities like 50-foot tongue lassos and exploding methane stomachs. These antagonists will square off against the four-player Survivor team, though the logistics behind matchmaking are still under wraps.

All this is coming to both Xbox 360 and PC, hopefully by the end of this year. We'll bring you more gory details as they become available ■ ■ ■

■ There's no word on how this title will make use of the Source engine's excellent physics

SCORE 12700

LIFE
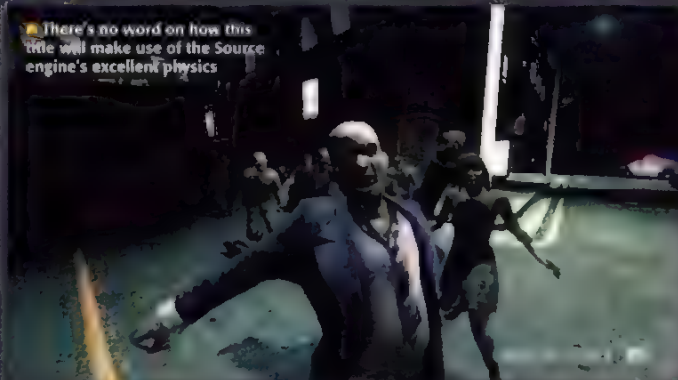
Widescreen support means more bad guys from more angles

HAND GUN 9

WEAPON SELECT

TIME 40 03

PLAYSTATION 3

Time Crisis 4

> **STYLE** 1 OR 2-PLAYER ACTION > **PUBLISHER** NAMCO BANDAI
> **DEVELOPER** NAMCO BANDAI > **RELEASE** NOVEMBER

THE MAN WITH THE ORANGE GUN

MACHINE GUN 297/500

LIFE

The enemy is gathering just ahead of you.

Time Crisis 4 is getting the full treatment when it comes home to PS3s later this year. For the first time, the line between first-person shooters and light gun games will be erased, all thanks to the latest version of Namco Bandai's GunCon. Notice the dual analog sticks? Players will be able to roam stages freely while blasting away with light gun precision. Captain William Rush, who was unplayable in the arcade version, will star as the main character of this new Full Mission Mode, which includes a combination of original and new stages and a new final boss.

Director of the Time Crisis franchise, Takashi Satsukawa, explains the hybrid control style. "The left analog stick controls the movement of the characters, while the right analog stick allows for camera movement," Satsukawa says. "The combination of the two will allow players to freely move

about the field as well as maintain a good view of their surroundings." Buttons on the GunCon 3 will allow for additional actions like jump, zoom, reload, and weapon swap.

Arcade purists can enjoy the original game as well with the addition of widescreen support. Also, new technology integrated into the GunCon 3 will overcome previous CRT-only limitations, allowing full support for plasma and LCD TVs. Objective-based Crisis Missions return with a focus on battling a biological threat. For the uninitiated, these missions have traditionally tasked players with killing a certain amount of enemies, earning a specific amount of points, beating a time limit, etc. Players can
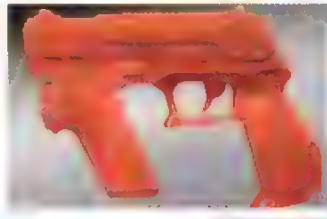
also unlock new weapons through skillful shooting.

Namco Bandai is not talking prices just yet, but we speculate that the game and GunCon bundle will be somewhere in the $70 to $90 range. The company also won't dis-

cuss the possibility of an Xbox 360 version. However, with Namco Bandai's previous PlayStation-exclusive franchises like Ace Combat and Katamari making the jump, we'd be surprised if the Microsoft faithful didn't get in on the action at least some time down the road. ■ ■ ■

Capt. Will Rush doesn't take any crap for his white guy dreads

Let's hope the new FPS controls aren't totally weird

Though there are bosses to be fought, most enemies come at you in packs

PC

Sword of the New World: Granado Espada

> STYLE MASSIVELY MULTIPLAYER ONLINE ROLE-PLAYING GAME > PUBLISHER K2 NETWORK/ELEPHANT ENTERTAINMENT > DEVELOPER IMCGAMES > RELEASE JULY 10

JOIN A THREESOME

Who hasn't sat in town for hours, waiting for a tank or healer to be available to dive into the dungeon you're interested in? For that matter, who hasn't wanted to be able to shell out a few bucks for the privilege of rolling a unique, overpowered character class? Sword of the New World, under development by the fine Korean minds behind the successful MMO Ragnarok Online, has solutions to these problems and more.

Rather than putting you in the body of a single avatar, this title has players controlling three characters at a time. Each of them has only a small handful of abilities and powerful AI to handle basic tasks, though, so it shouldn't get too overwhelming to control. This crew will evolve and be customized in normal MMORPG fashion on your trip up to the level cap of 100, at which point large-scale PvP becomes the new hotness (though K2 informs us that

there will be raid-style PvE progression for level-capped players as well).

During the leveling process – the portion of the game we got a good look at – the gameplay is much more akin to Diablo II than World of Warcraft. Players will be rounding up dozens of mobs for high-speed, efficient area-effect slaughter. Having three characters makes this process fast and entertaining, with gorgeous particle effects flying around everywhere.

Special character classes, PvE-only consumables (potions that can, for instance, increase your experience gain or regen rate), and cosmetic items will be available for real-money purchase, though the publisher insists that these are entirely optional and will not affect PvP balance at all. Sword of the New World is a different type of MMO, to be sure, but this Korean import looks like it could make a legitimate showing in the U.S. ■ ■ ■

Most of the female character designs aren't the most...empowering...pieces of art we've ever seen

XBOX 360

Blazing Angels 2: Secret Missions of WWII

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 16 PLAYERS VIA XBOX LIVE) > PUBLISHER UBISOFT > DEVELOPER UBISOFT ROMANIA > RELEASE AUGUST
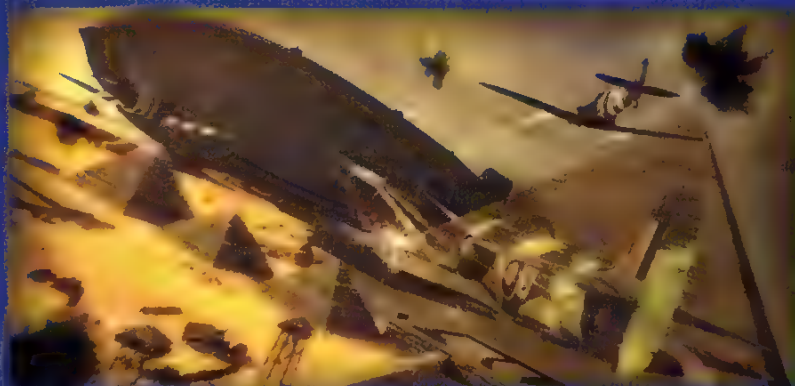
A LITTLE FICTIONALIZATION NEVER HURT ANYONE

The original Blazing Angels may have been a little too grounded in the realities of World War II dogfights for its own good. At least it seems as if that's the lesson Ubisoft gleaned from its earlier installment, as the sequel appears to up the ante in some major ways in order to deliver a more over-the-top flight combat game, chock full of prototype weaponry and unusual locations.

You are cast as the leader of a fictional undercover flight squad tasked with halting the Third Reich's construction and implementation of a weapon of mass destruction. We're envisioning James Bond in a cockpit, but who are we to say? No matter what persona you adopt in your mind, you'll be piloting an array of real historical and never-before-seen prototype aircraft throughout the 18 missions of the game. While traditional dogfights and bombing missions are a big part of the title, more unique objectives like taking out giant Nazi zeppelins and utilizing secret government weaponry like self-guided missiles should deliver some of the variety that the first game lacked. The powerful weapons and planes should come in handy, since you'll constantly

have your squad pitted against a special German force of pilots that serve as your analogue on the opposing side of the war. Whether you're tackling these elite pilots or other more mundane enemies, the unusual locations over which you'll be flying will include exotic locales like the Himalayas, Cairo, the Red Square in Moscow, China, and even San Pietro's Cathedral in Rome.

Beyond single-player content, Blazing Angels 2 has an extensive multiplayer component that includes both cooperative and competitive game types – includ-

ing a new Capture the Flag type and an intriguingly titled Epic Battle mode, all designed for up to 16 ace pilots. While we haven't seen much yet of the game in action, the most recent word is that we'll be able to take to the skies before the end of the summer. ■ ■ ■
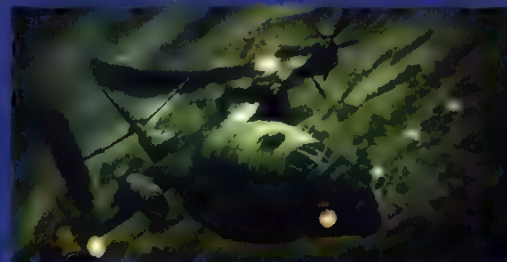
The game exhibits some remarkable graphic fidelity, which will include extensive use of depth of field and an insane level of detail on both ally and enemy aircraft
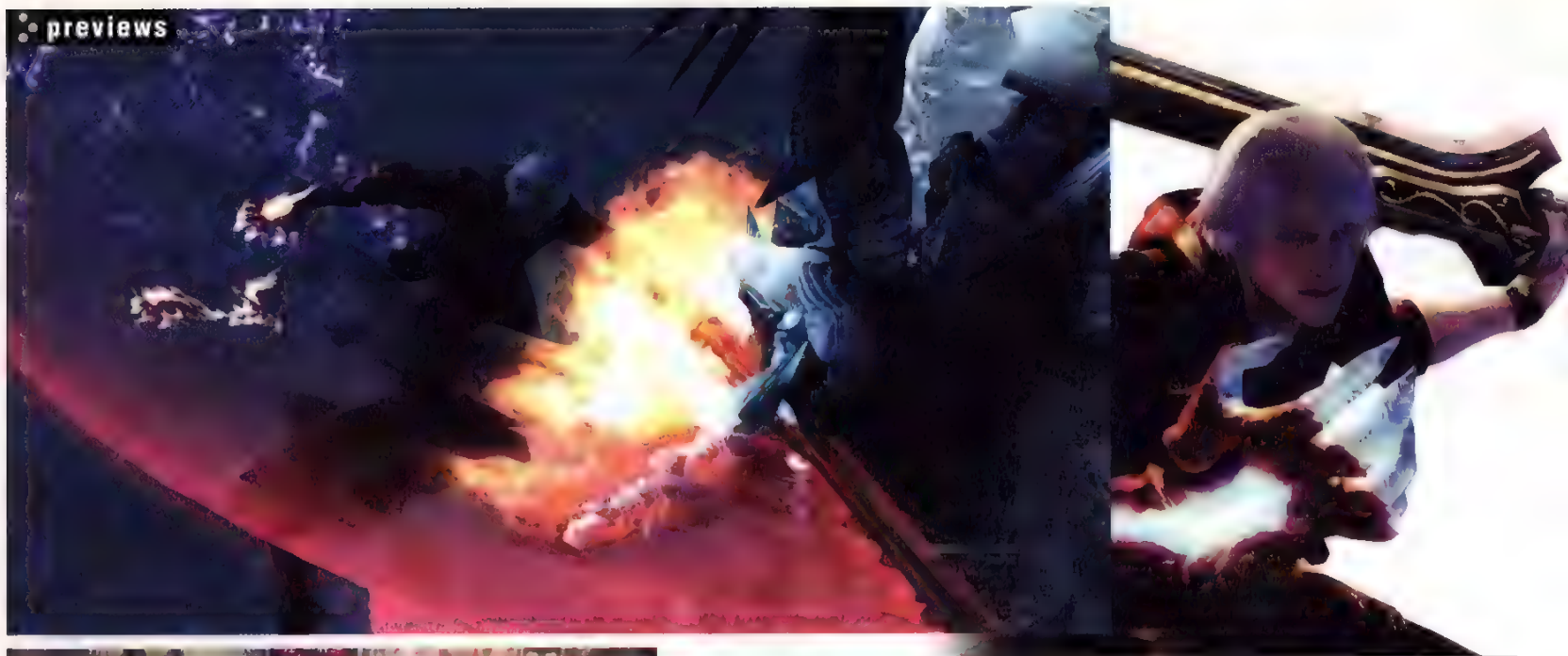
Devil May Cry 4

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

BRING IT ON

With the recent announcement of Devil May Cry 4's multiplatform status, it seems that this title is a hot topic of conversation. However, instead of talking about console fanboys, it might be better to focus on the way the game's pieces are coming together to form an over-the-top, adrenaline-fueled adventure. We played the latest PS3 build (a 360 version was still MIA), and it definitely feels like classic Devil May Cry action with some new twists.

Nero's possessed arm, called the Devil Bringer, is still a decisive advantage in combat, but its other uses are quickly becoming more apparent. In addition to positioning enemies, the arm can be helpful for navigating the environment – whether it's grabbing out-of-reach power-ups or assisting in superhuman leaps. It also facilitates finishing techniques against tough foes (like the fire demon Berial), delivering incredibly powerful attacks when they are weakened.

While the Devil Bringer is great tool, it isn't the most effective way to do damage. Nero still uses his gun (the Blue Rose) and his sword (the Red

Queen) to dish out the real pain. As in previous games, players will be able to hold a button to charge up powerful gun blasts, but now a similar mechanic exists for the sword. By "revving" the L2 button, you can imbue the Red Queen with additional power that causes the weapon to burst into flames on its next strike. While cool, this technique doesn't feel like it replaces the Devil Trigger, though whether or not Nero will have that ability has not been revealed.

There was only one element of the demo that raised a red flag for us: the abundance of outdoor environments. We fought on piers, snowy mountain plains (where the Frosts from DMC 1 made a reappearance), and in city streets. Battles in these areas were still fun, but we still have flashbacks to the unimpressive outdoor combat in DMC 2. To be fair, that was the only thing that reminded us of the infamous entry in this series. Everything else, from the silky smooth combat to the puzzle solving, seems to take Devil May Cry's stylish formula to the next level. ■ ■ ■

■ The charge blast isn't quite as fun as shooting rapid fire

■ This is the result of revving up the Red Queen

■ Berial is still the only boss we've seen so far

THE RED COAT RETURNS

We may not know exactly what you'll need to do to unlock Dante as a playable character, but we did learn more about how his controls will differ from Nero's. He will use a style system similar to the one in DMC 3, but instead of selecting one style at the beginning of a level – like Gunslinger and Swordmaster – Dante will be able to switch between them at any time. This mechanic ensures that playing as Dante will provide a new experience, much like playing as Vergil in the special edition of DMC 3. Speaking of Sparda's other son, there's still no news on what role, if any, Vergil plays in this title.
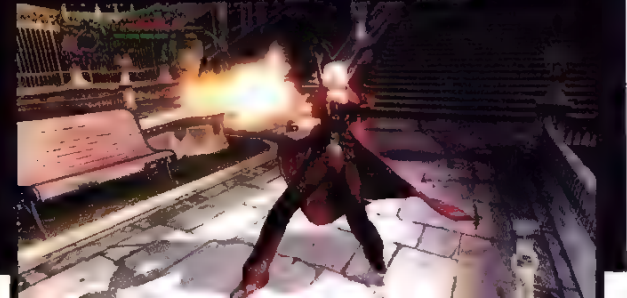
■ Before the game even starts, one screen warns: "Some parts of this game may be considered cruel and violent." Score one for Silent Hill fans!

■ Weapons all have a limited number of uses, meaning you will constantly have to scavenge to survive

PSP

Silent Hill Origins

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION > **PUBLISHER** KONAMI > **DEVELOPER** CLIMAX > **RELEASE** FALL.

A LITTLE SCARE

f you save a creepy young girl named Alessa from a fire in the town of Silent Hill, your number one concern should be getting out of there as soon as possible, because scary stuff is bound to happen. However, Silent Hill Origins is a prequel in the classic survival horror series, so you can't blame Travis O'Grady for not knowing the town is bad news -- he is a trucker, after all.

■ "I'll just relax here a while. What could possibly eat me alive?"

Dogged by a troubled development history, this handheld horror title appears to be back on track, though changed from its original form. The game will no longer try to incorporate the over-the-shoulder camera popularized by Resident Evil 4, instead relying on a traditional third-person fixed perspective. Going back to basics, Origins will focus on translating classic Silent Hill gameplay to the PSP, including improvised weapons, haunting puzzles, and weird half-naked twitchy nurses.

It appears that Origins will be one console experience that won't take much of a hit in its move to handheld. In addition

to impressive visuals (the lighting looks especially nice), the control scheme also feels natural. Players will move with the analog stick, center the camera by tapping L, and hold R to initiate combat mode. Since Travis' weapons all degrade with use, the notion of ammo conservation applies to melee attacks as well as guns, so sometimes it may be better to run than waste all of your katana swings.

Gamers who have played the other Silent Hill games will notice several connections between Origins and the future events in the haunted town, including recognizable characters like Dahlia and Dr. Kauffman. It's not Silent Hill 5, but Origins is a title to watch if you like survival horror, or if you don't have enough ways to scare yourself while riding public transportation. ■ ■ ■

Wi

Ghost Squad

> **STYLE** 1 TO 4-PLAYER ACTION > **PUBLISHER** SEGA > **DEVELOPER** AM2 > **RELEASE** HOLIDAY

GHOSTS DON'T NEED RECON

t's a good thing that a president's job isn't as dangerous as it is in video games. With all the terrorist threats, assassination attempts, and kidnappings, only the best of the best would even be able to make it to lunch. At least the video game president won't have to worry too much when the Ghost Squad shoots its way onto Wii. Formed in secrecy by the UN, they are an elite team trained to deal with terrorist threats and other volatile situations without leaving a trace.

It may sound like one of the most basic Tom Clancy rip-offs, but this on-rails shooter was fairly successful in the arcades, and Sega is hoping to have some similar luck on the Wii. Even though the game is on rails, at certain points players will be able to pick alternate routes through the level.

Of course, a shooter without guns is no

shooter at all, and Ghost Squad will have at least 25 different types – machine guns, submachine guns, pistols, sniper rifles, shotguns, and even crossbows. Players will also get to do some hand-to-hand combat between defusing bombs and rescuing hostages. With four different game modes, including the original arcade version and the ability to play with up to three friends, Ghost Squad looks like it might provide some good clean arcade-style fun this holiday season. ■ ■ ■

■ Commander is a limitless fountain of obvious information

■ You have only one chance. Choose carefully.

