GAMEINFORMER

WORLD'S #1 COMPUTER & VIDEO GAME MAGAZINE ®

WORLD EXCLUSIVE

ALPHA PROTOCOL

A Modern-Day Espionage Thriller
That Will Change The Way You
Think About Role-Playing Games
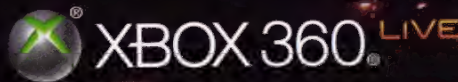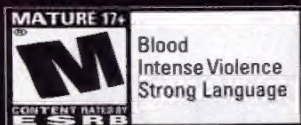
BEAT THE ODDS

Return to Sin City in the sequel to the 2006 shooter of year.* With massively expanded multipl new seamless co-op, and customizable character creation, you are now fully equipped to put ar to the terrorist threat. This time the stakes are raised.

IN THE BEGINNING, THERE WAS DARKNESS.

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The "Holy Crap, Games Do Release In Spring!" Issue

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GUITAR HERO ─ AEROSMITH

Developer Neversoft is partnering up with legendary rockers Aerosmith for the next Guitar Hero release, and we're bringing you the exclusive first look at the project. Chronicling the band's rise to fame, this title gives gamers a behind-the-scenes look at the history and music of one of America's most popular acts of the last few decades.

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GAME INFARCER

Our annual spoof pokes fun at the last year of personalities, events, and stories in video gaming. Join us for a five pages of satire, snarks, and parodies directed at everything related to our favorite hobby. And, as usual, we're not above making a few cheap jokes at the industry's expense.
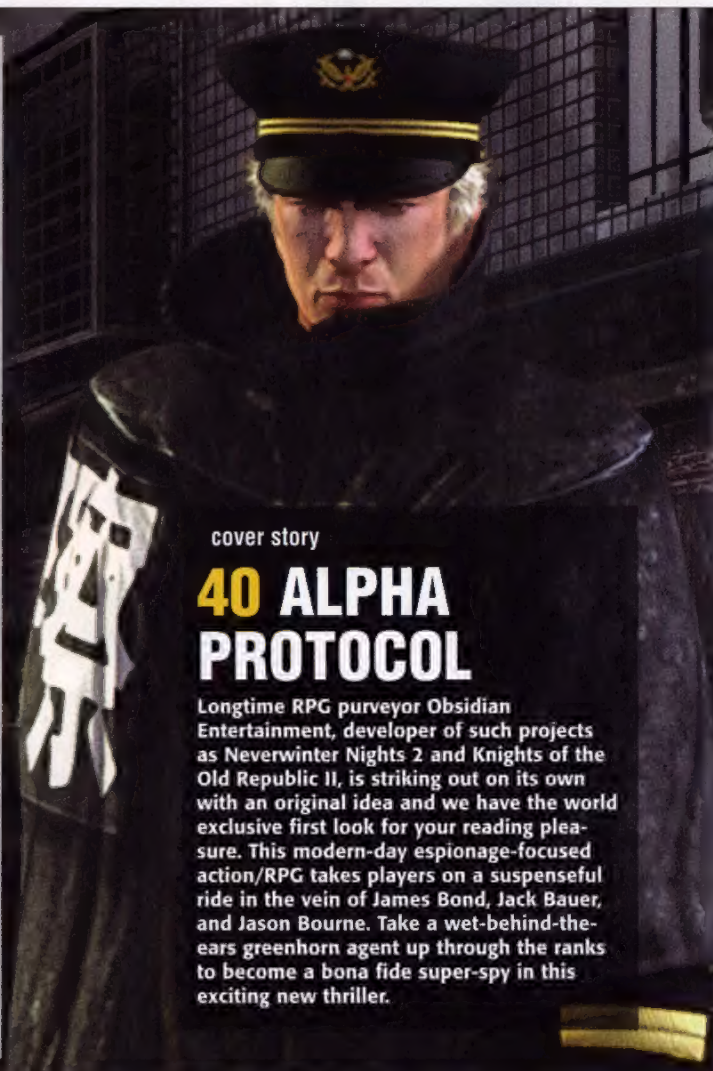
cover story

40 ALPHA PROTOCOL

Longtime RPG purveyor Obsidian Entertainment, developer of such projects as Neverwinter Nights 2 and Knights of the Old Republic II, is striking out on its own with an original idea and we have the world exclusive first look for your reading pleasure. This modern-day espionage-focused action/RPG takes players on a suspenseful ride in the vein of James Bond, Jack Bauer, and Jason Bourne. Take a wet-behind-the-ears greenhorn agent up through the ranks to become a bona fide super-spy in this exciting new thriller.

departments

BIG MONEY, BIG PRIZES

ANDY McNAMARA
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

First it was the giant merger of Vivendi Games and Activision to form what, on paper, would be the biggest game publisher in the business. Next, it was the talks of Electronic Arts moving in to purchase Take-Two Interactive for a measly two billion dollars (which would easily make it the biggest publisher). Consolidation in the video game industry isn't just a fad. It is the future of gaming.

This year, video games eclipsed the music industry in revenues. In the future, many research companies have the industry reaching as high as 60 billion dollars globally by 2011. With that kind of money flying around, video games aren't just a hobby anymore. They are a giant entertainment medium that's still in its infancy, but most likely will turn into one of the most influential media of the 22nd century.

Of course, to the gamer, all this business talk is just fodder. Gamers just want to play games. On one side, the consolidation of companies is a good thing. For example, if one of the other major players is picked up, like a Sega or Square Enix, perhaps the added publishing fire-power from joining with another company would enable gamers to get Final Fantasy games on a yearly basis, or perhaps a big-budget version of Phantasy Star. Giant companies have more dollars to invest in a lot of product and could very well give gamers more variety.

There is the other side of the coin, however, that warns that once the business gets bigger, the stakes become too high, and games that we all know and love might not have the draw (or sales) of another Madden or one of our industry's classic "licensed games that suck."

Ultimately, the growth of the music and movie industries led to more variety in my opinion, so I have high hopes for the future of video games. But don't think those industries got to where they are now without some bumps in the road. And after years of success and fantastic products, we just might be due a few lumps. Here's to hoping that while publishers have to care about money, they ultimately don't forget about who makes them that green: gamers. All we want is good games, and we don't care where they come from.

Cheers,

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Handle: The Game Hombre **Expertise:** RPGs, Action/Platform, Driving, First-Person Shooters **Interests:** Meat, Cheese, Cereal, Burritos, Burgers, Tacos, Spaghetti, Guacamole (Hungry Yet?), Radiohead **Dislikes:** Watching The Combine Because I Miss NFL Football So Much, The "Two Ps" Myth, Army Of Two's Dialogue **Current Favorite Games:** World Of Warcraft, The Legend Of Zelda: Phantom Hourglass, Rock Band, Guitar Hero III: Legends Of Rock, Rainbow Six Vegas 2

Reiner >> reiner@gameinformer.com
Handle: The Raging Gamer **Expertise:** RPGs, Action, First-Person Shooters, Strategy, Sports, Fighting **Interests:** A New Star Wars Movie Coming To Theaters (And It's Not Penned By George Lucas!), The Flying Soufflé (My Champions Online Character), The LEGO Millennium Falcon (My Precious!), The Luna Brothers' *Girls* **Dislikes:** The Death Of HD DVD (I Loved It Like A Son), Waiting For Spore, The *Star Trek* Trailer (We Don't Have Better Welding Torches In The Future?) **Current Favorite Games:** Army Of Two, Culdcept Saga, Lost Odyssey, Alpha Protocol, Grand Theft Auto IV, Frontlines: Fuel Of War, Spore, Saints Row 2

Matt >> matt@gameinformer.com
Handle: The Original Gamer **Expertise:** First-Person Shooters, Action/Platform, Action/Adventure, Action/Sports **Interests:** The Vandermark 5, Burial – *Untrue*, *Twister* (A Modern Classic Of Cinema), Generally Being Acknickulous, People That Have Only Heard "Baby Got Back" Not Understanding How Awesome Sir Mix-A-Lot Was, Old Man Winter, Blinding Neck Pain, Day Trips By Plane **Current Favorite Games:** Mass Effect, Pinball Hall Of Fame: The Williams Collection, Guitar Hero: Aerosmith, Grand Theft Auto IV

Kato >> kato@gameinformer.com
Handle: The Game Katana **Expertise:** Sports, Racing, Action/Adventure, Action/Platform **Interests:** Ryan Newman & Kurt Busch Getting "The Captain" Roger Penske His First Daytona 500 Win, *This Is England*, Suedeheads, Making My Own Sushi **Dislikes:** Peter Forsberg's Fake Gimpy Foot, Superdelegates, The Lack Of Fighting Minutes For Matt Cooke (Payback's Gonna Be A —), Roger Clemens' Ego Getting In The Way Of His Brain **Current Favorite Games:** Sins Of A Solar Empire, Spore, Alpha Protocol, Downstream Panic!

Adam >> adam@gameinformer.com
Handle: The Alpha Gamer **Expertise:** RPGs, Strategy, First-Person Shooters, Fighting **Interests:** *Doctor Who*, Select Episodes Of *Torchwood*, The RNG In WoW Finally Deciding It Doesn't Hate Me Any More, Vacuums That Can Handle The Massive Amounts Of Cat Fur In My Apartment **Dislikes:** Most Episodes Of *Torchwood* (Note To The BBC: Captain Jack Sucks As A Troubled Brooding Hero), The Massive Amounts Of Cat Fur In My Apartment, Crappy Country Music Trying To Pass Itself Off As "Folk" **Current Favorite Games:** World Of Warcraft, Diablo II: Lord Of Destruction, Dark Messiah Of Might & Magic: Elements, Sins Of A Solar Empire

Joe >> joe@gameinformer.com
Handle: The Real American Gamer **Expertise:** RPGs, Adventure, Action, Strategy, Puzzle **Interests:** The Improvements Made To WoW In My Absence, Duchesse De Bourgogne, Unwittingly Siding With The Winner Of The HD War, *Tales Of The Dying Earth* By Jack Vance **Dislikes:** A Capella Performances, Apologizing To Bryan For Badmouthing *Veronica Mars* (So I Won't), Cheap Packaging (Real Classy, Lost Odyssey), Waiting Until Fall For More *Pushing Daisies* **Current Favorite Games:** Alpha Protocol, Lost Odyssey, Devil May Cry 4, Uncharted: Drake's Fortune, Crisis Core: Final Fantasy VII, Spore

Miller >> miller@gameinformer.com
Handle: The Once And Future Gamer **Expertise:** RPGs, Action/Adventure, Platform, First-Person Shooters, Music, Puzzle **Interests:** Large-Scale Writing Projects That I Will Never Publish Or Make Money From, Conquering Expert Drums (*Run To The Hills*, No Longer Will You Haunt My Dreams), *3:10 To Yuma* (Man, That's A Good Movie) **Dislikes:** Joe's Inspirational Calendar Gifts, Great TV Shows That Won't Return Now Until Next Year **Current Favorite Games:** Rock Band, Undertow, Call Of Duty 4: Modern Warfare, Assassin's Creed, Mass Effect, Tomb Raider: Anniversary, N+

Bertz >> mattbertz@gameinformer.com
Handle: Lord Gamington III **Expertise:** First-Person Shooters, Sports, Action, RPGs, Strategy **Interests:** Roger Clemens Throwing His Wife Under The Bus, The End Of The Writers' Strike, *Trailer Park Boys*, Balvenie Scotch **Dislikes:** Crappy '80s Music Played In Serene Beach Locations, The Senate Wasting So Much Time On Sports (Um… Isn't There A War Going On?), The Sense Of Emptiness You Feel After The Super Bowl (Thank God For The NFL Network) **Current Favorite Games:** NHL 08, Contra 4, Frontlines: Fuel Of War, Rock Band, Guitar Hero III: Legends Of Rock, Rainbow Six Vegas 2

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Handle: Your Friendly Neighborhood Gamer **Expertise:** Action/Adventure, Action/RPGs, Platform, Survival Horror, First-Person Shooters **Interests:** *Harry Potter And The Deathly Hollows* (I'm Not That Slow, Just A Late Starter), The New Spider-Man Comics (He's Better Than He's Been In A Decade) **Dislikes:** Being Banned From Talking To Certain People In Authority, My Car **Current Favorite Games:** Super Smash Bros. Brawl, Condemned 2: Bloodshot, The Legend Of Zelda: Phantom Hourglass, Metal Gear Solid: Portable Ops, Rez HD, Professor Layton And The Curious Village

Bryan >> bryan@gameinformer.com
Handle: The Gamer's Advocate **Expertise:** Action/Adventure, RPGs, Survival Horror, First-Person Shooters, Music **Interests:** Getting A Mostly Full Season Of *Lost*, More Weezer And Stone Temple Pilots On Rock Band, HD DVD's Glorious Crash And Burn **Dislikes:** Trying To Dodge Cold And Flu Threats, Empty Rock Band DLC Promises (Just Release An Album Already!), Waiting For All Of The HD DVD Exclusives To Make Their Way Over To Blu-ray **Current Favorite Games:** Mass Effect, Super Smash Bros. Brawl, Condemned 2: Bloodshot, Professor Layton And The Curious Village, Rock Band

These four top hats are all the same height, but the length of the brim is different. In other words, the hats are equally tall but vary in width.

One of these four hats has a brim and height that are the same length. Which hat is it?
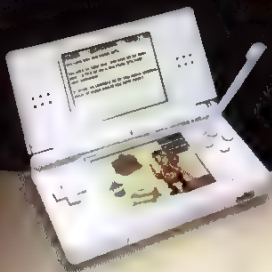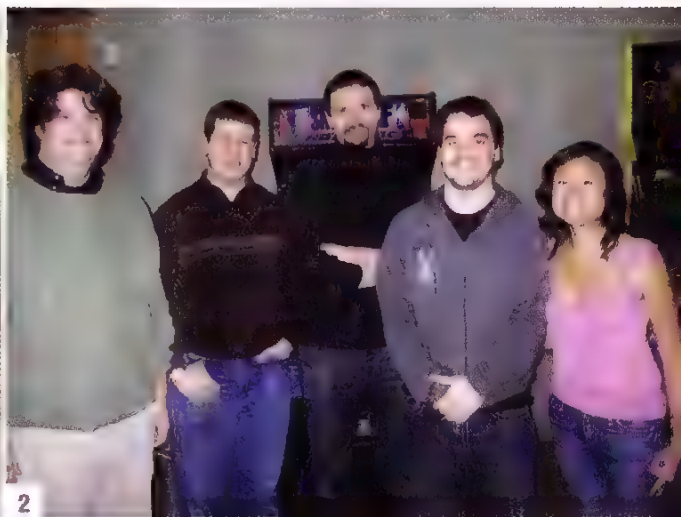
1 Future Game Informer reader Vincent Colozza discovers that it is hard to be Kratos when you are absolutely adorable **2** Planet Moon's Aaron Loeb and THQ's Vanessa Vanasin introduce Reiner, Ben, and Bryan to the wonderful world of musical mashups **3** Sean Kauppinen and Eddiemae Jukes of TriplePoint PR party down with *The New York Times'* Seth Schiesel **4** Joe and Andy hang with some video game heavyweights: [Left to right] Scarface/Riddick producer Pete Wanat, Spike TV's Geoff Keighley, MTV's Stephen Totilo, *Newsweek's* N'Gai Croal, and Remi Sklar of Warner Bros. Interactive **5** Miller smiles after finishing a session of mayhem with the Saints Row 2 crew: Volition's Greg Donovan and James Tsai and THQ's Craig Mitchell **6** Vince Zampella and Jason West of Infinity Ward are all smiles at DICE. You would be too if you'd made Call of Duty 4! **7** Nick plays Colonial Marine with a real-life warrior, Colonel John Antal, who helps Gearbox get the realism for their Brothers in Arms series **8** Ubisoft's Kjell Vistad, Carol Quito, Prince of Persia producer Ben Mattes, and Miller pay tribute to the Prince himself

MORE LIKE "RESIDENT EVIL: BORE!"

I have noticed that while video games are becoming increasingly appealing to the senses, it also seems that they are also becoming more linear and full of mindless action. For example, Resident Evil 4 was just that – a boring mistake of an action game. It took everything that made the Resident Evil series great (non-linear, adventure-based gameplay) and threw it in the trash. To my dismay, reviewers (including yourselves) rejoiced! Now I hear that Resident Evil 5 will adhere to this horrible new game structure. Am I destined to watch all my favorite games turn into mindless shooters? Is the golden age of games over, only to be replaced by beautiful-but-empty games designed to cater to gamers who demand nothing more than zombies sporting rocket launchers?
Max Otworth
via yahoo.com

Resident Evil 4. If only companies mode "mistakes" like this more often

■ **We hate to break it to you, but you'll have a hard time rallying gamers against Resident Evil 4, one of the best games of the last generation. We all have attachments to certain franchises, and it can be tough to see them change and evolve, but it's better than seeing outdated gameplay recycled time and time again. As for the charge of all games becoming focused on "mindless action," that's just plain false. Contrary to claims that first-person shooters are the only titles on the market, we are currently enjoying a time when there are more types of games for more types of gamers than ever before; thankfully, your perceived decline of one series is not representative of the industry as a whole.**

WAPARADOX

I just want to comment on your consistently unfair treatment of Waluigi. Particularly in the recent months I've heard nothing but utter disdain for my favorite character. Your barrage of underhanded cheap shots has not gone unnoticed by the Waluigi fans out there. By slandering Waluigi, you risk alienating all of us! Stop hating on Waluigi! Come on guys, please be nice to him.
Jason Krug
Toms River, NJ

■ **What? Sorry, you lost us at "Waluigi fans."**

HELPLESS

I have been playing games for as long as I can remember, and have never used a guide or walkthrough for help on any puzzles, boss battles, or anything else. I get stuck just like everyone else, but I take the necessary time to figure things out. My friends ask, "Why don't you just look online for some help?" Because, in my opinion, a walkthrough takes the fun and challenging parts out of a game. I don't find any joy in knowing how to beat a game before I even play it, or powering through it as quickly as possible with little to no effort at all.
Matthew Bertovich
via yahoo.com

■ **You portray strategy guides as the gaming equivalent of CliffsNotes – something lazy gamers use to avoid actually playing a game. Games aren't assignments. They're about having fun. If using a guide contributes to someone's enjoyment of a title, then what's the problem? Most gamers take a measured approach to walkthroughs, using** them as a last resort or under special circumstances. For instance, many games have secrets so obscure that it would be practically impossible to uncover them without assistance – like the Zodiac Spear in Final Fantasy XII that requires you to not open four random treasure chests throughout the course of the game. If you turn to a guide in those situations, are you really sacrificing any fun or challenge? Or are you just getting the most out of your game? If guides hamper your sense of accomplishment, then it makes perfect sense not to use them. But ultimately, it's all about personal preference, not taking the moral high ground.

SMART GAMES

I'm writing you simply to thank you, something I've never done to a magazine before. I've been collecting Game Informers since 2001, and never have I read an article that was as compelling as Matt Miller's "Rated Mature: The Rising Tide of Games With Something to Say." BioShock was my first taste of a game that blended my love of literature, philosophy, and morality, with my all-time favorite hobby, and it was an experience that will forever hold a place in my memory. To answer the question Miller poses, "They know we want fun. But do we want more?", yes. It is exactly what I want, what we want, and if I can spend days locked away in my room, running the juice out of my batteries while enjoying my escapist tendencies and exploring phenomenal intellectual games, I'll be more than happy to pay whatever the sticker price.
Jason Douglass
via email

WHY PLAY?

Why is Wii Play still on your top 20 games list? Let's be honest, it is only a game in the technical sense. I work in a video game store, and the reality of the situation is this: No one wants Wii play. They want the extra Wii remote, and that's basically all Wii Play is. The games included with it are mediocre at best, and I consider it an insult to other deserving games that are bumped off your list.
Andre Dennis
via hotmail.com

■ **Look, we don't like Wii Play either. But we don't compile the top 20 list in our charts section; it's based solely on sales data from the NPD. Admittedly, Wii Play has dubious qualifications as a game, but it is telling about the state of Wii gaming that this gussied-up peripheral is consistently the best-selling title for the system. People seem to want extra remotes for old games more than they want to buy new titles like Metroid and Mario. It just underscores Nintendo's chronic difficulties in securing quality third-party support. Of course, Wii owners are probably too busy playing Brawl right now to worry about that.**

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

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I just wanted to take the time to applaud Matt Miller's opinion piece in issue 178. I agree wholeheartedly about the place of thematic issues and ideas in the interactive medium. The very reason I've played video games into my adult life is that they have purpose beyond pure enjoyment and entertainment value. Sure, when I was a kid, I completely enjoyed stomping Koopa shells and shooting wave after wave of vicious space bugs like any other boy of my era. However, as I am at a point in my life where social issues take up more space in my mind, the premise of thematically weighted interactive games is more exciting and relevant. I read novels and explore philosophy for the exact reason I spend hours in front of a glowing screen late at night, and I praise the developers in the game industry who understand this.

Jason Martin
via mac.com

■ **Thanks for your thoughts, Jasons. Surprisingly, no one (except Joe) sent in a "Miller is a stupid egghead" letter, which leads us to think that there is a significant segment of the gaming population that agrees with you. Several of the titles that Miller cited as examples, like BioShock and Portal, achieved widespread recognition and impressive sales, proving that gamers are hungry for more than just your standard save-the-world scenario. If this trend continues, these types of games could develop into an independent genre, or even better, we may see more thematic maturity injected into a variety of titles spanning all genres. Either way, we're excited to see what happens.**

BIG SHAKESPEAREAN CHICKENS

Recently I wrote this sonnet for a class assignment, and I now feel that it is my duty to share it with you and my fellow gamers:

They gallop gracefully over the plain
Their yellow feathers shine under the sun.
Under their golden flanks, their muscles strain
To bear their riders proudly as they run.
These noble steeds, whose work is never done,
Unlock steep paths o'er mountains, seas and snow,
Protecting riders from foes they outrun.
Where airships dare not land, they bravely go
What name is theirs, what title, dost thou know?
What noble word can encompass their might?
I'll tell thee straight, that name is "chocobo"
That princely bird, so favored in God's sight
O, tremble at their coming, O, and hark
To hear them sweetly sound their stately "wark!"
Rachel Kohler
via email

■ **We'll be honest...our knee-jerk reaction to video game-themed compositions usually isn't positive. Maybe we've become jaded by reading too many odes to Sonic and strange romance fantasies involving Master Chief (will he ever find the right woman/computer?). Regardless, Rachel's poem gets points for A) actually being readable and funny, B) conforming to the proper English sonnet rhyme scheme, and C) using "wark" as the chocobo call, rather than the inferior "kweh." Choco Billy would be so proud.**

READER ART

WINNER!

This month's winner receives a copy of Konami Digital Entertainment's *Karaoke Revolution Presents: American Idol Encore.* Release date – Feb 5th on Wii. *Karaoke Revolution Presents: American Idol Encore* delivers the most realistic recreation of the American Idol Experience. Grab a mic and challenge your friends!

STEVEN BARTON

JAMES RAFAEL
Fake Robocop defends Old Detroit from the Covenant

KIM PARKER
"Boy, I sure hope none of my descendants end up being wieners." "LOL," says Fate

DYLAN CHENEY
In addition to painting, it appears Amaterasu is also familiar with burnt wood as an art form
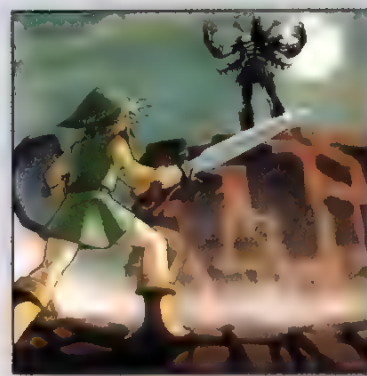
ALEX PEÑA
Good luck finding an obvious, glowing weak spot on this one, pajama boy

CARLA OVER
If incessant 1-UP dinging noises would keep you awake at night, maybe you shouldn't sleep on this pillow

EA'S GRAND THEFT AUTO?
EA MAKES OFFER FOR TAKE-TWO

Hold onto your hats, because Electronic Arts is going after the biggest enchilada in video games. The company has proposed an acquisition of Take-Two Interactive – owners of Rockstar Games and Grand Theft Auto IV – for roughly $2 billion. EA CEO John Riccitiello says EA considered a deal for Take-Two last spring, but axed it at the last minute.

This news was revealed in a letter sent in mid-February by Riccitiello to Take-Two Interactive's chairman, Strauss Zelnick. The cash deal was declined by Take-Two's board of directors. This won't deter EA, however. In the letter, EA states that it would pursue a hostile takeover if Take-Two's board of directors didn't approve the move. "Our strong preference is to conduct a private negotiation," states the letter. "If you are unwilling to proceed on that basis, however, we may pursue other means, including the public disclosure of this letter, to bring our offer and the compelling value it represents to the attention of Take-Two's shareholders."

In effect, EA's public disclosure of the deal is an end-around move whereby it is directly appealing to Take-Two shareholders, saying that this deal is in their best interest and should be approved by them, regardless of what Take-Two's board of directors thinks. EA's thinking has some weight behind it. The estimated $2 billion

deal works out to $26 a share. Since Take-Two's share price before EA's letter was $17, shareholders will have to gauge whether this is adequate compensation.

Take-Two released a statement explaining its own reasons behind rejecting the offer. "In addition to undervaluing key elements of our business, EA's proposal fails to recognize the value we are building through our ongoing turnaround efforts, which will further revitalize Take-Two." Take-Two feels that the offer undervalues its creative talent – including BioShock creators Ken Levine and Irrational Games (now called 2K Boston) and Civilization king Sid Meier – franchises, and the public value of the brand.

Regardless of Take-Two's initial rebuff, the company does not rule out further conversations on a deal with EA. Take-Two has offered to discuss the matter after Grand Theft Auto IV releases on April 29, since Take-Two does not want EA to swoop in before the game comes out and before Take-Two's overall worth is bolstered by GTA IV's sales and hype. "We believe this offer demonstrated our commitment to pursu-

ing all avenues to maximize stockholder value, while we believe that EA's refusal to entertain this path is evidence of their desire to acquire Take-Two at a significant discount."

EA's proposed takeover of Take-Two is assuredly in response to the blockbuster merger between Activision and Vivendi, which saw EA's rival Activision acquire the World of Warcraft franchise among others. Not only would EA be getting Grand Theft Auto IV, but the move would once and for all squash the company's main competition in the sports genre – 2K Sports, which includes NBA 2K/All-Pro Football developer Visual Concepts. Currently 2K Sports holds the exclusive third-party rights to Major League Baseball, and EA has not released an MLB title since 2005.

Although EA says that the offer may be withdrawn, the company's open appeal to Take-Two shareholders, as well as what EA stands to gain, make this deal a likely one. Riccitiello and EA believe that what shareholders would get in increased sales under the EA banner should be more than enough motivation. "We believe we can take games from Take-Two and sell more of them." Gaming is about games, but to the companies that make them – and their shareholders – sales is the bottom line.

HEAVY LIFTING

Here's a quick look at some of the games and franchises EA would gain in acquiring Take-Two Interactive. Note: Although 2K Games published Bethesda's The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion (and will release Fallout 3), Bethesda's relationship with 2K is for distribution, and therefore it remains to be seen what effect, if any, a deal between 2K parent company Take-Two and EA would have.

- Grand Theft Auto
- BioShock
- Sid Meier's Civilization
- Borderlands
- Midnight Club
- 2K Sports portfolio, including NBA & MLB titles
- Bully
- Red Dead Revolver

2K Games' Borderlands

Sega's use of external and internal studios has allowed it to support triple-A titles such as the Monolith-developed Condemned 2: Bloodshot

The Haves And The Have-Mores

With Electronic Arts and Activision firmly entrenched as the two largest third-party publishers in the industry, this leaves a gap until you hit companies such as THQ or Sega – publishers with internal studios and strong properties in their portfolios, but aren't big enough to challenge the likes of EA in terms of sheer size and capital.

Billy Pidgeon, program manager for analyst IDC, says that running with the big dogs can be risky. "The high-end video game business – trying to put out triple-A titles and trying to cover all the genres – is very risky because it requires a huge budget to make these games and market them as well." Companies like THQ, which has a successful wrestling license as well as kid-centric titles based on movies, appear well-funded to try and develop a few triple-A games such as Saints Row 2 and Frontlines: Fuel of War.

Unfortunately, the loss of Pandemic, which was an independent developer who worked with THQ for the original Full Spectrum Warrior and Destroy All Humans! before it joined with BioWare and later by proxy Electronic Arts, shows some of the dangers of being a big company that might not be big enough to compete with the likes of an EA in all areas. Although THQ has its own stable of internal developers, publishers will always rue the loss of development partners like Pandemic (even though THQ owns the Destroy All Humans property, for example) when such talented companies catch the eye of another publisher and are acquired.

The Road Less Traveled

For some companies, pursuing a triple-A strategy is out of reach. Majesco serves as a useful example in this case. More importantly, however, Majesco shows how a company can re-tool its strategy and survive and thrive in a new environment. Since 2000, Majesco has taken its shots at the big time, but the BloodRayne franchise, Advent Rising, and Psychonauts failed to take hold. Other attempts such as Taxi Driver and Black9 were even cancelled.

In 2006 Majesco consciously withdrew from the premium games market and has released more casual or younger-oriented titles such as Cooking Mama to great success. This kind of re-tooling isn't endemic yet, but it's a smart move for Majesco in particular, as it was clear a change was needed.

Game Informer talked to Gui Karyo, executive vice president of operations at Majesco, who told us that the company is quite comfortable where it is, stated that given the high development and marketing budgets of triple-A titles, the company is better off finding gems like Cooking Mama – a title that appeals to both the casual and hardcore audience. When we asked him if he sees Majesco ever attempting a move back to the big leagues, he confidently replies, "I think it's highly unlikely."

Decisions, Decisions

Pidgeon believes that Majesco's success story is one that holds a few lessons. While some publishers will inevitably be acquired (for instance, Eidos/SCi was a popular target until recently), others may downsize and focus on one title or technology, and some have the vision to strike out in other directions. Pidgeon believes that realistically coming to grips with your situation is important. Assess your audience and the competition. "If you make a couple of good games, just stick to what you know. Try to differentiate. Unless you can beat or compete with the latest first-person shooter or RPG, then don't do it. Don't put yourself up against unbeatable competition. Even being number two in a category like sports can be fatal. The thing is: If everyone tries to be on top, then we end up with fewer original and inspiring games. If people start to diversify, we're going to have a lot more to choose from.

"I love Atlus because the games that they do are perfect for the handheld. I also like Codemasters because they realize that they can't compete on all the platforms, so they are moving towards digital distribution, towards dis-

tributing a couple quality titles, which is always the thing that companies say when they screw up – 'We're going to do a couple of things well.' They should be thinking that in the first place. Don't try to cover all the bases, because that's the quickest way to get knocked out – unless you want to be acquired. And if you want to be acquired, you better have some IP worth a high-ticket price."

This isn't only a problem for the smaller publishers out there: Even Electronic Arts admits it's not protected from a changing industry and marketplace. At DICE 08, CEO John Riccitiello said that EA's sheer size and consolidation strategy can make it hard for innovation to come through if not handled properly. With the likely acquisition of maverick studios such as Rockstar Games and talents such as Sid Meier and BioShock's Ken Levine, this is clearly a juggling act that EA will have to manage if it wants to properly harness their creativity. This just goes to show that preparing for the future is a problem that each company – no matter its size or strength – has to solve in its own way.

Eidos' IP such as Tomb Raider recently made it an attractive target for acquisition

news

WHERE DO YOU GO FROM HERE?
PUBLISHERS SEEKING SOLUTIONS

Companies like Electronic Arts and Activision are making headlines with their mergers and acquisitions. While the big get bigger, however, no company's destiny is set in stone. In fact, as this is happening we're finding that companies of all sizes are working to adjust their own strategies for the future.

MICROSOFT AT GDC: AN EPIC ENCORE
UNREAL DEVELOPER SHEDS LIGHT ON GEARS OF WAR 2, ENGINE UPDATES

Gear up for an Epic holiday. During the Microsoft keynote at the Game Developer's Conference in San Francisco this February, Cliff Bleszinski announced that Gears of War 2 is slated for release this November. Scarcely any game details could be culled from the short trailer shown at the presentation (which you can download now from Xbox Live). The *Sin City*-style teaser shows Marcus Fenix muttering about the toll of death and the need to take it head on before he charges a Locust Horde soldier with the lancer and shoves the chainsaw bayonet into its back after a brief struggle.

Gears of War 2 wasn't the only Epic property shown at the keynote. The multifaceted developer also showed off its technical prowess with a preview of the new features offered in the updated Unreal Engine 3.0. Epic founder and CEO Tim Sweeney demoed several new tools developers can use to bring their games to life, including new dynamic shadowing effects, more realistic fluid surfaces, high density crowds, fully destructible environments that use structural analysis protocol to determine how objects break apart due to stresses and strains, and a soft physics prototype of a gelatinous meat cube that Fenix pushed around and pumped shotgun shells into to demonstrate the object's viscosity and elasticity. Though Epic was quick to point out that these were not demos of Gears of War 2 tech, we wouldn't be surprised to see at least a few of these tools in the game.

Xbox Goes Indie
Microsoft Unveils Xbox Live Community Games

Indie rock has South by Southwest and indie film has Sundance, but where is the major public platform for indie game development? Microsoft hopes Xbox Live will become this missing hub. At Microsoft's Game Developer's Conference keynote, chief XNA architect Chris Satchell revealed an ambitious plan to showcase indie games developed on the XNA platform right on your Xbox 360. Amateurs and pros can submit, rate, download, and play games created on the XNA platform on Xbox Live.

Microsoft already gives away the XNA Game Studio 2.0 for free, which means would-be developers simply need some programming know how, free time, and a community games account to begin their careers as fledgling developers. For $49 for four months or $99 a year, community members can also become a part of XNA Creators Club, the body of peers who reportedly control the entire ecosystem of the indie games on Live. The peer board reviews each game submitted to the team and rates it based on its appropriateness for public consumption and technical stability before it's cleared for distribution online.

Many questions about the program still need to be addressed, such as how much power Microsoft will have in controlling the content uploaded to Live, how much space developers will be allowed to use, pricing, and how users will be able to navigate a large library of titles. Many of the logistical issues should be addressed when Microsoft launches the beta program this spring. Until then, you can download and play the first batch of indie games submitted to Microsoft right now on Xbox Live.

■ The Dishwasher: Dead Samurai

■ Little Gamers

MADDEN EXTENDS EXCLUSIVITY
LARGER STRATEGY TO EXPAND PRESENCE

The New England Patriots' defeat at the hands of the New York Giants may signal the end of the Pats' dynasty, but another empire is only getting stronger. The NFL and Electronic Arts have announced an extension to EA Sports exclusive rights to the football league and its players' association. This now means that EA's Madden series will be the only NFL product (including teams, player likeness, official stadiums, etc.) through the 2012-2013 NFL season.

Although it may seem that the previous deal, signed through 2010, adequately sealed up the NFL license for NFL and pushed out its competitors, the timing of this could be significant. If one presumes that the next round of gaming consoles come out around 2010 according to a five-year cycle (the Xbox 360 came out in 2005), then it was smart for EA to lock up the exclusive rights to the league beyond what might be the launch period of the upcoming consoles. Under this timing, even if EA does not renew the new contract in the year 2013, the company will still have a year or two head start on making football games for the next round of consoles in the event that the NFL goes non-exclusive.

Beyond the strategic and economic considerations of this deal, EA claims that the extra breathing room allows it to expand its NFL video game strategy. This includes using more NFL Films and NFL Network content, as well as expanding the accessibility of its products like the Family Play settings did for the Wii version of Madden last year. Similarly, EA wants to extend football's buying season into something that can sell year round. It remains to be seen if offshoots such as NFL Tour and NFL Head Coach can fill this void in their current forms, or if new strategies and titles will arise in their place.

It's In The Game

In related news, EA has signed a deal with sports and entertainment giant IMG. IMG's expertise is in expanding businesses through event management, brand growth, sponsorship sales, and more. What does this mean? Although no specific projects have been announced, expect to see EA Sports venture into some different areas that promote EA Sports as a lifestyle brand rather than just a name on a video game box. According to a statement by EA, the deal "could include sports camps, gaming lounges, publishing products, performance apparel, and more."

GI OPINION

EA says that this deal will allow more NFL integration, but it said that the first time it signed the exclusivity deal, and we're still waiting for Madden to really make use of the NFL license (or its ESPN one, for that matter). I worry that EA's more interested in getting your grandma to play Madden and selling EA Sports-branded oven mitts. I hope this isn't at the expense of fixing the franchise that you and I have come to love and would like to see returned to its former glory.—**KATO**

When You Want Your News Categorized With A Sarcastic Editorial Spin

QUOTE

...in circumstances where we either led with the Xbox 360 or ran parallel production, for the most part, we're still experiencing some delay on the PS3. It's a little bit more of a challenging development environment for us.

—EA CEO John Riccitiello

UGLY

One of Microsoft's own Xbox 360 demo machines at GDC was afflicted with the Red Rings of Death. Go ahead, laugh. You've earned it.

GOOD

Dr. Kawashima's heart is bigger than his head. The good doctor of Brain Age fame could have pocketed $6.5 million in royalties from the series, but instead he donated it to the Japanese university that he works at. "My hobby is work," he explained. "Everyone in my family is mad at me, but I tell them that if they want money – go out and earn it."

GOOD

Fight fans everywhere were dismayed to hear that EA was closing down its EA Chicago studio, which had given the world the Fight Night franchise. The studio's former head, Kudo Tsunoda has now landed on his feet at Microsoft, where he will reportedly head up the next Gears of War game. Meanwhile, EA is still recovering from the Chicago studio's closure. While the Fight Night franchise has relocated to EA Canada, EA has announced that it has "discontinued development of the Marvel titles under the EA Games label." At the time of its dissolution, Tsunoda and EA Chicago were working on an EA/Marvel fighting game.

BAD

While you can't argue with how hot Nintendo's Wii is right now, one unfortunate casualty of its success are Japanese arcades. Both Sega and Namco are closing large numbers of their arcades in Japan, where they have remained popular and relevant for longer than here in the U.S.

UGLY

Shortly after Wal-Mart and Best Buy declared they were giving up on HD DVD, technology creator Toshiba announced that it was suspending its HD DVD business by the end of March. Microsoft has even declared that it won't be making any more HD DVD peripherals. Next up: Blu-ray vs. HD digital downloads.

GOOD

EA claims that its upstart series Skate (shown) has outsold the recent installment of Activision's Tony Hawk at a 2:1 ratio. Although we can't verify the numbers, clearly Skate has shown up the old master. So much so, in fact, that in a recent earnings conference call, Activision CEO Mark Griffiths said the company would be "re-engineering the franchise." Better late than never

GOOD

Spore is finally in sight! EA has confirmed a release date for the PC, DS, and Mac versions of the game – September 7. A Wii edition has been confirmed (but not given a date), and other console Spores are in development according to EA Games president Frank Gibeau for an unspecified future release.

After*words*

BURNOUT PARADISE

Craig Sullivan,
Lead Producer, Criterion
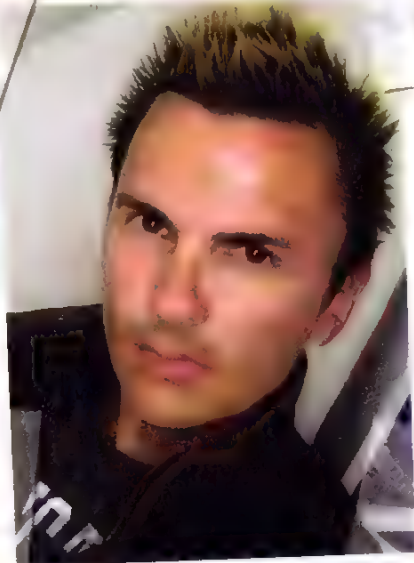
Criterion's Burnout series has been known over the years for delivering the simple pleasures of video game racing: insane speeds and intense wrecks. However, Burnout Paradise, the latest in the franchise, represents a bold new attempt at open-world racing. Eschewing the familiar Crash mode and closed tracks of past Burnouts, this game took some real risks with a proven formula. This month, GI readers ask lead producer Craig Sullivan about the decisions that were made in the creation of Burnout Paradise.

How difficult was the decision to forego including Crash mode? Was that an early cut, or did you struggle over it for the better part of the development cycle?
– aubradley84

■ It was a decision we made very early on in development. The goal for Burnout Paradise was to create a completely seamless experience, and this had to carry across all aspects of the game including what we've previously known as "Crash" mode. We could have created crash junctions as we have in the past, but this would have broken the dynamic of the whole game. Showtime was created to allow the user to crash anytime, anywhere. This feels truly "next gen" to us, as it doesn't give the user any restrictions, as they are able to do what they want when they want. Also, creating a specific number of junctions means that once you have completed them all, that's it, the experience ends and you would be removed from the seamless nature of Burnout Paradise. With Showtime every time you play it's different, you determine the route you take, you determine what you try to hit, and you can continue to get better and better.

The online is awesome, is there any chance you'll have more content or missions available for download?
– louie_the_puppy

■ We've already announced in our regular podcast on www.Criteriongames.com that we're going to be doing downloadable content for Burnout Paradise. We can't reveal details just yet, but it's going to be very cool, so look out for more information soon.

I know you guys abhor loading screens, but don't you think it's just a *little* ridiculous that you have to drive all the way back to where you started?
– only_to_survive

■ Exploration and discovery is a core part of the experience and we designed everything around that. An open-world game gives designers a real challenge when compared to level-based games – when the player can go anywhere and do anything, how do you deal with issues such as navigation, retry, and so on? We decided to tackle this challenge head on, rather than do what other open-world games have done to date, which is to resort to conventions from level-based games such as chevrons, arrows, and retry options. We wanted players to learn the city as fast as possible, because we wanted to get rid of outdated concepts like chevrons and big arrows on the screen. If you teleport around the world all the time, you never get to learn it like you do a real place. If you just follow an arrow everywhere, you do not get to recognize a certain road or a certain turning. We spent a long time on this challenge and what we have done absolutely breaks convention – which puts us out there in the firing line. Some will love it, but for them to love it others must loathe it. That's the beauty of entertainment.

The Burning Laps are always really close when you do win; how do you balance all the races for difficulty when there are so many?
– roscoe49

■ All of the events in the game have a dynamically balanced difficulty curve that is constantly adjusting itself based on what the player is doing as they progress through their license. The only things that are manually set up are the Burning Routes, and we do those by playing the game a lot and setting a time that is right for that route and car, plus a couple of crashes. It's really important that we find the sweet spot for those times so the player feels challenged, but at the same time not making the route too hard.

How did you get the game to run so fast in an open world and still have so much detail? Does the PS3 or 360 have the best graphics?
– arliss

■ We spent a lot of time pushing both systems as far as we possibly could to make sure the game ran at 60 frames per second, even with the open world and everything else that is happening on screen – to us Burnout wouldn't be Burnout without that feeling of speed you can only get at that frame rate. As for which version is best, we get asked that question all the time and the answer is simple: Both versions of Burnout Paradise are as identical as they can be. As developers we wouldn't be satisfied with anything less, and certainly never compromise on either machine.

How did you come up with the idea of people jumping in the game while you play? Do you plan on using that feature for future Burnout games?
– Wii_Master

■ As game creators we purposely set out to make a game where online was as easy to get into as driving down the street, creating a seamless online game that breaks down the old PC paradigms of waiting around in lobbies and looking at lists while you wait for the action to start.

In Burnout Paradise you click the d-pad three times while you're driving and then you're online with no loading, no waiting, and no fuss. This is a totally new approach to this problem, but by innovating in this area we believe that we're helping to push games forward. Online shouldn't be hard to access, and when you get online it shouldn't be just competitive play. That's why we created Freeburn Challenges in the game. This is another area where we created something new to encourage more social play, co-operative play with friends, which is a first for the genre. As for whether or not we will use this in future games from Criterion, we'll have to wait and see.

