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PLAYSTATION 3





CONTENTS

The "Antihero Is The New Hero" Issue



cover story

48 PROTOTYPE

The creative team behind *The Incredible Hulk: Ultimate Destruction* is breaking free of any and all restraints with this massive effort. *Prototype* features a protagonist that puts the Hulk to shame when it comes to leaving a swath of destruction in his wake. Government cover-ups, a sinister viral pandemic, and experiments gone wrong are laid bare here. We couldn't be more proud to bring you the world exclusive first look at this open-world adventure.

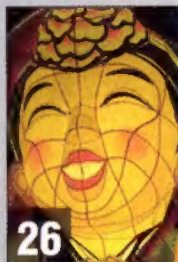
features



DEVELOPERS VS. PUBLISHERS

We got industry insiders to tell us the stories that nobody wants to get out: the dirty dealings and power plays that go on between publishers and developers. Come peek behind the curtain and see the forces that shape your favorite games.

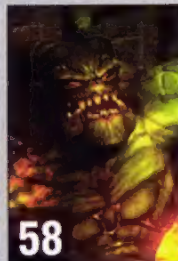
18



GREETINGS FROM KOREA

Join us for this in-depth exposé of gaming culture in Korea. You think video games are hot stuff in your town? You ain't seen nothin' yet. We've got the photos, the interviews, and the experiences to prove it.

26



DARKSIDERS

We've all dreamt about mounting up as a Horseman of the Apocalypse, with all the awesome action that entails. *Darksiders* gives you that opportunity, and combines it with the comic book stylings of famed artist Joe Madureira.

58

game index

GAME	PAGE #
Agency, The	78
Age of Empires III: The Asian Dynasties	86
All-Pro Football 2K8	91
Beowulf	68
Big Brain Academy	97
BioShock	80
Blue Dragon	81
Brain Age 2: More Training in Minutes a Day	87
Conan	84
Condemned 2: Bloodshot	72
Cookie & Cream	102
Darkness, The	90
Destroy All Humans: Path of the Furon	70
Dirt	98
DK: Jungle Climber	86
Dungeon Maker: Hunting Ground	103
Dungeons and Dragons: Tactics	103
Dynasty Warriors: Gundam	87
Fantastic Four: Rise of the Silver Surfer	92
Final Fantasy II Anniversary Edition	103
Geometry Wars: Galaxies	81
GrimGrimoire	96
Guitar Hero Encore: Rocks the '80s	97
Guitar Hero III	82
Halo 2	101
Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix	92
Haze	85
Heavenly Sword	66
Insecticide	79
LEGO Star Wars: The Complete Saga	87
Medal of Honor: Airborne	76
Metroid Prime 3: Corruption	64
NCAA Football 08	93
Need for Speed ProStreet	75
New York Times Crosswords, The	103
Overlord	99
Picross DS	86
Planet Puzzle League	103
Rainbow Six Vegas	94
Shadowrun	100
Shin Megami Tensei: Persona 3	96
Shrek the Third	93
SimCity DS	102
Surf's Up	93
Tales of the World	103
Tenchu Z	99
World in Conflict	74

departments

8 STAFF

Read the team's latest favorites

10 GI SPY

Silly pictures of our life and times

12 DEAR GI

Your chance to fire back at us!

14 CONNECT

Where news, talk, and technology collide

38 INTERVIEW

Gameloft founder (and co-founder of Ubisoft) Michel Guillemot discusses the mobile games industry

42 GEAR

Geeky gadget stuff for the masses

44 OPINION

GI Associate Editor Joe Juba stands up in defense of shorter games

46 CALENDAR

Get hip to this month's happenings

64 PREVIEWS

Remember a little game called *Metroid Prime 3: Corruption*? Or maybe a series that goes by the name *Need for Speed*? How about the legend of *Beowulf*? We have them all, so get on over and read!

88 REVIEWS

Game of the Month: *The Darkness* for PlayStation 3 and Xbox 360

104 CHARTS

Retail Sales Data and the GI editors' Top 10 Games

106 SECRET ACCESS

Codes, strategies, and passwords

108 CLASSIC GI

Reliving gaming's greatest moments

111 ONLINE

See what's happening at Game Informer Online

112 GAME OVER

The end...or is it?

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Jason McCarthy, Construction Job Site Supervisor and Sergeant in the U.S. Army Reserve.
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STAFF

People Who Actually Get Paid To Play Video Games



VIDEO GAMES HAVE TO GROW UP

ANDY McNAMARA
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

I remember the simpler times, when video games were this wonderful new technology that let me play games on my TV. In the beginning it was simple: two paddles and a dot that was volleyed back and forth. No ESRB. No watchdog groups. It was all about gamers making games, and gamers playing them.

Boy, have the times changed. At the time I write this, there will be a giant story on *NBC Dateline* about the American Medical Association's investigation into video games as an addiction. The ESRB has just asked game companies to pull various game trailers off the Internet that don't adhere to previously unheard-of standards. Chalk it up as one of the many challenges that seem to come to the surface daily in the modern day world of video games. The chorus of miscommunication and misunderstanding is a constant that doesn't seem to have an end in sight.

Of course, it's rare that anything that comes to the surface in the mainstream media or Congress or corporate America in general about video games is positive. And sadly, the infancy of the video game industry is most certainly to blame.

No one wants to talk about the good things – the camaraderie that comes from playing games with your friends and loved ones both on and offline, or the improvement in problem solving and dexterity that you attain from navigating video games' numerous challenges. It's about the children we are polluting, or the adult content that is growing a legion of murderous zombies who can't tell the difference between right and wrong.

And there is no end in sight. Xbox 360 will bring Xbox 720, PlayStation 3 will bring PlayStation 4, and Wii will spawn Uss or whatever crazy title Nintendo dreams up. With each step forward in the evolution of gaming technology we will be faced with a new set of problems staring us right in the face unless the industry grows up and starts to show people why gaming is the greatest form of entertainment this planet has seen to date.

For all the headaches and government hearings that gaming brings, I feel that sometimes people forget that gaming also brings joy and entertainment from exploring never-before-seen worlds – or from dodging that speeding bullet, or jumping that building in a single bound. I believe games give people hope, and an escape from the day to day world that grinds forward whether we want it or not.

I'm a gamer and always will be. I just can't wait for the day when that means something positive to the world at large, rather than the counter-culture caricature that everyone seems to currently embrace. Only when we finally get through all the growing pains and obstacles in gaming's path will we finally return to the wonder years of old. Just like music yearns to be just about the music, I dream of a day when gaming is just about the games.

Cheers,

Andy >> andy@gameinformer.com

Handle: The Game Hombre **Expertise:** RPGs, Action/Platform, Driving, First-Person Shooters **Interests:** *Entourage*, Muse, Shellac, Nine Inch Nails, The Current NASCAR Season With Gordon Pwning All **Dislikes:** The Covers In Guitar Hero Rocks The '80s Are Close To Awful And The Game Lacks A Ton Of '80s Music That Could Have Made It Great (Missed Opportunity Activision – Especially With Rock Band Looking So Impressive) **Current Favorite Games:** World Of Warcraft, The Darkness, BioShock



Reiner >> reiner@gameinformer.com

Handle: The Raging Gamer **Expertise:** RPGs, Action, First-Person Shooters, Strategy, Sports, Fighting **Interests:** E3 Predictions (PS3 Price Drop, New Nintendo Handheld, Halo Steals The Show), *Transformers* (I've Been Reenacting This Film In My Backyard For Decades), Hasbro's McQuarrie Concept Star Wars Figures **Dislikes:** Blockbuster Flipping The Bird To HD-DVD Owners, The Plot For *Indiana Jones 4*, The Lack Of Violence Against Cows In Today's Video Games **Current Favorite Games:** The Darkness, Grand Theft Auto IV, BioShock, Forza Motorsport 2, NCAA Football 08, Persona 3, Geometry Wars: Galaxies



Matt >> matt@gameinformer.com

Handle: The Original Gamer **Expertise:** First-Person Shooters, Action/Platform, Action/Adventure, Action/Sports **Interests:** *Across The Great Divide: The Story Of The Band In America* By Barney Hoskyns, Thomas Jefferson Slave Apartments – *Bait & Switch*, *Ocean's 13*, Dairy Queen's New Waffle Crisp Blizzard **Dislikes:** Waffle Crisp Blizzard Dissenters, How Expensive Weights Are, Not Being Able To Get Back On A Decent Sleep Schedule Since Korea **Current Favorite Games:** Brain Age: Train Your Brain In Minutes A Day, Planet Puzzle League, BioShock, Guitar Hero Encore: Rocks The '80s



Kato >> kato@gameinformer.com

Handle: The Game Katana **Expertise:** Sports, Racing, Action/Adventure, Action/Platform **Interests:** "Whipping Post" By The Allman Brothers Band, Ben's Hard-Hitting Journalistic Style To Everyday Conversations – Asking The Tough Questions Like "Is She A Big Woman?", *Viva Hate*, Cheese & Figs, Junior Leaving DEI **Dislikes:** The Anaheim Ducks, Feeling Like You're Living Inside A Giant Xeroxed Cotton Ball, That Joe Likes To Abuse Retail & Other Service Employees, The Growing Power Of Hendrick **Current Favorite Games:** All-Pro Football 2k8, NCAA Football 08, Dirt, SimCity DS



Adam >> adam@gameinformer.com

Handle: The Alpha Gamer **Expertise:** RPGs, Strategy, First-Person Shooters, Fighting **Interests:** *Cryptonomicon* By Neal Stephenson, Chiropractic, Finally Finding A Wii For My Home, Figuring Out Why My Router Was Being Such A Piece, Bicycling, *M-5* **Dislikes:** People Who Don't Bother To Spell-Check Themselves On The Internet (You'd Think I'd Just Let It Slide By Now, But No), Spending Two Hours In Any One Store, Losing Expensive Electronics To Cat Compulsions **Current Favorite Games:** Puzzle Quest, World Of Warcraft, Super Paper Mario, The Legend Of Zelda: Twilight Princess, Baldur's Gate II: Shadows Of Amn



Joe >> joe@gameinformer.com

Handle: The Real American Gamer **Expertise:** RPGs, Adventure, Action, Strategy, Puzzle **Interests:** *Battlestar Galactica* (Why Didn't Anyone Tell Me This Show Was So Awesome?), Super Classy Tuxedo T-Shirts, Saying "I'm Sorry" (Best Lie Ever), The High Brought Low **Dislikes:** TV Shows Pulling The "One Year Later" Cop-Out To Create Conflicts, "Carry Me Home," *DOA: Dead Or Alive* (And I Liked *Ghost Rider*), People Who Think Snake Is A Bad Guy (Pay Attention!) **Current Favorite Games:** BioShock, Blue Dragon, Heavenly Sword, Persona 3, Guitar Hero II, DarkSiders



Miller >> miller@gameinformer.com

Handle: The Once And Future Gamer **Expertise:** RPGs, Action/Adventure, Platform, First-Person Shooters, Music, Puzzle **Interests:** My Unhealthy Obsession With The New Transformers Toys, Painting Mishaps (Why Is My Brother The Color Red?), The Secret Room In The Company Basement (It Will Be Ours!) **Dislikes:** Online Passport Expediting Services, Mowing Grass (Can't You, Like, Stop Growing?), No Parking At The Airport **Current Favorite Games:** Prototype, Pac-Man Championship Edition, Bully, Prince Of Persia Classic, Super Paper Mario



Bertz >> mattbertz@gameinformer.com

Handle: Lord Gaminington III **Expertise:** First-Person Shooters, Sports, Action, RPGs, Strategy **Interests:** *The Flight Of The Conchords*, 9-11 pm Happy Hours, *The Sopranos* Final Episode Backlash (Settle Down You Blood Mongers!), *The Last King Of Scotland* **Dislikes:** Comcast Screwing Everyone With The NFL Network, The Slow IPTV Rollout (Please Save Me From Comcast!), No Draft In All-Pro Football 2k8's Online League Mode **Current Favorite Games:** NCAA Football 08, BioShock, The Darkness, Guitar Hero II



Ben >> ben@gameinformer.com

Handle: Your Friendly Neighborhood Gamer **Expertise:** Action/Adventure, Action/RPGs, Platform, Survival Horror, First-Person Shooters **Interests:** *Stumbling On Happiness* By Daniel Gilbert, Sentences: *The Life Of M.F. Grimm*, My New Plan: To Write A Deadpool Movie, Actioneer – Pirate Auctions **Dislikes:** *Fantastic Four: Rise Of The Silver Surfer* (And That None Of My Friends Wanted To Go See It), The Malt Lady, Trying To Come Up With A List Of Things I Dislike Every Month **Current Favorite Games:** Planet Puzzle League, Forza Motorsport 2, Guitar Hero II, Final Fantasy XII, Quake, Tomb Raider Anniversary



Bryan >> bryan@gameinformer.com

Handle: The Gamer's Advocate **Expertise:** Action/Adventure, RPGs, Survival Horror, First-Person Shooters, Rhythm **Interests:** Skeletons (Ben's Term For Those Extra Clips After Movie Credits), *Beowulf*, *Hard Boiled* **Dislikes:** Strict Public Urination Laws (Man Has Been Free To Go Wherever He Wants For Thousands Of Years, Why Do We Now Have To Find A Fast Food Place Or A Bank To Take Care Of Business When There's A Perfectly Good Patch Of Grass Everywhere?) **Current Favorite Games:** Rock Band, Guitar Hero III, Dirt, Sim City DS, BioShock, Blue Dragon

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PUBLISHER

Cathy Preston

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Andrew McNamara

EDITORS

Executive Editor Andrew Reiner

Senior Editor Matt Helgeson

Senior Associate Editor Matthew Kato

Associate Editors

Adam Biesnesser • Joe Joba • Matt Miller

Ben Reeves • Bryan Vore

Content Manager Matt Bertz

Mascot Arthur

PRODUCTION

Art Director Thomas Blustin

Production Director Curtis Fung

Production Assistant Rachel Nimerfroh

CONTRIBUTORS

Photographer Beth Perkins

Illustrator Adam Elrashidi

GAME INFORMER ONLINE

Managing Online Editor Billy Berghammer

Online Production Assistant Nick Ahrens

Associate Online Editor Jeff Cook

ADVERTISING SALES

MINNEAPOLIS

Rob Born

Associate Publisher

(612) 486-6155 • Fax: (612) 486-6101

rob@gameinformer.com

WEST COAST

Damon Watson

West Coast Advertising Director

(310) 450-3260 • Fax: (310) 450-3571

damon@gameinformer.com

EAST COAST

Suzanne Lang

East Coast Advertising Sales Director

(718) 832-5575 • Fax: (718) 832-5569

suzanne@gameinformer.com

MINNEAPOLIS

Amy Arnold

Advertising Coordinator and Online Sales

(612) 486-6154 • Fax: (612) 486-6101

amy@gameinformer.com

Matt Edgar

Advertising Assistant

(612) 486-6152 • Fax: (612) 486-6101

matte@gameinformer.com

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Circulation Manager

Paul Anderson • (612) 486-6100

Circulation Services

Ted Katzung • (612) 486-6107

ted@gameinformer.com

Information Systems Manager

Paul Hedgpeth

paulhedgpeth@gameinformer.com

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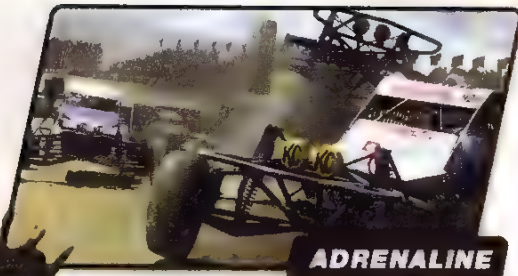
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Candid Photos From The Seedy Underbelly Of The Video Game Industry



1 Joe classes it up in a tuxedo shirt for the benefit of Irrational's Dean Tate and Ken Levine 2 Freelancers Tal Pinchevsky and Jason Buhmester watch as EA Tiburon's Tyrone Miller points an accusing finger at you. You know what you did 3 Microsoft's Adam Kovach can't bear to look upon Ben's juvenile hijinks. Edelman's Tina Yu and Kato maintain a brave face in spite of the shameful shenanigans 4 Jeff approves of Reiner's rad bike skills under the watchful eye of Sierra's Roger Carpenter and Michael Cervin 5 Future rookie of the year and NFL Hall of Fame first-ballot inductee, Vikings running back Adrian Peterson, shows us his game face. Packer fan Billy pooped his pants when he saw this picture 6 Fanball.com mastermind and radio personality Paul Charchian (who hosts Video Games Weekly with Andy McNamara - check KFAN.com for streaming archives) rocks out with a sweet Gears of War custom guitar 7 Billy, in new pants, celebrates his ritual beheading of Master Chief with Microsoft's Genevieve Waldman and Shane Kim 8 Miller and Nick infiltrate Bethesda HQ. From left to right: Emil Pagliarulo, Istvan Pely, Gavin Carter, Erin Losi, and Todd Howard





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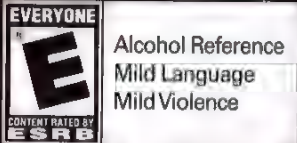
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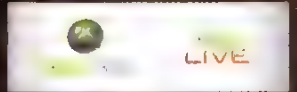
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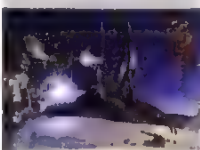
THE QUESTION:
Were you impressed by the Halo 3 beta?

I thought it was great. The gameplay was smooth as ever, the visuals were noticeably improved, and the new weapons were awesome (spike grenade, anyone?) It's too bad there was only one really good map in the beta, though

azaz119

Yeah, it improved many of the major faults in Halo 2 (like the auto-aim), and plays more like Halo CE. The amount of customizable options for custom games is insane. Bungie has really learned from their mistakes

Apocalidiot



Halo 2

I wasn't floored by it, but I am somewhat impressed! I like the new maps and weapons, and I'm really glad they brought back the assault rifle. I couldn't shake the feeling that it was just like Halo 2, though. It just didn't seem different enough.

chaos87

It feels like I'm playing Halo 2 all over again, except with more bloom

Tourney-Tyme

I love it. It takes the best elements from Halo and Halo 2 and combines them to create the most balanced multiplayer I have ever seen. I just wish Bungie released more than three maps.

nebluebat

I personally don't play betas of any kind. I am just going to wait for the game to come out. I would never buy Crackdown just for a beta of Halo 3 when I can play Halo 2.

GameFreak221

Yeah. But where were those unicorns and the triple-wielding they promised us?

AllerEcho09



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

HERO HATER

I know it's late to be complaining about this, but seeing how Guitar Hero has cornered the nation's market on music games, I have to say something. I'm tired of everyone talking to me about how new and awesome Guitar Hero is. GuitarFreaks, the Japanese arcade original, came out in 1998! Harmonix just ripped off the controller. Also, everyone tells me it's the hardest music game ever, but Beatmania IIDX songs clock in at over 1,000 notes per minute with seven buttons and a turntable. Guitar Hero doesn't even track your score right; you either hit a note or you don't, with no way to judge accuracy. Now everyone is getting all excited about this newfangled "Band Hero" game, when GuitarFreaks, Keyboardmania, and DrumMania (other games soon to be ripped off) could all link together back in 2002 – at home or in an arcade. Oh, and you should go online and watch videos of people playing "V" on Beatmania IIDX. It makes "Freebird" look like Pac-Man.

Brendan Der
via hotmail

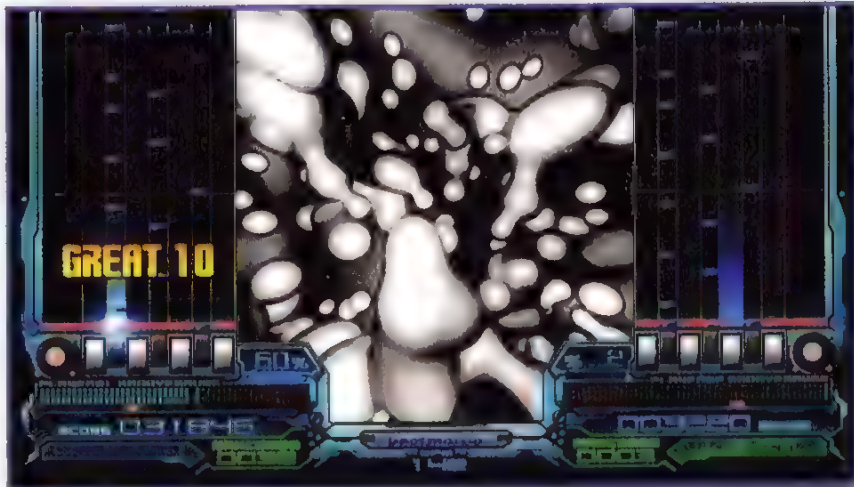
You are correct to point out that several of Guitar Hero's distinguishing features are not totally original, but that doesn't make the game any less worthy of the attention it has received. Being a successful game isn't always about doing something first; sometimes it is more important to do it well. Guitar Hero took the idea of a guitar-like peripheral, put together a track list that's easy to love, and brought it to home consoles to be enjoyed by gamers of all skill levels. This kind of accessibility is really where Guitar Hero shines. Konami's titles like GuitarFreaks and Beatmania may use similar concepts, but they don't have the same pick-up-and-play appeal. They are much better suited for the hardcore rhythm game enthusiast.

THE WAITING GAME

What is up with the big delays in Nintendo development? The company was once the pinnacle of gaming, but even its faithful fans are beginning to criticize its lack of interesting games. Sure, we had Twilight Princess at the launch of the Wii, but large gaps between games like Super Smash Brothers Brawl, Metroid Prime 3, and Super Mario Galaxy only leaves gamers hungry for long periods of time.

Victor Luo
Monterey Park, CA

Interestingly, this problem isn't unique to Nintendo; Sony and Microsoft also have sig-



■ Konami's Beatmania

nificant gaps between the releases of their first-party games. The big difference is that the PS3 and 360 have stronger third-party support right now, so there isn't a noticeable drought. It's okay if you're not playing Halo 3 or Heavenly Sword, since there are games like Dirt and BioShock to tide you over. When the only big games you have to look forward to involve Mario, Link, and Samus, then you are subject to Nintendo's calculated game rationing.

GOOD REPORTING

I recently replayed Hitman: Blood Money, and I noticed that in the post-mission newspaper after

Agent 47's first hit, there is a small article in the bottom left corner. The article reports that two criminals escaped custody in a prison bus crash. One is described as a mercenary involved with a group called "the Seven," and the other is said to be a medicated psychopath. Isn't this a reference to Kane and Lynch? Wasn't Hitman released before that game was even announced?

Charles Prieleau
New Rochelle, NY

Great catch, Charles! Hitman: Blood Money

came out in May 2006, while Kane & Lynch wasn't unveiled until our August 2006 cover. This is the coolest Easter egg we've seen in a long time. If developers can start dropping in-game hints about future projects, gamers may want to start paying more attention to all of those seemingly meaningless bits of information scattered around their virtual worlds.

DOWN IN THE VALLEY

I loved your article on the Uncanny Valley in issue 170. It shed great light on the challenges game developers face when they focus on recreating realistic human figures. I feel as though, at

WE ASKED FOR IT

A couple of issues ago, we asked our readers to send in their best captions to this screenshot. In respect, we should have guessed the kinds of responses a picture of some dude almost touching another dude's crotch would inspire. We learned our lesson. However, as promised, we will feature the five best submissions. As an added bonus, you can also check out the two worst:



TOP FIVE:

"And so the final gate to Oblivion was shut." – Michael Hinte

"I'm not so sure pyrotherapy is going to help this guy." – Bryce Kinney

"Just two more Poe souls and I'll be drinking fairy tears all the way to the bank." – Matt Borges

"The Chadster just painted this endzone." – Eric Woods

"Jack be nimble, Jack be quick, Jack got bent over by my flaming hand trick." – Jorge Ramirez

BOTTOM FIVE:

"Turn your head and cough"

"E.T. phone balls"

"That's what she said!"

"[anything referencing Lindsay Lohan]"

"You've got the touch! You've got the power!"

the very best, graphics on today's consoles are only capable of reaching (not overcoming) the Uncanny Valley. I feel that developers who are more focused on impressing us with their realistic characters may be missing the boat. With future technology's inevitable increase in processing power, and with a lot more effort, characters in games may have the facial animation and AI to truly convince us that they are real, and the Uncanny Valley issues will no longer hold them back. But I don't see it happening in this generation of gaming. For now, the focus should just be creating characters that gamers can empathize with, which can be done with even simple iconic visuals like a Mii.

Jonathan Holmes
Via email

■ **Thanks for the observations, Jonathan. Just because current technology prevents us from seeing virtual characters as completely real doesn't mean that developers should stop trying, though. We can all agree that Gears of War wouldn't have been the same if it had used a Mii version of Marcus Fenix. The key is to find the middle ground where characters are real enough for gamers to connect with, but not disturbingly so. If every game just used LEGO men until developers could create perfect human simulations, we'd have many long years of protagonists smiling vacantly.**

ANOTHER REINER

Ever since your cover story on Grand Theft Auto IV, I have been getting pounded with ICQ messages from people wanting to ask me questions about the game. There certainly seem to be some downsides to the Internet these days; too many people seem to be figuring out how to find a contact for a person without knowing who's behind the name. I don't suppose your executive editor Andrew Reiner would be willing to change his name? I didn't think so. Oh, well. Perhaps I'll just start messing with people when they send me their requests. Better yet, I'll just start handing them your email address so you can filter through all of the broken English that I keep waking up to.

Andrew Reiner
Via email

■ **Whoa! Apparently the GI staff members have doppelgangers! Oh, wait...it's just a normal guy who also happens to be named "Andrew Reiner." Seriously, why would you want to bother this nice man? Our email addresses are right in the magazine! Please use those before resorting to some kind of Internet divination to track us down. You don't want to end up talking to Doppelganger Bryan Vore - he'd just as soon tear your throat out than look at you.**

PREDICTION

How awesome would Pokémon Snap be on the DS?

Michael Maurer
Via yahoo.com

You mean the game where you don't collect Pokémon or battle with them, but just take their pictures? On a scale of awesomeness, that would probably fall somewhere between a monorail-riding game and one about pants-hemming.

READER ART

AUGUST WINNER!

CHIN PONG

It's a game of chance and skill. You can win or lose. It's a game of chance and skill. You can win or lose. It's a game of chance and skill. You can win or lose.

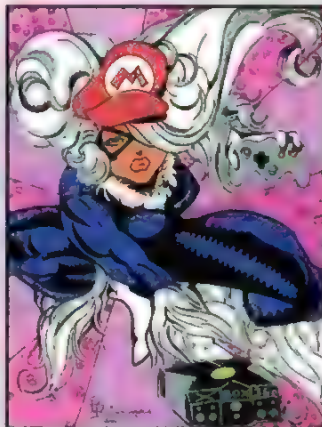
Enter the Game Informer Reader Art Contest. All you need to do is draw, paint, scratch, spit, or carve the best dam art you can think of and send it to us. Please include your name, phone number, and return address. If you're the monthly winner, we'll feature your work in GI and you'll receive a video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

Send to:
Game Informer
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4th Floor
Mpls, MN 55401



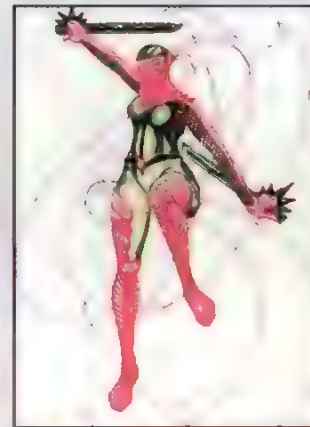
DARRELL FLOYD

If Kratos ever saw this picture of him looking all artsy and thoughtful, he'd be seriously ticked off



PABLO H. RIVAS

It's Black Cat wearing a Mario hat using a Wavebird to play her Xbox with "Xbox 360" written on it. Makes perfect sense



ROBIN BEAUREGARD

Shinobi accidentally threw his white ninja suit in the wash with his reds. Also, his bosom grew



STEVE BARTON

A Locust in the rain. Incidentally, "Locust in the Rain" would be an awesome album title



BARRY H. CHANDLER II

Hold on... none of these agents have dreadlocks? Isn't that, you know, not "extreme" enough?

THE RETURN OF MARATHON

CLASSIC HITS XBOX LIVE ARCADE



You've probably heard a lot about Halo developer Bungie's early title Marathon, and now this seminal Macintosh game from 1992 will be hitting Xbox Live Arcade as a downloadable title for all to enjoy this summer.

The game (at 134MB in size) is being handled by Mac games/apps developer Freeverse, and the studio has been working on the project since last September. This game will be available in both standard and high-definition versions (720p), and will cost 800 points. Apart from Marathon's improved look, Freeverse has built its engine from scratch and thrown in some extra goodies, including Leaderboards and Achievements. All of the Achievements can be earned cooperatively and there is also one viral Achievement. You can even get one if you kill a member of Bungie.net's Seventh Column. Marathon supports eight-player Live, LAN, and splitscreen for all game types, including co-op.

Game Informer talked to project lead and producer Bruce Morrison, who assured us that Freeverse is making Marathon all you remember it to be. "Marathon, to the Mac gamer, is like the Holy Grail, so you gotta treat it right, and I think we do. Old fans of the series will feel right at home."

For more about Marathon, check out our Classic GI article on the series on page 108.

How did resurrecting Marathon come about?

We've been friends with a lot of the Bungie guys for many years, when they were Mac guys. I actually play World of Warcraft with them and that's how it all started. I was in a WoW game with the community leader, and I said, "You guys should really do a Live Arcade game." And he said, "Well, we'd like to do Marathon, but we don't have time," so I said, "We'd do it!"

The game obviously looks improved. What kinds of tweaks have you guys been making?

Tons of tweaks. We didn't want to just bring it to Live as some of the ports have happened. We wanted to give it a true experience. Lots of small things. For instance, we constantly run at 60 frames per second. The original game ran at 30. So we had to rewire all the internal logic to work at 60 fps. We offer 720p widescreen. We redesigned the in-game HUD to take advantage of this, so the original game actually hid part of the screen so we opened that back up. You can look up and down a little [more] and it doesn't distort because of the widescreen viewing angle. We've redrawn every graphic in the game in full color, full [resolution]. We're not just scaling it up; it's brand-new artwork. We mapped the controls so it all makes sense, removing the controls that were very Mac-centric and putting in 360-specific items.

Is there anything you had to make concessions on?

There's only one thing we had to cut out, and that's film support. We couldn't do full film support because you only get like 10MB of user space for each profile, so we couldn't really guarantee the film space, and I think this is what Bungie is going through with Halo 3. We came up with a brand-new networking layer and it doesn't work with films.

Would you guys do the other Marathon games?

We would. The early design docs we toyed around with putting Infinity inside of this one, but then we realized that it would not be as fun as if Infinity was its own game. We would like to do it. I think a lot of it comes down to, "Is there room for it on Live? Are people really accepting to it?" So if they are, we're really game for it.





■ Marathon producer Bruce Morrison says the team ported the game's original engine and rewrote extensively to bring the classic title up to date

DATA FILE

More News You Can Use

CARMACK ALL FOR MAC

At Apple's Worldwide Developer Conference, id Software's John Carmack showed off his new id Tech 5 engine with a demo for an upcoming next-gen, PC – and yes, Mac – game. The demo showed off a detailed outdoor race track that Carmack said featured 20GB of textures. More demos are scheduled for E3 and QuakeCon.



MICROSOFT SUES IMMERSION

What goes around, comes around. Microsoft is suing rumble technology company Immersion for what Microsoft claims is a failure to pay on "certain business and IP licensing agreements." In 2002, Immersion originally sued both Microsoft and Sony for millions in a settlement over rumble technology in the Xbox and PlayStation 2 controllers.

CONTRA CONTINUED

Konami is bringing the acclaimed Contra series to the Nintendo DS. Contra 4 is being developed by WayForward Technologies and will appear on the handheld at the end of the year.



THE LITTLEST ASSASSIN

A retail listing for Assassin's Creed on the Nintendo DS has appeared, with an apparent price tag of \$29.99. Producer Jade Raymond has said that Ubisoft has envisioned the franchise on all sorts of media and formats, and this is consistent with Ubisoft's usual treatment of its franchises.



NEW COMPANY OF HEROES FORMED

Three members of Relic Entertainment (Company of Heroes) have banded together and formed their own development studio – Smolung Gun Interactive. The trio has declared to "push the envelope and redefine the art of gaming," but no projects have been announced just yet.



BRASH MOVES ON MOVIES

NEW PUBLISHER STOCKED WITH TALENT

New publisher on the block Brash Entertainment has opened its doors with a stable of writers, creative directors, and producers that have worked on titles such as God of War, Gran Turismo 4, Medal of Honor, Star Wars: Battlefront, and more. But what is remarkable about Brash is its approach to publishing. In a time when movie-based games are derided, Brash is taking them head on.

The publisher has lined up \$400 million and is focusing its resources on movie, television, and music properties. The company aims to be the link between Hollywood and developers, and has already inked deals with the five major film studios. "We open the door with the creative talent that's coming out of Hollywood that knows how to tell stories," says president and COO Nicholas Longano.

Brash says it currently has more than 40 licenses and a dozen projects lined up, and has already announced it is publishing multiple games based on the horror movie Saw. We talked to Longano about Brash's move into video game publishing.



■ Brash Entertainment president and COO Nicholas Longano

Tell us about how Brash started.

We struck the idea of a video game publisher who really specialized in bringing to life theatrical-based properties. No one really specializes in it. It's considered an afterthought for most publishers, so we felt that we could really carve out a really strong niche in the marketplace.

You've already partnered with the major movie studios. Was it difficult getting them on board?

It's not as if we were putting together a true start-up, per se. Sixty percent of our team is production, and every single one of those producers have not only been involved in triple-A video game development, but has been involved in video games that are based on theatrical releases such as *Chronicles of Riddick*, *The Thing*, *Hulk*. So, I think as far as credibility was concerned, we went into this with industry veterans, and we knew most of the studio individuals from the licensing group, so the comfort level was there from the onset. They also happen to like the idea – because it's their own idea – that you go out and find the best development team that's suited to develop a particular property [instead of a publisher just assigning a game to an internal studio].

We hear a lot from developers that the one thing they don't have when making movie games is time, and that this negatively affects the titles they make. How will a Brash-published game be able to ensure quality in the face of movie-enforced deadlines?

Under a traditional publishing model, that's usually the case, but because of the way we're set up, our development schedules are a lot tighter than traditional publishers. But that doesn't mean we're spending less time or less focus on these games. We have games on our slate that go out until 2010. So we've been able to go out there and talk to the studios and really identify which titles in their portfolio can best be translated to video games two years out, three years out.

But also, because of the way we're set up, and because we're only working with teams that are very much familiar with a particular type of genre, game, and audience, and who are already having the capability in technology and on platforms, there's very little – if any – learning curve when a licensor is dealing with Brash. So there's no second-guessing when you're wondering if they can deliver on time, and you automatically save yourself five or six months because you

have a team sitting around trying to figure something out. One of the fundamental things for our company is "zero learning curve."

Many gamers would argue that we don't need more licensed games; we need more original titles. What do you say to the argument that movie games don't need funding, original IPs do?

Well, I think there are two parts to that equation. First and foremost, the dollars we spend on those studios to develop our licensed properties are enabling them to go off and develop their own projects on the side as well. It's funding the studios – that's the most important element. The second part to that question is, I think that the reason people are looking for original content is exactly to your point: in the past, historically, they've been more fun. They've been more innovative. But if you bring back the fun and innovation to licensed properties, what's the difference? At the end of the day, you spend \$59 dollars to get a great experience.

You currently have 40 licenses and a dozen games in production. What's the distribution of those titles among your developers?

It's spread out over half a dozen developers. And that is predicated on slate deals we do with development teams. We take in consideration their com-

petencies, so there might be a title in development with one team because they have experience on the 360 or the PS3, and there's another team that has handheld experience that might be working on the same project as well.

Will there be a mix of genres and demographics that your games cover?

We're building a portfolio. With any portfolio you want to be diverse in your approach. There are certain genres we'll have a focus on over others, and there are certain genres we just won't get into, but it's going to be right across the board in terms of demographics. I think we have to get away from a niche approach while not losing quality.

Your focus is clearly movie-related titles. Do you have plans for original IPs in the future?

Sure. That's not something we rule out.



THE OFFICIAL EXPANSION PACK OF MEDIEVAL II: TOTAL WAR



MEDIEVAL II TOTAL WAR KINGDOMS AUGUST 2007



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**Developers
vs...?**

Publishers



Elrashi '07

Art by Adam Elrashi

THE TIES THAT DIVIDE

“The worst part of this business is that publishers think developers are out to screw them and developers think publishers are out to screw them.” Paranoia. Power. Money. These are all common themes in game development. Unfortunately, they take away from everyone’s primary goal: making a good game. Game Informer talked to people on both sides of the equation – some who could only do so anonymously – to shed light on the behind-the-scenes battles that go on in game development between publishers and developers, and to discuss how this traditionally at-odds relationship can be fixed for the betterment of the games that we play.

On the face of it, the relationship between developers and publishers is simple: Publishers give developers an advance payment and the promise of back-end royalties to create a game, with payments doled out at agreed-upon milestones as the project progresses. These milestones, which vary in length, could involve anything from demonstrating how an in-game feature might work (even if it lacks any AI, art, etc.) to providing a playable preview build for a press demonstration.

In practice, while milestones are important in guiding development, mapping out years’ worth of work is a fool’s errand. “I’ve never worked on a project where from the beginning to the end, we knew what the product was we wanted, and at the end sat back and said, ‘That’s exactly the product we started to create,’” says producer on the publisher’s side Pete Wanat. Not only are features being added

and dropped, but technology is changing and a host of problems can derail the project from day to day. Unfortunately, s— happens – and that’s also the moment it hits the fan, because if you don’t deliver on a milestone you don’t get paid.

Developers’ need for cash from publishers puts them in desperate situations. It can cause them to sell off the rights of the intellectual property they’ve created to the publisher, accept bad royalty rates, or be bought out by publishers (where autonomy is exchanged for survival). Often, financial demands create a situation ripe for bad choices. Multiple developers told us that studios often take projects that they know they can’t finish simply to get money from a publisher. They gamble that the publisher will give them more time – even if the publisher doesn’t like the game – because of the money already invested. This only leads to bad games and mistrust.

Developers’ monetary demands also lead to bad competition between developers, since publishers often look for a studio to make a game that fills a certain need in the publishers’ portfolio. In this case, external developers might have to outbid each other for a project – one which they might know they can’t fulfill to expectation – and as the fee for work gets lower and lower, so does the promise of quality. One anonymous developer we talked to thinks that under certain circumstances made-to-order titles are bad for the industry. “There is a little secret society in every publisher that says, ‘Here is a game we’re going to do. We’re trying to hit a marketing window, and we don’t care how bad it is. We’re just trying to sell to those people.’ I believe that these destroy our industry.”

Is Game Development A Cooperative Or Competitive Game?

66

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Money is the root of all evil. Said one developer, "Someone once told me the Golden Rule really is, 'The guy with the gold makes the rules.'" Scott Miller, 3D Realms co-founder, states it just as plainly. "The dirty secret is: Publishers control developers through payments. Rockstar was paying Human Head so late on the milestones payments [in the early days of Prey] that 3D Realms was jumping in to help Human Head because they had payroll to meet. [Rockstar] even said to us, '[You're] taking over the control [we] have over developers.' Nasty stuff like that happens all the time." For its part, 3D Realms is helping its fellow developers by offering creative and financial assistance on projects.

Naturally, the money that publishers pour into a project entitles them to have some say. These suggestions can run the gamut of good, bad, and ugly. "When Prey was being developed early on it was actually a Rockstar-label game," explains Miller. "At the time, Metroid Prime was going to be released, and they had the whole visor thing, and this producer [from Rockstar] said, 'Well, the visor is going to be a big thing for Metroid, and we should have a visor for Prey.' And it didn't fit anything to do with the game at all. So it ended up where we were rejecting all these crazy ideas, and for that reason along with some others, Rockstar ended up dropping the game because we were too hard to work with."

The headaches that developers have to put up with involving money, creativity, control, and time, the publishers have in the form of risking millions and millions of dollars. While we've illustrated how developers can be hamstrung by the milestone process, this common form of development doesn't help publishers either. They have to commit a large sum of money up front to a project that everyone knows might not be any good, has too short a schedule to being with, or could change substantially by the time it releases. It's like paying several million dollars for a single lottery ticket.

Sometimes publishers' fears are wholly justified. Wanat told us a horror story — which he says happens all the time — of a developer who took the money from a publisher for a project. Unfortunately, little progress was being made on it. Suspicious, Wanat investigated and discovered that the developer was letting his game idle while it was using the publisher's money to fund a secret project it was working on all along. It wasn't until Wanat sent out an associate producer to literally oversee day-to-day operations (through a series of surprise visits) that work was completed on Wanat's project.

At this year's GDC Burning Mad rant session, Lee Jacobson, vice president of business acquisitions at Midway Games, told the crowd of developers some of his own experiences. One tale involved a studio head that kept \$300,000 in milestone money for himself and then told his own employees that Midway never sent it. Jacobson also told a story of a visit to a developer who said it had devoted two teams to his project. Jacobson met the first team and then went to lunch. When he came back to meet the second one, he realized that it was made up of a bunch of members from the first team who were pretending to be different people by wearing different clothes.

Publishers' worries about developers are reflective of their need to focus on the bottom line. Plenty of publishers are publicly traded companies, and are therefore beholden to the people who own their stock — people who demand consistent profit growth. The vicious circle of needing to sell more and more copies — not only to pay back the initial advance the developer was given, but to placate shareholders — is strong. Mike Wilson, CEO of publisher Gamecock, says it's a never-ending trap. "They have to perpetually show growing profits to their shareholders, and to do that they have to sell more games. No amount of profit will ever be enough."

The pressure of meeting a release date — right or wrong — leads everyone to some very unfortunate situations. If it's a movie-based game, you can't miss the film's launch, and there's also more than just the development schedule to worry about. "Nobody ever wants to push out a release date," says Wanat. "People get pissed. You are not making a game in a vacuum." Publishers' strengths are providing marketing, sales, PR, and distribution/retail support for developers, and these usually start working on the behalf of a title a year out. Wanat says delays at this stage are "somewhat" acceptable, but when it happens six or three months out, that's when a serious ripple effect occurs that places the work the publisher puts in at risk.

While every game would benefit from shipping only when it's ready, there are times when push comes to shove and the game gets burned out the door. Titles that are sent out prematurely or are running late often skimp on bug-testing and other quality assurance practices that occur later in development. "The money people are like, '[Quality Assurance] doesn't make us any money,'" explains one producer. "Shipping this game and selling it to people makes us money. [Developers] being happy after the fact doesn't make us money." Many developers told us this stage is crucial because it's when a game comes together and gets polish — which often separates the good titles from the bad.

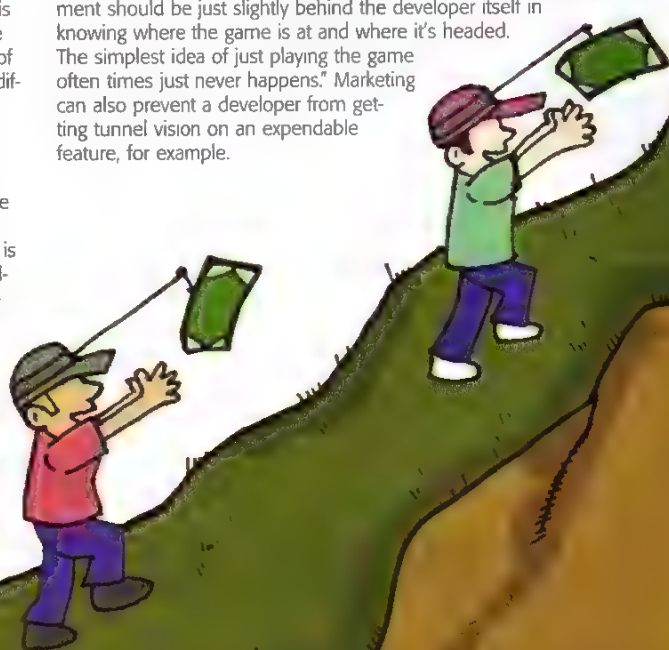
One developer we spoke to said they once had to intentionally sabotage their own product as it was about to be released to gain valuable Q.A. time. The title had major problems, but the publisher didn't care. Knowing that the game was about to ship out to stores and that there was no time for a proper fix, the developer submitted the final version of the title and inserted a game-halting bug that forced the publisher to give the developer more time to solve the original issues.

One of the keys to solving these fundamental development problems and creating an environment between publisher and developer that is less acrimonious and conducive to great games is thankfully simple: communication. Communication replaces fear and paranoia with understanding, trust, and respect. To a person, the developers we talked to felt that the more both sides knew about the other the better. Liquid Entertainment's Ed Del Castillo says that the situation is improving as more people from the development side go over to publishing, allowing a better understanding of what goes on. "I wish there was a publisher/developer exchange program," he told us. "The guys at Codemasters were in development before. They get it."

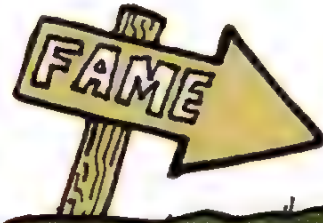
Better communication can make stressful situations like the milestone process a little easier. It allows developers to be more honest about deadlines and the ability to become more creative with their ideas because the publisher trusts the developer's vision, has a better understanding of how to achieve it, and is more flexible in how to make it happen. On the flip side, developers would understand the business realities the publisher faces. A closer relationship like this already exists between good publishers and developers, as well as between publishers and their internal studios, where the publisher isn't treated as just a bank, but a partner.