■ There is just something about shots of rail shooters that make them look exactly like rail shooters

Universe At War: Earth Assault

Developer Petroglyph has teamed with Sega for this spiritual successor to successful RTS Star Wars: Empire at War. The game is set in the year 2012 as three separate alien factions face off in an X-Com-inspired battle for Earth. The brutish Hierarchy race (shown here in red) moves at a slower pace, but their massive walkers pack a devastating punch. The Novus faction may not have the same pound-for-pound power, but their networked structures allow almost instantaneous tactical unit transportation. We're excited to see what the mysterious third faction brings to the table as the fall release nears.
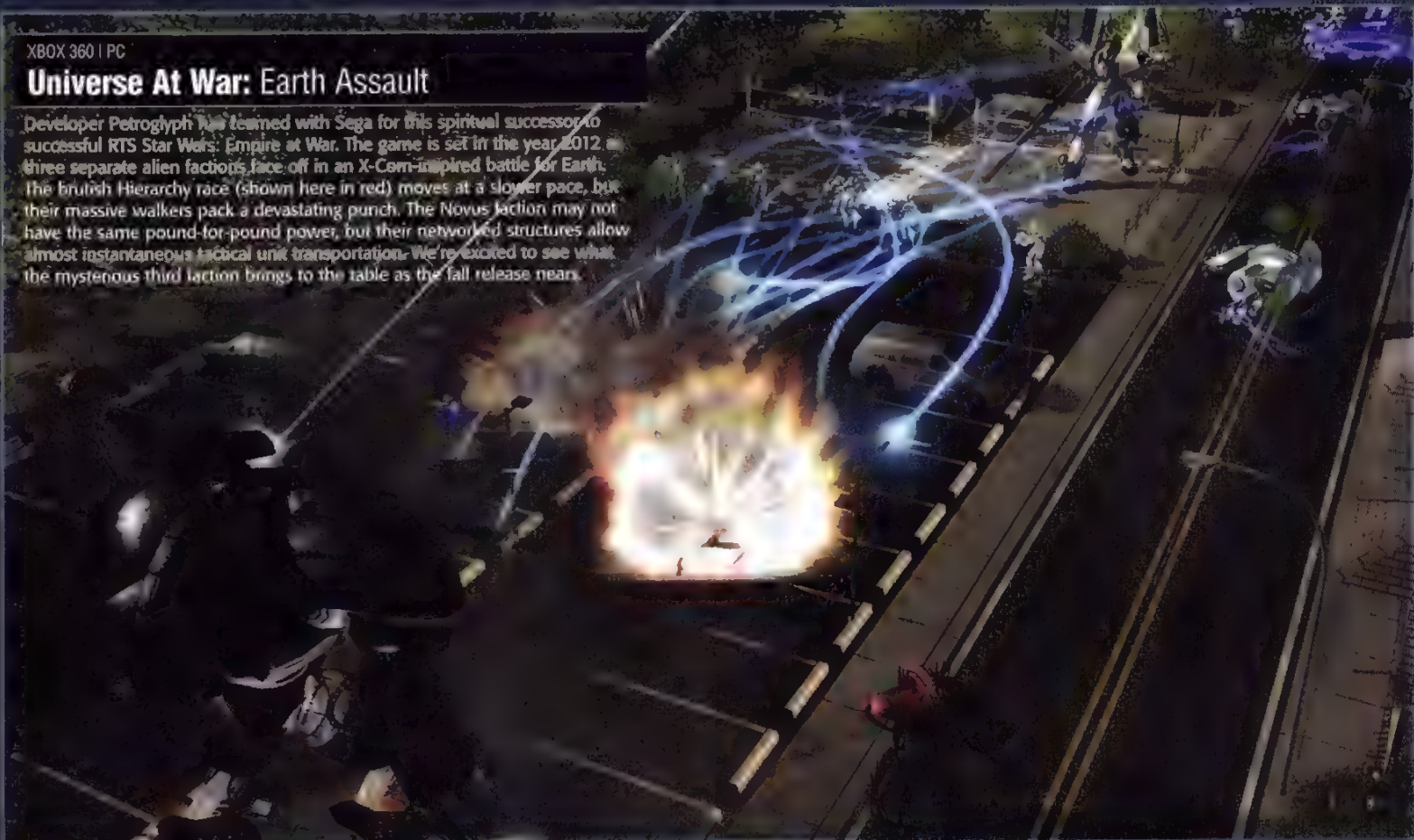
Boogie

If Tim Burton and the creators of SpongeBob SquarePants ever got together to create a *Saturday Night Fever*-inspired dance game for the Wii, it would probably look like Boogie. Since the chances of that actually happening are slim, we will have to settle for EA's attempt. Using the Wii's controls, players will manipulate their onscreen character like they would a marionette. The nunchuk controls the lower body and swings the character's hips, whereas the remote moves the upper body and directs character movement. Boogie will also let players sing along through a microphone peripheral and make their own music videos. Boogie's release date is not yet solidified, but it will definitely street sometime this year.
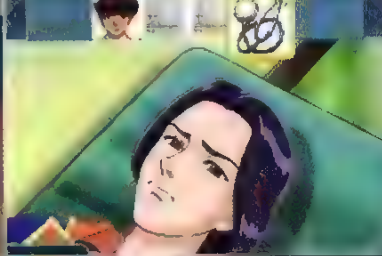
LifeSigns: Surgical Unit

Fans of Trauma Center finally have a new medical game to look forward to. Developer Spike originally released LifeSigns in Japan a couple years ago, and now Dreamcatcher is bringing it to the U.S. But how does LifeSigns compare to Atlus' cult hit? "Lifesigns really bridges the gap between being a medical simulation style game like Trauma Center and full on interactive adventure title," says producer Jay Podilchuk. Players will examine, diagnose, and operate on patients. Think of the non-surgery elements as the investigation phase of a Phoenix Wright trial. Discuss patient medical records, collect test results, and deal with personal drama (which *Grey's Anatomy* has taught us happens in every hospital). Look for it June 26.

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PC
The Typing of the Dead II

It's been a good seven years since the original Typing of the Dead came out on Dreamcast, and fans outside of Japan have been hoping for a sequel ever since. That time has finally come, but it's only set to release in Japan sometime in 2007. Based on House of the Dead III, this entry ditches the in-game Dreamcast backpacks and keyboards in favor of the original HotD shotguns. The game will feature a dynamic difficulty system that will lengthen or shorten the zombie-slaying phrases depending on players' typing skills. Practice your typing now by writing Sega to demand a U.S. release!
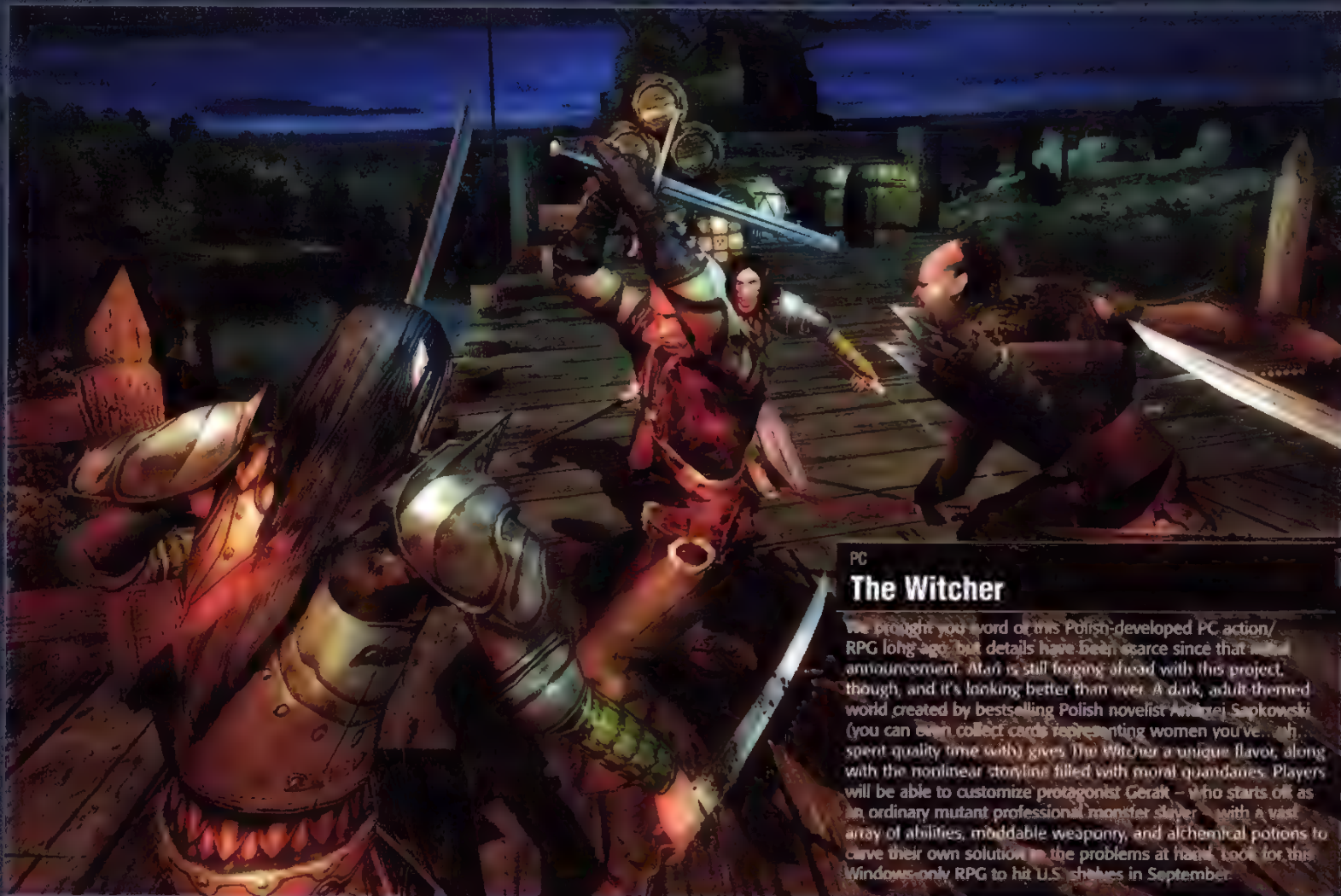
PC
The Witcher

We brought you word of this Polish-developed PC action/RPG long ago, but details have been scarce since that initial announcement. Atari is still forging ahead with this project, though, and it's looking better than ever. A dark, adult-themed world created by bestselling Polish novelist Andrzej Sapkowski (you can even collect cards representing women you've... uh, spent quality time with) gives The Witcher a unique flavor, along with the nonlinear storyline filled with moral quandaries. Players will be able to customize protagonist Geralt – who starts off as an ordinary mutant professional monster slayer – with a vast array of abilities, moddable weaponry, and alchemical potions to carve their own solution to the problems at hand. Look for this Windows-only RPG to hit U.S. shelves in September.

REVIEWS

MULTI

94

Spider-Man 3

PS3

97

Ninja Gaiden Sigma

Wii

100

Resident Evil 4

XBOX 360

103

Call of Juarez

GAME OF THE MONTH

Odin Sphere

Don't scrap your PS2 just yet! This new action/RPG from developer Vanillaware is an experience you won't forget. Odin Sphere hooks you immediately with its striking visuals and storytelling, but the battle mechanics and clever systems will have you playing until all of the pieces of this compelling tale fall into place.

Note: Due to the fact that Ninja Gaiden, Resident Evil 4, and Tomb Raider Anniversary have already appeared in previous iterations, they have been withdrawn from consideration for Game of the Month. Also due to a lack of worthy titles, we did not award a Handheld Game of the Month.

98

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	Scrumptious Chocolate Cake. Look out! It's poisoned!

> 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.

PSP

PaRappa the Rapper

NINTENDO DS

Dynasty Warriors DS: Fighter's Battle

REVIEWS INDEX

pg. 99

PC GAME OF THE MONTH

The Lord of the Rings Online:
Shadows of Angmar

Even the most cynical of haters is going to have trouble denying the skill with which developer Turbine has brought Tolkien's fantastic world to life in this otherwise by-the-numbers MMORPG. The sense of wonder and exploration that permeates every square foot of this online realm is truly outstanding. Hopping on the leveling treadmill yet again is a blast thanks to the amazing ambience and solid execution found here.

the edge
When All Games Aren't Created Equal

This is where GI breaks down multi-platform games. So whenever you see this logo, there is important multi-system information regarding that product.

	Content suitable for persons ages 3 and older		Content suitable for persons 17 ages and older
EC		**M**	
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

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

My Pokémans – Let me show you them

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

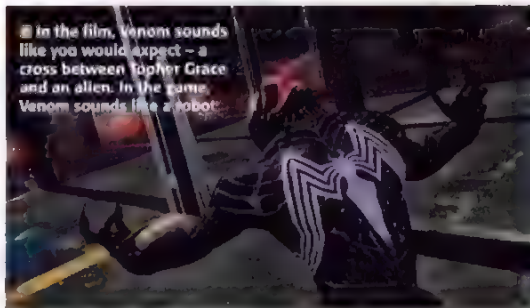**sports** – A term we use for games like Madden NFL

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

■ Most of the boss battles conclude with cinematic finishing moves that require swift button presses

■ In the film, Venom sounds like you would expect – a cross between Topher Grace and an alien. In the game, Venom sounds like a robot

■ Completing side activities will reward the player with new abilities

PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360

Spider-Man 3

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION > **PUBLISHER** ACTIVISION
> **DEVELOPER** TREYARCH > **RELEASE** MAY 4 > **ESRB** T

THE FUTURE OF MOVIE GAMES

Similar to the alien symbiote that clings to Peter Parker's skin, the Spider-Man 3 film utilizes the game as a host, delivering the same story arc, the voices and likenesses of the actors, and an overall tone akin to its silver screen counterpart. Just as the black suit manifests the dark side in Spider-Man, the film taints the game by imposing its ill-fitted structure.

It's not that director Sam Raimi and his scriptwriters dropped the ball with Spider-Man 3. As you play through the game, it just becomes painfully clear that this story was intended for one entertainment medium and not another. While some plot points lend themselves nicely to interactive moments, such as the subway battle against Sandman, most of the movie content feels forced. Some scenes are artificially lengthened, and others are completely altered. What's the point in making a movie-based game if it's not even going to be true to the film?

Thankfully, Spider-Man 3 is different than most

■ The Scorpion origin story is expertly crafted and something that Spider-Man fans have to see

movie games in that the poorly implemented movie content only accounts for a small fraction of the experience. Developer Treyarch has penned its own story that extends beyond the movie and makes up the majority of the game. Rarely are developers credited as skilled writers, but the new material Treyarch created is far more compelling and exciting than anything the film lends. In particular, the Scorpion subplot is deserving of its own silver screen treatment. Not only is this misunderstood villain's story fascinating, it's emotionally complex and a perfect compliment to the film origin stories of Green Goblin and Doc Ock.

The gameplay accompanying the original content created specifically for the game is outstanding. In the previous Spider-Man games, there weren't many substantial missions. Most goals consisted of beating the tar out of a handful of thugs in a matter of seconds. In Spider-Man 3, the missions are lengthy, greatly varied, and loaded with cinematic moments.

With these elements in place, the experience no longer feels centered solely around the web swinging. As brilliant as that mechanic is, there's so much more to Spider-Man, and you now get to experience it.

The brawling mechanic is still amazingly fast, but it's not the button-mashing affair it used to be. Acrobatic combos abound, a slowdown mechanic allows for easy countering, and you'll even be treated to flashy finishing moves that play out like God of War's timed button sequences. The black costume further adds depth to the combat. In the normal red and blue suit, Spidey is graceful. In the black suit, his moves are fueled by power and the appetite to destroy.

New York City plays a much larger role in this sequel as well. The action that unfolds on the heavily populated city streets is only half of the experience. Players will now get the chance to explore some of the city's interiors, as well as the underworld. These new locales make the city feel more alive, and also add layers to the gameplay. For instance, web swinging through the tight sewer system requires a different skill than on the open streets.

Spider-Man 3's greatest strength isn't how accurately it captures the essence of this hero; it's the game's ability to keep you in a state of wonder. You never really know where Spidey will be headed next, or what challenge you'll be tasked with upon arrival. Variety really makes this game stand out above the others. Whether you are averting a bank robbery, defusing a bomb strapped to a skyscraper, or taking a break from your superhero duties to sky dive, your spider sense continually buzzes with excitement.

The game also does a great job of illustrating what steps can be taken to make the game just as powerful as the film. History has proven that simply retelling a movie in the framework of game usually doesn't work. On the other hand, as Spider-Man 3 clearly illustrates, content that expands beyond the film can be tailored to fit the video game experience perfectly. Hopefully more developers and movie studios pick up on what Treyarch has accomplished with this game.——**REINER**

PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360

The Bigs

> **STYLE** 1 TO 4-PLAYER SPORTS (UP TO 4-PLAYER VIA PLAYSTATION NETWORK OR XBOX LIVE)
> **PUBLISHER** 2K SPORTS > **DEVELOPER** BLUE CASTLE GAMES > **RELEASE** JUNE 25 > **ESRB** E

PLAYING WITH A LITTLE JUICE

Is this game supposed to be a biographical recreation of Jose Canseco's life? Not only does every player look like he's been popping 'roids since the day he was at his mother's teat, you'll actually see fly balls bounce off of players' heads for home runs. The only elements missing are the occasional bar fight and a night in Madonna's penthouse.

Gamers are certainly familiar with juiced up baseball experiences, but unlike Midway's now-deceased MLB Slugfest series, this title is still true to the rules of the game. You won't see fights breaking out on the basepaths or pitchers with the ability to throw physics-breaking screwballs. The Bigs is more of an exaggeration of the real sport – a nice change of pace for the zany arcade-style sports genre. Fastballs have more zip and movement, and curveballs that originally would have broken 12 inches now have a drop of 20. Fielder reflexes have been honed to cat-like levels, which allows for bullets to be snagged, and any wall in the park to be scaled. Sluggers are even deadlier. If a ball is served up as meat, it'll likely reach orbit. These elements come together to create an entertaining baseball package that pushes players skills.

The only aspect of the game that has been altered is its length. Rather than playing a full nine innings, the default is set to five. Naturally, this leads to much shorter games, but there isn't a drought of scoring. The turbo system, which allows players to add some juice to certain actions, is balanced perfectly for the shorter five-inning game, with players usually saving their big plays for the final nail-biting inning.

The gameplay is simple, but nicely polished, and effective in setting a fast-paced experience. Unfortunately, this bite-size formula also passes into the game modes. Rookie Challenge is a bare-bones and uneventful affair that only takes you through 25 games. Home Run Pinball, as amusing as it is, will likely bore you in a few hours.