Why did you abandon the extreme weather effects after making Burnout 2: Point of Impact, along with having races that took place during the night instead of the day?
– Nom Anor

■ Burnout Paradise is an open world game that runs at 60 frames per second, and the feeling of speed and excitement was and is the key part of the gameplay experience. If we had put in extreme weather it would have compromised the frame rate and that is something that we weren't willing to do. If we did racing at night we would want to change the gameplay significantly so it really means something to the player. For Paradise, we chose to focus all our efforts on driving during the day and making that feel really great.

LOOSE TALK
Hot Gaming Gossip

XBOX LIVE 2.0?

Microsoft's Xbox Live has set the standard for the online console experience, so what does the company do for an encore? According to this program manager job posting, it looks like that process is already underway. "Want to be involved in the next release of Xbox?" it reads. "Join the server-backed games team, part of the Xbox Live team that's responsible for creating a completely new way for mainstream audiences to enjoy the Xbox and Live. We're building the games, the console interface and logic, and the server support for a totally new Live experience. Both the games and the dashboard experience will be deeply paired with dynamic server support to create a compelling, fresh scenario each time. We are looking for a passionate games producer to help implement our first generation games that will run in this new environment."
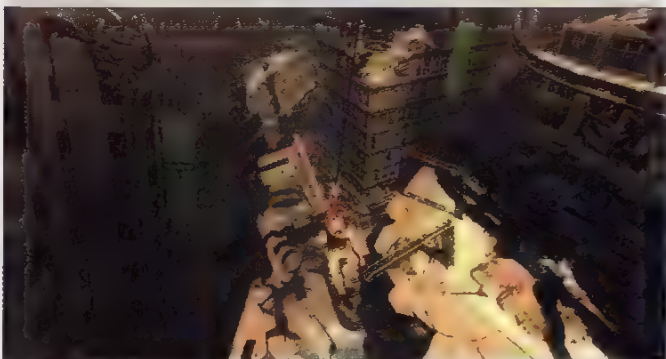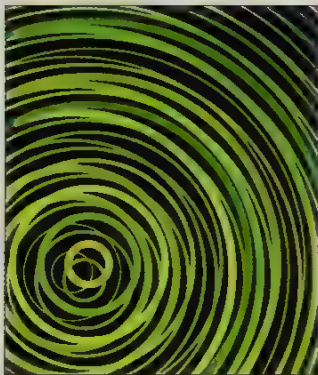
BIONIC TERMINATORS

Word is that Bionic Commando developer Grin (which also worked on the PC version of Ghost Recon: Advanced Warfighter 2) is getting started on the next Terminator video game project. *Terminator Salvation: The Future Begins*, the next film, will begin shooting this spring, and is planned for a summer 2009 release.

WHAT ELSE IS EA PLANNING? A CONSOLE?!

With news that EA is eyeing a purchase of Rockstar parent company Take-Two, we've found out a few other tidbits about what EA's got up its sleeve. Despite some lukewarm reviews, the company is going ahead with another Godfather title. It's unknown, however, if this new title will be based on *Godfather Part II*, or a whole other title entirely. Also, as if the possible Take-Two Rockstar deal wasn't big enough, Rockstar hasn't just been plugging away at Grand Theft Auto IV. Plenty other projects have been going forward at Rockstar -- specifically those for PS3, and they could make a deal with EA even more advantageous. But EA is apparently not stopping there. Loose Talk has even heard that some within EA are considering a move to console manufacturing – the hitch being that EA is waiting to see if the PS3 picks up its sales by 2010.

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

NAME THAT GAME
Test Your Sight

Crime doesn't pay, and it can often get you killed – or in this game's case, cancelled. This 2K console and PC title cast you as an out-of-work actor looking to build his fortunes by creating a drug empire cocaine brick by cocaine brick. The strategy title featured a supply-and-demand economic model that requires you to sell and smuggle narcotics across your territories.

(Answer on page 26)
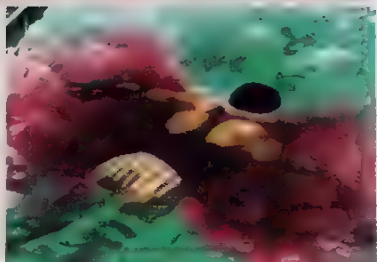
HARRISON LEAVES SONY
GIVES PARTING SHOT ON WAY OUT

Phil Harrison, Sony's president of worldwide studios, has announced his resignation after 15 years with the company. "I am so proud of everything PlayStation has achieved and will continue to support its future in every way I can," said Harrison. Kaz Hirai, president and group CEO of Sony Computer Entertainment International, will take over Harrison's responsibilities.

Harrison oversaw Sony's first-party games and its overarching strategy worldwide. He came up through the ranks during both the PlayStation and PS2 eras, and as president of worldwide studios oversaw the launch of the PlayStation 3. Although price and hardware availability blunted the system's initial fortunes, a lack of software also put the console behind the eight ball in the beginning.

Harrison, however, has had great success with other casual Sony initiatives such as SingStar and EyeToy. He was also involved in Sony's upcoming social networking hub, Home. In fact, GamesIndustry.biz reports that Harrison will be furthering his interest in the casual market with a move to Infogrames, although this could not be confirmed as of press time. At GDC, Harrison expressed his frustration with Sony Japan, saying that Sony Europe had casual products such as EyeToy out before Nintendo's Wii, but Sony Japan didn't believe enough in the products. "Our Japanese colleagues said that there is no such thing as social gaming in Japan – people do not play games on the same sofa together in each other's homes. It will never happen. And then out comes the Wii."

WiiWARE ON ITS WAY
NINTENDO ONLINE: PAY TO PLAY

Nintendo's WiiWare channel is getting off the ground, and it will let gamers play products from independent developers starting May 12. As many as 100 projects are reportedly already underway for North America alone, although no specific launch games have been announced. WiiWare will not only be home to efforts from smaller developers like Frontier and its platformer LostWinds, but even Square Enix is planning to put games on WiiWare with its Final Fantasy Crystal Chronicles: My Life as a King (shown).

As if Nintendo's online experience didn't already have its drawbacks, the company has announced that you'll have to pay an online fee for select games in the future. Those games labeled with a "Nintendo Wi-Fi Connection Pay and Play" on their box will require a payment for online play. Gamers will use Wii Points to pay for their experience, although no fee parameters have been announced.

(Standing L-R) Jared Coulston, Nathan Quinn, Greg Risselada, Mason Groendal

Team Pandemic World of Warcraft Pwners

Game Informer scours the leaderboards in search of 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 our next featured gamer.

CHRIS COSSEY
- Handle: Douja
- Age: 22
- Hometown: Sacramento, CA
- Favorite Class: Shaman
- Favorite Ability: Grounding Totem

MASON GROENDAL
- Handle: Nitrana
- Age: 20
- Hometown: Jenison, MI
- Favorite Class: Rogue
- Favorite Ability: Distract

GREG RISSELADA
- Handle: Malice
- Age: 21
- Hometown: Jenison, MI
- Favorite Class: Mage
- Favorite Ability: Ice Lance

JOSEPH ROMANO
- Handle: NoktyN
- Age: 20
- Hometown: Philadelphia, PA
- Favorite Class: Warrior
- Favorite Ability: Mortal Strike

DAVID QUICK
- Handle: sck
- Age: 24
- Hometown: Kansas City, KS
- Favorite Class: Warlock
- Favorite Ability: Bloodlust

NATHAN QUINN
- Handle: Kintt
- Age: 21
- Hometown: Dallas, TX
- Favorite Class: Priest
- Favorite Ability: Anything but Mana Burn

Accomplishments

Team Pandemic (which also has CounterStrike and Guitar Hero branches) was the first professional gaming organization to sign a World of Warcraft team. The team remains undefeated in 3v3 play in tournaments spanning the U.S., Canada, China, and Sweden, and has won approximately $100,000 in prize money.

Origin of Skills

NOKTYN: I first got into World of Warcraft during the last phase of beta after having played EverQuest for a few years before it.... Our teamwork and combined experience helped us to be very successful in arena play early on. This success is what brought us into the WoW tournament scene, not to mention how Team Pandemic came to find us, and we are grateful for that.

Practice Time

NITRANA: I remember playing well over 200 games one particular week with Kintt and Malice to prepare for a 3v3 event.
MALICE: At peak times we're well over 50 hours a week.

Life outside of WoW

TEAM PANDEMIC PRESIDENT CHRIS LEMLEY: We go out, watch sports and movies, hang out with friends...you'd never know we were "pro gamers" unless you caught us in the act. Some of us are still in school completing degrees, and others are busy working their way into careers in video gaming or related fields.

The Key To Victory

KINTT: We won a lot of our matches at tournaments because of strategies based on what we thought the other team would be running or doing in matches. People are always trying to figure out how to overcome what's currently dominant, so you always have to be ready for new things to be thrown your way.
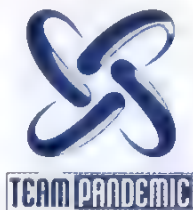
MALICE: I believe that 1800-2000 rated teams know how to play well, they just don't look at the bigger picture. Great teams (2200+) see everything that is happening in the fight and are able to adapt to what the other team is doing at any given time. A lower-rated team tends to have a set strategy which they stick to no matter what, which eventually leads to their downfall.

Improving WoW

SCK: [There should be] more spectator friendliness, PvP and PvE segregation, class balance, faster game updates, and more tournaments whether they be online or LAN-based.

NITRANA: Blizzard never seems to disappoint, I'm sure they'll create another masterpiece, but one thing I wouldn't mind seeing disappear is flying mounts. Flying mounts ruined world PvP.
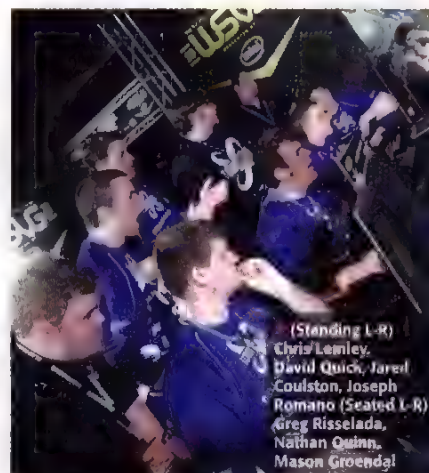
(Standing L-R) Chris Lemley, David Quick, Jared Coulston, Joseph Romano (Seated L-R) Greg Risselada, Nathan Quinn, Mason Groendal

(Standing L-R) David Quick, Nathan Quinn, Jared Coulston

PC CUSTOMIZATION
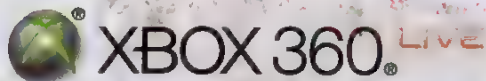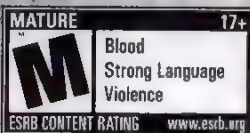
Make your rig stand out at a crowded LAN

Whether it's spending upwards of $5,000 on a custom-built machine that can run Crysis at full resolution and impress the ladies at the same time, or heading down to the local electronics shop to drop $20 on some LEDs to add a little flavor to your current machine, owning a PC that nobody will mistake for your mom's eMachine is its own reward. We talked to Alienware's Marc Diana about some of the methods the professionals use to craft unique looks, and got some tips for the do-it-yourself-ers out there as well.

DIY 101: MARC DIANA'S ADVICE FOR ASPIRING MODDERS

"PC modders really need to understand electricity to be successful in PC modding. Just about every mod outside of physical chassis mods requires power, and it's absolutely crucial that modders understand how much power they need and how to use a power supply that can support it. If not, you can end up really damaging your PC."

"The best way to get started is to start small and work your way up. Get a 550 watt power supply, some lights and maybe a physical chassis mod like a window. Then slowly start to try new things. It's also best to learn on an extra PC that you might have lying around the house. If you don't have an extra one, pick one up at a local second-hand store or Goodwill. This will save you a lot of time, trouble, and money further down the road. You don't want to blow your whole gaming rig because of some LED lights on the feet of it."

CHASSIS

HOW THE PROS DO IT: Professional boutique PC manufacturers have a lot of advantages when it comes to creating unique looks, and nowhere is it more evident than in the area of chassis design. Pros can optimize just about everything, since they're designing it from the ground up. "Professionals also have access to multiple vendor roadmaps and upcoming technologies," says Diana. "These roadmaps are instrumental when designing a new chassis because it allows professionals to make design accommodations and adhere to multiple new technologies before they launch." There's a reason the price tag on boutique PCs is so high.

DIY TIPS: Just because people who do it for a living have access far beyond regular Joe Gamer's means doesn't preclude the ability to do some cool stuff on your own. Window mods are far and away the most common. There are a ton of options out there for the intrepid modder, including windows with laser-etched designs and/or fans built into them. If you're going to give people a look inside your chassis, though, do it with pride. "(Windows) are pretty easy to do and offer a view into either an incredibly well-designed chassis or a cable nightmare," notes Diana.

Hardcore DIYers can take it way further. "Extreme modders, and incredibly experienced ones, will sometimes redesign their entire chassis using body filler and fiberglass resin. This helps to create an outer casing for the chassis that can then be applied to areas of the PC where you want it to have a different shape," states Diana. "Some DIY chassis builders add materials like fiberglass, wood, plastic, or paper to give their chassis a different texture as well. It's very similar to body kits used on cars."

LIGHTING

HOW THE PROS DO IT: The big pro advantage here is in access to proprietary software systems that control cosmetic lighting. Cool pulsating effects in standby mode and the like are achieved through this sort of integrated software, and can be very difficult to set up on your own. As with everything else, crafting a lighting solution hand-in-hand with the chassis itself gives the pros a leg up.

DIY TIPS: Three styles of lighting are available to consumers: Cold cathode, LED, and electroluminescent wires. LEDs consume less power than cold cathodes but aren't as bright, while wires are generally bundled with other wires and cables to make them glow. "Most of the time, you will find yourself using cold cathode for around the chassis window to show off everything inside the chassis and then using LED lighting accessories, such as fans, heat sinks, and power supplies, inside Molex connectors and in the chassis feet," explains Diana. "Both cold cathode and LEDs can take advantage of sound activation modules, or can come from the factory with sound activation capabilities, to have the lights act in accordance with nearby sound waves." Be aware that you have to power all these goodies, though, so make sure your power supply is up to the task.

SOFTWARE

HOW THE PROS DO IT: Manufacturers like Nvidia and Alienware have a whole host of software applications that can make lights and such respond to the state of nearly anything, from heatsinks to power supplies. Of course, they'll only work with proprietary hardware and offer users neat abilities at the cost of hardware flexibility.

DIY TIPS: "Implementing software into custom PCs can be the difficult road less traveled; however, for the few who decide to pursue this path the rewards can be amazing," says Diana. "Applications like Webguide, a custom developed program that provides a friendly UI for users to interact with Windows Vista Media Center remotely, and ATI Tool, an easy to use overclocking application for ATI video cards, give users quick freedom from vendor application restrictions." Open-source software is another great resource for gamers; places like http://sourceforge.net offer everything from Windows skins to device drivers and media viewers. For the knowledgeable user, the sky is the limit for running custom applications.

NOTEBOOKS

HOW THE PROS DO IT: Because of the nature of the beast, most aesthetic modifications to notebooks have to happen at the factory. On the plus side, manufacturers have started to offer gamers a lot more choices over the last few years, ranging from custom decals and lighted keyboards to more fully integrated lighting solutions like you'd see in a desktop.

DIY TIPS: While most anything that makes you open the case of your notebook will void the warranty, a variety of vendors are happy to paint custom designs onto your 'book for a price or swap out LCDs with something more personal. Diana also suggests: "There are also several skin vendors for notebooks that can create custom vinyl stickers for notebooks that can be put on and taken off easily and with little to no mess."
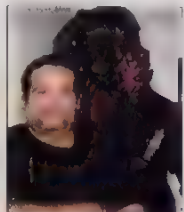
TOP TEN
Lists...Everybody Loves Lists...

Top 10 Rejected Game Infarcer Ideas

10 Garnadan

9 Lair Dev Tips

8 "Real Estate Values in Rapture On The Decline"

7 Snake Snacks (ask Ben)

6 Final Fantasy Football

5 The Alliance (already a joke)

4 Heavenly Sore

3 Something about pockets (again, ask Ben)

2 Bass Effect

1 Tom Hanks

Name That Game Answer Snow

EA RECONVENES WHITE COUNCIL?
LORD OF THE RINGS BACK ON

In half a year, EA's The Lord of the Rings: The White Council went from promising RPG to unfulfilled promise. The game was cancelled in early 2007. However, EA's Lord of the Rings plans are far from over. Company CEO John Riccitiello recently stated that EA is moving forward with a Lord of the Rings project based on Peter Jackson's vision of J.R.R. Tolkien's creation. Riccitiello says the game is anticipated in EA's 2009 fiscal year that runs from April 2008 to March 2009.

Documents from EA show that Pandemic (Mercenaries 2) has been assigned to the project, but it is unknown if it will be a reprisal of The White Council or an entirely new project. The White Council was originally conceived as a game set at the beginning of the Third Age in Middle-earth before The Hobbit or The Fellowship of the Ring.

At first, The White Council was indefinitely delayed before it was officially terminated, and at the time, Peter Jackson's royalty lawsuit with New Line Cinema and the studio's possible movie plans were believed to throw the whole project in jeopardy. Fast forward to today, and the landscape has changed – but all is still not well.

While Peter Jackson has cleared up his lawsuit with the studio and the pair have agreed to make two films: one based on The Hobbit and another preceding The Fellowship of the Ring (Jackson will serve as executive director and Pan's Labyrinth director Guillermo del Toro will be behind the camera), a final snag could remain. A group representing J.R.R. Tolkien's estate is also suing New Line for royalties purportedly not paid by the studio. This latest lawsuit could delay the films. Also, if EA anticipates releasing this newest LOTR game before March of next year – the film itself hasn't even begun filming – trying to line up this game with the movie could be next to impossible in EA's stated time frame.

SHADOWS OF ANGMAR DEEPEN

Publisher/developer Turbine, producer of the successful The Lord of the Rings Online: Shadows of Angmar, has extended its licensing agreement with Tolkien Enterprises to create MMORPGs based on Tolkien's The Hobbit and The Lord of the Rings books through 2014. There is also an additional option to extend the deal through 2017.

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inside

the top 10 weirdest games of all time

For an audience that easily accepts a plumber who eats mushrooms to grow twice his size and stomp turtles, it can be difficult to find something strange enough to affect gamers. It takes a particular sort of peculiarity, and no one does it like Japan. So take a tour of Game Informer's predominantly Japanese 10 strangest games of all time.

1 The Typing of the Dead

Common sense has always taught us that if your town is overrun by zombies it's best to reach for a shotgun. Typing of the Dead has a different take. What if zombies exploded every time a word or sentence was typed quickly and accurately? It's probably safe to say this is the most action-packed typing software on the market. Even though the core concept was pretty strange on its own, the random phrases like "pink tofu" and "Why can't you use a toilet?" took things to the next level.

2 Seaman

From the moment the soothing voice of Leonard Nimoy welcomes you to the world of Seaman, it's obvious that something's off. Part pet simulator (it was the Tamagotchi era, after all) and part conversational experiment, Seaman tasked players with raising creatures from eggs to fish with faces to land-roaming amphibians. Experimenting with various phrases via the Dreamcast mic yielded talk about religion, politics, and correct pronunciation ("That's Sea-man, skin puppet").

3 Killer 7

Three years later and people are still trying to figure out what the hell's going on in this game. But there are a few things we know for sure. Fact: You play as a wheelchair-bound old man who has seven distinct assassin personalities. Fact: Travis' T-shirts are usually inappropriate. Fact: The dialogue is nuts! "Children are pure. They know who's the strongest." "God and the pigeon are one." "Poof. You're f***ed."

4 Katamari Damacy

After a few sequels, the Katamari series has become more of a gaming staple than an outlier. But the original's mix of strangely catchy music, a star-destroying flamboyant King of all Cosmos, and an odd game mechanic that had players roll up everyday objects into a growing sticky ball, set a new bar for the bizarre. Particularly fun is the first time you roll up a person and listen to their shouts of horror mixed with glee as their legs kick frantically out of the side of your katamari.
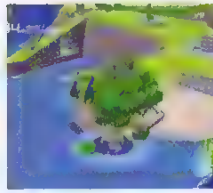
5 Mister Mosquito

"Warning. This game contains scenes of explicit itchiness." So reads the opening message in this first-ever mosquito sim. Players take on the role of the titular insect and proceed to slowly drive the Yamada family insane with bug bites. You can turn off the TV or make a cell phone ring to distract your victims before going in for the kill. If discovered in your quest, the Yamadas will go on a Godzilla-style rampage until you ram into one of their "relax" points.

6 WarioWare, Inc.: Mega Microgame$!

Just when we thought minigames couldn't get any shorter, WarioWare came along and trimmed them down to mere seconds. With pals like the disco-crazy Jimmy T. and mad scientist Dr. Crygor, Wario sets out to make the best game ever. With challenges like nose picking, toast catching, and Game Boy cart inserting all flashing by in an instant, it's tough to fully digest all of the oddities. But keeping players constantly disoriented is what this game's all about.

7 Feel the Magic: XY/XX

One of the first of many minigame collections to come on the DS, Feel the Magic stands out with its wacky perspective on romance. An enthusiastic group of rabbit ear-wearing matchmakers come up with a multitude of perilous schemes to help you score the girl. Halt charging angry bulls, touch scorpions, ride a unicycle on a plank between two skyscrapers, and wipe mud off your crush all in the name of love. Quick sidenote: the sequel (The Rub Rabbits) is called Where do Babies Come From? in Japan.

8 No One Can Stop Mr. Domino

Dominoes is a relatively relaxing game on its own, so how do you spice it up? Why not bring the dominoes to life and have them prance around a track dodging errant dice, packages of Pocky, and station wagons. Players spend the first lap setting up dominoes, making sure they're set up to trigger various "traps" that will keep the chain going. These payoffs include a spring-loaded boxing glove smashing a dude in the face, a sumo wrestler launching a kid off a seesaw, and even a fallen meteor.
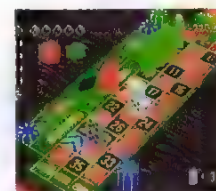
9 Guilty Gear

"Heaven or Hell? Let's rock!" So begins every battle in this over-the-top metal-themed fighter. Characters include a girl who can fight with her hair, a blind man who summons giant shadow fists and creatures, and a 9'4" mad scientist who's not averse to throwing you on the operating table and hacking away in the middle of a brawl. Fatalities also played a part, though they could be triggered at any time. Nothing like getting squeezed to death in a chain cocoon by the computer when you were one slash away from winning.
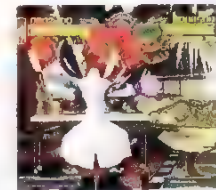
10 Dog's Life

This game is based on the probably true concept that all dogs think about is crapping, peeing, and smelling foul aromas. In this ridiculous collect-a-thon, you could perform any of these actions at the press of a button. Gameplay consists of fetching things for humans, challenging other dogs to races and piss contests, and farting on butterflies. Parents beware, the ESRB descriptor makes no mention of the rampant feces tossing contained within.

"life can be

HARD...

sometimes i need to be harder. "

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want you to smoke weed or do stupid
things that aren't you. Be real. You're
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PETER MOORE

PRESIDENT, EA SPORTS

>> A major player at both Sega and Microsoft, Peter Moore has seen the game industry from many sides. Now returning to his first love – sports – the former Reebok executive looks to lead a revitalized EA Sports <<

Coming into your new position, what did you see as the biggest strength of EA Sports and what did you see as the biggest weakness?
I think they were probably the same thing, which is scale. The company has incredible scale on a global basis. At the same time, the scale of the company was slowing it down. They're the aircraft carrier in the battlegroup; they're not the most nimble of beasts. At the same time, John Riccitiello [was] coming back with a real emphasis on getting the company lean and focused on quality. This was a very different EA to what I had seen even six months prior.

What had changed internally at EA in those six months?
The way that it was previously organized was that you had Electronic Arts and you had a Worldwide Studios division, which was the real controlling influence here [at EA Sports]. Then, there was the Publishing division, whose job it was to take the games to market. It had worked incredibly well for this company for many years. But, in recent years, anybody here will tell you that we kind of lost our

for interactive entertainment. Electronic Arts, as did a number of other companies, bid on that.

You recently announced Facebreaker, an over-the-top, cartoonish boxing game. Do you see casual sports titles as being the growth area for EA Sports?
I think that there's bigger growth in the more casual market, but I don't think we've maxed out the potential of the hardcore games…but I do think the onus is on us to offer new experiences. The real core element is going to be growing the business to the broader consumer that is currently intimidated by the way that we offer our games. While there's probably 10 million people that call themselves a part of Madden nation, there's 120 million, according to the NFL, football fans that for some reason haven't shown an interest in playing a football video game.

You said that EA Sports needs to compete with Nike and ESPN as overall sports brands. How do you do this?
I think that there is [huge] potential for the brand

look at sports that are appealing there – soccer is huge there and we'll continue to invest in soccer. But fast behind that comes things like cricket. If you think India's going to be important in the next three to five years, you better have a presence in cricket. If you think that you can continue to be only in NASCAR and have a global footprint in competitive racing, I think we all understand you're sadly mistaken.

You've also referred to EA Sports expanding into a "social news" network. Could you clarify what you meant by that? Is it MySpace for sports?
When I look at what we need to do to aggregate our consumer base, I see that we need to give them a place that they can come and meet as EA Sports fans. We're starting to build technology that they can use to share their experiences. If you go to EASportsWorld right now, which is a beta site, you'll see a small portion of those consumers posting videos. You know that EASports.com becomes a very important URL for us moving forward – more than just a website for static information and

> ## I look forward to having a conversation with [the MLB] when the time is right about how EA Sports can get back in baseball.

mojo a little bit – because of our size. What you had was unclear reporting structure, unclear decision-making structure that was unwieldy and difficult to understand for the different groups. With the new system, we have very clear reporting. It's myself at EA Sports; I run the sports label. Cathy Vrabeck in casual [games]. Nancy Smith runs the Sims label and, of course, Frank Gibeau runs EA Games.

You spoke about "mojo." I think, since EA got the exclusive NFL license, there's been perception amongst gamers that EA Sports has been resting on its laurels.
I think it's a misperception for a number of reasons. First of all, the tallest tree always catches the most wind. It is incredibly difficult to innovate year-in and year-out on the timelines that we have. But in the great majority of cases we do just that. At the same time, I recognize that when we do a deal that we've recently renewed with the NFL that people somehow see that as a crimping of competition or buying our way into marketshare when we can't innovate. I've said this 100 times since I've been here, and it seems to fall on deaf ears: EA did not barge into the NFL offices demanding an exclusive three years ago. The National Football League determined that they would tender an exclusive license

that is EA Sports, which I always admired from the outside and wondered why it wasn't being further leveraged. We've announced a deal with IMG…they are the preeminent sports marketing company in the world for licensing. IMG will represent the EA Sports brand in areas other than our core competency of video games. It corrals a lot of the stuff I saw when I got here with our logo appearing on all kinds of promotional items I didn't feel comfortable with. It also allows us to take EA Sports to places like apparel and sporting equipment. There will also be things like sports camps and utilization of our technology to aid broadcasting. All of these are ways that we believe we can invest in our brand, and bring more people into the video game industry.

You've previously mentioned the possibility of cricket and F1 racing as being examples of huge sports that are essentially ignored in North America.
We're looking at whatever sport we think can help us grow our global footprint. We do not do well in Asia; it's a huge opportunity for this brand. But you're not going to go in there with the NFL; you're certainly not going to go in there with the NHL. You've got a chance with the NBA. But you

showing you game releases…. Extending it out, social networks are becoming incredibly important, and the "widgetization" of content is very [important]. We're starting to do that in Facebook with things like Madden, to bring a bite-sized experience to those tens of millions of people that visit their homepage everyday.

Are there any plans for exclusive deals with the NBA or NHL? Will you attempt to get back into the MLB market when 2K's exclusive expires?
Not having baseball as part of our portfolio pains me a little bit. I respect the fact that there is an exclusive arrangement there that precludes us from doing anything there. Having said that, when the time is right, I've got very good relationships with MLB and I've got a lot of people that work there who worked with me at Reebok that are good friends. I look forward to, at the very least, having a conversation with them when the time is right for how EA Sports can get back in baseball. In regards to the other two leagues, there have been no conversations with the NBA or NHL as far as exclusive arrangements. [This interview was conducted prior to EA's attempted buyout of Take-Two and 2K Sports – Ed.]

CAPTAIN
OF THE TEAM

FANATEC PORSCHE 911 RACING WHEEL

GOOD ●●●●●●●●○○

We finally got to take this wireless 911 Racing Wheel out for a test drive, and we were more than pleased with its smooth performance. Built for both the PC and PS3, the 911 has three force feedback motors and comes with swapable 6+1 manual or Tiptronic style sequential gear sticks. Still, the 911's biggest feature is the hand-stitched leather and inset metal Porsche logo. This is one case where you really might be paying for the logo. The 911 is a great racing wheel, but unlike a real Porsche, its high performance hardly justifies the price.
$350.00   www.fanatec.com

BELKIN n52te SPEEDPAD

pc

DEFAULT ●●●●●●○○○○

Belkin's updated SpeedPad features three saved profiles, a scroll wheel, and 15 programmable, backlit keys. We liked its keys' short throw, and the unit rests comfortably in your hands, but many of the buttons feel out of place resulting in some awkward hand contortions. The d-pad comes with a removable joystick, which is nice, but the pad itself feels loose under your thumb. Many gamers may enjoy the SpeedPad's few benefits, but it's certainly not for everyone.
$69.99 · www.n52te.com

LOGITECH CORDLESS MEDIABOARD PRO

peripherals

OK ●●●●●●●●○○○

Logitech's newest version of its MediaBoard Pro now includes Bluetooth so there is no need for a USB dongle. We tested the unit and it worked well (to around 30 ft.) and the integrated touch pad with vertical scrolling provides a nice mouse-free solution. Still, this is just a keyboard, and a fairly expensive one at that, therefore probably only of interest to those who do a lot of web browsing or text messaging on their PS3. You know who you are.
$79.99 · www.logitech.com

RAZER PIRANHA

pc

●●●●●●●●●○○

Fans of smaller headsets might want to check out Razer's Piranha. This headset comes with a nice three-meter long cable, produces some clear, full sound, and has an adjustable mic that requires only a little bit of volume tweaking. The Piranha's biggest fault is only apparent after several hours of use. Due to the headsets small can size, the ear cups don't fit over your ears and can result in some discomfort. If it weren't for that detail and the unit's higher price point, this would be a sure bet.
$79.99 · www.razerzone.com

Pictured from left to right: LCDR Mark Simon, ETCM Eric Olis, BMC Dan Ames, BM1 Michael O'Connell, EN1 Jason Fetterman, EM2 Mark DiPietro, LT Lewis Baker, MM2 Sergio Rodriguez

navy.com/seals

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MCFARLANE HALO FIGURES

Sure these seem a little late to the party, but who's going to complain when one of the top toy makers, Todd McFarlane, tackles one of the largest video game properties? The first series will be available starting in March and will include Master Chief, Cortana, a Jackal Sniper, a Spartan Soldier, and a Brute Chieftain. McFarlane will also be making a few vehicles to go along with the set, including the Warthog, Ghost, and Brute Chopper.

$7.99 - $14.99 · www.spawn.com
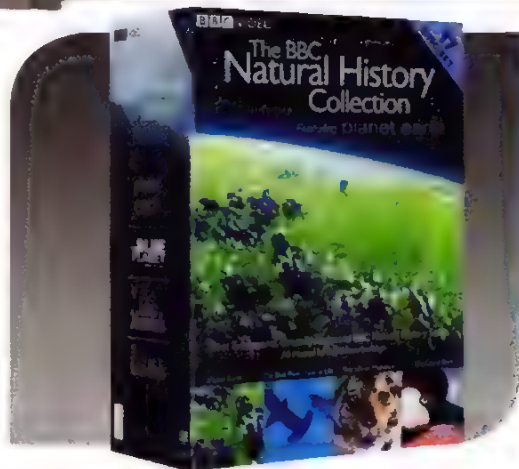
BBC NATURAL HISTORY COLLECTION

This DVD set includes four of the BBC's award winning documentaries: *Planet Earth*, *The Blue Planet*, *The Life of Birds*, and *The Life of Mammals*. All told, this is over 33 hours of programming spanning 17 discs. With all that knowledge, who needs to read books anymore?
$169.98 · www.bbcamericashop.com

RETRO DUO CONSOLE

Tired of blowing on cartridges and lighting candles to the ancient Nintendo goddess in hopes that your old systems will work? The Retro Duo console might be your solution, since it combines the technologies of the NES and SNES into one slick package. Unfortunately, the Duo doesn't work perfectly with both systems' full libraries, but it will play a lot of your favorite titles like: Metroid, Castlevania II: Simon's Quest, Legend of Zelda, Star Tropics, Chrono Trigger, Earthbound, F-Zero, and Star Fox, to name a few.
$49.99 · www.innexinc.com

COMMANDER SHEPARD STATUE

If you're like us, you've probably already polished off everything there is to do in Mass Effect and are hungrily awaiting more. These officially endorsed 8" statues are for you. Situated on hand-numbered bases and limited to a 2,500 worldwide run, these statues won't start shipping out until a little later this spring, but you can pre-order yours online right now.
$89.95 · hyperchildwow.com/blog

A QUESTION OF CHARACTER

EMIL PAGLIARULO, LEAD DESIGNER OF FALLOUT 3, BETHESDA SOFTWORKS

When I was a kid growing up in South Boston, the trashcans in our backyard were dragged to the curb for pickup, every week, by a homeless man named Vinnie Trashski. Yeah, I know. "Trashski." Bitter irony or cruel nickname? It really didn't matter. Here was a disheveled, disenfranchised alcoholic with a heart of gold, a guy who could have simply sifted through the garbage after it had been brought curbside, but instead chose to bring the barrels himself. Despite his outward appearance and social status, Vinnie was one of the good guys. Deep down, he just wanted to help.

Vinnie was just one of dozens of real-life characters that populated my world in the mid-1970s. Today, the cast is different, but no less colorful. There's the kid in the park, listening to his iPod while dangling languidly from a swing, too old for a playground, but with nowhere else to go. And the silver-haired teacher directing students and traffic outside my kids' elementary school, one eye on her charges, the other on my car. Frowning, joyless, obviously burnt out on children and the tedium of structured education.

They're amazing, the stories we tell ourselves. All it takes is a single glance, and our imaginations fill in the rest. "Show don't tell" made manifest. That woman there? Soccer mom with a failing marriage and a mountain of debt. That guy? Recent college graduate with a bachelor's degree in marine biology whose only contact with dolphins was some suspect tuna.

Whether or not these perceptions are entirely accurate is beside the point; our imaginations work with the material they're given.

But not everyone gets the internal character portrait, do they? Some people are just too mundane, too plain, too boring to trigger that spark of creation. So we move on, we dismiss the average and seek the exciting or, at the very least, interesting.

And that's the real challenge of creating believable characters for a computer role-playing game, like those in The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion or Fallout 3. With a cast of hundreds, sometimes thousands, there's only so much information you can realistically relay about each NPC [non-player character].

Ah, there's that word -- NPC. For a role-playing game developer, it's a professional necessity, part of the shared language of our craft. But for a creator of interactive fiction, the term is anathema. So clinical; so cold. Because if your game makes its way to players, and those players encounter NPCs and not living, breathing characters -- indeed, believable people -- then you have failed both yourself and your audience.

So what's the trick? How does a game designer turn trite, insensate NPCs into believable, exciting characters? How do we populate our games with people, and not simply voice-acted cardboard cutouts (a crime most developers have been accused of at one time or another, Bethesda included)? If only there were a silver-bullet solution. Perhaps an "NPC to character" conversion button in our construction set... Truth is, creating believable and entertaining actors is always a challenge, and each designer or writer has his or her own techniques.

For me, the process of creating convincing characters begins with an understanding of the medium I'm working in. And that's no small thing. In fact, I feel pretty strongly it's one of the single most important aspects of game development. Because no matter how well developed your skills, creating fiction for a video game poses one very distinct challenge -- you've got to accept that the whole of your writing -- characters, narrative, everything -- is simply not as important as the gameplay.

Yeah -- ouch. As a writer and designer, that's a pretty tough thing to accept. I should know: in Oblivion I ended up cutting more than eight hundred lines of specifically-written dialogue because it's what the game needed. It was a painful but necessary decision. It always is.

Ironically, when you're creating a role-playing

> Truth is, creating believable and entertaining actors is always a challenge.

game -- arguably, the most fiction-heavy video game genre of them all -- the problem intensifies. The temptation to add text is ever present. It is, after all, the easiest type of gameplay to implement. No complicated coding or messy scripting, just...words. In the case of The Elder Scrolls or Fallout, words are typed into our construction set, which then become a permanent part of the game just minutes later. Get careless, and before you know it, you've drowned the player in fiction -- books, dialogue, needless background stories, what have you. And none of that guarantees you've told the story you wanted to tell

That's where believable characters come in. With the right character, you tell your story and establish fiction instantly; there's no need for a lot of superfluous exposition. The fact that Samus is an intergalactic bounty hunter -- and a woman to boot -- is all we need to know to enjoy Metroid.

If we accept that all video game characters fall under one of three literary classifications -- prototype, archetype, and stereotype -- it's easy to see the appeal of the archetype. This is the established, easily-understandable character model. The badass space marine or seductive sorceress. The prototype, while imaginative and interesting, is too easily viewed as "weird," and that means inaccessible. The stereotype? Overused, oversimplified, and more often than naught, offensive.

And so, in Fallout 3, we use these strong archetypes to immediately capture the player's imagination. At least, that's the idea. Because when you meet little Timmy Neusbaum, we really have just one hope: that you believe, that you are convinced, he is a real person. Only then will your task have any real meaning, only then will you believe you're making a little boy cry. And if you enjoy this particular act of cruelty? Well, so much the better. ■ ■ ■

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.

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

sun	mon	tue	wed	thur	fri	sat

OFFICIAL grand theft auto IV MONTH

01

NEW RELEASES
- Devil May Cry 4 – PC
- Mr. Slime – DS
- NBA Ballers: Chosen One – PS3, 360
- Rock Band Wireless Controller – PS3, 360

NBA Ballers: Chosen One – 04/01

04

BATTLESTAR GALACTICA
Thank the gods because one of television's best shows is finally back on the frakkin' air. It's been a long dry season due to that WGA strike, but *Battlestar Galactica's* fourth season will finally be premiering tonight on the Sci-Fi channel at 10pm ET/PT. Head over to Miller's for the party.

Arcana Heart – 04/08

08

NEW RELEASES
- Arcana Heart – PS2
- Imagine: Animal Doctor – DS
- The Sims 2: Kitchen & Bath Interior Design Stuff – PC
- Supreme Commander – 360
- Storm of War: Battle of Britain – PC

Supreme Commander – 04/08

12

HOW TO PREPARE FOR GTA IV: PART 1
The day you've been waiting for is only weeks away. If it's anything like the previous GTA titles, it will rule your life. So starting today, you had best get your body and mind prepared for marathon gaming sessions. We recommend starting slow. Have a friend hide 160 packages within a 166-mile radius, then spend the week finding as many as you can.

Gran Turismo 5: Prologue – 04/15

15

NEW RELEASES
- Gran Turismo 5: Prologue – PS3
- High School Musical 2: Work It Out – DS
- Predator – PS2
- Rondo of Swords – DS
- Teenage Zombies – DS
- UEFA Euro 2008 – PS3, 360, PS2, PSP

17

T-ELOS STATUE
If your desk is covered with Kos-Mos figures (like Joe's is), and you often talk about Xenosaga at lunch (like Joe used to do before we banned him from lunch), this new T-elos statue has your name all over it. At $79.99, it's a bit pricey, but it is a beautiful sculpt of one of gaming's most under-appreciated characters.

19

HOW TO PREPARE FOR GTA IV: PART 2
Did you find all of the packages? Good. Now, let's step things up. Grab your cell phone and contact everyone in your address book. Ask them if they have missions for you. If they say no (or if they act like they don't know what you are talking about), they're in cahoots with the bad guys. Shout "Who are you working for?" until they give you a mission or hang up.
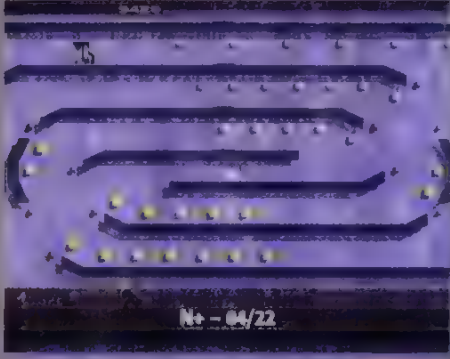
N+ – 04/22

22

NEW RELEASES
- Monster Madness: Battle for Suburbia – PS3
- N+ – DS
- Nitrobike – PS2

23

COUNTDOWN #1
DC Comics's yearlong event *Countdown to Final Crisis* clicks down to it's final conclusion this month. Issue number one comes out today. Get ready to discover all the mysteries surrounding Darkseid and Jimmy Olsen and Mary Marvel. The DCU won't be the same after this.

26

HOW TO PREPARE FOR GTA IV: PART 3
Now, it's time to get into Niko's head. The best way to accomplish this is to watch films about good-hearted immigrants trying to make it in America. *Fievel Goes West*, *Coming to America*, and *Short Circuit 2* are clearly the classics you should be looking for. With this step out of the way, you are ready. Congratulations! Reward yourself with a hot cup of coffee.

Grand Theft Auto IV – 04/29

29

NEW RELEASES
- Grand Theft Auto IV – PS3, 360

Grand Theft Auto IV – 04/29

april

TIME TO DISAPPEAR

ROME ::

Secret agents are the epitome of cool. In their worlds, they are the last line of defense against corrupt governments and terrorist attacks, single-handedly saving the day. While protecting humanity is the primary goal, their appeal isn't solely tied down in what they do — equally important is how they do it. James Bond trades barbs over a martini, Jack Bauer does whatever he has to, and when the assassins show up for Jason Bourne, he's already gone. Many video games have tried to capture the essence of these archetypes, but the mystique of espionage is not easily conveyed through high-octane gameplay alone. In addition to guns and explosions, there needs to be depth, sophistication, and dialogue. How do you create an experience that integrates all of those elements and still provides the excitement and intrigue that we expect from secret agents? According to Alpha Protocol developer Obsidian Entertainment, the solution is surprisingly simple. You make a role-playing game.

⟫⟫

ALPHA PROTOCOL

PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360 | PC
> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION/RPG
> **PUBLISHER** SEGA
> **DEVELOPER** OBSIDIAN ENTERTAINMENT
> **RELEASE** SPRING 2009

TAIPEI :: MOSCOW :: SAUDI ARABIA ::

For the team members at Obsidian, "make a role-playing game" is more of a philosophy than a statement, and one for which they have demonstrated an uncommon aptitude. Unless you follow the genre closely, there is a chance you haven't heard of this Santa Ana-based studio. However, if the company itself isn't immediately familiar, the games it has produced since its founding in 2003 will jog your memory, like Knights of the Old Republic II: The Sith Lords and Neverwinter Nights 2. Prior to forming Obsidian, the developer's leadership was a part of Black Isle Studios, sharing development and design credits on legendary role-playing titles like Fallout, Fallout 2, Planescape: Torment, and Icewind Dale. When it comes to western RPG developers, the talent at Obsidian stands at the forefront with the likes of BioWare and Bethesda.

The mere phrase "role-playing game" carries with it the history and traditions of an entire genre. There was a time when gamers couldn't even imagine an RPG without turn-based combat, magic swords, goblins, and sorcerers. Fortunately, as video games continue to evolve, so do the conceptions of how various themes and gameplay mechanics can blend into a single experience. "The RPG genre is changing," observes Obsidian CEO Feargus Urquhart. "You can't go off and make [the original] Fallout again. But I think, with Mass Effect, Fallout 3, Oblivion, and a lot of the other RPGs that are coming out, you're starting to see a movement in the RPG genre."