Part of this communication has to include working with the publisher's marketing department as soon as possible. In this way, a developer can sell the marketing professionals their vision of the game so they can turn around and sell it to others. "A lot of people are like, 'We need to hide from big, bad marketing.' Bulls—, Marketing's a part of the process. Rope them in early if you want them to be great," observes Wanat.

Gamecock's Mike Wilson is in total agreement. "A marketing department should be just slightly behind the developer itself in knowing where the game is at and where it's headed. The simplest idea of just playing the game often times just never happens." Marketing can also prevent a developer from getting tunnel vision on an expendable feature, for example.



“Those that can't do, publish”



Developer Clinton Keith is a proponent of an iterative game development method known as "Scrum," which, in his opinion, fosters better communication and changes the typical development cycle entirely. Scrum focuses on creating playable, full-featured game releases from the beginning. This is in contrast to traditional development, where all the moving parts aren't interacting with each other until near the end. Scrum allows publishers to see a more fleshed-out version of a game earlier (and thus mitigate risk), and offers flexibility to a developer. Instead of trying to decide what a game is on paper at the beginning of the cycle and adhering to that throughout development, Scrum aims to let the game itself show where it needs to go.

Keith says that Scrum is a revolution that actually occurred a long time ago – with Nintendo. "I've worked first-party with Nintendo, and they refuse to read anything you send them. We worked with Miyamoto at Angel Studios, and he would just show up once every three months and look over your shoulder and give you a couple poorly pronounced English sentences, but it was really pure wisdom. Basically, they'd pay you for another three months and then go away. A lot of times, he'd say, 'Find the fun.' And so, that kind of became our motto."

Why doesn't everyone use Scrum? Like any process, it's simply not for everyone. Ironically, failure is a huge part of the method, because if you can't execute it, Keith says you'll find out right away. First of all, it's better to find out your game's not fun early on and not a couple months before its release. "By failing fast on an idea you can preserve the relationship [with a publisher] rather than someone being upset about losing eight million dollars. Maybe half a million dollars was spent with a small team prototyping an idea and proving themselves, and they can go onto a different idea, preserve the relationship and not lose that much money."

Of course, if a developer didn't have to rely on a publisher's money in the first place, then many of their problems would solve themselves. Developers could take their time making a game since milestones wouldn't be as important. BioWare and Pandemic used cash from venture capitalists Elevation Partners to fuse into one big super studio, while Brash Entertainment is entering the industry with capital from equity firms (see page 16 for more). There doesn't seem to be any one golden road to financial independence, but right now there is a lot of outside money trying to find its way into the game industry.

Another possible route is to change the advance-against-royalties model. With more evenly dispersed payments, developers wouldn't have to worry about not getting money after a project ships because there are no royalties – which is already common, as many games don't turn a profit as it is. Not having to worry about there being no light at the end of the tunnel creates incentive for studios, stability, and less of a feast-or-famine situation.

Method Games' Michael John, who was the lead design on PSP's *Daxter* (working with Ready at Dawn) says that change can also happen on the individual level. John advocates that more developers become free agents like him, selling their experience and skills to studios on a project-to-project basis. This would mean that studios wouldn't have to spend their money reserves to retain valued employees between projects when the publisher milestone money is not coming in.

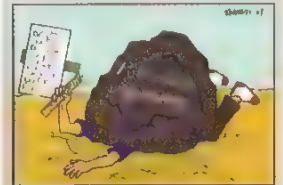
With studios being able to operate on lower overhead costs at the beginning of a project (adding free agents as they need), publishers won't have to risk such an initial investment to jumpstart a project. "People say, 'Publishers never take risks,'" explains John. "Well, you know what? That's because you're giving them a really, really bad bet." For their part, individual developers like John can pick and choose the projects they want to work on and avoid the office politics. John has already signed on for *God of War: Chains of Olympus* for the PSP.

The future of game development has to look different than it does today. In fact, major change is already happening. Publishers and developers are refining their methods to remove the pitfalls and paranoia of the process and trying to ensure that the games we play are fun. And as Wanat succinctly puts it, "That's the only litmus test that I give a s— about." ■■■

THAT JOKE ISN'T FUNNY ANYMORE



Licenses are the great four-letter word of video games. They often create rushed development schedules (to coincide with a movie's release, for example), which cause them to be bad. Industry insiders tell us that with movie licenses in particular, good sales don't even correlate with a good game, they simply mean that people like the movie. However, with more collaboration between developers and filmmakers from the start of a project, and as respect for video games increases licensed games are slowly improving.



Publishers making creative demands on developers is such a fact of life that not one person in the industry we talked to even disputed it. The question becomes: What is good advice and what is bad advice? Producer Pete Wanat says "it's good to want things," but it's up to him to take a stand. "No. No matter how bad you want a mine cart rail level, we're not going to put it in." On the other hand, developers have to rely on a publisher's strength – its marketing department – not to jump off into the deep end and put time and effort into features that aren't important.



The current money-for-milestones structure has some developers living check to check, but this way of doing business isn't good for the publisher, either. "People need constant reality checks to see if a relationship is working or not," says Liquid Entertainment's Ed del Castillo. "Sometimes you have unscrupulous developers who will take advantage of a situation and under deliver again and again." Whether it's a developer taking an advance and literally running away with it or a publisher not being able to see the woods for the trees and causing a studio to work on a schedule that's too short, more developer financial stability eases the milestone structure for everyone's benefit.



ELVASHIDI '07

To read more about what some of the publishers and developers we talked to had to say on this topic, head over to Game Informer Online's Unlimited section

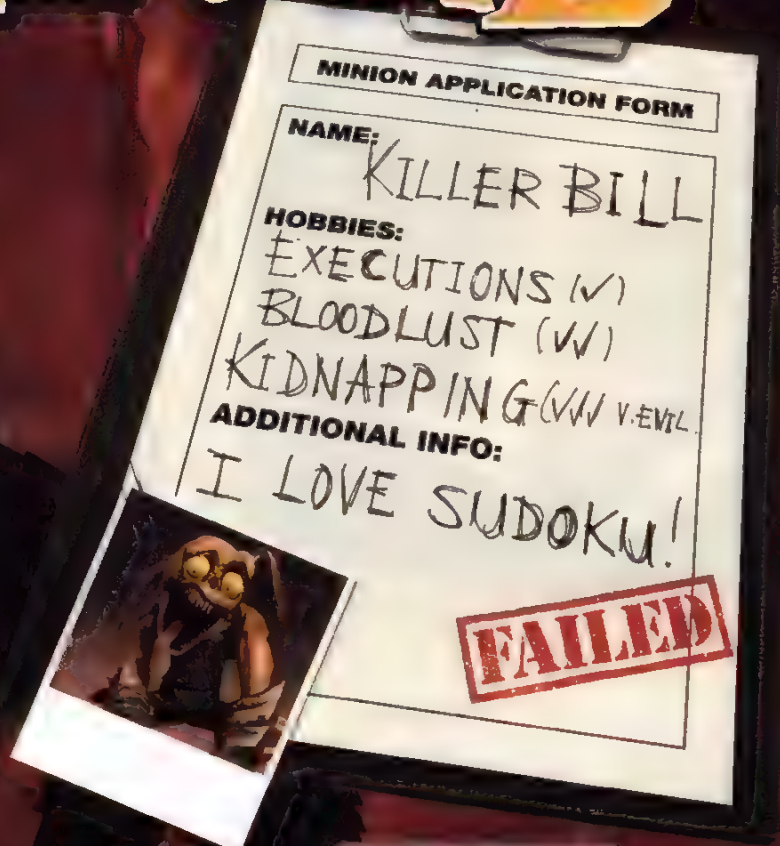
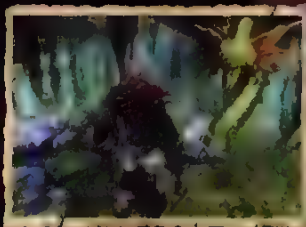
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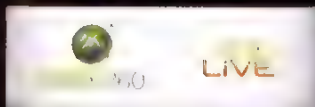


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David Briers

Lord of the Guitar Heroes

Handle:
wuLFe79

Age:
27

Hometown:
Richmond,
Indiana

Rivals:
le b3nzor
ParadigmShift89
lamchris4life
Kov
GetThere1Time
PriestREA

Game Informer is 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.



■ At the time of this printing, Briers is the best in the world at the following tracks:

- "Arterial Black"
- "Carry on Wayward Son"
- "Fall of Pangea"
- "Gemini"
- "Hangar 18"
- "Jessica"
- "Kicked to the Curb"
- "Laid To Rest"
- "Mother"
- "Push Push (Lady Lightning)"
- "Rock and Roll Hoochie Koo"
- "Rock This Town"
- "The Trooper"
- "Them Bones"
- "Thunderhorse"
- "War Pigs"
- "YYZ"

Accomplishments:

Number one total career score on the Guitar Hero II Xbox Live leaderboards. Currently the top player on 17 songs and is in the top 10 on most of the rest.

Life Outside of Guitar Hero:

Briers was born and raised in Port Elizabeth, South Africa, and moved to the U.S. to pursue job opportunities in computer programming and web development. He's also classically trained to rock your socks off in both guitar and piano.

Origin of Skills:

"I was one of the sad people who got [Guitar Hero I] pretty much the day it was released and played it for about six months obsessively, and then put it down having five-starred everything on Expert," Briers says. "I wasn't really ever thinking I'd pick it up again, but I ended up playing in a tournament at GenCon in Indianapolis. I won the tournament fairly decisively, so I figured that I might as well start playing again."

Favorite Tracks:

YYZ, Laid to Rest, Hanger 18

Biggest Thorn in His Side:

"I've still got a good 100,000 points that I can get from Misirlou alone, which is my weakest song by a substantial margin," Briers says.

The Key to Leveraging Star Power:

Briers explains, "When a new game comes out, the only way to do it is to play through the song a few times, find out where the star power sections are, and figure out where you're going to hit the most notes and not overlap another star power. [It's] trial and error. Eventually, when people have figured out what works best, they post that information on ScoreHero.com."

Practice Time:

"When [Guitar Hero II] came out I took a day off work and played for 17 hours, which is a little sad," Briers says. Now he averages three to four hours every weeknight, but takes the weekends off to head out of town.

Blowing It:

"I can still recall on the 360 I was playing through all of the songs the first time around and on "Bad Reputation" I got everything, including the insanely quick solo, and then I missed the very last note. I was just mortified," Briers says.

Guitar Hero 2 YYZ Expert 100%



■ Search "wulfe" on YouTube to watch David Briers own over 30 songs

What's So Great About Guitar Hero?

"For me it's definitely not the sense of rocking out," Briers says. "I have a very musical background and what I love about guitar hero is it tests your rhythm, but it scores you. It's nice to have an objective criteria of how well you're playing your 'instrument.'"

Other Games:

"I've tried Beatmania, but it's so... I didn't like the learning curve on that. I specifically did not enjoy the song choices they made," Briers says. "I've seen videos of some of the top Beatmania players and it makes mine and my friends' Guitar Hero accomplishments look fairly mundane in comparison [laughs]."

Guitar Hero accomplishments look fairly mundane in comparison [laughs].
Non-music favorites include World of Warcraft and Half-Life 2.

What Songs Should Be in the New Guitar Games?

Briers would love to see songs from groups like Immortal and Opeth, his favorite band. "I'd also like to see an actually black metal song since they have the character Lars, who is a black metal creation, but they don't have any songs for him to play, frankly." ■ ■ ■



A close-up, high-contrast photograph of a Marine's face. He is wearing a dark uniform with a white service cap. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting the texture of his skin and the intensity of his gaze. The background is dark and indistinct.

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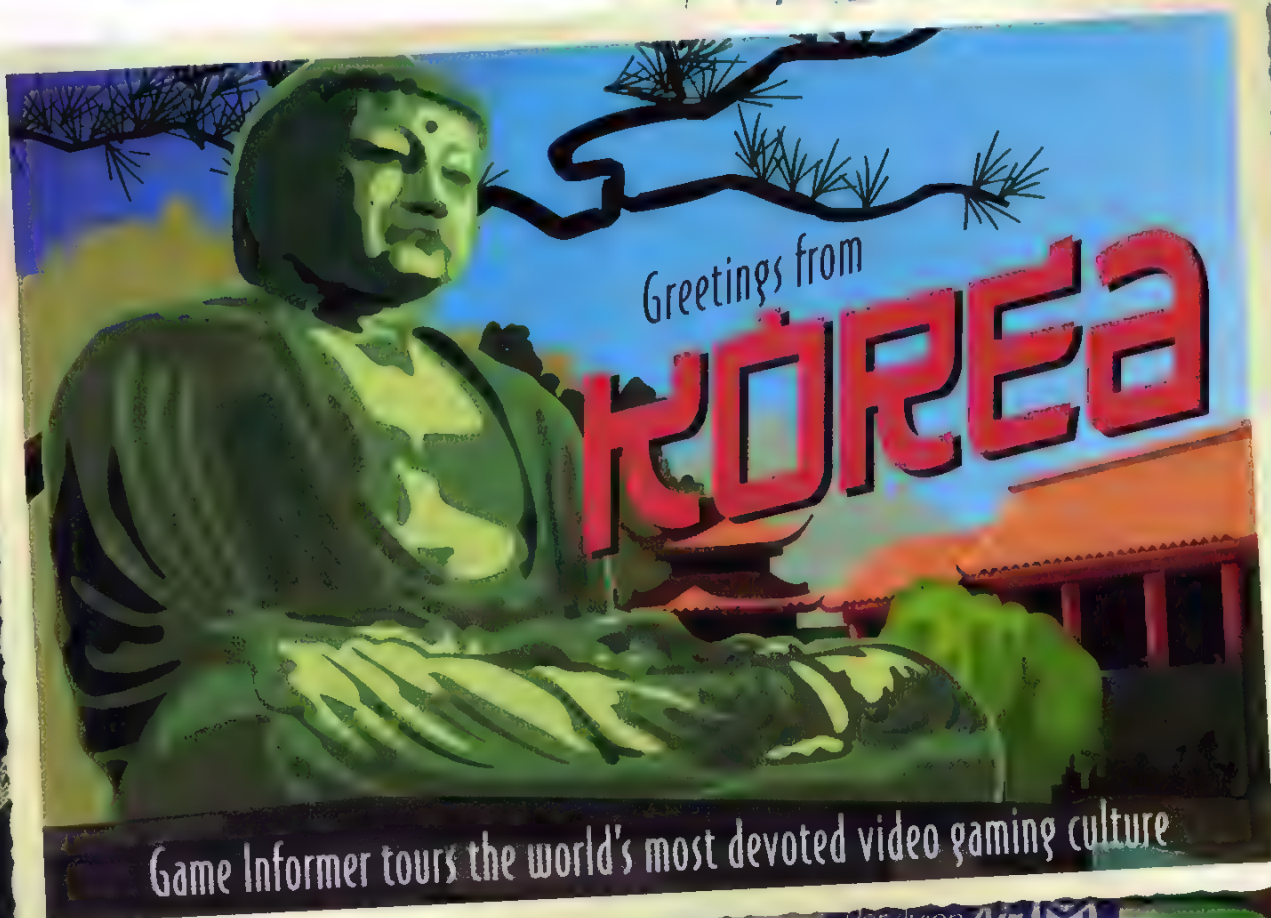
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While our shuttle bus works its way through the crowded streets of Seoul, Donna Fargo's saccharine 1972 country hit "The Happiest Girl in the Whole U.S.A." warbles out of our driver's cassette player. As Donna sings "Shine on me sunshine, walk with me world, it's a skippity-do-dah day" against a background of enormous block apartment buildings and Lotte World (perhaps the world's most imposing shopping mall), it's not hard to imagine that we've been somehow transported into a poorly scripted knockoff of "Lost in Translation."

(continued below)

Game Informer
 724 N. First St. 4th Fl
 Minneapolis, MN 55401
 USA

Our destination is Seoul's Olympic Park, the sprawling grounds built to host the 1988 Summer Games. The '88 Olympics were a major event in Korean history, envisioned as a coming-out party for the rapidly modernizing nation. As it happened, political unrest surrounding the games resulted in South Korea's transformation from a military dictatorship to a democratic republic. So it's appropriate that the Olympic Park is now playing host to

an event that typifies the new South Korea, a sporting festival of a very different kind. The 2007 Blizzard Worldwide Invitational, held in two large former Olympic stadiums, is an event that celebrates the very special bond shared between one of America's most respected development houses and the world's most devoted fans of video games. Over the two days of the event, more than 60,000 gamers patiently wait in line to watch professional gaming

competitions, participate in open tournaments, and – most importantly – witness the first public showing of StarCraft II, the sequel to the game that helped kick Korea’s gaming market into overdrive nearly 10 years ago.

Standing in the Olympic Gymnastics stadium, it’s quickly apparent that the debut of StarCraft II will be quite unlike anything we’ve ever seen before. A crowd of around 10,000 has filled the arena, and is politely sitting through endless loops of footage from World of Warcraft playing on the giant screens above and to the side of the stage. The elaborate staging and light rigs looks like they should be playing host to a rock concert rather than a game announcement, which in the U.S. are more frequently conducted in a conference room filled with a handful of journalists.

As TV crews record the event for posterity, the crowd cheers while several of Blizzard’s best-known executives and developers are introduced (later in the weekend, Blizzard autograph signings are mobbed with fans). A few pro gamers who will compete in the tournaments come onstage under a hail of pyrotechnics to take a pledge of sportsmanship. Soon came the main event, a real-time demo of StarCraft II, which was met with enthusiastic applause by the assembled crowd. Wrapping up the opening ceremonies were concerts by Korean pop stars Lee Hyolee (essentially the Korean version of a pre-insanity Britney Spears), B-Boy Maximum Crew (a breakdancing/hip-hop group), and Super Junior (a 13-member boy band), who lip-synched their hits to deafening shrieks from the younger attendees.

Over the course of the next two days, we’d see evidence of Korea’s love of gaming at every turn. Long lines of gamers wait to buy Blizzard merchandise. Rapt crowds watch every move of the StarCraft and Warcraft III matches taking place throughout the day. Contest winners go for rides in a giant World of Warcraft hot air balloon. Basically, it’s a two-day E3 convention held for three games, the most popular of which was released in 1998. No, we’re not in Kansas anymore.



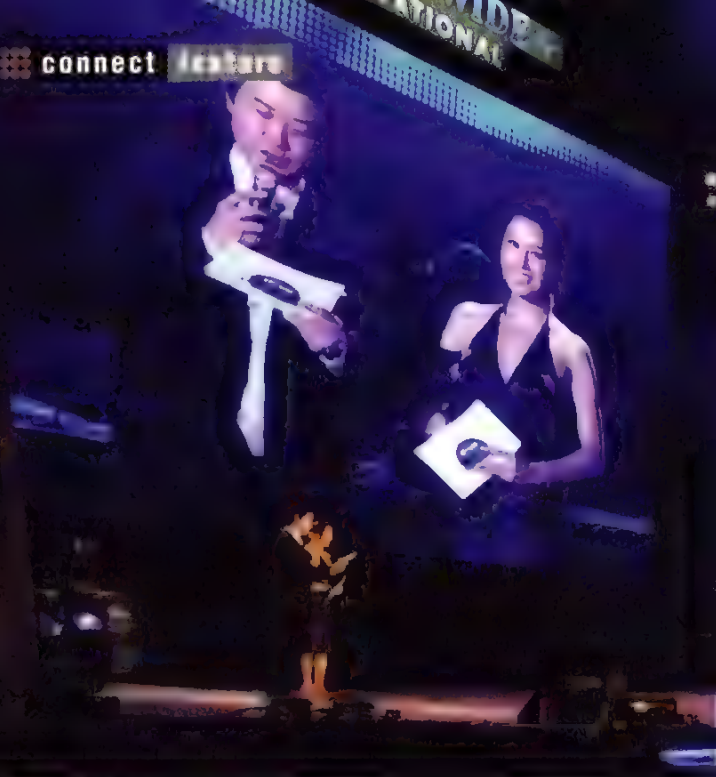
■ (Left) The Olympic Gymnastics Stadium was home to the 2007 Blizzard World Wide Invitational (Above) Scenes from a Buddhist Temple in Seoul

■ Over 60,000 gamers attended the Invitational over the two days of the show (Bottom Left) Complex borten art is a Korean tradition



■ Some lucky gamers get a ride on a WoW hot air balloon





Here's a scene from the opening ceremonies. (Inset) Blizzard Korea's head, Jungwon Hahn, welcomes the crowd to the Invitational. (Below) Lee Hyelae performs, plus cosplay contest finalists.



The National Pastime

While the scale of the Worldwide Invitational is impressive, the thing that struck us most during the week we spent in Seoul is just how intertwined video games are into the everyday life of Koreans. As successful and beloved as video games have become in Japan, Europe, and the U.S., the level of mass acceptance that they have achieved in Korea is unprecedented.

"Now it's like the movie industry," observes NCsoft PR manager Min Jisun. "We don't ask, 'Do you go to movies?' we just ask, 'What kind of movies do you like?' The question used to be 'Do you play online games?' back in the 1990s – but now we ask 'What kind of games do you enjoy?' We assume now. It's one of the leisure [activities] of our culture."

A small but telling example of this phenomenon occurred when we ate dinner at a basement restaurant in Seoul, one of the thousands of similar establishments that litter the labyrinthine alleys that cut through the city's larger blocks. Our host Rudy, a gracious man in his mid-50s who has owned the restaurant for years, sat with us as we ate, explaining the menu and the traditional Korean dishes we were sampling. During the course of our conversation, he asked us why we were in Seoul, and we replied that we had been at the Olympic grounds. Instantly, Rudy lit up, interjecting – "Ah, StarCraft III!" adding, "I wish I could have gone." We asked if he played StarCraft and he said, "Not so much anymore. I used to...I'm not very good anymore."

Listening to him, it's easy to imagine a man of similar age in the U.S. lamenting the state of his golf game.

Although the bread and circuses of the professional gaming events are certainly a



As successful and beloved as video games have become in Japan, Europe, and the U.S., the level of mass acceptance that they have achieved in Korea is unprecedented.

major part of the industry's appeal, the daily lives of gamers in Korea take place in the hugely popular "PC bangs." Bangs are similar to cybercafes in the U.S., offering people pay-to-play gaming at reasonable rates – usually between 1,000 and 2,000 Korean won an hour (the equivalent of one to two U.S. dollars). Unlike in the U.S., where cybercafes have become a relic of a time before most of us had a decent Internet connection, bangs remain the dominant method of gaming in Korea. Currently, it's estimated that there are over 20,000 in operation throughout the country. Touring Seoul, it's not hard to believe this figure, as nearly every other block seemed to house a bang of some sort.

At the Rodeo PC Café, located in a trendy Seoul shopping district, owner Lee Young Seouk presides over 64 computer stations, each featuring a high-end PC and flatscreen monitor hooked up to a broadband connection. For his loyal clientele, Seouk provides top of the line computers that are regularly updated with all the patches and expansions. The place is remarkably clean, and he offers the expected snacks and soft drinks. Most of Korea's popular PC titles are already pre-loaded into the machines, including StarCraft, World of Warcraft, Lineage, Sudden Attack (a Korean first-person shooter), and Kart Riders (a casual racing title that appeals to younger gamers).

"We have three peak times. From 5 to 7p.m., 10 to 11p.m., and also around 2a.m.," says Seouk. "Usually in the daytime, there are lots of



A New Breed of Stars

The PC bang phenomenon has grown hand in hand with another: the massive popularity of professional video gaming. Although professional competitions are becoming more successful in America and Europe, nowhere on Earth have "e-sports" reached the level they have in Korea. There are several popular Korean gaming leagues, most notably the World Cyber Games (a worldwide event that was started by a Korean company) and the Korean Pro Gaming League. Pro gaming events regularly draw tens of thousands of spectators, and feature flashy pyrotechnic production values more associated with professional wrestling than real-time strategy. In fact, pro gaming has reached such status in Korea that a major new urban development in Seoul, the Gaebong Residential Area (to be completed in 2009), is set to include a large new e-sports arena in addition to housing, shopping, and arts centers. This major investment in infrastructure shows just how serious Korea is about professional gaming, akin to a U.S. city investing in a new pro football arena.

Much of its popularity is due to the one thing that still eludes the fast-growing U.S. e-sports industry: regular and highly rated television broadcasts. While some U.S. organizations have recently made some inroads into TV, Korea boasts not one but two 24-hour cable networks devoted solely to video games, OnGameNet and MBCgame.

OnGameNet general manager Hyeon Su Lee has been around since the inception of the network in 2000, making him one of the pioneers in e-sports broadcasting. Started by the Korean media giant OnMedia (which owns 10 television channels), OnGameNet is the first network devoted solely to video games in the world.

"We tested if it would work," recalls Lee. "We aired 30 minutes a day of the Korean Pro Gaming League [on another network], and at that time we got very good audience attention. So, in 2000, we decided to open OnGameNet."

OnGameNet draws audiences of up to a million viewers at a time (keep in mind that the entire population of South Korea is only 46 million

people), made up of predominantly 13- to 29-year-old males. Professional matches and tournaments make up the majority of the programming, but OnGameNet also broadcasts general gaming news as well as publisher-sponsored previews of new products.

Like professional sports coverage in the U.S., OnGameNet has learned how to make the lightning fast action onscreen palatable to mainstream audiences. Excitable announcing crews break down the movements in a StarCraft match in gripping fashion, spitting out commentary like over-caf-feinated auctioneers. Tournament highlights are shown with quick, MTV-style editing to triumphant modern-rock soundtracks. Canny producers also discovered that building interest in the stories and personalities of the pros themselves was crucial to gaining widespread appeal.

"In promoting the pro gamers, we make the 'real story' programs," says Lee. "We tell Yoon Yueng Lee's [a popular pro] story; he only has a mother because his father passed away. We try to make it a human story. Also, we can record what happens backstage, what the pro gamers are doing. We record their normal lives at home. Our target is 13- to 29-year olds. At that age they are very naive and innocent, so they are easily moved when they see what pro gamers face every day."

This media exposure has succeeded in turning professional gamers into a curious new breed of teen idol. The pros, almost without exception, tend to be slight, cherubic boys between 16 and 22 years old who favor the asymmetrical, bangs-forward haircuts worn by MTV-style emo bands. During competitions, they are decked out in ostentatious uniforms, which range from white, F1 racing-style jumpsuits adorned with sponsor badges to flashy, ersatz military costumes.

The best of the pros have followings that rival those of pop stars. Some of the better-known gamers even have fan clubs that hold weekly meetings. Standing in back of the Olympic stadium, we watched as one sheepish pro gamer was surrounded by a gaggle of female admirers, who giggled as they hung on his every word.

Speaking with top StarCraft player Jae-Yoon Ma backstage at the Invitational, he seemed a bit



■ Rodeo PC Cafe owner
Lee Young Seok

"[StarCraft] started this incredible phenomenon in Korea. It was the birth of the game rooms. There are 20,000 game rooms in Korea now. If you speak to anyone here, most of them will tell you that it was StarCraft that started the boom."

- Paul Sams,
COO, Blizzard

embarrassed by all the fuss. "I get a lot of fan letters and presents. Some of them are handmade," Ma says. "These days, I don't like to go around by myself. When the guys see me they say 'Hey, that's Jae-Yoon Ma.' But if the girls find out that it's me, they'll run to me. I don't hang around by myself anymore."

Ma, who at 21 has been a pro gamer since he was 18, says he enjoys the lifestyle, but sometimes feels overwhelmed by the demands of the pro gaming circuit, which often demands as much as eight hours of practice a day. During the offseason, pro teams are frequently sequestered in camps, where they live in barracks and train all day and night.

"[When I started], I was a high school student," Ma remembers. "At that time, it was really fun, but after I became a pro gamer I had to practice a lot every day and I got into lots of tournaments. [I was] captured by a tight schedule. I'm a little bit tired. But when I win I feel happy, and especially these days I feel good."

Respect for pro gaming extends to the highest levels of society and government, as evidenced by the creation of a pro gaming team sponsored by Korea's Air Force. All Korean men must perform mandatory military service of 24 to 27 months once they reach a certain age. This had led to several pro gamers, including Yo Han Lin (the "Michael Jordan" of pro gaming, according to OnGameNet's Hyeon Su Lee), being forced into early retirement. Responding to fan complaints (and perhaps sensing a great marketing opportunity), the Air Force relented and allowed their enlisted pro gamers to compete for a military team while continuing to complete their military service. As far as gaming has come in America, it's hard to imagine a private in the Army being released from regular duty because they were really good at Counter-Strike.



■ (Left) A group of school-aged girls cheers for boy band Super Junior (Above) Some professional gamers take the pledge of sportsmanship for the competition to follow



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The History of an Explosion

As gaming has grown in popularity, so has Korea's game industry. NCsoft, which is celebrating its 10-year anniversary this year, has transformed itself from a small startup to worldwide corporation, due in large part to the hugely successful MMOs Lineage and Lineage II. Currently, the company occupies parts of four buildings in Seoul's "Tehran Valley" district, the center of Korea's thriving information technology sector (The name "Tehran Valley" comes from Tehran Road, named in celebration of an agreement between Iran and Korea many years ago, which runs through that area of the city). The company, now grown to over 1,500 employees, is building its own high-rise that will accommodate all its employees under one roof. Although NCsoft is the best-known Korean company in the States, Korea is home to over 3,000 gaming companies, including NCsoft's closest rival, Webzen, and casual game giant Nexon. Analysts have recently predicted that Korea's game market will surpass two billion dollars in 2007.

The Korean game market, although large, is also extremely different from those in the U.S., Japan, and Europe, most remarkably in the fact that it's grown up from almost nothing in the course of 10 years. It's also notable in that it's entirely dominated by PC online gaming – consoles make up for a small fraction of sales. The reasons for this are historical, and bear the influence of the important political and cultural forces within Korea that created a fertile ground for an explosion of PC gaming.

In the mid-1990s, the Korean government, eager to place itself at the center of the new information-age economy, invested huge amounts of money into broadband internet infrastructure. Korea's dense population, nearly half of which is located in and around Seoul, made it ideal for wiring lightning-fast networks on a mass scale. By 1998, a good deal of the country had access to a high-speed connection. Today, over 90 percent of Korea gets a 3 Mbps Internet connection for less than \$20 a month.

Consoles, which take a large share of the market in most of the other major gaming countries, have traditionally been a non-entity in Korea, due to long-standing tensions between Korea and Japan.

"If the girls find out that it's me, they'll run to me. I don't hang around by myself any more."

- Jae-Yoon Ma



Until 1998, Korea had a ban on Japanese cultural products, including games. The only way that Japanese consoles could enter the market was to be licensed to a Korean distributor. Although the NES and SNES were released as the "Comboy" and "Super Comboy," a general hostility towards Japanese-made products meant that consoles never really gained a foothold in Korea.

Given the climate that existed in 1998 – a rapidly growing economy, huge broadband penetration, and limited exposure to game consoles – it's perhaps no surprise that PC gaming found a rapid following in Korea as quickly as it did. However, the fuse on this powder keg was lit by a couple of massive hits that released around the same time – Blizzard's StarCraft and NCsoft's Lineage.

Blizzard COO Paul Sams recalls those heady times: "[StarCraft] released in 1998. The first year in Korea it did pretty well; it was a strong product. But it wasn't until 1999 that it blew up...and started this incredible phenomenon in Korea. It was the birth of the game rooms, after the launch of StarCraft. There are 20,000 game rooms in Korea now. If you speak to anyone here, most of them will tell you that it was StarCraft that started the boom of the game rooms."

While StarCraft established Blizzard with a whole new audience, Lineage, a homegrown product, helped make the MMO Korea's most popular genre. While it was a bit archaic compared to some Western MMOs, the game was a huge hit in Korea, peaking at nearly three million subscribers at a time when EverQuest (the most successful MMO in the U.S. at the time) bragged about topping the 500,000 mark. Although the company's own Lineage II and Blizzard's blockbuster World of

Warcraft have cut into the original's appeal, Lineage still has over 1.3 million active users worldwide.

If anything, the success of the Korean gaming industry has been so total that many native companies are being forced to look towards other markets for growth opportunities. "People think that the Korean market has grown full," said NCsoft's Min Jisun. "There's no room for more revenue, so we had to think about going outside. We went to North America and other Asian countries."

They are also keeping an eye towards what's likely to be this century's largest new gaming market – China. Though currently hamstrung by excessive government regulation of the Internet and widespread software piracy (or, as Min Jisun diplomatically puts it, "China is a very tricky country"), it's likely the country China will most resemble in terms of gaming tastes is Korea.

"I think probably the biggest growth market is China," states Paul Sams. "When you have the size of population they have there, we've only scratched the surface. There's a lot of potential. I can tell you that it's absolutely a PC market. There are some consoles trickling in, but it's a PC market. When people tell you that PC is dying, you can look at them and tell them they're wrong. It's not happening."



■ (Above) A pro gamer is surrounded by some admiring female fans. (Right) Blizzard employees sign autographs for StarCraft and Warcraft devotees. (Above Right) A boy rides a Tauren from World of Warcraft & The Front of the Rodeo PC Cafe.

Looking Toward the Future

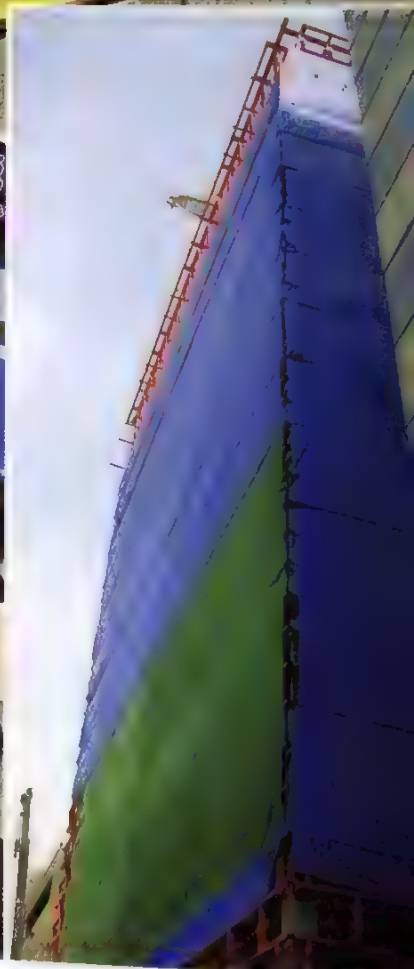
As a visiting gamer in Korea, it's hard not to be envious of what the country's gamers, developers, and publishers have managed to achieve in such a short time. The sheer love of gaming that permeates Korean culture is evident from the most modest PC bang to the largest stadium matches. As the country with the world's highest broadband penetration, the online future that Microsoft and Sony are now touting for U.S. gamers is an everyday reality here. Perhaps more importantly, where in the U.S. games often serve to isolate us from one another, Korean gaming is a force that unites people both online and in real-world gatherings both large and small.

Can it happen here? The odds seem against it, but many in the U.S. are betting that professional gaming and more television coverage can help take the industry to even greater heights of acceptance. Already several of the major pro gaming leagues in the U.S. have made inroads with television. With time, perhaps an audience that appreciates watching games being played as well as playing them can develop on a mass scale. As for online gaming, the U.S.'s broadband penetration rate (which is set to hit 50 percent of households by the end of 2007, as opposed to Korea's much lauded 90 percent) will have to dramatically improve before online gaming truly becomes the national pastime.

"I'm not sure it's going to be an exact kind of duplication," comments Blizzard's Paul Sams. "There's a lot of competition in North America; you have the NFL and the NBA and a lot of things people spend a lot of time focusing on. [Our] heroes happen to be sports figures. Here in Korea, the heroes are the gaming champions. But I do think that it can be very successful. We've been in conversations with a number of major household name broadcasting companies. I think the time is soon in North America and Blizzard will absolutely be a part of it... I don't know if it will replicate Korea, where it's a cultural phenomenon, but I think it will become very significant."

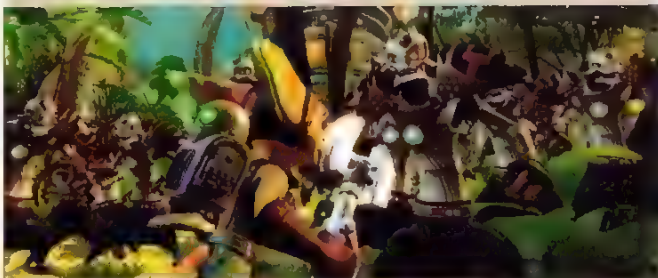
Here's to hoping, because after our time spent in the Korean gaming scene, you can't help but get the sense that — in Seoul, at least — the future is now. ■ ■ ■

■ (Top Right) NCsoft employs over 120 GMs for Lineage II. (Far Right) The NCsoft tower will eventually house 1500 employees. (Bottom Right) Pro gamers are housed in glass booths to isolate them from crowd noise. (Immediate right) Gamers deep in play at the Rodeo PC Cafe



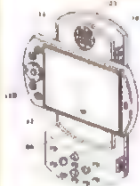
LOOSE TALK

Hot Gaming Gossip



PS3 ACHIEVEMENTS

Up until now, Sony has been vague about whether it would have an achievement system for the PlayStation 3 similar to those on the Xbox 360. Now, however, Loose Talk has seen proof that games coming out this holiday will have achievements. Like those on the Xbox 360, an icon will pop up when you win one, and the requirements for these as-yet-unnamed achievements will likely be the same between both systems. Given Sony's hands-off approach to third parties, it's unknown if these will be mandatory for all PS3 games going forward.



NEW PSP STILL IN THE WORKS

Gamers have been hearing about a PSP redesign for a while, and when Sony dropped the price of the handheld a couple of months ago, it was assumed that this was what we'd actually been hearing about. Now, the rumors of a new PSP are once again flying due to a recently discovered patent for a PSP with a flip screen that's the same size as the current screen. This PSP will also include phone service, and Loose Talk has heard that this updated handheld will be released to promote *God of War: Chains of Olympus*, which comes out this winter.

THE PS3 PRICE DROP (NO REALLY!)

Sony has been publicly contemplating a price drop for the PlayStation 3, and Loose Talk has heard some details on the matter. A cheaper version of the system will come out for \$399 – \$100 cheaper than the current 20GB model. The thing is, this new PS3 will have a 40GB hard drive (versus the 60GB model for \$599), but it will not have backwards compatibility. We have not heard of a release date for this new system (although we expect an announcement at E3), and there is no news as to whether the \$499 version will remain on shelves.



UNLUCKY FF NUMBER XIII?

We're all wondering what *Final Fantasy XIII* is going to be like when we finally get it in our hands – which may be later rather than sooner. Word is that the game's a mess right now, and the localization process itself is expected to take a full year. This is about three months longer than usual. Seeing as how the game likely won't come out in Japan until the end of next year at the earliest, it looks like we're in for a long wait.



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

NAME THAT GAME

Test Your Sight

Anyone who's seen *The Color of Money*, Martin Scorsese's brilliant follow up tale of Fast Eddie Felson (from *The Hustler*), will surely know this month's Name That Game. This top-down arcade stock car title has you escaping cop cars and avoiding oncoming traffic while you try to avoid running out of gas or getting three speeding tickets. In the movie, Tom Cruise's character Vincent can't stop playing the game, saying that in the future, those who are good at this title will get into West Point.

(Answer on page 33)



games

NHL ENFORCERS

FIGHT, FIGHT, FIGHT!

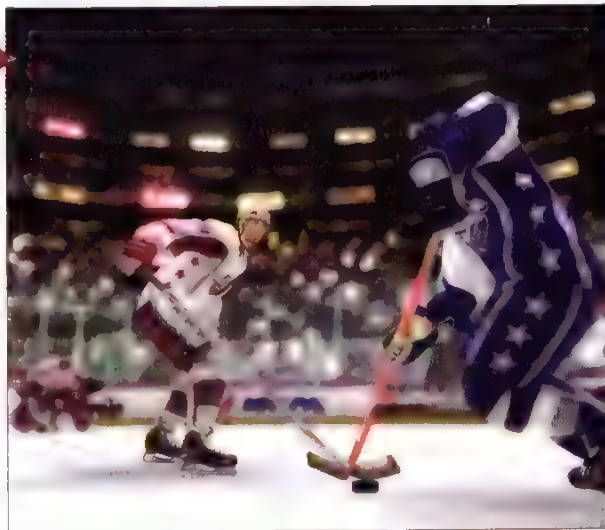
NHL Commissioner Gary Bettman may be doing his best to run the league into the ground, but at least 2K Sports and Electronic Arts are doing their best to make video game hockey a viable product. Both franchises have shown improvements and added features that fans will welcome.



NHL 2K8 (2K Sports)

PlayStation 3/Xbox 360/
PlayStation 2

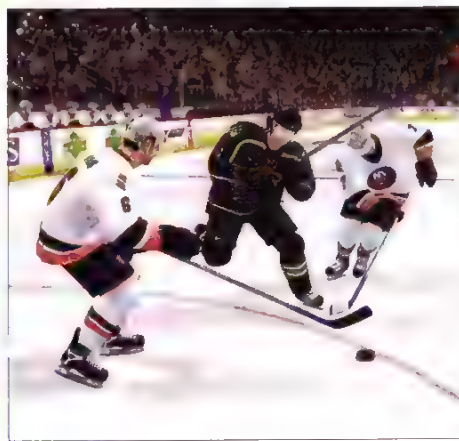
If you can't beat 'em, join 'em. This series is now introducing skill moves on its right analog stick, and this is one part of what the franchise is calling Signature Style. This not only entails animations and dekes, but work has also been done on providing accurate player faces and equipment. Depth has been added to the September game's Franchise mode, goalies have been beefed up in every aspect, and 2K8 even introduces a brand-new face-off system created with input from Joe Thornton.



NHL 08 (Electronic Arts)

PlayStation 3/Xbox 360/PlayStation 2/PC

Last year saw the introduction of stick moves via the right analog, while the rest of the game took a back seat. Now, the team is working on fundamentals such as better skating and AI for this game's fall release. Your players will turn differently – using either crossovers for wide turns or their edges for quicker cuts – depending on how you move the left analog stick. Dekeing is more involved thanks to a modifier button for your right analog moves, and you can now move the puck into free space around players, giving you more license to improvise and maneuver past defenders.



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	3	<input type="checkbox"/> Heath	<input type="checkbox"/> Resident Evil 2	<input type="checkbox"/> MirrorWorld Evolution	<input type="checkbox"/> Star of Echoes
	4	<input type="checkbox"/> The Italian Job	<input type="checkbox"/> Black Pearl	<input type="checkbox"/> Rebel	<input type="checkbox"/> Devil's Playground
	5	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

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CHANGING THE GAME

THE AFTERSHOCKS OF MANHUNT'S AO RATING

The first *Manhunt* title from Rockstar was shocking in its own right. The game put the player in the shoes of escaped convict James Earl Cash, who was forced to kill for his life and those of his family. As violent as *Manhunt* was, it made gamers examine their attitudes towards violence as they were confronted by their own shocking onscreen brutality.

Now, however, *Manhunt 2* appears to be upping the ante. As of the time of this writing, the ESRB has slapped an Adults Only rating on the title – the harshest rating the industry ratings board can give. Per ESRB rules, Rockstar is allowed to resubmit the game (in either its original or a modified form) within 30 days or it can appeal the rating. In a statement released by Rockstar, the company says it is exploring all options. “*Manhunt 2* was created for mature audiences and we strongly believe it should receive a Mature rating, aligning it with similar content created in other forms of media. We are exploring our options with regard to the rating of *Manhunt 2*.”

The game was set to appear on the Wii, PlayStation 2, and PSP in early July, but Sony and Nintendo have said that if *Manhunt 2* keeps the AO rating, they would bar it from their systems – making it all but certain that Rockstar will modify the game. This makes one wonder if this isn't all a publicity stunt from Rockstar. After all, the ESRB doesn't talk in specifics how individual games are judged, and from what we understand of the rating process, the game's rating is not something Rockstar would have been blindsided by this late in the process.

This is not *Manhunt 2*'s first brush with controversy. The game is only one of two titles that have

been banned in the UK. The British Board of Film Classification issued the ban on the Wii and PlayStation 2 versions of the title. The game is also appearing on the PSP, but that version has not yet been submitted.

Game Informer has not yet reviewed the game, so we cannot comment on its content. However, the statements surrounding the title present larger questions which will continue to surface in the future. The ESRB released a statement on behalf of president Patricia Vance outlining the decision that said, “The

ratings assigned by ESRB are based on the consensus of our raters, who consider several factors including not only the content itself and the context in which it is presented, but also elements such as the reward system and degree of player control.”

That last factor brings up the question as to how much the Wii's interactive control system had to do with the rating. The Wii, with its motion-based controllers, offers a different experience and arguably greater “player control” than the other versions. Does this mean that the Wii version was more harshly scrutinized than the other two? We asked the ESRB, which said that there were two different submissions: one for Wii and another for the PS2 and PSP. These builds were rated independently, and all three versions of the game were tagged with the initial AO rating.

While there aren't expected to be many other Wii games that flirt with AO ratings, as the nature of our interactivity with games changes and expands, the question of how much video games influence players will only increase. This is something that the Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood already believes. “[The] harmful effects of ultra-violent video games on children will be magnified by playing them on the interactive Nintendo Wii system.” Whether restricted to the Wii controls or not, gamers are only getting more interactive and realistic. And as graphics continue to bring more life-like experiences into our living rooms and gamers demand that this high bar of fidelity is met, the questions regarding video games' influence on people will only increase.