The Bigs delivers engrossing arcade-styled gameplay, but there's little here that you can really wrap your mitt around. There's a good chance that you'll grow disinterested in this game faster than you threw Jose Canseco's book into the trash.—**REINER**

BOTTOM LINE 7.5

> **Concept:** Fun, over-the-top baseball that is surprisingly true to the real game

> **Graphics:** Most of the player models look bloated rather than muscular. The animation isn't exactly fluid, either

> **Sound:** Repetitive announcers and little in terms of stadium noise

> **Playability:** Simplistic play with an exaggerated flair. Pitching and batting require little more than a button press, yet are surprisingly entertaining

> **Entertainment:** A great game for short sessions, but there is little here that you can really invest a lot of time in

> **Replay Value:** Moderate

Second Opinion 7.5

Dusty Baker would be a great manager in The Bigs; in this dumbed-down version of baseball, clogging up the basepaths with pesky baserunners rather than shooting for the fences with 'roided-up sluggers truly is a boneheaded move. For all the over-the-top antics, this is the XFL of baseball titles just like Slugfest before it. The mechanics are solid enough – hell, the defensive gameplay isn't any more broken than this year's true sims – but the game of baseball loses nearly all of its charm when all semblance of balance or strategy gets chucked out the window. Nonetheless, The Bigs can deliver some entertainment as long as you're not trying to delve too deep, particularly in two-player mode.—**ADAM**

PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360

Pirates of the Caribbean: At World's End

> **STYLE** 1 OR 2-PLAYER ACTION > **PUBLISHER** DISNEY INTERACTIVE STUDIOS > **DEVELOPER** EUROCOM
> **RELEASE** MAY 22 > **ESRB** T

Turns out Moss Man got some work after He-Man after all

YO-HO-OH-NO!

If this game held true to the Pirates of the Caribbean films, the dissipated Captain Jack Sparrow would be nearly impossible to control. His love of rum would mean that he could never walk a straight line. His manipulative approach would lead to most objectives being solved by other characters that were tricked into it. If handled properly, players would walk away from this game feeling both filthy and morally crushed. While there is a hint of drunken stupor to the game's version of Captain Jack Sparrow, he's mostly a likeable buffoon who suckers proud swordsmen into embarrassing deaths. This is very much the PG version of one of cinema's most dynamic characters.

The game spans two full motion pictures, recapping the events of both *Dead Man's Chest* and *At World's End*. There are a number of memorable action sequences from both of these films, but the game doesn't offer one memorable second. Captain Jack's antics are certainly amusing, but the swordplay is so detestable that you actually feel bad for the enemies. After swinging their sword a few times, their AI tells them that they have to slump over and basically fall asleep, allowing the player to end their life without any resistance. From start to finish, this is how every swordfight is won. The platforming segments are equally dull. Whether you are playing as Captain Jack or any of the other playable characters like Will Turner and Elizabeth Swann, hardly any joy can be derived from gameplay this repetitive and easy.

The only area where this game really shines is in its visuals. Developer Eurocom has pulled out all of the stops to bring out the highest level of realism in the character models and lush landscapes. This game may put a twinkle in your eye, but it's quick to follow it up with a razor-sharp cutlass.—**REINER**
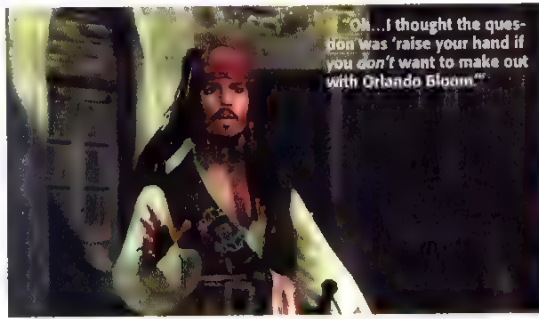
"Oh...I thought the question was 'raise your hand if you *don't* want to make out with Orlando Bloom.'"

BOTTOM LINE 6

> **Concept:** A visually impressive movie game that delivers the most mundane gameplay possible

> **Graphics:** All of the characters look exactly like their movie counterparts. The scenery is divine, and the lighting effects are so realistic that they can play tricks on your eyes

> **Sound:** An adventurous score that is backed up by decent voice work by imposters of the actors

> **Playability:** Tap, tap, tap, tap, kill Tap, tap, tap, kill. Tap, tap, tap .

> **Entertainment:** The uninspired action ruins this entire experience

> **Replay Value:** Moderately Low

Second Opinion 6.5

If I could only use one word to describe Pirates of the Caribbean, it would be "slow." The animations are sluggish, the combat moves at a snail's pace, and even though this is called At World's End, it is a hibernation-inducing grind to get to the third movie's content. Animal comparisons aside, the graphics are stunning – it's easy to mistake the in-game models for real actors from a distance. The fighting looks pretty good too, especially the counterattacks. One-on-one fencing segments do a nice job of breaking up the action, but even they don't feel very robust. I just wish the environments felt a little more like the bustling cities from the movies rather than the stilted animatronic backgrounds of the ride. Sadly, I don't even know if I should recommend this to movie fans, especially with the wealth of solid platformers out there right now. —**BEN**

PLAYSTATION 3
Ninja Gaiden Sigma

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION > **PUBLISHER** TECMO > **DEVELOPER** TEAM NINJA > **RELEASE** JULY > **ESRB** M

THREEPEAT

Ninja Gaiden has always been one of those games that the hardcore crowd likes to notch across their belt and then hold over everyone else's head. It's true that Ninja Gaiden provides a formidable challenge when it wants to, but it has somewhat unfairly developed this aura for being a game that devours gamers and spits them back out. This is kind of unfortunate, since I know some people have chosen not to play the game simply out of fear, and anyone who enjoys some good action should give this title a try.

Even three years after its initial release, Ninja Gaiden still has the moves that inspire awe. The action is fluid and intense, and you still get to upgrade your weapons to learn new combos. Those who have played the game before will be impressed to see new cutscenes, combos, enemies, and bosses. There are even new missions featuring Rachel as a playable character. The new dual katanas are pretty fun to use, even if I found a few spots where it is better to just use one of the original weapons instead.

Of course, one of the biggest changes is the graphical overhaul. I went back to play a little bit of the original game, and was surprised to see how much the graphics have changed. It's a graphical powerhouse.

As great of an experience as this is, I do have a few problems with the game. The biggest I consider to be a design flaw that could have been fixed with a continue system or better save point spacing. Developers, I don't care how hard you make a game, but when I die, please don't make me replay the last 10 easy minutes to get back to the point where I need to practice.

A few other holdovers from last gen make this game feel a little outdated, like odd load points, confusing level layouts, enemies that respawn when you turn a corner, and a bad camera. That last one actually baffles me since the camera is a little worse now than it was in the original. This may sound like a huge laundry list of complaints, but they are all fairly minor, and when you are in the middle of a killer combo or pulling off some slick ninja moves, they just float away.

BOTTOM LINE 9

> **Concept:** Remake the classic Xbox action title (again) with even more stunning graphics

> **Graphics:** Considering it could have been a quick port, it is impressive how much time these artists must have put into this game to redo the graphics

> **Sound:** The voice acting is a little cheesy, but you don't play this game for story

> **Playability:** Multiple difficulty settings should hopefully ease timid players into the game

> **Entertainment:** With action this intense you'll probably lower your cholesterol level

> **Replay Value:** Moderate

Second Opinion 9

It's the video game equivalent of Lucas' special edition Star Wars releases. This isn't a new game by any stretch of the imagination. It is, however, a remake of one of the smoothest action games ever released. Dramatically redrawn graphics make an already impressive looking game shine all the brighter. On the other hand, it's debatable whether the new levels, adjustments to camera, and new enemies add much to the formula. Fans may thrill to the addition of jiggle-tastic Rachel – for me, there was always a certain coolness to Ryu's solitary journey that's interrupted a little bit by the intermittent dominatrix scenes. With that said, nobody does ninjas quite like Team Ninja – and the punishing battles that await in the newest adjustment to this modern classic won't fail to please even the most ardent of twitchy gamers.—**MILLER**

PLAYSTATION 3
MLB 07: The Show

> **STYLE** 1 OR 2-PLAYER SPORTS (UP TO 2-PLAYER VIA PLAYSTATION NETWORK) > **PUBLISHER** SONY COMPUTER ENTERTAINMENT > **DEVELOPER** SCE STUDIOS SAN DIEGO > **RELEASE** MAY 15 > **ESRB** E

BATTLING THE GENERATION GAP

The PlayStation 3 version of MLB 07: The Show is comparable to a proven All-Star who has just signed a lucrative multi-year deal with a new ball club. It delivers the same great gameplay that we have seen in years past, and is once again capable of pounding out thrills, but moving it to a new system doesn't hide the fact that it was created a generation ago.

In a nutshell, this is a current-gen game that has been ported to a next-generation console. It runs at a higher resolution, and the lighting is a bit more dynamic, but the level of detail is clearly not as advanced as you've seen in other PS3 games. It doesn't look bad, however. The animation is very lifelike, player facial modeling is exemplary, and the stadiums, which are jam-packed with polygonal fans, really couldn't look more alive.

All of the PS2 game's content (sans the EyeToy support for character creation) is included in this version. The Road to the Show mode is still the best experience that any baseball game has to offer, and thanks to hard drive caching, you can now bounce to your rookie's next appearance with far less loading. The rock-solid pitching and batting interfaces haven't changed in the slightest, either, but a few tweaks have been added to fielding. Tapping into the PS3's motion sensing capabilities, players can now flick the controller upward to leap for a ball, or downward to perform a dive motion. You can also use the controller's tilt abilities to slide to the inside or outside of a bag. These movements work well, but are incredibly sensitive, which could lead to you inadvertently accessing them during a game.

One thing that isn't as polished in the PS3 version is the computer logic for fielding. Rather than turning a double play, you may see a player simply throw the ball to first for one out. In other instances, a player may not recognize that he should cover the bag. These problems pull you out of the experience, and if you are like me, will make you restart the game just so that you feel that you aren't cheating or being cheated.

While the PS2 version shines as the best baseball game released this year, this iteration really needed to cook a little longer in the minors to nail down the fundamentals of the sport. With that said, PS3 owners should look to the previous generation's game.—**REINER**

BOTTOM LINE 7.5

> **Concept:** A slightly tweaked port of the PS2 game that boasts motion-sensing movement, updated rosters (Dice-K!), and enhanced visuals

> **Graphics:** The crowd is so realistic that you can actually pick out the tag-along girlfriend that doesn't want to be there. Sadly, the player detailing doesn't hold the same level of realism

> **Sound:** The crowd is just as vocal as the amazingly insightful commentators. The soundtrack is rocking, and you'll love hearing good wood on the ball

> **Playability:** Makes use of the same pitching and batting mechanics, but fielding is not as polished

> **Entertainment:** It's loaded with outstanding career and online functionality, but the gameplay could use some tweaking

> **Replay Value:** High

Second Opinion 8

What do you get when you take a PS2 game, increase the texture depth and poly count, and tack on some shoddy motion controls? You guessed it – a PS3 game! Broad generalizations aside, The Show hasn't gained anything in this generational transition other than better visuals. The lack of analog pitching and batting mechanics hurts this title rather badly, and there are still plenty of times where the defensive AI breaks down. Sony's baseball franchise is in better shape than it's been in for years, but it still feels about a year behind rival 2K Sports' series.—**ADAM**

Are you some sort of jester? Do not ridicule me, beast

Good Leave us, Oswald

PLAYSTATION 2

Odin Sphere

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION/RPG > **PUBLISHER** ATLUS
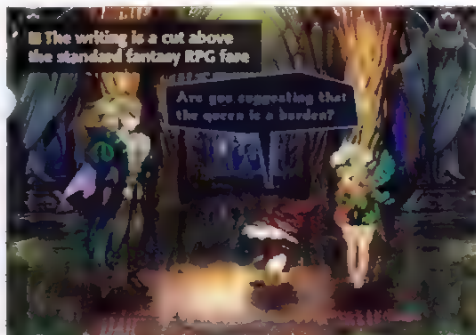> **DEVELOPER** VANILLAWARE > **RELEASE** MAY 22 > **ESRB** T

SPIN YOU RIGHT ROUND

There is a certain type of gamer who has already been looking forward to Odin Sphere for months -- the type who is drawn, as if by instinct, to a Japanese action/RPG sporting a stylish design. This kind of person has been Atlus' bread and butter for years, but it would be a mistake (not to mention a shame) to limit this title's appeal to such a narrow audience. With breathtaking visuals, innovative storytelling, and frenzied action, no true gamer should overlook Odin Sphere.

The tale that unfolds is one of war, love, duty, and friendship with five protagonists at its center. Since you must play through a character's entire arc before starting another (in a prescribed order), it feels as though the curtain is constantly being drawn back, revealing surprise after surprise about the heroes and their motivations. The result is a wonderfully written story that starts out cool and gets more intriguing the deeper you go. It even calls to mind George R. R. Martin's fantasy series *A Song of Ice and Fire*, giving gravity to key moments by tying them
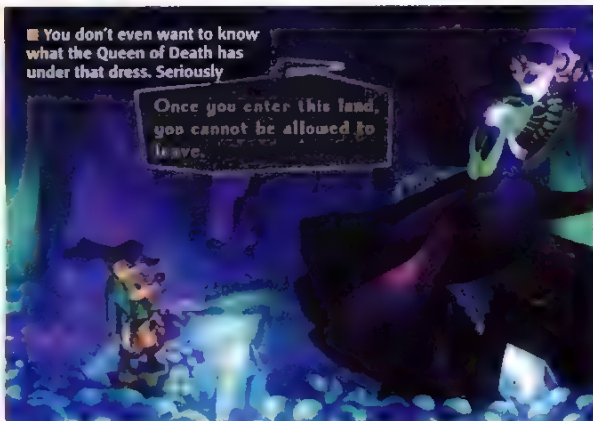
together from multiple perspectives. When you aren't watching the story sequences, you'll have your hands full on the battlefield. Each level is comprised of a network of circular nodes, and each node is a side-scrolling 2D loop. At first, combat will seem deceptively simple, relying primarily on a single attack/guard button and a jump. As you progress, this setup evolves into an intricate procedure laced with strategy, relying more and more on the items in your possession. Standard attacks will always be your first defense, but powerful items (created through a clever alchemy system) can instantly turn the tide in a fight by halving damage, poisoning foes, or engulfing them in flames. Given the game's demanding difficulty, learning how

THE TASTE EXPERIENCE
Your weapons will level up naturally in combat by absorbing phozons from fallen foes, but your HP is another story. It increases independently based on its own XP, usually raised by consuming fruit and meat on the battlefield. There is another way to make increase your life bar: cooking. By collecting money, recipes, and ingredients in the stages, you can prepare various dishes between levels. These foods often provide massive boosts to your HP XP, and are a great way to gain an edge in the battles to come.

and when to use items is sometimes the only path to victory.

Odin Sphere's story, systems, and combat mechanics are easy enough to describe, but the game's biggest strength is the way it cultivates a sense of wonder. Fantastic artistic design fuses with addictive gameplay to form a world that constantly impresses, despite some repetition and technical shortcomings. Odin Sphere is in the same league as games like Shadow of the Colossus and Killer 7; it isn't perfect, but it delivers an experience you just won't find anywhere else.—**JOE**

The writing is a cut above the standard fantasy RPG fare
Are you suggesting that the queen is a burden?

Gwendolyn (the one who isn't dying) is the first playable character
The King... Father will endoubtedly praise my actions.

You don't even want to know what the Queen of Death has under that dress. Seriously
Once you enter this land, you cannot be allowed to leave.

> **Concept:** 2D combat isn't always old-school...especially when combined with an inventive story structure and striking artistic direction

> **Graphics:** Captivating and surreal. The cut-out style characters, though not exactly life-like, still feel alive

> **Sound:** Solid voice acting and a fitting epic score

> **Playability:** Combat is usually fluid, but slowdown occurs at hilariously inopportune moments, like pivotal boss fights

> **Entertainment:** An impeccably balanced mix of story, combat, and side tasks. A little bit of frustration works its way in too

> **Replay Value:** Moderate

Second Opinion 8.5
If there were a festival dedicated to art house video games, Odin Sphere would most certainly be the talk of the show. Both a remarkable work of imagination and a spellbinding experience, it boldly defies the conventions of gaming to deliver an adventure that constantly has you saying, "I've never played anything like this before." The divergent approach to storytelling, unusual art style, and logic-defying circular/2D battlefield will blow your mind. The game doesn't succeed solely on its experimental qualities, however. The combat system is as simple as jamming on the attack button and occasionally firing off a spell, but its swift speed, razor-sharp difficulty, and daunting size of many of the adversaries make it an inexhaustible blast. Stretches of near game-breaking slowdown do mar this amazing quest at the least opportune of times, but as frustrating as this is, it shouldn't detour you from running out and picking up this revolutionary epic.—**REINER**

PLAYSTATION 2

.hack//G.U. Vol. 2: Reminisce

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION/RPG
> **PUBLISHER** NAMCO BANDAI
> **DEVELOPER** CYBERCONNECT2
> **RELEASE** MAY 8 > **ESRB** T
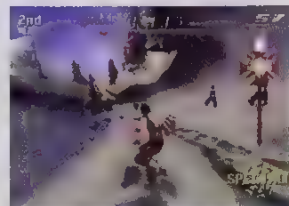

BOTTOM LINE **5.75**

This is pretty simple: If you liked the boring, archaic gameplay in the first volume of the new .hack trilogy, you can look forward to more of that junk here. Picking up where the first left off (newcomers beware), the plot remains mildly interesting despite the stilted dialogue and stale storytelling. With only a few minor tweaks (and a card game!), this entry in the series delivers the same repetitive dungeons and formulaic combat of the original. That's probably what fans of the series want, but the fact that they play these games in the first place doesn't reflect very well on their preferences.—**JOE**

PLAYSTATION 2

Tony Hawk's Downhill Jam

> **STYLE** 1 OR 2-PLAYER RACING
> **PUBLISHER** ACTIVISION
> **DEVELOPER** SUPERVILLAIN STUDIOS
> **RELEASE** MAY 8 > **ESRB** E10+

BOTTOM LINE **4**

This game is a skateboarder's worst nightmare. It's a 20-foot plummet onto a lineage-ending metal pole. It's not even worthy of being endorsed by Bam Margera. By no means is it an extension of the highly revered Tony Hawk series. This stand-alone racing game, which originated on Wii, doesn't push players to hone their skateboarding skills to create amazing runs. It's all about barreling down a hillside with nothing more than shoddy gameplay and a worthless trick system at your disposal. By coupling the most forgiving balance meter ever created with uninspired track designs, I found that it's possible to win races by grinding for thousands of feet uninterrupted. At the most, this game is great for punishing ill-behaved children. They will think that you just bought them a new Tony Hawk game, but in reality, you've handed over a punishment worse than anything else out there.—**REINER**
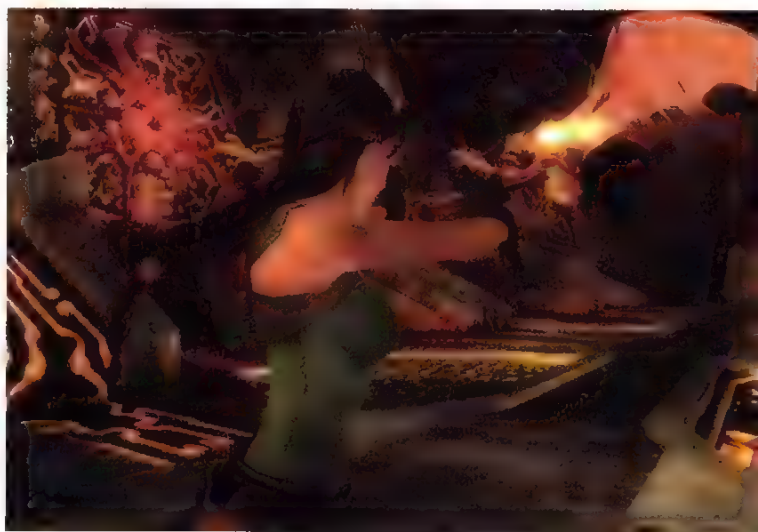
PLAYSTATION 2

Tomb Raider Anniversary

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION/PLATFORM > **PUBLISHER** EIDOS > **DEVELOPER** CRYSTAL DYNAMICS
> **RELEASE** JUNE 5 > **ESRB** T

YOU CAN GO HOME AGAIN

What a wonderful world we'd be living in if every remake were handled with this much care. Okay, so maybe it's not solving world hunger, but it's certainly setting a high bar for others to meet in the realm of reinventing classic games. Balancing the almost impossible tasks of delivering nostalgia-laden moments against giving players updated and modern gameplay, Tomb Raider Anniversary does both with aplomb. Mixing classic and modern elements, it brings old players what they want and gives new players what they need to join in the fun.