This shift in the landscape means that it is time to move past what RPGs have been and start shaping their future. "We knew we wanted to do something different," states team lead Chris Parker. "Something

that didn't involve a d20 system, and with more action. Something faster paced, more compelling, and that did a better job blending player skill with character skill." These concepts gave rise to Alpha Protocol, a modern day action/RPG espionage thriller.

Gamers will take control of CIA field agent Michael Thorton, a fully trained but inexperienced young operative who has his world turned upside down when a mission goes wrong. Cut off from his contacts, betrayed by his superiors, and hunted by his country, he is given no choice but to uncover the conspiracy. This is what is known as invoking the Alpha Protocol, an action normally reserved for senior agents in which they go underground and operate off the radar – often to preserve international security.

"Senior agents, which Michael is not, have secret networks of safehouses around the world that they can use in an emergency situation," Parker explains. "Michael sort of steals that from somebody else and goes rogue in the best interest of the country. He's been framed, and he is the only person in the world that knows some bad things are about to happen."

This story set-up seems perfectly suited for an edge-of-your-seat spy movie, and Alpha Protocol will certainly have the defining action components that characterize similar adventures on the silver screen. Much like BioWare's Mass Effect, Alpha Protocol's battle system will revolve around real-time combat – especially gunplay. As a secret agent, Michael won't be using any +2 maces or casting Magic Missile; he relies on advanced weaponry and high-tech gadgets to accomplish his objectives. If fact, in terms of the

fighting and shooting mechanics, Alpha Protocol has more in common with Uncharted: Drake's Fortune than with Obsidian's previous titles.

At first, this third-person, action-oriented gameplay might seem like a breach of the RPG code. However, anyone who got engrossed in Mass Effect's expansive universe knows that there is much more to role-playing than the combat. "There is running and gunning, but I want to make absolutely clear that, first and foremost, it's a role-playing game," Parker clarifies. "That's what we do. We *like* systems, complex stories, and character interactions. All that stuff. And we're not stepping away from that." You may be aiming a reticle instead of selecting spells, but once you start investing in Michael Thorton's development as an elite agent, Alpha Protocol's RPG elements clearly shine through.

At the beginning of the game, Michael is a completely competent CIA operative, but his talents lack the comic book edge that distinguishes other famous special agents. He may be able to defuse bombs and score headshots, but he won't be jumping any motorcycles out of exploding airplanes quite yet. The progression of Michael's abilities throughout the game will signify his transformation from a rookie into a nearly superhuman facsimile of, as the team calls them, "the three J.B.s" (James Bond, Jason Bourne, and Jack Bauer).

"Our goal was to take those guys, the J.B.s, and figure out how to blend them and make a game where you pick which of those guys you want to be,"

■ Close-quarters fighting can be a last resort or primary method of combat, depending on how you spend skill points
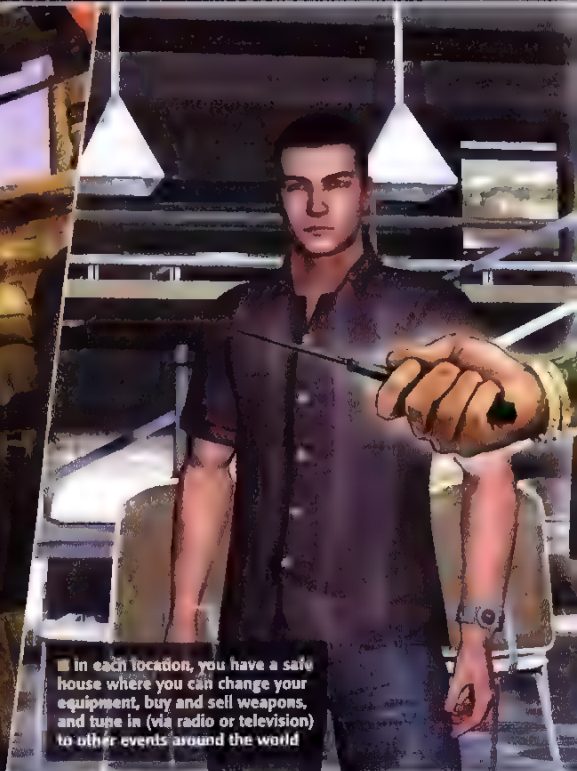
■ In each location, you have a safe house where you can change your equipment, buy and sell weapons, and tune in (via radio or television) to other events around the world
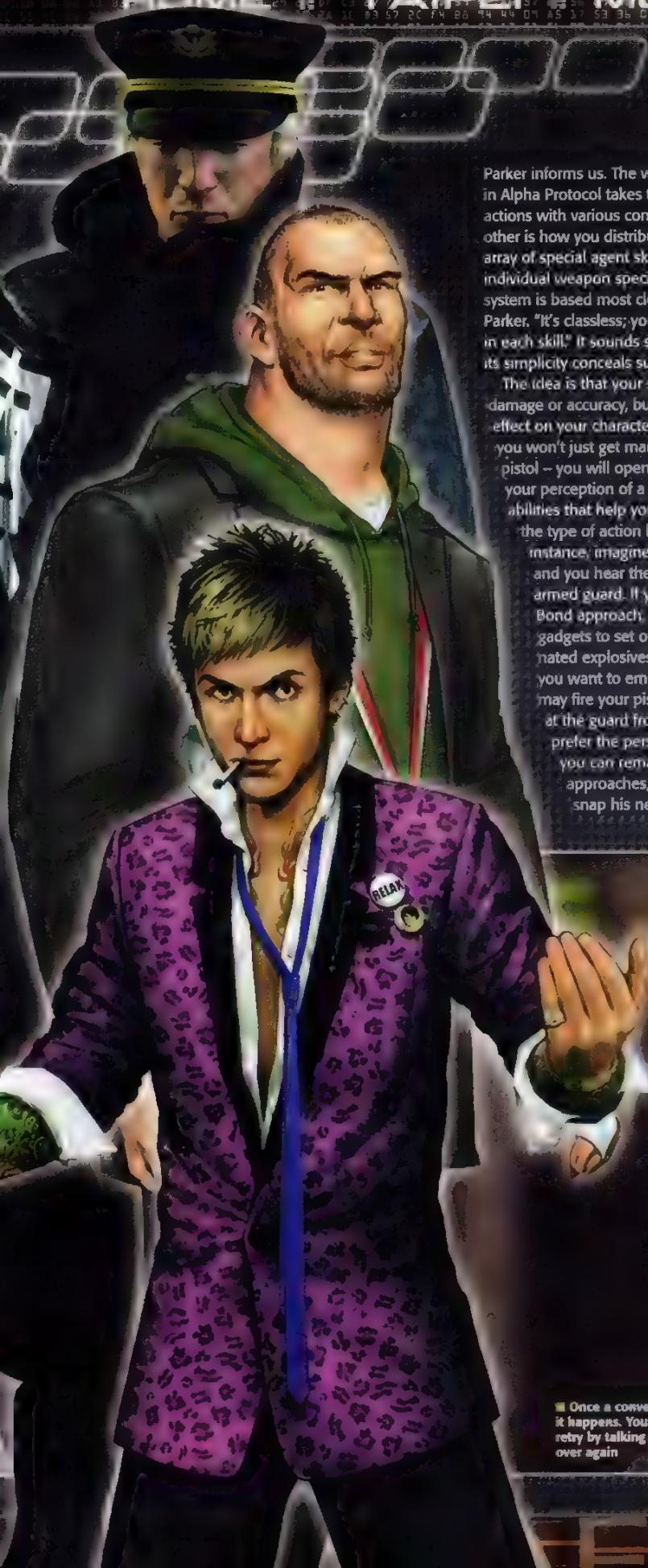
Parker informs us. The way players make that choice in Alpha Protocol takes two forms: One is your interactions with various contacts and civilians, and the other is how you distribute points across Michael's array of special agent skills. These can range from individual weapon specialization to stealth. "The system is based most closely on Fallout," reveals Parker. "It's classless; you have 10 skills, and 10 ranks in each skill." It sounds straightforward enough, but its simplicity conceals surprising depth.

The idea is that your skill points don't just increase damage or accuracy, but actually have a tangible effect on your character build. In other words, you won't just get marginally better at shooting a pistol -- you will open up new skills that change your perception of a situation. These are the abilities that help you craft Michael Thorton into the type of action hero you want him to be. For instance, imagine that Michael is in a hallway, and you hear the footsteps of an approaching armed guard. If you are going for the James Bond approach, you can use your skill with gadgets to set off a series of remote-detonated explosives to eliminate the threat. If you want to emulate Jack Bauer's tactics, you may fire your pistol (with deadly accuracy) at the guard from behind cover. Or, if you prefer the personal touch of Jason Bourne, you can remain hidden as the guard approaches, then silently step out and snap his neck as he passes.

In each of those situations, the options presented are available exclusively to agents who have invested sufficient points in the relevant skills. Even though the three J.B.s are being used here as archetypes, it is only for illustrative purposes. The player isn't limited to one of three options for character progression; just like in Fallout, you can focus on any combination of skills that suits your play style. "Whatever you want to do -- if you want to play the stealth guy, the assassin, the monk, or the run-and-gun guy -- we have that," engineering producer Darren Monahan assures us. Remember that Michael is a skilled CIA agent from the outset, so even without specific training he will be able to perform most tasks to some degree, albeit with few added advantages.

Some classic RPG systems make the transition to a modern day framework better than others. Weapon proficiency, combat skill, and even personality can be easily removed from a traditional fantasy context and integrated into a real-world, numbers-based system. Creative lead Chris Avellone jokes, "When we, as role-players, go through our normal workday, we can't help but sort of quantify the people around us and the way normal things would happen in a video game anyway." On the other hand, certain conventions of the genre, like magic, don't have a clear modern analogue. "For a long time we struggled with finding our 'spells,'" admits Parker. "That's where we decided we need special abilities for Michael that make him more superhuman."

It stands to reason that if Michael were just a really good shot, he probably couldn't measure up to the larger-than-life image of a true espionage hero. But what if he has an ability to unerringly pop out from cover and take down six assailants? If you

■ Once a conversation happens, it happens. You won't be able to retry by talking to NPCs over and over again

place enough points in pistols, he will. That particular ability, called Chain Shot, allows Michael to enter a state of heightened awareness to quickly take stock of his surroundings as events around him slow to a crawl. In this mode, you can mark the positions of nearby hostiles, and when Michael returns to reality, he jumps out and fires a precise and lethal shot at each target.

Not all abilities are actively selected. Some are just built into the other systems, like the way the game handles critical hits. Since the team wants to blend player skill with character skill, the whole shooting mechanic doesn't rest solely on you lining up headshots. "We all love RPGs and FPS titles, and we wanted to create a game that would bridge that gap," explains Monahan. The result is something a little bit like what gamers saw in Crackdown: when you aim at your target, a circle begins to constrict around the reticle. After a few seconds, when the two circles have lined up, your next shot will be a critical. The specifics vary slightly for each class

of weapon – the assault rifle, for example, can pre-load a critical without a target – but the basic method is the same, and you still need to spend skill points to learn how to use them.

Chain Shot and critical hits are just two examples of powers Michael will acquire. Each skill discipline will have abilities that players will be able to utilize on a cooldown (rather than a mana-dependant) basis, but there will not be a large number of them. The intention is to encourage players to focus their efforts, and reward them appropriately for their commitment to a specific style. "We don't want the player to get to the end of the game and have maxed out the character," Parker confesses. "If we do that, then no one has created a unique Michael Thorton, they've created the same one, but the way they got there was different."

The concept of providing every player with a unique Alpha Protocol experience
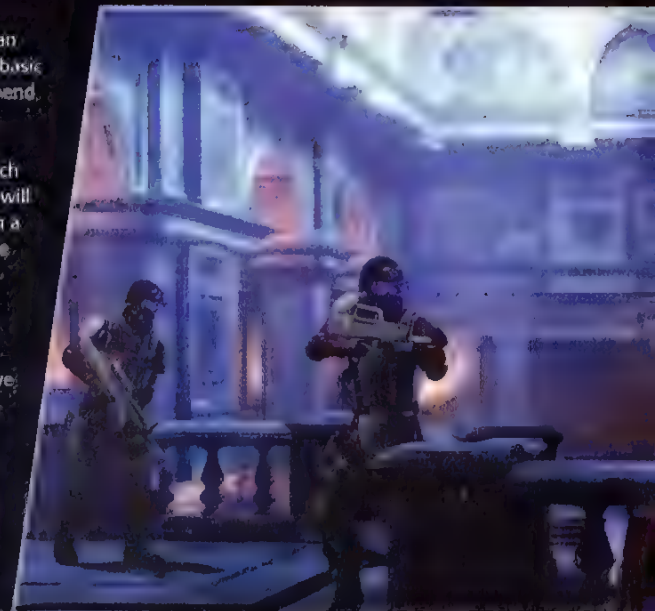
> ## There is running and gunning, but I want to make absolutely clear that, first and foremost, It's a role-playing game.
> ### —Chris Parker

■ You will be free to adjust the camera during exploration, but it switches to an over-the-shoulder view for combat

goes far beyond the combat capabilities of Michael Thorton; it pervades nearly every interaction players have with the world and the characters that populate it. Obsidian's dedication to this goal is most apparent in Alpha Protocol's dialogue system, which is shaping up to be a compelling fusion of the conversation styles found in BioWare's Mass Effect and Quantic Dream's Indigo Prophecy.

Currently known as DSS (Dialogue Stance System), the way players communicate with NPCs is a key component in establishing and reinforcing their connection with Michael and determining what kind of agent they want him to be. At the same time, it forces players to make snap decisions, retaining the cinematic flow of the conversation. This is accomplished by scrapping the idea that players need to read and select from a series of dialogue options. Instead, you will only dictate the tone of Michael's response, pressing the face button that corresponds to the onscreen option you want. One will usually be smooth or suave, another cool or professional, and the third will be brash or impatient

"There are going to be comparisons to Mass Effect, so we'll hit that right on the head," acknowledges Parker. "Our system has gone a little bit

■ Michael isn't tied down to any one area. He can have multiple active missions in different countries and travel between them

further than theirs. We break responses down into fundamental emotional states. Once you pick one of those stances, you can change it at various points in the conversation, or you can leave it on the same stance." This means that if you know you want Michael to be a Bourne-like consummate professional, you can select that stance at the outset of the dialogue and put the controller down, watching the conversation like a cutscene. If you do want to change your approach, you will have a limited amount of time to do so when the option arises; a timer bar will deplete as the last line comes to a close, ensuring that conversations actually feel like people talking to each other.

For example, we witnessed Michael's first encounter with a photojournalist named Scarlet Lake on a plane. The conversation can go one of several ways, and unlike many RPGs, the responses you choose affect more than just what your character says – they also affect how the other person responds. That may not sound novel at first, but every RPG fan out there has been disappointed to realize that an NPC was going to say the exact same thing regardless of player input. In the case of Scarlet, if you choose to adopt a curt stance, she becomes abrupt and standoffish. On the other hand, if you

KEEP TALKING

In Alpha Protocol, what your character says in conversation isn't just a bridge to the same NPC dialogue. It actually affects the course of the conversation, and will leave you with a very different impression of Michael Thorton, as well as the people he interacts with. The development team is still determining the specific points at which the player will input commands, but here are two ways your initial meeting with photojournalist (and potential love interest) Scarlet Lake can play out, depending on how Michael presents himself.

Scarlet: (Lets out a long sigh) You wouldn't believe the day I've had.

Mike: I think I've got you beat.

Scarlet: You ever been a pushy woman in the heart of Arabia?

Mike: Once. Lost a bet.

Scarlet: (Mildly amused) Cute.

Mike: (slick, affirmative) Yeah.

Scarlet: (Sarcastic) You could keep that up the entire flight I bet.

Mike: Did you already have plans?

Scarlet: I was going to invite you to slow down.

Mike: You're right – it's a long flight, plenty of time to get your name and hotel room.

Scarlet: Wow. You just come right out and say those kinds of things, huh?

Mike: When I'm not putting my foot in my mouth. By the way, I'm Mike.

Scarlet: I'm- Oh, you nearly got me there.

Mike: Yeah...

Scarlet: So, Mike, when you're not getting shot down, what do you do with yourself that would bring you out to this part of the world?

Mike: No, probably not.

Scarlet: You too, huh?

Mike: ...Sure.

Scarlet: Fella, don't take this the wrong way, but you look like you just got sucker-punched by the world.

Mike: What the hell's that supposed to mean?

Scarlet: Whoa, calm down – I was just-

Mike: (Sighs) Don't worry about it.

Scarlet: It's this country – does that to everybody.

Mike: I guess.

Scarlet: If you don't mind me asking, what do you do that would make you want to come out here?
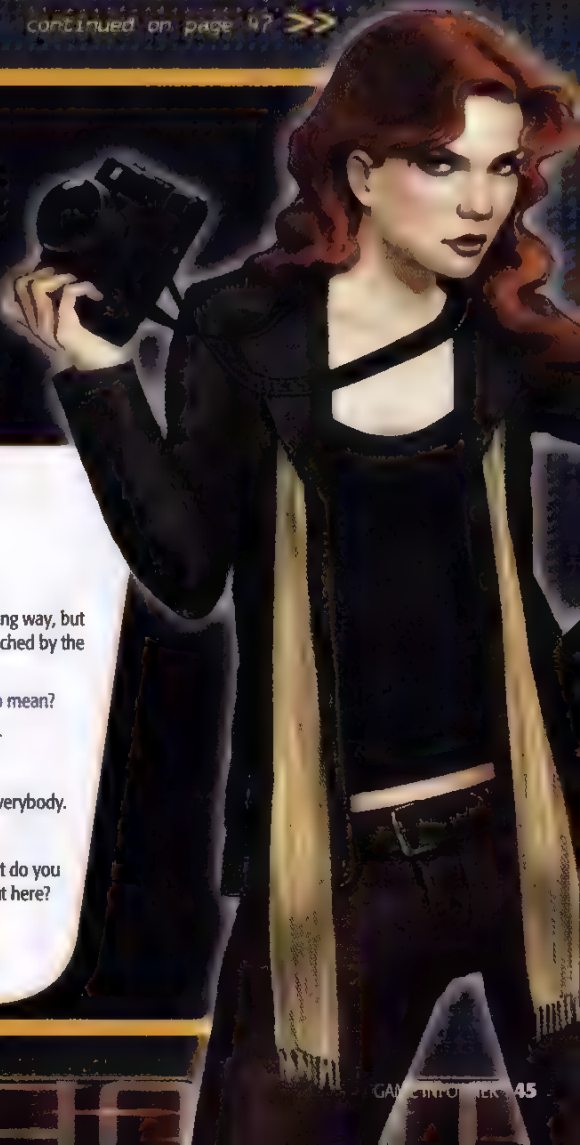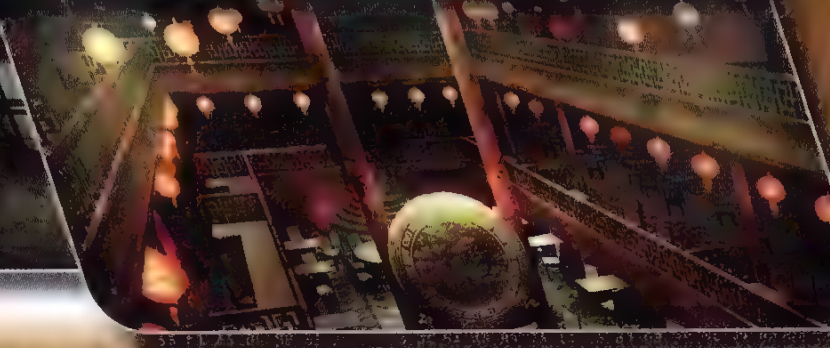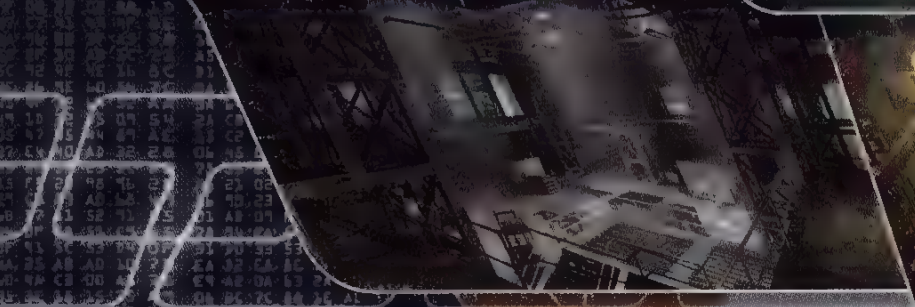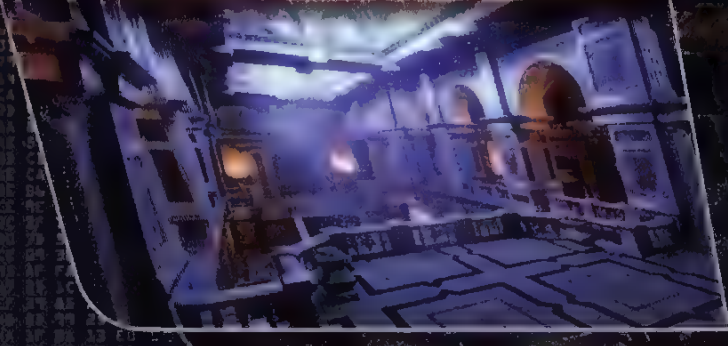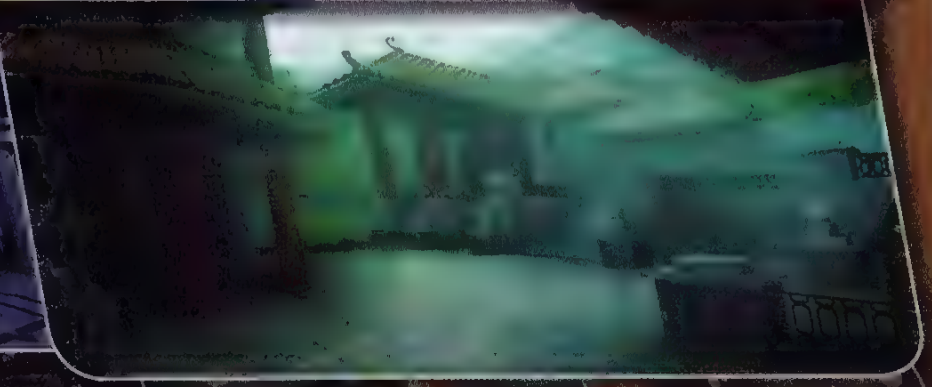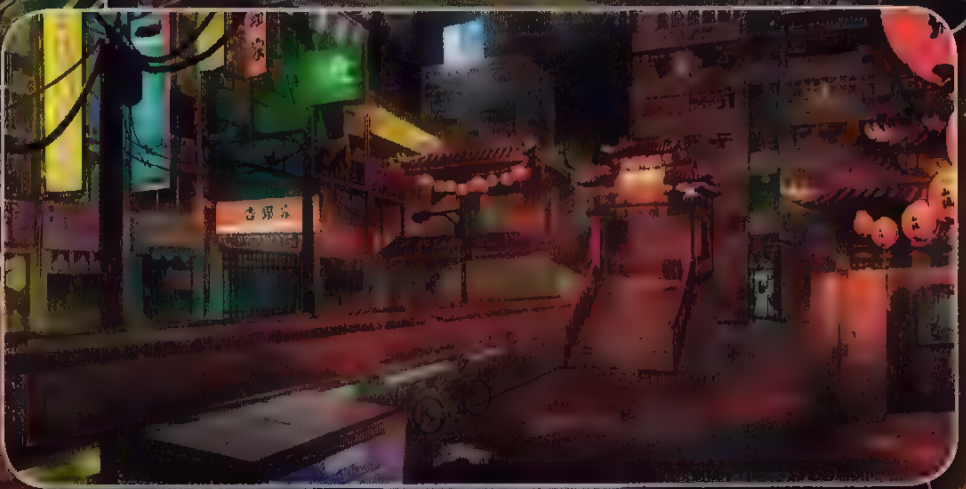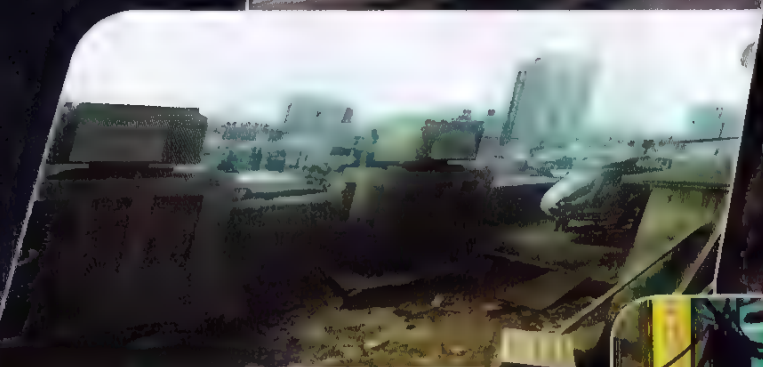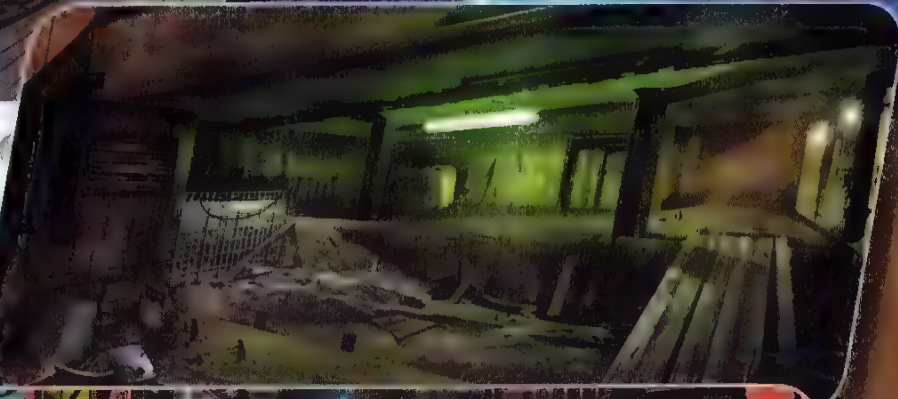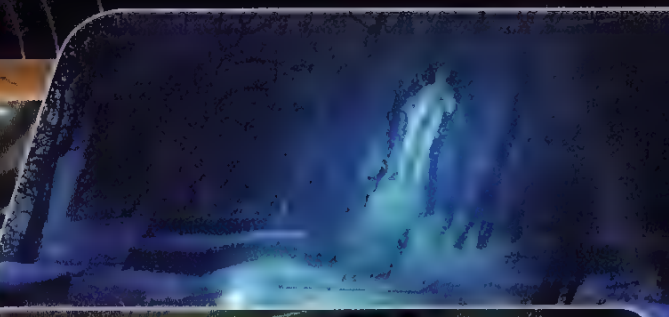
■ The teams current solution to selecting powers and weapons is similar to BioShock's. Hold one shoulder button to bring up the radial menu, and pull the trigger to activate your selection

are an unrelenting flirt, Michael comes off as a little thick – though still charming. Of course, you don't need to commit to one extreme or the other. If you mix it up, the dialogue still feels natural, and you aren't penalized for not picking one end of the spectrum. "If you play the entire game as the flirt, you'll get one kind of reward. If you're aggressive, you'll get another one," Parker promises. "But what if you do a little of everything? We're making sure you get rewarded for that, too."

It is necessary for Alpha Protocol to focus intently on the dialogue system because so much of Michael's success rests on his ability to obtain information. After the initial mission-gone-wrong, all you have is a list of names. The people on the list are scattered across the world in places like Italy, Taipei, and the Middle East. With no standard CIA support network, it's up to Michael to follow the leads, talk to his contacts, and find out how to clear his name. The way this plays out conceptually is reminiscent of Assassin's Creed (in structure, not mechanics). In each major location you visit, there is a large operation that ultimately brings Michael closer to resolving the central conflict. However, the cities also have a series of preparatory missions that feed into the primary objective. In Rome, for instance, there could be as many as eight minor

operations, though you only need to complete a few in order to advance to the main story arc. That being said, it will be to your advantage to carry out as many preparatory missions as possible since each one might impact another, not to mention giving you a critical advantage when it comes time to tackle the big one.

The sub-missions will be far from your standard RPG fare. After all, it doesn't really make sense for an elite super-spy to go kill rats in the mayor's cellar. They tie into the main objective by providing Michael with key intelligence that will impact how the final operation in the area plays out. You may find yourself breaking into an office building to steal a hard drive, or simply tracking down someone who wants to stay hidden. In one instance, you will run into a contact with crucial information. To extract what you need, you can bribe him, persuade him, or just kill him. Whichever path you choose, you go into the next mission with an edge, but it varies depending on your actions. Bribery grants access to the informant's network and highlights important tactical locations. Diplomacy yields a little less info, but also nets you a reward for comporting yourself with dignity befitting an agent. Murder gets you extra loot that you can use to buy your advantage.

"Within the context of the operation, we're trying to change and improve how the game interacts with

itself," Parker tells us. "Instead of solving problems independently, they are all tied together, as well as to the big mission at the end of the operation. Within that contained sphere, we want to improve how the game reacts to your choices, how those consequences play out."

When it comes to choice and consequence, most gamers expect to be presented with two options: good and evil. That works great for games in the Star Wars universe, which is based on the opposing sides of the Force, but the real world is never so easily categorized. As such, it's difficult to even discuss how morality figures into Alpha Protocol because the game isn't about doing the right thing or the wrong thing. As Avellone says, "We present a lot of hard choices, but it's not light side or dark side. It's about your place in the world." The team's hope is that this will drive players to consider potential repercussions, and what kind of man Michael is, before making decisions.

Often in role-playing titles, one aspect that can cloud the player's judgment is a desire for optimization. If a game provides a reward for one course of action (but not another), many gamers will re-load a save until they feel they have achieved the best payoff. This will not be necessary with Alpha Protocol. "One thing

GAME INFORMER 47

"Approaching Alpha Protocol, we really looked at what we are good at. We're good at making role-playing games."

—Feargus Urquhart

During character creation, players will be able to choose from a variety of appearances for Michael Thorton

■ Many of your special abilities will be on cooldown. "We had a mana bar for a while," admits Chris Parker. "We decided it was dumb."

LADIES IN WAITING

we find frustrating in a lot of RPGs – and in games in general – is when you feel like you missed some bit of content or did something wrong," Parker declares. The team is avoiding this roadblock by making sure players are rewarded for any course of action, not just cleaving tightly to one paradigm. Anyone who got left out by being neutral with the Force (or juggling both Paragon and Renegade in Mass Effect) will definitely appreciate this inclusive approach to decision-making.

For all of Alpha Protocol's innovation in terms of world reactivity and player choice, it is still anchored firmly in the systems and traditions of classic role-playing games. "Approaching Alpha Protocol, we really looked at what we are good at. We're good at making role-playing games," states Urquhart candidly. "But what parts of them? It's character, story, and gameplay." It wasn't until recently that a component like third-person gunplay would be considered a viable addition to the RPG genre's list of features, but the team at Obsidian is confident that the action mechanics can be integrated seamlessly with the rest of its repertoire. For the gamers that still might be skeptical of the combination, Avellone emphatically eliminates any lingering doubt. "We can pull off a great game with the following elements in it: a great character development system, compelling mission objectives, cool storyline, character interactions, and exploration that makes you feel like you're in charge of the plot. By the end of it, your pants will be off. Clothes will be scattered around the room and you will have had a great time." Hmm. that sounds like the James Bond brand of espionage to us. ■ ■ ■

PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360 | WII | PLAYSTATION 2
> **STYLE** 1 OR 2-PLAYER MUSIC (2-PLAYER VIA PLAYSTATION
NETWORK AND XBOX LIVE) > **PUBLISHER** ACTIVISION
> **DEVELOPER** NEVERSOFT > **RELEASE** JUNE

Although the series is in its relative infancy (it debuted for the first time on the PlayStation 2 in 2005), it's not too early to call Guitar Hero a legend in the music genre. Created by Harmonix and published by Activision and Red Octane, the franchise is by far the breakout story of the last three years in gaming, creating a sensation along the lines of the early '80s outbreak of "Pac-Man fever." Once confined to a niche market of Japanophiles, music games are now front and center on the pop culture landscape, garnering extensive mainstream media coverage and spawning Guitar Hero-themed nights at bars across the country. Recently, Guitar Hero made history when Activision announced that the franchise's total sales had surpassed the $1 billion mark – a feat it accomplished in only 26 months, an industry record.

The continuing success of the franchise is gratifying to Neversoft, the developer that took over the reins from creators Harmonix after it left the Activision stable to create Rock Band with MTV. Although some questioned whether Neversoft (best known for Tony Hawk's Pro Skater) could continue the series' hot streak, Guitar

THE MONSTERS OF ROCK UNITE!

How Neversoft and Aerosmith Joined Forces To Make A Historic Video Game Collaboration

Hero III has actually outsold Harmonix's Rock Band and continues to hold down positions in the top five on the sales charts.

With so much success, it's not surprising that more Guitar Hero products are coming down the pipe in the near future. What is surprising is the direction that Neversoft has taken with its next follow-up. While it's not a full-on sequel, it's a unique title that's the product of an unprecedented partnership Neversoft has cultivated with some classic rock icons: Boston's hard rock legends Aerosmith.

Back In the Saddle

Coming out of the rough and tumble bar scene of early '70s Boston, Aerosmith has weathered the ups and downs of the music business for more than 30 years, earning them a rare multi-generational

appeal enjoyed by only a select few groups in history. Formed in 1970 by guitarist Joe Perry and bassist Tom Hamilton, the band (fronted by rubber-lipped singer Steven Tyler) quickly became one of the most popular hard rock bands on the east coast. After being signed to Columbia Records (their label to this day), the band vaulted from the local stage to international stardom with such classic albums as Toys in the Attic and Rocks.

Perhaps predictably, Aerosmith ended the '70s in shambles, wrecked on the rocks of drugs and alcohol – it was not for nothing Perry and Tyler earned the nickname "The Toxic Twins." After a couple of ill-fated records cut after the departure of Perry and fellow guitarist Brad Whitford, and a failed 1985 record called Done With Mirrors, Aerosmith looked to be yet another casualty of the rock n' roll lifestyle. Then in 1986 something rather unpredictable happened – Run-DMC, then the world's most dominant rap group, hit the charts and MTV with an Aerosmith-assisted cover of the band's hit "Walk This Way."

Suddenly Aerosmith was vaulted back into the spotlight, quickly following the

Run-DMC hit with Permanent Vacation, a multi-platinum smash powered by hits like "Dude (Looks Like A Lady)" and "Rag Doll." What followed was a string of hit albums and singles, culminated with "I Don't Want To Miss a Thing" from the Armageddon soundtrack in 1998 and an iconic Super Bowl halftime appearance in 2001. Today, the band once considered '70s burnouts holds the record for the most gold and platinum sales awards by an American group.

Aerosmith's decades-long heritage proved to be the right answer for Neversoft, which was looking for creative ways to do a follow-up to Guitar Hero III – something much deeper than Guitar Hero: Rocks the '80s, a painfully thin Guitar Hero 2 expansion that Harmonix delivered to fill a remaining contractual obligation with Activision and Red Octane. Comments lead designer Alan Flores, "We didn't want to take Guitar Hero III and re-skin it and throw some new songs in there."

After some internal discussion and feedback from some Guitar Hero fans, the idea to focus the project on a single artist emerged. One of the names that kept popping up in these brainstorming

sessions was Aerosmith – a group that proved to be high on the list of fans as well. With its years of history and literally dozens of hits, the band seemed an ideal fit for Guitar Hero. Thankfully, the band itself – especially guitarist Joe Perry – had long been admirers of the franchise, and had even lobbied to get Aerosmith songs included in Guitar Hero II and III.

"I was walking through the living room and one of my sons was playing the first Guitar Hero, " recalls Perry. "He had the guitar controller, and the first thing I thought was, 'I wonder if we're on there?' We weren't. From then on, I've been on the warpath, getting hooked up with these guys because it's such a cool thing. It's awesome. The kids are getting to play air guitar with some great rock n' roll and it doesn't have to be Top 40 music. It's just good guitar rock. It all flashed in front of me when he was playing it. Then I called my manager and said, 'We've got to get involved with this; this is the future.' As time went on, we built a relationship with the guys at Activision."

For Tom Hamilton, a longtime fan of older PC flight-sim games like Air Warrior, the game represents a new paradigm for

enjoying music. "It's a product of a new way of listening to and participating in music. More and more, listening to music has the potential to be attached to visuals. Which is really cool, but you also have the factor that people are concentrating on the music, because they have to interact with it to earn points. It's a much deeper way of interacting with the music you love. You're getting into the rhythm of a song and that's such a huge part of it."

Dream On

After some extended talks with Neversoft, the idea was hit upon to craft the game as a virtual trip through Aerosmith's history as a band. "We have such a big catalogue and such a long story as a band, so it made sense to do something that was a little different than just putting songs up there. They had already done that with three games," recalls Perry. "So, this whole chronology of the band started to develop as an idea and a format."

The result is a title that attempts to sum up the entire 30-plus years of Aerosmith's career. The levels are all taken from the band's rise to stardom, starting out with the very first gig they ever played, Nipmuc Regional High School in Massachusetts. Another venue is a recreation (done with the help of the original owners) of Max's Kansas City, a famous hangout of such notables as Andy Warhol and the Velvet Underground, and the place

where industry legend Clive Davis signed Aerosmith to its first record contract.

Although Activision wouldn't officially confirm, there will also be levels based on the Orpheum Theater in Boston (where the band reformed backstage in 1984) and the "Big Game," a NFL license-free version of the 2001 Super Bowl halftime show. To add even more appeal to hardcore Aerosmith fans, many of the stage sets are tributes to classic album covers. The Max's Kansas City set is modeled after the cover art for *Toys in the Attic*. To add the almost documentary level of detail, the band also conducted numerous interviews that will help place each level in the context of their career, setting the stage for the next set of songs. "That kind of relationship was really awesome," remarks Alan Flores. "Personally, I found it great. I watch VH1 *Behind the Music*, and I love learning about the history and try to put all that in the game. It's a good way to pay tribute to the band."

Of course the most important part of any Guitar Hero game is the song list, and the band and Neversoft worked together to create the a tracklist that would encapsulate the band's career. Here again, a spirit of cooperation reigned.

"We worked pretty close together on just about everything. We basically picked the set list of songs we were going to use that

■ You'll be able to unlock authentic Aerosmith stage outfits

■ Steven Tyler did both traditional and facial motion capture

This level is based on the legendary NYC nightclub Max's Kansas City and features a stage set based on the cover of *Toys in the Attic*

For the opening acts, you'll play as GH III characters, although there will now be five onstage at once

made sense for the chronology of the band and as far as having different tempos. They had ideas about certain things and there were certain technical limitations that we weren't aware of," comments Joe Perry.

"Well, I kind of expected 'Sweet Emotion' would be in there, which I co-wrote," said Hamilton. "But the song that I was really pleased that it made it through the process was 'Kings and Queens.' When we started doing the list I suggested it and remember thinking, 'Well, they may not use this song because it's long.' But once we gave them all our input, they sent back their list and it was on there. So, I was pretty psyched about that."

The band was so committed to getting the proper song selection that, when it was discovered that some of the multi-track masters (which are essential to creating Guitar Hero tracks) to early hits "Movin' Out" and "Make It" were missing, they entered the studio and cut brand new versions.

Although we don't know the final tally, the list so far is impressive: "Movin' Out", "Make It", "Sweet Emotion", "Draw the Line", "Uncle Salty", "No Surprize", and "Kings and Queens." In addition, the levels are rounded out by a selection of other groups whose careers intersected with Aerosmith's – around a dozen in all. So far, we've seen tracks by Mott the Hoople ("All the Young Dudes"), The Kinks ("All Day and All of the Night"), Joan Jett ("I Hate Myself

Having five band members onstage meant having to re-do the camera system

■ Although Tyler's sessions were the most involved, all the band members did extensive mo-cap work

for Loving You"), and Cheap Trick ("Dream Police"). Here again, it was important not only to have a good song list, but one that resonated with the band. "Cheap Trick are a great band and really good friends of ours," states Perry. "That's where the collaboration came in, because a lot of the guys [at Neversoft] are gamers and don't know all the minutia about Aerosmith. That's where we've had to come in and help out...we're hoping [players] will learn a little bit about what the band went through to get where we are."

These complementary songs are woven into the game by using the familiar Guitar Hero III characters as opening bands that perform two non-Aerosmith songs to get the crowd warmed up. Then, after a dramatic entrance, Aerosmith comes in to perform two songs and an encore. In this way, the game evokes many of the real-life tour lineups the band experienced as both headliner and opener.

The Other Side

Another thing that was important to both Neversoft and the band was truly capturing the live Aerosmith experience. To do this, the developers quickly realized that the animation and camera systems from Guitar Hero III would have to be dramatically reinvented. "Everything in here – venues, characters, five people on stage – is new," observes producer Chris Parise. "With new venues and five characters on stage you have to re-do all the cameras."

It was clear that the band's dynamic

stage show was going to require some serious animation and collision detection work, especially considering Perry and Tyler's penchant for moves that require their characters onscreen to interact, like their habit of singing "Draw the Line" into the same mic with Tyler's arm around Perry. To make things as realistic as possible, Neversoft did extensive motion capture sessions with each member of the band, a decision that gave them a little more than they bargained for – especially in the case of singer Tyler.

While Perry and the rest of the band did their mo-cap in Boston, giving the developers sets of moves and animations to construct performances from, Tyler – a notorious perfectionist – was intent on capturing entire performances, doing motion capture on both his body and facial expressions.

"We had Steven Tyler here for what seemed like forever, about four weeks," recalls Parise. "When we started doing this, we thought it would be a lot more realistic if we had him actually perform the songs. He has a routine he does every night live, so what you see here is him performing all the songs as he would in the concert."

Tyler also insists on singing each take – he apparently never lip-synchs, even during video shoots. This limited the session to about four hours a day before his voice would begin to fade. From demanding more scarves on his virtual microphone stand to suddenly breaking into "Dream On" right in the middle of a discussion, the Steven Tyler experience is definitely everything you would expect from one of rock's most flamboyant frontmen. "There's some stuff we just can't tell you," reveals Neversoft cofounder Joel Jewett. "You know how

■ The band will play guitars from their personal collection onstage
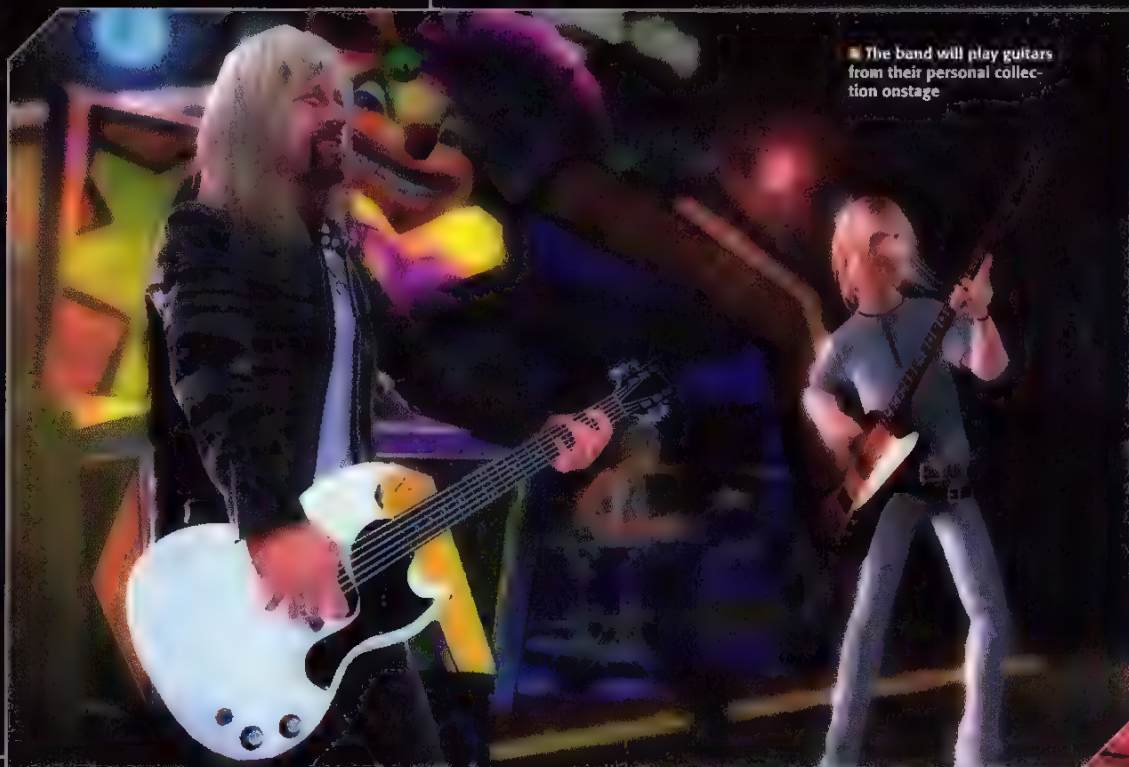
you walk through life, and if you're like me, you edit out about 97 percent of the s— you think? Steven Tyler doesn't edit anything – it just comes out of his mouth. And you're like, 'Woah, you thought that and you said it.'"