While we have no doubt that *Manhunt 2* puts you in some pretty grisly situations, it will be interesting to see how the ESRB, the industry, and the public reacts to future

GI OPINION



In light of the “Hot Coffee” controversy, it's no surprise that Rockstar's *Manhunt 2* is being scrutinized. Having played three levels of the game, my impression was that it seems in line with the content of its predecessor (which received an M rating). The Wii controls do add a gruesome new level of interactivity, which makes me wonder just how the ESRB evaluates new titles. *Manhunt 2* is certainly grim; it's one of the most disturbing games ever made. Is it art? I think that all games are, and deserve protection as such. However, I think Rockstar's misleading and botched reaction to Hot Coffee has as much to do with this incident as the game itself. It looks like video games' most daring company is learning that there are, indeed, limits after all. —MATT

TOP FIVES

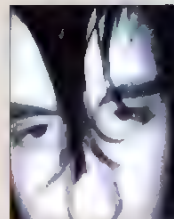
Favorites From Industry Pros And GI Readers

DEVELOPER

DAVID RILEY
Director, The NPD Group

READER

KISS THESKULL
Seattle, Washington



- | | |
|---|-------------------------------------|
| 1 <i>The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time</i> – N64 | 1 <i>Twisted Metal</i> – PSone |
| 2 <i>Resident Evil 4</i> – GC | 2 <i>Twisted Metal 2</i> – PSone |
| 3 <i>Devil May Cry</i> – PS2 | 3 <i>Twisted Metal 3</i> – PSone |
| 4 <i>Advanced Dungeons & Dragons</i> – Intelivision | 4 <i>Twisted Metal 4</i> – PSone |
| 5 <i>Ultima IV: Quest of the Avatar</i> – Commodore 64 | 5 <i>Twisted Metal: Black</i> – PS2 |

Send Top Fives and a photo of yourself to:

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

TOP TEN

Lists...Everybody Loves Lists...

Top 10 Events at the Parallel Universe E3

- 10 Duke Nukem team apologizes, admits “Yeah, we got nuthin”
- 9 Nintendo listens to what gamers want, announces Mario Hentai Dating Sim
- 8 Microsoft press conference subdued, with no strained attempts at hipness
- 7 Disappointing WoW revenue forces Blizzard to focus on its only remaining successful franchise: The Lost Vikings
- 6 My Little Pony MMO (Miller is really pumped about this one)
- 5 Bubsy denied entrance to Sony party (heard shouting “How does Kameo get in and I don't!?”)
- 4 Kaz Hirai plainly states “We lose,” then shuffles offstage
- 3 GameCube relaunch announced, dubbed “Wii”
- 2 Phantom wins best of show
- 1 “Remember Gex? He's finally back!”

Name That Game Answer: Stocker

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THE GOOD, THE BAD, THE UGLY

When You Want Your News Categorized With A Sarcastic Editorial Spin

QUOTE

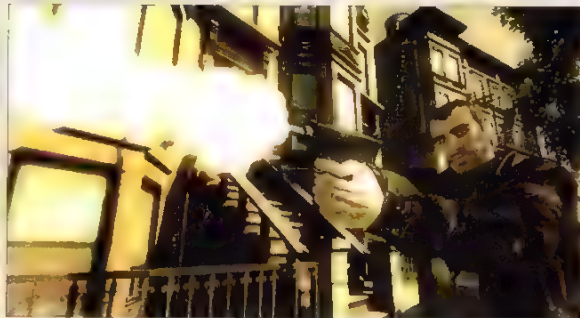
NINTENDO WII HAS BEEN A SUCCESSFUL ENTERPRISE, AND A VERY GOOD BUSINESS COMPARED WITH OURS, BECAUSE IT'S CHEAPER.

— Sony chairman and CEO Howard Stringer realizes people like stuff more when it costs less.



WEIRD

Sonic gets respectability? Canadian RPG uber-developer BioWare has announced that it is making a Sonic the Hedgehog RPG, due out sometime next year for the Nintendo DS. If these guys can't make a good Sonic game, then it truly is a sign that Sonic's days are done.



DAMN

Microsoft has paid \$50 million for the exclusive rights to publish two exclusive Grand Theft Auto IV downloadable Xbox Live episodes, the first of which will appear in March. This is more money than Take-Two has earned on all of its Xbox 360 titles combined (\$43 million). Although the episodes' pricing hasn't been announced, luckily they won't cost you 25 million Marketplace points apiece.



UGLY

In a story that seems to change with every month, the remake of Final Fantasy VII appears to not be happening... unless it does. In Japanese magazine *Dorimago*, series character designer Tetsuya Nomura said, "we're absolutely not making [such a game]." However, director Yoshinori Kitase, countered, "As long as there are people who want to make it and people who are waiting for it, we don't want to proclaim 'The End.'" We want it. You want it. So make it already!



GOOD

Director John Woo and game developer Warren Spector are teaming up for a project called *Ninja Gold*, which will involve ninja in modern-day settings — not pirates. The game will be one of the first for Spector's Junction Point Studio, but no release date or platforms have been announced. Woo is also planning a film of the project.



GOOD

Nintendo of Europe has hired local celebs to pimp its *More Brain Training* DS title on the continent. Although she's from Australia, Tom Cruise/Scientology survivor Nicole Kidman is one of the featured actresses. If you meet her, now it looks like the two of you finally have something in common.

GOOD

Technical officers at Sony have claimed that the PlayStation 3's audio and visual quality could be improved by 30 to 40 percent by further firmware updates. Sony has already used these to add features to the system.



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CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

1984 Family Business

A video game fanatic, Guillemot, along with his brothers Yves, Christian, Gerard, and Claude, begins a computer hardware and software distribution business

1986 Ambitions

Now focused on gaming, the Guillemots form Ubisoft, which helped bring foreign video games to France through a network of distributors

1992 Creative Endeavors

Guillemot begins to work at establishing Ubisoft's internal studio division (which would open in 1994). Under his direction, the studio system eventually swells to more than 1,000 people, and creates such hit franchises as Rayman and Monaco Grand Prix

1999 Going Mobile

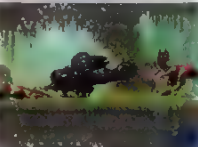
gameloft

Sensing great opportunities in the mobile phone market, Guillemot forms Gameloft, a company devoted to mobile and casual gaming

2002 Ramping Up

Gameloft releases its first lineup of downloadable mobile games. Not surprisingly, it's heavily weighted with Ubisoft properties, including Rayman, Prince of Persia, and a series of Tom Clancy games

2005 Sweet Success



Gameloft wins five awards at the annual Mobile Game FAQ Awards, and launches a huge hit in King Kong, which charts high in both Europe and the U.S.

2006 That's Hot!



Gameloft announces Paris Hilton Diamond Quest, a puzzle game featuring the image of the infamous party girl. Something tells us this won't see a sequel

2007 Primetime



Along with the announcement of a 54 percent increase in revenue, Gameloft inks two mega-successful TV licenses, NBC's Heroes and ABC's Lost

MICHEL GUILLEMOT

FOUNDER/CEO, GAMELOFT

>> Since leaving Ubisoft, the company he helped found, Michel Guillemot has built the French firm Gameloft into a powerhouse in the mobile gaming business. We recently talked with him about the past, present, and future of the mobile space. <<

You've obviously had a lot of experience in console games at Ubisoft. What made you decide to make the leap into mobile gaming in 1999?

In the '80s, video games were sold at very inexpensive prices to a very wide audience, including children and their parents. I was longing for that again. I saw that cell phones would be able to give the same gaming experiences as the ones we had 20 years ago. The good thing about phones is that everyone has [one]. So, for the first time ever, everyone can play video games without having to get over the barrier of purchasing a console or PC. I thought that it was an opportunity to bring video games to a true mass audience. We want to provide video games to a potential audience of the 4 billion people who will have phones by 2010.

You wanted to return to the simple, arcade-style games of the '80s. If you look at the market today, there's a real resurgence of that with things like the Wii, the Nintendo DS, Xbox Live Arcade, and Nintendo's Virtual Console. Does that benefit the mobile phone game market?

compromise in the size of the form factor of their phone for the sake of playing games, because games are just one of the activities you do with your phone. I knew we would have a diversity of phones. It's in the handsets manufacturers', the carriers', and the consumers' interest to have a variety of phones. So I considered at that time that, as a company, we would have to adapt to the fact that we would potentially have 4 billion consumers and these consumers would have one or two thousand types of handsets... Each time you want to reach a consumer you have to adapt to his handset and his service provider if you want him to purchase your product. But the good thing is that Gameloft has been adapted from the beginning to this paradigm.

Nokia obviously tried with the N-Gage to bring a more standardized mobile phone gaming platform to market and failed. Do you think that the idea could still be viable, or could someone do it and make it work?

What's going on is that progressively what we may see is that that the two worlds will be closer and closer. Either you will buy the phone on which you

At Gameloft, it's the creators that decide which machine they want to support based on what they think that can do on it. Clearly, the Wii is a very good candidate because it's a great machine, it's a great gaming experience, and our creators are looking at it very seriously.

The cost of data access for cell phones in the U.S. and some other countries is very high. Are data access fees holding back the growth of the mobile game market?

It depends on what you do with it. The thing is that, on the carrier side, they have yet to take into account what you need to have a perfect gaming experience. The fact that data access is usually – not everywhere, but usually – high in cost makes it difficult to do multiplayer games, for example. We've released multiplayer games for two years in the U.S., but if you want to play them you have to have a flat-fee data rate and very few consumers have that kind of service plan. It's hindering the growth of that segment of games a bit... Nokia is trying to get around that. Also, you will see phones trying to get on the Internet in new ways – you have 3G [wireless broadband data service – Ed.]

For the first time ever, everyone can play video games without having to get over the barrier of purchasing a console or PC.

What's really interesting is we were talking [to partners] in 2000, and there was no interest from the video game companies in providing casual entertainment to non-core gamers. The first machine that this audience would be able to use was cell phones. What's interesting is that Nintendo had the same reasoning on their side, saying, "We want to get off of hardcore-only gaming." In their own way, they managed to create a whole market of non-core gaming, but on console. The idea was the same. The way we both chose was a bit different, but the result is that Microsoft and Sony have followed suit... That's amusing to see. The guys that went out of the box and into uncharted territories ended up being in the center of the expansion of the video game industry.

Right now, you obviously have to do distribution deals with various providers, service plans, and cell phone technologies. Does that hurt your business?

What I thought in 2000 is that, contrary to the console, a mobile phone is something that each consumer buys for various types of usage. My conclusion was that people would never accept a

can play games, or you buy the console on which you will eventually be able to call your friends. Nokia tried to do something in the middle of the two and it didn't work because it was neither a very good console nor a good phone.... The capacity of the phones is growing very fast; [but] I don't expect that either of the two will replace each other. The iPhone will not replace the phone. The phone will not kill the Nintendo DS. There will be diversity, as a company that is organized to be able to support this diversity, we are really excited about that.

You've just completed Prince of Persia for Xbox Live Arcade. Do you have any other games in development for XBLA?

Yes, we intend to release more games for Xbox Live Arcade. It's a very good casual game platform and we feel that we've got some properties that would be very good for that platform.

Have you considered Wii development, either for the Wii itself or for Nintendo's Virtual Console?

The Wii is certainly a very interesting machine.

coming. So, progressively, these data bandwidth issues and data costs issues will ease.

You do a lot of licensed projects, based on console games, movies, and TV shows, etc. Is it difficult to do more ambitious, original IPs in the mobile business?

We have been quite successful with some of our original IP. In fact, our original IP games represent 60 percent of our sales today. But we will be more able to create brands and be innovative with the evolution of the phones and the networks. Today, it's rather simple; a phone game has a footprint of 600 kilobytes to 2 megabytes on the high end. Innovation is important, but it's more difficult to create a clear-cut difference inside a very tight memory factor. The new phones that are going to be released by the end of this year have 5 gigabytes of memory. So, when you have a phone that has 5GB of memory, you can really think of doing something great. It will be a bit like the evolution of PC games between what we had in the '80s and what we have now.

gameloft

THE MOBILE MASTERMIND

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PRO Both the speakers and the mic performed admirably. The rumble effect adds a nice immersive element to the sound, but it overwhelms the audio on occasion.

CON Our biggest problem with the AudioFX Pro is its inline remote, which feels like a two-dollar gas station toy that will likely break within two weeks.

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CREATIVE FATAL1TY PROFESSIONAL SERIES GAMING HEADSET

AVERAGE: ●●●●●●●●

PRO The Fatal1ty's mic sounds really clear, and the fact that it is detachable is nice when you are just using the headphones.

CON The failing of this headset is its audio output is not very strong. The sound is tinny, and the bass in particular feels weak. Also, bigger heads might find this set a little tight.

\$49.99 • www.creative.com



PLANTRONICS AUDIO 365

SCORE: ●●●●●●●●

PRO The Audio 365 boasts a good design and produces a clear, even sound. The mic response also impresses. If you can't afford the Sennheiser, this is the headset to get.

CON While this headset isn't uncomfortable, it doesn't feel as good on your head as some of the other sets on this list, especially after a few hours of playtime.

\$44.95 • www.plantronics.com



GENIUS HS-04U

SCORE: ●●●●●●●●

PRO This super-light and comfortable headset features open ear cups, which helps to prevent sweaty ears.

CON The audio performance here is passable, but sometimes the microphone gives off a slight high-pitched, whiny feedback.

\$50.00 • www.geniusnet.com



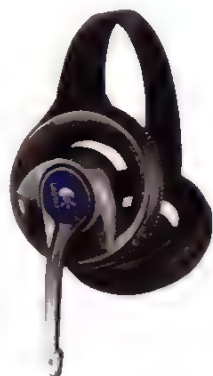
TRITTON AUDIO EXTREME PC

SCORE: ●●●●●●●●

PRO Ultra comfortable design makes the hefty overall weight of this headset easy to endure. Not only do they sound great, the microphone is easy to position for both intense gaming and mid-game snacks.

CON We encountered numerous glitches after installation, including an odd buzzing sound that comes and goes, as well as a microphone that glitches out and makes you sound like a chipmunk on Ventrilo.

\$79.99 • www.trittontechnologies.com



LOGITECH PRECISION PC GAMING HEADSET

SCORE: ●●●●●●●●

PRO The Logitech's best features are its light weight and cheap price. The speakers produce a crisp sound, but lack the oomph for louder explosions and effects.

CON Sadly, this headset is poorly designed. It's behind-the-head strap feels everready to fall off your noggin.

\$29.95 • www.logitech.com

SENNHEISER PC 166

VERY GOOD: ●●●●●●●●

PRO The PC 166 is so light and comfortable that you may forget you're wearing it, and the audio hasn't been sacrificed for comfort. The sound is crystal clear and rich.

CON The only real drawback to this headset is that it looks more like a telemarketer headset than a gamer headset. Don't worry, your friends will only laugh a little.

\$149.95 • www.sennheiserusa.com



peripherals

HALO 3 ACCESSORIES

So your Xbox 360 is decked out with the Halo faceplate and you've had the Elite edition of Halo 3 reserved for a year. It's time to complete the set with these limited edition Halo 3 controllers and headset. Featuring artwork by Spawn creator Todd McFarlane, these slick first-party controllers will be available in September only at GameStop.

\$59.99 • www.gamestop.com



toys

SQUARE ENIX WEAPON REPLICAS

This summer Square Enix is launching the American branch of its online store. In addition to hosting an arsenal of cool weapon replicas, the Kingdom Key Darkside will be exclusive to the site. All the replicas are made using high quality plastics and die-cast metal and are 1:6 to scale. If nothing else, these would make freaking awesome letter openers.

\$34.99 • www.square-enix-shop.com/usa



toys

WETA HELLGATE: LONDON COLLECTIBLES

In the future, London may well be destroyed, and humanity may come under the heels of a horde of bloodthirsty demons, but video game collectibles will always be cool. These Hellgate: London statues based on the upcoming game from Flagship Studios are sculpted and molded by the fine folks at Weta Collectibles. Just don't let your girlfriend call them collectible dolls. Trust us, it's hard to live that down.

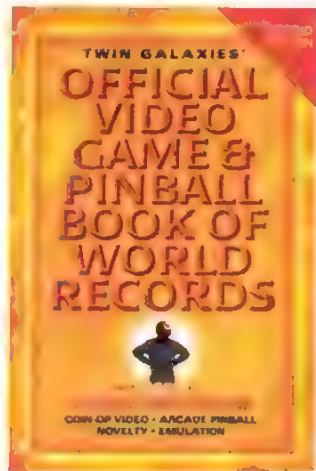
\$225.00-250.00 • www.wetanz.com/collectibles

books

TWIN GALAXIES OFFICIAL VIDEO GAME & PINBALL BOOK OF WORLD RECORDS

The culmination of over 19 years worth of work, the official video game records book is so big they needed to break it into three parts: the arcade volume (out now), and the PC and Console volumes (coming soon). These books include the top scores from nearly every game imaginable, bios of the record holders, and mini-features on the history of gaming.

\$34.95 • www.twingalaxies.com



IT'S OVER WHEN IT'S OVER

IN DEFENSE OF SHORT GAMES



BY JOE JUBA,
ASSOCIATE EDITOR

Remember when I viewed maxing out a game's timer as a badge of honor. Seeing that 99:59 attached to a save file was proof that I had gotten the most out of my investment and wrung every possible drop of fun out of it. Of course, that was in the days when I had a lot more free time and relied on saving my allowance to make game purchases. Things are different now; these days I find that I only have the time and patience for so many 40-hour epic adventures, and I'm tired of the stigma attached to games that don't clock in at that lofty mark. Sometimes you only want to play something for eight hours to get the satisfaction of a job well done – and that should be okay.

Where a long and involved critical path was once an incentive to play a game, many gamers are being drawn to more compact experiences. These titles may not offer weeks of entertainment, but they are still complete games with compelling characters, rich stories, and engaging gameplay. They just take less time to deliver the entire package.

As an example, let me tell you a story about how I quit playing Final Fantasy XI. I had been exploring Vana'diel for months, spending hours grinding levels and getting loot. I had a Saturday to myself set aside for that purpose, but Internet problems kept me from logging in. On a whim, I decided to start up ICO instead. About eight hours later, I was watching the end credits in awe. I couldn't help but wonder what I would have had to show for those hours if my Internet hadn't been on the fritz – a few XP and a new hat for my Tarutaru? I cancelled my Final Fantasy XI account the next day.

I should point out here that I am still a hardcore RPG and MMO fan, and love getting wrapped up in their expansive worlds. But at the end of the day, you walk away with your gaming vocabulary

expanded by a single new experience. In the 40 or 50 hours it takes to finish The Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess, you could beat Gears of War, Indigo Prophecy, Shadow of the Colossus, Rayman Raving Rabbids, and still have time to rock through a career in Guitar Hero II. I'm not criticizing Twilight Princess – it's a great game that everyone should try – but the same cannot be said for all games that require a similar time investment. It is getting harder to commit to these gargantuan games when there is so much payoff to be had from briefer (yet still complete) titles.

Assuming that I'm not the only gamer out there who feels like this, why does it seem like more and more games are touting their sheer size as a selling point? Part of the problem is that some people believe that a game's length is in some way tied to its quality. That's garbage. As a gaming journalist, I attend game unveilings and demos. At these events there is invariably someone who asks, "How long is the game?" as though it's the most important question. My quiet hope is that someday a developer, instead of answering evasively or apologetically, will reply, "It's as long as it needs to be. Next question." Why shouldn't that be the standard response? Do you judge a book by its page count? I can see it now: "Hi, Mr. Salinger! How long is your new book?" "Oh, it's about 200 pages." "Gee, that's too bad. I was thinking it would be better around 600. Oh, well. Maybe it won't suck!"

I know that I am speaking from an uncommon position. After all, as a member of the Game Informer staff, I get to play a lot of great games free of charge. I also understand that a game's duration is an important trait to consider for most gamers. After all, if you're shelling out \$60, you want to make sure that you're not getting ripped off. But there is a distinct separation between a game's value and its quality, and making it longer doesn't always mean better. In fact, sometimes

Sometimes
you only
want to
play some-
thing for
eight hours
to get the
satisfac-
tion of a
job well
done – and
that should
be okay.

a great game can ultimately be brought down by dragging on longer than it needs to, like (brace for heresy) Resident Evil 4.

If publishers and developers really want to add value to a title, there are ways to do it without cramming in a bunch of collection quests and treasure hunts to artificially lengthen the experience. My personal favorite is the New Game+ option. A concept introduced to me in the 1995 RPG Chrono Trigger, New Game+ allows gamers who have completed a game to start over at the beginning using the statistics and items they had at the end of their last playthrough. Even though it was an RPG-exclusive phenomenon for years, recent action titles like God of War II and Dead Rising have used this tactic to keep gamers coming back again and again. As a matter of fact, I'd like to see every game implement this feature. Who cares if it throws off the balance? I already beat the game once, didn't I? Beyond that, there are also the classic avenues of integrating optional sidequests (as long as they have worthwhile rewards), or adding replay through multiplayer.

Obviously, not all long games are bad, and not all short games are good. That's the whole point. True gamers recognize and appreciate quality in a variety of forms and durations. The industry has evolved beyond the arcade mentality of the 1980s; gaming is no longer about plugging in your quarter and milking it for every possible second of gameplay. If a developer creates a quality title, it doesn't matter if it's five hours long or fifty. It just needs to be worth the time and money you put into it. ■■■

The views and opinions expressed on this page are strictly those of the author and not necessarily those of Game Informer Magazine or its staff

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*Games***

Themes



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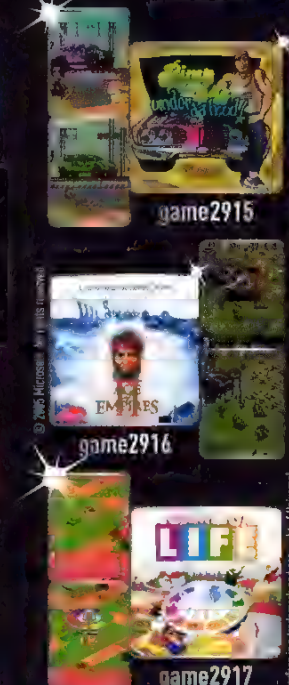
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august

01
DARK SECTOR ZERO
 This comic serves as a prequel story to the game. It shows players how Hayden's transformation begins, and also shows some of Lasra's secrets. The game still doesn't have a rock-solid release date yet, but you should be able to pick up this comic starting today.



03
 In *The Bourne Ultimatum*, Matt Damon can't remember who he is. This is a blessing in disguise because if he did remember, he'd realize that he used to be best friends with Ben Affleck. Man, that guy sucks!



07
NEW RELEASES
 • Go Pets: Vacation Island - DS
 • Jeanne D'Arc - PSP
 • Lair - PSP
 • Madden NFL 08 - PSP
 • Mega Man: Star Force: Leg - DS
 • Mega Man: Star Force: Pegasus - DS
 • Moto GP 2007 - 360
 • Silent Hill: Origins - PSP
 • SingStar Amped - PS2
 • Too Human: Part 1 - 360



10
 Neil Gaiman and Charles Vess' *Stardust* opens in theaters today. Gaire Danes riding a unicorn? Sold!



14
NEW RELEASES
 • Bratz Power - DS
 • High School Musical: The Musical: The Series - PS2, DS
 • Madden NFL 08: The Complete Edition - PS2, DS
 • Metal Gear Solid: The Twin Snakes - PS2
 • Stranglehold - PS2

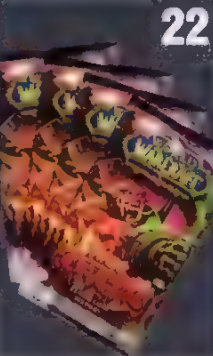
15
THE DARKNESS LEVELS
 Co-written by Paul Jenkins and David Wolf, this six-issue collection ties directly into the video game, and expands upon its story. We recommend reading the comic before going into the game.



17
 Some of you may have heard of Billy Mitchell for his Pac-Man high score. Others of you may know of him for his line of hot sauces. After you see today's theatrical release *King of Kong: A Furtal of Quarters*, the breaking of the Donkey Kong high score, you'll remember him as the man who wears the tightest pants!



21
NEW RELEASES
 • BioShock - 360, PC
 • Dead Head Fred - PSP
 • Ghost Recon: Advanced Warfighter 2 - PS3, PSP
 • Metroid Prime 3: Corruption - Wii
 • Namco Museum - DS
 • World Championship Paintball - PS2



22
FIRES OF OUTLAND
 Upper Deck is pumping out World of Warcraft trading card expansion packs faster than you can say "nerf Deathcoil." The Fires of Outland set releases today, and we bet you can't wait to play as the Draenei and Blood Elf races. As always, make sure you camp out in front of your favorite retailer to ensure you get a pack!

23
PENNY ARCADE EXPO
 Who would have thought that a bunch of nerdy cartoonists could throw one hell of a bash? The Penny Arcade Expo is a massive gathering of developers, consumers and cosplay freaks. This show boasts an impressive lineup of upcoming games, tons of tournaments, and the least healthy food in the world!



28
NEW RELEASES
 • Blazing Angels 2: Secret Missions - PS2, 360
 • Blue Dragon - Wii
 • God of War: Blood and Honor - 360, PC
 • Sam & Max: The Devil's Playhouse - PS2
 • Space Sheriff: Vengeance - 360, PSP
 • Super Robot Wars: Original Generation - PS3, 360, Wii, PS2, PSP, PC
 • Wild Arms 5 - PS2



31
 When Michael Myers isn't recording voice work for billions of Shrek movies, he's running around town, hacking up teenagers on Halloween. Don't let the fact that this film is directed by Rob Zombie steer you away from this exciting remake of the original horror classic!

Blue Dragon - 08/28

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[PROTOTYPE]

UNLIMITED ENABLED

PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION (2-PLAYER VIA PLAYSTATION NETWORK OR XBOX LIVE)> **PUBLISHER** SIERRA ENTERTAINMENT> **DEVELOPER** RADICAL ENTERTAINMENT> **RELEASE** 2008

FIRST OF ITS KIND

Imagine total creative freedom.

You're a game developer, hot off a recent critical and commercial success. You've overcome the immense challenges of handling a well-known license, and come out on the other end of that dangerous tunnel unscathed. You've been offered a blank slate, and earned the right to make the game you want to make. But what is that game? If you're the folks at Radical Entertainment, that game is the start of a brand new franchise filled with mystery, conspiracy, and unparalleled flexibility of combat and movement — a totally new take on the open world concept to which gamers have become so accustomed. Radical knows that only the very best original properties have any hope of rising above the noisy word-of-mouth din that rules the fickle gaming public. Prototype doesn't just have to be good. It has to give people something to talk about.





Prototype includes three sides of a massive conflict – the military, a vicious mutagenic viral epidemic, and you.

Nestled in the emerging development hotbed that is Vancouver, Radical Entertainment is made up of several teams hard at work on various exciting projects. The team in question created *The Incredible Hulk: Ultimate Destruction*, a rare licensed title that garnered both high review scores and excellent sales numbers. When that game was completed, they were offered a chance to explore a new property with their next project. "A year and a half ago, three or four of us got the chance to sit around and think about IP, which was an amazing thing for us. And one of the things we really wanted to do was leverage next-gen power to give gamers something new," explains executive producer Tim Bennisson. What emerged was in some ways a conceptual sequel to the open-world playground that *Hulk* provided, but with an entirely new framework for telling a compelling story and delivering constantly changing gameplay. In *Hulk*, the green goliath had the ability to "weaponize" objects in the environment, crafting spears from lampposts or ripping missile pods from tanks to use as handheld missile launchers. In those long brainstorming sessions, lead game designer Eric Holmes wondered aloud how cool it would be if a character was capable of weaponizing himself, and from there the concept of *Prototype* began to take shape. "We have the freedom with this property to do what we want and have the character be as bad as we want him to be," Holmes tells us. "It's good to have a setup where you can do very bad things, and make them fantastic, but have them justified within the setting. We asked ourselves: 'What do people want to do in a game?' We're creating a character that does what players want to do, and creating a structure and a framework around that which works."

The prototype is an entity called Alex Mercer. As the story opens, Alex finds himself on an experimentation table with no memory of his past. Emerging from a mysterious lab onto the bustling city streets of New York, it's quickly apparent that he has a deeper mystery to unravel than a bout of amnesia. Whatever he was before, it's now questionable whether he's even human any more – or if he ever was in the first place. What sets Mercer apart is the disturbing ability to kill and absorb any other person he encounters. Like some terrifying ancient tribal warrior who takes on the power of the enemies he consumes, Alex Mercer doesn't kill for pleasure – he kills to grow, evolve, and learn. As each new person becomes integrated, so too do their memories, their abilities, and their very appearance.

Whatever Alex Mercer is at the beginning of the game, he's constantly becoming something more complex and frightening with every minute the player guides him through the city. He can change shape to look like anyone he's killed, the perfect master of disguise. Decades – then centuries – of human knowledge begin to build up in his mind. "As our character



continued on page 52 >>>



■ Most people know the word "prototype" from its commercial and industrial usage, as in the prototype version of a new car. The word can also carry the meaning of the first example of a new species or group.

■ The developers at Radical are actively pursuing real commercial brands to adorn billboards and buildings, so don't be surprised to see some familiar advertisements and logos in the final version of the game.



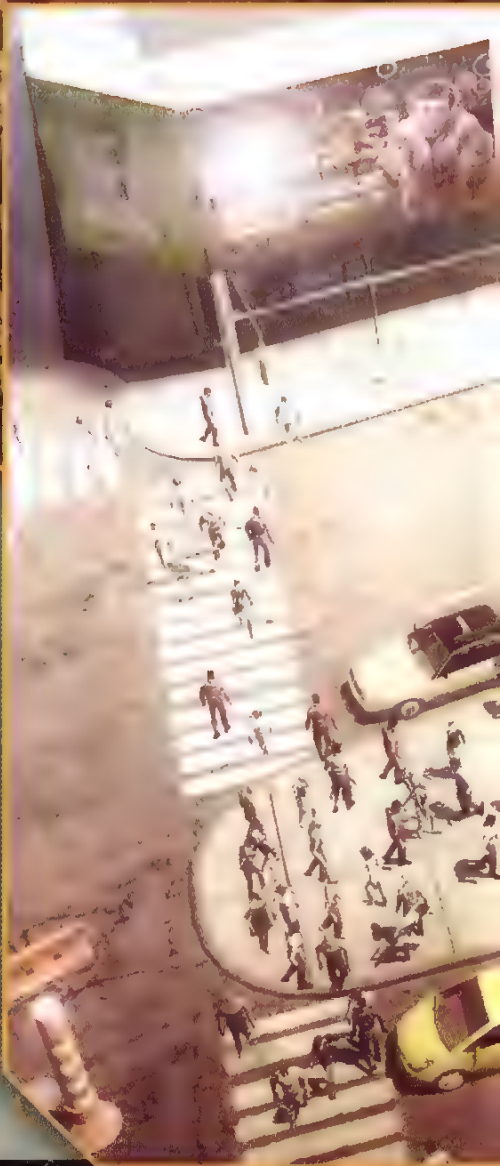
■ The creatures that spawn from the viral epidemic are in many ways as fast and powerful as the main character. Attract their attention, and they'll pursue using the same techniques you have at your disposal. Even half a dozen blocks away, you might think you've made an escape, only to have one of these beasts leap 100 feet from a nearby roof to tackle you.



■ Alex Mercer is a dark and merciless anti-hero with few compunctions about killing in the name of the vengeance he seeks.



■ While you'll be able to pilot all sorts of military vehicles, the team hasn't decided if you'll ever jump behind the wheel of normal civilian cars. In the traffic-jammed streets of Manhattan, it's hard to imagine how such mundane transportation could override your abilities to leap headlong over and around buildings.



continued from page 50

progresses he's becoming something more brilliant than any human being has ever been," Holmes relays. That knowledge might include the location of a secret military installation, or the ability to pilot an Apache helicopter. With each new body, Alex becomes more dense and powerful, and he begins to discover new ways to morph his biomass into weapons of destruction or impenetrable armor to protect him from bullets and explosions. He's the darkest kind of anti-hero — a character driven by a need to discover his own past and wreak vengeance on those who made him what he is, inconsiderate of the cost to human life it might take to succeed. Alex Mercer brings a dark new meaning to the concept of the everyman protagonist.

It's a pretty amazing concept, but it's an idea that doesn't mean much if this remarkable character isn't fun to play. Radical specializes in open world games, and the full force of their fourth generation tech engine (created entirely in-house) is at work in Prototype. The results are on display in the demo the team shows us during our visit to the studio. The first thing you'll notice about the game is the uncanny speed and ease with which the

main character moves through the environment. "A key aspect of this character is his agility — the parkour, the different movement styles. The ability to cover ground and the verticality in an environment like Manhattan is astounding in this game," Bennison asserts. Eschewing the traditional platforming ideology that a player needs to press a button for every action on screen, Mercer reacts automatically to a player's movement intent, leaving the controller free for more complex interactions like combat and implementation of powers. He pushes through crowds of people while maintaining a sprint and maneuvering around obstacles instantly. With a leap, Alex becomes airborne, crossing whole city blocks in seconds and scaling skyscrapers with ease as he wall runs and backflips from rooftop to ledge. Like at street level, the prototype automatically maneuvers around or through obstacles, even on a sheer surface — if a fire escape looms above him, he won't halt or suddenly get thrown to the ground. His momentum continues unabated as he seamlessly grabs hold of the scaffolding and flings himself upward in his running climb to the roof.

In our demo, the prototype drops down dozens of stories into the middle of Times Square and immediately

hones in on a walking businessman. By pushing the analog stick towards him, Mercer automatically jumps over a nearby cab without breaking stride to grab the hapless victim. The camera zooms in close to witness the vicious throttling as the prototype efficiently dispatches the defenseless foe. After brutally beating the civilian, the body begins to shrink and morph off the sidewalk, slipping up Mercer's leg and disappearing into the ever-growing body mass. Perhaps using some of that new mass, at a press of the d-pad, Alex's hands begin to grow horribly misshapen, expanding into massive claws. The crowd begins to scatter, but not before Alex stalks and easily overtakes a fleeing pedestrian and literally splits him in two. The military is quick to arrive, and Alex responds by transforming once again, hatching jagged ridged plates that coat his form. Now running towards the same cab as before, he smashes through instead of leaping over as bullets from the nearby soldiers ping off his new exoskeleton. Easily dispatching the soldiers, he tracks down their leader. The mustachioed captain is quick to succumb, and now Alex slips through a nearby alley and emerges on the other side

looking like his most recent victim. Ahead, a military cordon blockades the road and protects a giant, egg-like hive, a strange sight even to jaded Manhattan dwellers. Striding up to the soldiers as their apparent commander, the disguised Mercer punches one of the soldiers, indicating to the others that this poor man he's attacking is the prototype. The others open fire, and the real Alex is able to slip through to his objective: the hive. It's then that the big guns show up to the fight, and Alex returns once more to his high-ranking officer guise to order an air strike.

Giant hive? The conspiracy-laden story of Prototype is a closely guarded secret, but it's clear from our early look at the game that New York is the stage for a massive three-sided war that will play out during the game. The military (specifically a top secret group called the Black Watch Special Forces) is present in full force to do battle against a massive and potentially intelligent viral epidemic — one that seems to be horribly mutating the populace. The team leads are firm in their assertion that these unusual creatures and hives are very homegrown; this isn't an alien invasion story. The third side of this city-wide

war is Alex — enough of a threat all by himself to be a target for both of the opposing forces. "This is reality plus one fantastic element," Bennison explains. "That fantastic element is your shapeshifting powers, and how they are somehow linked to this epidemic." As the war unfolds across the increasingly devastated landscape of Manhattan, a meta-game begins to emerge that explores the current state of the city as a whole. "There are different zones of New York. As the military and the virus have this tug of war across Manhattan, different neighborhoods will be under the control of each faction. That will evolve throughout the game," Bennison explains. The prototype will affect the shift in control, but he'll also be able to sit back and watch as the other two opposing armies clash. Without Alex's interference, you could observe as a heavily fortified military strong point is repeatedly beaten down and destroyed, giving the forces of the strange virus a foothold in that part of the city. Alternately, Alex might step in and turn the tide of the battle. "These abilities give you tremendous player choice. The 'deceive or destroy' idea is key to our game," Bennison opines. "You can annihilate your enemies by going straight in, or you can assume the perfect disguise, and exploit the infrastructure. Every setup in the game will allow you to go either way."

To participate in such massive conflicts, Alex Mercer



■ A huge number of pedestrians and cars will swarm through the streets of New York. When you reveal your monstrous nature, crowds of hundreds will scatter in fear

Home Grown Technology

Many developers in recent years have opted for the route of purchasing the rights to an existing engine like Unreal 3 to power their games. Not so at Radical. With a long history of open world games like *The Simpsons: Hit & Run*, *The Incredible Hulk: Ultimate Destruction*, and *Scarface: The World Is Yours*, they've had plenty of experience crafting an engine worthy of the complex demands of a game like *Prototype*. "Our tech is designed for open-world console games," executive producer Tim Bennison explains. "All of our technology — the rendering engines, the physics engines, the audio stuff, the character tools — it's all built by the team or our advanced technology group." Called the Titanium Engine, the technology is capable of juggling everything from driving to platform games, but is especially optimized for open world environments. The latest version of its rendering capabilities allow for basically unlimited draw distances. Hundreds of people, props, and most importantly enemies are supported at once. Every geometrical surface in the environment casts and receives shadows and light, allowing for dramatic mood-altering dynamics to the look of the world.

The Titanium Engine also includes a flexible gameplay editor, where designers and programmers alike can rapidly drop objects and characters in to a sort of gym, where they can test everything from new animations to mission structure. The next-gen animation and physics systems combine to exhibit remarkably lifelike movements as characters move through the world, whether they're walking down the street, or ragdolling end-over-end away from an explosion. Finally, a cached, shared build system is running on computers throughout Radical — when changes are made to the code, everyone on the network has instant access to the new version. All the tech jargon adds up to a remarkably powerful game creation apparatus that is all the more impressive because it was born and raised by an individual studio through years of practice. In the genre.



better have some pretty remarkable abilities. As he evolves, a library of special powers and morph options will begin to grow. At any time, you'll have one of these extraordinary actions assigned to the four slots of the d-pad. An attack power might be the growth of massive blade arms to rip apart melee opponents, or players might assign the ranged groundspike ability, which has Alex bash the earth and send out a burrowing force of biomass that emerges dozens of feet away as a bloom of spikes. Defensive powers might have the prototype forming a massive shield to block incoming projectiles, or a long array of spines that pop out from his back. The third category of power optimizes the prototype's senses, enabling him to view in infrared and night vision, or track individual enemies through a crowd. Finally, the last d-pad press shifts Mercer into his currently selected disguise — any one of dozens of individuals that he's killed and consumed since the game began. Together, the team

promises over 750 unique combinations as you mix and match your various powers. "You are a walking slaughterhouse," Bennison declares. "The combination of all of your abilities gives you this incredible guilty pleasure." Beyond these metahuman gifts, Alex will also learn the more mundane technical skills of his opponents. With over 20 weapons to choose from, he might pick up a missile launcher or sniper rifle. Vehicles work under the same principle. Absorb a pilot and you might find yourself in anything from an Apache helicopter to an M1 Abrams Tank, or even an F-22 Raptor Jet.


While the constant absorption of new bodies certainly gives Alex a tactical advantage in this massive war, the knowledge he gains as he consumes one human after another will also be the primary means for storytelling and unraveling of the conspiracy behind the game. The unique structure for plot exposition is something the team calls the "web of intrigue."



Hitch A Ride

Alex Mercer can adopt the abilities of anyone he encounters in New York City. That includes the operating knowledge of complex machinery. Consume a helicopter pilot, and suddenly Alex has a lifetime of flight hours under his belt. From that point forward, he'll be able to fly anything that one victim was trained on.

In this scenario, the prototype wildly leaps onto the tail end of a passing helicopter from his perch on a nearby building. Through a sequence of rapidfire button presses, he clambers forward to the cockpit, yanks off the door, and flings the unfortunate gunner to his death. The pilot you see in the back seat certainly isn't any luckier. After climbing in, Alex tears into the rear of the cockpit and the windows splatter with blood as the prototype consumes the man and absorbs his vast flight expertise.



■ Powers like this are horribly efficient killing tools. With dozens of unique attack, defense, and sensory powers, the prototype is an army unto himself.

"It's an interactive chain of clues that lead into the heart of the conspiracy," Bennison tells us. "The web is composed of nodes and links between those nodes." When Alex emerges from the lab, a single node of what will eventually be a sprawling interconnected map is visible on the web. That node is his name. When he absorbs an important individual, a new node might open up – occasionally completely disconnected from anything else, and other times the final piece of a puzzle that will unravel the larger mystery. These all-important nodes will often have accompanying flashes of insight, taking the form of everything from cinematic sequences that reveal a salient memory, to audio clips, to map locations. Far from a linear progression, the web in its final form has around 250 unique interconnected nodes, and only the most fastidious players are likely to see all of them unlocked. In fact, the team hopes that friends who are playing the game will be able to piece together their own disparate pieces of the conspiracy to learn the truth.

It's not the only way you'll be working together with a friend; Prototype will support online cooperative play for you and a friend. Each gamer will bring their own version of Alex into the online play space, so one of you may be wildly swinging his hammer-like fists while your buddy impales enemies with those destructive groundspikes. For those who want to, it's possible to experience the entire story playing cooperatively, and there are plenty of reasons you might want to. Radical

tells us they plan to include exclusive combat moves, special powers, and 360 achievements that you'll only encounter while playing online with another shapeshifting powerhouse.

While it won't end up as a node on your web, there's another element of the game that's in a constant state of flux and growth – New York City. "New York is quite literally a character in our game. It responds to what is going on. It has an identity. And it will change in accordance with how you're playing the game," Holmes says. With thousands of NPCs making their way through the game world, the team hopes to have the most populated and lively cityscape anyone has ever seen. This vibe will only be enhanced by the dozens of cars and other vehicles that slowly push through the traffic jams of the streets. As mentioned earlier, the appearance of the city will dramatically alter over the course of the war. However, more subtle shifts will help to provide a mood and atmosphere to the experience. As you play, time will pass, and days will roll into weeks. As many as nine unique light and shadow schemes will pass in a given 24 hour period, as night turns to day and back again. A wealth of weather effects will blanket the city. All told, several weeks of unique days will be programmed into the game. By the time they start to repeat, if they do, you'll be hard pressed to notice.

continued on page 57 >>>



■ The giant hive in the background is just one manifestation of the virus as it decimates the Manhattan population



■ Radical hopes the modern conspiracy laden story will touch on real world issues like distrust of the government, through their control of information, the issue of martial law, and the danger of incurable viral outbreaks



Explosions will remain persistent over many minutes, leaving huge plumes of smoke rising into the sky and clouds of dust that swell outwards into the street



continued from page 55

When needed, these atmospheric elements can be altered to set the tone of a given encounter or situation. Persistent destruction gives even more character to the game world. When massive explosions rock a building or road, the smoke and debris won't simply fade away and leave behind a tiny decal. Instead, the team at Radical is aiming to create an almost documentary-style combat zone, where huge plumes of smoke will rise from the site of a grenade blast. Dust from an air strike half a block away will sweep up towards you until it overtakes your location and you find yourself temporarily walking blind. These effects will not always remain hours later in the game, but in the immediate aftermath of a major conflict, a given city block can become positively devastated. With so much activity, dark alleys and comers, throngs of people, and massive skyscrapers, the New York City of Prototype will be either the ultimate hiding place or a disaster of a warzone — all depending on the player's choices.

Just as the team at Radical has had almost complete freedom with Prototype to craft the game they wanted to make, it's a freedom they want to pass on to the gamers who play their game. The open world genre of games first became popular because it broke the mold of linear paths through a game world. Few games, however, have followed through on the promise to provide gameplay that matched that freedom of movement. With Prototype, Radical will be able to realize that promise in a totally new way, combining tense stealth with brutal combat, and delivering complex story elements while simultaneously letting players leap and sprint through a gigantic city at breakneck speed. It's a game design concept rooted in the idea that players want the cathartic release provided by a character that can know and do just about anything. If they have their way, Radical will make a game that carries a double meaning in its title. Alex Mercer may be the first of a new species, but Prototype might very well be the new model for a game genre that's aching for change. ■■■

PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360
> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION
> PUBLISHER THQ > DEVELOPER VIGIL GAMES
> RELEASE FALL 2008



DARKSIDERS

One of the most popular settings in video games is the post-apocalyptic world scarred by a tragic event. In these scenarios, humanity's ruin is typically brought about by nuclear war, a devastating pandemic, or an alien invasion, all of which result in a sorry wreck of a once-great civilization. In *Darksiders*, a new action game from THQ and developer Vigil Games, players will once again have a chance to

explore this kind of post-apocalyptic landscape, but with an important twist: You are War, one of the fabled Four Horsemen, and that means this isn't your standard sci-fi end-of-the-world situation. "This is like the ultimate apocalypse," declares creative director (and comic book icon) Joe Madureira. "The biblical one, with demons and angels battling over the fate of the planet."