As PS2 games go, this return to Lara's first adventure is no slouch in the visuals department. The detail on Lara is remarkable, and the environments are suitably awe-inducing. Unfortunately, like in the original game, there's more repetition of wall and floor tiles in many areas than I'd like to see. I also found myself frustrated with the camera more than once. One of the brilliant things in the recent Tomb Raider Legend game was the camera, as it twisted and turned to lead you to the right angle. Sadly, that feature seems less prevalent in Anniversary, and it slows down the sense of speed and quick platforming. In addition, some odd environmental collision issues feel a little sloppy.

Even with these technical foibles, the positively brilliant

level designs are the highlight of the show. Completely redesigned puzzles truly make this a totally different experience than the original, requiring quick reactions and careful observation. Few puzzles are hard enough to halt progress – just enough to make old and new players alike pause and think. Newer mechanics, like perching on top of poles and grappling across long distances, add to Lara's repertoire of actions. At the same time, grizzled PSone veterans will without a doubt encounter brief flashes of remembrance as they move through particular oddly shaped hallways, dive past familiar traps, or encounter massive dinosaurs in a certain hidden valley. It's pure nostalgia – minus the horrible polygonal graphics and wretched grid-based movement.

More recent players of the franchise will find that Anniversary moves at a slower pace than the action-packed levels of Tomb Raider Legend. Instead, this remake takes players through long stretches of fascinating exploration punctuated only occasionally with brief bursts of action. It's a more deliberate pacing, but one that still feels right since it stays so true to the original in tone. That first Tomb Raider game garnered a lot of attention in its day. Its remake is a worthy tribute to that success.—**MILLER**

BOTTOM LINE **8.5**

> **Concept:** Return to Lara's original adventure with dramatic level redesigns and modern tech

> **Graphics:** Lara looks great and environments are big and inviting, but some tile repetition is a downer

> **Sound:** Great ambient sound effects and brief snatches of melody evoke the feel of that first game

> **Playability:** Camera isn't always as friendly as I'd like, but otherwise the game plays as smooth as butter

> **Entertainment:** A genuine treat to those who are familiar with the original, but a great play even for new gamers

> **Replay Value:** Moderately High

Second Opinion **8**

This this game fulfills everything that was promised. Longtime fans will enjoy plenty of nerd moments as they experience completely revamped puzzles and enemies from their gaming youth, and those who never played the original have a great new action game for a system with an ever-shrinking release list. The new adrenaline dodge works well on bosses, but is entirely skippable on regular enemies. Despite small clipping issues and occasional weird shadow effects, gameplay and presentation is tight on the whole. Anniversary surely doesn't break new ground in the franchise, but I'd pay $30 for a solid experience any time.—**BRYAN**

PLAYSTATION 2

Hot Shots Tennis

> **STYLE** 1 TO 4-PLAYER SPORTS > **PUBLISHER** SONY COMPUTER ENTERTAINMENT > **DEVELOPER** CLAP HANZ
> **RELEASE** JULY 17 > **ESRB** E

CONQUERING ANOTHER SPORT

On the greens of various golf courses, the over-the-top characters of Hot Shots have proven that just because the game looks cartoony and stylized, it doesn't mean you can't have a strong gameplay package hidden under the hood. Luckily for fans of video game tennis, that same philosophy has found its way onto the courts of Hot Shots Tennis.

Older players will immediately recognize the similarities Hot Shots Tennis shares with its much older cousin Super Tennis. You won't be pre-loading your swings like most other current releases in the genre. Timing and position is everything in the fast-paced action that Hot Shots delivers. The simple swing style makes this a better option for casual players. In fact, easy pick-up-and-play elements have been built into everything from the front-end menus to the speed and flow of a match. On the other hand, a surprising amount of depth is included for players in for the long haul. Constant unlocks bring you more courts, referees and characters. Each of the many characters vary widely in skill – and players pushing through the various leagues will find the need to fre-

quently change up both their preferred character and play style in order to remain competitive.

The skill-based gameplay is not without its flaws. In particular, it becomes far too easy to exploit the outside line during your serves even on the later, more difficult matches. It's also disappointing that many of the later contests force you to take on the hardest competitors while playing as a beginning character – it's a cheap way to ratchet up the challenge.

Those complaints aside, Hot Shots' first attempt at a new sport holds up remarkably well to scrutiny. The gameplay mechanic itself is ultra smooth and simple, yet satisfying even after hours of play. The characters look great and deliver just enough humor to keep you smiling. I'd love for this franchise, or any other tennis property for that matter, to try out a right analog swing mechanic sometime soon. Until that happens, Hot Shots' straightforward approach to the game has got me hooked — **MILLER**

BOTTOM LINE **8.25**
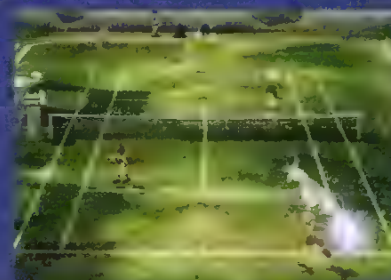
> **Concept:** Maneuver some cutesy characters through increasingly challenging tennis matches with regular Pavlovian rewards of new unlocks

> **Graphics:** Simple but well-animated characters jump about on bright and colorful tennis courts – nothing amazing, but certainly in line with the style

> **Sound:** You'll want to turn off the music after a few matches, but each court is peppered with its own unique sound effects

> **Playability:** Very easy to pick up, but the need for careful observation and reflexes deepen the experience over time

> **Entertainment:** A great addition to the tennis genre, even with the cartoony look

> **Replay Value:** Moderate

Second Opinion **8.25**

The Hot Shots franchise excels in the other country club sport by doing what it does so well in golf - melding a cartoonish visual style with engaging, surprisingly deep gameplay. I was very pleased by this game's solid on-court action, in fact, in some respects it's more challenging than Virtua Tennis or Top Spin. The swing mechanics, which emphasize correct timing over pre-loading your shots, are honed to perfection. As a last-gen game, it doesn't have the silky smooth animations and movement transitions that VT 3 offers, but it's a damn fine tennis title. The only knock against it is a lack of variety; don't expect much in the way of extras or minigames. Still, for $30 this is a great value for PS2 owners.—**MATT**

GAME INFORMER **99**

Ada Wong delivers her sexy brand of justice to a dirty old man
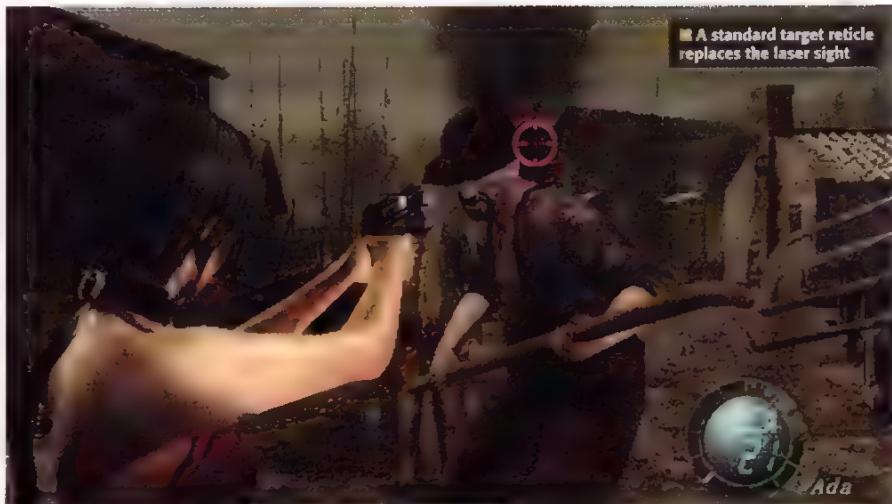
Resident Evil 4

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION > PUBLISHER CAPCOM > DEVELOPER CAPCOM > RELEASE JUNE 19 > ESRB M

RESIDENT GREATNESS

Resident Evil 4 is like Michael Meyers or Jason Vorhees – the classic horror villain who just won't die. Right when you think it's finally safe to turn your back and focus on your next quest for survival, it pieces its shattered skull back together, grabs a pitchfork, and continues its blind quest to hunt you down. But unlike the clichéd slasher stars of the '80s, this is one zombie we're not tired of seeing brought back to life.

Over two years after its initial release, Resident Evil 4 is still the benchmark in the survival horror genre. For those of you who missed the boat, here's the recap: The game picks up six years after the resolution of Resident Evil 2 and 3. The U.S. government has successfully shut down the Umbrella Corporation, and brash young Raccoon City cop Leon Kennedy has taken a job with the Secret Service. When the President's daughter is abducted, Leon travels to a remote European village to investigate her last known whereabouts. There he stumbles upon a village where the population, known as Los Ganados, is governed by a parasite that takes over their bodies, making them act like zombies equipped with smarts and motor functions. In addition to the standard plot, Wii gamers can play through the Separate Ways storyline introduced in the PS2 version featuring the bodacious secret agent Ada Wong.

Now to the question everyone is asking: How are the Wii controls? For the most part, the transition from a standard scheme to the motion-sensing controls is successful. Players will navigate using the analog stick on the nunchuk and aim with the remote while holding in the B button. The one hiccup in the controls is the aiming. You cannot scroll the screen by moving the reticle to the edge of the screen like with most gun-based games on the Wii. Instead, you must use the nunchuk to re-navigate the screen. The result is a rather clumsy scheme that can get you in trouble when Los Ganados are hunting you from more than one direction. Perhaps because of this problem, I noticed the boss fights were toned down in difficulty compared to the previous versions.

As improved as the Resident Evil 4 controls were compared to the tank-like schemes of its predecessors, they still aren't ideal. The final version of the game would have been the perfect time for Capcom to polish the controls with new features that nearly every game now takes for granted – like strafing and being able to shoot your gun while moving. Unfortunately, Leon still isn't capable of performing these basic moves.

Minor complaints aside, Resident Evil 4 still stands as a must-play game for anyone who hasn't done so already. It will only cost you $30, so what are you waiting for?—**BERTZ**

A standard target reticle replaces the laser sight

BOTTOM LINE 9.5

> **Concept:** Slash Los Ganados in the face with Wii motion controls!

> **Graphics:** Hardly improved from the last-gen versions, but still better than the average Wii title

> **Sound:** As creepy and haunting as ever

> **Playability:** Wii motion sensing controls work effectively for the most part, but can be unwieldy in frantic situations

> **Entertainment:** If you haven't played this classic game yet, the time is now before we officially revoke your gamer card

> **Replay Value:** Moderately Low

Second Opinion 9.5

Technically this game has been available on Wii (via backwards compatibility) since the system launched, but this is probably the ultimate version of Resident Evil 4. Gamers get one of the best games to ever hit the GameCube with all of the exclusive content that made it onto the PS2. Bucking convention, RE's controls might actually be better on the Wii. Now you can aim your guns by pointing the Wii remote at the screen and attack with Leon's knife by slashing at the air. The graphics don't seem as stunning as they once were, but they still outshine much of the Wii library. The only thing that bugs me about this version is the targeting reticle that – annoyingly – is always onscreen. What was wrong with the laser sight? If you somehow missed this game before, don't let that happen again. Tweaked controls might not be reason enough to warrant a replay for the rest of you, but then again, maybe the fact that this is still an awesome game is enough.—BEN

Unfortunately, the ropes cannot be used to strangle your characters

Never let Sky Guy drive your boat after he downs a 12-pack of Bowser Brew

Wii
Mario Party 8

> **STYLE** 1 TO 4-PLAYER ACTION/BOARD > **PUBLISHER** NINTENDO > **DEVELOPER** HUDSON SOFT > **RELEASE** MAY 29 > **ESRB** E

GETTING BETTER...SLOWLY

Is there anything more pathetic than a grown man reviewing a Mario Party game? Well, I guess I'm going to find out. The task of reviewing a new title in this series is what's known as a "no-win situation." Either you, A) decide to push aside your usual standards of game design and deem this mess a perfect party game for tots or B) come across as some bitter, snooty old journalist who's going around popping balloons at a kid's birthday party. Let's see what's behind door number two, shall we?

First off, I would like to say that there's nothing wrong with Mario Party that couldn't be fixed. In fact, Mario Party 8, the first of the series to appear on the Wii, does manage to be more compelling than the last couple editions – if only because motion-based gameplay still has that fresh, novel feeling that's made so many of us embrace the Wii. While many of the minigames aren't exactly the most creative contests in the history of video games, they are by and large more engaging than those in past titles. The Wii is great for stuff like this, and it does serve to make these brief sequences at the same time more fun and more intuitive.

Because the Wii is so tailored to these types of brief but entertaining bits of gameplay, I think there was an opportunity for Mario Party 8 to break this series out of the tedious rut it's been plowing for the last few years. Unfortunately, this chance is wasted.

Mario Party's problem has never been the minigames; it's the atrociously paced board game that you have to slog through to get to them. Sadly, this fault has not been righted – although a few steps have been taken in the right direction.

Simply, the board game elements of Mario have never impressed me enough to make the entire experience compelling. While not as often as in the past, winning sometimes feels like a matter of sheer luck. I appreciate the fact that board games do rely on chance, but a good one usually makes you feel that your strategy plays an equal role. Not so here, as certain spaces and scripted events will arbitrarily dump you back several places for no apparent

reason. While I like the new "candy" items that allow you to do things like swap positions with your opponents, the board is so random that you never feel like you've really gained an advantage.
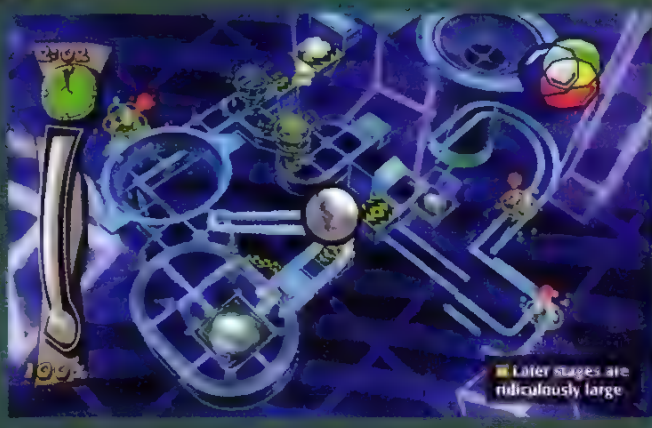
The best thing they've done here are the options to skip over your CPU opponent's minigame turns and increase the speed of the scrolling text (i.e. making it faster to skip through this crap and get to the your next contest). However, it's a chore to endure the constant trial and error involved in beating the boards. In an age of the Internet and 200-channel digital cable, I just don't have the attention span for this. Mario Party should be about fast-paced fun, which is why I prefer to get my kicks with the spastic, oddly humorous Rayman Raving Rabbids.—**MATT**

"We need to lose some dead weight! Sorry, Luigi, but you're going overboard"

This is just as action-packed and exciting as it looks

Later stages are ridiculously large

Mercury Meltdown Revolution

> STYLE 1-PLAYER PUZZLE > PUBLISHER IGNITION > DEVELOPER IGNITION BANBURY
> RELEASE JUNE 12 > ESRB E

MERCURY POISONING?

You may remember the previous versions of Mercury Meltdown that came out on PSP and PlayStation 2 in late 2006. If you've already played these, there's really no reason to pick up the Wii version unless you really want to try out the remote tilting controls. However, fans of games like Kororinpa: Marble Mania and Super Monkey Ball who haven't tried out the series yet may find something worth checking out here.

Players hold the remote like a NES controller and guide a blob of mercury through a series of traps and puzzles in order to reach a checkered goal. The controls work well, but I just didn't feel the precision of Kororinpa here. This could also be due to the fact that I'm handling some silvery goop that can split apart at any time instead of a solid ball.

Stages are setup in blocks of 16 or 17, called labs, and there are ten labs total. This adds up to a whole lot of freakin' levels (over 160) with a decent variety of challenges. However, after making it through several dozen stages I really started to lose interest in what was next. Mixing painted mercury, hitting pressure switches, and heating and cooling the blob does not take long to lose its luster. In fact, I'd be willing to bet that 90 percent of the people who pick up MMR will never see it through to conclusion.

Unlockable "party games" include racing, curling, color matching, painting, and a stay-on-the-tilting-platform challenge – though it's tough to picture any party where single-player-only games like these would be a hit. Perhaps Ignition should have just called them minigames to avoid these semantic issues. I definitely recommend renting this one before fully committing.—**BRYAN**

BOTTOM LINE **6.5**

> **Concept:** Bring the Mercury formula to a system with motion controls

> **Graphics:** Bland, even for a puzzle game

> **Sound:** A surprisingly large mix of decent music

> **Playability:** Classic controller play is an option, but why would you do that when you can tilt?