Still the singer's unbounded enthusiasm was a huge positive for the project. Or, as Alan Flores puts it, "a good pain in the ass."

Chris Parise praises the entire band's work ethic. "They all wanted to make sure we captured the essence of Aerosmith, like 'Let's do it again, I can do it better next time.' It was really great to work with all those guys. Some of Steven's input has made this game a lot better."

They've also continued to make real technical improvements. "It was good, because he pushed us," recalls producer Jody Coglianese. "We didn't have the technology to do all the cameras that way, or we didn't have the cameras pointing down at certain angles. But he was like, 'No, you've got to have this move – we always have this move at every show!' So we'd go back and figure out how to do it." They are also tweaking Guitar Hero III's most controversial feature – the boss battles. The battles will still be present, but Alan Flores is aware of the existing problems. "I heard all the complaints about the boss battles," he said. "We want to make them perfect, as good as possible. It's hard when you do something new and change something that's a tried-and-true formula. People are going to say, 'What the hell?'"
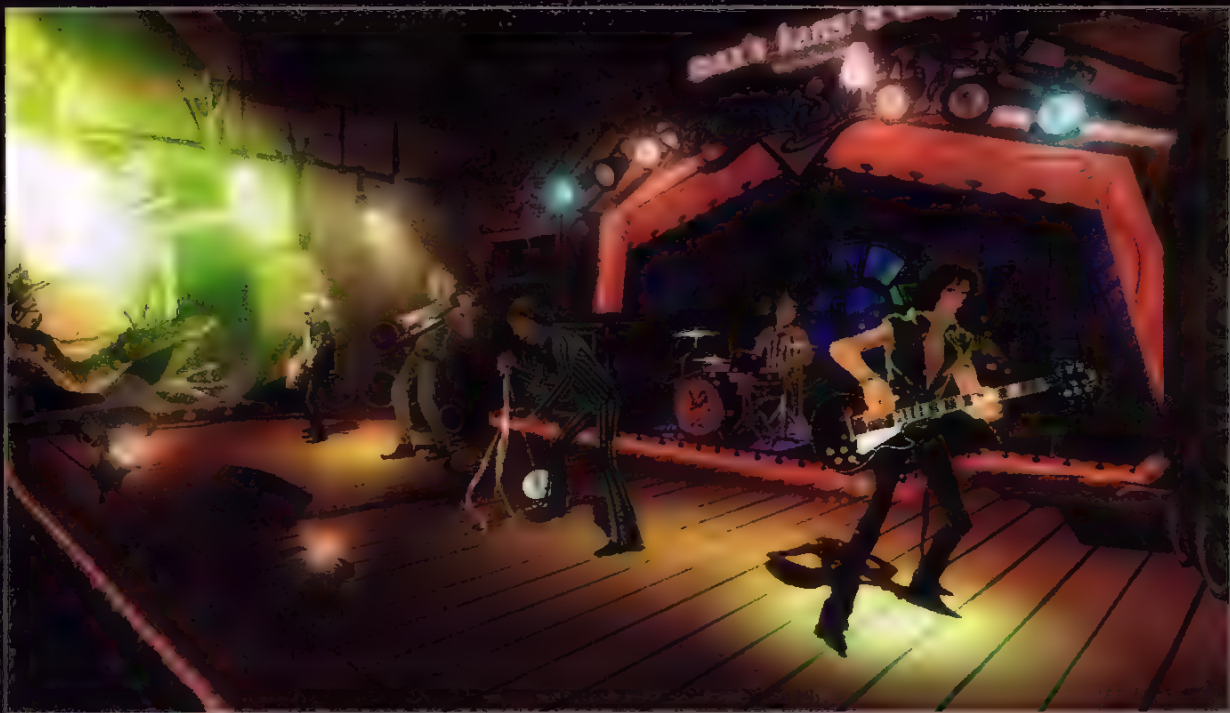
Draw The Line

Based on what we've seen so far, Guitar Hero: Aerosmith looks to be just what the doctor ordered: another quick dose of axe-shredding goodness that features a little more depth and sense of rock history than the haphazard selection of random tunes that made Guitar Hero: Rocks the 80s feel so half-hearted.

The team at Neversoft clearly hopes that this kind of artist-centered, in-depth primer can be a new model for the still evolving music genre. "For me, it was an amazing process to bring a whole lot of creative people involved in making video games together with creative people from [the music] industry," comments Joel Jewett. "Both these industries are huge, and to bring them together, it's like 'This is some heavy s— – check this out.'"

For Aerosmith's part, they hope the game can help to both summarize where the band has been in the past as well as introduce it to yet another generation of rock fans. The ironic thing is that there will probably be more people exposed to our music playing this game than listening to the last couple of records we've put out," predicts Tom Hamilton.

As the record industry continues its rapid decline, even established bands like Aerosmith are looking for new ways to reach their audience. Joe Perry, a Guitar Hero supporter since day one, sees a world of possibilities in the world of gaming and downloadable content.

"That's one of the things I thought about when I first saw the game being played," Perry observes. "As I've watched the record business dissolve and eat itself, I wonder how fans are going to get their music. There's no change in the fact that kids want to play rock n' roll; there's plenty of great new bands playing. The fans want to hear this music. Plus, they're getting turned onto the older stuff, the so-called 'classic' stuff that in the last five years has really had a comeback, due in great part to video games.... As we've been talking about different ideas about how to get music out there, the possibility of people being able to download more songs for the game is an obvious way for fans to get new music. It makes a lot of sense. It's a new way for the business to rebuild itself. We're talking about it all the time – Activision is becoming one of the new record companies. I'm sure we'll be putting out new songs for this game as time goes on."

Who knows, maybe this old dog can still teach the music industry a few new tricks? ■ ■ ■

■ The game delivers on a very lifelike Aerosmith in concert experience

THE NEW REGIME

If you are a faithful reader of this publication, you are probably expecting me to begin by talking about my overwhelming "awesomeness" or pervasive "radicalocity." However, I am (thankfully) not Garnadan, and that kind of puerile bravado left when I usurped his position as Editor-in-Chief. Let me tell you something about the new Game Infarcer: We tell it like it is. Other publications, and I won't name names here (just go ahead and assume it's everyone else), hates games and wants to deceive you; they intentionally tell it like it *isn't*. Not us! If we think a game sucks, we'll say so – even it doesn't even come out for a year or more. Some companies don't like the fact that we judge their games that far in advance, but like-it-is-telling isn't an easy job. Do you love us for our honesty? I hope you do. Please, please keep buying our magazine.

**DarthClark,
Editor-in-Chief**

DarthClark

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connect word fight

IS ITAGAKI THE GREATEST?
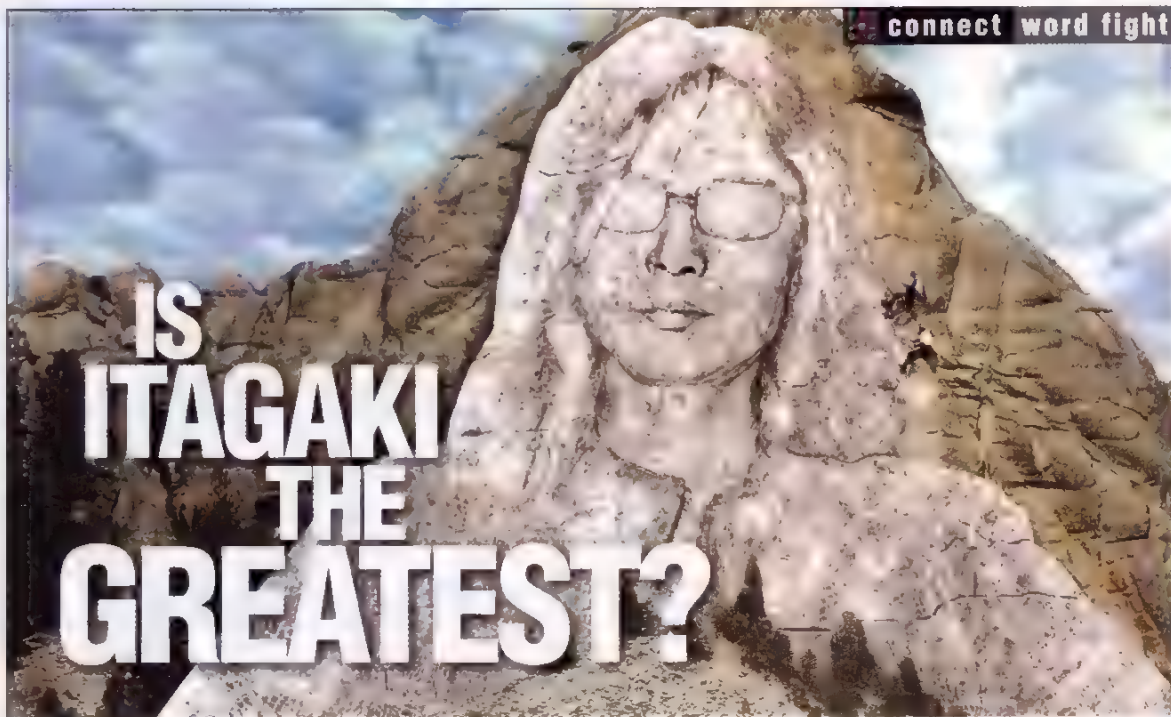
Whether you absolutely adore his games or just love them, you can't deny that Team Ninja's Tomonobu Itagaki is an excellent game designer, and certainly the greatest one alive today. But is he the greatest of all time – past, present, and future? We've asked his most vocal supporters to discuss his place among the elite of game gurus.

PRO

IMAGINE THAT YOU WERE to get the best game developers in the world and line them up from best to worst. Would you see Itagaki at the front of that line? No, you would not. Not because he isn't the greatest (he is), but because his skill is so far ahead of his "peers" that, in order to accurately place him, he would have to be standing out of sight beyond the horizon. In fact, he would not even be standing. He would be a shining star on the horizon, burning radiant and alone in the darkness of space.—**ITAGAKI**

PRO

MY OPPONENT, WHILE COR-RECT, neglects to mention what I consider to be the most remarkable aspects of Itagaki's unparalleled brilliance. His innovative and cutting-edge strategies, like using sexuality and violence to sell his products, are years ahead of their time. Furthermore, as a generous favor to the community, he periodically re-releases these products to give gamers a brief respite from the unplayable tripe that otherwise floods the market. If you believe that these are not the actions of the greatest mind of all time, go play some [chuckle] Tekken. You deserve it.—**ITAGAKI**

1005 8679 8302 7739 >> *mii@wii.com*

Handle: The Friend Code Gamer **Expertise:** Anything Waggly **Interests:** Wii Puns (Wii-kly, Wiimote – Hilarious!), Re-Buying Games I Beat 15 Years Ago, Anything With Mario, Substituting The Word "Innovative" For "Fun" **Dislikes:** Online Multiplayer, Downloading, Convenience, Actual Games **Current Favorite Games:** Wii Sports (My Only Favorite Game For 15 Straight Months!)

Milt >> *staring@thewindow.com*

Handle: The Golden Gamer **Expertise:** Get Off My Goddang Lawn! **Interests:** Andy Rooney, *Murder, She Wrote*, My Hoveround, Hawaiian Shirts, Golf **Dislikes:** Gas Prices, Damn Hippies, Enlarged Prostates **Current Favorite Games:** Canasta, Bridge, Tiddlywinks, Wii Play

Target Male >> *currenttrend@populardomain.com*

Handle: The Corporate Construct Gamer **Expertise:** Whatever You Prefer **Interests:** Your Favorite Show, Your Favorite Band, Your Girlfriend **Dislikes:** Parents and/or Bosses, Common Problems Among 18-35 Year Old Males, Conformist Activities **Current Favorite Games:** The NPD Top 20, A Few Obscure Japanese Titles For Good Measure

Kane & Lynch >> *badbadmen@eidos.com*

Handle: The F-Bombers **Expertise:** Games Starting With "Kane & Lynch" **Interests:** Disjointed Game Storylines, Bad AI, Rogaine, Lowered Expectations, Eidos **Dislikes:** Accurate Reviews, Lynch (Kane Only), Kane (Lynch Only) **Current Favorite Games:** Kane & Lynch: Dead Men

P A R O D Y

NASA COMES CLOSER TO RUNNING CRYSIS AT MAXIMUM SETTINGS

Scientists at NASA's John F. Kennedy Space Center have revealed that they are extremely close to accomplishing what experts once thought impossible: running EA's PC shooter Crysis at maximum settings. Using a custom built Cray XT3 Opteron supercomputer, NASA engineers, in partnership with a team of students at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, claim to have actually run the game at full capacity for more than 10 minutes before a fatal system crash.

"It's been hard," comments NASA project lead James Ferguson, "but challenges like this are why we do what we do. Hearing everyone applaud in the control room when we got the first level up and running was a feeling I'll never forget. This has been a real journey for the whole team...even a few months ago we weren't able to put the sliders up past half before it crippled the system. Now, we're playing for five, ten minutes at a time at full resolution with no demonstrative frame lag."

Although progress has been good, time is of the essence, as recent rumors have speculated that a rival team in China will be attempting a full run-through of the game within the next month. Still, Ferguson remains confident. "I believe in America's know-how, and I guarantee we'll be the first country on Earth to run Crysis. Now if you'll excuse me I have to go sign off on a shipment of Red Bull. It's gonna be a late night."
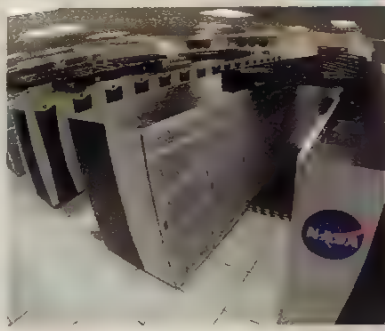
EA SIGNS EXCLUSIVITY DEAL FOR ALL SPORTS

We bet you've never heard of the United States Equestrian Federation, but you soon will – to the tune of $60. In a move that dealt a major blow to competing publishers, EA Sports has signed long-term exclusivity deals with every major and minor sport in the world. Included in the massive move toward locking down the sports market are the Professional Bowlers Association, the World Curling Federation, the Tri-County Archery League of Southeastern Massachusetts, and even extreme hopscotch.

EA also announced that it signed amateur spitball phenom Julian O'Neal to be on the cover of Spitball Live 09. The aggressive move gained momentum when 2K Sports expressed interest in making a Wii minigame collection that included many playground games. Not to be outdone, EA used its considerable financial muscle to outbid 2K for the rights for each sport by millions of dollars. "I'd like to see them try and put out that game now," said EA Sports mogul Peter Moore. "The branding power of Julian O'Neal is universally recognized, as his Q rating of 2 clearly indicates. And no one wants to play a generic spitball game."

MICROSOFT GAME STUDIOS LEAVES MICROSOFT

Following the lead of former Xbox partners Bungie, Bizarre Creations, and BioWare, Microsoft Game Studios has left its parent company Microsoft. In a press release issued this week, studio head Shane Kim said, "We didn't even know this was possible, but we're glad it happened. That division just made some terrible decisions – Vampire Rain? LOL. It's a great time to branch out and make a name for ourselves without being bogged down by crap like Fuzion Frenzy."

This leaves Microsoft with one in-house developer, Rare. "We're not too worried about this," said a Microsoft executive who wished to remain anonymous, "this sort of thing happens all the time. There is no way that Rare can make another flop. Third time's a charm, right? Or is it the fourth? And anyone who thinks this was a bad move on our part obviously hasn't seen Blinx 3." Microsoft Game Studios plans to change their name to Free At Last Productions.

DATA FILE

SILICON KNIGHTS SUES SELF

Too Human developer Silicon Knights has filed suit against Silicon Knights for breach of contract, fraud, and "delaying the s*** out of all of our games." An anonymous staffer recalls: "We were all debating whether we were going in the right direction with Baldur's belt buckle and Denis just snapped." After ripping out a chunk of his own hair, company president Denis Dyack reportedly shouted, "This is just too big for us to figure out alone! It's time to let the courts decide."

DUDE WILL PROBABLY BE IN PARTY

Earlier this month in a small village populated by nearly identical citizens, adventurers encountered the town's only conspicuous inhabitant. The man had a distinct appearance and name (Zul'ran Fireheart), which caused other party members to "basically guarantee" that he would join the group in the next few hours – probably in the middle of a pivotal boss fight. When asked to comment, a nearby townsperson repeatedly responded: "The entrance to the Northern Cave is blocked by thick ice. You'll need the FIRE ROD."

HOW ARE YOU USING YOUR PS3?

Talledega Nights **12%**	Resistance **7.9 – 8%**	All Other Games **.006%**
Folding@Home **20%**		System Update **60%**
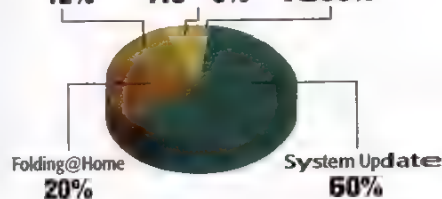
Mario Key Party

> **STYLE** 1 TO 20-PLAYER ACTION > **PUBLISHER** ADAM & EVE
> **DEVELOPER** FURRY PRODUCTIONS > **RELEASE** PREMATURE

MUSHROOM SWAPPIN'
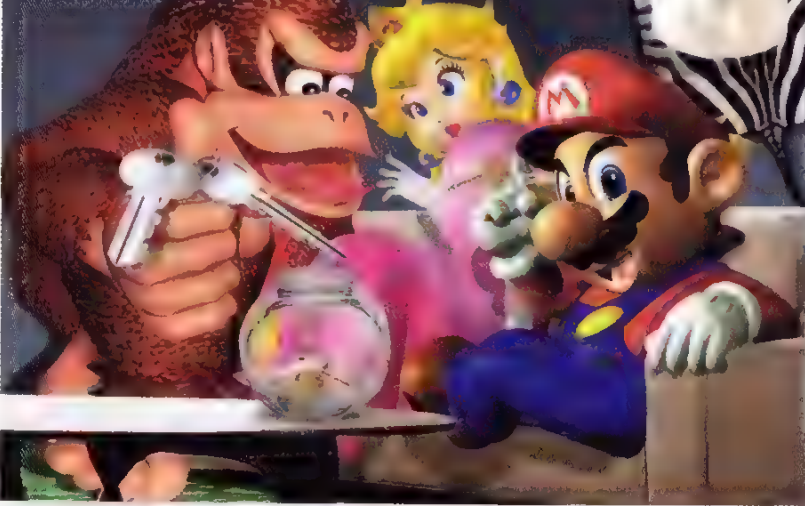
We all know that the Mario gang has some of the wildest parties in the industry, but Key Party takes the gang into some saucy new territory. Hey, we all know things can get a little boring in a long-term relationship (Toad and Yoshi have been domestic partners since '92), so why not spice things up with some gameplay that puts a new spin on the term "multiplayer?" Using the Wii remote to select a key from the fishbowl, you'll find out who you'll be hooking up with for the evening. From there, let's just say things get interesting, and feature some motion control moves we never thought we'd see.

From Princess Peach to Kirby, the whole crew takes it to the next level in this one, and we even find out that some Nintendo heroes we thought we knew had some definite skeletons in their closet. Hey, has anyone seen Link and Wario? Wonder where they went off to…

Call of Duty 5

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER REHASH > **PUBLISHER** ACTIVISION
> **DEVELOPER** NOT THE AWESOME ONE > **RELEASE** C.O.D. DAY

ODDS AND EVENS

Call of Duty 4 was one of the most popular titles of 2007, so it was only a matter of time before Activision decided to leverage that success. The publisher has already hired Treyarch, the go-to studio for fake Call of Duty games, to begin work on Call of Duty 5. "We are extremely excited to have access to the Modern Warfare engine and assets," says Treyarch's Michael Allen, barely stifling laughter. "You have no idea how much it will help people believe this is a real Call of Duty game."

Activision is adamant in its claims that the next Call of Duty be a true addition to the franchise. "We learned a lot from publishing Big Red One," says producer Craig Jonas. "We might as well have called it 'Big Red Flag' for all of the sales it cost us. By slapping a '3' on there, players had to get a couple stages in before they realized something was wrong. By then it was too late, they already paid for it!" Jonas then proceeded to flex his bicep and make a "ka-ching" sound effect.

Following the massive success of Rock Band, other publishers are looking for a piece of the music game action. Enter Boy Band, a game destined to be the hit with the pre-pubescent set. Finally, you'll have the chance to mime your way to stardom with Boy Band's impressive tracklist, which includes everything from current stars Jonas Brothers to classics like N-Sync, Backstreet Boys, New Kids on the Block, and Menudo. The game's patented "RockFace" technology uses the EyeToy 2 to accurately track how accurately you're lip-synching, as well as grade your dancing.

The character create mode is huge, allowing you to craft such Boy Band archetypes as "The Young Cute One," "The Dangerous One Who Likes Rap And Wears Baseball Hats At Odd Angles," "The Guy Who's Really 35," "The Dude Who Wears Weird Headbands To Hide His Hairline," and "The One Who Actually Has Some Talent." Once you form your group, you'll take your Boy Band from county fair talent shows to mall tours to basketball arenas, and all the way back down to bankruptcy and rehab.

PLAYSTATION 3

Boyband

> **STYLE** 1-WAY PLAYER HYSTERIA
> **PUBLISHER** TRI GAMES
> **DEVELOPER** CREEPY OLD DUDE WHO WEARS TOO MANY RINGS
> **RELEASE** PUBERTY

MORE
KIDS
ON THE
BLOCK

---

connect gear

PORTAL-POTTIES

Before we were able to distort the fabric of space, there were designated "rest rooms" set aside to accommodate your biological needs. They seem laughably obsolete with the advent of Aperture Science's portal technology. Whether you are at a sporting event or a high-society dinner, this device means you will never need to suffer the embarrassment of excusing yourself to take a leak. Just be careful where you shoot the exit portal. Remember: Speedy thing goes in, speedy thing comes out. **Priceless · www.bendspace.wiz**

re-branding

MICROSOFT DISC CALIBRATOR

Did you know that, right now, your Xbox 360 game discs could be dangerously uncalibrated? After hours of ceaseless spinning, a disc's internal balance matrix can degrade, adversely affecting performance. This revolutionary Xbox 360 peripheral will restore disc equilibrium and optimize your experience. You will definitely notice the difference. Supplies are limited, so buy yours today!
$129.99 · www.microsoft.com/hd-dvd

Any resemblance to the Xbox 360 HD-DVD player is strictly coincidental

P A R O D Y
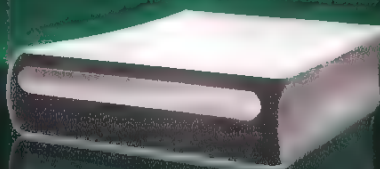
Wii

WiiNap

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER SLEEPY TIME > **PUBLISHER** NINTENDO > **DEVELOPER** UNISOM > **RELEASE** AROUND 3 IN THE AFTERNOON > **ESRB** E FOR ELDERLY

NEW-FANGLED

What?! It looks like a pillow! I already told you I don't need no pillows......Boy, I remember when we used to pick the rhubarb in the summer, my grammy made the most delicious pies. Game? Well, I do play a mean hand of pinochle, if I do say so myself. Video? What!? This isn't one of those sex videos you kids Google on your iPods like that Britney Spears girl, is it? I tell ya, this country's been going downhill since the damn Beatles started burning their bras all over the damn place. Nap? Well, to tell you the truth, I could use a little shut-eye, don't have as much pep as I used to...Hey, boy howdy, that is comfortable...So I'm supposed to watch that fat guy with the moustache onscreen? Okay.......zzzzzzzzzzzz.....WHAT? [mumble mumble]....zzzzzzzzzzzzz.....pumpernickel...... . zzzzzzzzzzzz.—**MILT**

BOTTOM LINE — One Penny

> **Concept:** What the heck is this contraption?

> **Graphics:** Listen. I don't want no goddang fancy pillow, my old one is just fine!

> **Sound:** What?! What was that? We nap? I ain't nappin' with you, sicko!

> **Playability:** Where do you plug this thing in? Wireless – what? We used to listen to Ike on the wireless, best damn president we ever had!

> **Entertainment:** Listen, get the hell off my porch before I call the cops!

> **Replay Value:** Sandy Koufax, best damn pitcher I ever saw

Second Opinion 1-10

Research has shown that games that reach out to a casual audience, though substantially growing the overall market, will alienate 80 percent of participants who play more than 3-5 hours of games per week. For this reason, I dislike the title in question. Focus tests prove that young men, like myself, prefer at least a 68 percent saturation index of dinosaurs, babes, and lightsabers. Make games like that for me, and foist this off on less important demographics.—**TARGET MALE**

PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360 | PC

Kane & Lynch: Dead Men

> **STYLE** DO NOT PLAY THIS WITH LYNCH > **PUBLISHER** EIDOS > **DEVELOPER** IO INTERACTIVE > **RELEASE** WHILE I WAS ON THE LAM > **ESRB** E FOR EXCELLENT

COMPLETELY FLAWLESS

First off, let me go on record as saying that I'm glad this game only has split-screen co-op, because it puts my frenemy Lynch right within choking distance (see above). Aside from shooting me every chance he got, this !#*$*# spent the whole game blasting civilians, stealing all the best guns, and ordering our crew to march into suicidal firefights. There are only so many times I can buy the blackout excuse, pal.

Also, I know every adaptation has to be edited somewhat, but I was shocked at the amount of stuff left on the cutting room floor. Remember the nightclub level? We totally partied with those hot Japanese chicks before we shot the place up. And what happened to the touching moment where I helped Jenny practice for her driver's license exam on that huge truck that tried to run her over?—**KANE**

BOTTOM LINE — 10

> **Concept:** An attempt at capturing how badass we really are

> **Graphics:** Way to focus on the bald spot, guys. Mano's had a hat since I was holding up liquor stores, so I know headwear is possible

> **Sound:** Not enough cussing

> **Playability:** Fine, if your partner ever stops shooting you

> **Entertainment:** Wow, I come off like an incredible a******. Where's the Habitat for Humanity mission we talked about?

> **Replay Value:** I already lived it and played it. What more do you want?

Second Opinion 10

Not so fast, Kane. I always ran over and gave you some adrenaline every time I shot you in the ass (which is the best place to shoot a guy, by the way). Don't be such a baby. As long as we're splitting hairs, what's with that part where your dude is showing my guy how to hide behind boxes and blow up mannequins like I'm some kind of idiot? If anything... Gack! (gurgling noise) Whoa, what happened? Whoops, well at least we don't have to pay for the pizza now.—**LYNCH**

MULTI QUICKIES

LIKE, A BUNCH

Burnout Paradise

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER UNFOCUSED/UNMOTIVATED
> **PUBLISHER** MTV GAMES > **DEVELOPER** STUFF IT, NARC
> **RELEASE** OR NOT > **ESRB** B FOR BOGUS

It just became a compliment to be called a "burnout." This game deftly tackles the issue of growing social malaise with its protagonist, The Burnout, who is a compelling modern everyman. In a tongue-in-cheek wink to the gamer, the Burnout's world doesn't extend beyond his unkempt living room. It's like the hub area of other games, except you can't go anywhere or accomplish anything. The avant-garde mission structure (sitting on the couch and waiting for things to happen) indicates that the developer truly knows its audience and what they want. This gameplay-starved and repetitive experience is an artistic masterpiece.—**DARTHCLARK**

BOTTOM LINE — A+

PLAYSTATION 3

Jak & Dexter

> **STYLE** 1 TO 4-PLAYER VENGEANCE/PLATFORMING (ONLINE?)
> **PUBLISHER** SIX FEET UNDER > **DEVELOPER** DARK PASSENGER
> **RELEASE** SWEET RELEASE > **ESRB** I FOR INEVITABLE

Ahhh! I'm sorry, but this game is sooo scary and gross. At first I had fun playing with cellophane (I'm not allowed to use it in real life. I might choke!), but then it started getting weird. When I first started using the scalpel, I thought I was playing Cooking Mama or Trauma Center (which is a little too graphic for me). Then Jak started screaming. I don't understand why these two characters are hurting each other...why don't they just go to the Olympics together instead? This game might have online – I don't really know, because I couldn't find anyone else with a random 16-digit code to play against. In conclusion, Wii Sports is 10 times better than Jak & Dexter.—**1005 8679 8302 7739**

BOTTOM LINE — 0

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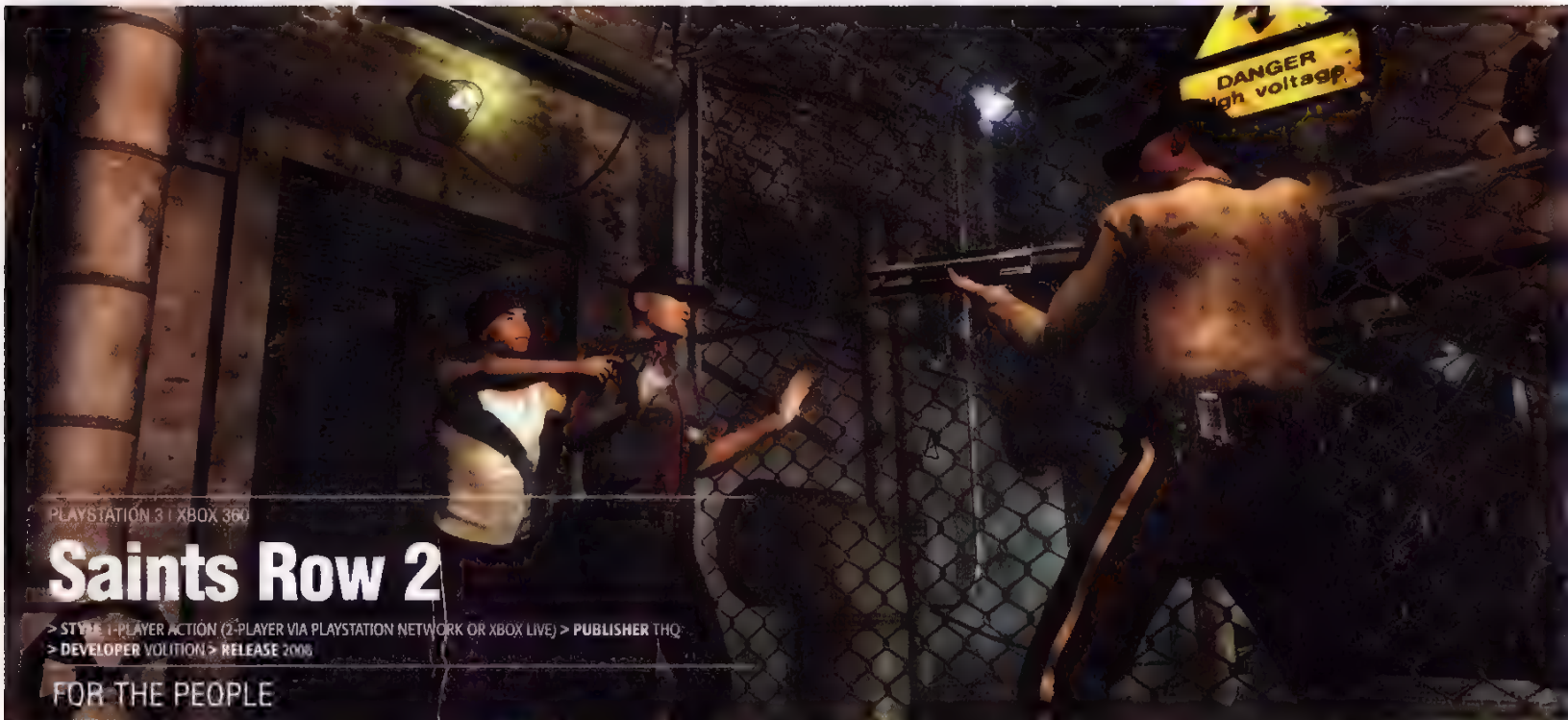
PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360

Saints Row 2

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

FOR THE PEOPLE

■ Physics-based destruction is a specialty of Volition, and that prowess is on full display in Saints Row 2

Talk about giving people what they want. This month, we got an extensive hands-on session with Volition's Saints Row 2. While the game is still early, we had an amazing time with the extensive customization options and free-form sandbox gameplay that seems to be the focus for the team as they ramp up into the final months of production. Everything about the title screams out to fans of open world, over-the-top action. It isn't the prettiest game coming out this year – but it's a heck of a lot of fun.

The character creator is highly flexible, allowing players to craft remarkably similar likenesses to themselves, celebrities, or anyone else. The shape of the nose has over a dozen sliders all by itself. Alternately, it allows for some pretty heinous, misshapen beasts – to each their own.

Both male and female main characters will have multiple voice tracks to pick between – no more silent hero. Not only do you craft your hero/heroine's physical appearance, but you'll also set their walking and combat style, along with an array of hilarious taunts and compliment motions, most of which are too explicit for us to discuss in detail here.

With your protagonist established, you'll find yourself dropped into the city of Stilwater. Waking from a decade-long coma (check out the original Saints Row for how you got into that predicament), your character is horrified to see what has happened to the Saints and the city during his or her absence. This time, you'll take control of the gang yourself, building it back up as you take on new gangs, the police, and anyone else who stands in the way of your vengeance.

■ The satchel charge can be thrown and then detonated remotely. Incidentally, you can attach satchel charges to people and vehicles

■ Abandoning realism, Saints Row 2 aims to deliver explosive thrills from the get go

The Saints have **fallen** a long way since the end of **the first** game, and you're **all about** putting them back **on top**

A huge number of new vehicles pepper the game world – a number of them have built-in weaponry of one sort or another

Vehicle racing is still a big part of the game

Taking to the air in an assault helicopter is insane – police helicopters will try to bring you down, but you do have homing missiles...

Along the journey, you'll tackle dozens of missions and activities, using the money you earn to further customize your gameplay. Each of the nine cribs around the city can be pimped out with everything from pool tables to stripper poles – good-looking hideouts and expensive clothes in your wardrobe add to the respect you'll get as you continue through missions.

Combat is extremely destructive and action-packed. You can shoot using the well-done third-person free-aiming style of the original game, but Volition has also added a zoomed in over-the-shoulder camera for more precise aiming. From satchel charges to guided rocket launchers, expect to see a ridiculous amount of explosive firepower. Mission structure is equally bombastic. We saw an objective where the player has to fly an assault helicopter and fire homing missiles at the cops as they wildly chase

after a criminal associate.

Of course, the real treat was getting to play two-player online co-op. This mode has been designed from the ground up to be accessible and fun to play. A second player can drop in and out at any time. Any missions completed by both players register in both of their single-player campaigns. The ability to hurt each other can be turned on and off. Each player can roam freely anywhere they like in the world without being tethered to their companion.

Quite simply, we had a blast as we wreaked havoc across the city, especially once the law had two miscreants to deal with at once. Saints Row 2 is on track to offer pure escapist thrills, and we couldn't be happier with the direction the game is headed. ■ ■ ■

You can pay to **update** your cribs – a better **place** to hang out for your **gang** equals greater respect

NEW GAME, NEW TECHNOLOGY

Prototype

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

FREEDOM OF MOVEMENT

There really isn't anywhere that players won't be able to explore

New York City won't be the same once Alex Mercer is done with it

W e've been excited about Radical's newest foray into open-world games ever since we announced the game in our August cover story last year, but we've heard very little new information about the game since our visit to the studio. The team broke their silence at GDC this year, showing off some footage of the game and speaking more in depth about the extravagant plans they have for Prototype's expansive game world.

Set in modern day New York City, the cityscape presented in Prototype is incredibly busy and dense in every direction. Hundreds of cars and pedestrians act as window dressing while main character Alex Mercer tears his way across the landscape. Perhaps the most exciting component of the city itself is how much it appears to change throughout the course of the game. As a strange and monstrous infection

overwhelms the city and its populace, players will see individual locations begin to change from familiar backdrops into eerie distortions.

The storyline will follow an anti-hero whose goals rarely coincide with peace and order. Instead, Alex Mercer is firmly focused on finding out what made him the way he is – a shapeshifting beast of magnificent power who can absorb living tissue and thought, integrating them into himself. He'll fight a two-front war against the sinister military forces of the Blackwatch and the growing menace of the Infected. What we're most excited about are the options Radical will put in front of players to confront objectives. For every dilemma that arises, there will be a choice between a subtle and deceptive course and a destructive path. By shapeshifting and gleaning knowledge from those he absorbs, Alex can bypass overt conflict. Likewise, the ever-grow-

ing arsenal of his superpowers will make a frontal assault an appealing alternative to many players. If the excitement of that mechanic isn't enough for you, then recall that original plans for the game included two-player online co-op. While the team hasn't said much about that feature since our visit last year, we can only hope it makes it through to the final version.

The Incredible Hulk: Ultimate Destruction was one of our favorite open world games of the last generation. Prototype is being crafted by many of that same team, and the fluidity and quality of the world and animation work shows. It's no exaggeration to say that Prototype is one of our top picks for 2008. It may be a new franchise, but trust us when we say that this is one you'll want to watch as the game nears launch later this year. ■ ■ ■

The familiar military combatants have enormous resources, while the monstrous infected will share many of Alex's powers and match him step for step as he moves through the city

Lighting and environmental effects will alter throughout the story, subtly changing to match the tone of the story at particular moments

Players will constantly shift between a growing arsenal of shapeshifting powers

While Alex has many abilities that alter his physical shape, he'll also absorb mental abilities from his victims, like the ability to drive

Grand Theft Auto IV

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION/RACING (MULTIPLAYER TBA) > **PUBLISHER** ROCKSTAR GAMES
> **DEVELOPER** ROCKSTAR NORTH > **RELEASE** APRIL 29

YES VIRGINIA, THERE IS A GTA IV

There's an old saying in football that goes: "Games are won and lost in the trenches." Meaning that, while the high-flying antics of the quarterbacks, wide receivers, and running backs usually garner the highlights on *SportsCenter*, it's the lumbering men of the offensive and defensive lines who do the hard, unglamorous work of controlling the line of scrimmage, and thus, the game itself.

There's a similar truth in video games. While gamers and press (Game Informer included) often obsess about the flashy specs of upcoming titles, success or failure is still a matter of making sure that the small details of control, collision, and camera are nailed down tight. For a game on the enormous scale of Rockstar's Grand Theft Auto, this is no easy task, as the team at Rockstar North can attest.

With Rockstar, it's never a matter of ambition. The GTA series has always offered a mind-blowing amount of variety, depth, and nonlinear gameplay. What it hasn't always offered is finely tuned third-person action and combat. Last generation, that was enough, given all the other things the series

was bringing to the table. This time around, the game must not only look better, but also offer a more refined play experience.

Game Informer recently got the chance to play the game for over two hours at Rockstar's NYC headquarters. We played multiple missions on both platforms (contrary to the rumors, the PS3 version of GTA IV is very much real and running as well as the 360 version). While the missions weren't particularly unique (producer Jeronimo Barrera called them "meat and potatoes" missions), they did give us a chance to get our hands dirty with the basics of Grand Theft Auto: running, gunning, and driving.

Our first impressions of the revamped control scheme were overwhelmingly positive. This new targeting system is vastly better than that of previous titles, and should allow fans of everything from Call of Duty to Crackdown to feel instantly at home with the game. It's essentially a variation on the console first-person shooter mechanic, adapted to better suit the GTA universe. Walk with the analog, run by pressing A or X (tapping this button now gives you an extra burst of speed), select a weapon with the d-pad

and you're ready for action. At this point, the game offers you the choice between free targeting and auto lock, or a combination of the two. Depress the left trigger halfway and go into an "aim mode" similar to Gears of War. Click the right analog for a further, fine-targeting zoom. However, at any point you can pull the left trigger fully and cycle between auto targets by flicking the right stick. However, you do have some flexibility even within the auto-targeting, as you can move your reticle to target various limbs and appendages on the target, allowing you to take out a knee or go for a quick headshot.

This new system, coupled with the fact that you now have camera control on the right analog stick, results in the evaporation of many of the frustrations we've had with the GTA series in games past. That's not to say there's still not work to be done. While the cover system is definitely a nice addition, moving around while in cover still feels a bit sticky. Also, having to press the A button to run got a bit stressful during particularly hectic gunfights. Still, what we've seen in recent months gives us every reason to think that the (no doubt difficult) choice to delay

the game was the right one. The difference between the build we played and one we saw in late summer of last year is striking, to say the least.