Darksiders begins in the throes of the world's collapse. In the very first level, amid a demonic assault, a great pit opens in the earth and an ancient beast called Abaddon emerges. War engages Abaddon in battle, but is ultimately defeated and stripped of his supernatural abilities. The majority of the game will chronicle War's crusade to recover his lost power and exact his revenge on Abaddon. The other three horsemen come into play as allies and NPCs, but the story is focused on War.

This set-up is a far cry from the text in the book of Revelation. Unlike the systematic and coordinated destruction detailed in the Bible, the world of *Darksiders* paints the horsemen, angels, and demons as different groups with different agendas. The

destruction of Earth appears to be more of a side effect of this conflict rather than the goal. "We wanted it to be our own fiction, and not follow

"We wanted it to be our own fiction, and not follow the Bible or get religious with it."

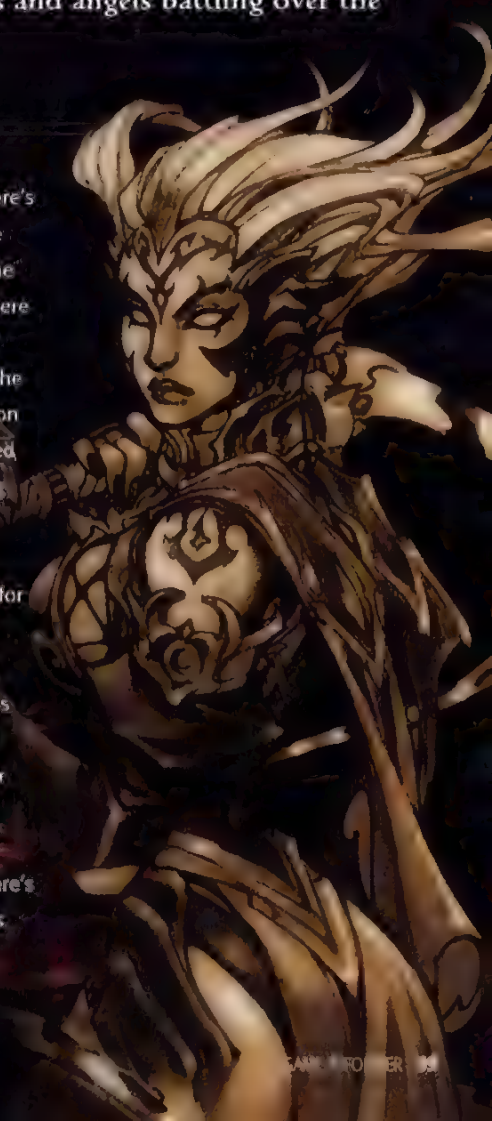
— Joe Madureira

the Bible or get religious with it," Madureira clarifies. "We are calling it a comic book adaptation [of the book of Revelation]. They are more like super heroes." Vigil's general

manager, David Adams, adds: "There's some terminology – you know, we refer to angels and demons and the four horsemen. Apart from that, there are no religious undertones at all." Given Madureira's background in the comic book industry (see sidebar on page 60), Vigil is uniquely equipped to deliver a gaming experience augmented with superhero style.

The concept of a powerful hero stripped of his powers on a quest for revenge has already hit the mainstream in the form of *God of War*, but even though *Darksiders* sounds similar at first, the two games will be very different in execution. "Our initial motivation was to create a game more in the vein of *Zelda* or *Castlevania*," explains Adams. "There's a lot of exploration in those games

Sounding The Trumpets





■ When this monster grabs War, players will have to rapidly hit buttons to escape

Uncanny Transition

Anyone who was a comic book fan in the 1990s should recognize the name Joe Madureira. With a successful run as the artist for *Uncanny X-Men* from 1994 to 1997, his drawings helped shape how we view those classic heroes today. As a founding member of Vigil Games, Madureira told us about his transition from comics to the gaming industry: "If I had known I could have gotten into games, I would have done it a lot sooner. It was something that happened over time," he says. "Comics are cool, but they don't evolve as much as games do.

Every game we see, we learn something from it and are excited by it. It presents unique challenges. Plus, I just love playing games. I love the end product."

God of War is pretty linear. We want to have fun, visceral combat, so it's obviously going to draw some comparisons to *God of War* or *Devil May Cry* there. But I think the overall flow – since it's more about exploration and adventur-

ing – is really quite different."

At its core, *Darksiders* is an action game. Initially armed only with his sword, War fights through legions of enemies with an array of stylish and brutal moves that showcase his status as a superhuman being. "A lot of War's moves are anime and comic book inspired," Adams tells us. This means players can expect flashy and exaggerated attacks and weapons. That doesn't mean the combat system will be overly complicated, however. The combos will be easy to execute, and the enemies won't cause unforgiving amounts of damage. The overall goal is to create a game where amazing things can be done without too much complexity or effort. "We didn't want the combat to limit the game to certain players," Madureira explains. "Ninja Gaiden was



■ The flying enemies add a complication to this early boss fight

freakin' hard. You have to be a skilled player to have fun with that combat."

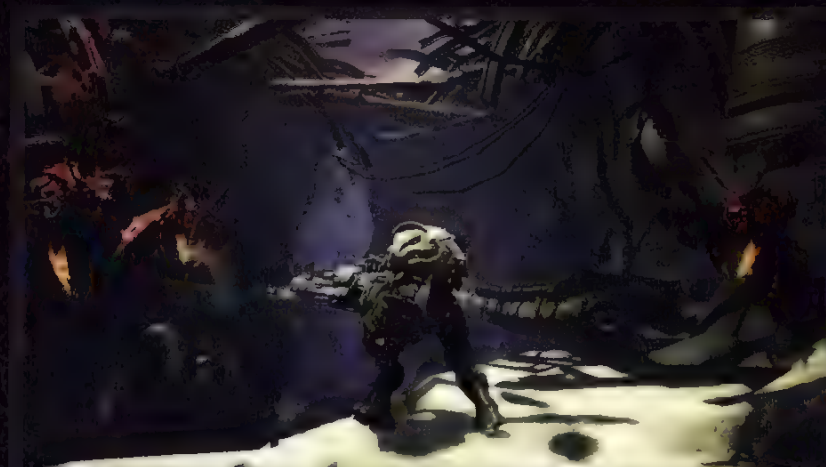
As the game progresses and the enemies become more difficult, War will need more than his sword to make it through fights. Darksiders will have a total of four permanent upgradeable weapons that players can switch between (like Death's scythe), but you will also be able to use items in the environment to attack. For instance, if War comes across a downed military helicopter, he can tear the machine gun from its wing and wield it like a Gatling gun. If there are no obvious weapons in sight, you can just pick up a nearby bus and start smashing. "You won't be picking up anything small like pistols or shotguns," Adams states. "Think rocket launchers or larger."

Other items that War obtains will

"You won't be picking up anything small like pistols or shotguns. Think rocket launchers or larger."

— David Adams

have different applications. Adams and Madureira are currently calling these tools "gear items," and they have uses inside and outside of combat. Similar to games like *Metroid* and *Castlevania*, some of the world will be inaccessible to War until he obtains a particular item or ability. The game is split into eight distinct dungeons branching off from two hubs, and it is in these areas that players will get new gear items to open up new sections of the game. For instance, War gets a hookshot tool that allows him to grapple to specific points



(very much like the clawshot in *Twilight Princess*). Another item allows him to bend reality and link two points in space by portals.

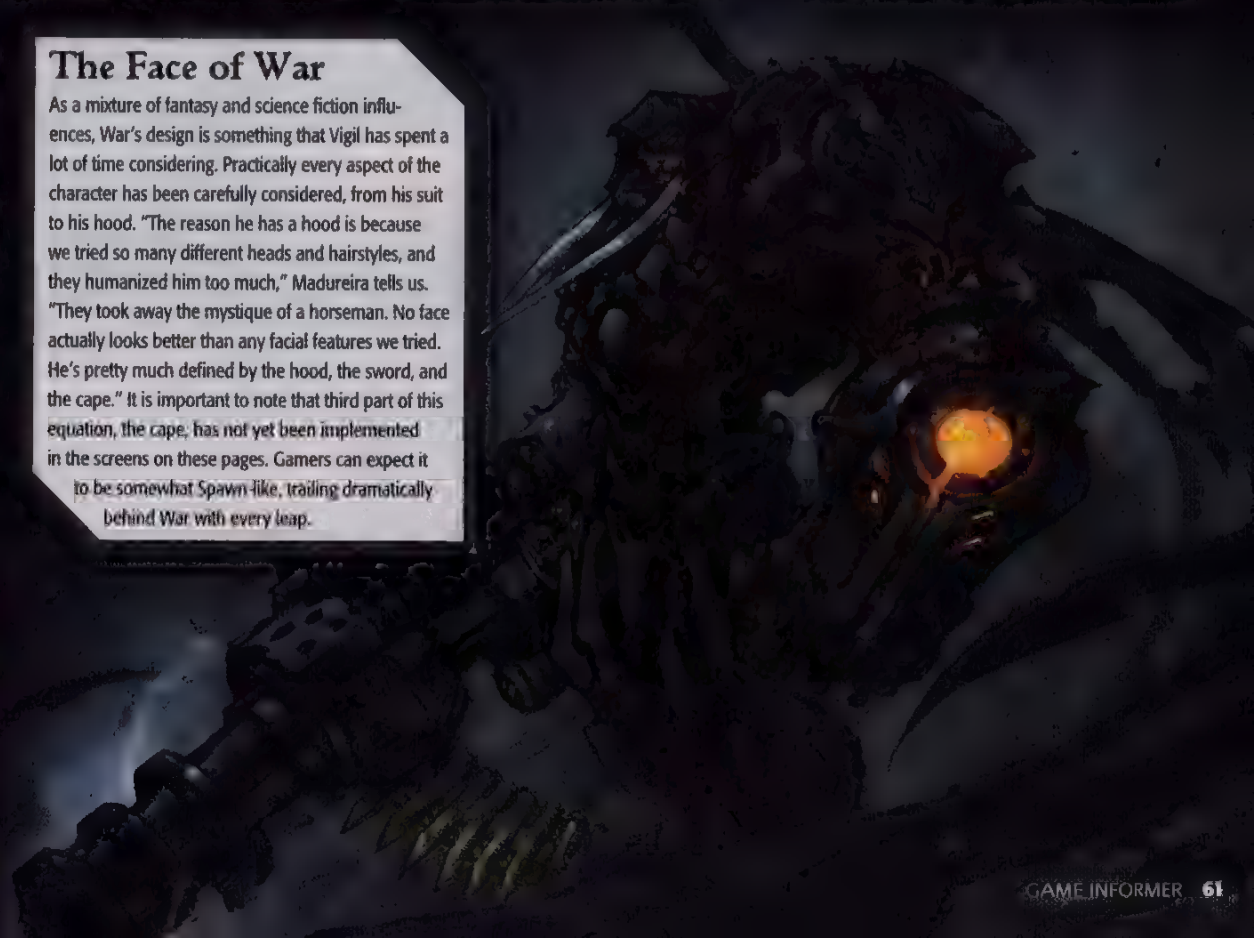
These items will be necessary for boss fights as well, since War's standard attacks won't usually work by themselves in such encounters. For instance, when you're up against a gigantic bat queen in a church tower, normal weapons won't reach her. However, if you use a throwing blade to ring a nearby bell, the sonic disturbance will disable the queen and send her

crashing to the ground, where you are free to use your full arsenal of attacks. Solutions like these won't be incredibly difficult to discover, since they will usually revolve around using a gear item that you just recently obtained.

"When you get an item, we try to focus all of the puzzles in a dungeon around that item. It's not the same mechanic every time," Adams points out. "The idea is to make it fresh and interesting, and give each dungeon a different tone with its puzzles." Of course, the term "dungeon" shouldn't

The Face of War

As a mixture of fantasy and science fiction influences, War's design is something that Vigil has spent a lot of time considering. Practically every aspect of the character has been carefully considered, from his suit to his hood. "The reason he has a hood is because we tried so many different heads and hairstyles, and they humanized him too much," Madureira tells us. "They took away the mystique of a horseman. No face actually looks better than any facial features we tried. He's pretty much defined by the hood, the sword, and the cape." It is important to note that third part of this equation, the cape, has not yet been implemented in the screens on these pages. Gamers can expect it to be somewhat *Spawn*-like, trailing dramatically behind War with every leap.



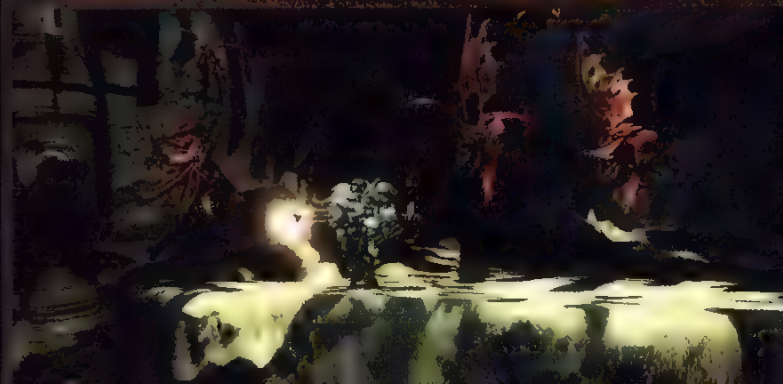
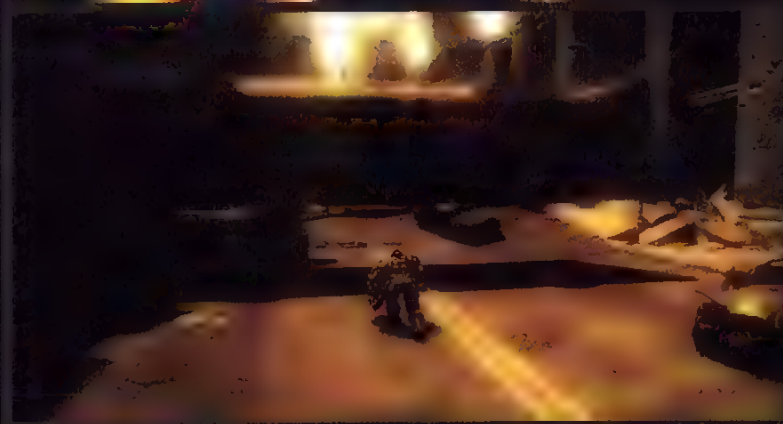
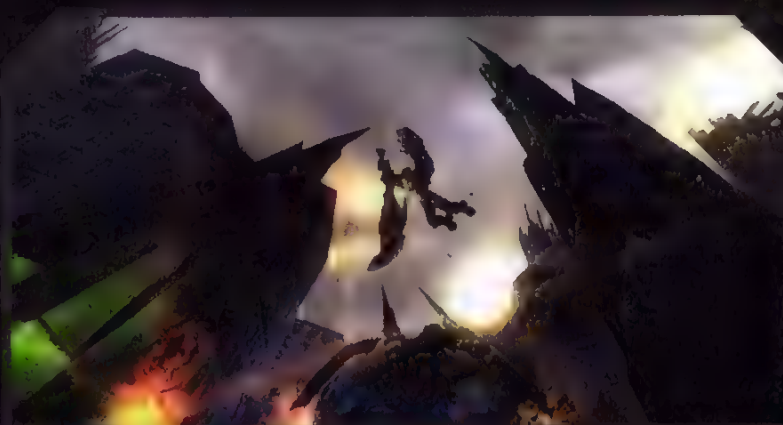


■ War begins with his sword, but eventually gets three more weapons to upgrade

be taken literally; War won't be going through brick-and-mortar underground caverns. They won't necessarily be dungeons in the Legend of Zelda sense; a "dungeon" could be a part of the city like a harbor, or a strange corner of the Underworld.

There is one more major aspect to Darksiders that broadens the horizons of combat and exploration: As one of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, it would be ridiculous if War didn't have a horse. War regains his ethereal mount, named Ruin, about halfway through the game. The team is aware that horses present some challenges as major gameplay components, and as such, they are often relegated to a mode of transportation. In Darksiders, Ruin won't just be a way to get from point A to point B. "We want you to feel like you can do anything on horseback that you could do otherwise," Adams assures us. "We want it to be an advantage. Our basic motivation was to make it feel like an extension of War, so a lot of the horse's abilities and War's abilities can be used together."

Since Ruin isn't bound by earthly



constraints, War will be able to summon and dismiss him at will – even between moves during combat. You could use him to jump into the air, dismount (at which point Ruin just disappears) and perform an aerial combo, then summon him again before you land to keep the flow going. Additionally, the team's goal is to make Ruin almost as maneuverable as War himself. Unlike Twilight Princess and Shadow of the Colossus, Darksiders' horse controls won't be stubbornly realistic. In other words, you won't be limited to riding circles around your foes and wildly swinging at whatever happens to be in range.

New approaches to familiar mechanics like these are one way Vigil is hoping that Darksiders will distinguish itself from its peers. It is an ambitious undertaking, especially considering that Darksiders will be the first game from the studio to hit retail shelves. Even so, the team has been invested in the idea since the studio was founded in 2005. "We knew we couldn't just pitch [Darksiders] with a document with some nice art in it, so we got something up and running that publishers



■ The ruined city acts as a hub from which most of the game's "dungeons" are accessible



Retired Horsemen

Traditionally, the Four Horsemen are War, Death, Famine, and Pestilence. In *Darksiders*, the names War and Death remain consistent, but the others have been changed to accommodate the game's fiction. "We just imagined a character select screen where players had to choose a character named Famine or Pestilence and it just seemed kind of lame," Madureira admits. "Fury and Strife have replaced Famine and Pestilence."



■ Most boss fights will involve puzzle solving elements in addition to straight-up combat

could play, and we sort of had *Vigil* open on our own dime for eight or nine months," reveals Madureira. "Then THQ snatched us up. At first they were just going to publish the game, but then they pitched the idea of buying the company outright."

THQ must have had incredible confidence in both *Vigil Games* and *Darksiders*, and after seeing the game in action, it isn't difficult to see why. Combining stylish design and larger-than-life combat and characters, *Darksiders* should provide gamers with plenty of twists on the action/exploration formula. "We basically wanted to create an IP that let us do the kind of gameplay and setting and scenarios that we liked," Madureira says plainly. "The Four Horsemen idea got everyone excited. It just got people on the team pumped, so we figured that was a good place to start!"



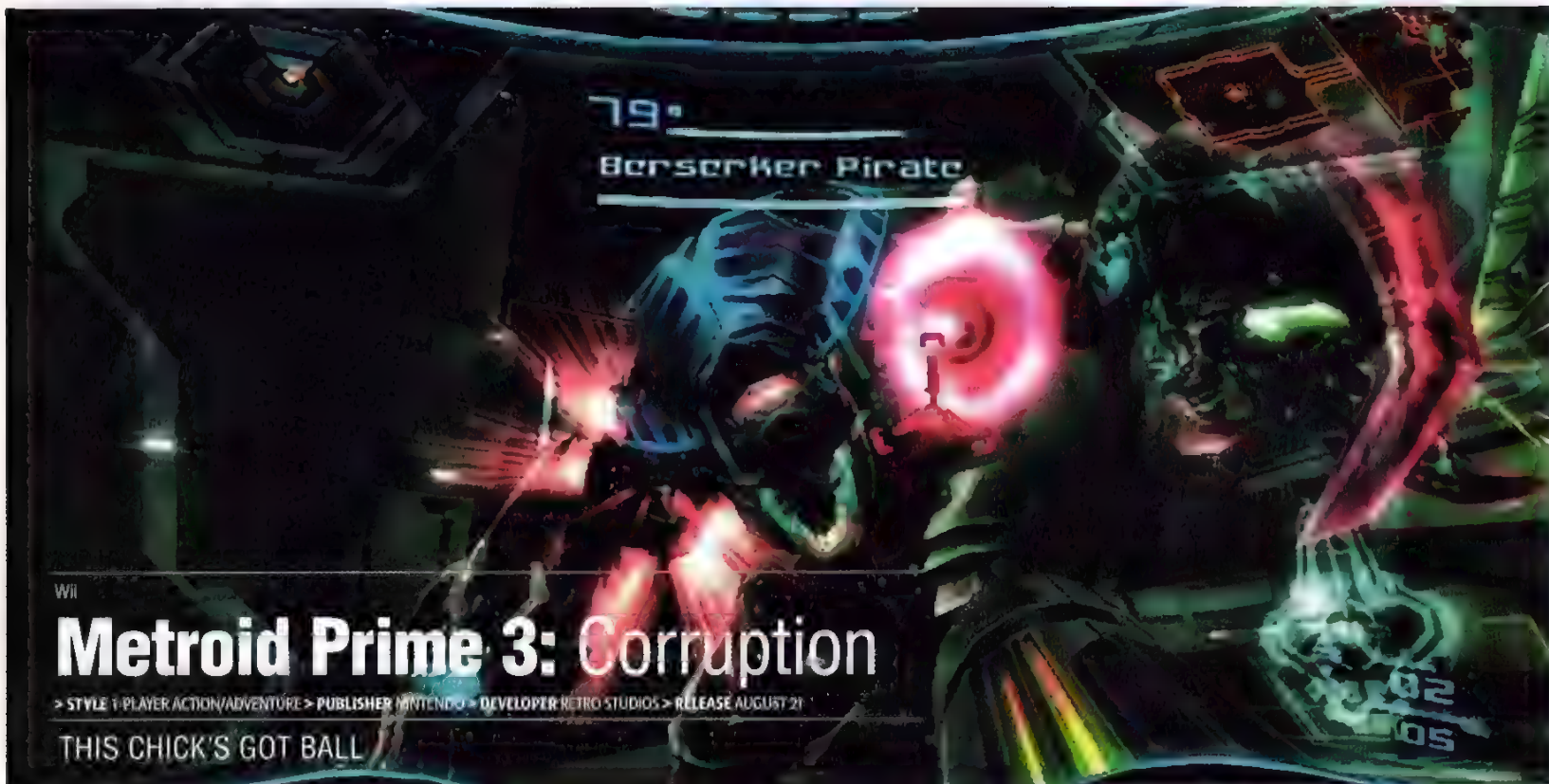
■ Guns will be useful for specific sequences, but War won't carry them around the whole game

Head to Game Informer Online to check out our full conversation with Vigil's David Adams and Joe Madureira about their vision and inspiration for Darksiders.



PREVIEWS

A Glimpse Into The Future Of Gaming



Wii

Metroid Prime 3: Corruption

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION/ADVENTURE > PUBLISHER NINTENDO > DEVELOPER RETRO STUDIOS > RELEASE AUGUST 21

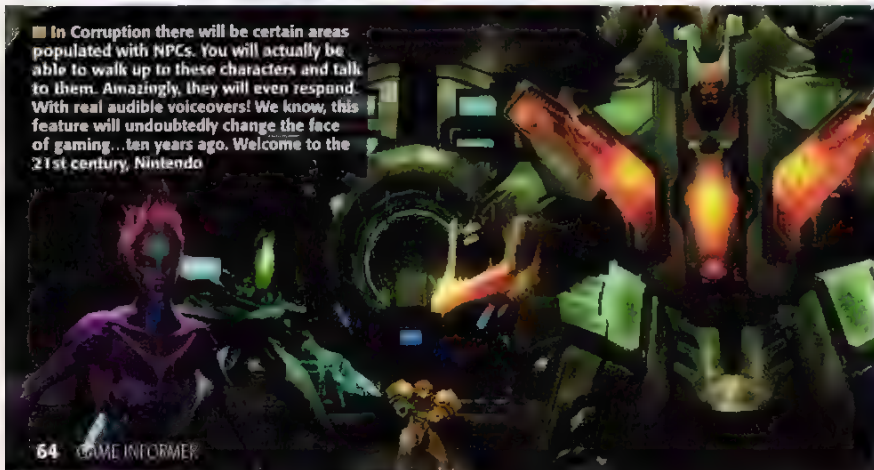
THIS CHICK'S GOT BALL



■ Retro Studios has tried to add Wii specific twists to all of Samus' gadgets. The grapple beam, for example, can latch onto enemies' shields by holding down the grapple button then throwing the Nunchuck controller forward like a fishing pole. Yanking the Nunchuck back toward you will then rip off the shield.

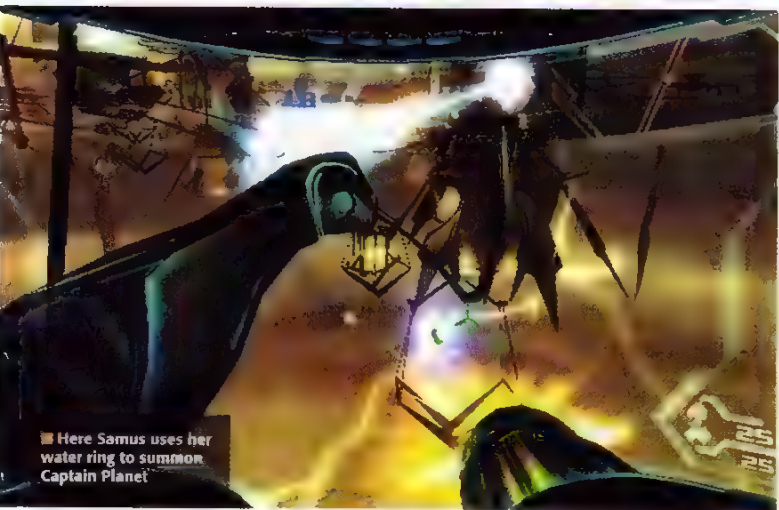
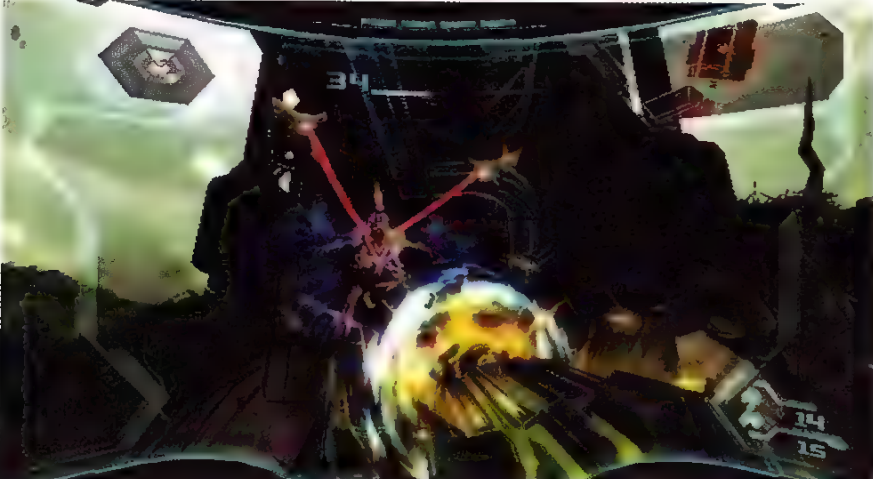
Developer Retro Studios may be hoping to prove a few things about the Wii with *Metroid Prime 3: Corruption*. On a system that is technically the weakest, *Corruption* could prove that a few graphical tricks can still be squeezed out of Nintendo's tiny white box. On a system that has so far faltered when delivering compelling first-person action experiences, *Corruption* could prove that the system excels at immersive first-person narratives. But most importantly, on the system with the most minigame collections and casual games marketed to soccer moms and grandparents, *Corruption* could prove that Nintendo is still dedicated to that loyal fanbase eager to sink its teeth into a more epic gaming adventure.

The game opens with Samus seated in the cockpit of her ship. We felt immediately at home with the controls as we fiddled with the switches along the dash of her ship. *Corruption's* controls are probably the most important element in the game for Retro Studios to get right, and it looks like it has risen to the challenge. Looking around by pointing at the screen feels completely natural, making us



■ In *Corruption* there will be certain areas populated with NPCs. You will actually be able to walk up to these characters and talk to them. Amazingly, they will even respond. With real audible voiceovers! We know, this feature will undoubtedly change the face of gaming...ten years ago. Welcome to the 21st century, Nintendo.





Here Samus uses her water ring to summon Captain Planet



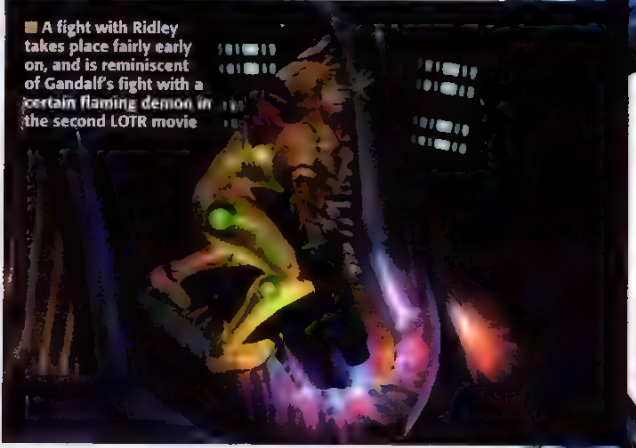
wonder why games have struggled with this on the Wii before.

There is a new kind of targeting mode in Corruption called "lock-on free aiming." In this mode, whenever Samus locks onto an enemy it becomes fixed to the center of her view – the focal point that she strafes around – but unlike previous lock-on features, Samus will still be free to shoot at anything within her field of vision. Of course, the more traditional targeting type will also be available.

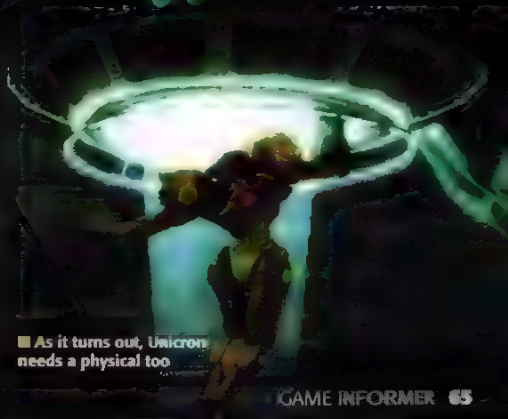
As the story continues to unfold we learn that six months have passed since the events of Metroid Prime 2 on the planet Aether. The Galactic Federation's network of computers has been inexplicably infected, and the Federation has asked for assistance from several bounty hunters, including Samus Aran. It looks like Dark Samus has made her return from the grave, and she is corrupting several other alien worlds. Not only will Samus be able to pilot to these different worlds

with her ship, but it now comes with a nifty new trick. Throughout the game there will be certain designated areas where Samus can call her ship, allowing her to refill weapons and energy or save the game.

Corruption's most impressive feat, however, may be its graphics. It is certainly a tall order to expect any Wii game to compete graphically against the big boys on more powerful systems, but Retro Studios' art team has done a masterful job with Corruption. The few levels we witnessed were gorgeous, and we don't even feel the need to qualify that with "for a Wii game." One area, called the sky tower, was particularly memorable. It's just a shame the Wii doesn't support full HD, because Corruption is one of those rare Wii games that is actually worthy. So do you still need any more proof? Metroid Prime 3 already looks to be the Wii game to get this summer, if not this year. ■ ■ ■



A fight with Ridley takes place fairly early on, and is reminiscent of Gandalf's fight with a certain flaming demon in the second LOTR movie



As it turns out, Unicron needs a physical too

PLAYSTATION 3

Heavenly Sword

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



IT SLICES! IT DICES!

Heavenly Sword has been an intriguing title in the PlayStation 3's arsenal. Since its unveiling at E3 2005, it has perpetually been one of the games on the horizon with the potential to be cool, but specifics about the story and gameplay remained largely unknown. As the game's fall release nears, Sony is finally pulling back the curtain on this stylish adventure, and we have seen the gorgeous action lying in wait.

The game was initially perceived as another title in the vein of God of War, but after playing through the second of Heavenly Sword's six chapters, it's clear that the heroine Nariko is carving out her own corner in the action game arena. Wielding a cursed sword with the ability to act as several kinds of weapons, Nariko has three distinct fighting stances: ranged, speed, and power. These positions do more than affect more how cool you look as you defeat hordes of bad guys; Heavenly Sword is far from a simple button-masher, and juggling these styles is at the core of its calculated combat.

On the surface, it isn't too complicated. The speed stance is the default, and delivers quick strikes. If you are in the power stance (initiated by holding R1) you will perform a slow but strong attack, and the ranged stance (hold L1) is weak but has reach. Combining your moves deliberately results in combos, which you will need to learn quickly to get anywhere in battle. The easiest ones involve staying in the same stance, but in order to get a good aerial combo, you'll have to switch mid-stride to keep the chain going. The moves have other effects, too. For example, by sweeping your blades in ranged mode, you can deflect incoming arrows or scatter an oncoming tidal wave.

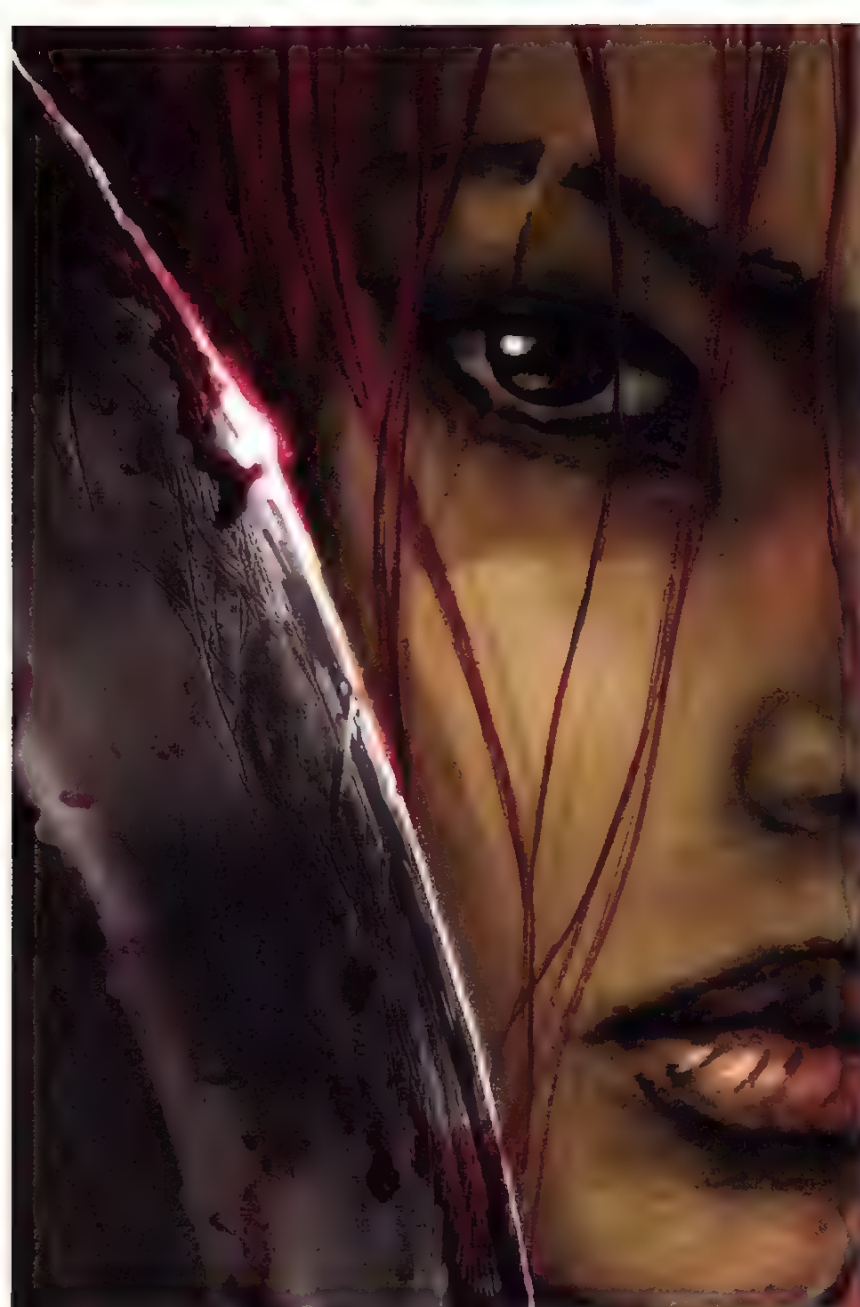
Most of the fights are focused on one-versus-many encounters, and as such, there is equal emphasis on avoiding attacks as there is on making them. While you are vulnerable in the middle of a move, when stationary Nariko will automatically block incoming attacks depending on her stance: Speed stance blocks normal moves, and power stance deflects stronger ones. It sounds simple at first, but this system really tests your reflexes when you are surrounded by 15 armed guards, trying to keep track of enemy movements while launching your own offensive.

We fought through a couple of one-on-one boss fights as well, and the generals of the evil King Bohan (played by Andy Serkis) are just as bizarre as the cast from the Metal Gear series. Flying Fox has bladed wings on his back and the power of teleportation, and Whiptail is a freakish snake/fish hybrid with control over water. These fights seemed to involve a fair bit of the old "dodge or block until they're vulnerable" mechanic, but since they occur relatively early in the story, that may not be representative of all the game's boss bouts.

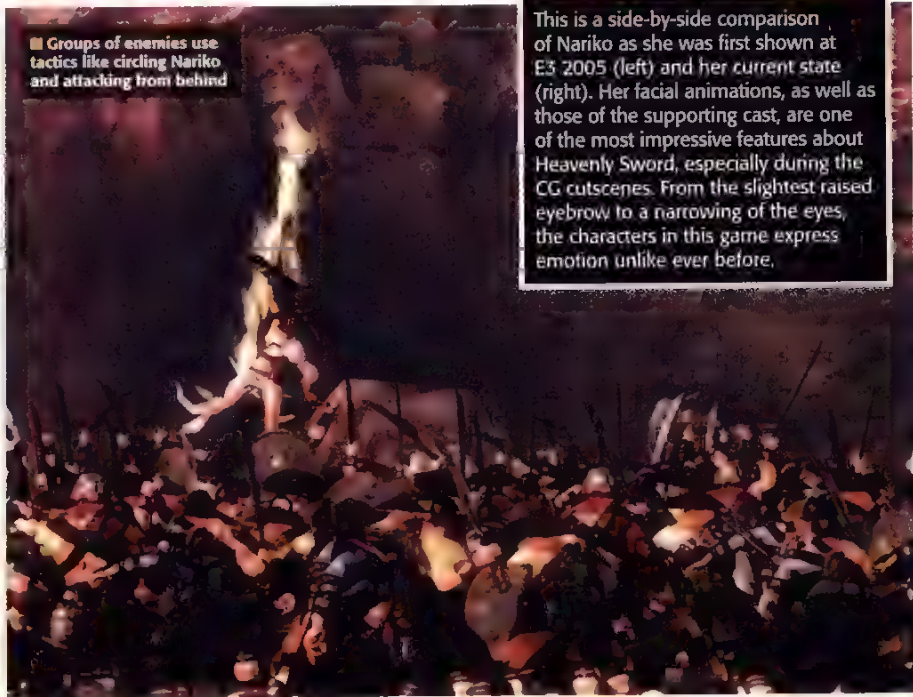
With all of these combat and story elements coming together, Heavenly Sword is finally alchemizing its potential into actual gameplay. The action is challenging, the cutscenes are gorgeous, and everyone who dismissed it as "Goddess of War" will likely be changing their tune. ■ ■ ■



This is a side-by-side comparison of Nariko as she was first shown at E3 2005 (left) and her current state (right). Her facial animations, as well as those of the supporting cast, are one of the most impressive features about Heavenly Sword, especially during the CG cutscenes. From the slightest raised eyebrow to a narrowing of the eyes, the characters in this game express emotion unlike ever before.



■ This brute is the son of King Bohan. He's about as smart as the ground he tramples



■ Groups of enemies use tactics like circling Nariko and attacking from behind



■ Some enemies will drop shields or swords that can be used as projectiles



■ Each of the three stances is useful in certain situations



■ The game quickly teaches you that you can't just mash buttons. Learning combos is the key.



■ By hitting the triangle button just as an enemy attacks, you will perform a counter

FRONT ROW SEAT

Heavenly Sword uses some mild puzzle elements like pulling levers and hitting switches, but adds an interesting twist. Any time Nariko throws an item, you can make the camera follow the object, allowing you to direct its path in mid-air. If you need to hit a gong with a shield to open a gate, you can throw the shield and guide it straight to the mark. This aftertouch mechanic isn't restricted just to opening doors, though. In one mission we played, we were in a sniper position defending a bridge. We lovingly steered each arrow we fired at the advancing goons, hitting them from every agonizing angle and relishing the direct connection to the carnage.



■ The ranged stance doesn't block any attacks, it gives Nariko reach, but leaves her vulnerable

■ The game is sharing many assets with the film, so it will have many of the same environments, plus a few surprises.

PLAYSTATION 3 / XBOX 360

Beowulf

▶ STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION ▶ PUBLISHER UBISOFT ▶ DEVELOPER UBISOFT SHANGHAI ▶ RELEASE NOVEMBER

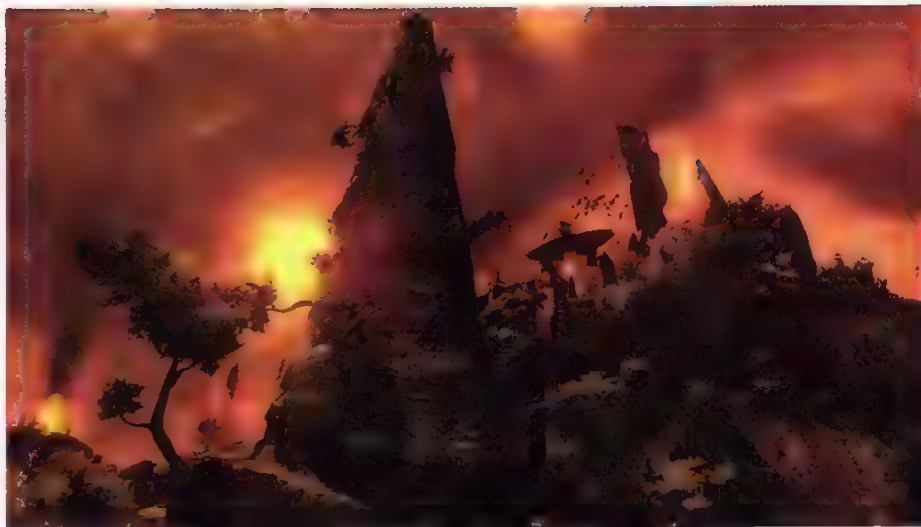
TOTAL LITERATURE

It seems like most of the literary works that Hollywood adapts into films are full of child-like wonder and discovery, like *The Chronicles of Narnia*, *Harry Potter*, and *Transformers: The Golden Compass*. But sometimes, instead of entering a whimsical fantasy world, you just want to see a guy with the strength of 30 men fight a demon. That's when you turn to the middle-english epic poem *Beowulf*.

The legendary hero Beowulf is best known for his battle against the monster Grendel, and the movie (due out this fall) will deal with that, along with the ensuing conflict with Grendel's mother. The accompanying game, being handled by Ubisoft's Shanghai studio, will cover even more ground by delving into a 20-year period not detailed in the movie after Grendel's death.

Players will control Beowulf during his pursuit of power as he fights beasts of all sorts. Instead of using standard button-mashing, Ubisoft is describing Beowulf as a "hack n' lead" game, since the involvement of Beowulf's followers (up to 20 of them) will be a key part of the action. They can defend positions, move obstacles, and row ships. Beowulf is the hero, after all; he can't be bothered with that grunt work. His job is to pick up weapons, hit bad guys until the weapons break, and then pick up more.

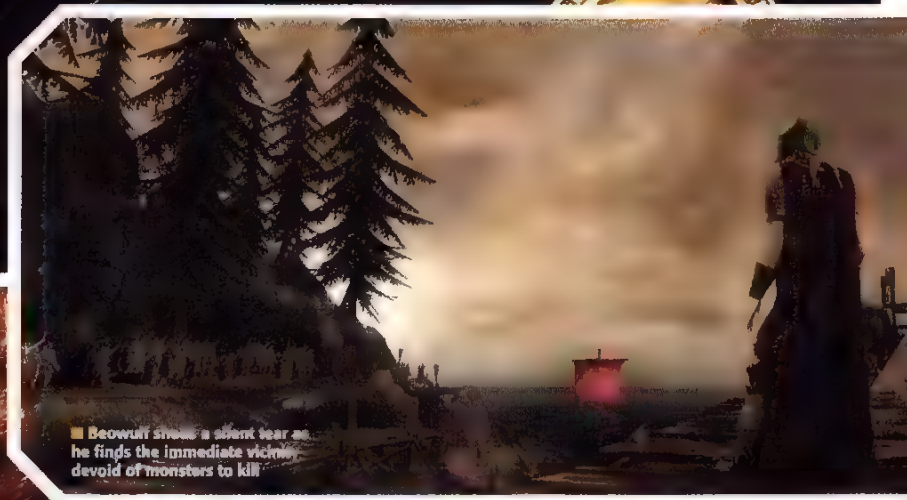
The game will also feature a struggle between Beowulf's carnal and heroic tendencies, but it isn't really a morality-based system. By tapping into his carnal abilities (like a berserker rage) Beowulf betters himself, while his heroic tasks like effective team management do more to benefit the group. It won't be a case where you choose one path or the other; you will have to balance both of them. When you're an unstoppable powerhouse like Beowulf, you don't have time to think about the difference between right and wrong — you just beat the hell out of stuff in different ways and hope it all turns out okay. ■ ■ ■



■ Apparently fur is in



■ Hogwarts has really gone downhill



■ Beowulf sheds a silent tear as he finds the immediate victory devoid of monsters to kill



■ One of Beowulf's concerns will be keeping his thanes alive in the face of monsters like this

BEOWULF

For a movie with such high-profile contributors, it is surprising that *Beowulf* hasn't been getting more buzz. Directed by Robert Zemeckis and written by Neil Gaiman and Roger Avery, the film stars Anthony Hopkins, John Malkovich, Angelina Jolie, and Ray Winstone as the title character. Instead of being fully live-action, the film features a visual style similar to *The Polar Express*, with realistic but computer-enhanced characters. It might look somewhat eerie, but then again, when has John Malkovich ever not looked a bit creepy?