> **Entertainment:** Starts out clever city. Takes a trip into frustration town

> **Replay Value:** Low

Second Opinion **7.5**

In some ways I think Mercury Meltdown has improved on the Super Monkey Ball formula. I like breaking up the mercury blob and mixing it back together with different colors in order to solve some of the puzzles. It also provides a really good challenge. Almost too good a challenge, the later levels are fairly unforgiving. Making that worse is the fact that there are no checkpoints within a level, so you really have to practice to get some of them right. It took me an hour of retries to finish one of them. My biggest problem with this game is that its tilt controls sometimes don't feel responsive enough. Meltdown will only appeal to a specific crowd, but that crowd should have a good time.—**BEN**

Spider-Man 3

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION > PUBLISHER ACTIVISION > DEVELOPER VICARIOUS VISIONS > RELEASE MAY 4 > ESRB T
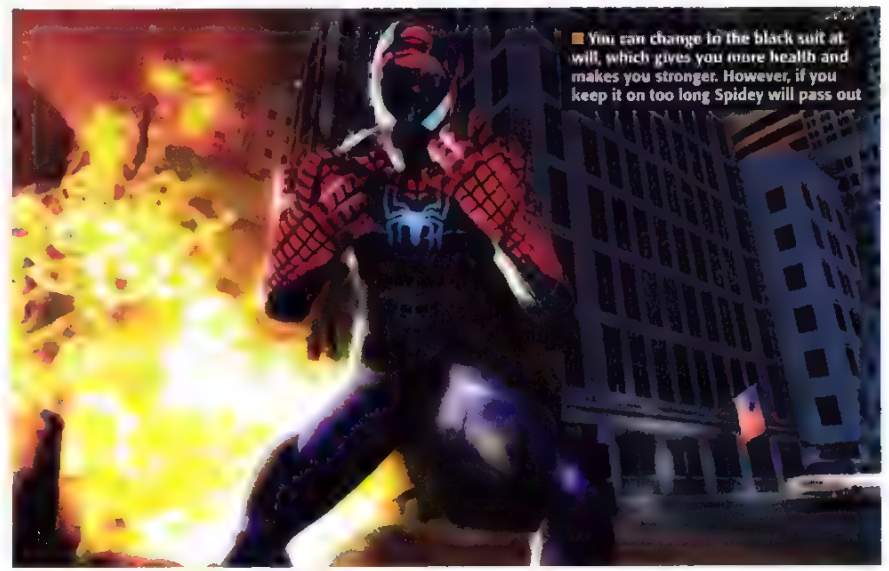
You can change to the black suit at will, which gives you more health and makes you stronger. However, if you keep it on too long Spidey will pass out

FLUSH THIS SPIDER DOWN THE TOILET

My arms are sore from web swinging, I have a headache from fighting monotonous rounds of thugs, and I'm frustrated that in an "open world" I don't have more control over my destiny. I guess it's not as fun to be a superhero as I've always thought. Spider-Man 3 on the Wii isn't just a shoddy port of the PS3/360 version; it's an entirely different game. Sadly, I would have preferred the shoddy port.

As an action game, Spider-Man 3 is just barely passable. You string together combos primarily by shaking the Wii remote back and forth. The timed button pressing events that I enjoyed in the PS3/360 version are few and far between, and when they show up they are watered down to alternately shaking the Wii remote and the nunchuck. Web swinging still feels pretty good, but I wouldn't take it over a standard controller setup.

The Wii version's linearity takes a lot of fun out of the game. Whole strings of side story missions on the PS3/360 are reduced to single events on the Wii, making the game quite a bit shorter. Conversely, the game feels artificially lengthened with its repetitive crime fighting missions. Some of them are even downright strange. Spidey has to stop a group of thugs from punching a truck. Okay. Wait a minute! Why is a group of thugs punching a truck?

The Hero upgrades, where you use experience points to gain new moves, is probably the only area where the Wii version is better than (what I have started calling) the *real* Spider-Man 3. If you only have a Wii and really need a Spider-Man fix, go find a cheap copy of the GameCube's Spider-Man 2 and save some money.—**BEN**

BOTTOM LINE **6.5**

> **Concept:** Take Spider-Man on PS3/360, rearrange all the parts, and trim away its more exciting elements

> **Graphics:** I guess this is what last-gen Spidey looked like; I remember it more fondly

> **Sound:** Completely unimpressive

> **Playability:** The motion controls work without any fuss. Flicking the Wii remote to sling webs is cool, but the thrill wears off quickly

> **Entertainment:** The few fun elements can't save this game from being too repetitive and boring

> **Replay Value:** Moderately Low

Second Opinion **6.25**

Back in the heyday of comics, Marvel released a monthly book called *What If?* This comic altered pivotal moments in a hero's life and showed how different the future would be. The Wii version of Spider-Man 3 appears to be designed with a *What If?* scenario in mind. What if Spider-Man moved to Akron, Ohio? As this game painfully shows, the wall crawler's life has been reduced to stopping petty crimes in a lifeless town. He even delivers papers. The motion-based web slinging works well, but the remainder of the gameplay is as simplistic as can be, and often painfully boring. I applaud Activision's decision to create a new version of Spider-Man 3 for the Wii, but it needed more than one fun gameplay mechanic.—**REINER**

Unlike in the movie, Sandman can't fly... unless he's punched

Call of Juarez

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 16-PLAYER VIA XBOX LIVE) > **PUBLISHER** UBISOFT > **DEVELOPER** TECHLAND > **RELEASE** JUNE 5 > **ESRB** M

■ Everyone you meet in Call of Juarez seems to have a problem with you

A LICK AND A PROMISE

Taking into account all its infamous renegades and legendary shootouts, Westerns should mesh perfectly with video games. Yet somehow we're still waiting for the pixilated equivalent of Clint Eastwood to steal the show. Call of Juarez is the latest hombre to draw its pistols, but it's no Josey Wales.
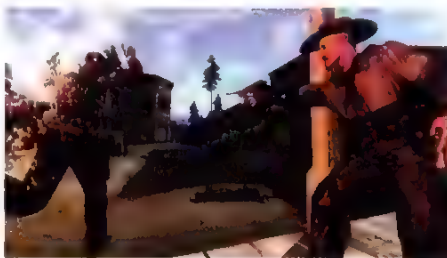
Call of Juarez's biggest strength is its unique plot, which places you in the role of the hunted – Billy Candle, a rogue accused of murdering his beloved mother – and the hunter – Reverend Ray, a preacher with a dark past guided by a vengeance-fueled belief that he is God's wrath incarnate. The game smartly implements many classic western action scenarios to keep gameplay fresh, including stagecoach chases, train robberies, saloon shootouts, and high noon gun duels. While many of Billy's missions task you with using the clumsy stealth mechanic to sneak though areas populated with dangerous foes, the Reverend focuses solely on spreading the piercing word of God to banditos via smoking revolvers.

The first-person perspective works adequately for gunfights and exploring the gorgeously rendered Wild West, but not all of the game mechanics are so successful. Outside of the poor stealth elements and awkward fistfights, the most annoying mechanic is easily the mandatory auto-save, which can interrupt the action at the most inopportune times. For instance, during an epic shootout, the game saved while I was a mere heartbeat away from death.

If Call of Juarez skipped its forgettable multiplayer and adopted a sandbox world more like Oblivion with fleshed out areas to explore and side missions, it could have been the gunslinger I've been waiting for all these years. As it stands, it's a respectable if unambitious title that should tide over Western fans until the holy grail of six shooters rides into town.—**BERTZ**

BOTTOM LINE **7.25**

> **Concept:** Hunt yourself for a crime you didn't commit in the Old West

> **Graphics:** Environments and lighting straight out of an Albert Bierstadt painting

> **Sound:** Typical sights and sounds of classic westerns, right down to the hilariously bad acting

> **Playability:** Auto-save hiccups during gameplay diminish an otherwise solid experience

> **Entertainment:** Epic shoot-outs and a well-crafted story almost make you forget the game's linearity

> **Replay Value:** Moderate

Second Opinion 7

When you close your eyes and think of what a western game should be, you probably see yourself riding horseback across the badlands, or drawing your six shooters in a high noon stand off. Call of Juarez is loaded with classic moments just like these. I, however, grew fond of the game for its less-than-epic moments – like whipping rattlesnakes and stealing a horse from a hapless old man. It has the western theme in spades, and its gorgeous visuals really bring out the gritty lifestyle of the era. Unfortunately, a gameplay noose prevents this experience from being truly immersive. The gunplay just doesn't have much of a punch to it, and the fistfights are so bad that they appear to be here for comic relief. Call of Juarez soars in concept, but drags its feet in execution. It's still worth a look, but just go into it knowing that it will yank out some teeth.—**REINER**

■ Who can forget the epic Gatling gun shoot-outs of the Old West?

XBOX 360

Forza Motorsport 2

> **STYLE** 1 OR 2-PLAYER RACING (UP TO 8-PLAYER VIA XBOX LIVE OR SYSTEM LINK)
> **PUBLISHER** MICROSOFT > **DEVELOPER** TURN 10 STUDIOS > **RELEASE** MAY 29 > **ESRB** E

SEARCHING FOR SPEED

The Forza series is classically known as Microsoft's answer to Sony's Gran Turismo series. The franchise has certainly filled the sim-racer spot in the publisher's lineup, but is that all Microsoft wants to accomplish? There are actually some key differences between the two rivals, but if Forza's not careful, it will follow in Gran Turismo's tire tracks in a way it shouldn't.

In my mind, the one key addition to the series is that Forza 2 uses damage. Not just visually, but in a way that impacts your driving. Sometimes you get into a small scrape that creates a slight pull on your steering. Other times you'll be blocking your opponents all across the track because you've lost power after a nasty collision and you're just trying to hold on until the finish line. It's been done before in racing games, but it's nice to see it in a sim title like this — particularly because it's something that Gran Turismo has been too chicken to do.

Apart from this feature, Forza 2 makes its mark because as a whole it's an all-around well made title. The graphics and track backgrounds jump out at you as you stream by, there are loads of cars to unlock, and the career progression does a great job of rewarding you and keeping you going. This last point in particular is no small matter, as Forza 2 adheres to the same basic menu-driven career path that we've seen before. Given this potentially boring format, it's nice that you're continually unlocking new cars and new circuits to race. I particularly like getting manufacturer discounts to encourage me to buy new rides.

Despite the damage capabilities, the wealth of cars available, and the remarkable increase in the number of upgrades and visual customization options in comparison to the first Forza, I feel that this game is a solid racer that still lacks the difference-maker that would bring it to the next level. Unlocking cars is great, but it doesn't take long before you tire of doing the same routine. Racing, of course, is what it's all about, but where's the personality? Where's the great track selection that doesn't make you feel bored within a few hours? Where's the career mode that's less like flipping through a car catalog and more like participating in an actual career? When is a sim-racer like Forza 2 going to turn track telemetry into something your average racer can understand and use? Hell, even compatriot Project Gotham Racing gives you your own virtual garage — a small feature that connects you to your progress in a very big way. At least this game hits a home run on the online front. Letting players auction off their cars to others is simply awesome.

Now that the Forza series has mastered the foundation of the genre in a way that makes it every bit as good as Gran Turismo, the race is on to see who will pull ahead and who gets left behind.—**KATO**
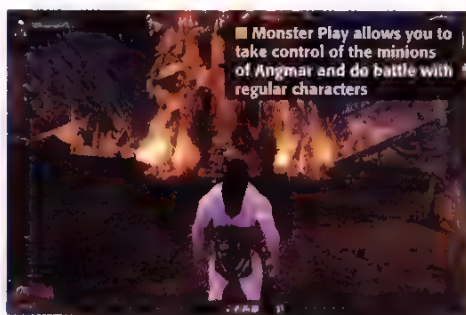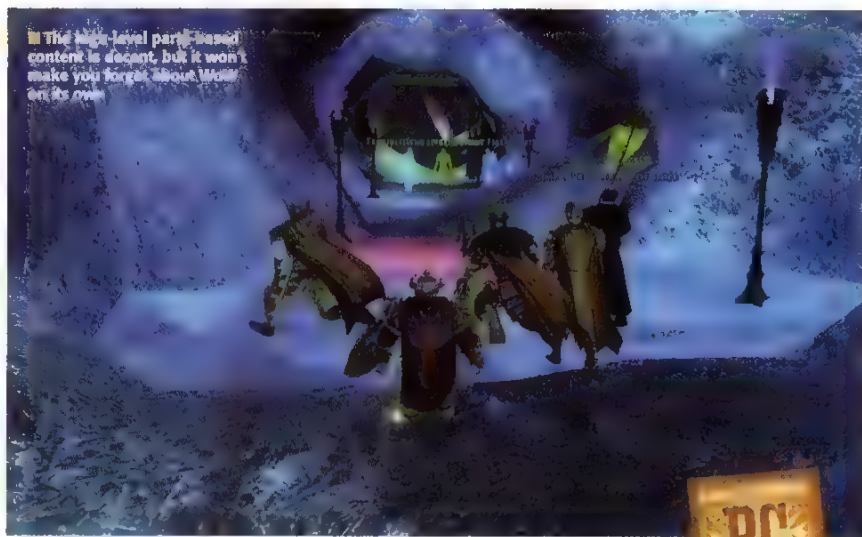
The online auctions for hot rods like these will surely be fierce

Much more car telemetry is available through different HUDs

The high-level party-based content is decent, but it won't make you forget about WoW on its own.

Monster Play allows you to take control of the minions of Angmar and do battle with regular characters

Exploration-centric players will have a great time here

Finally, justice is done to Radagast's awesomeness!

PC

The Lord of the Rings Online: Shadows of Angmar

PC GAME OF THE MONTH

> **STYLE** MASSIVELY MULTIPLAYER ONLINE ROLE-PLAYING GAME > **PUBLISHER** MIDWAY > **DEVELOPER** TURBINE > **RELEASE** APRIL 24
> **ESRB** T

HEROES OF MIDDLE-EARTH, ASSEMBLE!

It's impossible to talk about The Lord of the Rings Online without bringing up World of Warcraft, and not just because WoW is the 800-lb. gorilla in the room. Huge chunks of LOTRO's design are culled entirely from the WoW playbook, but that's generally for the best. WoW's pre-endgame experience is the best of this style of gameplay to date, and LOTRO successfully emulates that within the universe detailed by Tolkien's novels. If you're looking for a brand new style of MMORPG with fresh ways of interacting with the world and your fellow players, do yourself a favor and ignore this title entirely. But those who want a new gameworld to explore within the proven framework of a traditional MMORPG should look no further.

So if LOTRO is structured similarly to and plays just like WoW, why bother with it? Mainly because the leveling experience is absolutely outstanding.

Through a combination of good pacing, clever writing, and the undeniable ambience provided by Middle-earth, the storytelling in this game is leagues beyond anything else in the genre. I actually cared about helping out the beleaguered residents of some town, because they felt more like real people than faceless quest and loot dispensers. A good variety of content – solo quests, Deeds (both exploration and hunting-based), and more epic group-required adventures and instances – does an excellent job of allowing players to experience different things or simply stick to gameplay styles they prefer.

The basic systems that MMORPG players expect out of a full-fledged game are executed well here. Combat works well, though it feels too loose to be truly excellent. Group dynamics between the different classes are interesting, but nowhere near as complex or involving as WoW's

With the hardware to run them, the full-screen effects are amazing

byzantine synergies. The classes themselves are different enough to provide a compelling amount of variety while maintaining the LOTR setting. Crafting can be rewarding, though not nearly to the level of a more freeform game like Star Wars Galaxies. Guilds are a convenient way to form a base of fellow players you get along with, but aren't much more than a private chatroom. Travel is handled with a mix of teleporting back to hub locations and taxi-service stables that generally keep tedium low without making the gameworld feel tiny.

Turbine has done anything but reinvent the wheel with Lord of the Rings Online, but that's not a problem in and of itself. Whether the company will be able to generate enough endgame content to retain its playerbase is still up in the air, but the game experience out of the box ranks very highly within the MMORPG genre. LOTRO's version of PvP, Monster Play, could be very entertaining for a long time if communities spring up around it. WoW burnouts, LOTR fans, and anyone looking for a nice grind up through some levels will be well served here.—**ADAM**

Second Opinion 8.5

You wouldn't know it from Peter Jackson's films, but dwarves are actually good for something besides comic relief. Unfettered by ties to the movie license, The Lord of the Rings Online does a fantastic job creating a fresh, expansive, and addictive vision of Tolkien's Middle-earth. The level grind is augmented by a clever Deed system that gives players bonuses (like titles and stat boosts), but often the sheer beauty of the game is enough to drive exploration. A shortage of traditional casters (that's really more of a Gandalf/Saruman/Radagast thing) might be a turn-off for some, but the classes in the game fit perfectly with the mythology. The only really silly one is the Minstrel, who takes time between knife-stabs to strum out a damaging riff on a lute, demonstrating the pure destructive power of music. It would be so much fun to gank these losers – it is too bad that there aren't more opportunities for you to square off against other characters in PvP. LOTRO may be pressed from a WoW template, but Turbine has expertly adapted and expanded the MMO formula into an entertaining adventure with its own identity.—**JOE**

DOING THE DEED

Structured like Xbox 360 Achievements, LOTRO's Deeds reward players with cosmetic titles or virtue traits that give various bonuses and can be equipped to customize your character's abilities. Now you have a reason beyond personal gratification to find out what's over the next hill – you'll likely work toward an exploration Deed in the process. Likewise, committing acts of genocide against the local orc population takes on a whole new meaning when you're working toward an increase to your Justice trait. The Deed system may sound like a small thing, but it adds a surprising amount of entertainment to Turbine's version of Middle-earth.

PSP
PaRappa the Rapper

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER MUSIC (2-PLAYER VIA AD-HOC) > **PUBLISHER** SONY COMPUTER ENTERTAINMENT
> **DEVELOPER** SONY COMPUTER ENTERTAINMENT JAPAN > **RELEASE** JULY 17 > **ESRB** E

YOU (STILL) GOTTA BELIEVE

Years before the country was hooked on Guitar Hero, a scrappy, rapping puppy named PaRappa came to our shores and laid the groundwork for much of what has now become the music game genre. Like many of you, I have nothing but fond memories of the little guy, and I was very excited when I saw that it was being released for PSP.

Honestly, it's aged a lot more than I had hoped. While the basic play mechanics are still workable, the on-screen icons and voice triggering feels a bit stiff compared to Guitar Hero. It's also a fairly bare-bones port; no new songs were added aside from some moderately well-done remixes of the game's original tracks. While multiplayer functionality is nice, I really question the usefulness of non-Internet PSP networking. How often do you come across someone else that happens to be in your area playing the exact same title as you? It's also extremely

short. I was shocked when I saw the final credits rolling after only a couple hours of play. It seemed a lot longer back then.

However, PaRappa's saving graces are the things that will never age -- the infectious visual style and the amazing songs. Even after all this time, most of the editors at GI can spout off PaRappa lyrics from memory, and for good reason. Quite simply, these are some of the most fun and expertly written video game songs ever. While a cartoon canine rapper could have easily been condescending and smug, PaRappa succeeds in capturing the innocent, playful spirit of Prince Paul's early work with De La Soul. Add to this a vivid cast of memorable characters, and you have a title that won't fail to charm even the grumpiest gamer. This is a classic in my book, and I'd love to rate it higher than I am. However, time marches on, and by today's standards PaRappa isn't the top dog anymore.—**MATT**

PSP
Driver '76

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION (2-PLAYER VIA AD-HOC) > **PUBLISHER** UBISOFT > **DEVELOPER** SUMO DIGITAL
> **RELEASE** MAY 8 > **ESRB** M

Jive turkeys strutting on the sidewalks are few and far between

CAN YOU DIG IT (A GRAVE)?