Everything else was as we hoped. The driving mechanics are better than ever, and new motion-blur effects and camera angles make the faster rides even more dramatic than before. In the span of two hours, we jumped off a bridge, shot our way out of several tight spots, narrowly avoided a crashing semi spilling logs all over the freeway, sniped mafia thugs from a skyscraper, shot police helicopters down with a rocket launcher, got drunk and tried to drive home, and even took lady friend bowling (in a fully interactive minigame). In other words, it is everything you expect from a GTA title and more. While there's much we still don't know about GTA — none of the missions outside of the bowling we played could be counted as particularly new for the series — it's clear that Rockstar North has kept its eye on what's important. April 29 can't come soon enough. ■ ■ ■

■ You're now able to climb up and over ledges and, in this case, bridges to reach higher places in the level

■ Although he looks tough in pictures, Niko is actually a fairly sympathetic character in the cutscenes we've seen
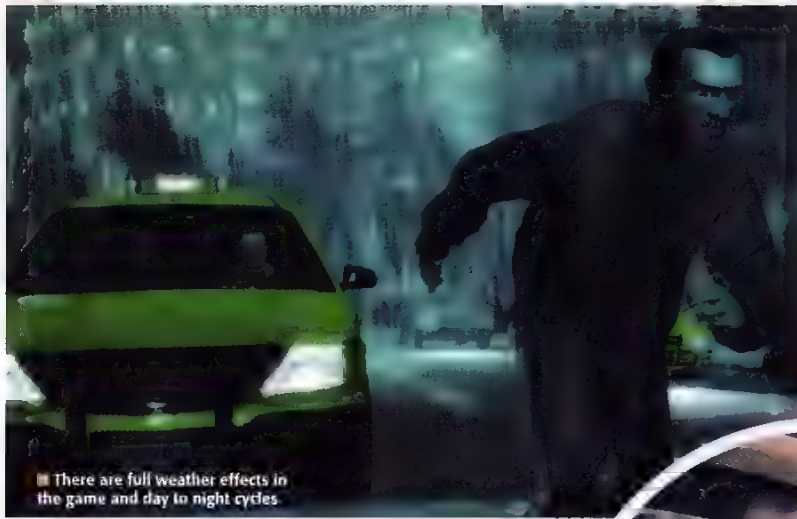
There are full weather effects in the game and day to night cycles
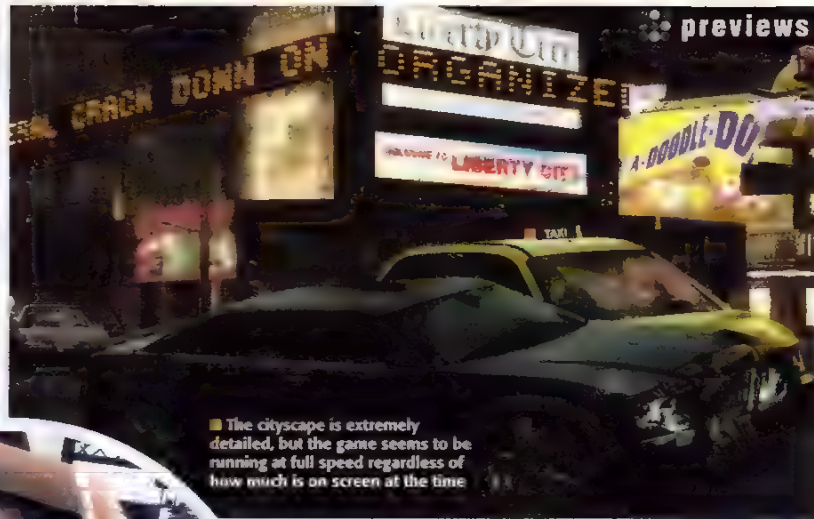
The cityscape is extremely detailed, but the game seems to be running at full speed regardless of how much is on screen at the time
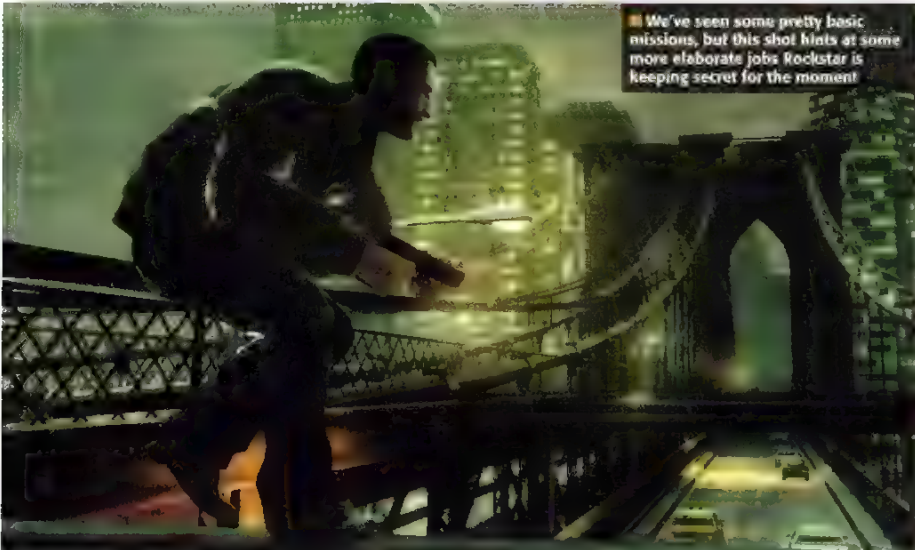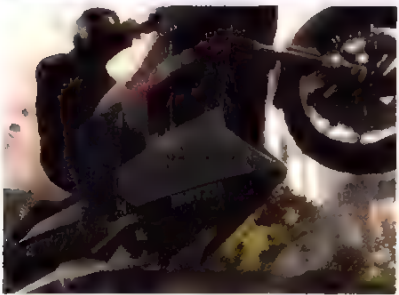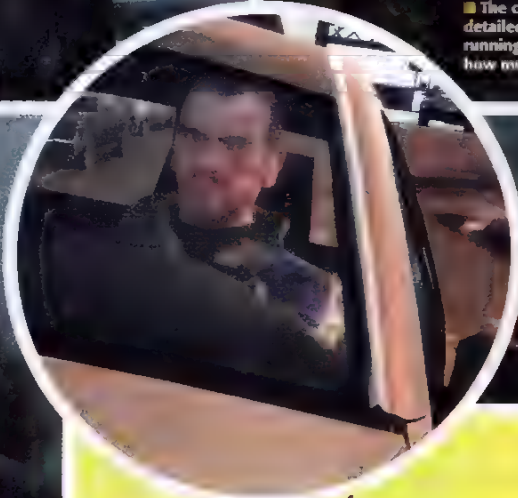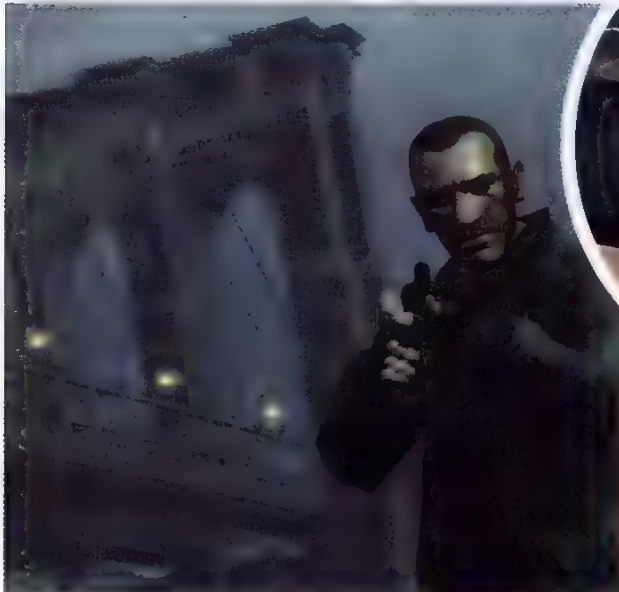
We've seen some pretty basic missions, but this shot hints at some more elaborate jobs Rockstar is keeping secret for the moment

The new targeting system should silence many of GTA's critics

PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360

The Bourne Conspiracy

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION > PUBLISHER SIERRA > DEVELOPER HIGH MOON STUDIOS > RELEASE SUMMER

BOURNE TO BE WILD

Sure, this Jason Bourne may look more like an Abercrombie model than Matt Damon, but that doesn't mean he's lost any of the deadly skills Damon flashed across the big screen as the $30 million malfunctioning weapon. With jump cuts inspired by the directorial style of Paul Greengrass and Bourne screenwriter Tony Gilroy (who is now nominated for an Oscar for his work on *Michael Clayton*) making sure the game script stays honest to the films, The Bourne Conspiracy hardly lacks the polish of its film counterparts. Seeing the game in motion helped to alleviate many of the worries we had about the title.

The key character trait of Jason Bourne is his ability to constantly outthink his soon-to-be victims in dire situations. Expecting this foresight from the game player is a risky proposition, so developer High Moon Studios

has chosen to express Bourne's abilities with a "simple input, complex output" gameplay formula. While there may only be two buttons used during combat, forming different combos to build up the Bourne Instinct meter unleashes Bourne's deadly martial arts skills via a pull-away in-engine cutscene where opponents find out just how painful Kali style martial arts are on joints, bones, and egos.

The same formula applies to the many evade and escape moments in the game, such as the standoff at the U.S. embassy in Zurich, Switzerland pulled from *The Bourne Identity*. As we took control of Bourne and the alarm sounded, the gameplay shifted from close-quarters combat to running for our life. As we moved Bourne through the stairwells and down the embassy corridors evading fire, a series of God of War-like quick

timed button sequences had to be matched to ensure Bourne's escape.

While the game recreates many of the memorable moments from the films, High Moon Studios was also given the green light to explore Bourne's past through the use of flashbacks, which will allow gamers to use the $30 million weapon before he began malfunctioning. During these sequences gamers will wield a gun, something Bourne rarely does in the films. In one sequence, we chased a target through a subway system, finding cover to avoid oncoming trains while picking off enemies as they popped from behind cover. The combat feels reminiscent of many modern shooters, with a button-press cover system and relatively responsive controls.

We also got a chance to relive the exciting Paris car chase scene from the films.

High Moon Studios employs some developers who cut their teeth on racers like Midnight Club, and the experience shows. While navigating through the crowded Parisian streets in the Mini Cooper, we noticed that the car handles as well as some arcade racers on the market. Crashing through storefronts and using the e-brake to take sharp turns into alleys and lose the cops proved a riveting experience.

While the fighting controls may not offer the depth of a true fighting game, and the game often takes the action away from you to display Bourne's startling array of combat moves, High Moon Studios makes you feel like a true Treadstone graduate. Look for The Bourne Conspiracy this summer. ■ ■ ■

■ Bourne can handle it all, from stealth moves...

...to brawling...

■ ...to evasive action...

■ ...to dirty fighting!
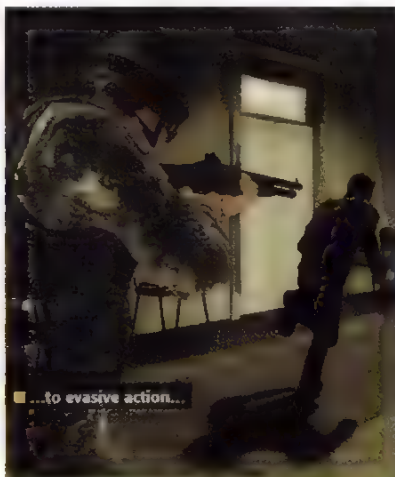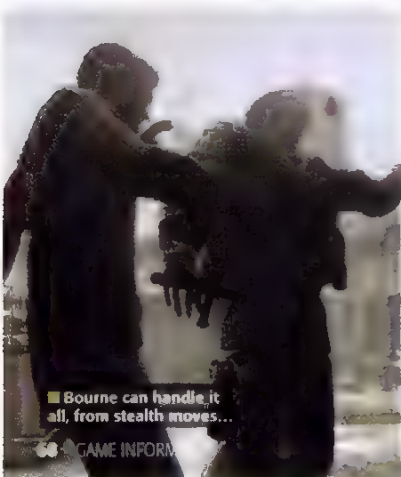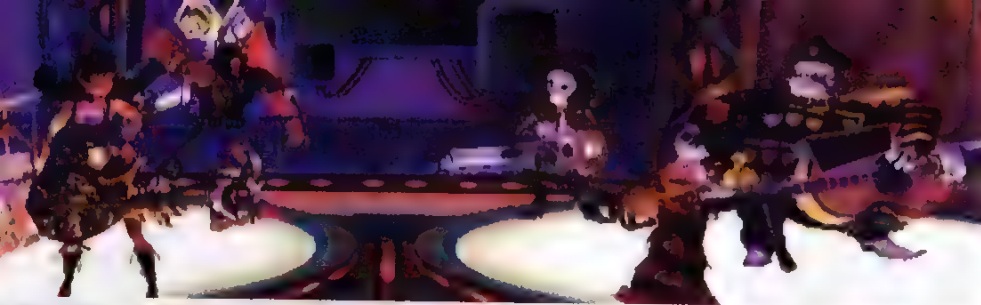
There are a few musical constants in the world. Bon Jovi should no longer wear leather pants. Country music is the music of pain. And Michael Jackson's style was better when he had a nose. Otherwise, it's pretty much all up for debate. And debated it is. Even the most laid back crowd can turn riotous when someone's favorite band gets insulted.

Developer Planet Moon Studios is hoping to tap into this fervor with its unique music game Battle of the Bands. The game is packed with 32 different songs covering titles like Black Eyed Peas' "Dum Diddly", Cypress Hill's "Insane in the Brain", and The Soggy Bottom Boys' "Man of Constant Sorrow". All the songs are covers, but they are some of the most hilarious covers you'll hear. In fact, unlike most music games, listening to musical covers is Battle of the Bands' selling point. Each song has been re-recorded into one of five different genres ranging from rock, country, hip-hop, Latin, and marching band.

The crux of Battle of the Bands' gameplay seems to be a kind of musical tug of war. After picking one of 11 bands covering the five genres, players enter into band battles against either their friends or the computer. Similar to standard music games, gems scroll up from the bottom of the screen and must be matched against motions of the Wii remote. The band with the leading score will have their music dominate the audio track.

Band powerups and various attacks (think something similar to Guitar Hero III's battle mode) help ensure that one band doesn't dominate for too long. The result is an often comical musical mashup. For example, the groovy beat of a Latin tune – complete with the shake of maracas and Spanish lyrics — could be abruptly interrupted by the twang of a county banjo or the deep bass beat of a marching drum.

Players who work their way through single player will eventually face off against Mr. Hong's Violent Orchestra, but the best feature of the game might be its inviting party game temperament. With more than 150 musical tracks in the game, the variety for musical mixing is pretty high. Who would have thought that the Gorillaz' "Feel Good Inc." would sound so good when performed by a marching band? Or that LL Cool J's "Mama Said Knock You Out" done in the Latin style would be so hilarious?

Sure, Battle of the Bands doesn't look like it will overtake the popularity of Guitar Hero, but there is certainly enough room in the music scene for a fresh and interesting take such as this. What are the chances that this will be a fun party game for all ages? We predict it's just as likely as anyone who played tuba in high school also being a nerd. ■ ■ ■

Battle of the Bands

> STYLE 1 OR 2-PLAYER MUSIC/ACTION > PUBLISHER THQ
> DEVELOPER PLANET MOON STUDIOS > RELEASE APRIL

BATTLE OF THE BANDS

ferent usefulness

■ Can you imagine a country version of Def Leppard's "Photograph"? Wait until you actually hear it!

■ The final boss is an orchestra, so expect to hear a few songs get the classical treatment

It wouldn't be Vegas without the gambling, so expect an M rating for this baby
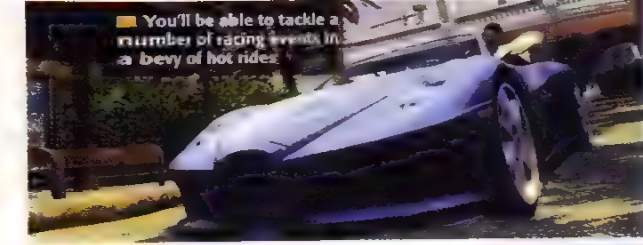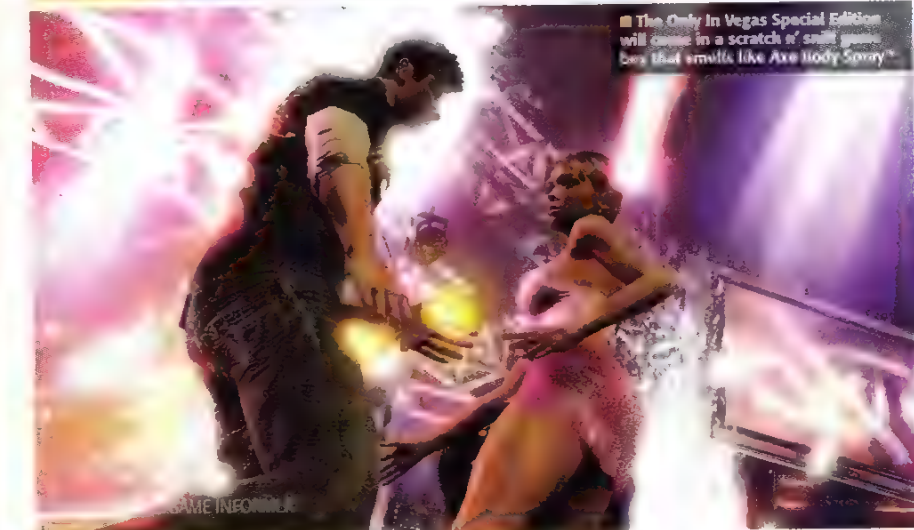
PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360 | PC

This Is Vegas

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION (MULTIPLAYER TBA) > **PUBLISHER** MIDWAY
> **DEVELOPER** SURREAL > **RELEASE** FALL 2008

TAKING BACK SIN CITY

Competing with New York for the "most appearances in video games" award, Vegas returns as the backdrop for a new open world game from Midway (who coincidentally loves throwing events in Sin City). Players take on the role of a young guy with $50 in his pocket looking to make it big in Vegas. After quite the bender during his first night in town, our hero realizes that whitewashing is afoot.

Billionaire Preston Boyer is trying to give Vegas the Times Square treatment and make it a family friendly vacation spot. In fact, he's already gotten rid of gambling in "Werner Schwarzenberger's" Super Mega Plex, replacing slots and tables with shopping and daycare. Obviously, the city's old guard isn't having it. By performing jobs for these powerful casino owners you can gain cash, influence, and maybe even a sweet ride. Although none of these locations around town use real casino names, the parodies are close enough to easily identify. Olympus Casino doubles for Caesar's Palace while the Mayan's pyramid structure emulates the Luxor.

Gambling, of course, plays a big role in the game, with simulations of poker, blackjack, and slot machines present in every casino. While slots are simple insert-money-pull-lever

tasks (like the real thing), poker and b[...]
cheating system to give you an edge. [...]
ink that can only be seen through cus[...]
backs of the cards will tell you if the c[...]
high. While this can result in big payou[...]
the shades will eventually get you kick[...]
times beaten).

Some situations just can't be talke[...]
times players will use a mix of Stran[...]
mechanics and Bully melee combat[...]
gory route, developer Surreal has op[...]
with brightly colored damage effects[...]
blood. Transportation is handled by [...]
monorail, but players can eventually [...]
of exotic vehicles to enter into races[...]
just to get around.

Although strip clubs and scantily cla[...]
prominently featured, the decision on [...]
nudity has yet to be made – mostly [...]
ESRB says they can get away with. Ap[...]
happen in Vegas must stay there. ■ ■

The funny thing is that what she's wearing is actually considered "business casual" in Vegas

You'll be able to tackle a number of racing events in a bevy of hot rides

The Only In Vegas Special Edition will come in a scratch n' sniff game box that smells like Axe Body Spray™

The game's virtual strip is insanely detailed and colorful

■ Where's the procedurally created Death Star?

■ The HUD implies that explicit goals will guide you through the game's phases

■ Making vehicles uses the same simple editor as creatures

PC

Spore

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION (MULTIPLAYER TBD) > **PUBLISHER** ELECTRONIC ARTS > **DEVELOPER** MAXIS > **RELEASE** SEPTEMBER 7

FROM OUT OF THE OOZE AND UP TO THE STARS

When SimCity and The Sims creator Will Wright says that his upcoming game Spore has turned out to be "kind of ambitious," it's not hard to see through his modesty. A simulation game spanning eons and a pioneering adventure into social networking, Spore is aiming to be his most immense and satisfying game yet, from the primordial ooze to the farthest reaches of space.

By now you probably know all about the Cell Phase, which has players taking a tiny microbe and evolving it through eating other microbes to bolster your DNA and ensure your survival. It's when your creation gets onto dry land where things really start to get interesting. The Creature and Tribe Phases have players evolving in more complex ways in order to facilitate communication skills or combat skills. If you pick a mouth geared more towards biting and less towards singing (the main way to communicate), your social skills will noticeably suffer.

Your learned social skills play directly into the Civilization Phase of the game, where evolution of the species takes a back seat to building the early foundations of your alien society. Allies and enemies are determined by your actions in the previous Phases, so hostile players might find a few more enemies at their gates than if they had played it cool. The communication and combat skill tendencies you could choose from give way to militaristic, religious, and economic social doctrines, all of which can be used to take over rival societies and add more strength to your species.

All of your efforts, however, are for a worthy cause – space travel. The Space Phase removes nearly all boundaries on movement, opening up an immense galaxy of planets to explore, terraform and colonize. But real estate is a highly coveted commodity, so you'll need to deal with rival alien species out for the resource-rich planets, as well as working towards exploring the ultimate goal of charting the very center of the galaxy.

While racing for the stars is a worthwhile endeavor, Spore has far more to offer. Utilizing an incredibly deep and user-friendly content creation system, players can create creatures, buildings, spaceships, and other objects, all with complete control over color, scale, and shape. Using the Sporepedia, the in-game hub for all content, players can share their creations with the entire world, subscribe to feeds that alert them when buddies have created something new, and even record movies of their adventures and upload them directly to YouTube via a process dubbed Sporecasting.

Whether you're out to dominate the galaxy or simply flex your creative muscle and create a universe's worth of aliens, Spore seems ready to deliver on both fronts. While years in the making, we can't wait to get our hands on the final build of the game in the second quarter of 2008. But for a game offering up eons of gameplay, the thought of waiting a few more months seems like an acceptable sacrifice ■ ■ ■

CREATION IN YOUR HANDS

For the younger gamers out there, EA and Maxis are shrinking down the Spore experience for the DS, but don't think that means the fun factor is getting any less attention. While the DS version focuses solely on the Creature Phase, players will get to use some of the same creature creation to craft their own unique species from the ground up. To keep evolution simple, defeated enemies will yield new body parts to customize your creature with, although being diplomatic will gain you allies that will watch your back during combat. A slew of minigames introduce you to some pretty intuitive DS controls as you explore the visually impressive pseudo-3D world around you. The DS version also includes a Sporepedia, so the creatures you create can be shared with other gamers via a Wi-Fi connection or directly through the Nintendo Network.

■ These guys are clearly boned, but what the heck, throw another grenade if it makes ya die with more dignity!

UNLIMITED ENABLED

PC

Stargate Worlds

> **STYLE** MASSIVELY MULTIPLAYER ONLINE ROLE-PLAYING GAME > **PUBLISHER** MGM INTERACTIVE
> **DEVELOPER** CHEYENNE MOUNTAIN ENTERTAINMENT > **RELEASE** TBA

TURNING MACGYVER INTO A WATER BOY

For as long as most of us can remember, there have only been two "Stars" in science fiction. These are, of course, Star Wars and Star Trek. In truth, however, there are three. Stargate, which has been on the air for over 10 years, has etched out just as prominent a sector of the galaxy as the other Star franchises. Come later this year, it will attempt to cross over into gaming through the massively multiplayer RPG, Stargate Worlds.

Developer Cheyenne Mountain Entertainment is pulling out all of the stops for fans of the shows (SG-1 and Atlantis) and gamers alike. "We've stated from day one that our goal is to make the player the star of the show," says Stargate Worlds creative director Chris Klung. "It's hard to do that if their characters are acting as water boys while SG-1 are saving the day. By setting the game between seasons eight and nine, we have the room we need to tell the stories that Brad Wright and Robert Cooper only alluded to in seasons nine and ten. An example of these stories would be the formation of the Lucian Alliance."

Unlike most MMOs, Stargate Worlds is not following a typical World of Warcraft-type combat system. Rather, the gameplay has been designed around the action of the show, which means a P90 needs to be fired every 15 seconds. Exact details

on how combat will unfold have not been revealed yet, but we do know that it is third-person and not in the traditional vein of World of Warcraft. Cheyenne's studio head, Dan Elggren, did disclose one interesting tidbit regarding battle. "The player and the AI can use the environment as a buff in combat. By taking up clear advantage points you receive a benefit not only in the damage you are dealing but in how much damage you will take. How I am using my position on the battlefield and the abilities that I have in my arsenal help dictate success or failure."

Cheyenne hasn't confirmed how many worlds will be available on day one, but if you've watched the show, you'll enter each gate expecting the unexpected. You may cross over to a world with primitive technologies, or you may enter a world where the sights defy classification. That's the beauty of the show, and something that gives Cheyenne Mountain an unbelievable amount of freedom for a licensed product. Heck, you may jump into a gate with a dragon waiting on the other side, or maybe even the greatest alien in the universe, Thor.

A release date is still up in the air, but with SG-1 ending its run and Atlantis on season break, it can't come soon enough. ■ ■ ■

■ If you looked at this shot and said "Lucia!", congratulations, you are the world's biggest nerd

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NINTENDO DS

The World Ends With You

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION/RPG (UP TO 4-PLAYER VIA WIRELESS)
> **PUBLISHER** SQUARE ENIX
> **DEVELOPER** SQUARE ENIX/JUPITER
> **RELEASE** APRIL 22

FIRST WE BATTLE, THEN MAYBE SOME SHOPPING

Square RPGs have introduced us to their fair share of weirdos through the years, but perhaps this game's cast of characters will be the most interesting yet: the denizens of Shibuya. This Tokyo neighborhood is known for being the epicenter of Tokyo's young fashion victims, and The World Ends With You has found the biggest one of them all -- your character, teenager Neku Sakuraba, who is designed by Final Fantasy artist Tetsuya Nomura. Underneath the bratty attitude and cheap clothes, however, lies an action/RPG with its share of good ideas.

As Neku and his friends fight the Noise and Reapers (not those Reapers!) throughout Shibuya, battles simultaneously happen on both the top and bottom screens of the DS. Neku is represented on the bottom screen and players will perform different attacks (enabled by a slew of pins that are collected in the game) by hitting the touch screen in a variety of ways. Lightning attacks and bullets fly with a simple tap, while walls of fire can be brought up with a sweep of the stylus across the screen.

Meanwhile, your partner will be fighting the same enemies as you on the top screen (with both of you sharing the same health bar). You can choose to control them or let them do their own thing. Although it's confusing at first to control both characters, the basis is simple and easy to perform with some practice. By guessing which cards will appear next among three choices you can earn Fusion Stars, which unleash Fusion Attacks. You pick which card you want by punching in a sequence of d-pad presses. Don't worry though, it's not like you're playing DDR. You can also time combo attacks between the top and bottom screens for more powerful attacks.

Of course, it wouldn't be Shibuya without some shopping, and The World Ends With You has populated its virtual city with numerous shops in which you can buy all kinds of items. Not only are the brand names of your pins and their relative popularity among the fickle kids of Shibuya important, but shop clerks will give you new abilities and special items if you're in the know. Yes, being 15 years old ain't going to be easy, but it sounds like it could be fun. ■ ■ ■
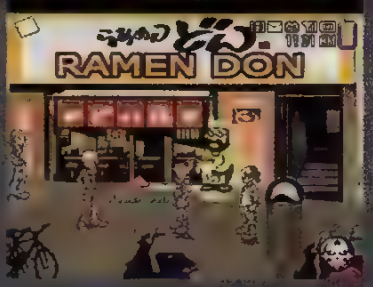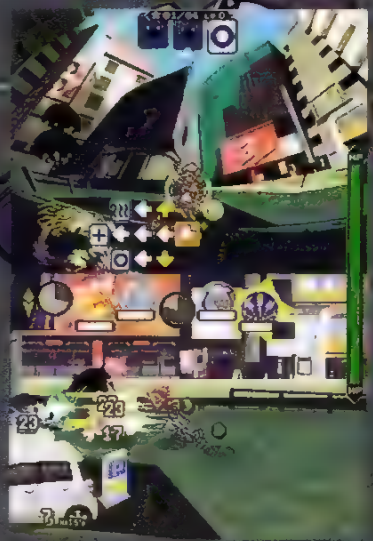
Wii

Boom Blox

> **STYLE** 1 TO 4-PLAYER PUZZLE > **PUBLISHER** ELECTRONIC ARTS
> **DEVELOPER** EALA > **RELEASE** MAY

STEVEN SPIELBERG?

Like a lot of gamers, we were pretty excited when we heard Steven Spielberg would be cooperating with EA on some upcoming titles. So it came as a shock when we heard his first collaboration would be a game about building up and knocking down a bunch of colorful blocks. Let's just say that it's a long way from *Saving Private Ryan*.

Apparently, the game concept isn't as much of a stretch as it first appears. "Steven is a very dedicated gamer and has been for many years," explains executive producer Louis Castle. "On top of that, he has been intimately involved in the entire development of Boom Blox and is often in on a weekly basis. Enchanted by the Wii at E3 when playing with Nintendo's [Shigeru] Miyamoto, he came back to EA with the strong desire to build a kinetic game of light-hearted destruction he could play with his entire family." So, even if it's not what we expected out of the cooperative venture, Spielberg is certainly enthused.

That leaves the fairly broad and important question of what the game is all about. Castle explains that gameplay is entirely built around the mechanics of throwing, grabbing, and blasting. In each level, players will aim to get a gold, silver, or bronze medal by meeting set objectives. On one level it might be to destroy a structure in a certain number of throws. Other levels might focus on timed challenges. Four themed worlds form the backdrop of the whole game, including medieval, tiki, western, and haunted environments. "Steven Spielberg gave particular attention to directing each world and its characters in order to give emotional context to the action-oriented puzzles," Castle explains. Cooperative and competitive play can be either turn-based or split screen. Finally, a robust but accessible Create mode lets players craft their own levels and challenges, which can be played locally or even shared over WiiConnect 24.

Castle promises that a big focus in development has been on meeting the divergent demands of casual family-oriented players with the more stringent desires of the hardcore set. It's a tough challenge these days; we're hopeful their focus on very simple but fun mechanics can pay off. ■ ■ ■
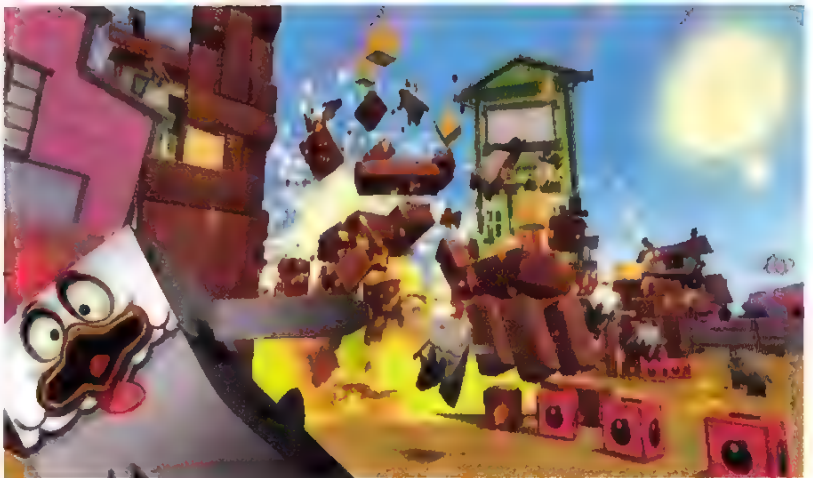
The development team has spent a lot of time trying to perfect very few gestures – the throwing mechanic has received the most attention to try and get the controls to feel just right
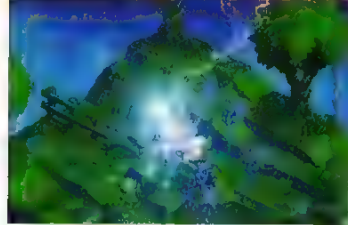
NINTENDO DS

Final Fantasy Tactics A2:
Grimoire of the Rift

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER STRATEGY/RPG > **PUBLISHER** SQUARE ENIX > **DEVELOPER** SQUARE ENIX > **RELEASE** SUMMER

THE NEVERENDING STORY

Hot on the heels of the successful PSP Final Fantasy Tactics release, Square Enix is gearing up to drop Tactics A2 on DS owners this summer. This title shares many concepts with its GBA predecessor, from story to specific game mechanics, but after our exclusive hands-on time with the U.S. version this month, a few changes have us excited to get our hands on the final version.

As expected, tons of lateral options for players to build their heroes up have been added. Seven playable races can adventure as any of over 50 jobs, mixing and matching skills as they are unlocked. A crafting mechanic similar to the Bazaar in Final Fantasy XII offers another path to increasing your combat prowess. And, of course, all of your party members can mix and match their learned skills to become as effective as possible in whatever role you use them in during battle.

One tweak that we found very appealing is in the loosening of the law system. While you'll still have to contend with certain actions being forbidden in each battle, ignoring them doesn't get you the kick in the groin that it did in the first game. Instead of having offending characters deported to jail, breaking the law merely forfeits a few bonus items at the end of combat and removes any KO'd allies for the duration of the battle. "Forbidden: Swords" isn't the death sentence it used to be

If you dug Final Fantasy Tactics Advance on GBA, this title will have plenty to offer you. Perhaps too much; from what we've seen, this is about as direct a sequel as exists. The art style, world, combat mechanics, and nearly everything else are all strikingly similar to its predecessor. When the first game is as good as FFTA was, though, you can't complain too much. ■ ■ ■

Lush grasses carpet the hillside. Caravans mark the progress of their journey as they pass the hill's lone tree.
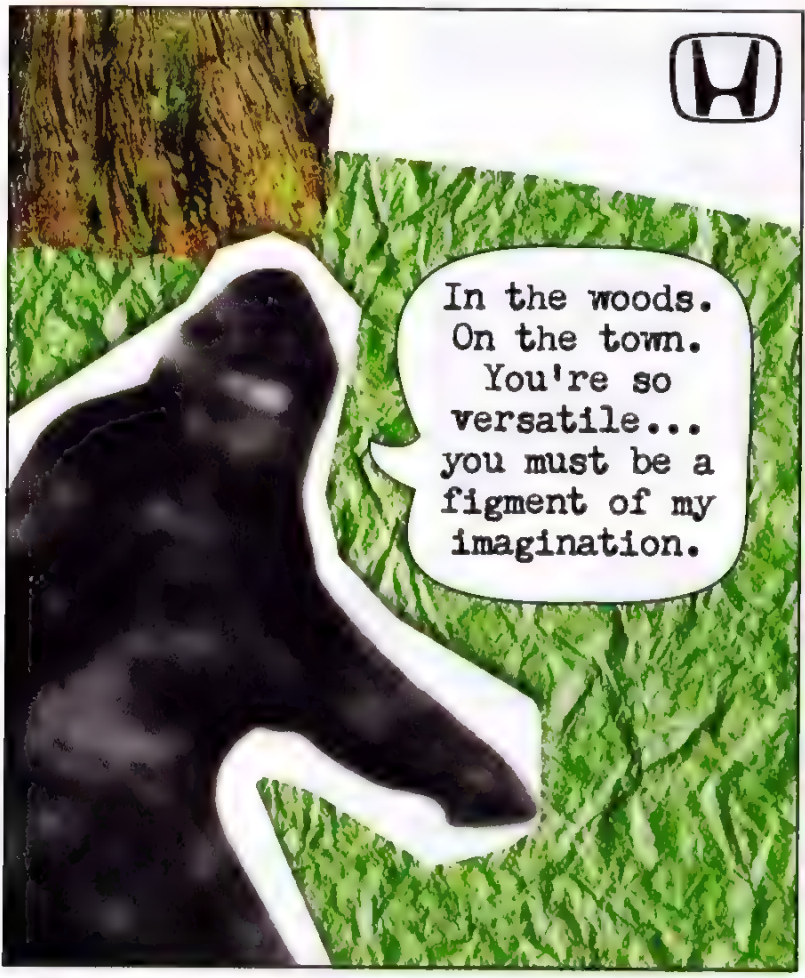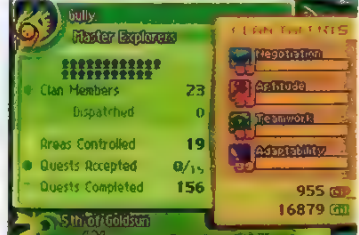
Well, I never pass up a chance to write in a library book!

I think there are some new postings up on the board.

PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360 | WII | PC | NINTENDO DS | PLAYSTATION 2

The Chronicles of Narnia: Prince Caspian

> STYLE 1 OR 2-PLAYER ACTION > PUBLISHER DISNEY INTERACTIVE STUDIOS > DEVELOPER TRAVELLER'S TALES > RELEASE MAY

FAUN SERVICE

The lastest celluloid ode to C.S. Lewis' epic fantasy series The Chronicles of Narnia is just around the corner, which can only mean a game spin-off of the Hollywood adaptation is chugging faithfully along as well.

Prince Caspian will follow the film's script very closely, with a focus on the major narrative moments (read: epic battles). The rest of the plot will be conveniently breezed over using in-game cutscenes and full-motion video. In addition, the game also takes the liberty of exploring Narnian history during the 1,300 years between The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe and Prince Caspian. These brand new levels will detail how Narnia fell into the hands of the Telmarine hordes and how the castle of Cair Paravel was left in ruins. This alone will be worth the price of admission for many diehard C.S. Lewis fans.

To bring the world of Narnia to life in its first next-generation game for the series, developer Traveller's Tales has added real world physics, motion captured moves, and ragdoll animations for characters. Prince Caspian also forgoes complete linearity in favor of an exploration-based experience; each level will have one or two main hub areas from which players can explore outward and access other mission areas

Players can assume the role of 20 playable characters during their adventure to free Narnia, including all four Pevensies and many new Narnian creatures. The characters you can use will vary from mission to mission, and you will have to rely on each of their differing skills to solve puzzles and rid the countryside of the Telmarine foes. As with The Lion, The Witch, And the Wardrobe, the entire game has been designed with co-op in mind. Unfortunately, Traveller's Tales has neglected to expand this feature to online co-op.

When it comes to action, Prince Caspian offers a less complex approach to battle than its predecessor. The game still features ranged and melee combat, but less emphasis is placed on learning combos. Instead of unleashing killer combos with complex button presses, players can simply chain attacks with their strong and weak melees as long as an enemy is within striking distance. If you're too out of control, the Telmarines will recognize your vulnerability and move in for the kill. You can also use your fellow combatants to trigger team combo attacks on some of the more imposing Narnian enemies.

While wandering the Narnian countryside, you'll also want to collect the shards and keys found throughout the land. Shards are pieces of armor that will make your characters more resilient to enemy attacks. Keys will unlock hidden chests that house treasures like bonus weapons that will deal more damage to your enemies.

We're excited to see if the game and the film stand up to the quality of the book when they release in May. ■ ■ ■

"Yiff! Yiff! Yiff!"
Furries are comic gold.

20 playable characters each have unique skills
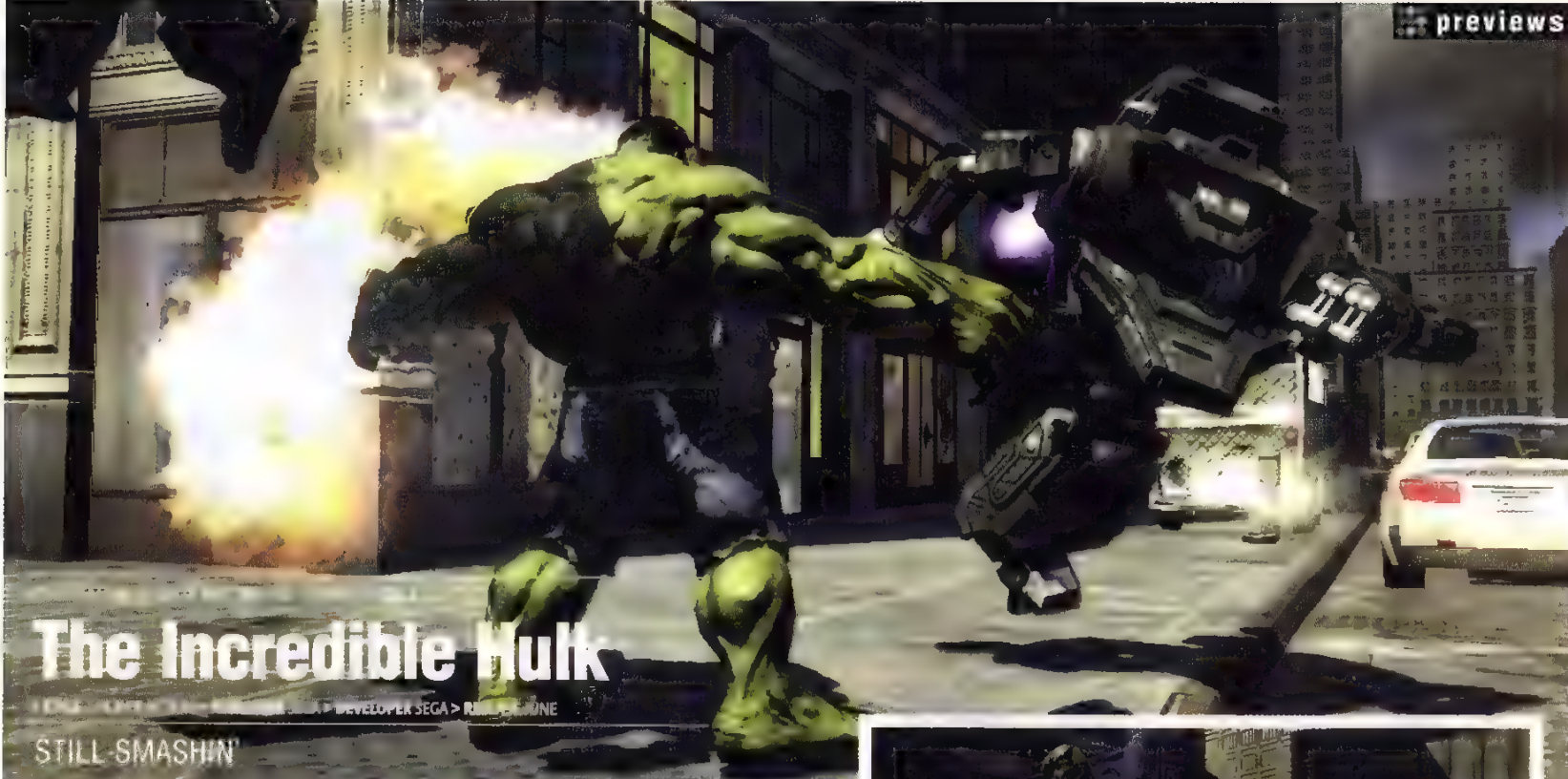
The Incredible Hulk

> DEVELOPER SEGA > RELEASE JUNE

STILL SMASHIN'

The Incredible Hulk is a figure ready made for the video game world. What more could a developer ask for than a main character with nigh-unstoppable strength, questionable morals, and a major anger management problem? Unfortunately, no one did full justice to the character's potential until 2005's The Incredible Hulk: Ultimate Destruction, the fantastic open world smashfest gifted to us by Radical Entertainment.

If these early glimpses of the new movie-licensed game are any indication, Sega must have liked that video game treatment as much as we did. A variation on the open world playground concept seems to be the approach, but it's unclear how much further Sega hopes to emulate the style that Radical presented in their 2005 success.

With the game being a licensed adaptation, it's not hard to draw some conclusions. Early photo leaks from the movie set show some positively massive cityscape destruction going on, a perception that is only reinforced by these exclusive screens from the game. Edward Norton is set to play Bruce Banner in the film, starring opposite Liv Tyler as star-crossed lover Betty Ross, but there's no word yet on whether they'll be lending their voices to the game adaptation. Early word on the script also indicates Hulk comic mainstays like General Thaddeus 'Thunderbolt' Ross and the Abomination will also play a major role. The film is being directed by French director Louis Leterrier, probably best known for his work on *Transporter 2*. The choice clearly signifies a shift towards a more action-packed blockbuster than Ang Lee's 2003 film, a change that will undoubtedly be reflected in the video game treatment.

The Incredible Hulk represents Sega's second recent partnership with comic powerhouse Marvel, with the first being the soon-to-release Iron Man. Games based on Captain America and Thor are also part of the deal, even though the details on those feature film projects remain under wraps. Scuttlebutt on the streets suggests that Marvel is slowly building towards a huge crossover Avengers movie several years down the road, but there's no word yet whether Sega would have any connection with such a project, assuming it exists.