Destroy All Humans: Path of the Furon

> STYLE 1 OR 2-PLAYER ACTION > PUBLISHER THQ > DEVELOPER SANDBLAST > RELEASE 2008

THE HARVEST CONTINUES

Since there were still humans alive at the end of *Destroy All Humans 2*, it should come as no surprise that THQ is publishing a third entry in this series to help Crypto continue his quest. Former DAH developer Pandemic has moved on to other projects, and the series has passed into the hands of Sandblast. Fans shouldn't worry, though, because it looks as though the new team is committed to keeping the spirit of the series alive and well.

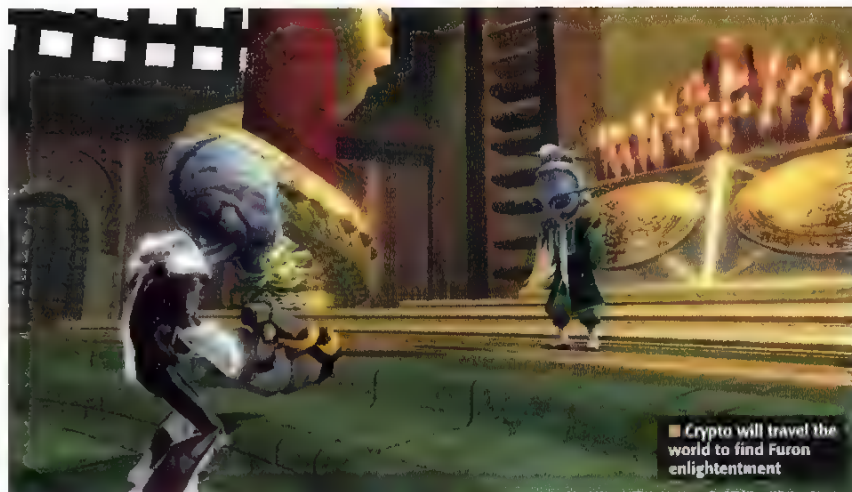
"Without a doubt, the greatest strength of the *Destroy All Humans* series is its unique brand of irreverent and satirical humor," creative director Jon Knoles tells us. "Gamers can expect a sizeable serving of chuckles, guffaws, and laugh out loud moments in story, dialogue, and gameplay this time around."

While the satirical aspect of the series hasn't changed, gamers might be surprised when they begin *Path of the Furon* to find Crypto's once-insatiable bloodlust waning. "Crypto's lost his motivation for destroying humans," admits Knoles. "He's content to chill out in his swank casino penthouse, living the good life." Thankfully, if movies have taught us anything, it's that disillusioned former heroes can dig deep and rediscover their will to fight. Plus, since the game is set in the '70s, it would be a shame to let all of those disco-dancing freaks go undisintegrated.

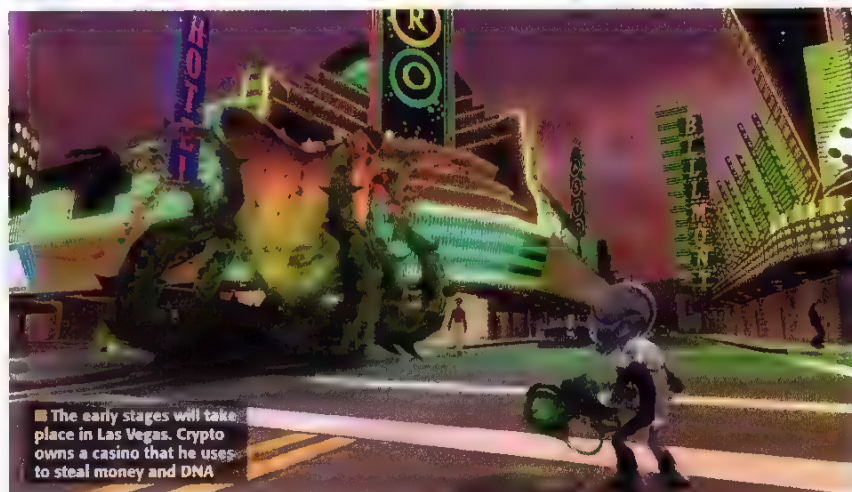
Once Crypto rekindles his crusade, players will be pleased to find an array of new mental abilities at his disposal. The coolest is called *Temporal Fist*, which freezes time around Crypto while still allowing him to interact with objects. "Crypto can freely run or fly around and manipulate things or people with PK to

set up crazy, Rube Goldberg machine-type scenarios, then unfreeze time and watch it all play out," explains Knoles. Among Crypto's new weapons you will find treats like a black hole gun and the Venus human trap.

The expanded arsenal is augmented by an increased ability to see the damage you inflict on the Earth. Instead of just using your UFO to blow up three-story buildings, you'll be taking down 40-story skyscrapers and witnessing the destruction as never before. "You can even write your name on buildings and terrain," Knoles reveals. "Best of all, as you damage these buildings, scores of panicked human crowds flock into the streets for you to mass abduct like a big vacuum cleaner." Ah, humans are so stupid. As long as this series maintains its trademark humor, we're happy to help Crypto obliterate us. ■ ■ ■



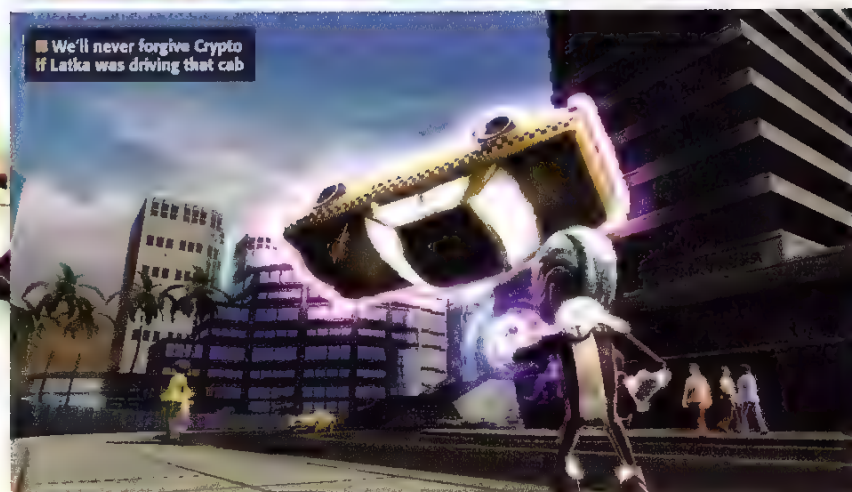
■ Crypto will travel the world to find Furon enlightenment



■ The early stages will take place in Las Vegas. Crypto owns a casino that he uses to steal money and DNA



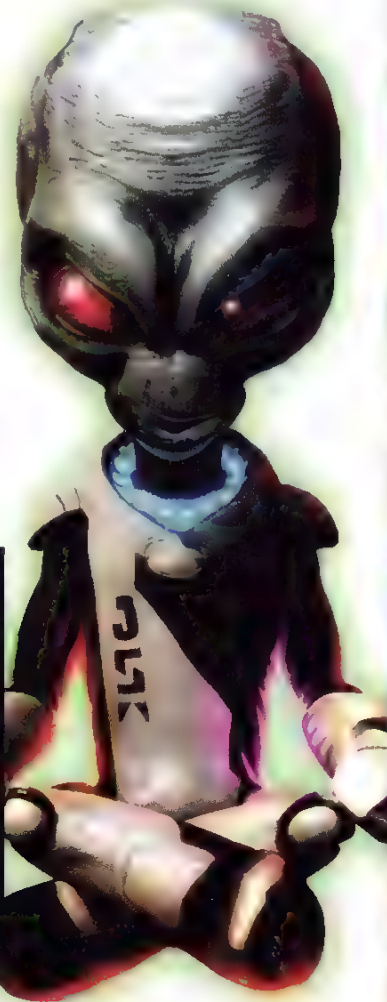
■ The UFO continues to play a major role in combat and transportation



■ We'll never forgive Crypto if Latka was driving that cab

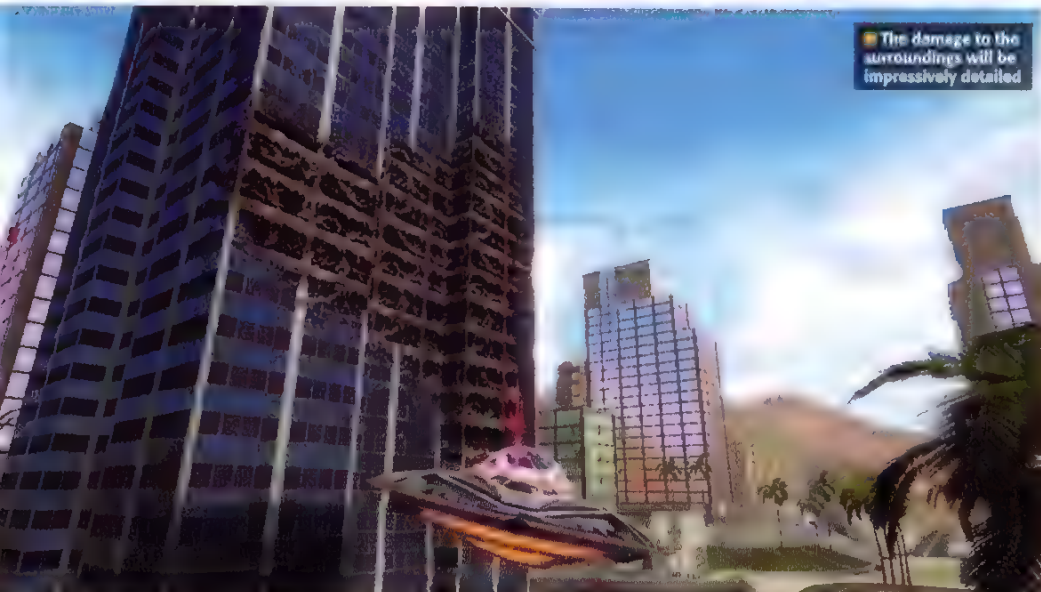
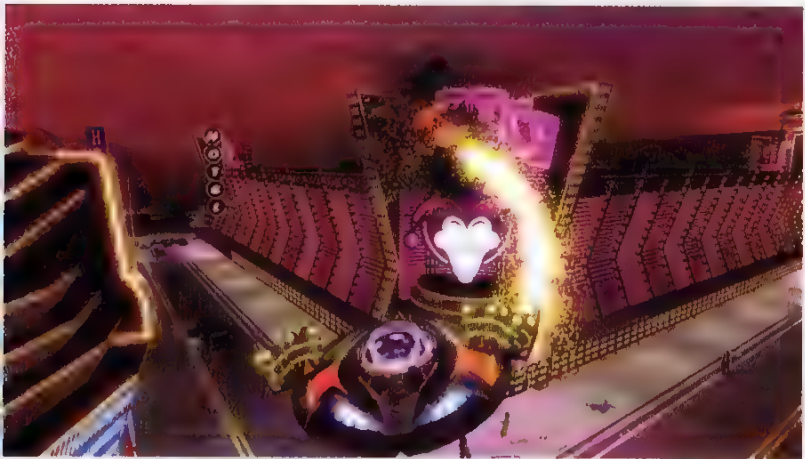
BIG WILLY UNLEASHED

Path of the Furon isn't going to be Crypto's only new outing in 2008. A prequel entitled *Destroy All Humans: Big Willy Unleashed* is also on the way. In development at Locomotive for Wii, PS2, and PSP, the game focuses on Crypto and Pox waging a fast food war against Colonel Kluckin'. In addition to using his usual mental powers and alien weaponry, Crypto will have access to Big Willy, a mech disguised as a fast food mascot. All three versions will have this basic premise, but the Wii's will of course use some motion-sensing.





The black hole gun is the game's most powerful new weapon



The damage to the surroundings will be impressively detailed





■ With more experience on next-gen consoles, Monolith is able to deliver a new level of gritty realism with its wayward and insane enemies

UNLIMITED ENABLED

PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360

Condemned 2: Bloodshot

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION (MULTIPLAYER TBA) > PUBLISHER SEGA > DEVELOPER MONOLITH STUDIOS > RELEASE SPRING 2008

UP CLOSE AND TERRIFYING

This month brings us the first real details on the sequel to one of the 360's most exciting and underappreciated releases. Monolith plans to return to the gritty supernatural detective work of the first *Condemned* game, but, as we learned from a conversation with producer David Hasle, the series is definitely ready to move into the future.

"We're picking up the storyline a year later," Hasle tells us. "Ethan Thomas has really hit rock bottom. The events from *Condemned: Criminal Origins* that drove him out of the SCU still continue to haunt him." While he seems hesitant to detail much about what happened to Ethan in the frightening final sequence of the first game, Hasle is very clear that Ethan will be taking a more proactive role this time around. "He's now out for payback and he will definitely be playing by his own rules."

That payback seems to take the form of some pretty brutal combat options for the former SCU detective. Fist fighting has been dramatically expanded with new swings, so players can experience the terror of a brutal life-or-death hand-to-hand fight. Finishing moves now include more interactive options, such as throwing some-

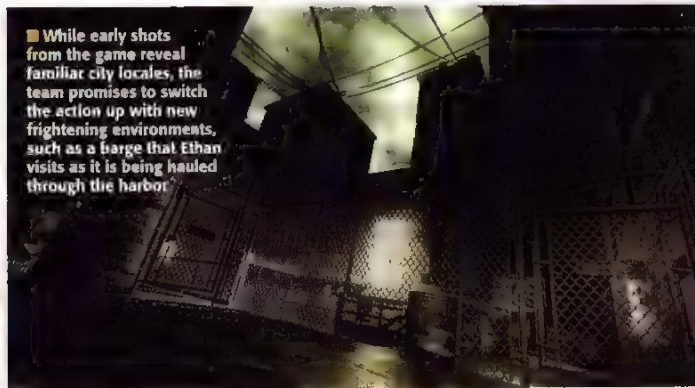
one's head into a TV, breaking their back on a bookshelf, or simply shoving their head into a toilet before snapping their neck. You know, real family friendly fare. "We're also now providing the ability to throw weapons – but watch out because what you can do, the AI can do," Hasle hints. Those AI routines are now more varied than before, so the random insane drifters you encounter throughout the game will act very differently from the rabid dogs that attack you in the first level.

Fans of the original will recall that forensic crime scene investigation was a big component of the gameplay – those options in the sequel have been drastically expanded. First of all, gamers can choose whether they want to investigate at all, rather than being pigeonholed into a forensic sequence. New investigation tools will also be available to Ethan. Further, each victim and scene will include options to zoom in close and make careful observations to determine things like identifying marks or cause of death. The game then asks a series of questions in order to piece together the crime.

A multiplayer mode is in the works, but Monolith has kept mum on the subject, so we'll have to wait and see how that comes together. The original game was a terrifying ride for those who had the chance to play it – here's hoping the sequel can take the next step forward. ■■■



■ New weapons abound in *Bloodshot*, plus new ways to use them. Producer David Hasle gives a hint: "You know what happens when you fire a taser at someone who is dripping in alcohol?"



■ While early shots from the game reveal familiar city locales, the team promises to switch the action up with new frightening environments, such as a barge that Ethan visits as it is being hauled through the harbor.





WAIT... XBOX 360?
Yes, it was just announced that World in Conflict will be making its way to Xbox 360 as well as PC. Unfortunately we don't know much else; all of our playtime with the beta was on the PC and we've heard no details about the console control scheme. Sierra assured us that the Xbox 360 version will be almost identical to the PC product, so console gamers can look forward to the full single and multiplayer experience.

■ Even when there are dozens of units blowing each other up onscreen, the framerate stays reasonable



■ We believe the operative word here is "pwned"

XBOX 360 | PC

World in Conflict

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER STRATEGY (UP TO 16-PLAYER VIA XBOX LIVE OR PC INTERNET OR LAN) > **PUBLISHER** SIERRA > **DEVELOPER** MASSIVE ENTERTAINMENT > **RELEASE** FALL (XBOX 360), SEPTEMBER (PC)

WAR HAS CHANGED

There aren't many series in gaming as underappreciated as the predecessor to World in Conflict, Massive's Ground Control franchise. We couldn't be happier about the fact that this title is getting some more exposure and attention, because it's an injustice that this talented team's efforts have been denied the recognition they deserve. After spending some time with the closed beta, we have high hopes that World in Conflict will break through to more gamers.

World in Conflict postulates that the Cold War has boiled over into open battle, and puts players in control of the tech-savvy militaries of the modern world. In this tactical RTS, unit creation is based on a pool of points. Everyone starts with the same amount, and you don't get them back until one of your existing units dies. Then the points invested in that piece slowly trickle back into your available pool, allowing for new troops to be airdropped in. In this way, the composition of your force can change during the course of battle, but you can't out-resource anyone to death. Tactical skill is the only currency that will buy you victory here.

The specialty you choose at the start of the match (armor, infantry, or air) determines how much you have to pay for certain units. An air-focused player doesn't lose access to tanks, but the prohibitive expense forces those cross-specialty units into a marginal role in any strategy.

This approach means that success in team-based multiplayer depends largely on communication with your teammates, as each player has only a fraction of the rock-paper-scissors equation available to him at a time. Working as a cohesive whole is key.

In the online matches we played, mobility and cooperation were the two qualities that correlated most strongly to winning games. Finding favorable match-ups for your chosen specialty and responding quickly to any enemy movement are crucial. The variety of modes was a plus, giving players the opportunity to play larger map-control matches (where you drain the opposing team's tickets à la Battlefield) as well as more intimate attack-and-defend gametypes that focus 16 players' worth of destruction on a single conflict point.

Graphically, World in Conflict is unbelievable – and we only saw the DirectX 9 version. Vista users with the appropriate hardware will get to play in DX10 mode, which should be a good showcase for the capabilities of that platform. Between the brilliant presentation and smooth gameplay, both of which are already evident in the beta, this game has a ton of potential. With the PC version shipping in September and the 360 release following soon after, we won't have to wait long to see if that potential is realized in the final product. ■■■



■ As you can see, the 360 version is no slouch when it comes to visuals either

XBOX 360

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

Need for Speed ProStreet

> STYLE 1 OR 2-PLAYER RACING (ON-LINE TBA) > PUBLISHER ELECTRONIC ARTS > DEVELOPER EA CANADA > RELEASE FALL

SPEED KINGS

Street racing changes. It evolves. It's not some monolithic thing that you can peg down and put in a *Win Diesel* movie. The *Need for Speed* series has to change and grow too. Accordingly, *ProStreet* isn't the cop chases of *Most Wanted*, nor is it the open-world/canyon racing of *Carbon*. It's another step forward and another look at street racing and its culture.

ProStreet takes place all around the globe, and focuses on the race weekends that attract mobs of racers who are there to show what they've got under the hood and on the track. These gatherings will have a festival-like atmosphere, and allow you to jump into a variety of different races. Unlike in previous titles, where you just had different events, *ProStreet* focuses on racing disciplines such as Drift, Drag, Grip, and Speed Challenge. To really succeed at each one, you'll have to own cars specifically catered to these race types. Not only that, but you'll upgrade and tweak each vehicle with specialized parts to make sure that your Speed Challenge car, for instance, is set up very differently than your Drift car. It's not a situation where you can just take your favorite car to various events. It's about understanding how to attain maximum performance. To this end, the Auto Sculpt

feature now is not just for looks.

Going along with this focus on specialization, the feel of the cars in *ProStreet* is more realistic than the more arcadey *Need for Speed* games of the past. As such, you'll feel your tires and suspension bite when you break into a corner and you'll be constantly aware of how your car's weight changes during acceleration and braking. Should you lose control and mess up your car, you'll be paying for it in possible lost speed (ruining your back spoiler, for instance, gives your car less downforce) and repair bills after the race. Despite these concerns, *ProStreet* remains a game focused on racing thrills. It looks very sharp, and the sense of speed can be a rush. We played a Speed Challenge course later in the game with an 800-horsepower rocket that was as thrilling as *Carbon*'s canyon races.

All of us who've been playing *Need for Speed* might have our favorite features from past titles that we wished were in *ProStreet*. But the changes being made to the franchise are all in the pursuit of racing excellence. After all, if you're not searching for that last bit of speed, that racing edge to take you above the competition, you'll only find that second place is merely the first loser. ■ ■ ■



■ Auto Sculpting returns, and now altering your car and its parts affects performance



■ Customization is a huge aspect of the game, and this car's level of decal work shows it

PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360 | PC

Medal of Honor: Airborne

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 12-PLAYER VIA PLAYSTATION NETWORK, XBOX LIVE, OR PC INTERNET OR LAN) > **PUBLISHER** ELECTRONIC ARTS
> **DEVELOPER** EA GAMES > **RELEASE** AUGUST 28

BATTERED, BLOODY, BUT CARRYING ON



■ What realism there is doesn't extend to getting shot before you even touch down, thankfully

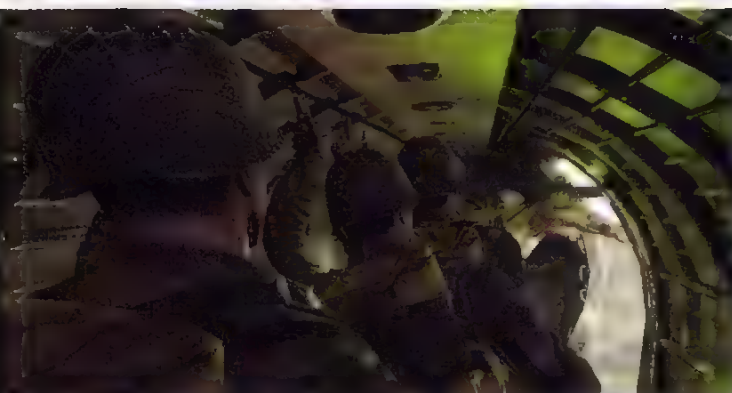
Since debuting on the cover of *Game Informer* in issue 154, *Medal of Honor: Airborne* has gone through some big changes. After being initially intended to showcase next-generation in-house Renderware technology, *Airborne* was moved to Epic Game's Unreal Engine 3. The original weapon-customization system, which was based on WWII soldiers' penchant for modifying their weapons during an operation, was scrapped in favor of fiction-breaking "leveling up" with different weapons. Controllable vehicles have been cut. Even so, the core concept of parachuting in and shaping the conflict through your actions is an incredibly strong hook, and could very well turn *Airborne* into something special yet.

It was amply demonstrated during our recent playtime with the game that dropping into a level from a few thousand feet up is an exhilarating way to kick things off. Seeing the area lit up by gunfire, with searchlights piercing the night sky at intervals and the odd explosion cooking off here or there makes for an outstanding contrast to the dry, clean briefing room maps you were studying just moments ago. After cutting the ties to your 'chute, you're free to pursue your objectives as you see fit, taking note of the spontaneous conflicts popping up as Axis and Allied forces stumble into one another amid the chaos of battle.

On that the dramatic, emotional level, *Airborne* is already a success. It isn't overt, with dying squadmates giving tearful soliloquies about their home back on the farm. The AI's ability to develop situations organically, and by extension force the player to maintain situational awareness at all times, creates a unique and compelling atmosphere.

Nonetheless, it would be impossible to talk about this game without bringing up concerns about the direction *Medal of Honor* is heading. Leveling up your weapons by killing enemies with them is all fine and good, but having the game go into slow motion and reward you with a double-sized MP40 clip for shooting Nazis is very contrary to the dramatic tone that the series has always taken. *Airborne*'s level design often forces you down a specific path to an objective – for instance, clearing through a set-piece building full of dug-in enemies – despite ostensibly giving players total freedom. And the AI is very inconsistent at this stage, though that is a problem that should hopefully be fixed by the time the game releases.

It's a far cry from what EA promised when we first featured the game on our cover, but *Airborne*'s core concept is strong enough to give us hope regardless. And who knows – maybe the multiplayer will blow us all away when EA reveals that still underwraps feature. ■ ■ ■



■ Lieutenant Bugeye was teased mercilessly throughout childhood



■ You may not know this, but there was an invasion that took place on the northern coast of France during WWII



■ Just about anything in the world can and will be used as cover by the AI

The shadow you cast is the shadow they fear.

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XBOX 360 LIVE

PLAYSTATION 3 | PC

The Agency

> **STYLE** MASSIVELY MULTIPLAYER ONLINE ACTION > **PUBLISHER** SONY ONLINE ENTERTAINMENT
> **DEVELOPER** SOE SEATTLE > **RELEASE** 2008

DRESS UP SPIES

It may have the body of an MMO, but at its heart *The Agency* just wants to be a fun globetrotting action romp. Inspired by spy and espionage entertainment, SOE is working to deliver an ever-changing modern day spy world. Its goal for this online shooter is to create cooperative and competitive story-based missions that are easy and quick to jump into.

Like most MMOs, player characters in *The Agency* will constantly evolve, gaining better gear in an attempt to become the ultimate super agent. Unlike most MMOs, where players pick a class at the beginning of the game and then are locked into their selection, SOE has come up with a system it calls "You Are What You Wear." If a player enters a mission that he or she wants to sneak their way through, putting on a stealth outfit will optimize their character's sneaking ability. If he or she would rather utilize a more run-and-gun approach, it would be in his or her best interest to outfit the character with combat gear.

Players start the game by picking between two different factions: the sexy and sleek spies called UNITE, or the rough and tumble mercenaries called ParaGON. Both factions will send players on missions dealing with drug smuggling, assassinations, espionage, and counter intelligence.

And in either case, players' ultimate goals remain the same: climb the ranks of their agency, visit exotic locales from around the world, and build up their own agency by recruiting new Operatives.

SOE thinks of these Operatives as "living loot." Operatives wait for players' orders, which can range from building new tech such as sports cars to gathering intel for the next mission. Not only will players gain better Operatives as they progress through the story, but they can also trade Operatives with other players.

While most spy games on the market try to present a realistic and gritty experience, *The Agency* simply aims to deliver a fun adventure in a playful environment where players don't have to wait around for their excitement. Will it succeed? We'll see, but at least *The Agency* looks different from its competition. That might be all the edge it needs. ■ ■ ■



CELLULAR SPY


One of the cooler features we learned about *The Agency* blends gameplay with everyday life. Players can receive text messages from their Operatives (yes, on their real cell phones) telling them when their new gadgets are finished being built and ready for use. But players might also receive a message that explains how their Operative was compromised while on a researching mission and is being hunted. Players will have the option to text back a message to pay off the hit that has been placed on their Operative, or just let that Operative die. Before making such a crucial super agent decision, we recommend saying something flirtatious to the woman next to you and ordering a martini.





I see you here at the beach a lot.



Oh, I love the ocean.

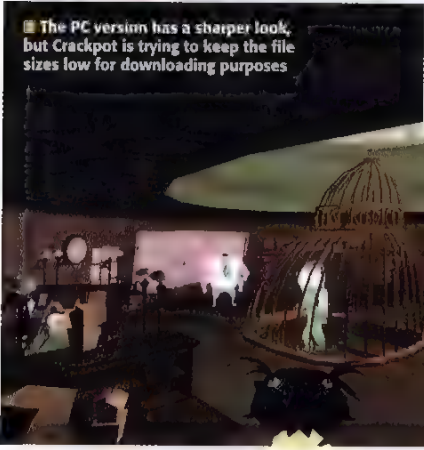



So do I, but I also like to ski in the mountains, camp in the desert and take road trips.

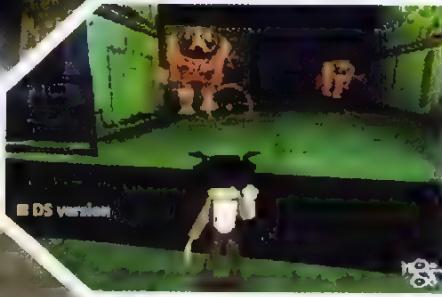
elementandfriends.com 



■ Team members behind 2005's Robots are behind over 20 minutes of CG cutscenes



■ The PC version has a sharper look, but Crackpot is trying to keep the file sizes low for downloading purposes



■ DS version

UNLIMITED ENABLED

NINTENDO DS | PC

Insecticide

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION/ADVENTURE (2-PLAYER VIA WIRELESS) > PUBLISHER GAMECOCK
> DEVELOPER CRACKPOT/CREAT > RELEASE HOLIDAY

SIX-LEGGED GUMSHOES

Readers may remember this bug detective game's debut in our March issue. Well, we've checked in with developer Crackpot to see how things are coming along. Given that the team has worked on several classic LucasArts adventure games like Day of the Tentacle and Full Throttle, it's easy to assume that Crackpot will return to form. But that's not necessarily the case.

"One thing we want to be clear about - Crackpot is not trying to 'revive' the adventure genre," says creative director Larry Ahern. "Insecticide is mostly an action game, but the adventure genre elements are what give it depth. Storyline, character interaction, and clever puzzles appropriate to the story bring the game to a whole new level."

Detective mode maintains the same third-person 3D navigation mechanic as the rest of the game. Here players will search for clues, collect evidence, and interrogate suspects. However, the primary focus will be on platforming and shooting.

Players will control detective Chrys Liszt with help

from partner Roachy Caruthers. She can stick to walls temporarily and "has lots of cool bug weapons throughout the game, including the Pollinator, which creates ammo from toxic pollen siphoned from the polluted skies, or the Amberizer, which encases enemies in Jurassic Park-like blocks of amber," says Crackpot president Mike Levine. "And those are just the standard weapons. Later in the story, there are some surprising twists that unlock a whole new approach to the action."

The PC and DS versions will have similar control schemes based around mouse and touch screen aiming. Friends will be able to play cooperatively over local wireless on DS in a separate squad training exercise. On the other hand, PC players will enjoy better graphics and will download the game in two separate sections. The download provider is still unannounced, but Levine says that Crackpot's "not ruling out a retail version later." ■ ■ ■



■ Search for clues and solve mysteries in detective mode



Not me. Just give me the briny blue ocean and the golden sand. The sea is my one true love.



Really?

Well, the sea and greasy french fries.

XBOX 360 | PC

BioShock

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION/ADVENTURE > PUBLISHER 2K GAMES > DEVELOPER IRRATIONAL GAMES > RELEASE AUGUST 21

SUBMERGE YOURSELF

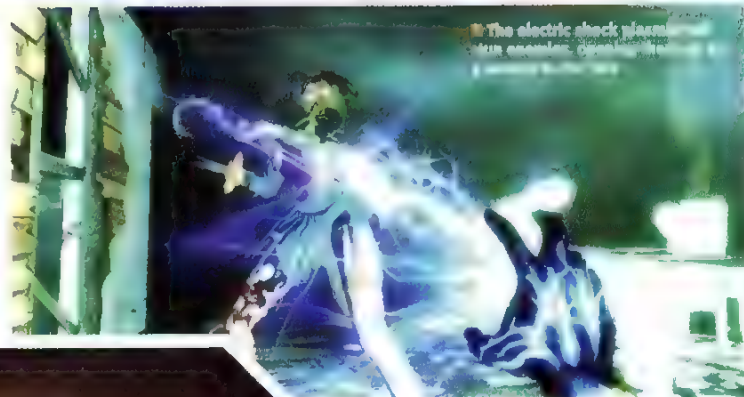
Countless posters hang in the hallways of the underwater city called Rapture. Extolling the virtues of cosmetic surgery and genetic enhancement, these advertisements represent the ideals of the isolated utopia. However, the fact that the posters are surrounded by corpses and smeared with blood is a testament to the citizens' failure to attain those ideals. This contrast between hope and reality forms the core of BioShock's ominous setting, but the gameplay itself centers around another philosophical concept: choice.

Many developers talk about the importance of player choice in their games, but from our hands-on time with BioShock's opening hours, it is clear that the notion is being taken to new heights. Rather than placing enemies and giving players a few set ways through them, BioShock seems to rely more on your ingenuity. Every area is teeming with potential weapons and strategies, and it is up to you to put them together, whether it's an oil puddle to ignite, running water to electrocute, or a lifeless body to throw with the power of your mind.

A perfect example of this idea in practice is during the game's first boss fight, which pits players against a crazed surgeon. You could just run in with your shotgun in hand and a bunch of medkits, but that's hardly the best method. Instead, try igniting him with a

flame power, and when he runs to water to put himself out, send a bolt of lightning through him. While he is stunned and convulsing, go hack the nearby medical station; this will cause the good doctor to get poisoned when he tries to recover his health. These are just a few of the options that seem to be built in to practically every area of Rapture, just waiting to be discovered.

Almost as thrilling as these player-driven battles are the sequences



The electric shock farm with enemies. (Screenshot by Irrational Games)



when the game takes control, with cinematic events occurring in real-time around the player. We ran through a glass tube as it ruptured and flooded, watched a junkie get brutalized by a hulking Big Daddy, and looked on helplessly as an ally was gassed in her own lab.

Most of these events are taken straight from BioShock's first couple of hours. If the game can deliver this kind of intensity throughout, it could be the title that launches Irrational Games out of the PC cult hit arena and into the mainstream. It won't be long until we know for certain, as the game's August release date is near. Now that we've gotten our feet wet, we can't wait to dive in. ■■■

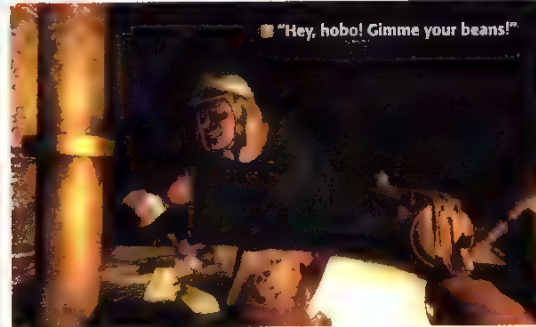
This surgeon is one of the most normal looking people in Rapture



Guns, explosive tanks, and a Big Daddy. This will be interesting.



"Hey, hobo! Gimme your beans!"

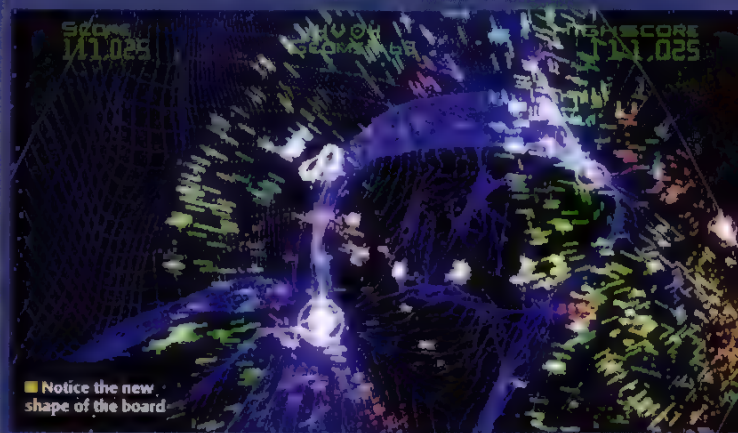


WII DS

Geometry Wars: Galaxies

> STYLE 1 OR 2-PLAYER ACTION > PUBLISHER SIERRA > DEVELOPER KUJU > RELEASE FALL

THE ADDICTION CONTINUES TO EVOLVE



Notice the new shape of the board

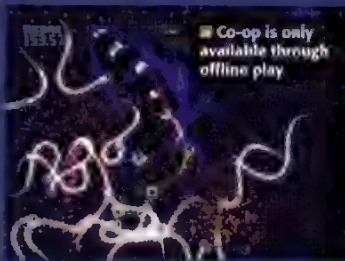
If *Geometry Wars*, a franchise that began as a lowly bonus game tucked away in a higher profile title, could be considered as the Annie of video games, would that make Sierra the Daddy Warbucks? Come this fall, *Geometry Wars* is going from the rags of a bonus game to the riches of a stand-alone retail release.

Strangely enough, creator Bizarre Creations isn't handling the development of this game. These reins have been handed over to Kuju. More perplexing yet, this entry, the largest one yet, won't grace an Xbox console like the first two have. As of now, *Geometry Wars: Galaxies* is a Nintendo exclusive, appearing on both the Wii and DS. Both versions share the same content, and

Holding true to this game's namesake, each level is endless. You can play them until your eyes bleed. To progress further in the galaxy, you simply must earn a high enough rank on each level. Playing longer will also earn you currency that can be used to upgrade a newly added drone that flies by your side. You can develop from this drone functions



Conquer the galaxy, planet by planet



Co-op is only available through offline play

can even be linked together to offer extra content to both games. As the name implies, *Galaxies* is a massive adventure that spans across an entire galaxy. You'll be tasked with exploring the solar systems and planets that make up this galaxy. Each planet serves as a level – each offering a different challenge and design. One planet showcases never-before-seen enemies that will break apart into smaller foes. Another stage features a rotating gravity well that will periodically change direction and send enemy ships hurtling in the opposite direction.

as you progress, and yes, it will have the capability to fire its own weapons.

The gameplay on the Wii is surprisingly intuitive. Using the analog stick on the nunchuk moves your ship. Slow rotations on the remote handle aiming. On the DS, the directional pad moves you, and tapping the screen aims.

Both versions will boast new multiplayer games. The DS offers a versus game that is particularly nasty. When you defeat ships, you can drop tons of them on your foe. The Wii version's standout game is co-op, which can be played in the included bonus game *Geometry Wars: Retro Evolved*.

As a game that only offered one stage, *Geometry Wars* was addictive in that it could be played forever. Now that the game has depth, there's a good chance that some people may take this statement to heart. ■ ■ ■

XBOX 360

Blue Dragon

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ROLE-PLAYING GAME > PUBLISHER MICROSOFT GAME STUDIOS > DEVELOPER MISTWALKER/ARTOON

> RELEASE AUGUST 28

ROLE-PLAYING'S GREATEST HITS

If you could pick and choose your favorite aspects from the best RPGs of the last 20 years, what would make the cut? That's a tough question to pose to any fan, but it is one that the minds behind *Blue Dragon* have clearly been thinking about. We recently had the opportunity to play through the first several hours of the latest English version of the game, and we were constantly reminded of classic RPGs like *Final Fantasy V*, *Grandia*, and *Chrono Trigger*.

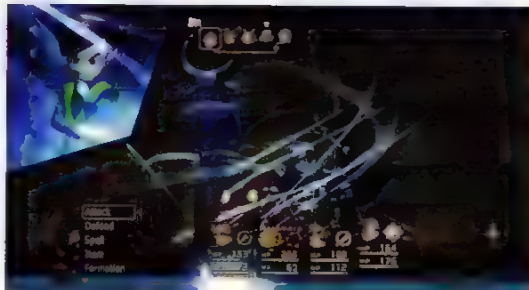
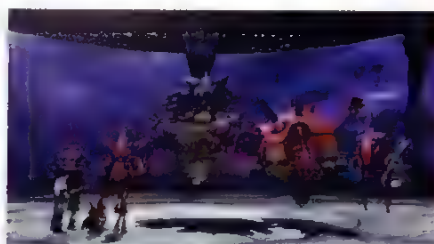
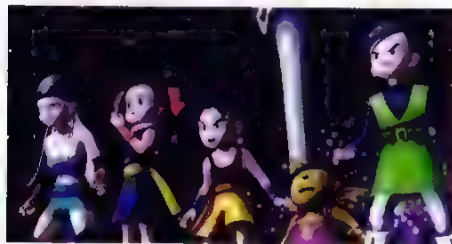
Even with these clear influences, *Blue Dragon* is impressive in the way it manages to avoid feeling derivative. Instead of lifting things wholesale from other games, most of the systems have been adapted and streamlined, resulting in something that is familiar but fun. The job system allows you to progress in one class (e.g. White Mage) but when you decide to switch and go down another path (like Monk), you are still able to use white magic. This mechanic creates all kinds of class and ability combinations, and lends itself to extensive character customization.

Another way *Blue Dragon* refines the RPG formula is in the way it handles battle initiation. You don't have to put up with random encounters; each

enemy is visible on-screen, and you can tip the scales to your side before combat even begins. In addition to being able to launch surprise attacks, you can engage more than one monster at once, which might lead to them fighting each other as well as give you stat bonuses between encounters. Late in the game, there is even a skill that allows you to automatically defeat enemies (gaining full XP) without even starting a fight – perfect for leveling up to prepare for the high-end downloadable content to be released later this year.

It might not be incredibly innovative, but all the elements of *Blue Dragon* seem to come together into an enthralling, highly polished adventure. Shu and his companions are a fun cast of characters, and the mixture of technology and fantasy creates a vibrant world. The only thing left is to

see how these elements tie into the whole story as it unfolds. Given the game's all-star creative team – including *Final Fantasy* creator Hironobu Sakaguchi, composer Nobuo Uematsu, and artist Akira Toriyama – *Blue Dragon* seems destined for greatness. ■ ■ ■



TO THE LIMIT

Blue Dragon's answer to the Limit Break is called a Corporeal attack. After building up a tension gauge by giving and receiving damage, you can command a character's shadow to detach and take on physical form. Once in this state, the creature launches into a long cinematic attack sequence that does heavy damage to your foes.

TWO WORLDS

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EPIC RPG
ADVENTURE
BOTH
ONLINE
AND OFF

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XBOX 360
LIVE
PC
DVD-ROM
SOFTWARE

SOUTHPEAK
GAMES
TopWare
INTERACTIVE

MATURE 17+
Blood and Gore
Violence
ESRB CONTENT RATING www.esrb.com

■ Right now, online features will only appear in the 360 and PS3 version. RedOctane's Bryan Lam says they're "working with Nintendo right now to possibly make something happen."



PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360 | WII | PLAYSTATION 2

Guitar Hero III

> **STYLE** 1 OR 2-PLAYER MUSIC (2-PLAYER VIA XBOX LIVE OR PLAYSTATION NETWORK)
> **PUBLISHER** REDOCTANE/ACTIVISION > **DEVELOPER** NEVERSOFT (XBOX 360 AND PS3), VICARIOUS VISIONS (WII), BUDCAT (PS2) > **RELEASE** FALL



WIRELESS ROCK

By the time this issue hits, everyone should be playing the crap out of Guitar Hero Encore: Rocks the '80s. But that doesn't mean we're forgetting the big boy on the horizon. Over 45 new tracks are getting finalized for Guitar Hero III, with many more original master recordings than any previous game in the series.

In addition to the traditional career mode, players can also team up for a full-blown co-op career. This mode will feature a selection of single-player tracks and also include songs completely exclusive to the co-op career. But how will this extra career affect the game's economy? Will there be enough to purchase in the store? "We're definitely going to have a large amount of unlockable content in regards to new songs, guitars, and other items," says RedOctane's Bryan Lam. "While there will be more opportunities to earn cash, there will also be more ways to spend it."

The most drastic gameplay addition so far, however, is the multiplayer battle mode. Instead of simply competing for points, two players will earn power ups by completing Star Power riffs. Now when you tip the guitar controller vertically it'll send a nasty temporary attack over to your competitor rather than initiating Star Power. Examples include adding double the amount of notes, forcing left-handed play, boosting the difficulty up a notch, shaking the in-game fretboard while making the notes blink on and off, and stealing the other player's power up. You can also make

the other player bust a "string" or their whammy bar, forcing them to furiously tap on a note or waggle the whammy bar to reactivate the note stream, respectively. This is also how single-player boss battles will play out against several real life guitar players. Though RedOctane won't say who exactly will appear in the game, looking over the announced track list gets us thinking... Keith Richards, Billy Corgan, Jack Black - this could really get out of control.

This time around the guitar controllers will be wireless across all platforms (see below). "It'll be the first ever first-party approved wireless accessory from both Microsoft and Sony," says Lam. "It's what all of the fans have wanted for a while now, and we're really excited to provide it to them." ■■■■

■ The PS3, 360, and Wii controllers will be based on the Gibson Les Paul (far right), while the PS2 controller will be shaped like a classic Kramer (note: guitars pictured do not indicate actual controllers or color schemes)



CURRENTLY ANNOUNCED SONGS

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





■ Conan will combat both man and beast in his travels



■ The art style is very evocative of the original book cover Conan artistry of Frank Frazetta



UNLIMITED ENABLED
PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360

Conan

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION > PUBLISHER THQ
> DEVELOPER NIHILISTIC > RELEASE WINTER

BARBARIC

We haven't heard too much from the team making Conan since we visited their studios to announce the game (see issue 167). This month, the fine folks at Nihilistic were kind enough to return the favor, when they dropped by the GI offices to show us the latest version of the game. While a quick glance at the game might draw immediate comparisons to the popular God of War, the recent months have seen the game grow into its own identity, with the original sword-and-sorcery hero leading the way.

As a master of both weaponry and unarmed combat, Conan has a huge number of moves at his disposal when he decides to throw down, a relatively frequent occurrence in the life of this particular barbarian. The huge variety of these powerful techniques comes from the fact that Conan wields different weapons in different ways – a single one-handed sword approach has him moving very differently than when he wields a giant two-handed halberd. All the weapons you find in the game world are useable, but all of them share one quality: brutality. Like the original Robert E. Howard stories that the game is based on, Conan doesn't pull his punches. Dismemberment and cringe-inducing bone breaking is commonplace. Interestingly, the different button combos that lead to a finishing move are often long and complex, with as much in common with a fighting game as the more traditional third-person action titles on the market.