If Ubisoft execs were smart, they would have left Driver's bludgeoned remains in the abandoned lot where they found it. The company must have a big heart, because resuscitating this maligned franchise isn't going to yield much more than good will from former owner Atari.

We're all familiar with the formula by now: Take the Grand Theft Auto concept, drain the game of any innovation, and release what amounts to a repetitive string of boring street races, car chases, and getaways. No amount of funk or retro style can make this game play better, though Ubisoft certainly tried.

Driver '76 does its best to create a facsimile of 1970s New York City, including four of the five boroughs and a section of dirty Jersey. While the game may feature the notable architecture of Gotham, it captures none of the city's spirit; the streets are so barren it looks like the American version of 28 Days Later.
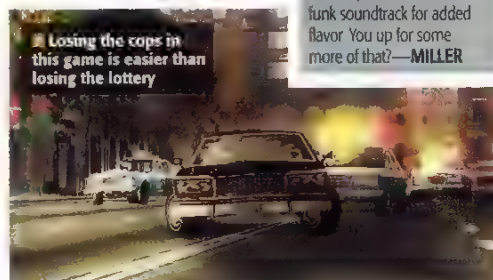
If the boring gameplay and empty city don't make you flee, the awful plot and wincingly bad dialogue may provide the final straw to join the missing NYC populace in the Hamptons. The game moves its plot along with comic book style cutscenes, but even in this hokey context your character's primary motivation (score a date with the Triad boss' daughter) doesn't really seem worth all the murders, car boosts, or gang wars you have to suffer through to reach your goal. To top it off, the clichéd dialogue takes

jokes that weren't funny in the '70s and turns the dial to 11. How many times do we have to hear bad cop and donut bits in one game?

Speaking of the boys in blue, Driver '76 is home to the most incompetent police force to ever grace a video game. If the heat is on your tail, you don't need to be a professional criminal to shake them. I lost the squad cars on several occasions by simply driving to my mission destination. When that didn't work, I relied on the foolproof technique of pulling over, waiting until the cops got out of their cars, then driving away. These cops make Ronnie Dobbs seem like a criminal mastermind.

The best feature of Driver '76 is definitely the retro soundtrack, featuring '70s musicians such as Funkadelic, Marvin Gaye, David Bowie, and Blondie. Also to its credit, Driver '76's driving and shooting mechanics work well, however recycled and sterile the content may be.

Gamers who can't get enough of this genre may find a few hours of fun, but for the rest of us, we're better off skipping the '70s altogether.—**BERTZ**

Losing the cops in this game is easier than losing the lottery

PSP

Innocent Life:
A Futuristic Harvest Moon

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER SIMULATION > **PUBLISHER** NATSUME > **DEVELOPER** ARTEPIAZZA > **RELEASE** MAY 15 > **ESRB** E

Gayak: And on the 6th day...

Taut dog will create an incredible amount of poop to clean up

ROBOT MARRIAGE BAN

BOTTOM LINE **7.25**

Harvest Moon diehards have had a new farm to tend almost every year for the last decade. Here players have tended to crops, raised livestock, traded gifts with townspeople, and swindled ladies into marriage. Innocent Life contains plenty of farming and livestock elements, but newcomer ArtePiazza has forgone the traditional wooing aspects in favor of exploration.

In somewhat of a Dr. Light/Mega Man relationship, main character Life is actually a robot created by Dr. Hope. The good doctor senses an anger in the town's nearby volcano due to the people's over reliance on automated farming technology, so he tasks Life with farming in the old way to open up new paths in the natural world, chill that crazy deity out, and try to become a real boy.

Things start out extremely slow, with players simply watering plants and sleeping for the first in-game week. Almost all progression is crammed into Life's Sunday tune-up with Dr. Hope, where he'll hand out a new tool or a townsperson will burst in with a task that needs solving. I don't know if I've ever seen such a regimented delineation of storytelling in a game, but somehow it did manage to keep me playing for "just one more week" instead of turning off the PSP and leaving work on time.

Once you get deeper into the game, a typical day consists of harvesting some crops, saying hello to your cows and sheep, checking to make sure your helper bot watered all the crops and cleared out weeds and dog poop, and going back to sleep. While this satisfies the grinding impulse, gamers who lack this gene will lose interest quickly. On some fortunate weeks, players will be able to run off to check out new landscapes, bust some rocks with a hammer, find treasure chests, and meet new people. However, most of these missions can easily be handled in the first few days, forcing you into the farm-sleep-farm pattern to get to more new stuff.

Innocent Life is a good fit for the PSP, working well in short bursts or long doses, but too many elements drag down the pacing and prevent true agricultural greatness.—**BRYAN**
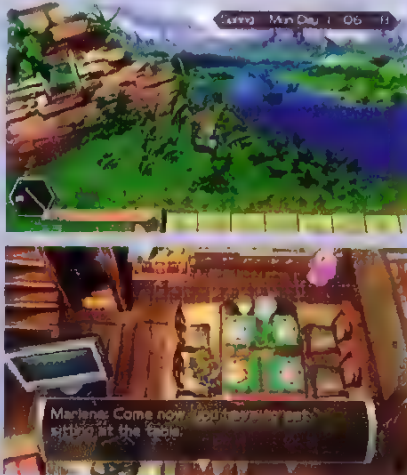
> **Concept:** Take Harvest Moon into the future while removing some tenets of the series

> **Graphics:** Cartoony, yet tranquil and effective

> **Sound:** Relaxing tunes mixed with farm animal noises

> **Playability:** Expectedly simple interface, though the loose analog controls result in plenty of misdirected seed tossing, watering, etc

> **Entertainment:** Still addictive, but I can already hear purists crying foul

> **Replay Value:** Moderate

Second Opinion **6.5**

With all of the planting, watering, and harvesting, it would be easy to mistake Innocent Life for a real Harvest Moon game. Like your crops after a winter storm, that perception quickly withers and dies, leaving only disappointment. Once you get a helper robot (who takes care of most of your day-to-day farm stuff), all that's left is some weak exploration, cooking, and other things that aren't enough to keep you busy. The distance of your farm from the town means you never get a sense for the characters or community, and – I never thought I'd say this – where's the courtship? The little robotagonist deserves love too! Innocent Life is a simple and manageable game that might interest those looking for something low-key, but it just doesn't dangle enough in front of you to really make the grind rewarding.—**JOE**

Earning Mon Day 7 06 11

Marlene: Come now...sitting at the table.

PSP

Final Fantasy:
Anniversary Edition

BOTTOM LINE **7.5**

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ROLE-PLAYING GAME > **PUBLISHER** SQUARE ENIX > **DEVELOPER** SQUARE ENIX
> **RELEASE** JUNE 26 > **ESRB** E10+

Here we go again! In case you missed it on your NES, PSone, or GBA, this is your chance to play the Final Fantasy that started it all. With sharp re-done visuals, the PSP incarnation of this classic isn't quite a port, but it's not a remake, either. There's a new end-game dungeon, but the gameplay is the same as ever. Plus, without the added bonus of Final Fantasy II thrown in (unlike the previous versions), the game's bare story and characters stand out like a Chocobo in the chicken coop. This is the best version of this game out there, and every RPG fan should experience the original Final Fantasy at least once. On the other hand, if this would be your fourth or fifth time through, don't kick yourself for passing on this gussied-up rehash.—**JOE**
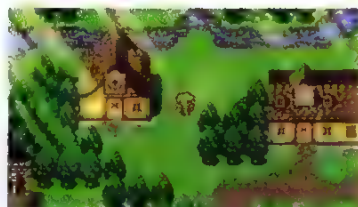
NINTENDO DS

Dynasty Warriors DS:
Fighter's Battle

BOTTOM LINE **6.5**

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 3-PLAYER VIA WIRELESS) > **PUBLISHER** KOEI > **DEVELOPER** KOEI
> **RELEASE** JULY 24 > **ESRB** E10+

Wan Cheng

Another month, another Dynasty game to review. Maybe it's not really that bad, but it feels that way sometimes. At first I thought this Dynasty might actually be fun. The Battle Deck system seems like a fresh way to power up your character and add allies, and the game isn't bogged down by an impossibly dull story (it's still dull, just not very present). However, Dynasty's old faults – poor AI and monotonous battling – are readily apparent. Because it works, all you'll do is input the biggest combo over and over again until you can unleash a Super Musou attack. Bosses fall to the same formula. It's like repeatedly punching the same math formula into a calculator.—**BEN**

NINTENDO DS

SNK vs. Capcom
Card Fighters DS

BOTTOM LINE **6.5**

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER PUZZLE (2-PLAYER VIA WIRELESS) > **PUBLISHER** SNK PLAYMORE
> **DEVELOPER** SNK PLAYMORE > **RELEASE** APRIL 24 > **ESRB** T

It's been a long wait for fans of the original SNK Vs. Capcom card battling game (released on the now-dead Neo-Geo Pocket Color). It's just a shame that this new DS iteration is so absurdly unpolished. Players will be more horrified by the many typos and horrendous localization than the legion of brainwashed card fighters, from the constant "You win! Congratulation!" to the strange card descriptions "This Martian is hard to fathom with his pee, poop, poo-wah." However, the battle system is solid and it's fun to find cards like Nelo Angelo and Miles Edgeworth. Be warned of an impassable bug on the second playthrough found in every retail copy (SNK has said they will replace the defective carts, though this still hasn't kicked off yet).—**BRYAN**

TOP 20
Listings Based Upon NPD Data For April 2007 Based On Units Sold

1 POKÉMON DIAMOND

Gotta catch...oh, never mind. We have nothing left to say about Pokémon as a franchise. It's a freaking juggernaut. It's bigger than if Kevin Garnett were to climb on Shaq's shoulders to dunk over Truckasaurus (yes, the monster truck) to win at the buzzer – in a series that won humanity's freedom from our mechanical overlords. Yes, Pokémon is bigger than that.

2 POKÉMON PEARL
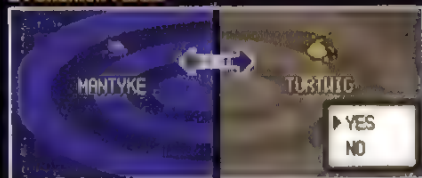
Imagine if KG were parading around, taunting the deposed robotic rulers with the game ball. You think the robots would stand for that? Of course not. They'd break out lasers and force KG to play for the hapless Timberwolves until he retired out of frustration. And, obviously, re-enslave the rest of humanity. Even so, Pokémon is bigger than that.

3 SUPER PAPER MARIO
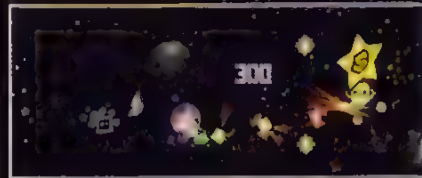
What's bigger than Pokémon? Mario, of course. But we will not go quietly into that good night! Dick Marcinko would totally team up with Worf and Chewbacca to break KG out of prison camp (Kevin McHale, of course, is the warden). McHale would lose his next 10 years of draft picks for his incompetence, and yet somehow still wouldn't get fired.

4 Wii PLAY
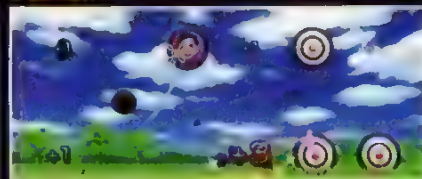
Huh, turns out that packing a game in with a controller is a good business move, if your property is as hot as the Wii and its accessories. Anyway, KG and Marcinko would infiltrate the robot masters' base to put an end to *homo sapiens*' oppression once and for all. But first, they'd need a distraction.

5 GUITAR HERO II

Rocking out rules, especially in high definition, and the sales numbers show it. But even "YYZ" isn't hardcore enough to tie up the robot army long enough for KG to disable the main CPU. Only Worf and Chewbacca fighting back to back against legions of remorseless killing machines for hours on end could do that. "You fight with honor." *"Rrrrrgh!"*

Rank	Title	L. Mo	System	Score	Release	Price
1	Pokémon Diamond	N/A	DS	8.25	04-07	$35
2	Pokémon Pearl	N/A	DS	8.25	04-07	$35
3	Super Paper Mario	N/A	Wii	9.5	04-07	$50
4	Wii Play w/ remote	4	Wii	7	02-07	$50
5	Guitar Hero II w/ guitar	3	360	9.25	03-07	$89
6	Guitar Hero II w/ guitar	11	PS2	9	11-06	$80
7	Spider-Man 3	N/A	360	8	04-07	$60
8	Spider-Man 3	N/A	PS2	N/A	04-07	$41
9	God of War II	1	PS2	9.75	03-07	$50
10	MLB 07: The Show	9	PS2	8.75	02-07	$40
11	The Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess	20	Wii	10	11-06	$50
12	New Super Mario Bros.	12	DS	9.25	05-06	$35
13	MLB 2K7	8	360	8.5	02-07	$60
14	Spectrobes	7	DS	6.5	03-07	$30
15	Ghost Recon Advanced Warfighter 2	2	360	8.75	03-07	$60
16	God of War	13	PS2	10	03-05	$20
17	Tiger Woods PGA Tour 07	15	Wii	6.5	03-07	$50
18	Gears of War	N/A	360	9.5	11-06	$61
19	Diddy Kong Racing	6	DS	7	02-07	$31
20	Mario Kart DS	19	DS	8.5	11-05	$35

TOP 10 JAPAN

Rank	Title	System
1	Final Fantasy Tactics: The War of the Lions	PSP
2	Final Fantasy XII: Revenant Wings	DS
3	Wii Sports	Wii
4	More Brain Training	DS
5	New Super Mario Bros.	DS
6	Super Paper Mario	Wii
7	Wii Play	Wii
8	Big Brain Academy: Wii Degree	Wii
9	Momotarou Dentetsu DS	DS
10	Yoshi's Island DS	DS
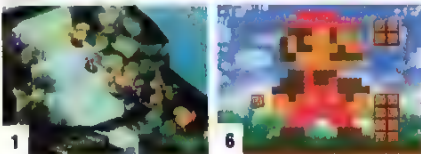
TOP 10 GI

Rank	Title	Mo	System
1	Odin Sphere	N/A	PS2
2	Super Paper Mario	1	Wii
3	The Lord of the Rings Online: Shadows of Angmar	N/A	PC
4	Forza Motorsport 2	N/A	360
5	World of Warcraft: The Burning Crusade	4	PC
6	Ninja Gaiden Sigma	N/A	PS3
7	God of War II	2	PS2
8	Hot Shots Tennis	N/A	PS2
9	Tomb Raider Anniversary	N/A	PS2
10	Resident Evil 4	N/A	Wii
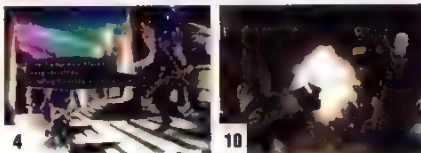
The Staff's Favorite Picks

TOP 10 PC

Rank	Title	L. Mo.	Price
1	The Lord of the Rings Online: Shadows of Angmar	N/A	$51
2	World of Warcraft: The Burning Crusade	2	$37
3	World of Warcraft	3	$24
4	Command & Conquer 3: Tiberium Wars	4	$48
5	The Sims 2	5	$35
6	The Sims 2: Seasons	1	$28
7	The Sims 2: Celebration Stuff	N/A	$19
8	The Lord of the Rings Online: Shadows of Angmar – Special Edition	N/A	$60
9	3333 XP Games	10	$10
10	The Elder Scrolls IV: Shivering Isles	9	$28
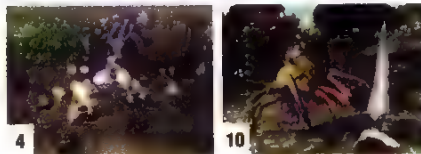
Based On Monthly Units Sold

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

REVIEWS ARCHIVE

F.E.A.R. - PS3 - May-07

PLAYSTATION 3

Title	Score	Date
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
F.E.A.R.	8.25	May-07
Fight Night Round 3	9	Jan-07
Formula One: Champion Edition	8	Apr-07
Full Auto 2: Battlelines	7.5	Jan-07
Godfather: The Don's Edition, The	7.5	May-07
Madden NFL 07	7.75	Jan-07
Major League Baseball 2K7	8.5	Mar-07
Marvel: Ultimate Alliance	9.25	Dec-06
MotorStorm	8	Apr-07
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
Virtua Tennis 3	7	May-07

XBOX 360

Title	Score	Date
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
Command & Conquer 3: Tiberium Wars	8.5	Jun-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
Earth Defense Force 2017	8	May-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
Ghost Recon Advanced Warfighter 2	8.75	May-07
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
Monster Madness: Battle for Suburbia	7.5	Jun-07
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
Rayman Raving Rabbids	7.25	Jun-07
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
TMNT	7.5	May-07
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
Virtua Tennis 3	7	May-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

Title	Score	Date
Ant Bully, The	6.5	Feb-07
Call of Duty 3	7.25	Jan-07
Chicken Little: Ace in Action	7.25	Jan-07
Cooking Mama: Cook Off	6.75	May-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
Godfather: Blackhand Edition, The	6.5	May-07
Heatseeker	7.5	Jun-07
Koronnpa: Marble Mania	8	May-07
Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess, The	10	Jan-07
Madden NFL 07	7.75	Jan-07
Marvel: Ultimate Alliance	8.25	Jan-07
Medal of Honor: Vanguard	4	May-07
Metal Slug Anthology	7.5	Jan-07
Mortal Kombat: Armageddon	7.5	Jun-07
Prince of Persia: Rival Swords	8.5	May-07
Rayman Raving Rabbids	8.5	Jan-07

Title	Score	Date
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	8.5	Apr-07
Super Monkey Ball: Banana Blitz	6.75	Jan-07
Super Paper Mario	9.5	Jun-07
Super Swing Golf	8	Feb-07
Tiger Woods PGA Tour 07	6.5	May-07
TMNT	7.5	May-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
Wing Island	5	May-07

PLAYSTATION 2

Title	Score	Date
Ant Bully, The	6.5	Feb-07
Ar Tonelico: Melody of Elemia	6.75	Feb-07
Arena Football: Road to Glory	6.5	Apr-07
Arthur And The Invisibles	6.75	Mar-07
Atelier Iris 3: Grand Phantasm	6.5	Jun-07
ATV Offroad Fury 4	7.5	Jan-07
Bully	8.5	Dec-06
Burnout Dominator	8	Apr-07
Chulip	3	Apr-07
Dawn of Mana	7	May-07
Eragon	6.25	Feb-07
Family Guy	5.5	Jan-07
Ghost Rider	6.75	Mar-07
God of War II	9.75	Apr-07
Grand Theft Auto: Vice City Stories	7.75	May-07
Guitar Hero II	9	Dec-06
Justice League Heroes	7.25	Dec-06
Lumines Plus	7.5	Apr-07
Marvel: Ultimate Alliance	9.25	Dec-06
Medal of Honor: Vanguard	6	May-07
Meet the Robinsons	7	May-07
MLB 07: The Show	8.75	Apr-07
Mortal Kombat: Armageddon	8.25	Dec-06
MVP 07 NCAA Baseball	7	Mar-07
Need for Speed: Carbon	8.5	Dec-06
NFL Street 3	7	Feb-07
Phantasy Star Universe	6	Jan-07
Raw Danger	4.5	Jun-07
Reservoir Dogs	5.75	Jan-07
Rogue Galaxy	9	Jan-07
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
Singstar Pop	8	May-07
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
Thrillville	7.75	Dec-06
TMNT	7.5	May-07
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