In the immediate future, we shouldn't have too long to wait to see if Sega's new deal with Marvel produces some quality work. The visuals alone are enough to get us excited. Here's hoping the gameplay is equally polished. ■ ■ ■
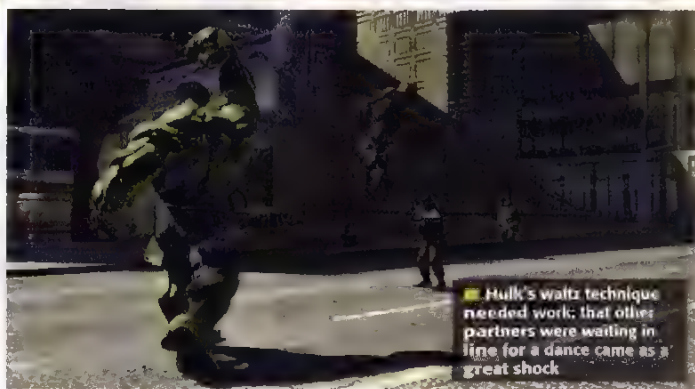
Hulk's waltz technique needed work; that other partners were waiting in line for a dance came as a great shock

The Hulk had been warned repeatedly to stop looking into Betty's window while she changed. Hulk smashed the people who gave him that warning

It would be easy to mistake these early glimpses of the game as part of a sequel to 2005's Ultimate Destruction, but this new movie-based game is made by an entirely different company

MULTI
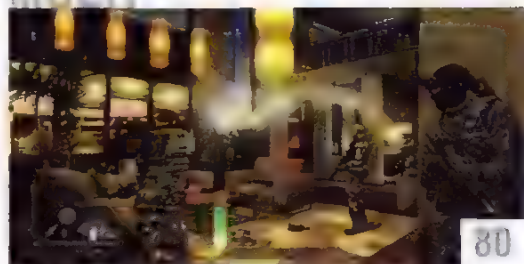
Rainbow Six Vegas 2 — 80

XBOX 360

Lost Odyssey — 90

Wii

Opoona — 95

GAME INFORMER
GAME OF THE MONTH
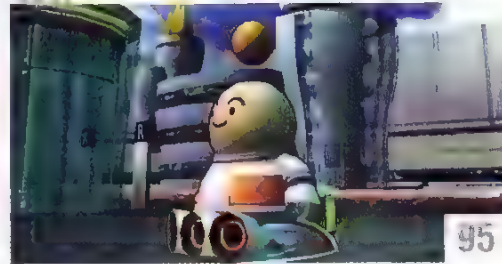
Super Smash Bros. Brawl

Quite possibly the Wii fan's equivalent to Halo 3, Super Smash Bros. Brawl is a big game with a lot of hype behind it. Nintendo's aversion to convention has resulted in one of the most unique fighting franchises on the market. Fortunately, it also provides some of the most fun you'll have on the tiny white console. Featuring more than 30 playable characters, a more involved story mode, and an exciting new online feature set, Brawl turns out to be the most well-rounded Smash Bros. to date. Get the full scoop on page 94.

94

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	The Hottie and the Nottie. A convergence of so many things that piss us off we don't know where to start.

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

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

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

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

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

> **Replay Value**

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

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

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

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

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

PSP

96

Crisis Core: Final Fantasy VII

DS

RESTART
Moves:

QUIT

98
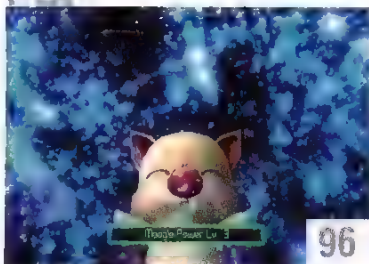
Professor Layton and the Curious Village
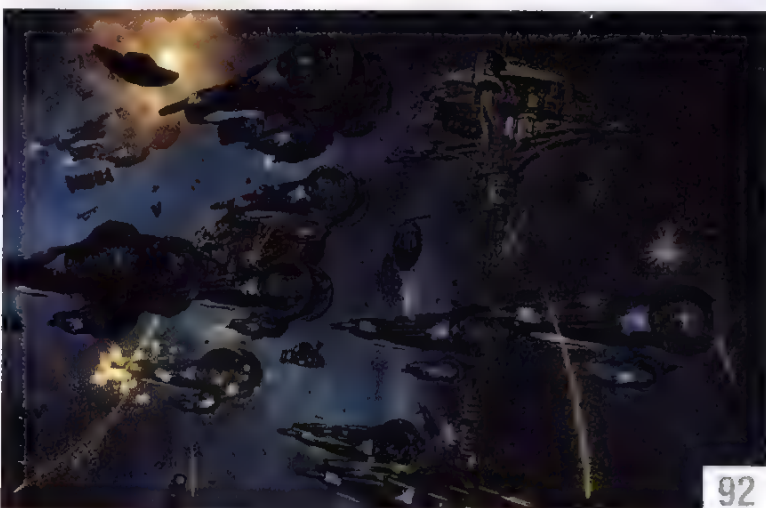
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Sins of a Solar Empire

Strategy buffs, listen up: Sins of a Solar Empire is like nothing you've seen before. This ingenious mix of the RTS and 4X genres is one of the most original and entertaining releases that either genre has seen in years. Plus, just about any machine built in the last three or four years can run it thanks to the highly scalable engine it runs on. You're running out of excuses not to play it, don't you think? Give in – we did, and we're very glad to have done so.

PC GAME OF THE MONTH

pg. 81

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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

1080p – Currently the best resolution for gaming on an HDTV. In widescreen, 1080p generates an image at resolution of 1920x1080 in progressive format

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 God of War and Devil May Cry

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

AI – Artificial Intelligence. Usually refers to how well the computer reacts to human opponents or works with human allies

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

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

board – A term we use for games like Scene It? and Mario Party

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

CG – Computer Generated. Usually refers to cutscenes that don't use in-game graphics

E3 – Electronic Entertainment Expo. A gaming convention held every year since 1995. It is one of the largest events in the gaming industry

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

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

FPS – First-Person Shooter. Describes games like Halo, Doom, and Call of Duty. Also used to denote the phrase "frames per second," or how many animation frames happen in one second.

framerate – The frames of animation used to generate the appearance of movement

frontend – A game's menus and options

HDTV – High Definition Television

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

IP – Intellectual Property. A single game or franchise encompassing the ideas and characters contained within

isometric – Three-quarters top down view, like Warcraft 3 or Baldur's Gate: Dark Alliance

jaggies – Graphical lines that look 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

music – A term we use for games like Guitar Hero and Rock Band

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 Ratchet & Clank

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

PS2 – Sony PlayStation 2

PS3 – Sony's PlayStation 3 console

puzzle – A term we use for games like Tetris and Picross

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

RPG – Role-Playing Game. A term we use to describe games like Final Fantasy and The Elder Scrolls

RTS – Real-Time Strategy. A subgenre of strategy games including titles like StarCraft and Command & Conquer

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

"slapping the Grimlock" – You still aren't saying this ultra-hip new phrase, are you? Get with the program!

sports – A term we use for games like Madden NFL and Top Spin

strategy – A term we use for games like Disgaea and Fire Emblem

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

PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360

Rainbow Six Vegas 2

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 16 ... ... YS ... ... ET ... ... OX LIVE ... ... SY
> PUBLISHER UBISOFT > DEVELOPE ... ... NT ... ... LLE ... ... CH ... ... M

ROUND 2 GOES TO RAINBO...

■ Note to bad guys: The facemask thing went out of style about 20 years ago

■ Story mode features some amazing setpieces

Gamers love to decry publishers pushing out franchise installments on a yearly basis, and there are good precedents for that view. With a product as good as Rainbow Six Vegas, though, it's hard to muster up the kind of righteous wrath that can only be expressed in pithy comments and animated GIFs on a message board. Without a doubt, this sequel is more of the same; a few additions to the gameplay and frontend do not a new experience make. However, Ubisoft managed not to screw anything up from the amazing original, which pretty much makes this the best tactical shooter out there by default.

Three things are all that separate Rainbow Six Vegas 2 from its predecessor. The first, new maps for both single- and multiplayer, should come as a surprise to no one. They're generally well-designed, with a variety of environments on the multiplayer side and enough branching paths to offset the linearity on the campaign side. Second, the addition of a sprint function is welcome and makes bounding from cover to cover less painful. Finally, the experience system has been expanded with parallel rewards for specific roles (dropping guys from long range nets you Marksman points, for example) and

is integrated into single-player as well as online.

Even though these few additions are the only things that distinguish the sequel from the original, this is an amazingly fun game to play alone, with friends, or with strangers online. The generic plot (mercenaries, terrorists, WMDs, blah blah blah) won't impress anyone, but playing through the story is an enthralling experience nonetheless. Figuring out how best to assault an entrenched enemy is as much fun as the excellent firefights themselves, and the maps are smartly designed to offer plenty of options.

Squad controls and interactions are simplistic,

as they always have been since Rainbow Six moved to consoles, but at least the AI is good. Story mode really shines when played cooperatively, though. Nothing else (on consoles, anyway) can forge a few friends on their couches into a squad of brutal military efficiency like the brilliant gameplay here can. After finishing out the campaign, co-op terrorist hunts offer even greater challenges to your tactical acumen. Simply put, there's no better cooperative FPS experience anywhere.

Adversarial multiplayer channels Counter-Strike in all the right ways. Matches are quick, bullets are lethal, and good teamwork defeats twitch reflexes every time. The reward system is genius, and offers plenty of incentive to keep playing for a good long time. Here again, map design allows enough creativity in your tactical approaches to engage more than just your trigger finger.

Rainbow Six Vegas 2 is a hell of a package. It's sort of a shame that so much of it is recycled from the last game, but nobody stops eating their favorite food because it's similar every time – and this is the Kobe beef of tactical FPS.——**ADAM**

■ The ability to call for an airborne thermal scan can be lifesaving

THERMAL SCAN

■ Covering each others' backs in multiplayer is even more important than keen aim

CO-OP STORY

Second Opinion 9.5

Dangling upside down on a health club's climbing wall with a pistol burning hot in my hands, I realized that Rainbow Six Vegas 2 was not only a highlight reel of FPS action, it was a dissertation in quality level design. Ubisoft Montreal has made an art of transforming mundane everyday locations into festive firefight playgrounds. Branching paths snaking through most of the areas, which is great for co-op tactics, and it's amazing how the cover is always organic to the particular environment. The enemy AI has also improved, learning to use night and thermal vision to thwart your secondary grenade attacks. This sequel may not offer a wealth of new gameplay features (a sprint maneuver and a dozen new weapons), but its campaign is now just as praiseworthy as its multiplayer, which with awesome new maps and modes, is worth investing another year or two of your life into.——**REINER**

> **Concept:** Army of Two places cooperative play on a pedestal, and pushes players to work together in ways they never imagined, all while delivering hard-hitting action

> **Graphics:** Imposing characters and a nice variety in the level designs. I especially like the look of the flooded airport

> **Sound:** Unfortunately, the gunshots don't drown out the dialogue

> **Playability:** The co-op mechanics are nicely implemented and effective, and the enemy AI always seems to have a vendetta against you

> **Entertainment:** Even after you play through the campaign, replay rests in the ability to gain new firearms and upgrades for your character

> **Replay Value:** Moderately High

PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360

Army of Two

> **STYLE** 1 OR 2-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 4-PLAYER VIA PLAYSTATION NETWORK OR XBOX 360) > **PUBLISHER** ELECTRONIC ARTS
> **DEVELOPER** EA MONTREAL > **RELEASE** MARCH 4 > **ESRB** M

INTRODUCING THE BUDDY GAME

Hollywood has the buddy flick, and now, as much as it pains me to say this, video games have the buddy game. Believe me, I could hardly bring myself to write that, but it had to be said. Not only does this game tell the story of two characters at the opposite ends of the social spectrum finding common ground on the battlefield, it insists that there is no wrong time for physical humor or airguitaring.

It also introduces gamers to an ensemble of characters that are just as obnoxious as Chris Tucker. As much as I wanted to place these unlikable personalities into a soundproof box, I was also compelled to bow down before their feet. They may be annoying, but they know exactly what it takes to entertain gamers seeking an explosive co-op experience (across online, split-screen, and LAN).

As you are probably aware, there are a number of games out there offering enjoyable cooperative components. None of them, however, make it a priority like Army of Two does. Coordinating tactics to flank and suppress is only a fraction of what you can expect. The game and its beautifully built levels wedge players into situations where they can use physical teamwork. For instance, you can rip a car door off of its hinges, and use it as moving cover for

your partner, who will follow you with a gun ablaze. You can also hoist your buddy up to the second story of a building (who will verbally tell you to go higher or lower) to sneak a peek, unload a clip, or climb up. You'll also find yourself counting down to coordinate simultaneous sniper shots. Best of all, however, are the tandem parachute jumps, where one player controls the descent and the other picks off soldiers with a sniper rifle.

All of the cooperative moves are mechanically sound, ingenious in their design, and effective in their use. The game also offers great stability in its gunplay. Like Gears of War, it's very much a game of finding cover, popping up to fire off a round, then finding new cover. The smooth targeting system allows for moving targets to be taken down with ease, and also the stability needed for precision aiming. The weapons, which favor the assault class, also pack a wallop, and can be upgraded with funds earned in the field to become even more ridiculously overpowered.

The overall result is a game that is gritty, intense, and well made. But it does have one design decision that I'll never wrap my brain around. If you provide covering fire for your friend, you will draw the enemies fire. This will turn your friend invisible

exactly like a ghost. Since enemies can't see him, he can move through the battlefield. As you can imagine, this really throws a kink into the game. Not only does it feel like you are using a cheat code, you feel bad for the adversaries that hide behind the same cover as the invisible player. Outside of this unfortunate event, the enemy AI is impressive, showing steady aim, an impulsiveness to throw grenades, and intentionally designed suicide methods.

If your idea of gaming is you, yourself, and no one else, you can play the same campaign by yourself, but trust me, it doesn't have the same bite with an AI-controlled partner, that rarely does what you want him to. Army of Two also features an enjoyable versus component that keeps the game's strong cooperative themes in play for four players. Just like the main game, you are tasked to complete missions with your partner, such as escorting a hostage or securing intel. CPU adversaries are still present, but your biggest threat is another two-player human team working to complete the same goals as you. The team that earns the most cash for completing goals and piling up kills is the victor.

Like dysfunctional characters in a buddy flick, Army of Two has some annoying problems, but if you just want a fun cooperative experience, it gets the job done and delivers sizeable thrills you won't find anywhere else.—**REINER**

The enemy AI is fearless, and more than capable of making you look stupid

"Sorry, Hank! Turns out Luke was right about not being able to see with the blast shield down."

The levels are littered with cover, and are filled with choke points

■ Why do catchers always lineup for a strike when they know you are throwing a beanball?

PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360

MLB 2K8

> **STYLE** 1 OR 2-PLAYER SPORTS (2-PLAYER VIA PLAYSTATION NETWORK OR XBOX LIVE)
> **PUBLISHER** 2K SPORTS > **DEVELOPER** 2K LOS ANGELES > **RELEASE** MARCH 3 > **ESRB** E

PERSONALITY IN THE PITCH

f I told you that Johan Santana's change up is thrown with the exact same motion as Tim Wakefield's knuckleball, I would deserve to be slapped, as this is one of the most erroneous observations ever to be made about baseball. But what if I was talking about video game baseball? If you strip away the names and likenesses for all of the pitchers in the league, would you still be able to differentiate Carlos Zambrano from Daisuke Matsuzaka, or Tom Glavine from Pedro Martinez? The answer is no. In every baseball game released thus far, all pitch types utilizes the same click-the-button to throw the ball mechanics. How potent these pitches are is dictated solely by backend statistics. Outside of placing pitches and gauging their velocity, there really is no skill involved.

With MLB 2K8, players finally get to experience the art of pitching. You'll see how a perfectly thrown curveball can make a batter's knees buckle, and you'll also find out what goes through a pitcher's mind when a ball slips out of their fingers, hangs

■ Dontrelle Willis would have made a great figure skater
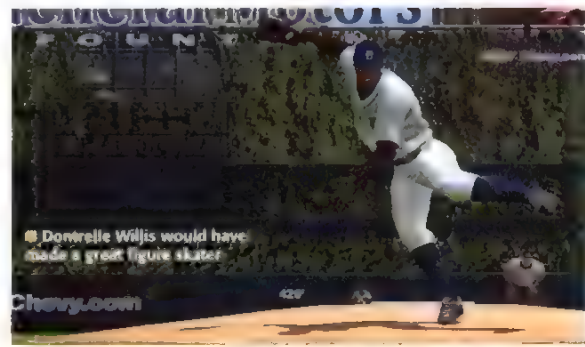
in the strike zone, and ends up in Earth's orbit. Developer 2K Los Angeles has done an amazing job of capturing these elements in the retooling of the pitching mechanic. Using the right analog stick to mimic the throwing motion creates a more skillful exercise that adds varying degrees of difficulty to the execution of each pitch type. To throw a curveball, you'll need to pull back on the analog, then rotate it in a forward motion to apply spin. The better you are at mimicking the required motion, the better the pitch and its placement. If you are off slightly, your pitch will break less, and will likely be off target as well. If you are way off, there's a good chance you'll throw a wild pitch, hit the batter, or serve up a meatball.

Given how greatly you have to focus on each individual pitch, MLB 2K8's pitching does require some serious skill, unless of course, you neuter the

CPU AI by adjusting the batting sliders and overall difficulty. On the other hand, batting will seem much easier, and it's not because a new system has been implemented. Rather 2K has improved its technology, meaning a batter, who could only make contact on three frames last year, can now get the bat on the ball on 13 to 16 frames. This subtle tweak allows players to feel more comfortable, as they can foul off pitches and adjust their timing to hit to the opposite field. Similar polish has also been added to fielding. The player's movements are more realistic, and the ball itself now has noticeable weight, which transitions into grounders taking erratic hops, and Texas Leaguers dropping in the shallow outfield rather than being caught. All across the diamond, this is an incredibly well-made game that is a true test of player skill.

It delivers new experiences with its gameplay, offers rewarding bonus content (playable minor league teams, and collectable baseball cards), and improves upon its already robust online play with an array of sorting options that will allow players to find the appropriate match-ups. The only area that needs work is Franchise mode. It's not bad, but it doesn't offer anything new. Up to this point, this generation's baseball has been about replicating the look of the game. With this release, it's now about replicating the game itself.——**REINER**

the edge
When All Games Aren't Created Equal

The PlayStation 3 version is not as polished, as evidenced in several strange fielding glitches, but it does offer more content...on the disc. Many of the unlockable jerseys and stadiums didn't fit onto the Xbox 360 disc, and can only be accessed via download. However, even if you don't have an internet connection, I would recommend going with the 360 version's tighter gameplay, fun Achievements, and rumble (which aids batting).

> **Concept:** Last year's focus was on the graphics. This year, 2K worked on the gameplay to create the most skill-laden baseball game to date

> **Graphics:** Some of the transitional animations jump a bit, and the crowd still consists of humanoid-like aliens, but the detail in the player models is the best in vid sports

> **Sound:** The announcers mostly cite the obvious, and rarely have anything interesting to say. In other words, this is trademark Joe Morgan

> **Playability:** Fundamentally sound, true to the sport, and above all, a blast to play

> **Entertainment:** Franchise mode offers a deep experience, but nothing new. The true excitement is on the field

> **Replay Value:** High

Second Opinion

You've got to take the bad with the good in MLB 2K8, but it's not such a terrible deal. The new pitching mechanic has all the promise of King Felix, but also dials in a rough first outing. It's difficult to get used to, and even after dozens of games the tuning feels off – at times it feels like the slightest mistake on an inside pitch results in a HBP. On the other hand, the on-field action has been improved in numerous subtle ways, particularly on defense. The addition of smart WPA graphs makes my inner stat nerd rejoice. However, 2K's failure to improve the irritating menu system, its often-baffling player ratings, and the fact that walks are nearly absent from the game are all very disappointing. This is definitely a solid sim franchise that keeps making strides in the right direction, and seeing a darn-near photorealistic #57 suit up in a Twins uni again is great, but the series still has a ways to go before being crowned the champ.—**ADAM**

Bloodshot is filled with many great screen effects, but sometimes they're a little overdone

> **Concept:** First-person action meets survival horror; can you handle it the second time around?

> **Graphics:** Better than ever, Bloodshot's levels are as gorgeous as if they are hideous

> **Sound:** Some haunting music and solid voice work help set the mood

> **Playability:** The combat is even more brutal than the first game, and the level layout is a little less confusing this time around

> **Entertainment:** A viciously fright-filled adventure. You might not understand the story, but you'll understand that you're scared

> **Replay Value:** Moderate

Don't worry, you wipe that "who farted" look off his face eventually

Throughout the game you'll find TVs and radios that give you additional snippets of Bloodshot's story

PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360

Condemned 2: Bloodshot

> **STYLE** PLAYER... ...RK OR XBOX LIVE) > **PUBLISHER** SEGA > **DEVELOPER** MONOLITH PRODUCTIONS > **RELEASE** ... > **ESRB**

Guns play a bigger part this time around, but still aren't the starring role

RUN FOR YOUR LIFE!

A nima rem... and ...th... ...t... underfoot as you make ...u... ...t hough the decayed rooms of an abandoned doll factory. A deserted flood light splashes your shadow across some peeling wallpaper. You hear mechanical dolls crawling towards you somewhere in the dark. Then miraculously, and without your consent, the shadow in front of you begins to move and you realize, with horror, that it doesn't belong to you.

Bloodshot is an atmospheric powerhouse haven't admired a game's environments its much since BioShock and the game has plenty of tense moments that will leave you hyper... and ...like a chubby marine about to charge ... make a each. Which is why – since Condemned excels ...well in certain areas – that it's a little sad the game falters, if only slightly, in a few other places.

Since we last saw him, the years haven't been kind to our hero Ethan Thomas. The former detective has fallen far from grace, landing heavily on alcohol and painkillers. Disheveled and far from sanitary, a possible lice infestation is the least of his worries. Thomas is haunted by his experiences from the first game, and the demons he's fighting are now are also internal. Some fans are bound to be turned off by this change, while the darker character might resonate better with others. However, as promising as the story may sound, Bloodshot's tale gets a little nonsensical and hard to follow near its conclusion.

Combat is a lot more interesting this time around as you have a wide variety of combos and a bigger selection of weapons to pick out of the environment. These are as diverse as exploding toy dolls, bowling balls, and museum broadswords. Knock an enemy to his knees and you'll get to perform an environmental kill on him as well. End level upgrades give you neat bonuses such as brass knuckles that make your fist attacks more powerful, or a holster that lets you store a pistol. It will take you a while to master all your talents, but it will be worth it.

Unfortunately, the crime scene investigations don't play as big a role as in the original. These scenes, where you track down the blood trail using a UV light or take photos of the murder victim, were my favorite part of the first game, so it's sad to see them downplayed. Instead, Bloodshot adds sections where you have to collect the correct information about a murder based on your observations. These sections are also pretty nifty, so it might be a fair trade off, after all.

Condemned 2: Bloodshot is probably the best survival horror title we've seen this generation. The online multiplayer modes aren't going to blow your mind, but they are a thoughtful addition. It's got a higher level of action than its predecessor, and some gorgeous horror backdrops. I don't want to spoil anything, but there is one moment in particular – where you find yourself alone in a deserted cabin suddenly running for your life – that will probably be one of the most memorable gaming moments of 2008. If you like survival horror, this is a no-brainer.—**BEN**

Monolith has improved its melee horror franchise in almost every way with Condemned 2. You may not be able to spam the stun gun this time around, but fortunately new combos, chain attacks, and environmental kills add more than enough depth and satisfying brutality to keep things interesting. Guns play a much larger role this time around. In fact, some stages provide enough weapons and ammo to shoot your way through the whole thing. These high-action sequences are well spaced between tense "what was that noise?" moments, vicious fisticuffs, and smart murder investigations. Here players will classify wounds, determine if the body was moved, and perform blood spatter analysis a la TV's *Dexter*. It's too bad that these sequences just fade away towards the end. Level variety is also a big plus here with scenes spanning a decrepit bowling alley, a freaky doll factory, and a seemingly BioShock-inspired magician's hall. Refreshing boss battles and pre-scripted events will have gamers talking – one specific chase scene already has my nomination for the moment of the year list. Unfortunately, the storyline moves from scary to silly, the final boss battle is a letdown, and the multiplayer and challenge modes are very mediocre. But don't let these things stop you from enjoying one of 2008's early gems.—**BRYAN**

■ C4 > Tank

XBOX 360 | PC

Frontlines: Fuel of War

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 50-PLAYER VIA XBOX LIVE OR 64-PLAYER VIA PC INTERNET OR LAN)
> **PUBLISHER** THQ > **DEVELOPER** KAOS STUDIOS > **RELEASE** FEBRUARY 25 > **ESRB** M

A WAR WITHOUT A HERO

For Battlefield fans, Kaos Studios needs no introduction. The upstart development team formerly known as Trauma Studios honed its game crafting skills on one of the most well polished and popular Battlefield mods of all time, Desert Combat. Frontlines: Fuel of War is the team's ambitious first attempt at making its own full-fledged game.

The single-player campaign follows a near-future tale of dwindling resources and escalating military tensions. Russia and China have joined as the Red Star Alliance, and the newfound group is in a global struggle with Western Coalition forces over the last remaining black gold on the planet. The story follows an embedded journalist as he tags along with the Stray Dogs infantry group, which is leading the push against the Reds.

The short single-player campaign may have a story, but with questionable AI on both sides of the battle and no epic gameplay experiences, the game plays more like a multiplayer mode filled with bots. Just like multiplayer games, missions often center on attacking and securing bases, radio towers, nuclear weapons, etc. The enemies feign smartness by attempting to flank, but will just as often turn tail and run. Your squad mates are equally useless; they will often sit idly in vehicles strapped to the core

with deadly weaponry rather than taking aim at enemies. They also rarely come to your assistance in battle. During the last mission in the game several Red Alliance tanks, helicopters, and soldiers moved toward Moscow's town center for one more retaliatory push, yet my fellow Stray Dogs were nowhere to be found.

On the battlefield, there is no shortage of ways to grease your enemies — machine guns, sniper rifles, grenade launchers, rocket launchers, C4, air strikes, tanks, helicopters, armored jeeps, and remote-controlled battlebots all aid you in your quest to smoke Big Red. While the gun combat is sharp, the land vehicles can be a chore to navigate, turning clumsily and often getting hung up on environmental objects they aren't visually touching. The large, open battlegrounds allow gamers to choose their points of attack, like climbing a tower, finding back entrances, or busting through the front door guns blazing. But these battles are broken up by loading screens between each segment of attack, which hurts the continuity of the action.

The multiplayer, on the other hand, is all about fun and fast-paced action. Battlefield 2 veterans will feel at home with the dedicated servers, squad-based action, and varied weapon kits, which feel

well balanced and offer players the opportunity to play to their strengths without having to endure a long weapon unlock process. The well-designed maps offer plenty of room for close-quarters skirmishes and vehicular combat. On the con side, Frontlines lacks a persistent ranking system, player customization, and medals for achievements like those found in the benchmark multiplayer-centric games like Battlefield 2, Call of Duty 4, and Rainbow Six Vegas. In a game so primed for playing online, this is an egregious omission. The game only ships with eight maps, which is also disappointing.

In the end, the Frontlines does enough to entertain on the multiplayer end to make up for the woeful single-player experience. It's a shame Kaos didn't scrap the single-player altogether to focus completely on honing the online experience.—**BERTZ**

BOTTOM LINE **7.25**

> **Concept:** Bring large scale FPS multiplayer to consoles and throw some gadget weaponry into the mix

> **Graphics:** The earth tone, near-future environments look okay, but no one will mistake this for Gears of War or Call of Duty

> **Sound:** Your standard cacophony of whizzing bullets and exploding vehicles

> **Playability:** Guns feel well balanced, but many land vehicles control like dump trucks

> **Entertainment:** The decent multiplayer counters the forgettable single-player campaign

> **Replay Value:** Moderately High

Second Opinion **7.75**

Whatever you do, don't buy this for the single-player. It's terrible. Online, however, has some decent potential to go along with its frustrations. The combination of loadouts (assault, anti-vehicle, etc.) and roles (ground support, EMP support, etc) lets players tailor their capabilities to the situation nicely and provides some fun toys like deployable turrets and special grenades. The maps are massive, and the bread-and-butter Frontlines gametype – which is effectively Battlefield's Conquest mode but with only a few active contested points – is relatively deep and interesting. Still, some issues keep this from being the new online hotness. Deployment load times, where after your respawn counter is up several seconds pass while you load back into the map, are a constant irritation. Vehicles control poorly, and the lack of party-based matchmaking bites. Even so, Frontlines pulls off its massive online battles well enough to scratch that particular itch, if not much else.—**ADAM**

The weapons feel great
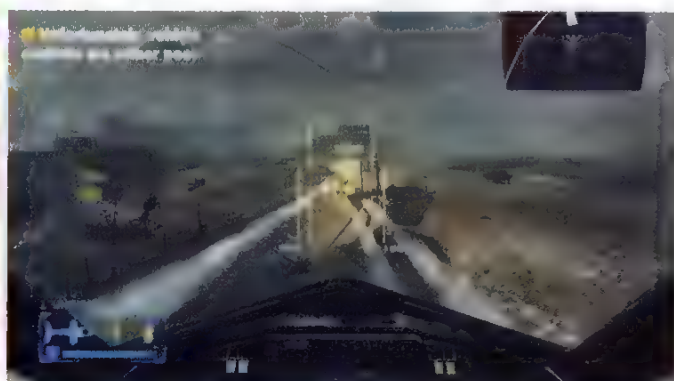
XBOX 360 | PLAYSTATION 3 | PC

Turning Point: Fall of Liberty

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 8-PLAYER VIA PLAYSTATION NETWORK, XBOX LIVE, OR PC INTERNET) > PUBLISHER CODEMASTERS > DEVELOPER SPARK UNLIMITED
> RELEASE FEBRUARY 26 > ESRB T

A STEP BACK IN TIME

BOTTOM LINE 3

Try as I might, I can't come up with a single redeeming quality in Turning Point. The subject matter, alternate history or no, is worn wafer-thin. The controls are poorly laid out and the analog stick sensitivity feels off no matter which setting you choose. Level layout is a study in tried-and-true on-rails FPS design. It feels like somebody decided it would be a good idea to combine everything that hasn't worked from the entire Call of Duty franchise and package it together into a game. It's even got the crappy minigames from CoD 3!

Normally, any modern FPS is entertaining in a basic sense because the genre's conventions are so set that it's easy to jump in and have a good time shooting bad guys. Not so in Turning Point – the control problems muck up the most ground-level aspects of the genre. The game doesn't even get this elementary concept right, which makes its myriad other failures all the more unforgivable.

The only thing worse than suffering through poor controls in unoriginal settings is doing so on objectively bad levels. First-person platforming is bad enough, but having to do so on maps saturated with invisible walls and lame climbing sections is salt in the wound. Long load times after a death are irritating; coming b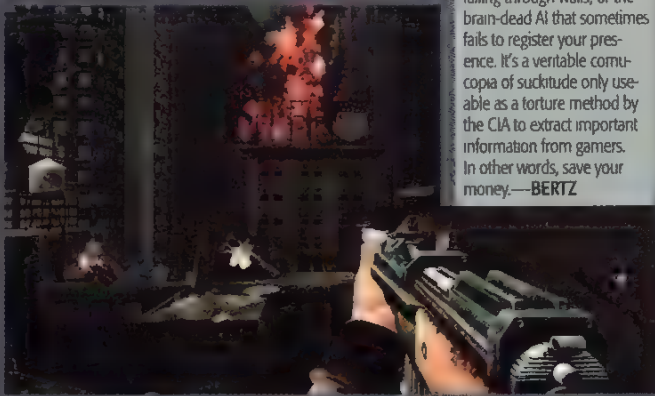ack into the game to find you hadn't crossed a checkpoint in the last 20 minutes is maddening. Turning Point has all this and more.

With the number of average-to-outstanding FPS titles available on next-gen consoles, there's absolutely no reason to waste your time with this disaster.—ADAM

> Concept: It's a WWII shooter...or is it?! Nazis invade America in this alternate history FPS

> Graphics: Explosions look cool. Other than that, there aren't too many nice things to say

> Sound: Firearms sound odd but the score is fantastic

> Playability: Who decided that vertical aiming should go twice as fast as horizontal aiming, and that none of the sensitivity settings should feel decent?

> Entertainment: This lame effort has no place in a genre as overpopulated as wartime FPS

> Replay Value: Low

Second Opinion 3.5

It's tough to pinpoint the worst trait of Turning Point. You could go with its stupid reimagining of World War II, painfully linear level design, sloppy player movement that finds your character constantly hung up on objects while moving through the boring environments, terrible iron sights that tend to block out your target, the broken clipping that has soldiers falling through walls, or the brain-dead AI that sometimes fails to register your presence. It's a veritable cornucopia of suckitude only useable as a torture method by the CIA to extract important information from gamers. In other words, save your money.—BERTZ

PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360 | PC

Conflict: Denied Ops

> STYLE 1 OR 2-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 16-PLAYER VIA PLAYSTATION NETWORK, XBOX LIVE, OR PC INTERNET) > PUBLISHER EIDOS
> DEVELOPER PIVOTAL GAMES > RELEASE FEBRUARY 12 > ESRB M

PUTS THE 'SPECIAL' IN SPECIAL FORCES

BOTTOM LINE 5.75

Denied Ops ditches the third-person perspective and squad-based tactics used in previous Conflict titles in favor of the first-person camera and a team of two testosterone junkies. The story is your standard doomsday Clancy clone where some evil foreigners are plotting to unleash destructive weapons on the free Western world. Your duty as cookie-cutter Special Forces dude is to stop them before they hatch their dastardly plans to wipe out our Wal-Marts while quipping cheesy one-liners that would make Arnold Schwarzenegger choke on his cigar.

The lone highlight of Denied Ops is the co-op campaign. The two characters have fixed arsenals – one has a sniper rifle with a shotgun attachment, and the other brandishes a machine gun and rocket launcher. When playing alone you can simply switch to the character that has the gun you prefer for that particular scenario, but in co-op you're locked into one of the two weapons classes.

The heart of the gameplay in Denied Ops, combat, suffers from poor calibration. It takes way too long to move between your standard vision and your gunsight, the blast damage from explosions laughably lacks impact on enemies, and your foes can take more bullets in the chest than Tony Montana before they go down. The AI also lacks polish; enemies display the intelligence of a common lab rat, running to the meat grinder posing as a cover position where three comrades just got greased.

When playing solo, commanding your second squadmate proves to be ineffective; they rarely heed your instructions on where they should find cover, and will often lag behind in a room you cleared out long ago. Also, when you are trying to target objectives you want your AI partner to pursue, like gathering ammo or planting a C4 charge, issuing commands is too finicky.

Don't expect anything special from the multiplayer, either. Denied Ops offers the bread and butter of deathmatch, team deathmatch, and conquest, but nothing about this tacked-on feature set stands out. I suppose you could say the same thing about the entire game.—BERTZ

> Concept: Fight terrorism with a wisecracking Special Forces duo

> Graphics: Bland graphics, poor character animations, and unimpressive destructible environment effects

> Sound: If these writers were on strike, they should have stayed there. The dialogue is atrocious

> Playability: Slow sights and touchy squad controls combine with lackadaisical AI

> Entertainment: Nothing to see here folks, move along

> Replay Value: Moderately Low

Second Opinion 6

There's really not much to say about Conflict: Denied Ops. Everything from the presentation to the controls is more of what we've been exposed to over and over again from the tactical FPS genre for the last several years. I can't hate it any more than I can give much of a crap about the Baltimore Orioles – both are so far from greatness yet not laughably bad that it's nearly impossible to come up with any strong feelings on the matter. Gamers in need of another run-of-the-mill terrorist hunt won't curse Conflict for sucking away their money and time, but at the same time I can't think of a single person I'd recommend this to. Nobody talks about those serviceable pancakes they made for breakfast the other day, and nobody will be talking about Conflict either.—ADAM

XBOX 360 | Wii

Bully: Scholarship Edition

> **STYLE** 1 OR 2-PLAYER ACTION > **PUBLISHER** ROCKSTAR GAMES > **DEVELOPER** ROCKSTAR VANCOUVER
> **RELEASE** MARCH 3 > **ESRB** T

BACK TO SCHOOL

Dripping with the trademark satire and biting wit of a true Rockstar classic, Bully is just as fun now as it was more than a year ago on PS2. It's an irreverent and unapologetic snipe at the silliness and foibles of life in secondary school, while it simultaneously embraces the fond nostalgia most of us have for those days. A few new missions, a bare bones multiplayer mode, and updated graphics are all nice additions, but none of them give Bully the sheen of a true next-gen game. Despite this, Scholarship Edition stands strong on the merits of its clever gameplay, brilliantly realized locale, and a willingness to skewer every schoolyard stereotype imaginable.

Bully's gameplay is remarkably straightforward, rarely veering off the traditional open world formulas. Plenty of missions are fetch quests and protection jobs, but each one is cleverly disguised under a veneer of cunning narrative. A few objectives offer more unique challenges, like stealth missions sneaking into the school, bike races, or panty raids on the girl's dorm. Regardless, there's always something to do or a new activity to try. Pacing is perfectly handled – just when a location or situation is starting to feel stale, something new pops up to draw your attention. It's in this element of gameplay that this new Scholarship Edition takes the biggest strides. By adding just a few more classroom activities and some new missions to periods in the game that previously felt a little barren, it feels like the puzzle is finally complete. It's easy to adopt that "just one more mission" approach while playing, and that's a good thing.

There are some notable frustrations that are more noticeable now on a next-gen console than they were on the PS2. Frequent loading sections as you move in and out of buildings, enter conversations, and other events are a pain. Characters in the world regularly wig out and start walking into walls or glitching as they bump into each other. It feels just a tad technically unpolished beside a gameplay package that feels so solid.

Much will be made of the addition of local multiplayer, but I'm not convinced it adds that much. In one-vs-one tournaments, you get to tackle sets of minigames, from speed photography to who can best dissect an animal in biology. It's a clever and amusing diversion, but you'll be back into the single player pretty quickly, if I have my guess.

Bully was a fantastic release late in the life of the PS2, and I'm pumped that the folks I know who've become gamers this generation now have a chance to experience it for themselves. For those of us who've already had our fun the first time, I'm not sure a second run at high school is really in order.—**MILLER**

the edge
When All Games Aren't Created Equal

While the actual game content is the same across both the 360 and Wii versions of Scholarship Edition, there are some notable differences in the controls. On Wii, you'll be handling a lot of actions with various gestures – in particular, some of the melee combat motion controls start to feel frustrating to pull off later in the game. Controlling the camera is also iffy on the Wii. Meanwhile, the 360 version had a couple of sound and frame hiccups in the version we played, but more traditional controls and an edge in graphics might nonetheless make it the preferred choice.
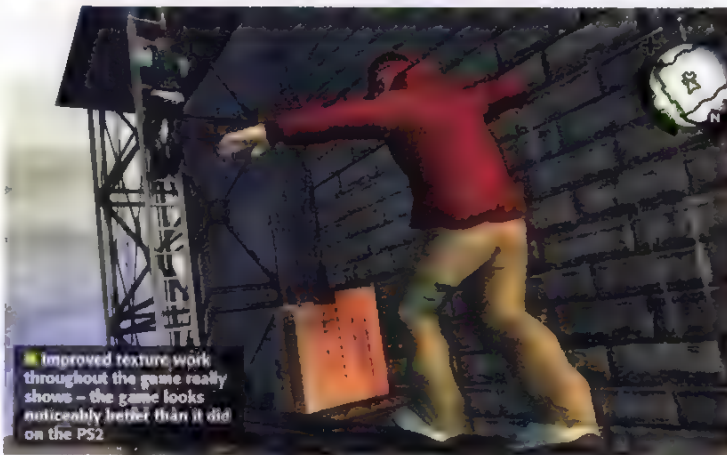
Improved texture work throughout the game really shows – the game looks noticeably better than it did on the PS2

The world of Bully is brilliantly laid out, communicating a broad sense of scale and exciting locales while keeping everything accessible and nearby

While the additions don't profoundly change the game, repeat players will notice everything from new clothes to new missions

Second Opinion 8.5

Bully doesn't even come close to simulating a realistic school environment. I mean, I actually enjoyed going to class. I even enjoyed the new classes, and made sure I was always on time. That never happened in real life. Then again, it's Bully's embrace of the absurd and its satirical lens that makes the game such a vividly enjoyable world to live in. The mission variety is just what you'd expect from a Rockstar game, since you'll be pulling Halloween pranks one minute then sneaking in the girl's dorm or playing the drum in the Christmas pageant the next. The fighting mechanic still hasn't grown on me (especially the Wii version which has some sensitivity issues) and the graphics are understandably dated. It's hard to say that the few new additions makes this version worth picking up for those who already played Bully on PS2, but if you missed it the first time, this is the better package.—**BEN**

PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360

Lost: Via Domus

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ADVENTURE > **PUBLISHER** UBISOFT > **DEVELOPER** UBISOFT MONTREAL > **RELEASE** FEBRUARY 26 > **ESRB** T

In addition to conversing with the Lost cast, you can trade with them. In my game, I handed Sawyer a few cans of beer. He coughed up a handgun.

NOT MUCH OF A GAME, BUT ONE HELL OF AN EPISODE

Lost isn't just a television show for me. It's an obsession that could clinically be deemed unhealthy, but until a psychiatrist tells me that I have a serious problem, I'm going to continue viewing it as awesome. If you share a similar appreciation for this show, and often find yourself viewing an episode frame-by-frame to see if anything is hidden in the backgrounds, you absolutely need to play Via Domus. This game expands the show's fiction and reveals a few mind-blowing twists, including one that has completely altered all of my theories about the show. As of the time of this writing, it is one of the biggest reveals yet.

The game also does a great job of bringing you into the world of the survivors of Oceanic Airlines flight 815. Being able to explore their campsite or micro-analyze every detail in the hatch is something fans will certainly love. The game also follows the show's presentation verbatim, and is broken up into episodes complete with playable flashbacks and "previously on Lost" introductions. Although the character you play isn't actually in the show, his story is nicely penned, and again, adds another layer to the highly debated mythos. In terms of capturing the Lost experience, the only area where the game stumbles is in how it handles the existing characters. You'll get the chance to chitchat with most of them, but most of their dialogue is terse and completely void of their personalities. Ubi did a great job of making the world feel alive, but its inhabitants are more like creepy Disneyland animatronics than the finely established characters you know. With Locke sounding like

a drunken Walter Matthau and Jack seemingly suffering from a nasal problem, the voice acting is equally as poor.

I'm not sure how Ubisoft managed to pull it off, but this game is mostly void of gameplay. What's odd is it never really seems to be an issue. Most of your time is spent exploring the locations from the show and soaking in mysteries of the island. They even equip you with a camera so, like an annoying super-fan, you can snap photos of iconic things, like the numbers on the hatch. At certain points in the story, you'll play through flashback sequences, which only involve talking and taking photos, and also action sequences, such as running through the jungle to avoid the smoke monster, or…well…running through the jungle to avoid The Others' gunfire. These sequences are handled nicely, but they usually only last for a few seconds, and really don't offer a deeply satisfying experience. There is little gunplay, too. And when I say little, I mean you only have to fire three shots in the entire game. As sparsely used as it is, you have to tip your hat to Ubi for delivering a finely polished targeting system. In total, the game offers five to six uneventful hours of gameplay, yet five to six hours of full-on Lost fan service.