Conan also has a number of magic-like abilities to utilize, from the formation of a gaping void that sucks up enemies, to summoning a swarm of demonic-looking black birds that will sweep through a crowd. For you Conan lore experts out there, Nihilistic hasn't forgotten how much Conan hates magic. It seems that these strange abilities and his quest to get rid of them are a big part of the game's story.

The best part of our recent time with the game was that Nihilistic offered us the chance to play it ourselves for the first time. The challenging combat definitely doesn't feel like a button masher – careful observation of your enemies is essential, as we found to our dismay while we wildly smashed attack buttons. We noticed that both movement and combat moves still feel a little floaty in this early version; the powerful movements of Conan would look and feel even better if they felt more grounded and his enemies' animations responded more noticeably. Of course, several months of development may very well

THE MUSIC OF A CONQUEROR

Make sure and check out this month's Unlimited feature on the music of the new Conan game. The amazing score was a real highlight of the game we saw in action, and we've got both an interview with the composer and some audio clips from the soundtrack for you to check out online.

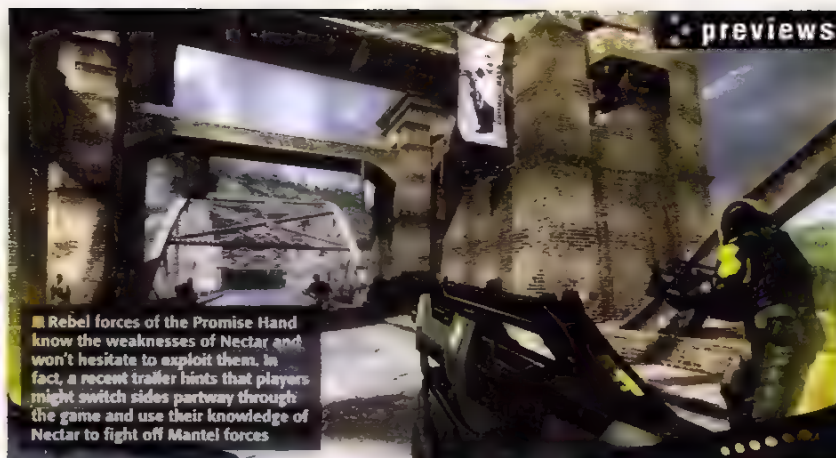
address these concerns. Perhaps the most impressive moment of the demo we played through was a titanic conflict with a sand dragon boss. This multi-stage fight had Conan leaping from platform to scaffolding inside an ancient desert fortress, while the angry serpent did its best to devour him. The fight included several button-press minigames with accompanying cinematic action, and the final kill at the battle's conclusion was immensely satisfying, involving the swinging of some giant rocks and the use of a very large, very pointy object. Conan has some interesting ideas in place to help set it apart from the wealth of great action titles headed our way this holiday. Now it only remains to be seen if the gameplay in its final form will be as tight and visceral as we all hope it will be. ■ ■ ■



■ While combat is certainly a big focus of the game, some light platforming and puzzle elements keep things interesting, whether it's mantling up a sheer wall or solving some ancient gate-opening mechanic



Free Radical is using its own engine for Haze to allow for maximum flexibility and insurance against unforeseen industry changes. "There is [an] associated risk," says director David Doak. "What if Epic is acquired and Unreal Engine 3 goes the same way as Renderware?"



Rebel forces of the Promise Hand know the weaknesses of Nectar and won't hesitate to exploit them. In fact, a recent trailer hints that players might switch sides partway through the game and use their knowledge of Nectar to fight off Mantel forces

PLAYSTATION 3

Haze

> **STYLE** 1 TO 4-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 24-PLAYER VIA PLAYSTATION NETWORK) > **PUBLISHER** UBISOFT > **DEVELOPER** FREE RADICAL > **RELEASE** HOLIDAY

DRUGS AND VIOLENCE

You may remember a brief mention of Haze out of last year's E3. Well, things have come a long way since then, and TimeSplitters developer Free Radical is eager to talk about the new direction the game has taken. "The FPS market is quite crowded, and we felt that we hadn't really nailed down the strong competitive identity that we wanted Haze to have," says director David Doak. "The most obvious change is the visual branding of Mantel, we completely reworked the Trooper character design and almost all of the Mantel technology — these guys have the best gear so we made sure they looked the business as well."

The team also brought in a renewed focus on Nectar as a central gameplay mechanic. The most assuredly sinister Mantel Corporation uses this substance to juice up its army-for-hire in order to take down South American rebel group Promise Hand. Players can inject this substance into their soldier at the press of a button for enhanced abilities like aim enhancement, beefed up melee attacks, and an enemy highlighter. Another ability called Foresight makes a ripple in time and space to warn you where rockets and grenades are about to hit.

If you hold the Nectar button down too long, it is possible to overdose. Here enemies and allies will look alike, and your weapon will automatically fire on any target in range. This is especially interesting given the fact that you'll always have three teammates, either AI or human (four-player co-op online and off), along for the ride. "If one of your squadmates overdoses, you're suddenly having to deal with a major threat who's right next to you," says project lead Derek Littlewood. "And you're also faced with the decision of whether to put them down for your own safety, or to just get the hell out of there until they recover."

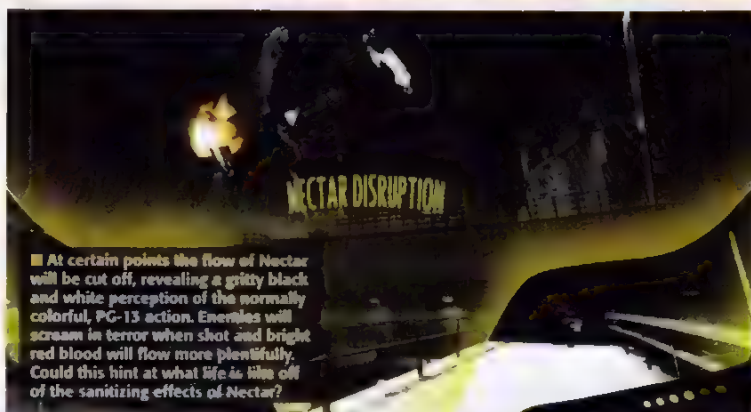
The ability of human allies to drop in and out of a co-op game any time raises the eternal question of how to scale the difficulty. Free Radical's Conspire AI can sense how many human players are in the game and ramp up enemy tactics accordingly. "An increased number of players represents a more serious threat, [so] you'll naturally see [enemies] becoming more cautious, group-

ing together more, laying down heavier suppressive fire, using more grenades and the like," Littlewood says. If one player gets taken down by these tactics, there will be a brief window in which you can revive him. Otherwise, he'll just have to wait for the next checkpoint to get back in the game.

So that all co-op players can experience the story the same way and for the sake of immersion in general, all story events will take place in-game without any traditional cutscenes. "We want [players] to feel a little uncomfortable, and maybe even a little claustrophobic," says screenwriter Rob Yescombe. "You'll be seeing some pretty disturbing events unfold, and watching them as a 'movie' absolves you from responsibility — it would allow you to draw a line between yourself and the experience." To further this notion of immersion, there will be absolutely no load screens once players get into gameplay. "There's nothing immersive about seeing a loading screen," continues Yescombe. "Having a mission select screen does nothing to help your suspension of disbelief." ■ ■ ■



All the vehicles have been designed to facilitate co-op play



At certain points the flow of Nectar will be cut off, revealing a gritty black and white perception of the normally colorful, PG-13 action. Enemies will scream in terror when shot and bright red blood will flow more plentifully. Could this hint at what life is like off of the sanitizing effects of Nectar?



The main pillar of competitive multiplayer is the side story based team assault mode. "An easy way to think of them is kind of like the deleted scenes from a DVD — you can enjoy the main story without them, but if you take the time to experience them, they'll add a few extra details to the narrative," says project lead Derek Littlewood



PHOTOPHILE

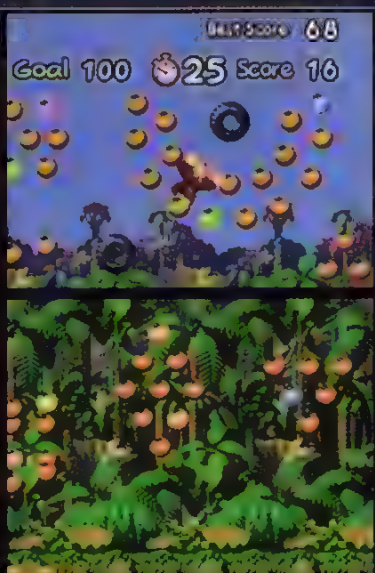
Mini Previews With Big Pictures



PC

Age of Empires III: The Asian Dynasties

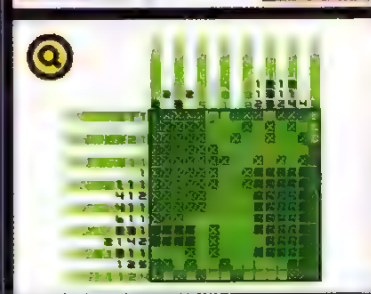
Wait a minute - Isn't Age of Empires developer Ensemble Studios working on Halo Wars? That is indeed the case, but another member of the Microsoft fold, Big Huge Games, is handling the heavy lifting for this expansion pack's development. The Asian Dynasties will, oddly enough, add a slew of Eastern cultures to the game. Fifteen Wonders native to those civilizations, like the Great Wall of China, will also make an appearance. The usual stable of multiplayer enhancements and new content is also included. RTS fans should get access to this latest reason to boot up their PCs sometime this fall.



NINTENDO DS

DK: Jungle Climber

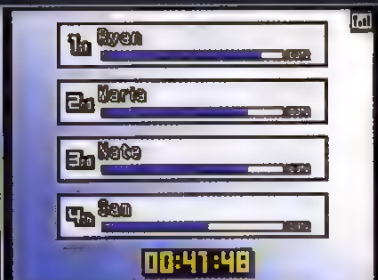
Many things can ruin a vacation: too much rain, a lot of bugs, an evil crazy crocodile who steals some Crystal Bananas and tries to use them to take over the universe. Guess which one is the premise for Donkey Kong's new game. As ridiculous as the story is, the controls are pretty simple. The L and R buttons control Donkey Kong's arms, allowing him to swing across pegs scattered throughout each level. Other than that, the A and B buttons are used for Donkey's jump attack. The game will even support four-player download play when Nintendo releases it this September.



NINTENDO DS

Picross DS

Remember how your seventh grade math teacher kept telling you that you would need math outside of school? Maybe she was talking about when you play games. This crossword-like math puzzle is sure to appeal to the Sudoku crowd. The goal is to figure out which squares to fill in based on the numbers at the margins of every column and row, thereby creating a picture in the process. You will even be able to create your own puzzles and send them to friends wirelessly or via the Nintendo Wi-Fi connection. Make your math teacher proud when Nintendo releases this game on July 30th.





NINTENDO DS
Brain Age 2: More Training In Minutes a Day

The first Brain Age came out over a year ago and you haven't played your copy in months. Be honest – what has your brain age fallen to? 65? 70? Maybe you need some more training in minutes a day. Whether you are playing keys on a piano or counting back the correct change after a sale, Brain Age 2's 17 new activities should be enough to give your brain the workout it needs to stay sharp. What might be the most exciting selling point for the game is the inclusion of the classic puzzler Dr. Mario as an unlockable minigame. Nintendo hopes that your brain is still sharp enough to know that, on August 21, Metroid Prime 3 won't be the only game worth picking up.



LEGO Star Wars: The Complete Saga

Star Wars is no stranger to gratuitous re-releases, so no one should be surprised that LucasArts and Traveller's Tales put together this ultimate collection of the sleeper hit series. The Complete Saga combines the first two LEGO Star Wars games into one package and ups the ante with more playable characters, new and redesigned levels, and other enhancements like online two-player co-op for the Xbox 360 and PS3. The famed Character Customizer now accommodates mashups from both trilogies, so Reiner can finally create his ultimate woman by combining the best attributes of Padmé and Leia.



PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360
Dynasty Warriors: Gundam

Taking two stale franchises and smashing them together, Dynasty Warriors: Gundam is like the perfect storm of mediocrity. It is also exactly what its title promises: the signature hacking and slashing of the Dynasty Warriors series, except with giant robots instead of ancient Chinese warlords. Even with improved draw distance, the game hardly appears to be pushing any hardware to the limits. However, if your only expectation is to wreck armies of mechs with swords and guns, then you won't be disappointed when Namco Bandai releases the game later this summer.

REVIEWS

We Play The Crap So You Don't Have To

MULTI



All-Pro Football 2K8

91

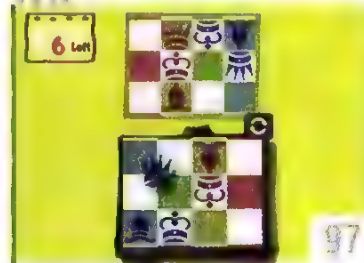
PS3



Rainbow Six Vegas

94

Wii



Big Brain Academy

97

XBOX 360



Dirt

98



90



The Darkness

From the folks at Starbreeze Studios, who brought us *The Chronicles of Riddick: Escape From Butcher Bay*, this month sees the release of their latest opus. This twisted take on *The Darkness* brings the original comic hit into the gaming world. The result is a first-person experience like no other. Jackie Estacado's journey to hell and back mixes brutal gameplay with emotionally wrenching story elements to pull you into the life of the consummate anti-hero. Dive into the dark with our review on page 90.

Note: Due to the fact that *Rainbow Six Vegas* and *Halo 2* have already been awarded Game of the Month in previous iterations, they have been withdrawn from consideration for both Game of the Month and PC Game of the Month.

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 | DOA: Dead or Alive. Not even funny-bad. Just bad. |

> **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.

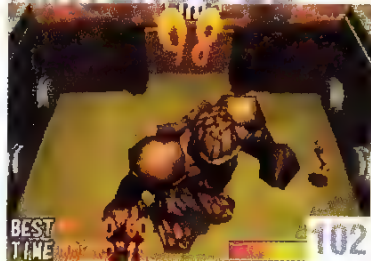
Moderately High - Good for a long while, but the thrills won't last forever.

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.

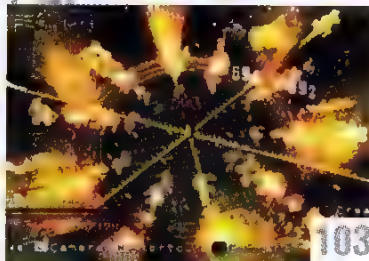
NINTENDO DS



Cookie & Cream

102

PSP



Dungeon Maker: Hunting Ground

103



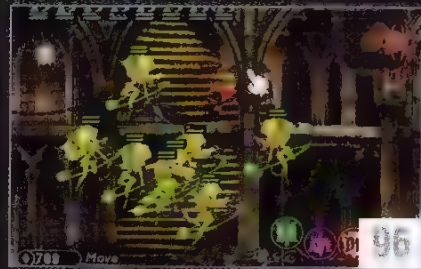
102



SimCity DS

A portable version of SimCity has never been this well-implemented both in slick interface and graphical presentation. Touch screen minigames break up the city planning in fun ways, and disaster scenarios will test the limits of your mayoral mind. EA's Japan-based development studio has debuted with a bang. Flip to page 102 for the full review.

REVIEWS INDEX



- All-Pro Football 2K8.....
- Big Brain Academy.....
- Cookie & Cream..... 102
- Darkness, The..... 90
- Dirt..... 98
- Dungeon Maker: Hunting Ground..... 103
- Dungeons and Dragons: Tactics..... 103
- Fantastic Four: Rise of the Silver Surfer..... 92
- Final Fantasy II Anniversary Edition..... 103
- GrimGrimoire..... 96
- Guitar Hero Encore: Rocks the '80s..... 91
- Halo 2..... 101
- Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix..... 91
- NCAA Football 08..... 91
- New York Times Crosswords, The..... 101
- Overlord..... 96
- Planet Puzzle League..... 101
- Rainbow Six Vegas..... 91
- Shadowrun..... 101
- Shin Megami Tensei: Persona 3..... 96
- Shrek the Third..... 93
- SimCity DS..... 102
- Surf's Up..... 93
- Tales of the World..... 93
- Tenchu Z..... 99

pg.96

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 10 and older.		Content suitable for persons 17 and older.
	Content suitable for persons ages 6 and older.		Content suitable only for adults.
	Content suitable for persons ages 10 and older.		Product is awaiting final rating.
	Content suitable for persons ages 13 and older.		

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

frontend – A game's menus and options.

GBA – Game Boy Advance.

GC – GameCube.

HDTV – High Definition Television.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

PS2 – Sony PlayStation 2.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

u mad – u mad.



BOTTOM LINE 8.75

> Concept: A comic book adaptation that lures you in with its storytelling, incredible dialogue, and likeable characters. The gameplay is certainly different, but not different enough

> Graphics: This is easily one of the best looking games to date, and a good example of why "The Uncanny Valley" is being brought up in games. It's incredible how lifelike these worlds and characters feel

> Sound: The voice actors bring their characters to life, and the Darklings are often laugh-out-loud funny. Don't be surprised if Jackie teaches you some new slang as well

> Playability: Standard FPS fragging with demonic powers on the side. It controls well, but the battles are rarely intense

> Entertainment: This is a remarkable 8 to 10-hour quest, but not for the reasons you usually turn to games for

> Replay Value: Moderate

PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360

The Darkness

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 8-PLAYER VIA XBOX LIVE OR PLAYSTATION NETWORK)
> PUBLISHER 2K GAMES **> DEVELOPER** STARBREEZE STUDIOS **> RELEASE** JUNE 25 **> ESRB** M



Second Opinion 8.75

For emotionally packed storytelling, it's hard to beat Starbreeze's latest effort. It includes some of the most exciting, terrifying, and heart-wrenching scenes I've encountered in a game – not all at once, mind you. The gameplay in the single-player campaign is a little slow at times, with the momentum impeded by frequent bouts of "where am I supposed to go now?" syndrome. Even so, the Darkness powers are quite sweet, and after several hours of gameplay you feel like the badass you should in the shoes of Jackie Estacado. The less said about the lackluster multiplayer, the better. Between the tearing out and devouring of hearts and some truly gruesome torture scenes, the subject matter here matches the name of the game in a way that should really steer some gamers away. For more desensitized players, it's one hell of a ride. —MILLER

TO HELL AND BACK

Tonight is like any other night. After grabbing a hot dish at Aunt Sarah's, you dial up your girlfriend Jenny, and arrange to spend the evening at her apartment. Like most nights, this one will probably end with the two of you cuddling on the couch and dozing off to an episode of *Flash Gordon*.

On your way to the subway station, a van dangerously rounds the corner, and a handful of heavily armed thugs emerge and open fire on you. With lightning quick reflexes fueling your actions, you pull out two pistols. Rather than returning fire, you focus your gaze upward, toward a streetlight. With a pull of the trigger, the light explodes, blanketing your assailants in the darkness of night. In the light, you are but mortal. In the dark, you are a remorseless monster that will get sick satisfaction from watching these thugs die in the most painful ways possible. You impale one with a tentacle, and another has his eyes gouged out by your pet darkling. With a wave of your hand, you open a black hole behind the remaining adversaries. With this brief skirmish behind you, you continue your journey to Jenny's, but not before devouring the hearts of those who dared raise a hand against you.

In *The Darkness*, players are immersed in an adventure that brings out the best of humanity, but also its worst. Jackie Estacado is a hitman, a murderer, and someone capable of doing anything, no matter how inhumane it is. At the same time, he shows us a softer side, a loving side, and side that makes you think that he can escape his past and change his ways. These diverse personality traits are captured within one of the best scripts to ever grace a video game. It's stuffed with unforgettable dialogue, narrative that flows without kinks, and moments (one in particular) that will be the talk of the gaming world. It's one of the most emotionally charged and intense

sequences that I have ever seen – and that goes for movies as well.

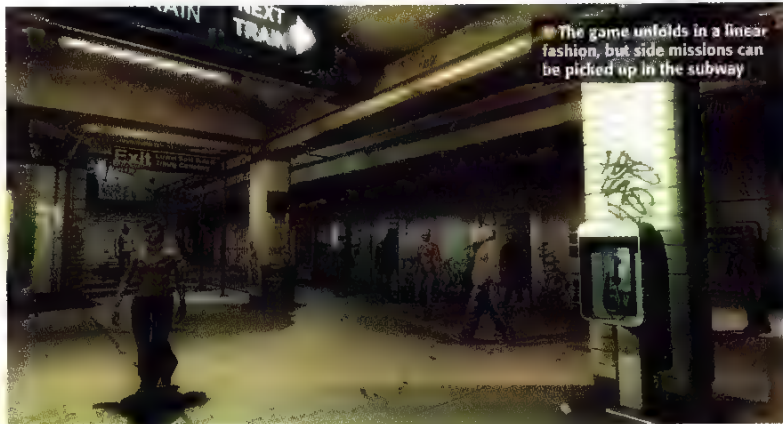
The unique gameplay, which pushes players to extinguish any source of light before unleashing hell upon the world, isn't nearly at the same level as the story behind it. Following the cookie-cutter game design of having player's earn powers as the adventure progresses doesn't work for this game. The Darkness powers steal the show, but you really don't see how potent they can be until the final two hours. Whether it was a decision to make *The Darkness* powers more enticing or not, the selection of firearms is fairly weak, and the gunfights that unfold don't really have a spark to them. The fun in the game comes from impaling enemies, sending your Creeping Dark (a snake-like extension of you) to grab a bloody lunch, and opening black holes whenever you can. When the Darkness powers are in full effect, you feel like an unstoppable killing machine. When they aren't, *The Darkness* is a typical (albeit finely crafted) FPS.

The level designs also have split personalities. On one hand, you can't help but look at the detail that is intricately woven into every object, texture, and light source. There's no questioning that Starbreeze wields some of the best tech and artists in the biz. On the other hand, you often find yourself trekking long distances to your next objective. As such, you'll see more of the New York subway system than you'll ever want to.

Like all shooters these days, a multiplayer mode is included, but it's by no means a destination where you can sink days of your life. Morphing into a darkling is certainly cool, but actually

landing a blow with this fast moving critter is more trouble than it's worth. Hit detection with the standard firearms is also somewhat off. All of the maps are nicely thought out and perfect for the game types they host, but again, the gameplay just isn't as strong as it needs to be.

You may not fall head over heels in love with *The Darkness*' gameplay, but like the demonic beast that controls Jackie, this game knows exactly what it needs to do to keep you locked in and lusting for more. Interactive storytelling is rarely this good, and there are few game endings that make you sit back and think, "Man, what if I did this instead?" like this one does. For its amazing narrative and believability of characters, and the twisted joys that come from being a slave of a demon, *The Darkness* will keep you enthralled, even when the gameplay lags a little behind. —REINER



All-Pro Football 2K8

> **STYLE** 1 TO 4-PLAYER SPORTS (UP TO 8-PLAYER VIA PLAYSTATION NETWORK OR XBOX LIVE) > **PUBLISHER** 2K SPORTS > **DEVELOPER** VISUAL CONCEPTS
> **RELEASE** JULY 16 > **ESRB** E



THE BIRTH OF A LEGEND?

For all you NFL 2K5 and football fans out there — this is the game you hoped it would be. It's the continuation of the Visual Concepts football tradition featuring bar-setting gameplay, graphics, and intensity. In the time since 2K5, the developer has implemented some clear improvements, but it also failed to solve continuing nagging problems. In all, it pushes the rivalry with Madden forward and is a title you shouldn't have reservations picking up.

Building your team with three tiers of NFL legends is brilliant. Even though I never fooled around with a depth chart or signed a free agent, I loved the team that I built. Your identity with your created team is strengthened by the fact that your non-superstar players aren't scrubs, so the gameplay doesn't get lopsided. For their part, the star players are done pretty well. Each showed some characteristics, even if they weren't perfect. For instance, Randall Cunningham isn't fast, but he will take off on you. The advantages of a well-built team are evident. Put a non-star tackle against Chris Doleman, and you'll feel the heat off the edge.

You'll notice better gameplay from 2K5, such as improved defensive back coverage. You'll also see some unfortunate hiccups, such as predictable and less aggressive CPU AI and a lack of smoothness when playing



TEAM PLAYERS

APF 2K8 gives you many different ways to build your dream team. Here's what I suggest. And if at any time you spend one of your superstar picks on a kicker or punter, I will come over to your house and punch you in the gut. You deserve it.

Gold Star (Two picks): Don't argue, just take a QB and a RB. I like Montana for his all-around skill, but there's not really a bad choice here. Any number of backs can do the job for you too, whether you like the power of Earl Campbell, the speed of Gale Sayers, or the shiftness of Barry Sanders.

Silver Star (Three picks): I suggest you pick up a WR (Don Maynard not only has a single-bar face mask, but he's damn good, too) and offensive and defensive tackles. Don't leave your lines until last — they are the heart and soul of any team.

Bronze Star (Six picks): There's still a lot of quality left in the bronze tier, and I would use it to get another WR, one more spot apiece on your offensive and defensive lines, a middle linebacker, a cornerback, and an outside linebacker.

defense. The new animations produce some amazing football moments such as jarring hits, great play from the offensive/defensive lines, and cool wobbly throws when a QB gets hit. Unfortunately, the QB also has trouble getting rid of the ball sometimes, which is very frustrating when someone's bearing down on you.

As much as I thought not having the NFL license was going to be a problem, it was the reverse: I wanted to know more about the game's league, but this title doesn't deliver. With no franchise mode, Crib, or many amenities apart from nice stadiums, it's the lack of connection with the league itself, not the fact that the NFL is missing, that is a letdown. Bolster this aspect and make some gameplay tweaks, and All-Pro Football will threaten Madden's NFL more than the NFL ever did. —**KATO**

BOTTOM LINE 8

> **Concept:** Mix the old with the new for a return to football that resumes where NFL 2K5 left off

> **Graphics:** Pretty sweet lookin', with some great jersey textures and helmet scuffs

> **Sound:** After Madden's lame announcer, it's great to have Dan and Peter back, who have some new (and old) lines

> **Playability:** Using strafe on defense can get you stuck sometimes, requiring an extra button press to get out of your backpedal

> **Entertainment:** A must-play for football fans of any stripe

> **Replay Value:** Moderately High

Second Opinion 7.5

I consider NFL 2K5 to be the best football title of all time, so I couldn't wait to play 2K's latest gridiron game. While APF 2K8 retains the great on-field action — from awesome presentation to the realistic player animations — the game fails to offer the in-depth experience a hardcore football fan like me desires. Stocking your roster with legends like Sweetness is appealing, but the rest of your team is so anonymous they don't even have player ratings. After finishing a season, there is no draft, free agency, or second season. All that's left to do is build another team of legends and no-names to win another unrewarding championship. Online leagues return, but there is no player draft, so everyone in the league could have the same exact rosters, which takes away the fun. In the end, APF is a solid football core missing the pieces of the puzzle necessary for a title run. Let's hope next time 2K can fill every roster with NFL alumni, deliver a deeper single-player mode, add a fantasy draft and trades to make the online leagues competitive. —**BERTZ**

I get it. You're hanging upside-down because you're demonstrating a visual metaphor.

I am?

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

Element SC

But I'm not upside down. You are.

That would explain the splitting headache.

elementandfriends.com

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



"Good thing I got that door open! Wait...this room looks just like the last one"

PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360

Fantastic Four: Rise of the Silver Surfer

> **STYLE** 1 TO 4-PLAYER ACTION > **PUBLISHER** 2K GAMES > **DEVELOPER** VISUAL CONCEPTS > **RELEASE** JUNE 15 > **ESRB** T

ALL DOOM AND GLOOM

If this game is a shining example of what mankind is capable of, then please, Galactus, devour our world. I thought that the video game industry had learned a lesson or two since the dark days of *Catwoman*, but with *Fantastic Four: Rise of the Silver Surfer*, we're diving right back into that dirty comic book movie litter box.

The most memorable moment that this entire game produces is a scene where Reed Richards introduces the *Fantastic Four's* new flying car. As this vehicle is shown, the camera pans directly over a Dodge logo. Just when you think that product placement couldn't get more blatant, Thing says, "Does this thing have a Hemi?" This sequence made me chuckle, solely because I couldn't believe this just took place. After finishing the game, I realized that this chuckle was the only moment of joy that I had experienced throughout this entire adventure.

The game can easily be completed in an afternoon, but you would be surprised how many locked doors you will open in this time. In fact, I wouldn't be surprised if this game holds the record for the most locked doors to ever be featured in a video game. When you really break it down, that's all this game really is. It's a locked door simulator. Next to punching baddies, your entire time is spent figuring out how to break locks. With each level being excruciatingly long, it doesn't so much feel like an adventure, but more like a lab rat test: "How long can the rat endure endless repetition?"

The only saving grace that this game has is its combat mechanic. By no means is it good, but it's competent, and successful in making you feel like you docked someone pretty hard. If you have some friends over, you can delve into four-player co-op. However, like a friend who picks out a crappy movie, there's a good chance that your buddies will mock you for this spirit-crushing game for the remainder of your days. —REINER



The only thing missing is a Calvin peeing on a Ford logo sticker

BOTTOM LINE 5

> **Concept:** A movie adaptation that only gives snippets of a story and forces players to experience some of the worst level designs to date

> **Graphics:** The massive levels are filled with highly detailed doors and repeated textures and objects. The characters look good, however

> **Sound:** Like a standup comic that is getting booed off of the stage, the one-liners that Thing and Human Torch throw out are deserving of tomato bombardment

> **Playability:** Use your super powers to open doors...lots of them...more than you saw in *Monsters Inc.*

> **Entertainment:** Outside of the Silver Surfer being on the box, there's little to cheer about

> **Replay Value:** Moderately Low

Second Opinion 6

If you really want to have fun with four player co-op and the *Fantastic Four*, you should play *Marvel: Ultimate Alliance*. This movie game can't really offer anything that wasn't done far better there—even with the ghoulish facial modeling of the film's lead characters. Except for the ally AI, everything works, this is still a completely functional game. It's just hollow and unfulfilling, from the basic combat right down to the objectives and level design. Strangely, for all its faults, I am thankful for one thing this game provides: the opportunity to steer Johnny Storm face-first into oncoming subway trains. Wham! Take that, you extreme sports-loving toolbox! —JOE

PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360 | WII

Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION > **PUBLISHER** ELECTRONIC ARTS > **DEVELOPER** EA UK > **RELEASE** JUNE 25 > **ESRB** E10+



This is very much the Good Will Hunting of video games. Harry has a ton of potential, but he wastes it all on janitorial duties

BOTTOM LINE 6.5

> **Concept:** This movie adaptation brings Hogwarts to life and asks the player to keep it clean. Most of your time is spent doing janitorial duties

> **Graphics:** See Hogwarts like you've never seen it before...filthy! The look of the school is an amazing accomplishment, and most of the character models are spot on

> **Sound:** Very typical for your movie game. It has some of the actors (not the big ones), some of the same music, and awesome Star Wars-like effects

> **Playability:** Do you enjoy doing yard work and chores for your parents? Sadly, a nicely designed spell casting system goes to waste on an eventless gameplay

> **Entertainment:** There's little here that will excite you outside of being in Harry Potter's world

> **Replay Value:** Moderate

Second Opinion 6

In the wizarding world, just because you can wave a wand doesn't mean you can make magic. The same rule applies to the latest game in this franchise. Whether you use the motion-sensing or analog stick controls, you'll feel more like the bumbling Neville Longbottom than Harry Potter as you flick and flail your wand only to watch disastrous results unfold, targeting is clumsy (especially on the Wii), motion recognition is spotty, and the spell selection very limited—even when you control the two more powerful wizards at the end of the game. The twisting and whimsical reproduction of Hogwarts is a joy to explore, but the game fails to imbue the characters or activities with any charm. You can't even target other students with spells outside of designated combat sequences. Chosen one or not, Harry spends most of his school year doing chores like dusting and doing other kids' homework. Way to fight the Dark Lord, scar-head. —JOE

WINGARDIUM BOREDIOSA!

After playing this game, my desire to read the final Harry Potter book has fluttered away into the night sky like a pesky golden snitch. I have no doubt that J.K. Rowling's mesmerizing fiction will offer a thoroughly satisfying conclusion, but I don't think that she'll be able to pen a better future for Harry than this game does. Rather than grooming young Potter into Lord Voldemort's ultimate opponent, Dumbledore is clearly prepping Harry to become the next janitor of Hogwarts. Through the majority of this game, you are asked to fix broken vases, straighten out rugs, open drapes, light torches, hang paintings, make beds, pick fruit, feed birds, and sweep up leaves. I just love the idea of this legacy ending, not with a Quidditch broom in hand, but a mop.

Outside of the occasional confrontation with Malfoy or a troubled student, this is mostly a non-violent video game. The number of wand fights that Harry gets into can literally be counted on one hand. For a world that is filled with magic and boundless imagination, you spend most of your time casting spells to tidy up Hogwarts, and running meaningless errands for your fellow students. Now, this may sound like a torture that only Snape could devise, but beneath the filth that you must clean, there's a lot to like in this game.

Its main draw is its ability to bring you into the Harry Potter universe. Much like the lively scholastic atmosphere attained in Rockstar's *Bully*, Hogwarts feels like a real school, and you are but one of its lowly students. As you navigate this architectural wonder, you'll run into teachers who are quick to push homework on you, you'll hear your name being thrown around in hushed conversation by other students, and in your down time you can put your Wizard Chess, Exploding

Snap, and Gobstones skills to the test. Don't expect much of a challenge, as most students aren't smart enough to take out an uncontested queen with a pawn. This school's unique charms are also in full effect. You'll quickly learn that paintings love to talk, ghosts find great amusement in flying right through you, and that Moaning Myrtle may have a bit of a crush on you.

The game also does a great job of capturing what you would expect spell casting to be like in the real world. With the analog stick or the motion-sensing capabilities of the Wii and PS3, you are asked to move the wand in the directions required to cast a particular spell. As much fun as these actions are, there's little you can do with the spells other than, you guessed it, clean up Hogwarts or — as I found — bash kids on the head with levitated objects.

Harry Potter's latest adventure may be light on action, but it does replicate the Hogwartian life better than any game before it. Out of all of the books, games, and movies, it allows you to get closer to the school than ever before — all at the expense of actually enjoying your stay. It's boring and tedious, just like a real school is. However, it's also a place where your Harry Potter knowledge can bloom. On this note, only hardcore Harry Potter nuts should enroll. —REINER

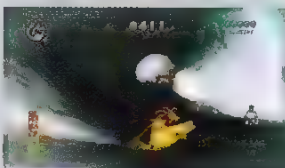


MULTI QUICKIES

PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360 | Wii | PC

Surf's Up

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION
> **PUBLISHER** JIBISOFT
> **DEVELOPER** JIBISOFT MONTREAL
> **RELEASE** MAY 29 > **ESRB** E 10+



BOTTOM LINE

6.5

This is the first licensed game I've played that is actually shorter than its movie. I'm not exaggerating; in a little over an hour I had received trophies in all of the main surf events. The premise of the game is to speed across the waves racking up a high score by doing tricks and going off jumps. Performing tricks on waves can be fun on a very basic level — I only wish there was more depth to the gameplay. Think of it as SSX on water with no racing element, a minimized über trick system, and a reduced sense of speed. Let's just hope this isn't the opening wave of a flood of Penguin-themed video games. —**BEN**



XBOX 360 | Wii | PLAYSTATION 2

Shrek the Third

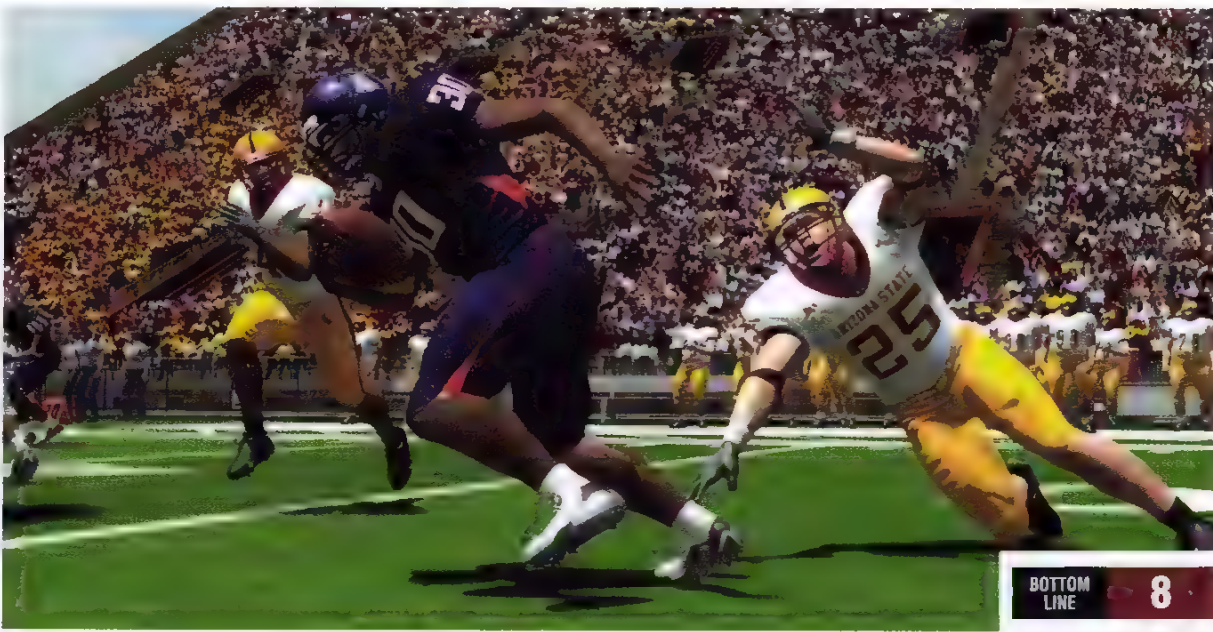
> **STYLE** 1 OR 2-PLAYER ACTION
> **PUBLISHER** ACTIVISION
> **DEVELOPER** SHABA GAMES
> **RELEASE** MAY 15 > **ESRB** E 10+



BOTTOM LINE

5.25

Shrek the Third is certainly a fun game to laugh at, but mostly for reasons that would make you regret playing it. This button-mashing brawler offers decent combat functionality, yet cannot deliver one adversary that you would actually feel good about punching... unless you get a kick out of clocking knights that are as passive as Buddhist monks. With levels that redefine "linear," there is no need to collect objects in a game like this, but that's mostly what you end up doing. Shrek may have found a place in the fairy tale kingdom, but in gaming, he's still a grotesque abomination that should be burned at the stake. —**REINER**



BOTTOM LINE

8

PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360

NCAA Football 08

> **STYLE** 1 TO 4-PLAYER SPORTS (2-PLAYER VIA PLAYSTATION NETWORK OR XBOX LIVE) > **PUBLISHER** EA SPORTS > **DEVELOPER** EA TIBURON
> **RELEASE** JULY 17 > **ESRB** E

JUST A FEW CREDITS SHORT

This franchise has built itself up nicely after its no-frills next-gen debut last year. But the problem I found while playing it wasn't dissimilar to the Uncanny Valley. The more realistic the catch animations were, the more I realized that they were actually gratuitous. The more I reveled in the recruiting options, the more I questioned them. NCAA Football 08 is a fun college experience, but it falls short of greatness.

The strongest leap forward the series makes is simply how it feels. It's smooth and fairly responsive. Its jump to 60 frames per second is overdue. This gratification, in conjunction with the myriad animations, makes your Saturdays come alive. Although I almost never think twice about replays, the work put into integrating these into your collegiate shrine is really cool, and just another piece of the puzzle that gives NCAA that rah-rah feeling.

I'm glad to see Campus Legend make its debut — especially since the camera has been improved since its use in Madden. Another key fix in place is the ability to sim to only the moments you are on the field. Finally, I applaud having the option to work my way up the depth chart — it makes practicing during the week important.

The game's other big feature is the new way recruiting is handled. Searching for, finding, and keeping tabs on recruits is very easy, and there are now a number of topics

to talk to your prospects about. As deep as this sounds, the more I spent time recruiting, the more frustrated I became. There seems to be no rhyme or reason to a recruit's thinking. Therefore, you spend lots of time on the phone throwing darts in the dark and getting hung up on. It's not unlike trying to find a date in high school.

Unfortunately, these niggling annoyances transfer onto the field, where the passing game can be a letdown. There's no location-based passing, so you can't pick if you want to throw over your receiver's left shoulder, for instance. This greatly affects your placement and causes unnecessarily reckless throws — as does your QB's inconsistent ability to put loft on the ball. Your receivers, for their part, don't help you any because they often break off their routes and seem incapable of catching the ball over their shoulder, instead insisting on

making unrealistic showboat catches that only lose them yards.

For all that it does right, perhaps it's telling that this series has improved its presentation off of the field, while still lacking some of it on the field. It's these kind of intangibles (and those above) that need to be addressed to unify all of NCAA's elements — as well as some of them are done — to create the ultimate college football experience. —**KATO**

I'M BORED

Here are some of the things you can spend your evenings doing in the game's Campus Legend mode (other events occur automatically), and how they affect your player.

- Play Video Games in Your Dorm Room — +1 Awareness
- Go to a Movie With a Friend — +1 Popularity
- Not Calling Your Family — Nothing
- Participating in a Chicken Wing Eating Contest — +2 Popularity, -2 Speed



The Hit Stick is dialed in, delivering cool high or low hits on defense and ball-carrier evades on offense

> **Concept:** Rebounding from last year, this game is finding its feet

> **Graphics:** The move to 60 frames per second is noticeable, as are the bevy of new animations

> **Sound:** The announcers remain good, but they're coasting

> **Playability:** Inaccuracies — even among highly rated QBs — make the passing game frustrating

> **Entertainment:** Very fun in some aspects, just missing the mark in others — this series is slowly improving

> **Replay Value:** Moderately High

Second Opinion 8.25

NCAA Football 08 scores big with revamped recruiting in Dynasty mode and the debut of an excellently refined Campus Legend mode. EA fumbled by leaving out the create-a-school mode, but more than makes up for it on the field with new branching animations, smoother gameplay, and a great highlight recording system that collects SportsCenter moments for display in your campus shrine. Not all is perfect between the hashes, however. Quarterbacks the size of water boys frequently power through huge defensive linemen, and the lack of location-based passing makes threading the needle between defenders a very dangerous proposition. Off the field, the poorly designed ESPN.com menu is a chore to navigate, and scrolling through your depth chart (essentially words and numbers on the screen) suffers from way too much lag. Overall, NCAA shows drastic improvements over its freshman next-gen effort. Let's hope the game makes the All-American team in its junior year. —**BERTZ**



■ The Rainbow team takes a quick break from saving the world for some Dim Sum

BOTTOM LINE 9

> **Concept:** Protect America's greatest treasures, Sin City slot machines, from a terrorist attack

> **Graphics:** Less impressive than its Xbox 360 counterpart

> **Sound:** Satisfying soundtrack of firing guns and exploding grenades

> **Playability:** Vegas is the proud owner of the best first-person shooter controls to date (provided you use the Tactician scheme)

> **Entertainment:** If you're a fan of tactical action, this is a must-play

> **Replay Value:** High

Second Opinion 8.5

Ubisoft has been pushing Rainbow Six toward the action side of the tactical shooter spectrum ever since Rainbow Six 3, and Vegas continues this trend. That's not a bad thing; to the contrary, the focus on action in Vegas comes along with improved control and more fluid gunplay. The negative side of this is that Rainbow Six continues to lose its defining qualities and moves more toward being another faceless techno-thriller. As for this PlayStation 3 version, there's really nothing here to make it any better than the 360 flavor. Sixaxis motion controls for the snake cam add precisely nothing to the game, and a few new multiplayer maps and modes are welcome, but not exactly mind-blowing. Still, the firefights are tight and entertaining, multiplayer is excellent as always, and the graphics are top-notch. I just can't help but miss the more precise, tactical roots of the franchise—sending my guys to breach a side door while I crash through the front entrance doesn't do much to strain the ol' noodle.—ADAM

PLAYSTATION 3

Rainbow Six Vegas

> **STYLE** 1 TO 4-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 16-PLAYER VIA PLAYSTATION NETWORK) > **PUBLISHER** UBISOFT > **DEVELOPER** UBISOFT MONTREAL > **RELEASE** JUNE 26 > **ESRB** M

WHAT HAPPENS IN VEGAS COMES TO PS3

The best tactical shooter known to man finally makes its way to the PlayStation 3. But despite the extra seventh months of development and additional content, this Vegas visitor doesn't cash out with as many chips as its Xbox 360 counterpart.

Make no mistake, Rainbow Six Vegas still offers a riveting single-player campaign that you can experi-

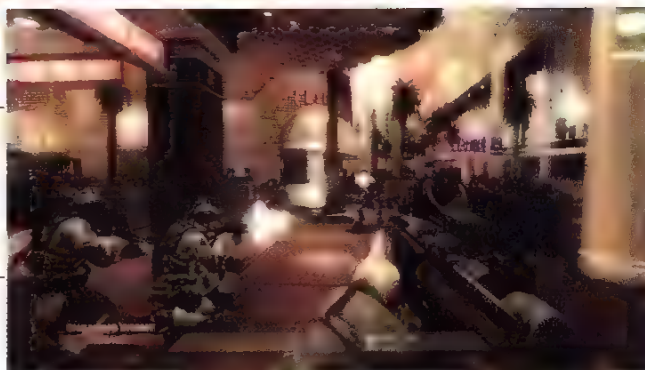
ence with up to four friends online (albeit without the cutscenes and story development) and the deepest multiplayer action available on consoles. The PS3 version even comes with two new multiplayer modes and 10 extra maps, five of which have yet to be released on Xbox 360.