Title	Score	Date
Ant Bully, The	6.5	Feb-07

XBOX

Title	Score	Date
Eragon	6.25	Feb-07
Family Guy	5.5	Jan-07
Justice League Heroes	7.25	Dec-06
Marvel: Ultimate Alliance	9.25	Dec-06
Mortal Kombat: Armageddon	8.25	Dec-06
Need for Speed: Carbon	8.5	Dec-06
Reservoir Dogs	5.75	Jan-07
Thrillville	7.75	Dec-06

PC

Title	Score	Date
Ant Bully, The	6.5	Feb-07
Battlestations: Midway	6.5	Mar-07
Command & Conquer 3: Tiberium Wars	8.5	May-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
Heroes of Might & Magic V: Hammers of Fate	8	Feb-07
Infernal	4	Jun-07
Lord of the Rings: The Battle for Middle-earth II - Rise of the Witch-King, The	8	Feb-07
Maelstrom	4	Mar-07
Medieval II: Total War	9.25	Jan-07
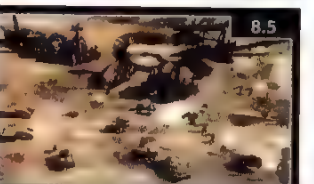
Command & Conquer 3: Tiberium Wars - PC - May-07

PC (continued)

Title	Score	Date
Neverwinter Nights 2	8	Dec-06
Phantasy Star Universe	6	Jan-07
Reservoir Dogs	5.75	Jan-07
S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Shadow of Chernobyl	8.25	May-07
Sid Meier's Railroads!	8	Dec-06
Silverfall	6	May-07
Star Wars Empire at War: Forces of Corruption	7.5	Dec-06
Supreme Commander	9	Apr-07
Titan Quest: Immortal Throne	8	May-07
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

NINTENDO DS

Title	Score	Date
Brain Buster Puzzle Pak	8	Apr-07
Cake Mania	6.5	May-07
Death Jr. and the Science Fair of Doom	7	Jun-07
Diddy Kong Racing	7	Mar-07
Diner Dash	7.25	Jun-07
Etrian Odyssey	6	Jun-07
Final Fantasy Fables: Chocobo Tales	6.5	May-07
Final Fantasy III	8	Dec-06
Gunpey	7.75	Dec-06
Honeycomb Beat	7	May-07
Hotel Dusk: Room 215	7	Mar-07
Izuna: Legend of the Unemployed Ninja	3.5	Apr-07
Kirby Squeak Squad	7.75	Feb-07
Konami Classics Series: Arcade Hits	7.75	May-07
Konductra	6.25	Feb-07
Lost In Blue 2	6.5	May-07
Lunar Knights	8	Apr-07
Meteos: Disney Magic	7.75	May-07
Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney Justice For All	8	Jan-07
Pogo Island	6.5	Apr-07

Pokemon Diamond/Pearl - Nintendo DS - Jan-06

Title	Score	Date
Pokémon Diamond/Pearl	8.25	Jun-07
Puzzle Quest: Challenge of the Warlords	8.25	May-07
Quickspot	7.5	Apr-07
Spectrobes	6.5	Apr-07
Time Ace	6.75	Jun-07
Touch of the Dead	7	Jun-07
Thoncube	6	Apr-07
Wario: Master of Disguise	7.25	May-07
Yoshi's Island DS	8.25	Dec-06
Zendoku	6	Jun-07

PSP

Title	Score	Date
300: March To Glory	6.25	Apr-07
Ace Combat X: Skies of Deception	8.25	Dec-06
Aedis Eclipse: Generation of Chaos	6	Jun-07
After Burner: Black Falcon	7	May-07
Brooktown High	6.75	Jun-07
Call of Duty: Roads to Victory	6	May-07
Capcom Puzzle World	7.5	Apr-07
Chili Con Carnage	7	Apr-07
Coded Arms: Contagion	6.75	May-07
Cube	5.5	Jun-07
Dungeon Siege: Throne of Agony	8	Jan-07
Full Auto 2	7.25	May-07
Gitaroo Man Lives!	9	Dec-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
Legend of Heroes III: Song of the Ocean, The	6	Mar-07
Lumines II	9	Dec-06
M.A.C.H	6.5	May-07
Marvel Trading Card Game	7.5	May-07
Metal Gear Solid: Portable Ops	9	Feb-07
Monster Kingdom: Jewel Summoner	6	Mar-07
Mortal Kombat: Unchained	8	Feb-07
Puzzle Quest: Challenge of the Warlords	8.25	May-07
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
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

GAME BOY ADVANCE

Title	Score	Date
Final Fantasy V Advance	8	Jan-07
Final Fantasy VI Advance	9	Apr-07

Tomb Raider: Anniversary

A Tomb Raiding Survival Guide
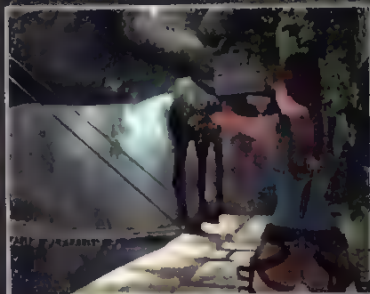
By Riley Cooper, Senior Designer

If you're feeling like the bosses are getting the better of you, or just want to know the quickest way to defeat them, read on for the how-to.

GENERAL BOSS STRATEGIES

Maintain Distance
The bosses are tough, but they can't hurt you if they can't reach you. Maintain distance to keep out of harm's way and to give yourself more time to react to their attacks.

Keep Firing
The bosses don't react well to being shot. They either take damage, get mad, or both. When they're mad they'll become overaggressive and careless, giving you a crucial opportunity to get in and capitalize on their mistake.

Use Your Adrenaline
When the boss' enrage meter fills they almost always charge. Wait until your field of view blurs, then quickly dodge. Your reticle will zero in on their head – wait until it does before firing to succeed.

SPECIFIC BOSS STRATEGIES

TYRANNOSAURUS REX

Enrage From A Distance
The key to beating T-Rex is enraging him from a distance. You enrage him by shooting him. The meter below his health-bar shows how enraged he is. Make sure you've got some distance from him before filling that meter up or you won't be able to dodge his charge attack.

Use The Environment
You will slowly damage T-Rex simply by shooting him, but defeating him by gunshots alone will take a long time. The best way to take him out is to get him to charge into each of the three wall-mounted log spikes in the valley where you fight him. Do this by dodging his enraged charge and successfully timing the headshot in line with them.

The Ground Is Your Guide
The terrain is worn leading up to the three wall-mounted spike logs in the valley, use these as your guide to positioning yourself in front of them before you enrage the T-Rex.

CENTAURS

Break Free From Stone Form
If you are turned to stone, quickly wiggle the analog stick to avoid being mule-kicked to smithereens.

Grapple Away Their Shield
If you successfully dodge the Centaur's enraged charge and succeed at the following return-fire headshot, the Centaur will bring his shield up to guard his face. This exposes the back of the shield, which has a grapple-ring on it. Quickly grapple it free to remove this defense and to advance to the next step of the encounter.

Reflect The Beam
Once you've removed one or both of the Centaurs' shields, you can use them to reflect their Medusa attack. When they initiate the beam of the attack, quickly pick up the shield and aim it right back at them. If you do this in time, you'll turn the Centaur to stone with his own attack. Fire away at him for massive damage before he recovers to finish him off.

Don't Look Into Their Eyes!
When you shoot the centaurs into an enraged state they will either charge at you or perform their Medusa attack, in which they stare into Lara's eyes and turn her to stone. You'll know this is happening by the beam that connects their eyes with Lara's. If this happens and you are in combat lock, quickly unlock to avoid being turned to stone.

TORSO

Make Him Roll Off The Edge
Get Torso to roll at you by shooting him into an enraged state. Position yourself near the open edge of the platform to make him roll right off. If you don't succeed with the headshot opportunity, he'll stop himself before he falls.

Shoot Off His Two Claws
After you've made Torso roll off the front edge, enrage him again. If you dodge his ensuing attack and pull off the return-fire headshot, he'll fall forward on his claw attack and get them stuck in the ground. Quickly switch targets to his

claws with the right analog stick and fire away to destroy the first of his two claws.

Shoot His Grip Free
If you successfully get Torso to roll off the front edge of the arena platform, he'll end up hanging from the ledge. Shoot his gripping fingers to disengage them from the ledge. Use the Uzis and you'll succeed after having destroyed only one of his claws.

Jump Over The Ground Pounds
Torso has multiple attacks that shake the ground and cause Lara to stumble. Jump just before these attacks hit to avoid being stumbled. When Torso gets his claws stuck in the ground, using this technique will allow you to continuously fire while his claws are stuck, pausing only to reload.

NATLA

Take Out Her Wings
The first step to defeating Natla is destroying her wings. When you lock, make sure one of her wings is targeted. If it's not, flick the right stick to switch targets to one of them before firing away. Her wings are strong, but if you keep at it you'll eventually take each of them out.

Make Her Charge
After you take out her wings and bring her to the ground, you'll have to shoot her in rapid succession to get her to charge. Shoot too slow and she'll regain her cool and continue to pelt you with her fireballs from a distance. If you shoot her fast enough, however, she'll charge.

Capitalize On The Counter-Attack
When she runs at you, dodge as soon as the field of view blurs, or you won't successfully evade the attack. If you do successfully evade and correctly time the return-fire headshot, your opportunity to hurt her will have just begun. Begin shooting right away and don't let up or she'll quickly recovery and you'll have to try again.

Jump, Don't Roll
When Natla's on the ground in particular, jump to the side just after she shoots her three fireballs to avoid being hit.

MULTI-SYSTEM

Def Jam: Icon Cheats

At the start screen enter these codes.

PS3
Unlock Yung Joc - "It's Going Down" – Down, O, ✕, Right
Unlock Fat Joe – Down, O, ✕, Right

360
Unlock Yung Joc - "It's Going Down" – B, Up, Right, Left, Y
Unlock Fat Joe – Down, B, A, Right

PLAYSTATION 3

Full Auto 2

In the Settings menu, go into extras then cheat codes to enter these codes.

Unlock Sceptre and Mini-Rockets – 10E6CUSTOMER
Unlock Vulcan and Flamethrower – 5FINGERDISCOUNT

Wii

Super Paper Mario

Experience Trick – In need of some more experience? After you finish Chapter 5 head back to 5-4 to the pipe on the ceiling that keeps sending out Sapiens (the Flower headed enemies). Use Bowser's flame breath to kill them and they will continually spawn. If you stand on the block just

Code of the Month

PS3
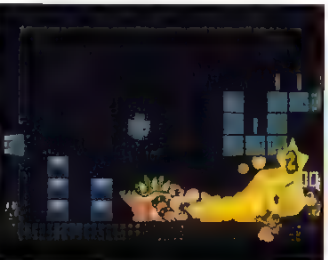
Motorstorm
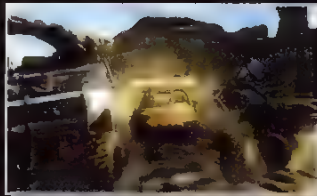
Yea haw! Strap on your straw hat and slap your brother on the behind, it's time for some mud racing. Whazzat? You're tired of eating dirt? You just want to unlock all the vehicles and tracks right now? You need some codes. Sure there aren't a lot of them, but when one of them does it all, what else do you need? Just don't get a big head about it; you *did* use a cheat code.
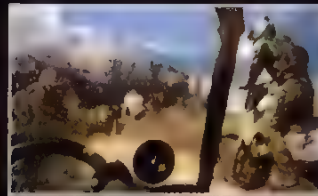
Big Heads for ATVs and Bikes – Pause the game, then hold L1+L2+R1+R2+R3 (while holding right click in on the stick)+L3 (while holding left click in on the stick)

Unlock Everything – At main menu hold L1+L2+R1+R2+R3 (while holding up click in on the stick)+L3 (while holding down click in on the stick)

Andy Adkin
Baroda, MI

left of the pipe, you will kill the Sapiens faster, earning nearly 10,000 experience every minute

Infinite 3D – Here is another tip that will help preserve your health and save some headache. If you beat Flopside Pit of 100 Trials twice, you get Mario's Card, which allows you to stay in 3D as long as you want.
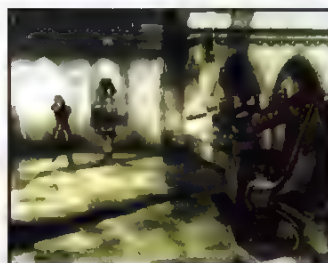
PC

Infernal

While playing, press escape and enter these codes to get some cool effects

Change Aura to Infernal – IFDAURA
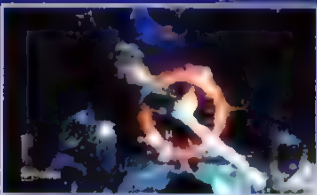**Full Ammo –** IFUAMMO

Get Pistol – IFGDGUN
Get Plasma Gun – IFGPLASMA
Increase Damage – IFMDAMAGE

"GI Droid"
(location unknown – last seen eating carrots from Mr. McGregor's garden)

Xbox Live Arcade Spotlight

Undertow

As the months pass, we're seeing more complex and involved games make their way onto Live Arcade. Undertow continues that tradition through its gorgeous underwater locales, voiceover work, and large-scale multiplayer options. The story of the game suggests that an alien race attacks Earth and melts the polar ice caps, plunging all of civilization into the ocean. The few humans who survive pull together to fight back. Simultaneously, the long-forgotten Atlantian race emerges to voice their claim to the seas. These three playable races each have four unique and upgradeable units that you move freely through the water – the team at

Chair Entertainment who makes the game describes the experience as a cross between Battlefield and Geometry Wars. It's a relatively apt comparison based on our time with the game, which boasts 16-player multiplayer matches in addition to a 15-level campaign for a single player or a cooperative two-player team. Thanks to the use of Unreal Engine 3, the underwater landscapes are gorgeous, from the ultra smooth liquid effects to the detailed backgrounds of long-sunken cities. While Microsoft continues to be far too secretive about when particular games will hit Live Arcade, we've heard that you should be able to dive into Undertow sometime this summer.
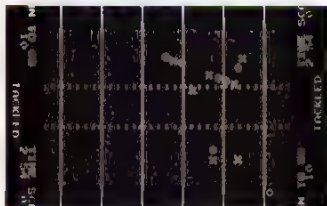
VIDEO GAME
GRIDIRON'S GREATEST MOMENTS

The evolution of video game football is synonymous with the development of video games themselves. Advancements in platform technology have always allowed fans to enjoy America's favorite sport (take a hike, baseball) in bigger and better ways. So grab your one-bar Kevin Butler helmet, dust off your Apple II, and grit your teeth for Game Informer's ten-yard fight through some of the greatest moments in video game football history.


■ Football on the 2600

■ Atari Football

ATARI

Atari was instrumental in the early days of video gaming, and it made sure football was there too. In 1978, the company released Atari Football into arcades – a game which, despite its gameplay problems, was ahead of its time. The first game to feature a trackball, Atari Football was a horizontal arcade cabinet that came in two and four-player versions; it literally replicated the Xs and Os of football in a decent form for the times. The trackball induced blisters and pinched skin, but it also produced some fun times. Atari's home version of football for the 2600 was a shameful affair whose three-on-three gameplay was a block-headed travesty, but at least 1982's RealSports Football was somewhat better.

INTELLIVISION'S NFL FOOTBALL

Mattel used sports (and Harvard sportswriter/pitch man George Plimpton) as the main weapon in advertising its Intellivision home console against Atari's 2600, and 1980 saw the debut of Intellivion's NFL Football. The game presented a sideways field view complete with a full 100-yard field and gameplay that included interceptions and safeties. The system's keypad controllers allowed players to call nine offensive and defensive plays, and the platform's superior specs enabled a visual leap from the blobs of the 2600. Its follow-up, Super Pro Football, would appear in 1986 with individually programmable routes for receivers.
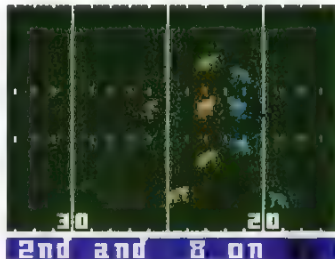
■ Super Pro Football

4TH & INCHES

After the great video game crash of 1983, systems like the Commodore 64 tried to fill the void, but few football titles stood out or gained much prominence. Titles such as Accolade's 4th & Inches for the system did, however, move the sport forward upon its release in 1987. The game marked the first time each team had 11 men, and also introduced players of different skill levels whose names could be edited. Also making its debut was formation-based play calling, which has become the industry standard.
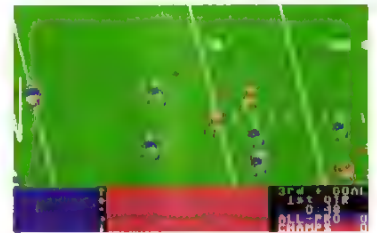
TECMO BOWL

Tecmo Bowl for the arcade (1987) and NES (1989) is where some gamers' love of football begins and ends. With only nine players per side and money plays that assured a TD, other football games were arguably better, but Tecmo Bowl was the first football title to capture the imagination of most gamers. Perhaps it was due to the fact that Tecmo Bowl was the first title to have a deal with the NFL Players Association, putting real life players such as Mark Duper, Bernie Kosar, Lawrence Taylor, and Walter Payton at your disposal.


■ Tecmo Bowl

All 28 NFL teams appeared in 1991's Tecmo Super Bowl, and the game made other strides by adding full-length regular season and playoff schedules, season statistics, injuries, and full 11-man squads with substitutions. Tecmo released other Tecmo Bowls, but they failed to catch on as much as these first two, which continue their legacy with user-created roster upgrades and continued accolades.