It's more of an interactive episode than a game. If you don't know anything about Lost, don't play this game. It'll ruin the show for you, and will likely bore you to death. Conversely, if you love the show and want to know everything, this should be the next game you play. The big reveals are well worth the time you put in.—**REINER**

| BOTTOM LINE | **6.75** |

> **Concept:** Ubi seemed more intent to make an interactive episode than a game. It won't bring newcomers into the Lost world, but it has a lot to offer to long-term fans

> **Graphics:** The environments are small, yet remarkably detailed. The jungle is an amazing sight, and little secrets are scattered everywhere for fans to find

> **Sound:** The intense Lost music is ever present. However, only a handful of the show's actors lend their voices

> **Playability:** Outside of walking and running, there really isn't much gameplay here

> **Entertainment:** It's a nice companion to the show, but not much of a game

> **Replay Value:** Low

Second Opinion 7.25

With most license-based games, there's an attempt to make it at least palatable to those without an intimate familiarity with the story and characters at hand. Such is not the case with Via Domus, a game squarely targeted at the hardcore followers, and it pays off. It makes what would otherwise be a pretty iffy design premise into a narrative I followed with rising urgency. The revelations to show followers are pretty profound, but the gameplay that gets you there is questionable at best. Between a repeated math-based fuse puzzle and long periods of wandering the jungle without knowing what to do, the game world feels lifeless – a funny thing, because this should be a universe teeming with vibrant island life and larger-than-life personalities. Taken as a whole, it's an odd mix of good and bad. Think of it like a restaurant with great ambience, a fantastic chef, and too little food on the plate when it arrives at your table.—**MILLER**
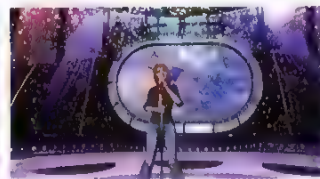

XBOX 360 | Wii | PLAYSTATION 2

Karaoke Revolution
Presents: American Idol Encore

| BOTTOM LINE | **7.5** |

> **STYLE** 1 TO 8-PLAYER MUSIC (2-PLAYER VIA XBOX LIVE) > **PUBLISHER** KONAMI
> **DEVELOPER** BLITZ GAMES > **RELEASE** FEBRUARY 5 > **ESRB** E

This is one of those games where the value to you the consumer should have very little to do with that little number I've attached. If you love both sing-alongs and American Idol, I think you'll be pleased. A fine selection of songs (all done up as pretty awful cover versions) can keep you singing for hours and hours, and the American Idol content is present in full effect, from Simon's backhanded compliments to Paula's effusive praise. Online play is a great bonus for 360 owners, while PS2 players with an EyeToy can input their own faces. As an overall karaoke gaming mechanic, I'd really like to start seeing word detection and some options for improvisation included. For less-critical gamers who just want to imagine they're auditioning and then going on to Hollywood and a dubious claim to fame, then this should be all you wanted and more.—**MILLER**

XBOX 360 | Wii

Jumper: Griffin's Story

| BOTTOM LINE | **1.75** |

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION > **PUBLISHER** BRASH ENTERTAINMENT > **DEVELOPER** RED TRIBE
> **RELEASE** FEBRUARY 13 > **ESRB** T

To all the truck drivers out there who are transporting copies of Jumper: Griffin's Story to retail, please redirect your shipments to Alamogordo, New Mexico. You'll know you are in the right location when you see thousands of E.T. cartridges moving out of the way to make room for your shipment. Jumper fails on all fronts; animation, sound, level design, control, combat, storytelling, balancing, item management…all of it. It can also be completed in approximately two hours. Initially, I had this listed as another one of its problems, but if you make the mistake of playing this game as I have, I think you'll agree its short length is its most praiseworthy aspect.—**REINER**

XBOX 360

The Spiderwick Chronicles

| BOTTOM LINE | **6.5** |

> **STYLE** 1 OR 2-PLAYER ACTION > **PUBLISHER** SIERRA > **DEVELOPER** STORMFRONT STUDIOS
> **RELEASE** FEBRUARY 5 > **ESRB** E10+

Eragon developer Stormfront takes on fantasy once again with decent results. The above-average visuals work well with an excellent soundtrack (taken from the film), hi-def movie clips, and not-so-bad voice work (except for super-rhymer Thimbletack). The basic melee combat could benefit immensely from a lock-on button. Catching and painting new faeries in the Field Guide starts out enjoyably enough, but eventually becomes a necessary hassle. The limited inventory system often forces you to waste items to make room, and multiplayer is a complete waste – unless prancing through the fields collecting faeries with a net is your cup of tea. However, for a children's movie licensed game you could do a lot worse.—**BRYAN**

Twisted Metal: Head On: Extra Twisted Edition

> **STYLE** 1 OR 2-PLAYER ACTION > **PUBLISHER** SONY > **DEVELOPER** EAT SLEEP PLAY > **RELEASE** FEBRUARY 5 > **ESRB** T
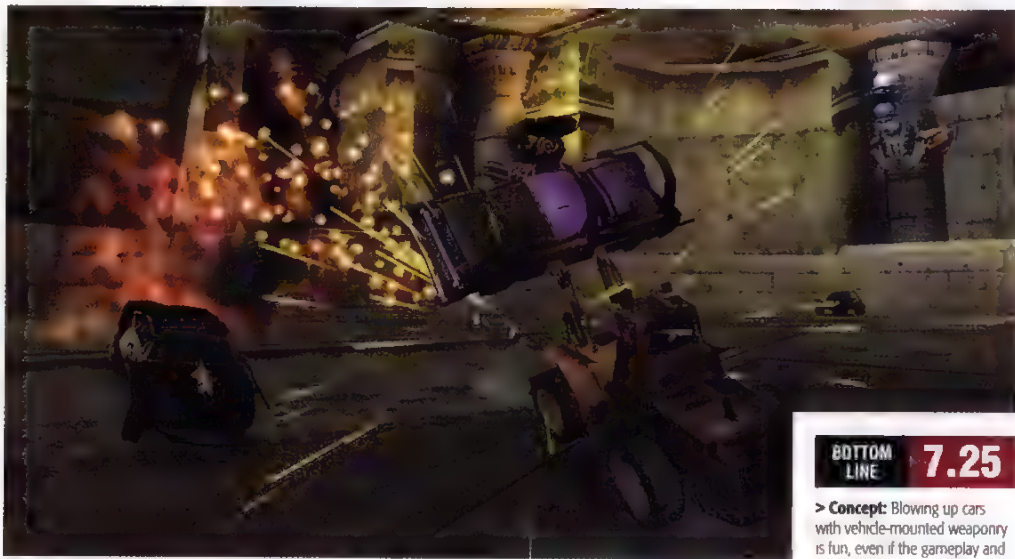
BEEN THERE, PLAYED THAT

Twisted Metal makes for a hell of a fun idea. Ignore the realities of how it might work, and revel in the glory of cars mounted with missile launchers and machine guns. This final PS2 installment doesn't move the franchise forward, but it does take us all along for a ride into its past. With a collection of goodies for fans of the franchise, this budget-priced game offers some thrills but fails to stand particularly well on its own.
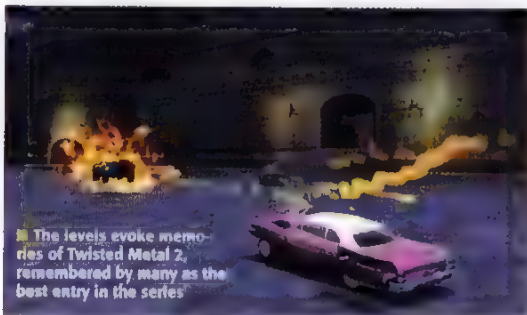
The meat of the gameplay lies in a port of the PSP game Head-On, minus the ability to play online. Many of the levels are excellently designed, allowing for wide, roaming battles across expansive environments, and then funneling characters into bottlenecks of high-octane action.

The second major component of the game is levels built but never released, ostensibly for the Twisted Metal Black sequel. Packaged as the unfinished work of developers who died before completing the project, the fiction feels

The levels evoke memories of Twisted Metal 2, remembered by many as the best entry in the series

more than a little in poor taste. Regardless, the included levels are grim and exciting, and make for a fitting return to the Black visual style.

Throughout both games, the combat is fast and frantic, and the various imaginative characters remain well balanced against each other – a hallmark of the series. The limited two-player multiplayer could have been aided by some other modes beyond deathmatch and co-op, of which the latter is the more satisfying in these large arenas. An excellent retrospective video on the franchise and some hilarious-because-they're-so-bad ending videos from the original PlayStation game are the best of the extras. The whole game would have made for perhaps the greatest bonus disc in history if it were packaged in with the inevitable PS3 Twisted Metal sequel. As it is, this edition has some trouble being more than a piece of history.—**MILLER**

14003 P-GC
Lv 3

Headbutt

XBOX 360

Lost Odyssey

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ROLE-PLAYING GAME > PUBLISHER MICROSOFT GAME STUDIOS > DEVELOPER MISTWALKER/FEELPLUS > RELEASE FEBRUARY 12 > ESRB T

IMMORTAL BELOVED

■ The biggest problem here isn't the dinosaur headbutt. It's the fact that Jansen is in the party. You should ditch that Dork of the Year candidate as soon as possible

Status	HP	MP	
Kaim	8727	532	
Seth	8375	728	
Jansen	3465	959	
Cooke	1520	470	
Mack	2401	505	

> **Concept:** A classically styled and thematically mature RPG from Final Fantasy creator Hironobu Sakaguchi

> **Graphics:** The entire world is beautifully conveyed through gorgeous graphics and cinematics

> **Sound:** An exemplary soundtrack by Nobuo Uematsu, and the voice acting is solid across the board

> **Playability:** Loading and other technical issues can interrupt the immersion, but all of the gameplay systems work well together

> **Entertainment:** As long as you have a tolerance for traditional Japanese RPGs, the interesting characters and the cool combat will keep you glued to your controller

> **Replay Value:** Moderate

Lost Odyssey is Mistwalker's answer to Final Fantasy. More accurately, it is Mistwalker's answer to Final Fantasy X. Unmistakable similarities can be seen throughout the entire game, from the tech-infused fantasy art style to the strategic flow of combat. Hironobu Sakaguchi may have left Square, but his enthusiasm for making Final Fantasy is still running hot through his veins. Whether you view this game as derivative or see it as the ultimate fan service, it's impossible to ignore this heartfelt story. It's wondrously contemplative, and backed by strong character performances. The cinematography is also breathtaking, but surprisingly, some of the most emotional moments come from pages of text. While the combat system could be entered into the dictionary as the definition of cookie cutter RPG, I did get some big kicks out of the composite magic system and reflex-based ring attacks. It also offers a nice variety of monsters and a handful of great boss fights. World exploration is as linear as can be, but the sights are simply stunning and the interactivity you have with your surroundings can be quite fun. In the end, Lost Odyssey won't change your perception of RPGs, but rather remind you of why you love them.—**REINER**

T he RPG genre as a whole is one of the most conflicted in gaming today. It is built on conventions that are over 20 years old, and as much as role-playing titles thrive on these traditions, developers also struggle against them, attempting to find new and innovative ways to engage gamers. This is not a battle that Lost Odyssey fights. The latest epic from RPG legend Hironobu Sakaguchi is not diplomatic, and doesn't attempt to find a middle ground between convention and innovation, it sides with convention all the way. The result is a rich experience replete with classic gameplay, familiar mechanics, and one of the most compelling tales ever told on the Xbox 360.

From the skill system of Final Fantasy V to the timing-based attacks of Shadow Hearts, it is easy to feel the influence of the past on Lost Odyssey. While the basic battle options aren't too surprising (attack, magic, defend, etc), Mistwalker has made a few attempts to expand the traditional elements. The ring system tests your reflexes during standard attacks, and it opens strategic options based on the weaknesses of your enemies.

Some of the best tactical moments surface when the plot leaves you with an unconventional party, like four mages and no fighters. In cases like these, the clever skill system really shines. Mortal party members follow a pre-set progression, and the immortals learn skills from the mortals, which can then be assigned however you see fit. Throughout the course of the game, this results in the perfect balance of specialized characters and those with more versatility.
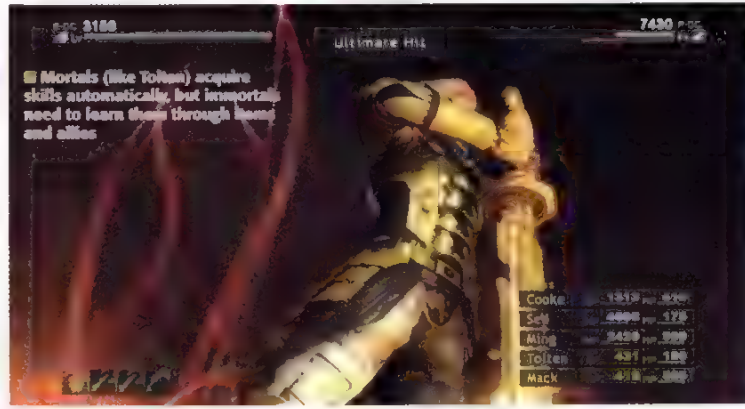
What really takes center stage in Lost Odyssey (especially in contrast to Mistwalker's last title, Blue Dragon) is the story. The immortal warrior Kaim is one of the most intriguing RPG protagonists I've played, and his dispassionate detachment is a far cry from the usual gotta-save-the-world hero. The universe he and his companions inhabit is a visually stunning fusion of fantasy and steampunk, and it serves as an excellent backdrop for the game's major revelations. Why Kaim has lived so long, how the immortals relate to each other, and how they lost their memories are just a few of the mysteries that make this adventure much more surprising than its traditional structure may lead you to believe.

While the nostalgic gameplay formula serves Lost Odyssey well, there are several technical elements that seem like conspicuous oversights in a modern RPG. The loading times are lengthy and frequent; after an encounter begins, it can take as long as 15 seconds before you get control. Then there's the superfluous action queue that appears only *after* you input your commands, so you can't use it to inform any combat decisions. The overall

■ Kaim is one of the coolest heroes in recent memory

balance is also a little off, with an unusual emphasis on heavy casting -- a problem since MP is an expensive and finite resource. These annoyances were frustrating in the moments I had to deal with them, but ultimately did very little to disrupt my enjoyment of the game as a whole.

As thankful as I am that there are role-playing titles that strive to innovate, I am also glad that games like Lost Odyssey are still being made. It is a testament to the philosophy that time-tested concepts, when implemented well, can be just as gratifying as they were at the genre's inception.—**JOE**

■ If you time it right, you can use the ring system to maximize damage

■ Mortals (like Tolten) acquire skills automatically, but immortals need to learn them through items and allies

Dream On

...join...00 years as a wanderer. These sequences, which are basically just text scrolling over a number of static background images, are simultaneously highlights and missed opportunities... presentation is disappointing given the fact that most of the scenarios would have...standing cutscenes. On the other hand, the text is wonderfully written, and I love how... develops the characters. Still, the content could have been much enhanced by showing (in addition to simply telling) these stories.

Dark Messiah of Might & Magic: Elements

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION/RPG (UP TO 10-PLAYER VIA XBOX LIVE) > **PUBLISHER** UBISOFT > **DEVELOPER** ARKANE STUDIOS > **RELEASE** FEBRUARY 12
> **ESRB** M

The action is great, but get used to killing a lot of the same enemies

KEEPING THE FAITH

This Might & Magic spinoff has received quite a few tweaks in the year and a half between its initial PC appearance and this Xbox 360 release. Its amusing core of brutal first-person melee action is intact and with one exception, the changes for this version enhance and expand the experience enough to make it worth your time.

Peripheral fluff like picking up collectibles aside, Dark Messiah's gameplay revolves around finding creative ways to dispatch your enemies. Coming up with and executing a plan of attack tailored to your abilities and the situation stays fresh and entertaining throughout the game. For example, the archer might knock one guy into a fire with a flying barrel, bait a few more into an explosive trap, and finish off the rest with bow and dagger. An assassin could distract the sentries by throwing a pot into a dark corner, sneak up and stealth-kill a few baddies while the others are investigating the sound, and then take them out as they come back to check the inert corpses of their allies. The classes play very differently from each other, and exploiting their unique abilities is great fun.

Unfortunately, the free-form skill tree of the original game has been scrapped in favor of those classes. While all four classes are well-designed, the freedom to build up a hero however you wished is missed. The other minor changes from the PC version – collectible relics, improved inventory management, and a few new levels – are welcome, but not terribly impactful.

If you can put up with the game's complete and total linearity and don't mind a largely forgettable multiplayer offering, there is a ton of brutal amusement to be had with Dark Messiah's excellent melee combat. The luster of physics-based gameplay may have worn off a bit over the last year and a half, but setting evildoers on fire is never boring.—**ADAM**

Depth-of-field effects lend an immediacy to melee combat

Zombies require a finishing move to be put down permanently

BOTTOM LINE **8**

> **Concept:** Bring 2006's first-person melee adventure to console

> **Graphics:** Spiffy depth-of-field and HDR lighting effects make the Source-powered visuals shine

> **Sound:** Voice acting is laughable, but the atmospheric score makes up for it

> **Playability:** The gameplay is well suited to gamepads, but intrusive aim assistance is sometimes irritating

> **Entertainment:** For all its minor flaws, Dark Messiah's unique brand of physics-powered death is endlessly amusing

> **Replay Value:** Moderate

Second Opinion **8.25**

Dark Messiah rewards the devious player. And by that I mean the game is at its most fun when you are carefully scouting out its environments and using them to your advantage. This could be something as simple as kicking an enemy into a wall of spikes, or it could be a more complicated event that has you sneaking around an enemy campfire, blowing out a support pillar, and watching a nearby wall collapse on everyone's head. Creative opportunities to take out your foes are hidden throughout the game, but they provide the game's highest thrills. It's unfortunate that in this action/RPG you don't get to control how your character levels up. The voice acting is generally awful, and the load times are a little long, but otherwise there is a lot to enjoy here.—**BEN**

A cinematic camera is available for when your only priority is watching the glorious destruction your fleet is dishing out

Planetary bombardment is pretty

PC

Sins of a Solar Empire

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER STRATEGY (UP TO 8-PLAYER VIA INTERNET OR LAN) > **PUBLISHER** STARDOCK
> **DEVELOPER** IRONCLAD GAMES > **RELEASE** FEBRUARY 4 > **ESRB** T

JOIN THE STRATEGY REVOLUTION

It's not terribly often that a developer attempts to mash two genres together and actually succeeds in creating something that's more than the sum of its parts. Sins of a Solar Empire, however, manages this complex task brilliantly. Injecting 4X concepts like a deep tech tree, massive military clashes, diplomacy, and infrastructure development into a real-time framework is a great idea on paper, but I never would have believed that it could translate to truly compelling gameplay if I hadn't seen it working here in Sins. A combination of smartly streamlined mechanics and a slick interface to control them with makes this experiment a resounding success.

In order to conquer the known galaxy, players have a number of concurrent tasks to accomplish. You've got to colonize available worlds, develop them to be economic assets instead of liabilities,

build and manage enormous fleets of starships, research improvements to both the civil and military sides of your empire, and ultimately wage interstellar war against rival civilizations. It sounds like a daunting undertaking, and it is. Fortunately, the pace of the game is best described as stately; any given improvement or research item takes minutes to accomplish and fleets can take a minute or more just to traverse the gravity well of a single planet. Along with the clever UI, this gives astute players just the right amount of time to keep up with every aspect of their dominion.

Along the left side of the screen, the innovative Empire Tree allows instant access to any of your assets. Once you learn to quickly read its compact icons, a quick glance to the left contains both

a status report on and a single-click method of selecting anything you own. For experienced players, it's not difficult to queue planetary developments and ship construction in a few seconds while zoomed into an intense space battle half a galaxy away. Furthermore, if you must tear your attention away from a conflict, the ship AI is reasonably competent at controlling your forces during your absence.

For all of its genius, Sins does have a few rough edges that can annoy from time to time. Maintaining

diplomatic relations with AI empires can be nearly impossible, as blowing up one of their many itinerant scout vessels resets their view of you to "undying hatred." Late-game battles can be difficult to control despite the generally good interface simply due to their enormous scale – it's not unusual to have hundreds of ships engaged in a single system. The relatively low number of available ship types and minor differences between the three races offer a merely acceptable level of breadth to the content. And while the presentation is functional and amazingly scaleable to lower-end PCs, Sins is average at best when it comes to visuals.

Overall, though, Sins is a highly polished, very original, and extremely fun strategy title. In only a few weeks since release, developer Ironclad Games has already released a few small patches that fix a number of minor issues, which bodes well for the game's future. This is one $40 investment that will pay PC gamers dividends for years.—**ADAM**

The vertical z-axis doesn't affect gameplay; the third dimension is just there for show

Second Opinion 9

Developer Ironclad has done a great job at delivering depth without sacrificing playability. It was kind of strange playing this game, because combat wasn't this nerve-wracking affair filled with mad hot key mashing. I was usually able to rely enough on the AI to sort things out that many times during battles I was off on other worlds building structures. But, that's not because combat's not cool, it's because this game excels at putting the many facets of its gameplay easily at your fingertips. Whether you're talking about using the HUD, inter-planetary trade, the bomber fleets of your capital ships, or upgrading the foundations of your dynasty, Sins does enough to keep your empire's trains running on time without making you feel like a bystander or overwhelmed. The only thing limiting your empire is your own ambition and ruthlessness. —**KATO**

■ Create up to four custom messages to communicate in online friend battles

Wii

Super Smash Bros. Brawl

GAME OF THE MONTH

> **STYLE** 1 TO 4-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 4-PLAYER VIA WIICONNECT24) > **PUBLISHER** NINTENDO
> **DEVELOPER** NINTENDO/GAME ARTS > **RELEASE** MARCH 9 > **ESRB** T

■ Bet on other online players in Spectator mode   Quick Brawl

Jackpot: 118 coins

SMASH IT UP

Super Smash Bros. Brawl is unquestionably the most anticipated game to come out on Wii. After all, why play as just one Nintendo hero when you can control almost all of them? Eclipsing the popularity of classic franchises via consolidation, Brawl effectively takes everything that made Melee great and improves upon it in subtle yet effective ways.

The combat system is practically identical to the previous iteration. While this will excite hardcore fans, players who never got into Melee will find little here that will change their minds. The nunchuk/remote control option is completely serviceable, but you're really going to want a GameCube or Classic controller to truly succeed. The sideways remote-only control scheme is a complete mess, and should only be used to put friends at a hilarious disadvantage.

Outside of alternate control options, the biggest change to core combat is the Final Smash. These icons randomly float through the air and encourage players to drop what they're doing and go for it. The first to grab it can unleash a satisfying over-the-top, screen-filling attack that may turn the tide of battle. Final Smashes do not, however, guarantee victory and can be turned off in multiplayer for concerned purists.

The dozen-plus new characters bring a little something fresh to the fight and are balanced well with the rest of the roster. Pikmin tamer Olimar gains stronger attacks as more little friends follow him around, Metal Gear's Solid Snake has a steerable Nikita missile shot, and Sonic utilizes his trademark speed in interesting ways. However, characters like Fire Emblem's Ike, Zero Suit Samus, and Mother's Lucas are slightly tweaked palette swap replacements of existing or former characters. It would have been nice to see more reimagined classic characters like Pit, but it's tough to complain when there's already this much variety.

New clever stage design is where you'll find most of the innovation in Brawl's battles. My particular favorites include arenas based on the constantly changing environments of WarioWare and Pictochat, and the side scrolling world 1-1 of the original Super Mario Bros. With the constant stream of unlocks, it always feels like you're getting a fresh backdrop to experiment in.

While Classic, Event, and Stadium modes return in similar form, the centerpiece this time around is the Subspace Emissary. This seemingly endless barrage of platforming stages and battles joins together the cast for one giant war against a mysterious enemy. An absurd amount of impressive pre-rendered cutscenes ranging from epic to just plain silly tie everything together, and will most likely be the primary incentive for many players to make it through the entire campaign. Essentially a 10-hour Classic

mode, this adventure gradually loses its promising luster through repeated environments, challenges, and enemies. Like most games out there, however, playing co-op style helps keep things fresh.

Online play is implemented about as well as it can be within Nintendo's structure. After going through the friend code hassle, Smash buddies can be easily browsed to see who's online. Friend battles include basically all the options of the offline mode, though true voice chat is disappointingly replaced by customizable phrases mapped to the d-pad. Facing off against strangers, however, is a different ballgame. You can't see anyone's name, communicate with them in any way, or customize your match outside of item toggling. Everyone's so devoid of personality that it's almost like you're fighting bots. The only match type available is a "2 minute KO-fest." No time options. No stock matches. The only thing you can definitively choose is your character.

Outside of the need for online improvements and a more concise and engaging campaign, Brawl still hits all the right buttons. With extremely tight controls and finely tuned balance, the core fighting mechanics and local multiplayer are spot on. There's still nothing like learning the intricacies of every character, discovering possibly the most unlockables in any game yet, and using all of that to beat the crap out of your friends late into the night.——**BRYAN**

■ This is only a small fraction of Smash's mind-boggling amount of unlockables

Please wait a moment...

■ Wallop a punching bag while you wait for online matches to begin

■ World 1-1: Desert Style

■ See that pudgy little kid in the center of the screen? Unfortunately, that's you
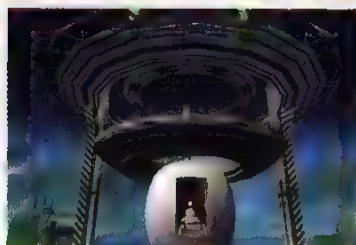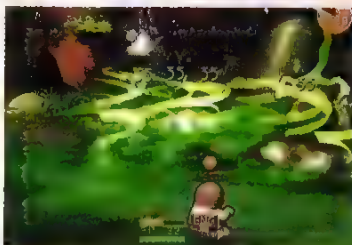
Wii

Opoona

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER RPG > **PUBLISHER** KOEI > **DEVELOPER** OMEGA FORCE ARTEPIAZZA
> **RELEASE** MARCH 25 > **ESRB** E10+

STOP FOR DIRECTIONS

If I'm going to get lost this often why can't it be on some tropical island with Evangeline Lilly? Seriously, your first several hours of Opoona will be spent wandering colorful hallways trying to figure out where you came from and how you should get back. It doesn't help that the game lacks a proper map system for its mazelike environments. Heck, half of Opoona's dialogue seems to be directions the characters have to give you just so you know how to get where you're going next.

Opoona's story is about a young boy, descended from a race of fierce intergalactic warriors, who finds himself crash-landed on the planet Landroll. Separated from his family he must search out his siblings. The game tries to incorporate some simulation and lifestyle gameplay into the mix. You build relationships with townsfolk and earn different licenses to take on certain jobs. In theory this sounds pretty cool. In practice, all your tasks are little more exciting then having a career in data entry.

Combat doesn't fare much better. This game is filled with annoying, tired conventions like having to put items in your pockets before you can use them on the battlefield. Opoona's Active Bonbon Battle system has you holding down the analog stick to charge up attacks and then flinging the ball above your head in different arcs to hit the monsters around you. Conceptually, I think the idea is passable, but it plays like a failed cell phone game experiment, and the gimmick gets old quick.

Stylistically, Opoona is actually kinda cool with some decent character designs, which begs the question: Why do you get stuck playing as a roly-poly little kid with a stupid ball floating over your head? The beautiful music is about the game's only saving grace. Just so you don't get lost yourself, here are some directions: Go to your local game store, hand the clerk your money, and buy something other than Opoona.——**BEN**

> **BOTTOM LINE** 5.5

> **Concept:** Make a frustrating and difficult maze game that was intended to be an RPG

> **Graphics:** Bright, beautiful, and detailed. These would be the game's most noteworthy elements except...

> **Sound:** ...the game's music is the best part. It would be worth buying if it didn't come with such a terrible game

> **Playability:** Boring, easy combat is offset by annoying, difficult-to-find objectives

> **Entertainment:** I'd leave this blank if I could, because sadly the game isn't entertaining

> **Replay Value:** low

Second Opinion 5

Mechanically, Opoona is a crappy RPG with shoddy combat, boring characters, and awful dialogue. More to the point, the story thrust of "do jobs for the colonists on the planet your ship crashed on to get enough resources for your parents to get the hospital treatment they need" makes me feel like an indentured servant doing lame odd jobs to get my family out of hock. If the combat were fun, the RPG progression elements interesting, or the story any good, I'd be willing to give this a pass for being original. Unfortunately, none of those are the case. The outstanding musical score isn't nearly enough to save Opoona from the weight of its crushing mediocrity.——**ADAM**

Wii QUICKIES

Wii

Bomberman Land

> **STYLE** 1 TO 4-PLAYER ACTION > **PUBLISHER** HUDSON
> **DEVELOPER** HUDSON > **RELEASE** JANUARY 29 > **ESRB** E
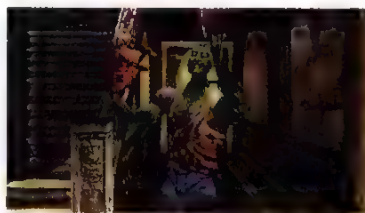

> **BOTTOM LINE** 6.5

Hudson, developer of the Mario Party and Fuzion Frenzy franchises, just can't stop making minigames. This time around, the bite-sized challenges themselves are relatively entertaining. Unfortunately, the packaging is not. The story isn't even up to fighting game standards, and the tournament structure encourages plenty of repetition and pointless running around. Character customization is tied to an advantageous style gauge, so rather than encouraging players to create their own look, Hudson has locked everyone into wearing the same high-value items. Fans will appreciate the classic versus bombfests and the multitude of modes and maps, but the lack of online play means many solo players will be stuck competing against lame bots.——**BRYAN**

Wii

House of the Dead 2 & 3 Return

> **STYLE** 1 OR 2 PLAYER ACTION > **PUBLISHER** SEGA
> **DEVELOPER** SEGA > **RELEASE** MARCH 11 > **ESRB** M

> **BOTTOM LINE** 7.5

With all the lightgun shooters making their way to Wii nowadays a rerelease of the old House of the Dead games seemed like a logical, maybe inevitable, conclusion. Although having a reticle onscreen does take away from some of the fun and "skill" of a lightgun shooter, these games still provide plenty of easy, cheap thrills just like they did so many years ago in the arcade. The ability to reload your gun by shaking the Wii remote is a nice touch, and you can also use the Wii Zapper if you're into that sort of thing (not that there is anything wrong with that). Then again, these games look fairly dated and the bonus content here is a little thin. Shooter fans who've already had their fill of Umbrella Chronicles and Ghost Squad might find this worth checking out.——**BEN**

Wii

Pinball Hall of Fame: The Williams Collection

> **STYLE** 1 OR 2-PLAYER ARCADE > **PUBLISHER** CRAVE ENTERTAINMENT > **DEVELOPER** FARSIGHT STUDIOS
> **RELEASE** FEBRUARY 22 > **ESRB** E

> **BOTTOM LINE** 8.5

When I was reviewing this game, Adam walked by my desk and commented, "Dude, I don't think I've seen you this addicted to a game in a long time." He might be right. There's something addictive about pinball, the way winning is a perfect mix of finely tuned skill and total luck. This museum titles features some of the most famous machines of all time, including the beloved Pin-Bot (although I came to prefer the excellent Taxi, a table I'd never played back in the day). This Wii version plays identically to the others (although it allows you to nudge with the motion controls), and that's a good thing. It's a hell of a lot of fun, and hardcore pinball fans will appreciate the special achievements and unlockables like hidden tables and original promotional pamphlets.——**MATT**

Wii

Sega Bass Fishing

> **STYLE** 1 PLAYER ACTION > **PUBLISHER** SEGA
> **DEVELOPER** SEGA > **RELEASE** FEBRUARY 26
> **ESRB** E

> **BOTTOM LINE** 5

I, like many of you, have fond memories of Sega Bass Fishing. Not only did I enjoy it in the arcades back in the day, it was also an instant must-buy for me on the Dreamcast back in 1999 with its wacky fishing controller. Problem is, like many of the games from that era, the game is extremely basic and time hasn't exactly done it any favors. There are some minor tweaks here and there for this Wii remake, most notably the use of the nunchuk for reeling in the lunkers, but nothing that stops this game from being extremely dated and lacking in content and variety.——**ANDY**

■ Angeal, Sephiroth, and Genesis are the elite among SOLDIER's ranks

> **Concept:** Learn more about the person Cloud thought he was for most of Final Fantasy VII

> **Graphics:** The in-game graphics are impressive, but the cutscenes and cinematics are just astounding

> **Sound:** Tons of familiar tracks, some okay new ones, and most of the voice cast from Advent Children reprise their roles

> **Playability:** Very simple, which is good and bad. It isn't very deep, but that just means it's easier to get to the story

> **Entertainment:** The gameplay may be repetitive, but it can still be fun in a mindless action sort of way

> **Replay Value:** Moderate

PSP
Crisis Core: Final Fantasy VII

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION/RPG > **PUBLISHER** SQUARE ENIX > **DEVELOPER** SQUARE ENIX > **RELEASE** MARCH 25 > **ESRB** T

PROVE YOUR DEVOTION

How much do you love Final Fantasy VII? If your answer is anything more enthusiastic than "It's okay," then you absolutely need to play Crisis Core. Even more so than Dirge of Cerberus, this addition to the Final Fantasy VII universe expands the fiction and has a significant impact on how you view the events of the original game.
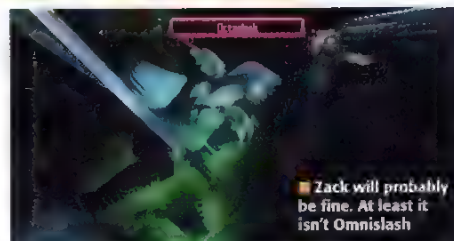
The price you pay for this illumination is about 12 hours of your life spent mashing one button on your PSP. As far as I'm concerned, it was worth it. Throughout the course of the story, SOLDIER 1st class Zack develops from a bit player into a full-fledged character, and you see the prominent role

he played in setting the stage before FF VII began. The plot also gives off a unique vibe that only prequels can provide; like the recent Star Wars movies, there is a constant sense of tragedy looming over the protagonist because we know his eventual fate. Unfortunately, the path you travel to guide Zack to that fate isn't exactly full of excitement.

Crisis Core is intriguing from a story perspective, but the mechanics of playing the game are far less engaging. You tromp through various maps, encounter enemies at every node, and slash through them using one-button combos. Magic and other special attacks are accessed by cycling through materia, but you'll usually do just fine with only your sword. There are dozens of side-missions to undertake, but they're all essentially the same task – wander a map, kill a specific monster – over and over. You don't even get experience from this grinding; all of the game's progression, from character level to materia strength, is done through random slot wheels. This arbitrary system also governs when you execute a limit break or a summon, though the specific move you perform is also random. This essentially robs the combat of any

strategy, but it keeps you barreling headfirst through the action. The sooner you cut down the bad guys, the sooner you get to the next cool plot point.

An interesting side effect of playing Crisis Core is a twinge of disappointment at the fact that those FF VII remake rumors haven't amounted to anything. Seeing how Crisis Core breathes new life into the captivating characters and locations from the classic RPG proves that it could be done phenomenally. Sadly, spin-offs that expand the FFVII mythology will have to suffice, but I sure wish they were more fun to play.——**JOE**

■ You'll face off against a couple forms of Bahamut

■ Zack will probably be fine. At least it isn't Omnislash

Sephiroth!
Yes, the most popular RPG villain of all time is a big part of the events in Crisis Core. Sephiroth may not be the game's primary antagonist, but Crisis Core gives you a chance to settle old scores by providing two awesome boss fights against Sephiroth. In fact, an entire chapter of the game is devoted to his defection and mental breakdown, which ultimately culminate in the incident at Nibelheim.
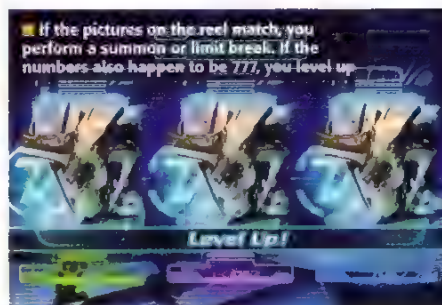
■ If the pictures on the reel match, you perform a summon or limit break. If the numbers also happen to be 777, you level up

Level Up!
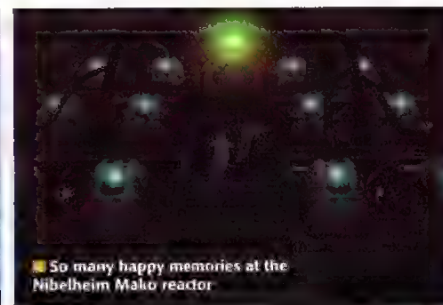
■ So many happy memories at the Nibelheim Mako reactor

Second Opinion 7

If you were to watch a movie and periodically pause it for five to ten minutes, you would, in essence, be creating an experience similar to the one I had with Crisis Core. This may seem like an odd analogy to make, but this game's combat system is just as uneventful as a movie's pause screen. Most of the battles can be completed without looking at the PSP's screen. With enemies exhibiting the liveliness of a stuffed sloth and your character automatically latching onto the next foe, it's just a matter of tapping the X button in succession. Gameplay this poor deserves to be tossed to the wolves, but the game itself isn't a complete loss. I enjoyed watching it. Like the motion picture *Advent Children*, the computer-generated movies knock you to the floor and smack you in the face with highly stylized crackerjack action. Zack's tragic tale is also the perfect companion to Final Fantasy VII. Once you play this, you'll want to jump right back into the PSone classic. So, if you've done everything but make love to your Final Fantasy VII discs, throw on your galoshes, because this story is worth trudging through the foulest of gameplay for.——**REINER**

No.001   0 PICARATS   COINS: 60

"My village is on a road that leads to no other towns. I look forward to seeing you there."

Use your stylus to draw a circle around the right village, and then touch Submit.

No.098   60 PICARATS   COINS: 60

Can you get the red ball out of the maze?

Slide obstructing blocks out of the way to clear a path for the ball.

This problem can be solved in as few as 12 moves.

NINTENDO DS

Professor Layton and the Curious Village

> STYLE 1-PLAYER PUZZLE > PUBLISHER NINTENDO > DEVELOPER LEVEL 5 > RELEASE FEBRUARY 12 > ESRB E

A PUZZLE WRAPPED IN AN ENIGMA

Professor Layton's developer, Level 5, has a pretty good track record in fusing exciting gameplay with an engaging story. This usually happens in an action/RPG context, so I was excited to play this game and see how the developer was going to turn its attention to the adventure/ puzzle genre. Unfortunately, Level 5's golden touch doesn't apply here because it didn't bother to use it.

Viewed simply as a whopping collection of over 130 puzzles, Layton does a good job in its selection and execution of its brain teasers. It's a fun adventure story as well. The problem here is that the two elements are never successfully merged. Sure, you come across puzzles while you're exploring the town of St. Mystere that you must solve before you

can advance the story, but the puzzles aren't directly related to what you've deduced from talking to the townspeople or to what's been happening in the plot. Despite Layton's prominent storyline, the puzzles don't service the story as they do in the Ace Attorney series or Hotel Dusk.

What's really frustrating about this game is that although the puzzles themselves are fun to figure out, all the big mysteries presented by the story are solved for you via cutscenes. The fact that you aren't allowed to actually solve the questions that have been on your mind all game long is simply a mistake. It takes all the wind out of your sails and even further renders null all the work you've been putting in.

With a sequel already out in Japan, there are many more mysteries for the Professor and his young sidekick Luke to solve, but it's Level 5 that has its own questions to answer.—KATO

BOTTOM LINE **7.5**

> **Concept:** Layton's a little more Brain Age than Ace Attorney, unfortunately

> **Graphics:** The game's clean style and memorable character designs help it come alive

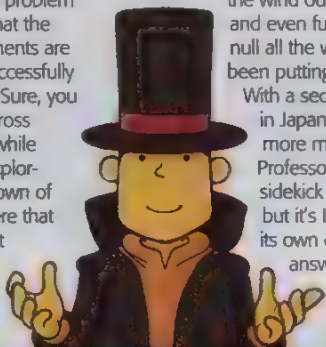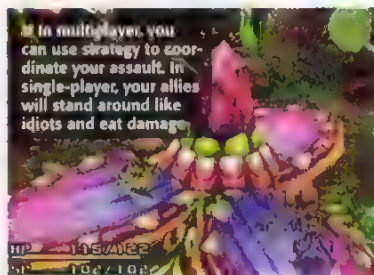> **Sound:** Major cutscenes contain voice actors, and the game's whimsical music is not bad

> **Playability:** For most puzzles the touch screen can be used as scratch paper, which comes in handy

> **Entertainment:** An impressive collection of puzzles, but not impressive enough to carry the game like they're supposed to

> **Replay Value:** Moderate

Second Opinion 8.75

Detective's journal entry #34: Three days past, I happened to chance upon a discovery of the most astonishing nature. A game by the title of Professor Layton made its way into my possession. The value to be found in the perplexingly small package is truly astonishing. This gem is filled to the brim with beautifully animated sequences, delightfully whimsical music, and an intriguing murder mystery all wrapped around one of the best collections of classic puzzles and riddles I have heretofore come across. The puzzles are the true prizes here, and some are so old they can be traced back for centuries. The only thing that shouldn't be in question here, my dear reader, is whether or not you should buy this game.—BEN

ANSWERS THAT LEAD TO MORE QUESTIONS
Nintendo has promised weekly puzzle downloads for the game through the first six months. During the game, you'll also collect painting pieces, currency, and parts for a robot dog. Of course, it's not like you use your robo-canine in the game. It just unlocks more...puzzles.

NINTENDO DS

Final Fantasy Crystal Chronicles: Ring of Fates

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION/RPG (UP TO 4-PLAYER VIA WIRELESS) > PUBLISHER SQUARE ENIX
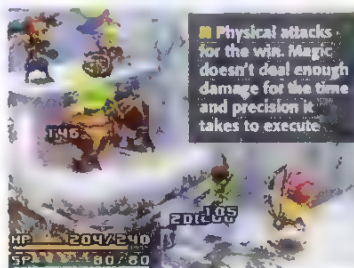> DEVELOPER SQUARE ENIX > RELEASE MARCH 11 > ESRB E10+

In multiplayer, you can use strategy to coordinate your assault. In single-player, your allies will stand around like idiots and eat damage.

There is no pause button, even in single-player.

KICKING THE BUCKET

I will always remember Crystal Chronicles for the GameCube as the Final Fantasy wannabe that made me carry around a stupid bucket. While that ignominious mechanic has been scrapped for this handheld follow-up, I can't say that my experience was improved over the disappointing original. Like that title, Ring of Fates is focused on multiplayer (though single-player is at least viable this time), but enjoying the game hinges on the player's willingness to sacrifice gameplay in order to play co-op with friends.

The critical mistake is how magic is handled. Spells are consumable items, not learned, and you can only hold a limited number. Normally this would just lead to conservative casting, except the spells also double as keys to open doors and make moving platforms appear. You can slowly replenish your stock at specific points using the gimmicky alchemy system, but the whole process mainly just

Meeth is one of the worst party members in the history of the Final Fantasy franchise.

Don't tell me-- We're in hell?! It can't be! B-but I'm a goodie! There's been a mistake!!!

encourages players to ignore magic as an offensive option.

Of course, if you ignore the magic, that means you need to focus on straight-up combat – which is another problem. Whoops. Movement and attacks are sloppy, and attempts to integrate DS-specific mechanics have gone terribly awry. The touch screen-based special abilities are useless unless you have competent teammates to run interference. In single-player, your AI companions would just as soon take constant damage by standing in fire than lift a sword to help you out.

Ring of Fates does provide the opportunity for you and three others to engage in Gauntlet-style dungeon exploration and lots of monster-killing. Even so, it's a poor excuse to round up the gang.

Physical attacks for the win. Magic doesn't deal enough damage for the time and precision it takes to execute.