So what's the problem, you ask? The first thing

you notice upon stepping off the helicopter and taking the safety off your rifle—the graphics. While the game still looks like a next-generation title, it lacks many of the subtle points of refinement the Xbox 360 version offers. Environments are noticeably muddier and jaggier, as if Ubisoft forgot to use anti-aliasing. This especially stands out on the edges of buildings and on telephone wires. Despite Sony's boasts about the PS3's fantastic particle effects, the game also skimps on environmental effects like the dust clouds you see littered throughout the dirty Mexican streets that serve as the location for the first few missions.

In an apparent effort to appease the SOCOM nation, the Ubisoft team also strayed from the fantastic Xbox 360 default control scheme, which used the left trigger as your cover button and the right trigger as your fire button. If you want to experience the game with optimal controls, switch to the Tactician scheme.

Despite these minor flaws, Rainbow Six Vegas offers a fantastic FPS experience that rivals anything else on the PlayStation 3. If you haven't played the game on the 360 already, this is a must-buy for any self-respecting fragger.—BERTZ



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PLAYSTATION 2

GrimGrimoire

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER STRATEGY > **PUBLISHER** NIPPON ICHI > **DEVELOPER** VANILLAWARE
> **RELEASE** JUNE 26 > **ESRB** E 10+

A 90-DEGREE SHIFT

Adapting real-time strategy to consoles to date has remained a process of shoehorning PC designs onto various systems. GrimGrimoire, from Odin Sphere developer Vanillaware, is a wholly new look at the genre from a console perspective. While it's not a breakout success, this title has enough going for it to please anyone with an interest in either RTS or quirky Japanese games.

By approaching RTS gameplay from a side scroller-esque perspective and presenting it via gorgeous high-res sprites, GrimGrimoire defies classification. Many usual RTS concepts are dramatically stripped down, as well. You only have a few structures to build, and each of the four factions (which players have access to simultaneously) has a mere handful of units. This setup works well for what it is, but fails to capture the deep strategic experience that the best in the genre offer.

The unique 2D side-view gameplay isn't GrimGrimoire's only break from RTS tradition. Instead of having compelling multi-



(left) But hasn't the scary mist. Three days later, he was found, exactly tortured

player (there's none whatsoever), the time-twisting story is what will convince you to keep playing this after you've mastered the relatively simplistic strategy. Witch-in-training Lillet Blan is thrust into a complex web of intrigue and world-ending catastrophe shortly after her arrival at the most prestigious magical school in the land. In fact, on her fifth day the evil Archmage's spirit breaks free and slaughters the academy's staff and pupils — and that's only the first chapter. The constant surprises and shocking reveals throughout comprise some of the best storytelling so far this year in games.

Somewhat shallow combat and clumsy controls keep GrimGrimoire's gameplay from shining. Its novelty value and clever plot are worth checking out, though, if you're willing to forgive some mediocre battles. —ADAM

BOTTOM LINE 7.75

> **Concept:** Turn RTS on its side...literally

> **Graphics:** The lavishly detailed sprites are pretty, but the animations leave much to be desired

> **Sound:** The voiceovers aren't offensively bad, nor is the battle audio — but there's not a whole lot there, either

> **Playability:** Liberal use of auto-pause features makes up for the sometimes-frustrating control scheme

> **Entertainment:** Different and somewhat quirky, though not incredibly deep, this is an intriguing novelty that doesn't have the legs to be truly great

> **Replay Value:** Moderate

Second Opinion 7

A game mixing RPG storytelling and RTS gameplay could be a lot of fun, but GrimGrimoire only manages to pull off half of the equation. The mysterious plot and bizarre characters pull you in, but the battles are sadly underwhelming. The gameplay is still entertaining, but it's also too shallow. It boils down to a 2D RTS with only a handful of units and no amenities like rally points or easy grouping. Even with an uncooperative unit selection and command system, the story and visuals make it worth a look; I'd rather watch a base get assaulted by a force of these lovingly detailed sprites than a cadre of space marines any day. —JOE

PLAYSTATION 2

Shin Megami Tensei: Persona 3

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ROLE-PLAYING GAME > **PUBLISHER** ATLUS > **DEVELOPER** ATLUS > **RELEASE** JULY 24 > **ESRB** M

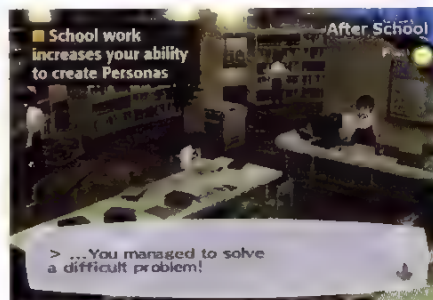


SCHOOL DAYS, DARK NIGHTS

The main character of Persona 3 is, in many ways, just a regular high school student. He goes to class, hangs out at the mall after school, and does stuff with friends on the weekends. Oh, he also spends his nights hunting otherworldly abominations in the hidden hour between 12:00 and 12:01 — the Dark Hour. You know, he's just your average kid.

Even with its overt fantasy elements, the Persona series has always distinguished itself by maintaining ties to a modern reality, and Persona 3 pulls this off better than ever before. The non-combat play is divided into discrete periods that revolve around a regimented school schedule, making players carefully choose how they spend their time. This simulation element is surprisingly deep; if you go to swim team practice, you'll gain different bonuses than if you had gone to the café with a friend. How you build your attributes like academics and courage, as well as the people you spend time with, affects the kinds of Personas (creatures born from characters' psyches) you can create.

Once the school day is over, the Personas take center stage. Late at night players can fight the evil of the Dark Hour by calling upon these creatures in battle. This happens in a tower called Tartarus, which serves as the game's primary dungeon. It gets a little old exploring the same location repeatedly, but since the floor layouts change and enemies get stronger as you go higher, it isn't too bad.



BOTTOM LINE 8.5

> **Concept:** The long-dormant Persona series returns in excellent form

> **Graphics:** A great example of how a unified visual style can offset less than amazing models and environments. As always, the demon designs are awesome

> **Sound:** Occasionally ridiculous. The upbeat Japanese soundtrack is especially odd, but the voice acting is passable

> **Playability:** This does an admirable job slowly opening up the game's many involved systems to the player

> **Entertainment:** It should feel repetitive, since you're basically going through the same routine, but it doesn't. There are lots of great surprises along the way

> **Replay Value:** Moderate

Second Opinion 8.5

In this game's introductory sequence, we see a girl nervously holding a pistol to her head. It's a tense moment, but also a scene that summarizes exactly what you can expect from the remainder of this adventure. Persona 3 bathes in dark themes, and isn't afraid to shock you with its story and gameplay. Whenever one of the characters summons a Persona, they must put a pistol to their head and pull the trigger. Within the span of one battle, there's a good chance you'll see three different characters blow their brains out multiple times. A finely crafted combat mechanic backs these cringe-inducing moments, providing a mix of challenging battles and unforgettable attacks. The one area where this game struggles is with its scenery. Most of the game takes place within one tower. As disappointing as this is, the long and difficult journey up in turn fuels your curiosity, and begs the question, "What resides on the top floor?" If you are looking for a unique RPG, Persona 3 won't disappoint. —REINER



PLAYSTATION 2

Guitar Hero Encore: Rocks the '80s

> **STYLE** 1 OR 2-PLAYER MUSIC > **PUBLISHER** REDOCTANE/ACTIVISION > **DEVELOPER** HARMONIX > **RELEASE** JULY 17 > **ESRB** T

HAIR HERO

Playing through this '80s collection of rock hits brings me back not necessarily to that influential decade, but to my time growing up in Sioux City, Iowa listening to Z98, the classic rock station. The thing is, I couldn't listen to their mix of butt rock for more than five minutes. As you peruse the track listing (see sidebar), maybe only a quarter of the songs can be recalled from memory. For the rest you'll have to look up a 30-second preview on iTunes or something. Where are The Cars, Journey, Bon Jovi, MJ (c'mon, "Beat It" would kick ass), or the countless other seminal '80s hitmakers and one hit wonders?

Fortunately, once you actually start burning through these tracks you gain an appreciation for the fun fretwork, even if you wouldn't ever throw some of these songs in your stereo. The classic Guitar Hero formula of opening up the setlist, rocking with friends, and challenging yourself to get better at that nasty solo is all additively intact. Yes, this fresh batch of tunes will help with the wait until the holiday rush of Guitar Hero III and Rock Band.

Those who are hoping for a new load of unlockables to shoot for are out of luck. All there is to purchase is the Grim Ripper and essentially the same batch of guitars and

TRACK LIST
(See our July issue for previously announced songs)

- "Because, It's Midnite" - Limozeeen (original artist)
- "We Got The Beat" - The Go Go's
- "No One Like You" - Scorpions
- "Turning Japanese" - The Vapors
- "Los Angeles" - X
- "Hold On Loosely" - 38 Special
- "Electric Eye" - Judas Priest (original artist)
- "Wrathchild" - Iron Maiden
- "What I Like About You" - The Romantics
- "Radar Love" - White Lion
- "The Warrior" - Scandal (original artist)
- "Balls To The Wall" - Accept
- "Caught In A Mosh" - Anthrax
- "Seventeen" - Winger
- "Police Truck" - Dead Kennedys
- "Only A Lad" - Oingo Boingo
- "Ballroom Blitz" - Krokus

skins from Guitar Hero II. This means that fans of Eddie, Casey, Lars, Clive, and Xavier will have to find another hero, and that there are no bonus songs. I was able to buy out the whole store before even finishing Hard mode, save specially axes like the casket guitar. And we're talking a lot of three-star ratings, people.

Obviously, everyone's going to pick this "expansion" up no matter what the reviews say. This is probably why Activision and RedOctane feel they can get away with charging a full \$50 for half the songs of Guitar Hero II. Despite the shortcomings, an unstoppable urge will still somehow compel me to get in line for a copy the day Guitar Hero Encore comes out. —**BRYAN**

BOTTOM LINE 8.25

> **Concept:** Guitar Hero + '80s. The title says it all

> **Graphics:** A bunch of '80s skins thrown onto the Guitar Hero II engine

> **Sound:** The latest round of covers ranges from relatively accurate to below "Mother" caliber

> **Playability:** Rocking is just as tight as ever

> **Entertainment:** The track listing could have been better, but a dose of new songs never hurt anyone

> **Replay Value:** Moderate

Second Opinion 8

Okay Activision, I want you to savor this moment. Because, right now, Guitar Hero Encore: Rocks the '80s is a totally awesome addition to the franchise and a must-play for anyone who loves the game. However, it's pretty clear to me that this was done on the last and cheap - it's just a repackaging of Guitar Hero II with a new track list and a few new items (sold for full price, I might add). While I'm definitely disappointed with the lack of extra songs to buy, right now I'm still sufficiently enthralled with GH to be happy with this very fun sampling of the best of Reagan-era rock. However, keep this up and you might find your arena headliner back playing the club circuit all over again. —**MATT**



Wii

Big Brain Academy

> **STYLE** 1 TO 8-PLAYER PUZZLE > **PUBLISHER** NINTENDO > **DEVELOPER** NINTENDO > **RELEASE** JUNE 11 > **ESRB** E

FLUFFY GRAY MATTER

Since enrolling in Big Brain Academy, I haven't started mapping star clusters or solving quadratic equations to pass the time, but my brain has definitely gotten bigger. I can now count how many red and blue balls are in a basket and recognize pictures of different animals. Okay, honestly, I may question how far these speedy exercises go towards making me a brainier person, but at least they are an enjoyable way to kill a few hours.

The 15 single-player puzzles are divided into five categories: identify, memorize, analyze, compute, and visualize. I feel weird calling them minigames, because they aren't all about having fun. Occasionally, they reminded me of the exercises I did in first grade. That said, Match Blast, which has you blasting out certain geometric shapes in order to match a given picture, is fun enough that I think someone should make it into a full-fledged DS game. Train Tum, which tasks you with laying down tracks to guide a train through a forest, and Covered Cages, which has you locate the bird under

the covered cages - similar to the grifter game Three-card Monte - are two more of my favorites. Still, for every exercise I liked, there were a couple others that I didn't enjoy.

You'll probably spend a few hours getting all the medals across the game's different difficulties and taking the test to see how high a grade you can get, but then you'll be done with single player. Fortunately, multiplayer might make you come back a few more times, as the puzzles are more compelling when you are racing through them with a friend. Up to eight people can crowd around your TV to complete in the exercises or the board game-like Brain Quiz. Sadly, Big Brain doesn't support online play, but you can download other people's records and try to best them. Even if it doesn't make you smarter, you won't feel completely stupid if you buy this puzzler. —**BEN**

BOTTOM LINE 7.5

> **Concept:** Whether you call them minigames or exercises, these puzzles feel a little like schoolwork

> **Graphics:** Not the game's highlight, but not intended to be. At least you can import your Mii

> **Sound:** The voice coming out of the Wii remote's speakers is so annoying that you will probably mute it

> **Playability:** The simple point-and-click controls certainly won't intimidate anyone

> **Entertainment:** Good clean fun, even if it is brief. Grab some buddies and let the competitive spirit lengthen this game's life

> **Replay Value:** Moderately High



Second Opinion 7

I enjoyed Big Brain Academy on DS, although I found it somewhat lacking in comparison to Brain Age. This Wii version features a bunch of new puzzles, each of which play off the previous game's brain teasers in clever ways. Although some of the new features, like the use of Miis, add to the experience, the Wii remote isn't as suited to this sort of twitch reaction gameplay as the more accurate touch screen. Other than one cool multiplayer mode, I don't really find much here to recommend it over the DS version. It's solid fun, but not nearly as addictive as the original. —**MATT**





BOTTOM LINE 8

- > **Concept:** The rally racing really stands out in this series' move away from...rally racing
- > **Graphics:** Track details will pop in as you drive, but the light bloom is nice, and shadows from creeping cars are cast on your vehicle
- > **Sound:** It's cool that Travis Pastrana has provided voice-overs for a large bulk of the menus
- > **Playability:** You can switch the tracks' turn indicators to different styles, depending on your preference
- > **Entertainment:** Codemasters shows you how to race on the edge on two wheels and live to tell about it
- > **Replay Value:** Moderate

Second Opinion 8.5

As someone who has never really gone all that deep into a rally racing sim, I was concerned that Dirt was going to be a non-stop, hardcore ass beating. Fortunately, the myriad difficulty levels and smoothly integrated audio tutorials will have even the most casual racing fan blazing around the track like a pro in no time. Gravel, dirt, tarmac, and the several other driving surfaces offer a distinctly different feel and challenge. This sensation of variety extends well into vehicle handling and race types as well, and it's all tied together by one of the slickest menu interfaces ever – racing game or otherwise. The biggest strike against Dirt is its horrendous load times. But at least you can watch a detailed list of your stats fly by in the meantime, and the graphical payoff once you're driving almost makes you forget the wait. Multiplayer also suffers from a lack of offline split-screen racing or even a head-to-head mode via Xbox Live. However, arcade and sim racers alike will find a supremely satisfying experience in climbing Dirt's plentiful and challenging tiers. —BRYAN

XBOX 360

Dirt

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER RACING (1-PLAYER VIA XBOX LIVE OR SYSTEM LINK) > **PUBLISHER** CODEMASTERS
> **DEVELOPER** CODEMASTERS > **RELEASE** JUNE 19 > **ESRB** E



CAR & DRIVER

Colin McRae is already less than a household name in most homes in America, so the fact that Codemasters dropped the driver's name from this franchise signals a new direction for the series formerly known as a hardcore rally racing sim. Dirt hasn't sacrificed any of the nail-biting, hair-raising racing action – nor the requirement that you have the driving chops to pull some of it off – but the game's lack of identity leaves me wondering why they made the change in the first place.

Dirt's career mode resembles another Codemasters title – Pro Race Driver – as it lets you pick from different racing types. This gives you the freedom to choose how you want to build up enough points to proceed to the next tier of the mode's pyramid. Unlike Pro Race Driver, however, the racing is restricted to various off-road forms. Apart from the rally racing and rallycross you've seen before, sometimes you'll race semis, trucks, or buggies on dirt tracks. Unfortunately, a lot of these races are on fairly short, contained tracks, and aren't as fun as the long, diverse, and crazy-ass rally courses. Which then begs the question: Why did Codemasters turn a perfectly fine rally game into a sort-of-rally game?

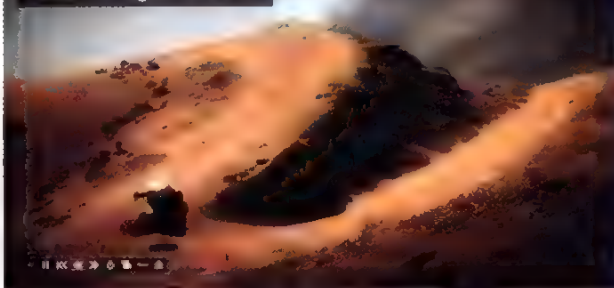
The answer, of course, is to broaden the series' horizons, but it's hard to tell if this game has been broadened too much or too little. For instance, I wished there were more traditional,

hardcore multi-stage rally races, which would make fixing the damage on your car actually important in this game. However, because it lacks a lot of multi-stage rally races, for most of the game the damage feature doesn't even matter. On the other hand, Dirt, unlike Gran Turismo or Forza, doesn't offer what most people want – a reason to collect a lot of cool cars. Although I did have to buy cars to compete in certain races, buying rides and liveries (no upgrading at all) just isn't that important.

Another example where the game gets caught in the middle is with online. True to rally racing, you don't race against others, only their times. I can't imagine most online players want to play this way.

Codemasters knows how to deliver solid racing games, and Dirt has what you need if you are looking for intense racing. I don't think it's necessarily going to gamer this series a new audience, but hopefully it's a case of taking one step sideways to jump forward one big step in the future. —KATO

■ Rally courses with big rigs can make for a dangerous combo



GETTING DIRTY

A DAY IN THE LIFE OF PLAYING DIRT

00:15 MINUTES

I placed first and second in two tier events to collect \$400,000, enough to buy from a selection of a couple cars. I unlocked my first new event on the first tier while playing on the Pro-Am difficulty, which means a hard level of mechanical damage and opposition skill.

01:00 HOUR

I just unlocked the second tier of races after earning 46 points, with six races in the first tier left. With my winnings I bought a \$15,000 livery for my Mitsubishi L200 Triton. I went back and re-raced an event to place first so I could get the full 10 points, and re-raced a truck race over a dozen times. I am now four percent complete, with \$885,000 in the bank.

04:30 HOURS

I just bought a RWD Lancia Stratos and opened up the third tier of races (including one only for big rigs) after having reached 50 of the 100 possible second tier points.

08:30 HOURS

I've unlocked the fourth tier after 40/90 third tier points, and the first buggy race is now open. My stats are as follows: 25-percent complete. Total Races: 40. Wins: 28. Podiums: 37. Fastest Speed: 110.40 mph. Distance Traveled: 112.19 mi. Vehicles Acquired: 13/46. Total Driving Time: 1hr. 47 min. Longest slide: 173 ft. Longest Distance on Two Wheels: 74.53 ft. Longest Jump: 157.63 ft. Longest Distance Without Crashing: 5.35 mi

■ The damage is spectacular, but isn't that important in the actual career mode





XBOX 360

Tenchu Z

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 4-PLAYER VIA XBOX LIVE) > **PUBLISHER** MICROSOFT/FROM SOFTWARE > **DEVELOPER** K2, LTD > **RELEASE** JUNE 12 > **ESRB** M

TENCHU ZZZZZZZZZZZZ

If I worked at From Software I'd have my house on 24-hour surveillance, because a clan of ninjas may strike at any time to prevent me from further sullying the great Tenchu name. The classic stealth franchise has fallen into such disrepair that the self-respecting shadow warriors of the world may be sharpening their katana blades as we speak with revenge on their minds.

If you've played one of the recent Tenchu games, then you already know what to

feels exactly like it did five years ago. The new stealth kill animations create Lone Wolf-like blood baths, but the basic swordplay drags woefully behind Ninja Gaiden, the high benchmark of ninja titles.

The two areas where From Software added new elements — character customization and co-op mode — succeed modestly. The co-op mode allows you to slash and sneak your way through missions with up to four friends. It's great watching your fellow ninja (who happens to have

bright purple hair) spring from a behind a box to slay an unsuspecting guard unloading over the edge of the dock. But like Rainbow Six Vegas, the game doesn't showcase the storyline or cutscenes



expect with Z. As the resident ninja errand boy (or girl), your job is to infiltrate sparsely populated Japanese villages, exterminate the guards on patrol whilst avoiding the sole civilian, and assassinate a shady character your clan deems expendable. Tenchu Z tries to mix things up with the occasional trailing mission or "boss fight," but the majority of the 50+ missions offer the same stale gameplay.

The graphics and gameplay are also stuck in last-generation ruts. Instead of arming this stealth title with high dynamic range lighting to give you the real feeling of hiding in the shadows, the game takes no advantage of the Xbox 360's technical power. Navigating your ninja through these boring environments

when playing with friends, which takes away from the overall experience.

Tenchu also needs a serious upgrade to its enemy AI. It's hard to imagine that a developer would release a game in this day and age where if you climb up to a rooftop or crawl under a building while an enemy is taking a swing at you, he completely loses track of you.

Ninjas deserve better. Let's hope the 'Z' indicates that this is the last of these titles we'll have to suffer through. —BERTZ



BOTTOM LINE 6.5

> **Concept:** Further diminish the once-great Tenchu franchise by releasing a game that may as well be a remake

> **Graphics:** Last-generation lighting and textures do this stealth game no favors

> **Sound:** The great traditional Japanese soundtrack gives the game more immersion than the graphics

> **Playability:** The control is adequate, but it's also stuck in neutral. Tenchu is in dire need of refurbishment

> **Entertainment:** Hunting with your friends in co-op is a blast, and it almost makes up for the recycled gameplay

> **Replay Value:** Moderate

Second Opinion 6.25

If, by odd chance, you happen to see a ninja slip off of a rooftop and land directly on the blade of his target, don't hold back from yelling, "You just pulled a Tenchu!" to him as he dies with tears of embarrassment in his eyes. Tenchu Z is very much a study of how you can make a ninja look like an ass. Thanks to the game's clunky controls, legally blind AI, and poor collision between the characters, this is easier to accomplish than you would think. Four-player co-op certainly makes the experience more bearable, but mostly because it's fun to watch someone else struggle with the archaic controls and poke holes in the shoddy AI. With over 50 levels, there's a ton of game here, but as you'll quickly see, this title isn't shy about recycling its environments or showing that it has little more to offer than just sneaking up behind everyone and turning their necks into gushing geysers. It has its moments, but most of your time is spent fussing with it rather than enjoying it. —REINER

XBOX 360

Overlord

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION/ADVENTURE (2-PLAYER VIA XBOX LIVE) > **PUBLISHER** CODEMASTERS > **DEVELOPER** TRIUMPH > **RELEASE** JUNE 26 > **ESRB** T



GOOD IS DUMB

As you set your minions about their mischief with a majestic gesture of your hand, it's hard not to crack a smile. Observing the little beasts gleefully swarm, destroy, and stab every creature and object in sight is one of the most entertaining things I've ever seen in a video game. The problem is that Overlord only shines this brightly when you're just watching it. When it comes to managing your minions and directing them through the puzzles, the game is just as frustrating as it is humorous.

As a newly resurrected evil overlord, you must reestablish your strength by striking back at the heroes who defeated you years ago. You do this with the aid of four minion types: Brown minions are just general-purpose combat goons, red minions can walk through fire, blue minions heal, and green minions can turn invisible. With careful planning and strategy, these special abilities help players defeat enemies and overcome environmental obstacles. It is strikingly similar in concept to Nintendo's Pikmin, but with more pillaging and defiling.

When you just want your minions to run

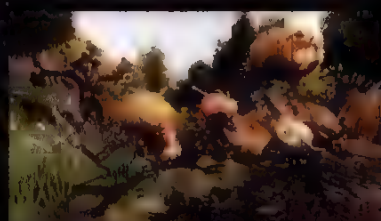
around and break stuff (and occasionally die), everything is fine. Overlord hits some snags when it comes to controlling the chaos, however. Several puzzles require a level of precision that the gameplay and controls just can't accommodate, like navigating minions around water or distracting monsters with one minion to create an opening for others. When faced with these aggravating moments, it is surprising how quickly the game's charm is lost.

In terms of writing and tone, I can't recommend Overlord enough. The satire is funny, and the evil is deliciously over-the-top, but the minions are the real stars. If the premise sounds fun to you, it is worth taking the lumps in the gameplay to enjoy what Overlord has to offer. —JOE

MINIONS ARE FUNNY

Here are a few quick examples of entertaining things your minions can do, some by your command and others of their own free will.

- Kill chiefs, then steal their hats
- Dance happily to fiddle music, then attack the fiddler
- Destroy pumpkins and wear them on their heads
- Ransack Halling homes, leaving only smoke pouring out of the door
- Ride sheep while attacking them
- Cheerfully say "For you!" when delivering an item to you
- Kill a zombie, then wield a rotting arm as a weapon



BOTTOM LINE 7.5

> **Concept:** Embrace your dark side by controlling an army of mayhem-loving minions

> **Graphics:** A showcase of rich fantasy visuals, from idyllic hills to swampy marshes

> **Sound:** Uneven. The music is good, but there just isn't enough of it. The game seems to rely heavily on the quality sound effects instead

> **Playability:** It takes a few hours before the strange camera and minion controls become second nature

> **Entertainment:** When it doesn't matter if your minions live or die, this game is hilarious

> **Replay Value:** Moderate

Second Opinion 7.5

This is a tough one for me — there were moments I found myself loving the gorgeous backgrounds, hilarious characters, and clever puzzles of Overlord. There were also times I cursed the lack of any sort of map, the poor camera, the blind stupidity of my minions (get out of the water, dummies), and unclear quest objectives that pervade the gameplay. It's sad that a few poor design decisions mar an otherwise funny and fun send-up of the fantasy clichés we all know and love. Whatever faults there may be, the swarming hordes of your mischievous minions and their penchant for destruction never really gets old. The large size of the game doesn't fail to impress, nor does the impeccable environmental art that fills the screen throughout your adventure. Overlord could have peaked way higher, but you still owe it to yourself to see your little gremlins take down a hapless sheep at least once. —MILLER



BOTTOM LINE 6.5

- > **Concept:** Shoehorn a classic RPG franchise into the Counter-Strike mold
- > **Graphics:** Keeps up with current FPS standards, but doesn't really push things in a compelling direction
- > **Sound:** Gunshots, explosions, radio chatter, and no music outside of the menu screens
- > **Playability:** Fun maneuvers like teleport and glide are implemented smoothly into a solid FPS control scheme
- > **Entertainment:** The various powers are fun to experiment with, but limited maps and gameplay types give little reason to dive deep into the community
- > **Replay Value:** Moderately Low

XBOX 360 | PC

Shadowrun

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 16-PLAYER VIA XBOX LIVE OR SYSTEM LINK, OR PC INTERNET OR LAN)
 > **PUBLISHER** MICROSOFT GAME STUDIOS > **DEVELOPER** FASA STUDIO > **RELEASE** MAY 29 > **ESRB** M

AFRAID OF ITS OWN SHADOW

We may never know why Microsoft thought it would be a good idea to use a classic RPG license as a tool to promote cross-platform deathmatches between Xbox 360s and PCs. When you are resurrecting one of the many franchises resting in the video game graveyard, it might be smart to go for one that's at least in the action genre. No, Shadowrun really doesn't have anything to do with the old games, but if you can get past that (or if you never cared in the first place), the core multi-player gameplay brings a few interesting appetizers to the table. Too bad it's not enough to fill you up.

The different races have various talents, with some kind of advantage and weakness present across the board. The speedy Elves take damage quickly, while trolls absorb a lot of punishment but move slowly. Dwarves are resistant to headshots, but take a while to regenerate "essence," more commonly known as mana. In comparison, human abilities are relatively middle of the road. Most of

the matches I participated in contained a decent mix of races, but at times seemed skewed towards humans and elves. The game's focus on capture the flag means that speed is key, and these two faster races will always have that slight advantage — hence, the balance among races is a little off.

Weapons include all of the old standards like machine guns, pistols, sniper rifles, and grenades. It's in the rock-paper-scissors dynamic of magic and tech skills that Shadowrun stands out. Blue crystals can be deployed to protect the artifact/flag, while magic-draining grenades will dispose of them quickly. A cloaking device makes players temporarily invulnerable to attacks unless a rival uses gust, a Force push-like maneuver. These are just a few of the many clever counters present in Shadowrun. The tricky thing is that you can only equip three of the twelve powers. Players have to choose just how much they want to invest in

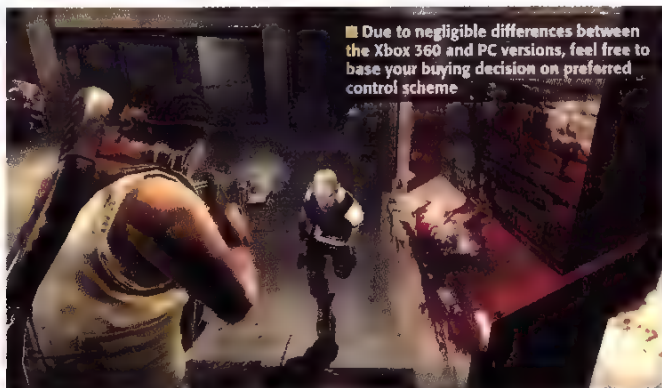


healing and resurrection, offensive and defensive skills, or mobility (teleportation and gliding). Experimenting with these powers to find the best combination for specific maps and situations is where the game shines.

Unfortunately, once players get rolling in this regard there really isn't much else to look forward to. The nine maps available aren't nearly enough, the lack of rankings and leaderboards provide no incentive to hone your skills to perfection, and the extremely meager offline options drag everything down. I would have loved to try out the game's mechanics in a full-blown single-player campaign with varying objectives for all of the different races. As it stands now, Shadowrun is simply a fraction of a game hidden behind the price of a full one. —**BRYAN**

Second Opinion 6.75

Shadowrun is the type of game you would expect to find as a prize in a box of cereal. It doesn't offer a single player campaign. Its multi-player component doesn't track player statistics and only offers an anorexic nine maps. There are no items to unlock, secrets to unearth, or goals to complete. Your characters can't be customized, and there isn't much in terms of match altering. The only challenges players face are unlocking the uninspired Achievements and fragging until their eyes bleed. There's little to it, but Shadowrun definitely delivers on the gameplay front. The unique, class types, wild assortment of spells and tech, and tight weapon play unite to create a deeply layered and highly enjoyable FPS experience. You just have to go into it knowing that it doesn't offer the wealth of options and substance you expect from every other game you play. Like Counter-Strike, I could definitely see people gravitating towards this game for its hard-hitting and original play. —**REINER**



BOTTOM LINE **8**

> **Concept:** Dress up Bunge's 2004 masterpiece as a Trojan horse to entice gamers into upgrading to Vista

> **Graphics:** As fondly as we all remember them, these visuals haven't aged well

> **Sound:** From the brilliant score to the excellent voiceovers, it still has some of the best audio design in gaming to date

> **Playability:** You know all those fancy leans and sprints you're used to in a PC FPS? You'll miss them here

> **Entertainment:** If you're two and a half years late to the party and need to check out Halo 2, so be it, but modern top-tier PC FPSs blow this away in many respects

> **Replay Value:** Moderately High

Second Opinion **8**

Halo 2 on Vista offers no surprises to faithful fans who have followed any preview coverage. The high-res look is definitely a step up from the original console version, but it still doesn't stack up against modern titles. The mouse and keyboard set can finally play the game their way with accurate results. However, this somehow accentuates just how slowly Master Chief runs. I personally preferred using the 360 controller to retain the Halo feel, and the ease of plug and play makes switching back and forth a snap. Achievement hounds can look forward to almost 500 points just for completing the single player campaign on Normal, not to mention the loads of multiplayer points. The two new maps are fun, but most people are playing classic levels. This game is most definitely not worth upgrading to an entirely new operating system for, but if you already use Vista and were planning on running through Halo 2 again to brush up for the next chapter, this is the way to do it.—BRYAN



PC

Halo 2

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 16-PLAYER VIA INTERNET OR LAN) > **PUBLISHER** MICROSOFT > **DEVELOPER** HIRED GUN/BUNGIE > **RELEASE** MAY 31 > **ESRB** M

THIS PARTY'S STILL ROCKIN'

Hardcore PC gamers like to rag on Halo for being an FPS-lite: a game that hardly innovates and lacks the complexity of PC titles like Far Cry or the Battlefield series. Console-centric players often hold the Halo series up as the pinnacle of first-person action gaming. While both viewpoints are valid, Halo 2's objective qualities lie somewhere in between these two extremes.

Halo 2's greatest strength – its incorporation of some modicum of tactical thought into fast-paced, guns-blazing action – shines through on PC just as well as it did on Xbox. Certain tasks, like sniping and nailing Hunters' weak spots, are noticeably easier with mouse-and-keyboard control. Others, like piloting airborne Banshees, are markedly worse. Overall it's a wash, with player preference ultimately dictating which scheme suits him or her better. Even

though Halo 2 was clearly designed to take into account the foibles of playing on a standard-def display with an Xbox controller, the platform switch doesn't really tarnish the experience – unlike in PC-to-console ports like Quake 4 or Half-Life 2.

Multiplayer, outside of the addition of a few bonus maps and a level editor as token concessions to the PC crowd, is the same as ever. The small-scale, intimate conflicts at the heart of Halo's competitive play are still compelling. Finding and joining a session is relatively painless, and the rampant idiocy that pervades Halo 2 on Xbox Live was less of an issue in our time online.

As gorgeous as Halo 2 was in 2004, advancements in technology have predictably left the game's visuals in the dust. Better anti-aliasing and the higher resolution of PC displays help to some extent, but Crysis this is not. Of course, tiny texture

depth and low polygon counts don't mean much when you've got two Ultras and a handful of Jackals flinging plasma at you, but discerning gamers will easily notice the difference between Halo 2's graphics and the quality of the visuals in a modern PC game.

Halo 2 on Vista is a solid port that brings the Master Chief's heroism to more gamers, and that's indisputably a good thing. If it's additional content or a new experience you're looking for, though, this direct translation to Windows Vista will feel like \$50 wasted.—ADAM

THE VISTA ADVANTAGE?

Halo 2 is the vanguard of Microsoft's attempts to bring Xbox Live to Windows Vista, and it fails to make a compelling case for the platform. On the positive side, it features hosted leaderboards, an in-game server browser, rudimentary matchmaking, access to Achievements, and your Live friends list. On the other hand, how many modern PC shooters have you played recently that don't have analogues to those features, especially with the advent of Xfire? Thankfully, despite needing Vista to play Halo 2, you're free to browse public servers or play LAN sessions without an Xbox Live Gold subscription. Co-op, sadly, is not in this version at all.



NINTENDO DS

SimCity DS

> STYLE 1-PLAYER SIMULATION > PUBLISHER EA > DEVELOPER EA JAPAN > RELEASE JUNE 19 > ESRB E



THE SMALL CITIES

When EA announced it was bringing SimCity to the DS, a rush of excitement and concern blasted through the series' fan base. The opportunity to bring your city anywhere you go was offset by concerns that the display would be too small to effectively interact with. Fortunately, EA's Japan-based studio has designed a control scheme that works surprisingly well.

In building mode an isometric view of the city appears on the top screen, while a simple black and white grid shows up on the bottom. Residential, commercial, and industrial zones appear as bright orange, purple, and red boxes, respectively. Players can use the stylus to place buildings or draw in roads and railroads with relative ease. Occasionally, I'd accidentally draw a kink at the end of a road or expand a zone a little farther than I was planning, but this can easily be remedied with the view zoom. Cartoony, bigheaded advisors will guide you along and facilitate meetings with your a-hole citizens. Seriously, old lady Agnes won't be satisfied until you build a hospital for every person in town.

SimCity DS contains 20 different maps ranging from \$10,000 to \$100,000 in starting cash. Unfortunately, if you want to try a new map, you have to delete your current city. Super lame! Saves and loads can also take a bit of time, which is strange for a cartridge-based game. Several more complex elements of the franchise have been removed for

this version, including terraforming and sewer pipes, but it's probably best to keep things simpler on the DS for space concerns and general interface.

Outside of working away on your city, several disaster scenarios await the quick-thinking city planner. Progress in these challenges cannot be saved, so be sure to block out enough time to quiet riots or restore a city from earthquake damage. I found these scenarios to be mostly about trial and error due to the strict rule sets and lack of any suggestions from your usually chatty advisor.

Though SimCity DS isn't perfect, it liberally taps that latent SimCity addiction found in everyone's brain. If you own a DS and have ever liked the series, this is definitely worth a look.—BRYAN

BOTTOM LINE 8.25

> **Concept:** Find the middle road between fun and complexity while squeezing SimCity onto a handheld

> **Graphics:** Not as pretty as the recent PC offerings, but city details hold up well on the tiny DS screen

> **Sound:** Innocuous tunes neither annoy nor impress, but you can easily get away with muting the volume

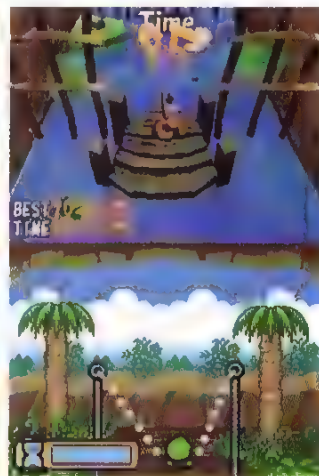
> **Playability:** The stylus-on-grid controls work surprisingly well, though sometimes you'll end up with a crazy road if you're not careful

> **Entertainment:** The open and shut freedom of the DS is perfect for tinkering around with your city

> **Replay Value:** Moderately High

Second Opinion

Almost two decades after its initial release, SimCity's greatness is not merely the stuff of legend; its prominence still stands due to the amazing gameplay. Building up your town is an addictive and deep pursuit that is fun whether you play the harder scenarios or simply tinker around with a homemade tangle town. This title offers a hodge-podge of robust features from the series' early days, but I would have loved a rotating camera and a better advisory system. Despite these quibbles, SimCity is a classic game that can still open eyes, excite, and inspire.—KATO



NINTENDO DS

Cookie & Cream

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION (2-PLAYER VIA WIRELESS OR NINTENDO WI-FI CONNECTION) > PUBLISHER AGETEC > DEVELOPER FROM SOFTWARE/HI CORPORATION > RELEASE JUNE 5 > ESRB E

A JOB FOR TWO

The Adventures of Cookie & Cream was a great curio of the last generation, a cooperative action/puzzle title that had you and a friend racing up mirrored sides of a vertically scrolling level, pulling switches, and performing other actions to open gates and lower bridges for the player on the opposite side. If you were especially skilled, you could even play it solo, by controlling each character with one of the analog sticks. It was essentially the video game version of the old "pat your head and rub your tummy" trick.

In bringing Cookie & Cream to the DS, FromSoftware couldn't rely on two analogs, so you now control Cookie with the d-pad and then perform contextual actions and puzzles (think WarioWare) on the bottom screen with the stylus. This unique gameplay sometimes pays off in surprisingly inventive ways, especially in some of the better-designed boss battles. However, just as often it's a complete mess, as your top character hops about while you flail around trying to man the stylus. These flaws are exacerbated by the fact that the platforming action is, well, fairly sub par.

Two-player coop, on the other hand, works great — one partner steers, one partner performs the touch-screen activities. It's very intuitive and is definitely the preferred way to tackle this title (although co-op can only be done through local wireless and with two cartridges). There are also some very interesting minigames to unlock. Still, the main single-player mode remains way too clunky for me to award this game high marks. That said, the great parts of this game are really something to experience.—MATT

BOTTOM LINE 7

> **Concept:** An ambidextrous DS reinterpretation of the long-lost PS2 classic

> **Graphics:** With separate gameplay, the developers had a lot to do here, and the end results aren't exactly pretty

> **Sound:** Forgettable, as in I actually forgot what the music sounded like

> **Playability:** The extremely creative control scheme is at turns amazing and amazingly frustrating

> **Entertainment:** I loved it; I hated it; I thought it was just okay — you'll experience a whole range of emotions in Cookie & Cream

> **Replay Value:** Moderately High

Second Opinion 7.25

Perhaps a more appropriate title for this game would be Sweet & Sour. For all of the clever bits in Cookie & Cream, there's a hearty dose of frustration to go along with it. The plentiful and interesting minigames will have you tapping your screen, blowing on the DS, and scratching your head. Boss fights are implemented well — my favorite is one where you have to play air hockey on the touch screen to slam a chunk of ice into a Yeti while dodging attacks on the top screen. Playing co-op style with a friend helps remove some stress and it's great for earning points to unlock new minigames. It's just too bad that some annoying minigames (damn you, slot machine!), sloppy platforming controls, and a static camera angle that never really gives you a proper depth of field drag down this otherwise refreshing experience.—BRYAN

PSP

Dungeon Maker: Hunting Ground

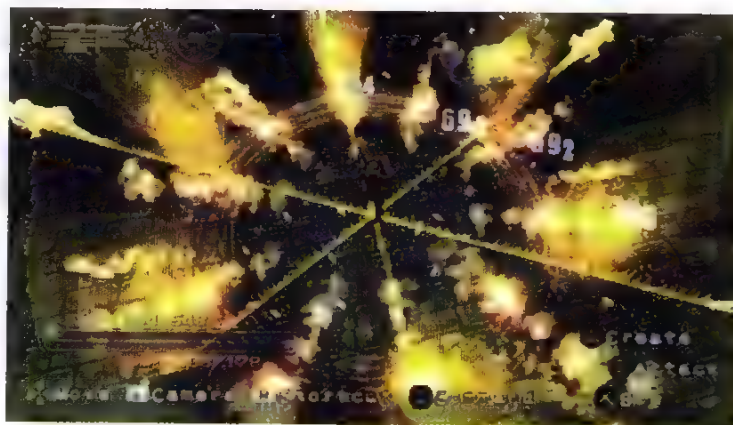
> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION/RPG > **PUBLISHER** XSEED GAMES > **DEVELOPER** GLOBAL A ENTERTAINMENT > **RELEASE** JUNE 19 > **ESRB** E10+

WORST LANDLORD EVER

There's a lot of promise in a game that lets you combine RPG leveling and character advancement with the fun of designing and fleshing out your own unique game world. It's not exactly a new idea, but it's still a good one when done right. *Dungeon Maker* has some cool features, but not enough to cross that threshold of having

been "done right," and the title winds up as a simple variation on the level grind we've been playing for years.

In *Dungeon Maker*, rather than going out to seek the monsters, you've decided to build them a home, invite them in, and then slaughter them. Seems a little underhanded to me, but



whatever. Every day you'll expand your dungeon while simultaneously clearing it out of its new denizens, then return to town for some vittles (to increase your stats) and to buy new equipment and rooms for your dungeon. Repeat ad nauseam.

The early hours of the game are fun because you're getting to craft your own unique dungeon. Those same early hours aren't fun because the gameplay is so simplistic and your dungeon is so small and uninteresting. The later hours share the same split personality of good and bad, but for different reasons. After you've gotten the hang of things, it's fun to try out new ways to lure monsters into your ever-

deepening lair. Unfortunately, every day you wander down into the same dungeon, where everything looks the same — except for the little tweaks you made the day before. You'll encounter a number of simplistic monster types that you'll hack and slash through with a useable if uninnovative action combat system. If that sounds a little boring, then I've made my point.