TIMELINE

1978
ATARI FOOTBALL
(arcade)

1980
NFL FOOTBALL
(intellivision)

1984
10-YARD FIGHT
(arcade) (NES – 1985)

1987
4TH AND INCHES
(Commodore 64)

TECMO BOWL
(arcade) (NES – 1989)

1988
TV SPORTS FOOTBALL
(PC/Commodore Amiga)

1989
JOHN MADDEN FOOTBALL
(Apple II)

1990
JOE MONTANA FOOTBALL
(Genesis)

THE PC PROS

As football evolved in arcades and on home consoles, the PC used its power to great advantage, creating a simulation-based category of football games that were ahead of their time in terms of sophistication. Games like Front Office Football stressed more coaching, general management, and franchise management than on-field twitch ability, and this brand of numbers-based football is still preferred by some. Perhaps the most popular one back in the day was Front Page Sports: Football from Sierra. The game was buggy, but complemented its gameplay with extensive franchise management options, creating a depth that is the norm today.
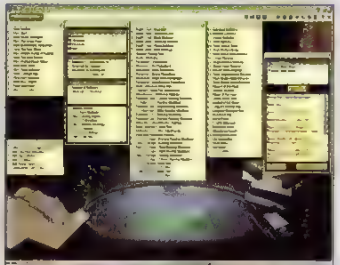
Front Office Football 2007

TV SPORTS FOOTBALL

Cinemaware was once known for high-quality graphics (and franchises like Defender of the Crown), and this multi-platform game didn't disappoint. TV Sports Football was a leap forward for the sport, featuring full playbooks (including reverse plays and sending a man in motion), penalties, fluid animation, and a cursor passing system that predated Madden's QB Vision. Although the game didn't utilize any NFL licenses, it was alluring not only because of its graphics, but its presentation. In accordance with its moniker, TV Sports Football had a TV broadcast-like style featuring a presenter, mini cut-scenes during the action, and a halftime show.

MADDEN VS. THE WORLD

When the first Madden title from EA appeared in 1989 for the Apple II, video game football had certainly evolved, but its identity was dissipated over various series that rarely survived more than a few inceptions. Madden changed that. For better or worse, the game came out every year, and while this is often cited as a detriment these days, it enabled the franchise to build momentum, create competition, and propel the sport to where it is today.

The franchise took off with the '92 installment on Genesis (which included the infamous ambulance for hurt players), and the series would go on to make the case for the system versus the SNES. The Genesis boasted that 40 percent of its software sales were sports titles. Madden '94 on the console was a giant breakthrough because the series acquired the NFL license, with the Players license coming a year later (except for the SNES version). During this time, the property was strong enough that the game engine powering Madden was spun off by EA to create Bill Walsh College Football and Mutant League Football – a title whose landmines, referee bashing, and exploding body parts still make it popular. The game's over-the-top style of football resonates in Midway's arcade sensation NFL Blitz (1987), a series that continues to this day on home consoles.

While Madden was building momentum, the seeds of a rivalry between it and Sega were being laid. Sega published Joe Montana Football in 1990 for the Genesis, and the series made some waves with Joe Montana II Sports Talk
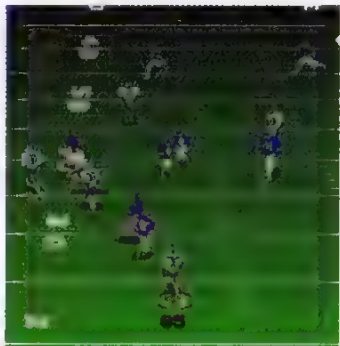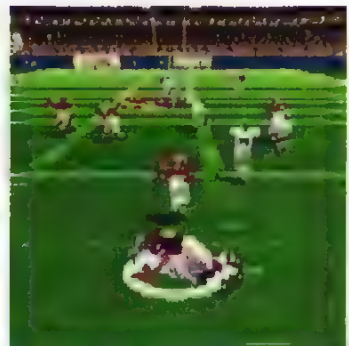
**Madden NFL 95** **Joe Montana II Sports Talk Football** **NFL GameDay 98**

Football in 1991 because the game was the first title to use digitized speech for its play-by-play commentary. For the follow-up, NFL Sports Talk Football 93, 500 voice samples were employed along with the NFL license. Sega would continue to support football games under the simple "NFL" moniker, a situation that would be important at the end of the decade.

The dawn of the PlayStation era in 1995 enabled newcomer NFL GameDay to make a name for itself on Sony's new system. The title made good use of the console's graphical prowess (for the time), and the controller enabled players to guide their players with precision. The series built on this debut in 1997 and seemed to overtake Madden (thanks in no small part to a gaffe on EA's part. See sidebar for more). GameDay utilized a new 3D graphics engine for GameDay '98, trumping the sprite-based Madden. The Madden franchise would recover, however, hitting a golden era where many of the genre's staples were introduced: Franchise mode (added in 1998), eye-catching animations, improved AI, and more realistic touches.

By now it was a well-established maxim that to boost a new system's sales, you had to offer a good football game with it – a practice that continues today. This was particularly true for Sega's Dreamcast in 1999, which debuted with Sega's return to the field in the form of NFL 2K from Visual Concepts. The newcomer wowed with its graphics and gameplay, and created an instant competition with Madden strong enough to effectively create a two-horse race. This fact, along with a changing video game sports environment, ultimately pushed out other franchises such as NFL GameDay, Konami's ESPN NFL PrimeTime, Acclaim's QB Club, and Microsoft's NFL Fever.

The 2K series had increasing success on the PlayStation 2 and Xbox, pushing the presentation envelope and even trying out first-person football in 2003, but the franchise would end with ESPN NFL 2K5 once EA secured the exclusive rights to the NFL and NFL Players Association licenses. Visual Concepts is planning a return with All-Pro Football 2K8, but it remains to be seen if football's future will ever be as rich and varied as its past.
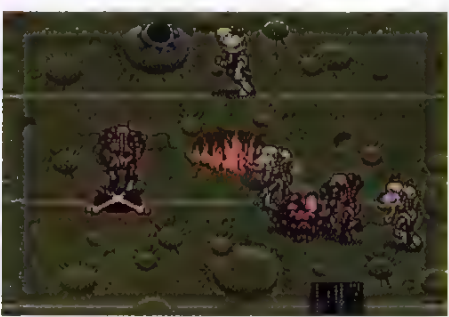
FOOTBALL FRENEMIES

Madden has been a constant for home consoles since its inception, but the series hit a bump when Madden NFL 96 did not release on the new PlayStation. The game was planned but kept getting delayed until eventually, in January 1996, the title was scrapped. Back then, EA relied on outside developers – such as The Two Towers' Stormfront Studios, or Madden veteran Scott Orr – and the PlayStation version of Madden NFL 96 was being done by future NFL 2K developer and rival Visual Concepts. After this debacle, EA handed the series to Tiburon (which it eventually bought), which was formed by Steve Chiang – a former Visual Concepts employee.

MADDEN 98

ESPN NFL 2K5

Mutant League Football

| 1991	1992	1993	1996	1997	1999
TECMO SUPER BOWL (NES) (Genesis – 1993)	**FRONT PAGE SPORTS: FOOTBALL** (PC)	**MUTANT LEAGUE FOOTBALL** (Genesis)	**NFL GAMEDAY** (PSone)	**NFL BLITZ** (Arcade)	**NFL 2K** (Dreamcast) **NFL FEVER** (PC) (Xbox – 2001)

NINTENDO 64

SUPER MARIO 64

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION/PLATFORM > PUBLISHER NINTENDO > DEVELOPER NINTENDO > RELEASE 1996

There may have only been two titles available at the launch of the N64 in 1996, but this game being one of them assured that Nintendo would have a healthy start for their new console. It's more than 10 years later, and Mario's first 3D adventure still offers hours of platforming goodness filled with the familiar sights of Goombas, Koopas, and kidnapped princesses. Time, however, spares very few games. By modern standards, a camera this bad would almost be considered broken. Frequently unhelpful hints make tracking down those elusive power stars more frustrating than perhaps it should be. In fact, those gamers overly spoiled on the hand-holding provided in most modern character platform games are in for a shock during their return trip to Princess Peach's castle – difficult objectives are the norm almost from the beginning. Regardless of its challenge, Super Mario 64 set a bar that others would emulate and iterate off of for years. With its constant secrets, clear and bright visuals, and remarkably varied level design, Mario's launch classic can still butt stomp with the best of them.

THEN 9.75*
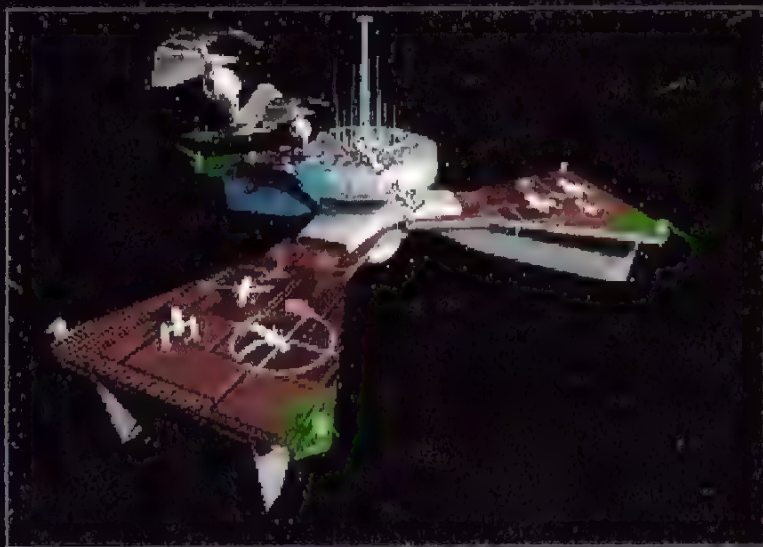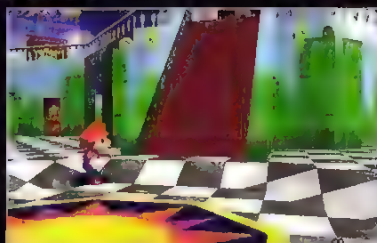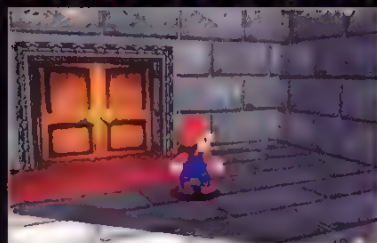
PC

STAR WARS: TIE FIGHTER

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION > PUBLISHER LUCASARTS > DEVELOPER LUCASARTS > RELEASE 1994

Being the scrappy freedom fighter up against impossible odds is okay, but sometimes it's just more fun to be on the winning team. This sequel to the successful X-Wing game casts players in the role of a hotshot Imperial pilot tasked with destroying Rebels, disciplining space pirates, and suppressing the coup d'état of a traitorous admiral. The crafts available are enough to make any fan salivate, from the hilariously expendable standard TIE Fighter to the virtually unstoppable three-winged TIE Defender. Blasting apart stupid A-wings never gets old, and secondary objectives for the Emperor's secret order add the perfect sinister flair. With tight flight controls, wingman commands, and fun story missions, TIE Fighter set the standard for later Star Wars flight games like Rogue Squadron. Technically, the collector's edition CD-ROM (which includes both expansions) is the most complete package, but TIE Fighter is a true classic that holds up no matter which version you play.
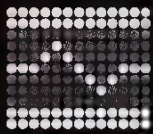
THEN N/A
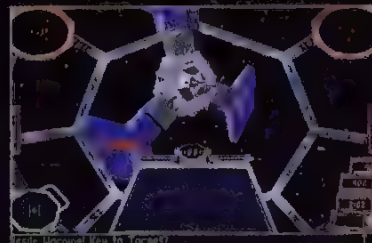
PSONE

RESIDENT EVIL 2

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION/ADVENTURE > PUBLISHER CAPCOM > DEVELOPER CAPCOM > RELEASE 1998

Gamers seem to be divided into two factions: those who hate the Resident Evil tank controls, and those who are able to put up with them. Those in the first category will have trouble going back to this game, but those in the latter will still be able to enjoy this game's good puzzle design and tense "oh no, I'm about to die" atmosphere. Long argued to be the best in the series by fans, RE2 improved on some of the good aspects of the first game (such as level design), and fixed some of the problems (such as terrible voice acting). Being able to replay through the game with different characters to find new story segments is something more games should do. Even the graphics, which were once pretty stunning, haven't diminished nearly as badly as many other games of its era. It's just a shame that it took Capcom so long to figure out a control scheme that appealed to the masses.

THEN 9.5*

*Score given to the game when it first appeared in Game Informer. Super Mario 64 (GI #40 08/96), Resident Evil 2 (GI #57 01/98)

UNLIMITED LAUNCH: JUN. 18

FALLOUT 3: PART I

Nuclear winter is back, and we couldn't be more excited. Watch our extensive video interviews with the Fallout team to learn more about the resurrection of this highly touted franchise.

Fallout 3: Part II

Still craving more Fallout news? Send your questions about the red-hot title to askmiller@gameinformer.com and he'll do his best to provide you with the answers.

All-Pro Football 2K8

Does your favorite gridiron legend make the cut? Find out by scanning the complete list of former NFL greats scheduled to make an appearance in 2K's new football franchise.

Alternate Reality Games

Want to learn more about this cool interactive medium? Read our Q&As with Jordan Weisman from 42 Entertainment, and Andrew Darley, the winner of Perplex City.

GI Places: Bethesda

Welcome to our special online edition in which Miller assumes the role of Robin Leach to take you on a guided tour of Bethesda's amazing studio via a photo essay.

ALSO ONLINE THIS MONTH:

Game Informer Online embarks for the unknown: the new and improved E3. Read the latest news about the newest titles at the coolest site. For those of you who missed the meeting, naturally that would be ours...

PLUS:
Check out more screenshots of StarCraft II.
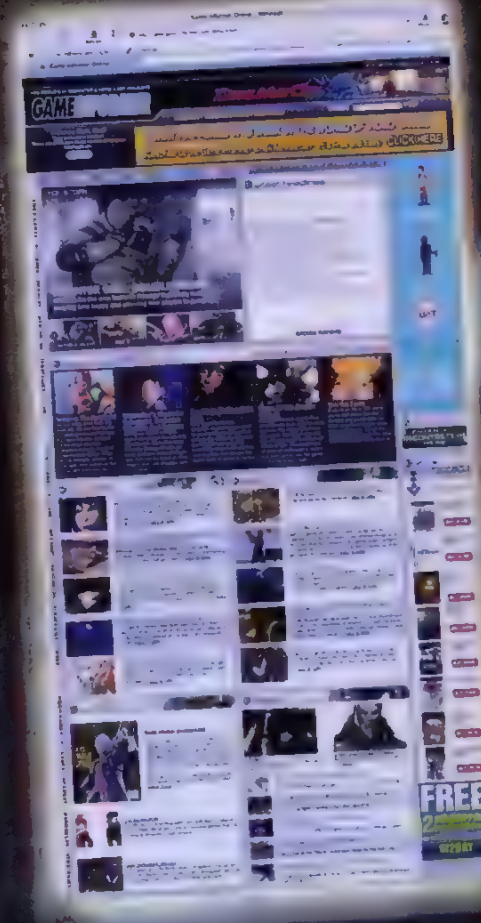
VIDEO GAME TRIVIA

After a long winter of being shut in playing video games, you might feel like you should run outside and get some exercise. Sadly, most of those games you've been playing have ill-prepared you for the dangers of the outside world. Take this quiz and compare your score below to find out which summer persona you'd be wise to avoid this year.

1 Many fans recall Mega Man 2 as one of the high points in the long-running franchise. The little robot hero of the game had a lot of weapons at his disposal in that installment, but which of the following wasn't an option until a later game in the series?

A. Metal Blade
B. Gemini Laser
C. Quick Boomerang
D. Leaf Shield

2 The Guy Game is widely regarded as one of the most complex and intricate interactive entertainment options ever released, but some stores pulled it from their shelves only months after release. Why?

A. Poor sales prompted a recall
B. The disc didn't work in some consoles
C. It was discovered that one of the young ladies in the game had actually been 17 at the time of filming
D. Some art simply isn't understood in its own time

3 The landmark anime series *Robotech* saw a revival in 2002 through a new game in the franchise. The first in the series released for PlayStation 2, Xbox, and GameCube. What was its subtitle?

A. Invasion
B. Crystal Dreams
C. The Macross Saga
D. Battlecry

4 2004 saw the release of Dog's Life, the tale of Jake the irascible dog and the many stories that surround him pooping and peeing throughout the game world. Which of the following was not an area in which Jake could mark his territory?

A. Clarksville
B. Mount Snowball
C. Lake Minniwahwah
D. Boom City
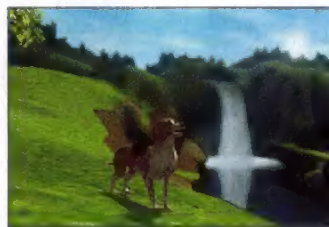
5 You remember You Don't Know Jack, don't you? Which one of these guys wasn't a host of the series at one point or another?

A. Buzz Lippman
B. Steve Stevenson
C. Cookie Masterson
D. Josh "Schmitty" Schmitstinstein

6 2007 marks a big change in the way E3 will be conducted, with a smaller size and more select attendees. What year was the first Electronics Entertainment Expo?

A. 1994
B. 1995
C. 1996
D. 20XX

7 Quake was a big success for id Software after the earlier release of smash-hit Doom. But what development studio made the later installment of the series entitled simply Quake 4?

A. id
B. Square Enix
C. Raven
D. Treyarch

8 Super Mario Bros. 2 had a hard time growing up – it tended to get beat up a lot after school, and it never managed to kiss a girl. But it still had some pretty sweet enemies. Which one of these didn't show up for the first time in that game?

A. Bob-Omb
B. Shy-Guy
C. Tweeter
D. Chain Chomp

9 Crimson Skies: High Road to Revenge was an awesome Xbox game, but its protagonist's moniker didn't exactly inspire one with excitement. What was his name again?

A. Ethan Drake
B. Jack Archer
C. Nathan Zachary
D. Millard Fillmore

10 Have you ever played Beyond Good & Evil?

A. Yes, that game rules!
B. No. I have shamed myself, my father, and my father's father

BREAKDOWN

99.8% of the entries we received for the Infernal caption contest contain one of the following words: "mojo," "viagra," "yoga," or "balltap"
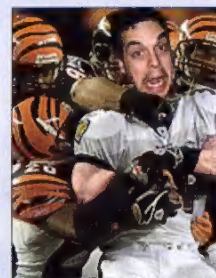
10,000 Slightly fewer than this number of PS3s sold in Japan during one week in May

1.75 Million copies of Pokémon Diamond and Pearl were sold in the U.S. during April

63 unique games were available on Xbox Live Arcade at the time of this writing

7 dwarves are in that one story about Snow White. We thought you should know

★ Trivia Score & Rank ★

0-1:
Madden Quarterback

2-3:
A True Guitar Hero

4-5:
Web-Slinger

6-7:
A Nintendog

8-9:
Burnout Driver

10:
Lara Croft

Video Game Trivia Answers: 1. B 2. C 3. D 4. B 5. B 6. B 7. C 8. D 9. C 10. A

GAME ON

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