Even so, the game certainly isn't broken, and I did take a certain pleasure in laying out my dungeon map. Then again, this is from the same guy who has enjoyed dungeon mastering D&D games for years, so I'm not sure I'm trustworthy on the point. Most of the rest of the game left me unimpressed. —MILLER

BOTTOM LINE 6

> **Concept:** An eccentric sword-wielding hero builds a dungeon for your monsters before killing them

> **Graphics:** Drab and without detail, the visuals certainly aren't going to hook you

> **Sound:** Totally forgettable

> **Playability:** Some cool building and combat with straightforward, simple controls

> **Entertainment:** More fun in concept than practice, dungeon making is a job best left to the professionals

> **Replay Value:** Low

Second Opinion 5.5

Why are you building a dungeon in a cave outside of town? It doesn't matter. All that's important is that you show up every morning to clear out the monsters, collect loot, and furnish your vast subterranean halls. That might not sound like enough to drive an entire game, and it isn't. *Dungeon Maker* tries to dangle rewards in front of you to keep you playing, but the controls, graphics, and gameplay make it painful at every turn. If I had a multi-level underground lair in real life, I'd bury this garbage on the bottom floor and seal the entrance with forbidden magic, the game's evil lost to time. —JOE



HANDHELD QUICKIES

NINTENDO DS

Planet Puzzle League

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER PUZZLE (UP TO 4-PLAYER VIA WIRELESS, 2-PLAYER VIA NINTENDO WI-FI CONNECTION) > **PUBLISHER** NINTENDO > **DEVELOPER** INTELLIGENT SYSTEMS > **RELEASE** JUNE 5 > **ESRB** E



BOTTOM LINE 8.25 The fact that Intelligent Systems developed this title is a dead giveaway — Planet Puzzle League is a reworking of Tetris Attack. Sure, it's not temblously original, but I'm not complaining about another chance to play one of the all-time greats — especially when this new DS version has been created with such care. The touch-screen functionality (which allows you to slide blocks with the stylus) fits perfectly, and Wi-Fi play means that you can take your skills online. A lot of other nice features also make appearances here, like a daily mode that allows you to test your skills once a day and plots a chart of your progress à la Brain Age. —MATT

NINTENDO DS

The New York Times Crosswords

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER PUZZLE (UP TO 4-PLAYER VIA WIRELESS) > **PUBLISHER** MAJESCO > **DEVELOPER** B.J.DCAT > **RELEASE** MAY 22 > **ESRB** T



BOTTOM LINE 8.25 Crossword puzzles may be a ubiquitous element of our culture, but that doesn't mean they can't morph into some sort of interactive context for the gaming crowd to enjoy. That's exactly what has happened here — Majesco has collected 1,000 crosswords originally printed in *The New York Times* over the last several years. Writing in letters with the stylus works remarkably well, and the ability to get letter hints makes these often infuriating puzzles more accessible to audiences beyond PhD-level linguists. Interestingly, there's even some fun competitive and cooperative play available via wireless connection. Judging the game on its own merits, this is just what a handheld crossword game should be. —MILLER

PSP

Dungeons and Dragons: Tactics

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER STRATEGY/RPG (UP TO 6-PLAYER VIA AD HOC) > **PUBLISHER** ATARI > **DEVELOPER** KULIU > **RELEASE** JUNE 19 > **ESRB** T

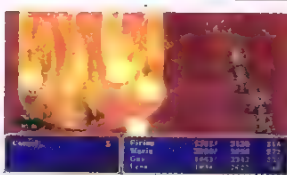


BOTTOM LINE 6 Previous attempts at translating the Dungeons & Dragons tabletop experience to video games (like *Dark Alliance* or *Neverwinter Nights*) have had to make certain concessions to be playable. D&D: Tactics hardly makes any, and as a result, feels like you are playing with the worst DM ever. I felt completely confined by the rigid rules, limited skill opportunities, and a between-battle interface that's more complicated than figuring out the rules for grappling. D&D: Tactics tries to find the middle ground, but ends up lacking both the freedom that distinguishes tabletop D&D and the gameplay that makes the digital versions entertaining. —JOE

PSP

Final Fantasy II Anniversary Edition

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ROLE-PLAYING GAME > **PUBLISHER** SQUARE ENIX > **DEVELOPER** SQUARE ENIX > **RELEASE** JULY 24 > **ESRB** T

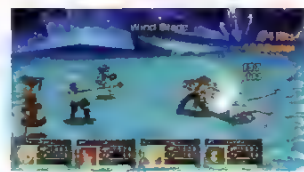


BOTTOM LINE 6 Final Fantasy II was a nice bonus in Final Fantasy Origins for PSOne, and again for GBA's Dawn of Souls, but the original Final Fantasy was always the star of the show. Now that the two games have been separated, it is all too plain why this substandard adventure has never been able to stand on its own legs. Pretty new visuals don't make up for the pervasive defects inherent in the game's leveling system. These problems lead to serious balancing issues that, though they feel improved in this version, still make this title stand out as the low point in the entire series. —JOE

PSP

Tales of the World

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION/RPG > **PUBLISHER** NAMCO BANDAI > **DEVELOPER** NAMCO TALES STUDIO > **RELEASE** JULY 17 > **ESRB** T



BOTTOM LINE 7 Boy, these Tales games really start to blend together after awhile. This one finds you in conflict with a world-devouring evil, and the giant World Tree gives you life in order to hold off the darkness. Fans will be pleased to find familiar characters from earlier Tales games aiding you in your tasks, which usually involves delivering some inane object or striking down a troublesome monster in a nearby dungeon. Since you can't take more than one job at a time, expect lots of repeat visits to your quest giver before delving back into the same areas again and again. From action-style combat scenes to cutesy animal sidekicks to world-saving dilemmas, this is a Tales game through and through. I'm pretty sure that's not a compliment anymore. —MILLER



CHARTS

An In-Depth Listing Of The Best Selling Games

TOP 20

Listing Based Upon NPD Data For May 2007 Based On Units Sold

1 POKÉMON DIAMOND (DS)



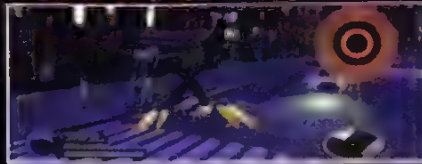
Please welcome this month's Charts guest host, the one and only Spider-Man! Thank you, thank you. Have you ever played Pokémon before, Spider-Man? No. Why is this game number one while mine is number three? It has to do with game sales. But isn't this that game where kids teach their pets to murder? Well...not quite. Yes it is! This is that cockfight simulator. Why is this game above mine? Let's move on.

2 MARIO PARTY 8 (WII)



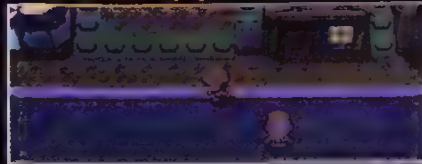
I think I could take this Mario guy, too. It's not a competition, Spider-Man. Can he do whatever a spider can? No. Can he spin a web, any size - catch thieves just like flies? I doubt it. Is he strong? Listen bud - I've got radioactive blood. Wait a minute! You're just quoting your old theme song.

3 SPIDER-MAN 3 (PS2)



Well, this is your game, so you probably have a pretty high opinion of it? Actually no, you want to know why? There's no dance scene. I love to dance. Dancing is really my secret passion, and I'm pushing that every project I work on from now on features a dance scene. Call me the Dancing Spider because no one puts Spidey in the corner.

4 POKÉMON PEARL (DS)



Did you just quote that ridiculous line from Dirty Danc-- forget about it. What's the next game on the list? Pokémon again? We already talked about this game. This is a different version. Uh-oh, I feel something coming over me. What? Wealth and fame, I've ignored - action is my reward. You just broke out into song and dance! Lookout! Here comes the Spider-Man.

5 WII PLAY (WII)



I actually played this game. You know what would have made it better? Dancing? Yeah, and I'll tell you what else. If the minigames were spread across some kind of hub world, and between playing you could swing through the buildings and fight criminals. You just described your own game. I don't think it's self serving of me to say that Spider-Man should be number one.

Rank	Title	L. Mo.	System	Score	Release	Price
1	Pokémon Diamond	1	DS	8.25	04-07	\$35
2	Mario Party 8	N/A	Wii	7.25	05-07	\$49
3	Spider-Man 3	8	PS2	8	04-07	\$40
4	Pokémon Pearl	2	DS	8.25	04-07	\$35
5	Wii Play	4	Wii	7	02-07	\$50
6	Forza Motorsport 2	N/A	360	8.25	05-07	\$59
7	Guitar Hero II w/guitar	5	360	9.5	03-07	\$90
8	Spider-Man 3	7	360	9.25	04-07	\$60
9	Command & Conquer 3: Tiberium Wars	N/A	360	8.5	05-07	\$60
10	Guitar Hero II w/guitar	6	PS2	9	11-06	\$80
11	Super Paper Mario	3	Wii	9.5	04-07	\$50
12	Spider-Man 3	N/A	DS	N/A	04-07	\$30
13	The Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess	11	Wii	10	11-06	\$50
14	Crackdown	N/A	360	8.5	02-07	\$59
15	Spider-Man 3	N/A	Wii	6.5	04-07	\$49
16	New Super Mario Bros.	12	DS	9.25	05-06	\$35
17	Spider-Man 3	N/A	PS3	8	04-07	\$65
18	MLB '07: The Show	N/A	PS3	7.5	05-07	\$60
19	MLB '07: The Show	10	PS2	7.5	02-07	\$40
20	Shrek The Third	N/A	DS	N/A	04-07	\$27

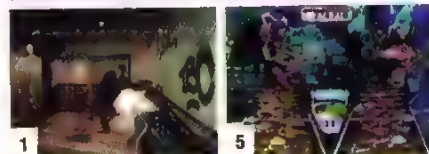
TOP 10 JAPAN

Rank	Title	System
1	Pachinko Pachislot Kouryoku Series Vol. 10	PS2
2	DS Eye Training	DS
3	Dragon Ball Z: Shin Budokai 2	PSP
4	Final Fantasy II	PSP
5	Wii Sports	Wii
6	Quendan 2	DS
7	Shin Bokukou Monogatari: Pure Innocent Life	PS2
8	More Brain Training	DS
9	Wii Play	Wii
10	New Super Mario Bros.	DS



TOP 10 GI

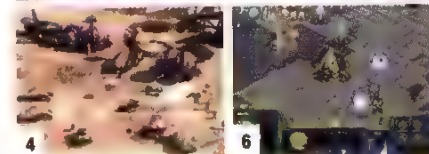
Rank	Title	L. Mo.	System
1	The Darkness	N/A	360
2	Odin Sphere	1	PS2
3	Super Paper Mario	2	Wii
4	Shin Megami Tensei: Persona 3	N/A	PS2
5	Guitar Hero Encore: Rocks the '80s	N/A	PS2
6	Forza Motorsport 2	4	360
7	World of Warcraft: The Burning Crusade	5	PC
8	All-Pro Football 2K8	N/A	Multi
9	God of War II	7	PS2
10	NCAA Football 08	8	Multi



The Staff's Favorite Picks

TOP 10 PC

Rank	Title	L. Mo.	Price
1	World Of Warcraft: The Burning Crusade	2	\$37
2	World Of Warcraft	3	\$22
3	Command & Conquer 3: Tiberium Wars	4	\$49
4	The Lord of the Rings Online: Shadows Of Angmar	1	\$51
5	The Sims 2 Seasons	6	\$29
6	StarCraft: Battle Chest	N/A	\$19
7	The Sims 2	5	\$35
8	3333 XP Games	9	\$10
9	The Sims 2 Celebration Stuff	7	\$18
10	Warcraft III Battle Chest	19	\$39



Based On Monthly Units Sold



The Darkness

Your Lantern in the Dark

By Jerk Gustafsson, lead level designer and Tommy Tordsson, writer & game designer.

Jackie gets himself into a lot of trouble. Here are some tips to help him get out of it.

LET THE DARKNESS PROTECT YOU

The Darkness is literally a shield. When you Manifest Darkness, a mass of slithering dark tentacles appear around you. These little creepers don't mean you any harm. Instead, they protect you from bullets, knives, explosions... you know, all things deadly. The damage you take while Manifesting Darkness is absorbed by the Darkness shield. This depletes your Darkness Energy. When in a fight, remember to stay in the shadows if you want to keep this shield up.

HUNGRY FOR HEARTS

Devouring hearts is your primary way of becoming more powerful. All hearts filled with evil (i.e. bad guys) can be devoured. Make sure to do so, because devouring hearts is a very important part of your progression. However, the Darkness won't bother with civilians, so there's really nothing to gain by using unnecessary violence (unless you're so inclined). One last crucial thing - some of Jackie's enemies have hearts that are more evil, as they say, than others. These contain secret powers and some Darklings can be gained by devouring them.

CONTROL CREEPING DARK

The first Darkness power that you gain is Creeping Dark. When controlling the Creeping Dark you can climb walls and ceilings. Remember to approach vertical surfaces head on to climb them. Since the Creeping Dark is a pretty slim fellow, you can access places you normally wouldn't be able to reach. Obviously, this will help you overcome some of the obstacles in the game or make use of alternative routes. Creeping Dark is the perfect tool for exploring the world and scouting out dangerous areas before venturing in head first. You can also go on a Creeping Dark rampage through the streets of New York. After you've stealth killed your victims you can devour their hearts with Creeping Dark to regain the Darkness Energy you've lost.

STAY IN THE SHADOWS

Keeping in the dark is naturally one of the most important aspects of the game. Darkness Energy is fueled by darkness and without the use of shadows you will be much more vulnerable when encountering enemies. You can seek out darkness around you, or create it yourself by either destroying lights or by trying the civilized method of using light switches. Keep on the look out for electrical cabinets that can be smashed to darken larger areas. When in Darkness mode, you become extremely powerful and have much more control over combat situations. Always prepare before fights by darkening your environment. Keep in mind the shadowy areas

you see that can be used as safe havens if you end up in a tight spot.

FLING THAT DEMON ARM

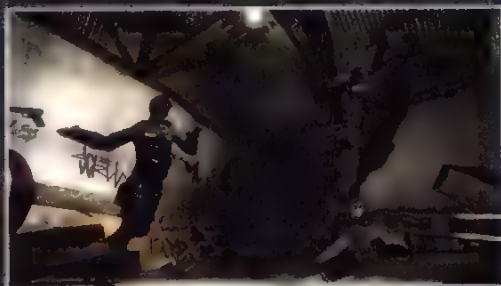
When you get the Demon Arm power, suddenly taking out lights becomes a truly joyous event. The Demon Arm is great for creating darkness. Just tap the Darkness Power trigger and your Demon Arm will lash out to destroy the nearest light source. Besides being a demonic light switch, the Demon Arm is also able to lift cars, trucks, and so on. Flinging these at cops or mobsters is an effective way of creating mayhem. Impaling enemies with your Demon Arm is a quick and fun way to dispose of them. Remember that you will encounter some obstacles that can be overcome or destroyed with the Demon Arm.

MANAGE YOUR DARKNESS ENERGY

Your Darkness Energy will deplete whenever you stand in bright light or start taking damage. When you are out of energy, your Darkness Shield will disappear and you'll go down much faster when facing enemies. Keep in mind that Darkness powers will deplete your Darkness Energy, so it's very important to balance the use of this Energy. While being fired upon by a dozen enemies surrounding you, you might want to think twice about using a power like Black Hole, which may use up all your energy. When using such a power, it may be wise to seek out shelter and regain lost energy.

SUMMON THE LITTLE ONES

Lurking in the shadows of the world are small, vicious creatures that obey the Darkness. To obtain the ability to summon new types of Darklings you must devour the hearts of certain evil enemies. The first Darkling you can control is the Berserker Darkling. This little fellow is anything but good. He will use his thirst for human blood and his dirty little claws to kill those who stand in your way. You can also find new weapons and outfits for the Berserker throughout the game, so keep an eye out for those. The Gunner Darkling is in love with her big gun and likes to spread the love to Jackie's enemies. There's also the Kamikaze who's a living bomb that you can direct wherever you want to make a big boom. Finally, we have the helpful Lightkiller Darkling who enjoys spreading the Darkness for his master. He can also electrify your foes.



MAKE THE DEAD DEADER

The Otherworld is a world of never-ending war where Death, Famine, and Pestilence thrive. The hostile soldiers you encounter in the trenches of the Otherworld unfortunately do not stay dead for very long once you've put a bullet through their skulls. They live in an infinite nightmare without hope of relief in death. Before you waste energy and bullets on killing the same enemy over and over again, it might be a better idea to just continue on. A tip to make the soldiers stay out of your way is to impale them with your Demon Arm and throw them away as far as you can. Once you find the Darkness guns you will be able to give these soldiers their final rest and yourself some breathing room. Also, as you progress through the Otherworld, remember that the British soldiers are your allies and their only intention is to help you out as much as they can.

BEING A DARKLING

The Shape Shifter mode will provide you with fast-paced multiplayer action and the possibility to play as a Darkling. When in the form of one of these little creatures you are able to quickly climb walls and ceilings as well as jump long distances. However, you are not able to carry and handle weapons like humans, which make it important to tactically manage the shape shifting. For instance, as a Darkling you are able to find weapons you otherwise cannot reach, but you need to be in human form to use them. Attacking by jumping from a ceiling using your flesh rending claws is, however, often equally deadly.

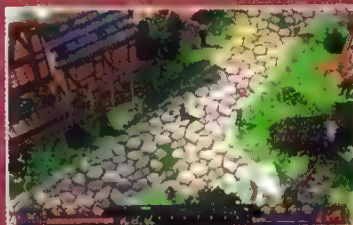
DIAL (OR POST) FOR EXTRA CONTENT

Scattered throughout the game is a wealth of collectibles in the form of phone numbers and letters. When you pick up a phone number it pops up in your inventory. To get anything from this collectible, you need to call the number written on it. Walk up to one of the payphones located in the subway stations. You'll get a prompt to dial a number. We won't tell you what disturbing secrets are unveiled by calling these numbers, but you will get a reward at the end of the phone call in the form of extra content. These range from behind the scenes movies, complete Top Cow comic issues, script outtakes, and conceptual art images. Some of the collectibles can't be unlocked by dialing a number. To unlock the letters you find in the game, simply walk up to a mailbox and post it. Collecting all will earn you an achievement or accomplishment.

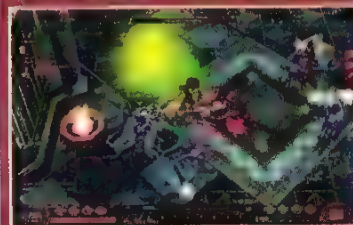
Mod World

MYTHOS

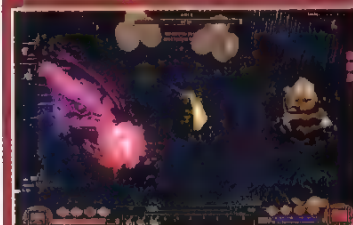
<http://www.mythos.com>



There isn't much better news a gamer can get than to hear that the developers of one of their favorite games is working on a spiritual sequel - and giving it away for free. That's precisely what Mythos is, though. Several team members from Diablo II are slaying away at the newly founded Flagship Seattle studio to create this action/RPG. Of course, the main Flagship studio (which is working on Hellgate: London currently) consists of many of the higher-up minds behind Diablo II as well, so there's plenty of experience to go around.



Conceived as a test case for the Hellgate: London network, Mythos will nonetheless be a full-fledged dungeon crawler. If our time with the closed beta was any indication, this will be a better Diablo II clone than many others that have seen commercial release - not even counting the fact that it's 100 percent free to download and play.



When we say "Diablo II clone" in this instance, we really mean it. From the interface to the skill trees and synergies, Mythos is structured almost identically to that seminal game. Don't construe that as negative, though; the only real concern we have with this title is if it will contain the depth necessary to keep players' interest. Unfortunately, we haven't heard anything in regards to a release date, so you'll have to



Attention All Cheaters!

Cheat codes, by their very nature, are in many cases buggier than Virginia in August. So unless you don't mind re-doing those 70 hours you put into the latest game, do yourself a favor and back up your save before using any codes.

On a lighter note, you can send your codes to secretaccess@gameinformer.com for a chance to be featured here and win a prize!

XBOX 360

Shrek the Third

Go to the gift shop in the game and enter this code.

Receive 10,000 Gold Coins – Up, Up, Down, Up, Right, Left



Guitar Hero II

Enter these codes quickly at the main menu screen.

Air Guitar – Yellow, Blue, Yellow, Orange, Yellow, Blue

Eyeball Head Crowd – Yellow, Orange, Blue, Blue, Blue, Orange, Yellow

Flaming Head Mode – Orange, Yellow, Yellow, Orange, Yellow, Yellow, Orange, Yellow, Yellow, Blue, Yellow, Yellow, Blue, Yellow, Yellow

Hyper Speed (1.5x Speed) – Blue, Orange, Yellow, Orange, Blue, Orange, Yellow, Yellow

Monkey Head Crowd – Orange, Yellow, Blue, Blue, Yellow, Orange, Blue, Blue

Performance Mode (Hides HUD and Track) – Blue, Blue, Yellow, Blue, Blue, Orange, Blue, Blue

Unlock All Modes And Items (will not save to your 360 gamertag) – Blue, Yellow, Orange, Red, Yellow, Orange, Red Yellow, Red Yellow, Red, Yellow, Red, Yellow

PLAYSTATION 3

The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion

While playing the game try out this great way to copy items. This will not work on certain weapons and armor, and the items must have full health and full magical energy.

Item Duplication – First collect several scrolls of the same type. It doesn't matter what they are as long as you have several of the same one. Click twice on the scrolls, then drop the single item you want to duplicate. When you exit the menu, several copies of the item will fall to the ground equal to the number of duplicate scrolls in your inventory.

"GI Droid"

(location unknown – last seen shaking soda cans in vending machines)

Code of the Month



Mortal Kombat: Armageddon



In the Krypt go to the second Media panel and then select the 7 square to enter these codes.

There are two ways to enter these codes. The codes listed use the classic controller inputs and are the best way to enter them, but use this handy conversion chart if all you have is a standard Wii remote control.

A button = Right on Wii remote d-pad

B button = Down on Wii remote d-pad

X button = Up on Wii remote d-pad

Y button = Left on Wii remote d-pad

ZL & ZR are classic controller only

Unlock Armory Music – B, Y, Left, X, Y, B

Unlock Blaze – X, Y, Left, L, Left, A

Unlock Blaze Concept Art – L, X, L, L, R, Y

Unlock Concept Pyramid at Crack of Dawn – X, Left, Left, B, Down, A

Unlock Concept Temple Trap Sketch – A, RZ, X, Down, A, Left

Unlock Cyrax Fatality Bloopers – Right, L, ZR, Down, Up, L

Unlock Daegon – R, L, X, Down, Down, Y

Unlock Drahmin's Alt. Costume – L, Right, B, R, Up, Up

Unlock Early Sketches of Taven – Up, B, RZ, Down, L (or LZ), B

Unlock Ed Boon Drawing Concept – L (or ZL), Left, Up, A, R (or ZR), L

Unlock Falling Cliffs Arena – ZR, A, Y, B, A, X

Unlock Firewall Sketch 3 – Up, Y, R (or ZR), L (or ZL), A, L

Unlock Frost's Alt. Costume – Down, R, R, L, A, L

Unlock General Reiko's War Room Arena – R, X, R, Up, B, B

Unlock Krimson Forest Arena – A, L, Up, Y, A, Down

Unlock Lin Kuei Palace Tune – L (or ZL), Left, A, B, RZ, Right

Unlock Meat – Up, Y, Y, A, A, Up

Unlock Mileena's Car Concept – R (or ZR), Right, Up, R (or ZR), X, Up

Unlock Motor Gameplay Movie – X, Up, ZR, L (or ZL), R, ZR

Unlock Nethership Interior Arena – R, Left, Left, Down, L, Y

Unlock Nitara's Alt. Costume – Down, L, Up, L, L, Right

Unlock Pyramid of Argus Arena – R, L, Y, B, R, Up

Unlock Pyramid of Argus Tune – Down, Left, R, L, Up, L

Unlock Sektor's 2-Hand Pulse Blade Sketch – R, L, Left, B, Up, R

Unlock Shang Tsung's Alt. Costume – L, Left, Up, A, Up, L (or ZL)

Unlock Shiinnok's Spire Arena – Left, Left, A, Up, X, L

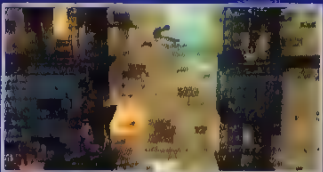
Unlock Taven – L, Left, ZR, Up, A, Down

Unlock Tekunin Warship Tune – Up, A, L, R, R, B

*Watanabe Michiyo
Bald Head, Maine*

Xbox Live Arcade Spotlight

Prince of Persia Classic

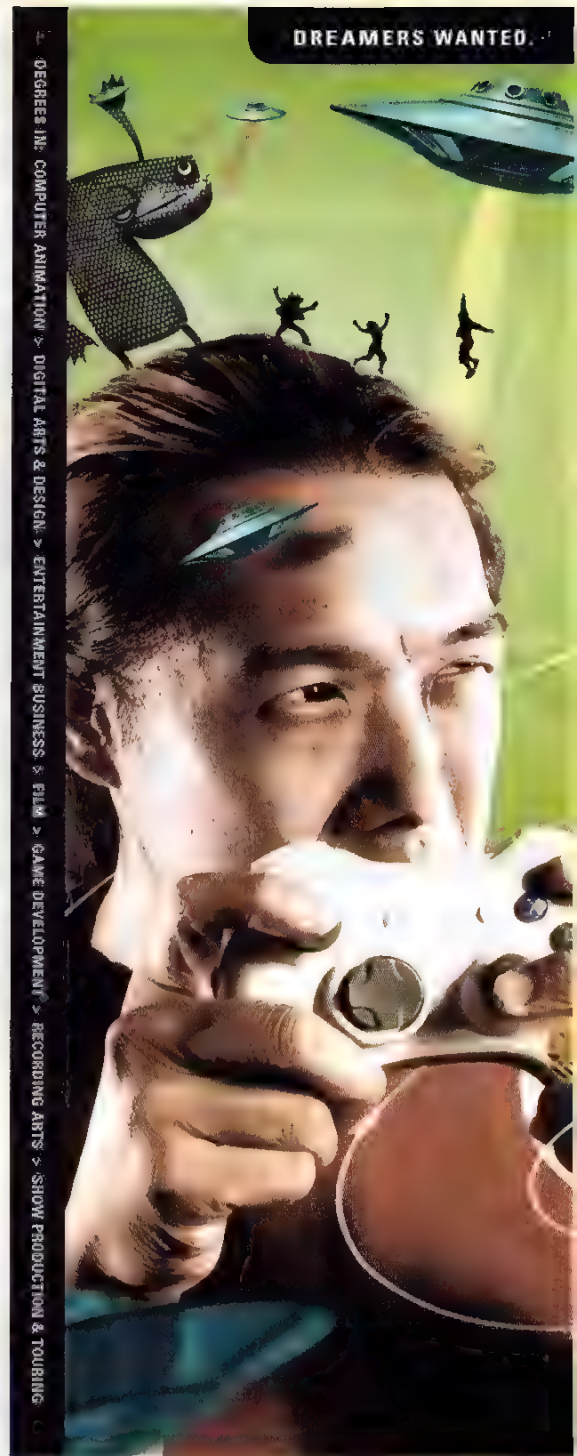


This visually stunning update to the original story of the Prince (first released for PC in 1989) doesn't compromise much for modern gamers in either level design or challenge. Like it was in the day, this is a platformer not for the weak of heart – many frustrating deaths await. It is in some ways the high difficulty that is the real charm of the title, and Live Arcade gamers who are encountering this game for the first time should expect an uphill road. The payoff is well worth the patience required. Players more familiar with this classic should be pleased by the tweaks to movement and

combat options; giving the Prince a little more agility certainly doesn't do anything but improve the game's quality. The quick counter and parry system that governs sword fights in particular holds up remarkably well with only minor adjustments – many modern action games could take a page from this book in delivering such a satisfying, yet simple combat design. Like Castlemania: Symphony of the Night, this is one of those Arcade releases that's more than worth the download, just to say you've played (and beaten) one of the truly great action/platformers.

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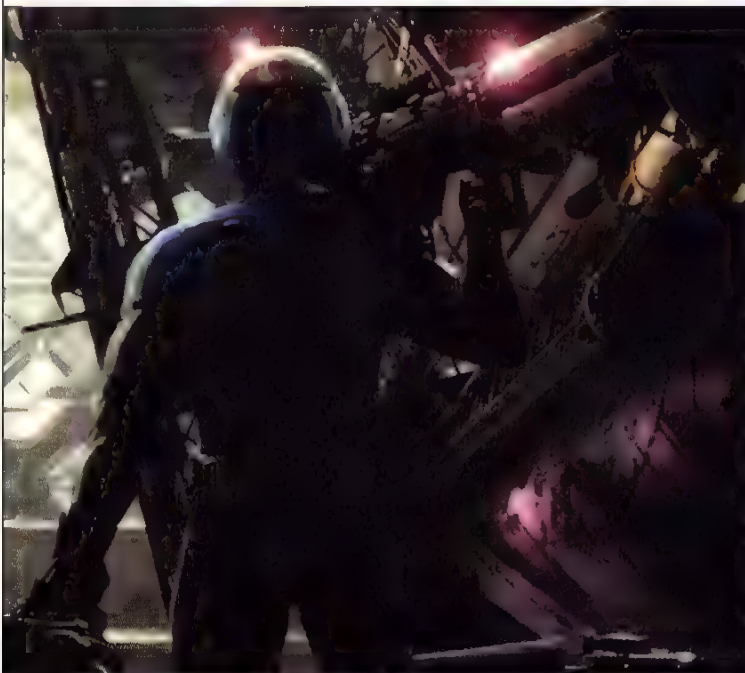
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THE LAND BEFORE HALO

MARATHON

The history and events surrounding the Marathon series of first-person shooters can give the Doom franchise a run for its money in terms of historical relevance. Not only did it pave the way for Bungie to eventually create Halo, it gave gaming-starved Macintosh owners something to rally behind. Far from simply placing players in a bloody playground filled with enemies to be fragged, Marathon experimented with advanced storytelling techniques and interesting plot themes. Throughout most of the '90s, this franchise was ahead of its time and ahead of the game.

Forget, for a moment, the post-mortem accolades conferred upon Marathon by virtue of Halo's success. Consider Marathon solely on its own merits: this is a franchise that established many conventions of the modern FPS genre, pushed the envelope with regard to storytelling within a video game, and eventually provided fans amazingly powerful content creation tools – unthinkable in 1997. Sadly, the series' adherence to the Mac platform, while admirable and a boon to that audience, prevented Marathon from getting the recognition it deserves.

As the unnamed Security Officer, the beginning of Marathon thrusts you into a ship (the eponymous Marathon, humanity's first interstellar colony ship) that's

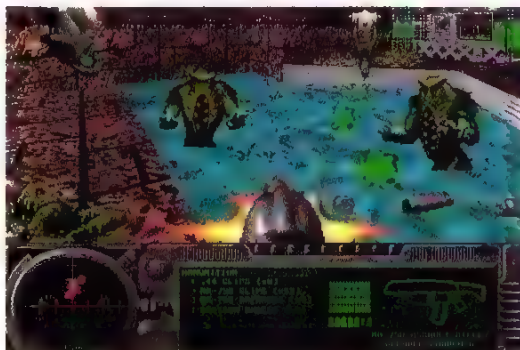
in the process of being overrun by bloodthirsty aliens. As most of the original human occupants are dead or fled, your sole companion for the early stage of the game is Leela, one of the ship's artificial intelligences. Your only points of contact with her are scattered terminals, which convey information from other sources as well – logs of former crewmembers, technical manuals, or intercepted alien transmissions, for example. But for the hordes of aliens trying to kill you, it's lonely aboard the Marathon.

Slowly, the story is revealed to be a complex, multilayered tale. In the vein of Killer 7 or Final Fantasy VII, little is what it seems to be on the surface. You are no mere Security Officer, but a cyborg built of recycled body parts and state-of-the-art technology (probably; like every other bit of information in the series, this is fairly apocryphal). Not only that, but you aren't a hero in the classical sense of the word. You're more of a pawn, a killing machine doing the bidding of another because it always seems like the best idea at the time. It eventually becomes clear that this puppeteer is far more of a central figure to the storyline than the character you portray. This is a being whose actions shape time and space and who literally aspires to godhood: the artificial intelligence Durandal.

Durandal's roots are somewhat pedestrian. He was the AI in charge of autonomic functions like ventilation and opening doors on the Mars colony, and performed much the same functions on the Marathon. As you learn during the course of the game, he was also the subject of forbidden experiments by a brilliant cybernetic engineer who was trying to create a self-aware AI that wouldn't go insane. The engineer failed; Durandal became self-aware, but at the

cost of his sanity. It was most likely Durandal that signaled the aliens to attack the Marathon, all so that he could jump into the alien ship's computers and pursue true immortality – never mind the thousands of humans that were slaughtered or enslaved in the process.

By the third and final Marathon game, you've saved the galaxy from the original slaving space pirates that threat-



ened humanity. Marathon: Infinity concerns itself with time-bending, space-twisting experimental narratives that detail Durandal's quest to survive the inevitable death of the universe. In his words, "Escape will make me God." Utilizing the technology of the long-lost Jjaro race, Durandal intends to dump a few thousand stars into a black hole to prevent the universe from collapsing back in on itself and ending. Or, alternatively, translating himself outside of Euclidean space and surviving the collapse and formation of a new



universe. Or, really, any number of other outcomes – Marathon: Infinity looks at timelines as if it were truly taking place in four dimensions, and things get a bit confused.

Marathon's gameplay itself is tough to swallow for a modern gaming palette – in most cases, players traverse tiny levels solving simple button-pressing puzzles in between blasting bad guys. There's no jump button, and the physics of how you carry momentum oftentimes feel a bit off. That's no different from going back to any other older 3D game, though. The key to Marathon's place in history is the massive number of smaller innovations present.

A surprising number of common FPS themes were done first in Marathon. Dual-wielding, AI-controlled allies, and secondary attacks on weapons all showed up here for the first time. There's even a motion-sensor readout that func-

tions nearly identically to the one in Halo. Yet more impressively, Marathon introduced mouse-look to the masses, forever changing the way we play FPS. The genre would look entirely different if we were still using the keyboard to control facing, and Bungie deserves plenty of credit for helping FPS to avoid that dismal fate.

If you weren't reading it here, would you believe that the mid-'90s saw the release of a series of hardcore action games that also deftly told a tale of galaxy-spanning intrigue, explored the ultimate consequences of self-awareness in artificial intelligence, and experimented with a variety of storytelling techniques never seen before in video games? It sounds implausible, but it's true – Marathon is all this and more. You won't find many more seminal works in gaming history. ■■■

FORGING A LINK?

Fans have long been trying to make the case that Marathon and Halo take place in the same universe. By Bungie's official timelines, the events of Marathon take place roughly 250 years after the Master Chief's exploits against the Covenant, which is easily enough cushion to explain away the lack of familiar organizations or situations. The Marathon symbol appears on the UNSC ship Pillar of Autumn during the first Halo game, though it's far from uncommon for developers to hide subtle nods such as this in their games. The rocket launchers in both games bear the designation "SPNKR", and several plot themes feature prominently in both games. Most incriminatingly, former Bungie head Alex Seropian (who has since gone on to found Wideload Games), once said that the Master Chief and Marathon's protagonist are one and the same. Seropian had already left Bungie at the time of the quote, however, and Bungie can obviously re-write any story elements that it pleases. Of course, it does seem odd that it is strongly implied that the player character is a "Mjolnir Mark IV cyborg" in Marathon – the Chief wears Mjolnir Mark IV, V, and VI armor, and is himself cybernetically enhanced...



DON'T TAKE OUR WORD FOR IT

Play Marathon for yourself! Bungie released the trilogy's source code to the 'Net for free in 2005, and the rabid fanbase has kept the game running on Mac OS X, Windows, and Linux via emulator. Simply visit <http://source.bungie.org> and grab Aleph One (the engine emulator) and any game scenarios you like – the original trilogy is available, as well as a generous helping of fan-created content. We promise, it's all legal! And in case you missed the news on page 14, Marathon is coming to Xbox Live Arcade as well!

This Month in Gaming History

In August of 1993, Sega took the first step down a path that eventually culminated in the formation of the ESRB. The publisher began putting self-determined ratings on its games, a first for the video game industry. Sega titles were labeled as "GA" for general audiences, "MA-13" for teens, or "MA-17" for adults only. No underage children ever viewed inappropriate content again.

Rated by V.R.C.

GA
Appropriate for all audiences.
General Audiences

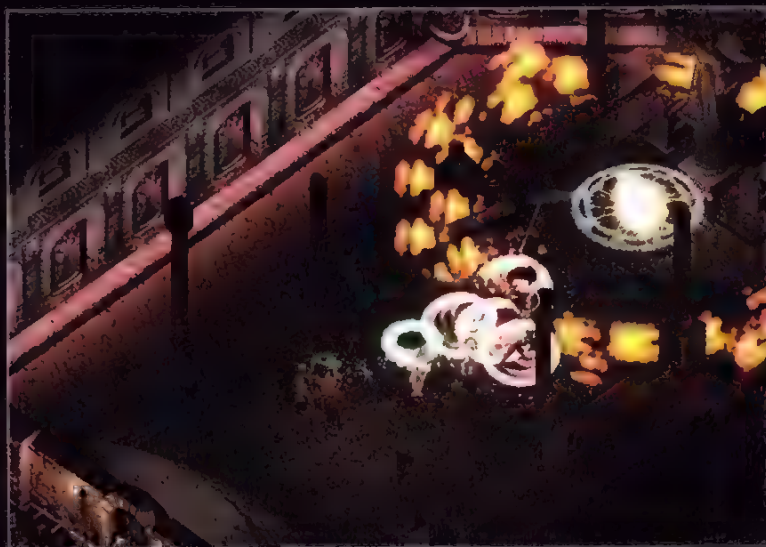
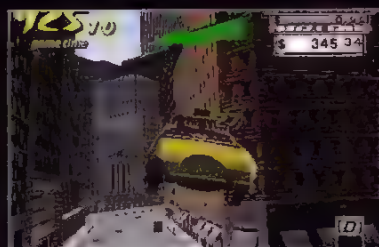


DREAMCAST

CRAZY TAXI 2

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION/RACING > PUBLISHER SEGA > DEVELOPER HITMAKER > RELEASE 2001

For guys who have trouble picking up women, the Crazy Taxi series has always made it easy. In fact, the game is like a metaphor for certain relationships, because once you pick someone up you soon realize that you are just being used as the relationship errand boy: driving to the Gap, driving to the coffee shop, driving to the airport. So if you're looking to relive the experience of dumping someone off as quickly as possible then picking up the next person you see, Crazy Taxi has you covered. The second entry in the series made the move to New York, and with it came a host of improvements and new features, such as picking up multiple passengers and jumping your cab. The Crazy Pyramid was a nice addition too. Training players in all the driving tricks required to rack up those high scores in the main game. Sure, the constant popup can get almost as annoying as the constant Offspring tunes, but the arcade gameplay, remarkably, remains just as enjoyable as it once was.

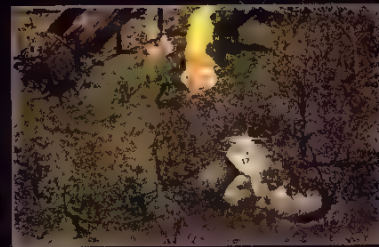
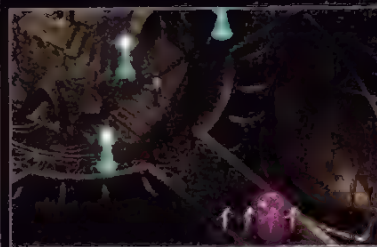


PC

BALDUR'S GATE II: SHADOWS OF AMN

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ROLE-PLAYING GAME (UP TO 6-PLAYER VIA INTERNET OR LAN) > PUBLISHER BLACK ISLE STUDIOS > DEVELOPER BIOWARE > RELEASE 2000

Today, BioWare is one of the premier developers in the world. There's an argument to be made that this title is what cemented the company's place in the video game pantheon. Featuring depth unrivaled in combat mechanics, character development, and storyline, Baldur's Gate II is inarguably a classic for all time. Sure, the balance can get a little off in the later stages of the game (thanks, 2nd Edition AD&D!), but that's a tiny blemish on this otherwise pristine jewel of roleplaying brilliance. Antagonist Jon Irenicus is one of the most memorable villains to date, and cleverly written and voiced companions like Minroe the addled berserker and Edwin the power-hungry mage will impress the most jaded of modern gamers. Even the hand-drawn 2D graphics hold up surprisingly well, lacking the low polygon count and muddy textures of older 3D games. It's worth messing around with newer versions of Windows just to get this running again. Heck, it's worth buying a computer just to get a chance to play this paragon of RPG design.



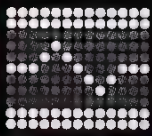
SEGA GENESIS

SPACE HARRIER II

> STYLE 1-PLAYER SHOOTER > PUBLISHER SEGA OF AMERICA > DEVELOPER SEGA OF JAPAN > RELEASE 1988

Not every game that was once amazing remains so with the passage of time, and the gameplay of Space Harrier II just isn't what it once was. This is mainly due to the incredibly primitive attempt at three-dimensional movement and camera – a high point for the game when it first released. Glimmers of brilliance remain despite this problem, not the least of which is the imaginative and unique concept. Players find themselves flying or running forward along an open plane as they dodge trees, columns, and a fantastic array of creatures. The enemy designs are wild and varied as you move through the many stages of the game, wildly firing your laser and swooping from one corner of the screen to the other. It's a challenging and totally different take on the shooter genre, even if there's not much meaningful replay to be had. And, thanks to the wonders of modern technology, it also happens to be a game you can try even if you threw your Genesis in the trash compactor years ago; Space Harrier II is available in its original form on the Wii's virtual console.





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PROTOTYPE

Check out our exclusive video interviews with the development leads at Radical Entertainment to learn about what makes this ambitious new title so unique.



Darksiders

Joe finally gets to live out his dream of becoming one of the horsemen of the apocalypse to smite the non-believers. Read our full Darksiders interview with Vigil Games, including some quotes from comic-book legend Joe Madureira.



Destroy All Humans! Path of the Furon

Crypto discovers disco in his latest adventure on Earth. GI discusses Destroy All Humans' move to the '70s in our Q&A with creative director Jon Knoles.



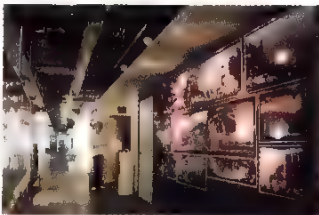
Re-Condemned

Sega's serial-killing sleeper hit makes its devilish return. Read our extensive interview with Monolith's David Hasle, the producer of Condemned 2: Bloodshot.



Conan Concerto

Whenever we think about Conan, brilliant music immediately comes to mind. Or is it gratuitous violence? Either way, check out some impressive soundtrack clips and an interview with the game's talented composer.



GI Places: Radical

Miller storms the Radical Entertainment offices with camera in tow to tour the building this talented team calls home.

ALSO ONLINE THIS MONTH:

The jet set GI online team heads to Chicago for Midway's gamers day (and bratwurst) before heading to Leipzig for GC (and bratwurst).

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GAMEOVER

"Proceed On Your Way To Oblivion"

VIDEO GAME TRIVIA

Aliens have invaded! What, you hadn't heard? Well, it's true. While some people are surprised, we gamers have been preparing for this since childhood. Take this month's video game quiz to see how prepared you are for the coming onslaught, and learn which gaming related tool you should use to defend yourself

1 With the recent announcement of *Fallout 3*, you should really go back and brush up on your post-nuclear knowledge set. What was the name of the animal that would join up with you in the original *Fallout*?

- A. Fluffy
- B. Dogmeat
- C. Ian
- D. Polly the Parrot

2 Which was the first stage of *Battletoads* that totally made you want to punch the TV?

- A. Two
- B. Three
- C. Four
- D. Six



3 *Poy Poy* came out for the PlayStation in 1997. What was the deal with that game, again?

- A. It's hard to forget such a weird take on the tennis genre
- B. It's a big 3D multiplayer arena combat game, miraculously playable by up to four players at a time
- C. That was the one about the Hawaiian luau eating contest!
- D. *Poy Poy* was an anthropomorphic squirrel who ran through a side-scrolling forest collecting nuts for the winter

4 *The Lost Vikings* was a sweet side-scrolling puzzle and platform game first published in 1992 by a developer called Silicon & Synapse, who you may not have heard of. They changed their name, and we bet you've heard their new name, which is _____.

- A. Bioware
- B. Blizzard
- C. Epic
- D. Bungie



5 For claiming to be comic book heroes, those crazy X-Men sure seem to have a lot of video game adventures. In fact, only one of these isn't a subtitle from one of their games. Which one?

- A. Rise of Apocalypse
- B. Mutant Academy
- C. Games Master's Legacy
- D. Rise of the Phoenix

6 Long before many of the great RPG franchises hit it big, *Ultima* had players leveling up and traveling the countryside. Which of the following was not a recurring companion to your character in the long running series?

- A. Shamino
- B. Iolo
- C. Dupre
- D. Alain

7 What two types of units could Conjurers summon in *Warcraft: Orcs & Humans*?

- A. Daemons and Spiders
- B. Peons and Murlocs

- C. Water Elementals and Scorpions
- D. Golems and Fire Elementals



8 In *Skullmonkeys*, your invisible musical friend in the famous bonus room was kind of like _____ and a little like _____.

- A. a crocodile, a teddy bear
- B. your cat, your dog
- C. your dad, your mom
- D. on fire, a cadaver



9 In *Parasite Eve*, would common cellular organelle became the potential downfall of mankind?

- A. Mitochondria
- B. Golgi
- C. Nucleus
- D. Ribosome

10 This was a pretty sweet issue of *Game Informer*. I'm glad I read it.

- A. True
- B. False

BREAKDOWN

4 The number of separate episodes you'll need to download in order to own the entire *Tomb Raider Anniversary* game when it releases on Xbox Live this fall. Incidentally, you'll need to own *Tomb Raider: Legend* for the game to work.

50 million dollars were paid by Microsoft to Take-Two in order to secure the exclusive downloadable episodic content that will be exclusive to the Xbox 360 version of *Grand Theft Auto IV*

31% U.S. video game industry sales are up this much for May, according to the recent NPD numbers

4 different labels for one company – EA recently announced plans to split their game publishing into four divisions entitled EA Games, EA Casual Entertainment, EA Sports, and The Sims

110% How much effort you should put into your favorite sport/class/job/performance. You can do it!

★ Trivia Score & Rank ★



0-1:
Peach's Umbrella



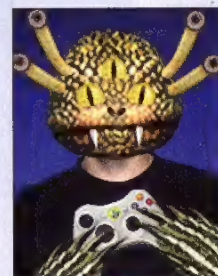
2-3:
Majora's Mask



4-5:
Cloud's Buster Sword



6-7:
Tiger Woods



8-9:
Welcome Their Unholy Mutation



10:
Accept Their Friend Request

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