Presumably, the reason why your friends are your friends is because you share some common interests. Do some of those together instead.—JOE

BOTTOM LINE **6**

> **Concept:** A reject in the Final Fantasy family tree soldiers on with a sequel

> **Graphics:** This is the only area where Ring of Fates truly excels. The visuals and cutscenes look good, and the action on-screen doesn't get too muddled

> **Sound:** There is a fair bit of voiced dialogue, but given its quality, I wish there weren't. The soundtrack serves its purpose, but isn't particularly memorable

> **Playability:** With such simplistic controls, it's a wonder that they can't be more accurate and responsive

> **Entertainment:** You need to sucker a friend into buying a copy with you if you hope to enjoy the game at all. Even then, it's barely worth it

> **Replay Value:** Moderate

Second Opinion 7

This is a more simplified and arcadey presentation of Final Fantasy than we're used to, but I can't say that it's all bad. In fact, the hack n' slash action can be pretty entertaining, particularly for new RPG players looking to enter the genre for the first time. Dungeons are large, but their design sometimes feels a little haphazard. Melee combat is satisfying while the magic system is peppered with problems. Aiming spells takes too long and the damage output is rarely worth the effort. The coming-of-age story feels tried and tired, but at least it is backed up by partial voiceover and a decent musical score. Meanwhile, four-player action is a kick for short sessions, even with some notable slowdown. Ring of Fates doesn't look so hot placed beside most other games with Final Fantasy in their titles, but on its own merits it isn't without its own charm.—MILLER

HANDHELD QUICKIES

Eco-Creatures:
Save the Forest

BOTTOM LINE 3

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER STRATEGY > **PUBLISHER** MAJESCO > **DEVELOPER** LIGHTWEIGHT/HEADLOCK CORPORATION > **RELEASE** MARCH 4 > **ESRB** E

A description of Eco-Creature's controls could easily read like a manual on how not to design an RTS. Instead of commanding all the action from some godlike, combat-immune point of view, you control a dumpy yellow monster who must lead his troops into battle. What makes this a bad design is the fact that you're terrible at combat and tend to die in two or three hits. Your troops, on the other hand, consist of attention deficit squirrels that may be able to hold their own in battle, but begin to wander off-screen when they have nothing to do. Given this game's insipid *Fern Gully* story and boring mission structure, the best way to win with Eco-Creatures is to not play.——**BEN**
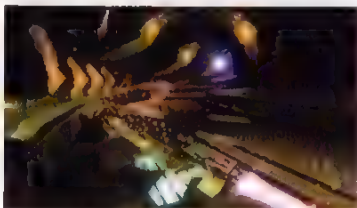
Wipeout Pulse

BOTTOM LINE 7.75

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER RACING (UP TO 8-PLAYER VIA AD HOC OR INFRASTRUCTURE) > **PUBLISHER** SONY COMPUTER ENTERTAINMENT AMERICA > **DEVELOPER** SONY COMPUTER ENTERTAINMENT EUROPE (STUDIO LIVERPOOL) > **RELEASE** FEBRUARY 12 > **ESRB** E10+

I adored Wipeout when it released on the PSone in 1995. I mostly enjoyed it in 2002 when the PlayStation 2 got its shot. I could still marshal some enthusiasm in 2005 when the franchise came to the PSP. In 2008, I'm ready for some change, and this isn't the game that is going to give it to me. While tech backdrops of futuristic cities are great, the fundamental racing mechanic has inched forward at a snail's pace, delivering an experience that is almost identical to every Wipeout game that came before. Thankfully, that core experience is totally solid and extremely invigorating, as it slowly works players up to faster and faster speeds until you feel like you can't possibly be in control. Online play is also a big plus. In summation: flashy beats, pretty streets, and breakneck speeds? Yes. Innovation? Not so much.——**MILLER**

Dungeon Explorer:
Warriors of Ancient Arts

BOTTOM LINE 6

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 3-PLAYER VIA AD-HOC) > **PUBLISHER** HUDSON > **DEVELOPER** HUDSON > **RELEASE** FEBRUARY 12 > **ESRB** T

The Dungeon Explorer franchise has its place in video game history, but there are reasons that it has sat dormant since its last appearance on Sega CD 13 years ago. Hudson's new PSP entry in the series (which is different from the DS title of the same name) offers hack n' slash dungeon delving of the simplest order. Without any narrative to speak of, you are just left with the repetition of taking on quests, going into the dungeon, and then returning to the hub town to take on more quests. The multiplayer option is a nice gesture, but the gameplay itself is far too plain to entice anyone but the most hardcore fans of boring stuff.——**JOE**

Assassin's Creed:
Altaïr's Chronicles

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION > **PUBLISHER** UBISOFT > **DEVELOPER** GAMELOFT > **RELEASE** FEBRUARY 5 > **ESRB** T

A POOR SUBSTITUTE
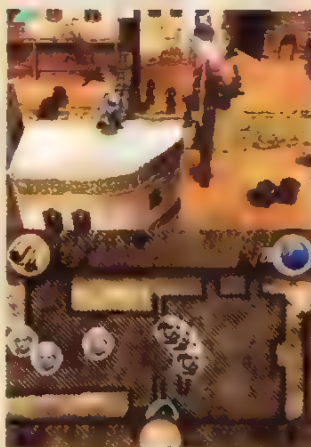
BOTTOM LINE 6

> **Concept:** Journey with Altaïr through a lackluster prequel to last year's console release

> **Graphics:** An impressive attempt at 3D on the DS involves some hefty load times and plenty of jaggies

> **Sound:** Music from the original console game is repeated a lot, but it is nonetheless of high quality

> **Playability:** Unresponsive controls and a protagonist that seems to have a mind of his own during combat really hurt the experience

> **Entertainment:** An interesting diversion, but this doesn't do justice to its parent game

> **Replay Value:** Low

Second Opinion 3

Guh! This is not Assassin's Creed. It is a shambling handheld homunculus – a poorly crafted and twisted form of its namesake. Instead of exploration, you get awful platforming. Instead of story, you get nothing. Every aspect of the control scheme, from navigation to combat, is so imprecise that it feels like you're just giving Altaïr suggestions, not commands. As if being flagrantly unplayable doesn't soil the franchise enough, there are numerous technical glitches, like being able to trigger checkpoints immediately before death. The whole mess is insulting to gamers in general, but most specifically to fans of the real Assassin's Creed.——**JOE**

Altaïr is one of my favorite new video game characters, and I'm all for Ubisoft expanding the fiction around their fledgling star. However, a move to the handheld space doesn't mean anyone receives a get out of jail free card on gameplay. While Altaïr's Chronicles makes some ambitious attempts to try something new on the DS, many of the mechanics and moment-to-moment interactions in this prequel game fall woefully short.

Altaïr needs to find a chalice. There's your story. While there are several steps to this process, few are memorable enough to elevate into your conscious thoughts. Sure, you can plan to run across some rooftops, kill some Templars, and climb some buildings. However, it all feels like a LEGO set that hasn't been put together into a shape you can recognize or care about.

The three-dimensional game world is basically linear, but a brave attempt to add verticality adds some scope. There are a number of stages scattered across the Holy Land, and each one hides unique traps and varied encounters. The later levels of this relatively long game are in particular filled with cool challenges. Unfortunately, the potential of that game world is hamstrung by several major technical and design problems. Blind death drops abound as you leap into offscreen areas that the camera hasn't yet revealed. An overly touchy jump mechanic has you leaping too short or long all the time, with unsurprisingly disastrous results. An auto lock-on during combat often sends you reeling towards an enemy you had no intention of attacking. Checkpoints are poorly placed, sometimes even triggering right before a guaranteed death – time for a level restart. Put it all together, and the game is kind of a mess, but at least it's trying to do something more exciting than the glut of me-too DS games on the market.——**MILLER**

TOP 20

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

**1 CALL OF DUTY 4: MODERN WARFARE (360)**

Overrated? We think so. More like Call of Doodie if you ask us. Sure, Modern Warfare is great if you want amazing graphics, unparalleled sound, and action so intense that you have to start taking Ritalin so you can fall asleep. But is that really what gaming is all about? No. Hopefully in the sequel they can focus on the important things: motion based controls, minigames, and not letting your brother play.

2 Wii PLAY (Wii)

You know what made Wii Play such a good game? The fact that it came packaged with a controller. That was awesome! Come on, how often does a game developer have the chutzpah to do something so bold, so original. No wonder this game is selling so well. A controller is inside the game's packaging! Pure genius.

3 GUITAR HERO III: LEGENDS OF ROCK (Wii)
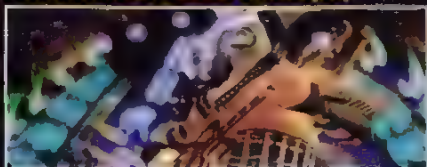
It just so happens that four out of the five best-selling games this month all come packaged with their own controller. There must be something to this. Is that just a coincidence or might it be a corporately approved fiction, engineered for the masses in order to control the world's information supply at its highest levels. What does that even mean? Stick with us as we tug on the thread of truth and watch this sweater of mystery unravel.

4 ROCK BAND (360)
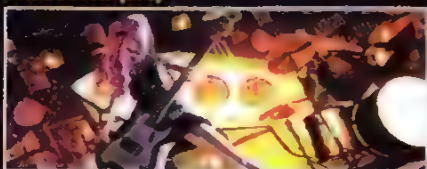
Through archeological finds we can date the history of the guitar back to ancient India and Central Asia. What's chilling to note is that every person instrumental in the early formation of this classic instrument is – inexplicably – no longer among the living. Do you really feel safe playing with a plastic controller shaped like an instrument that has been the herald of so much death?

5 GUITAR HERO III: LEGENDS OF ROCK (360)

Is it paranoia to assume some mysteriously evil technology within these ancient tools has now made its way into modern videogames? Perhaps. Or perhaps human society, as we know it, is about to be the destructive force of their own cataclysmic demise as they unwittingly...as they uh...we've sort of lost our train of thought. But, the moral of this story is don't be a slave to society. Buy American!

Rank	Title	L. Mo.	System	Score	Release
1	Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare	1	360	10	11-07
2	Wii Play	4	Wii	7	02-07
3	Guitar Hero III: Legends of Rock	12	Wii	8.75	10-07
4	Rock Band	13	360	9.25	11-07
5	Guitar Hero III: Legends of Rock	9	360	8.75	10-07
6	Guitar Hero III: Legends of Rock	3	PS2	8.75	10-07
7	Super Mario Galaxy	2	Wii	9.75	11-07
8	Burnout Paradise	N/A	360	8.5	01-08
9	Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare	11	PS3	10	11-07
10	Mario Party DS	20	DS	7	11-07
11	Mario and Sonic at the Olympic Games	N/A	DS	N/A	01-08
12	Assassin's Creed	5	360	9.5	11-07
13	Halo 3	6	360	9.75	09-07
14	Rock Band	N/A	PS2	9.25	11-07
15	Mario and Sonic at the Olympic Games	10	Wii	4	11-07
16	Madden NFL 08	8	PS2	8	08-07
17	Carnival Games	N/A	Wii	5.5	08-07
18	Brain Age: Train Your Brain in Minutes a Day	N/A	DS	8.25	04-06
19	Assassin's Creed	16	PS3	9.5	11-07
20	Burnout Paradise	N/A	PS3	8.5	01-08

TOP 10 JAPAN

Rank	Title	System
1	Super Smash Bros. Brawl	Wii
2	Mobile Unit Gundam: Giren's Ambition – Axis's Menace	PSP
3	Wii Fit	Wii
4	Devil May Cry 4	PS3
5	Mario and Sonic at the Olympic Games	DS
6	Wii Sports	Wii
7	L the Prologue to Death Note	DS
8	Family Ski	Wii
9	Tales of Destiny Director's Cut	PS2
10	Mario Party DS	DS
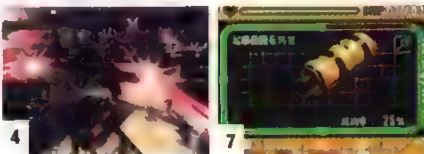
TOP 10 GI

Rank	Title	L. Mo.	System
1	Super Smash Bros. Brawl	N/A	Wii
2	Rainbow Six Vegas 2	N/A	multi
3	Sins of a Solar Empire	N/A	PC
4	Devil May Cry 4	1	multi
5	God of War: Chains of Olympus	2	PSP
6	Condemned 2: Bloodshot	N/A	multi
7	Lost Odyssey	N/A	360
8	Super Mario Galaxy	5	Wii
9	Rock Band	6	multi
10	Burnout Paradise	8	multi

The Staff's Favorite Picks

TOP 10 PC

Rank	Title	L. Mo.	Price
1	World Of Warcraft	2	$20
2	Call Of Duty 4: Modern Warfare	1	$47
3	World Of Warcraft: Battle Chest	4	$39
4	World Of Warcraft: The Burning Crusade	5	$32
5	The Sims 2 Deluxe	9	$31
6	Diner Dash	18	$10
7	15000 Games	12	$10
8	Sim City 4 Deluxe	13	$20
9	The Sims 2 Teen Style Stuff	6	$19
10	Crysis	7	$48
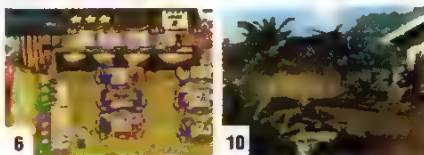
Based On Monthly Units Sold

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

REVIEWSARCHIVE

PLAYSTATION 3

Assassin's Creed	9.5	Dec-07
Beowulf	5.75	Jan-08
BlackSite: Area 51	7.5	Dec-07
Burnout Paradise	8.5	Feb-08
Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare	10	Dec-07
Clive Barker's Jericho	6	Dec-07
Club, The	8.75	Mar-08
College Hoops 2K8	7.75	Feb-08
Conan	7	Nov-07
Devil May Cry 4	9	Mar-08
Dirt	8	Nov-07
Dynasty Warriors 6	7.25	Mar-08
Eye of Judgement	8	Dec-07
FIFA Street 3	7	Mar-08
Folklore	7.25	Dec-07
Golden Compass, The	3.25	Feb-08
Juiced 2: Hot Import Nights	8.25	Nov-07
Kane & Lynch: Dead Men	7	Jan-08
LEGO Star Wars: The Complete Saga	7.5	Dec-07
Lost Planet: Extreme Condition	8	Mar-08
MX vs. ATV Untamed	8	Jan-08
NBA 08	7	Nov-07
NBA 2K8	8.25	Nov-07
NBA Live 08	7.5	Nov-07
NCAA March Madness 08	7.25	Feb-08
Need for Speed ProStreet	7.5	Feb-08
NFL Tour	5	Feb-08
Orange Box, The	9.25	Feb-08
Ratchet & Clank Future: Tools of Destruction	9.25	Dec-07
Rock Band	9.25	Jan-08
Sega Rally Revo	6.5	Dec-07
Simpsons Game, The	7.25	Dec-07
Time Crisis 4	4.25	Jan-08

The Orange Box – PS3 – Feb-08

Tony Hawk's Proving Ground	7.75	Dec-07
Turok	7	Mar-08
Uncharted: Drake's Fortune	8.75	Dec-07
Unreal Tournament 3	8.5	Feb-08
WWE SmackDown! vs. Raw 2008	8	Dec-07

XBOX 360

Ace Combat 6: Fires of Liberation	8.75	Nov-07
Assassin's Creed	9.5	Dec-07
Beautiful Katamari	7.25	Dec-07
Bee Movie Game	6.5	Jan-08
Beowulf	5.75	Jan-08
BlackSite: Area 51	7.5	Dec-07
Blazing Angels 2: Secret Missions of WWII	7.5	Nov-07
Burnout Paradise	8.5	Feb-08
Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare	10	Dec-07
Clive Barker's Jericho	6	Dec-07
Club, The	8.75	Mar-08
College Hoops 2K8	7.75	Feb-08
Conan	7	Nov-07
Crash of the Titans	7.25	Nov-07
CSI: Hard Evidence	4	Dec-07
Culdcept Saga	7	Feb-08
Devil May Cry 4	9	Mar-08
Dynasty Warriors 6	7.25	Mar-08
F.E.A.R. Files	6.5	Jan-08
FIFA Street 3	7	Mar-08
FlatOut Ultimate Carnage	7.5	Nov-07
Golden Compass, The	3.25	Feb-08
Halo 3	9.75	Nov-07
Juiced 2: Hot Import Nights	8.25	Nov-07
Kane & Lynch: Dead Men	7	Jan-08
Kengo: Legend of the 9	2	Dec-07
Kingdom Under Fire: Circle of Doom	5.25	Feb-08
LEGO Star Wars: The Complete Saga	7.5	Dec-07
Looney Tunes: ACME Arsenal	1.75	Dec-07
Mass Effect	9.75	Nov-07
MX vs. ATV Untamed	8	Jan-08
Naruto: Rise of the Ninja	8	Dec-07
NBA 2K8	8.25	Nov-07
NBA Live 08	7.5	Nov-07
NCAA March Madness 08	7.25	Feb-08
Need for Speed ProStreet	7.5	Feb-08
NFL Tour	5	Feb-08
Orange Box, The	9.75	Nov-07
Project Gotham Racing 4	8.75	Nov-07
Rock Band	9.25	Jan-08
Scene It? Lights, Camera, Action	8.5	Jan-08
Sega Rally Revo	6.5	Dec-07
Simpsons Game, The	7.25	Dec-07
Soldier of Fortune: Payback	4.25	Feb-08
Spider-Man: Friend or Foe	4.5	Nov-07

Devil May Cry 4 – Xbox 360 – Mar-08 (9)

Thrillville: Off the Rails	7	Dec-07
TimeShift	7.75	Dec-07
Tomb Raider Anniversary	8.25	Dec-07
Tony Hawk's Proving Ground	7.75	Dec-07
Turok	7	Mar-08
Two Worlds	4	Nov-07
Virtua Fighter 5	9	Dec-07
Viva Piñata: Party Animals	5.5	Jan-08
WWE SmackDown! vs. Raw 2008	8	Dec-07

Wii

Battalion Wars 2	7.25	Jan-08
Carnival Games	5.5	Nov-07
Cranium Kabooki	6.75	Feb-08
Crash of the Titans	7.25	Nov-07
Dancing With the Stars	5.25	Jan-08
Dewy's Adventure	7	Oct-07
Donkey Kong Barrel Blast	5	Dec-07
Dragon Quest Swords: The Masked Queen and the Tower of Mirrors	7.75	Mar-08
EA Playground	7	Jan-08
Endless Ocean	6	Jan-08
Fire Emblem: Radiant Dawn	7	Dec-07
Geometry Wars Galaxies	8	Dec-07
Ghost Squad	7	Jan-08
Godzilla: Unleashed	4	Dec-07
Golden Compass, The	3.25	Feb-08
Guilty Gear XX Accent Core	7.75	Dec-07
Guitar Hero III: Legends of Rock	8.75	Oct-07
Harvey Birdman: Attorney At Law	6	Feb-08
Jenga	2	Jan-08
Legend of Spyro: The Eternal Night, The	6.25	Nov-07
LEGO Star Wars: The Complete Saga	7.5	Dec-07
Link's Crossbow Training	6.75	Feb-08
Looney Tunes: ACME Arsenal	1.75	Dec-07
Madden NFL 08	7.5	Oct-07
Mario and Sonic at the Olympic Games	4	Dec-07
Manhunt 2	7.75	Dec-07
Medal of Honor Heroes 2	6.75	Jan-08
Metroid Prime 3: Corruption	9.5	Oct-07
My Sims	8	Oct-07
Need for Speed ProStreet	7	Dec-07
Nights: Journey of Dreams	6.5	Feb-08
Nitrobike	4.25	Mar-08
No More Heroes	6	Mar-08
Rayman Raving Rabbids 2	7.75	Jan-08
Resident Evil: The Umbrella Chronicles	8.25	Jan-08
Samurai Warriors: Katana	6	Mar-08
Simpsons Game, The	7.25	Dec-07
Sims 2: Castaway, The	7.25	Nov-07
Smarty Pants	7.5	Jan-08
Sonic Riders: Zero Gravity	6	Mar-08
Soulcalibur Legends	4	Jan-08
Spider-Man: Friend or Foe	4.5	Nov-07
Star Trek Conquest	5	Feb-08
Super Mario Galaxy	9.75	Jan-08
Super Swing Golf Season 2	8.5	Feb-08
Table Tennis	6	Jan-08
Thrillville: Off the Rails	7	Dec-07
Tiger Woods PGA Tour 2008	7	Oct-07
Trauma Center: New Blood	7.5	Jan-08
Victorious Boxers: Revolution	6.75	Nov-07
Winter Sports: The Ultimate Challenge	6.5	Mar-08
Zack & Wiki: Quest For Barbaros' Treasure	8.25	Nov-07

PLAYSTATION 2

|		
Crash of the Titans	7.25	Nov-07
Guilty Gear XX Accent Core	7.75	Oct-07
Guitar Hero III: Legends of Rock	8.75	Oct-07
Legend of Spyro: The Eternal Night, The	6.25	Nov-07
Looney Tunes: ACME Arsenal	1.75	Dec-07
Manhunt 2	7.75	Dec-07
Simpsons Game, The	7.25	Dec-07
Soul Nomad & The World Eaters	7.75	Oct-07
Spider-Man: Friend or Foe	4.5	Nov-07
Star Trek Conquest	5	Feb-08
Stuntman Ignition	8.5	Oct-07
Thrillville: Off the Rails	7	Dec-07
Warriors Orochi	5.75	Oct-07
Wild Arms 5	6.5	Oct-07

PC

Ages of Empires III: The Asian Dynasties	8	Dec-07
Beowulf	5.75	Jan-08
BlackSite: Area 51	7.5	Dec-07
Blazing Angels 2: Secret Missions of WWII	7.5	Nov-07
Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare	10	Dec-07
Clive Barker's Jericho	6	Dec-07
Company of Heroes: Opposing Fronts	8.25	Nov-07
Crysis	9	Jan-08
Empire Earth III	6.5	Jan-08
Enemy Territories: Quake Wars	8.5	Nov-07
Fury	5	Jan-08
Gears of War	8	Jan-08
Hellgate: London	8.5	Jan-08
Medieval II: Total War Kingdoms	9	Nov-07
Neverwinter Nights 2: Mask of the Betrayer	9	Nov-07
Orange Box, The	9.75	Nov-07
Painkiller: Overdose	6.75	Dec-07
Settlers: Rise of an Empire, The	7	Dec-07
SimCity Societies	8	Jan-08
Supreme Commander: Forged Alliance	8.5	Dec-07
Tabula Rasa	8	Jan-08
TimeShift	7.75	Dec-07
Turok	7	Mar-08
Two Worlds	4	Nov-07
Universe at War: Earth Assault	8.25	Jan-08
Unreal Tournament 3	9	Dec-07
Witcher, The	8	Dec-07

NINTENDO DS

Advance Wars: Days of Ruin	8.75	Mar-08
Apollo Justice: Ace Attorney	8	Mar-08
Contra 4	9.25	Jan-08
Cooking Mama 2: Dinner With Friends	7	Dec-07
Dementium: The Ward	5.75	Dec-07
DK: Jungle Climber	5.75	Nov-07
Dragon Quest Monsters: Joker	8	Dec-07
Draglade	6.75	Feb-08
Final Fantasy XII: Revenant Wings	7.5	Dec-07
Front Mission 1st	7	Nov-07
Jam Sessions	6	Dec-07
Left Brain, Right Brain	5	Feb-08
Legend of Zelda: Phantom Hourglass, The	9.5	Oct-07
LifeSigns: Surgical Unit	6	Jan-08
Mario Party DS	7	Feb-08
Master of Illusion	8	Jan-08
Mega Man ZX Advent	8	Nov-07
My Word Coach	8	Feb-08
Nanostray 2	7.25	Jan-08
Orc & Elves	6.75	Jan-08
Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney Trials & Tribulations	8.25	Nov-07
Prism: Light the Way	7.5	Dec-07
Rune Factory: A Fantasy Harvest Moon	5.75	Oct-07
Sonic Rush Adventure	7.25	Nov-07
Turn It Around	4	Dec-07
World Jong	8	Dec-07
Worms Open Warfare 2	7.5	Oct-07

PSP
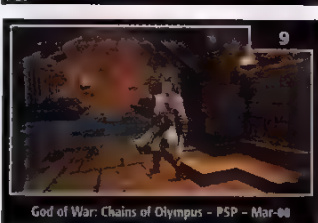
God of War: Chains of Olympus – PSP – Mar-08 (9)

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Castlevania: The Dracula X Chronicles	7	Oct-07
Crazy Taxi: Fare Wars	5.75	Nov-07
Disgaea: Afternoon of Darkness	9	Nov-07
Dragoneer's Aria	5.75	Oct-07
Final Fantasy Tactics: The War of the Lions	9.5	Nov-07
God of War: Chains of Olympus	9	Mar-08
Hot PXL	6	Oct-07
Jackass: The Game	6.25	Dec-07
Manhunt 2	7.75	Dec-07
Metal Gear Solid: Portable Ops Plus	7.75	Feb-08
Naruto: Ultimate Ninja Heroes	6.75	Oct-07
Patapon	8.75	Mar-08
Pursuit Force: Extreme Justice	7.25	Feb-08
Silent Hill Origins	7.75	Dec-07
SOCOM: U.S. Navy SEALs Tactical Strike	8	Dec-07
Star Wars Battlefront: Renegade Squadron	7	Nov-07
SWAT: Target Liberty	5	Dec-07
Syphon Filter: Logan's Shadow	8.75	Nov-07
Warhammer 40,000: Squad Command	8	Jan-08

God of War: Chains of Olympus

Divinity Survival Guide
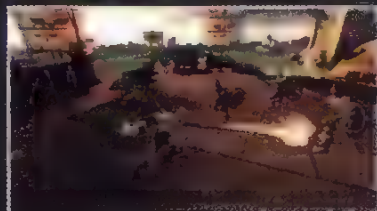
By Mike Birkhead, Designer, Ready at Dawn

Combat is an extremely important part of this game, and the God of War franchise as a whole. With the tips below I'm going to let you in on a couple secrets that will hopefully have you turning Kratos into the killing machine that we all know and love. I'll be covering some basics that some of the more hardcore fans may already be aware of, but I'll also be covering the new weapon we've introduced and some of the new enemies that can be tough for anybody – old fans or new.

ROLL CANCEL

Roll canceling is a key ability in God of War. Kratos has the ability to attack out of his roll evades. In order for these to feel responsive the game buffers any inputs it receives while you are rolling, so if it sees that you have pressed the attack button, it will cancel you out of the roll animation early and go right to the attack. You have, in effect, canceled out part of the "downtime" with the roll. That is only the first step. If you keep inputting the roll (by holding L and R) Kratos will cancel his roll animation and go right into another roll. In essence, if you press the attack button while rolling you can roll faster than you normally would.

KEEPING THAT HIT COUNTER GOING

There are two really good tricks to keeping your hit counter going in regular fights: rolling, and magic. Using the evade will pause your hit counter from going down during the frames of the animation where Kratos is invulnerable, but the real trick to rolling is using your roll cancel (as described above). Since you spend more time in the invulnerable frames of the roll, and less frames of the animation in the downtime, the counter is paused more often. This lets you get at least three or four rolls in before your hit counter goes away, as opposed to say two or three rolls.

The second key is magic, particularly the Light of Dawn. Kratos has the ability to hold the Light of Dawn magic, to both charge it up and to target different enemies. While Kratos is in this animation the hit counter is paused. This is an invaluable tool for when enemies are too far out of range, or more importantly, if you've just finished off a wave of enemies and new ones haven't finished spawning yet. You have as much time as you need to find a new victim, while at the same time not worrying about losing your hit counter!

GAUNTLET

The Gauntlet is incredibly powerful in God of War: Chains of Olympus, and it's my favorite weapon in the entire franchise. What?! I'm unbiased! Make sure to upgrade to level two on the gauntlet as soon as possible to not only get the first invaluable special attack the Olympic Strike, but also to increase its base damage. The Gauntlet is, in some cases, better suited than the Blades to taking out some of the more powerful enemies in the game. There are two key benefits to the Gauntlet: damage output and crush moves (heavy attacks). The Gauntlet has the ability to dish out more damage in a shorter amount of time than the Blades. If used correctly, any of the Gauntlet's moves (once fully charged) can break armor – meaning it makes short work of armored enemies.

The basic combo on the Gauntlet is three □ buttons. The first two hits of this combo do decent low-end damage, and the third final hit does much more damage than the other two hits. As you may have discovered, any of the attacks on the Gauntlet can be charged up and released. This causes any attack that has been fully charged to cause 50 percent more damage than it would normally. This is important information for when we're looking at the basic combo of the gauntlet. Fully charging the final hit of the combo deals out a devastating amount of damage to almost any enemy in the game. Combined with a fully upgraded Gauntlet (which increases its base damage a lot) you can even take out the fearsome Minotaur in only a few quick combos.
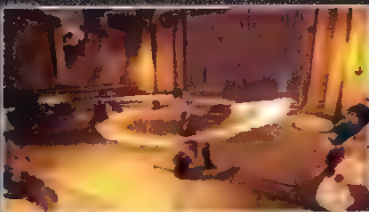
The second invaluable tool of the Gauntlet is the first special move you unlock – The Olympic Strike. I like to call it the Terry Punch! In order to pull off this move you must hold down L and press the □ button. This move causes Kratos to dash forward with his fist. What makes this move so good is that it goes into its hit frames early, meaning that it does damage almost immediately after you initiate the move. On top of that it has very little downtime (where you can't do any action) after it's done. This means that there is very little danger in getting hit after you perform the move. In addition to all of that, even without fully charging this move it acts like a crush move. This means that it can stagger most enemies in the game and break armor. There are several instances in the game where this can be a lifesaver – like when you see the Gorgon Queen. Coil up for her grab attack, one quick Terry Punch and she's flat on her back!

TOUGH ENEMIES AND THEIR COUNTERS

Lastly I'll talk about three enemies that cause lots of problems for people, and some tactics that will have you ripping their heads off in no time.

Hoplite: The Hoplite, and to a lesser degree the Shade, are nasty little guys. One of the nastiest things about the Hoplite is that he can "tank" during a lot of his attacks – this means that even though you are hitting him he doesn't play any hit reactions during his attacks. Specifically his dashing forward move can tank, which can cause a lot of frustration for people. However, the Hoplite can be grabbed at any time. So just press the ○ button to grab him. You can even grab the Hoplite right out of his running charge attack! So don't be afraid, just press the ○ button and get right to kicking his face in.

Minotaur: The Minotaur is a tough opponent, but the key to him is to make him do what you want. The Minotaur, much like the Hoplite, can tank through a lot of his attacks. But if you hit him with a heavy enough attack (like a fully charged Gauntlet punch) he will stumble (he shakes his head and snorts). Whenever you make the Minotaur stumble he has to follow that up with his charge attack. He will put his head down and snort. This is your chance! Back up slightly and wait for him to charge you; quickly roll to the side. The Minotaur now has a small window during the downtime of his charge where he can't do anything and he's open for attack! Here you should switch to the Gauntlet. What we want to do is hit him with a fully charged 3rd hit from the gauntlet combo. Don't charge the first two hits, just hit him twice then charge that 3rd hit – this will not only do massive damage but will also cause him to stumble. Meaning that he now has to charge at you again, so back up and repeat.

Satyr: The first time you'll come across the Satyr is in the courtyard of Helios' Temple, and he can be incredibly annoying, especially on God Mod. The key to the Satyr is that like the Hoplite, he can be grabbed at any time. My favorite trick is to roll in and hold △, Kratos will cancel out of his roll with his heavy overhead attack. If this hits the Satyr they will stumble, and if you keep holding down △ Kratos will transition into his launcher, throwing the Satyr into the air. Once in the air, the best thing to do is go for the grab; Kratos will grab the poor Satyr and throw him at the ground. This is great because the poor Satyr bounces right back up into the air – right back into your waiting ○ button! You can generally get several air throws off in relative safety.

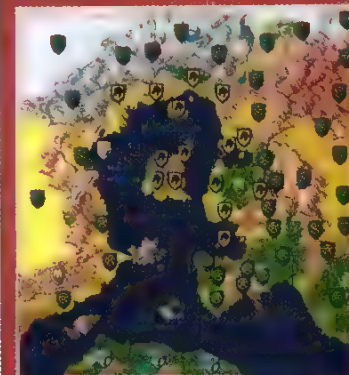## Attention All Cheaters!

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!

PlayStation 3

Unreal Tournament III

To unlock these characters enter these passwords at the Custom Character Screen

Alanna (Necris) – phayder
Ariel (Iron Clad) – jihan

Xbox 360

TimeShift

To be able to enter this password first go to the options menu, then select multiplayer, then select "Model." Press left once to highlight Krone, then press Y and type in this password to unlock the character.

Unlock Krone For Multiplayer –
RXYMCPENCJ
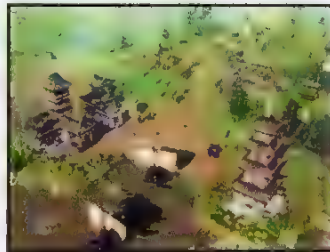
PC

Age of Empire III: The Asian Dynasties

While playing the game hit the enter key then type in the codes below for the desired effect. Each code's case does not matter.

Fatten All Animals – a recent study indicated that 100% of herdables are obese
Get 10,000 Coin – give me liberty or give me coin
Get 10,000 Food – medium rare please
Get 10,000 Wood – <censored>
Get 10,000 XP – nova & orion
Instantly Win In Single-player – this is too hard
Reveal map – x marks the spot
Spawn 20 Muskeeteers at Town Center – Jacquesiscute
Spawn 20 Skirmishers at Town Center – Jakeiscute
Spawn a George Crushington – where's that axe?
Spawn a Tommynator – tuck tuck tuck
Spawns the Mediocre Bombard – ya gotta make do with what ya got
Speed Up Building, Research, and Shipments – speed always wins

"GI Droid"
*(location unknown – last seen kissing rocks and throwing them at his favorite girls)*

Code of the Month

Tony Hawk's Proving Ground

PS3 | Xbox 360 | Wii

From the main menu go into the options menu and enter these codes.

100% Branch Completion – FOREVERNAILED
Invisible Man – THEMISSING
Mini Skater – TINYTATER
No Bails – ANDAINTFALLIN
No Board – MAGICMAN
Perfect Manual – STILLAINTFALLIN
Perfect Rail – AINTFALLIN
Super Check – BOOYAH
Unlimited Focus – MYOPIC
Unlimited Slash Grind – SUPERSLASHIN
Unlock Air & Space Museum Level – THEINDOORPARK
Unlock FDR Level – THEPREZPARK
Unlock Lansdowne Level – THELOCALPARK
Unlock Skater Boneman – CRAZYBONEMAN
Unlock Skater Bosco – MOREMILK
Unlock Skater Cam – NOTACAMERA
Unlock Skater Cooper – THECOOP
Unlock Skater Eddie X – SKETCHY
Unlock Skater El Patinador – PILEDRIVER
Unlock Skater Eric – FLYAWAY
Unlock Skater Judy Nails – LOVEROCKNROLL
Unlock Skater Mad Dog – RABBIES
Unlock Skater MCA – INTERGALACTIC
Unlock Skater Mel – NOTADUDE
Unlock Skater Rube – LOOKSSMELLY
Unlock Skater Shayne – MOVERS
Unlock Skater Spence – DAPPER
Unlock Skater TV Producer – SHAKER
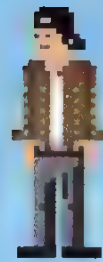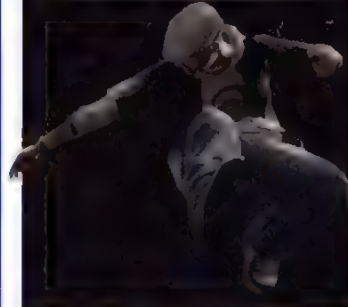
MONOCHROME MASTERPIECES

The original Game Boy is remembered by many for bringing Tetris to the masses, but Yokoi Gunpei's landmark system was home to a plethora of deep, complex, and involving (for the time) games as well. Join us now for a fond look back at some of the brilliant black & white spinoffs of major franchises that appeared on the monochromatic handheld. It's surprising just how much innovation took place on the small system; many mechanics that we now hold dear as integral parts of our favorite series originated in two-tone graphics and tinny single-speaker sound. Tracking down these old cartridges pays off with 2D gameplay as fine as many titles today.

MARIO

Super Mario Land
Release: 1989

Super Mario Land 2: Six Golden Coins
Release: 1992

Wario Land: Super Mario Land 3
Release: 1994

With Game Boy mastermind Yokoi Gunpei at the top of the developer credits, Mario's adventures on the handheld were anything but cash-in knockoffs. Super Mario Land released with the Game Boy launch, and ultimately ended up as the third best-selling Mario title with over 18 million copies sold. Though purists may take issue with Mario's somewhat less-precise control in this series, the franchise's familiar platforming is fully realized. There are plenty of Koopas to jump on (which explode afterwards, oddly), Goombas to stomp, and princesses to rescue. Auto-scrolling submarine and airplane levels even introduced something new to the plumber's adventures.

The second game incorporated the SNES Mario art style as well as an overworld very similar to Super Mario World and a new power-up, the carrot. Finally, Wario Land marked the introduction of Wario as a playable character and moved the gameplay toward Wario's less subtle "smash things that are in the way" approach.

Super Mario Land 2: Six Golden Coins

Wario Land: Super Mario Land 3

## ZELDA

The Legend of Zelda: Link's Awakening
Release: 1993

It turns out that taking Link out of Hyrule and plopping him on a mysterious island can be awesome. Link's Awakening charges the young hero with waking the Wind Fish so that he can make it back to his homeland. However, the gameplay is everything a Zelda fan could ask for: eight sprawling dungeons with unique boss battles, an extensive inventory system to expand Link's abilities, and a vast world to explore. There's even a plot twist at the end that M. Night Shyamalan would be proud of.

Link's Awakening was also remade for the Game Boy Color as Link's Awakening DX, which is by all accounts the superior version. In addition to imbuing Koholint Island with hues and shades, an entirely new dungeon was created for the release.
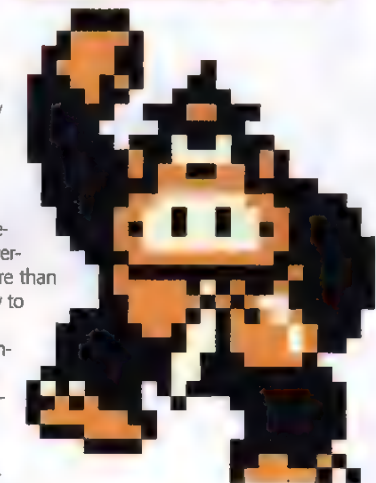
■ Donkey Kong on the Super Game Boy
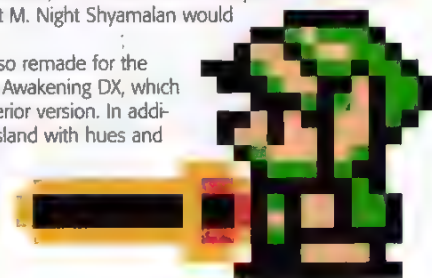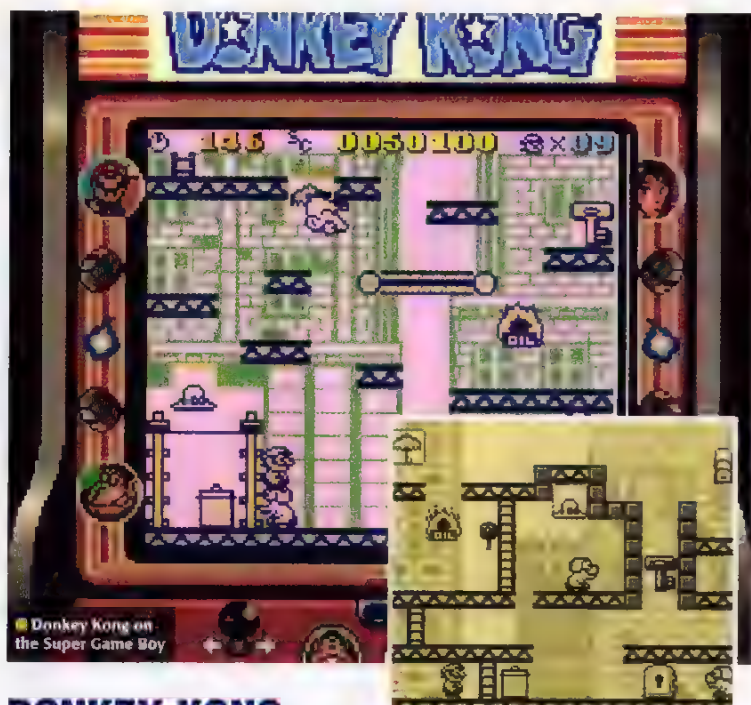
DONKEY KONG

Donkey Kong | Release: 1994

Though it shares the same title as the arcade classic, Donkey Kong on Game Boy is a vastly more intricate game. After defeating the original four levels, players are presented with a grand total of 97 more stages to clear. Mario gains new abilities as he chases the ape, including the debut of his now-signature triple-jump and backflip, in order to confront the ever-increasing challenges. These additions do more than enough to update the single-screen gameplay to something well worth playing to this day.

Donkey Kong was also the first game to benefit from enhancements when played on the Super Game Boy add-on for the SNES, including full color and a digitized cry for help from the hapless Pauline. The handheld Mario vs. Donkey Kong series has its roots here as well.

CASTLEVANIA

Castlevania: The Adventure
Release: 1989
Castlevania II: Belmont's Revenge
Release: 1991
Castlevania Legends
Release: 1996

Though Castlevania: The Adventure gets a place in this list only by virtue of sharing the franchise's title (the sluggish gameplay and poorly designed levels are a low point for the series), Belmont's Revenge and Legends are solid additions to the non-RPG, action/platforming segment of Castlevania's history. Belmont's Revenge features four levels to be tackled in any order before venturing into Dracula's castle itself, as well as offering similarly exciting whip-and-subweapon action to the 8- and 16-bit installments of the series. It also translates the gothic look and feel that we associate with the series quite well onto the handheld.

Legends features one of the few female protagonists in the series, with Sonia Belmont taking on Dracula's forces in classic Castlevania action. Instead of wielding traditional subweapons like the Axe and Cross, she gains magical powers by defeating bosses. Legends also has more of an anime vibe to its presentation, for good or ill. Interestingly, it is one of the few games (along with Legacy of Darkness, Circle of the Moon, and Castlevania 64) that was removed from the official Castlevania canon when Koji Igarashi took the reins of development – and the only one that hasn't been ret-conned to fit back in since.

■ Castlevania: The Adventure
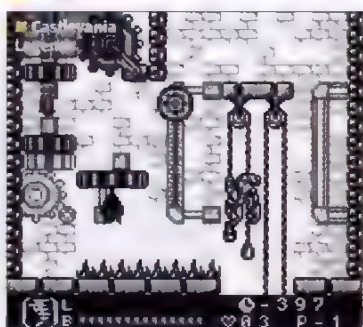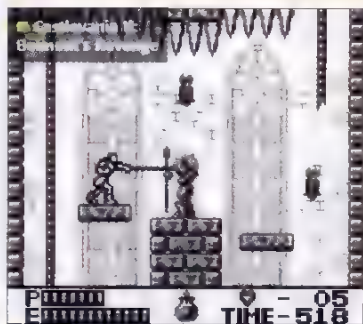
This Month In Gaming History
In April of 2000, John Romero's disastrous Daikatana was released and immediately burst its own publicity bubble. The game's numerous faults have been documented extensively elsewhere, but its spot in gaming history is owed to the deathblow it dealt to developer Ion Storm's overly ambitious Dallas offices. Years late and drastically over budget, Daikatana's weak sales despite an aggressive marketing campaign were too much for the studio, and it closed its doors for good just over a year later

DAIKATANA

FINAL FANTASY

Final Fantasy Adventure | Release: 1991

Though it has the Final Fantasy name attached to it, this title has more in common with Square's Mana action/RPG series than the well-known classic RPG franchise. From an overhead view, players hack and slash their way through the hordes of evil that threaten the Mana tree. To keep players from mindlessly mashing buttons, the hero's attack strength depends on an energy bar that empties with each swing of a sword, but refills slowly over time. Final Fantasy Adventure also breaks up its bread-and-butter monster slaying with puzzles here and there, completing the trifecta of Mana series gameplay to this day.
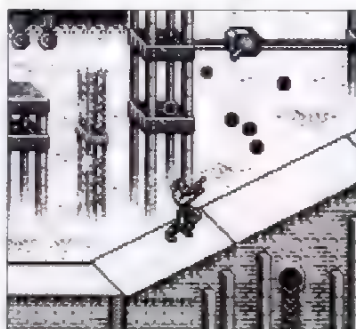
In addition to spawning the Mana franchise, Final Fantasy Adventure was remade as Sword of Mana for Game Boy Advance in 2003.

CONTRA

Operation C | Release: 1991

You know the drill: Aliens are invading Earth, and our only defense is two dudes with big guns and superhuman jumping abilities. Operation C plays nearly identically to its console cousins, and includes top-down levels just like Super C and Contra III. And yes, the Konami code works, but instead of 30 lives you get to choose which level to start on.

METROID

Metroid II: Return of Samus | Release: 1991

The original Metroid was one of the most ambitious titles on the NES, and this sequel fills that same role on the Game Boy. All of Samus's capabilities are fully intact in this adventure to the Metroid homeworld of SR388, and she gains access to a few new toys as well. The Space Jump, Spring Ball, Spazer Beam, and Plasma Beam all originated here and have since become part of Samus' standard repertoire. However, the open-world exploration concept that is so central to the series takes a different tack here: Samus gains access to new areas by hunting down all of the Metroids in her current location rather than by gaining mobility through new powers. In the absence of the sadly cancelled Metroid Dread, Metroid II deserves to be remembered and replayed by anyone with a fondness for the lady bounty hunter.
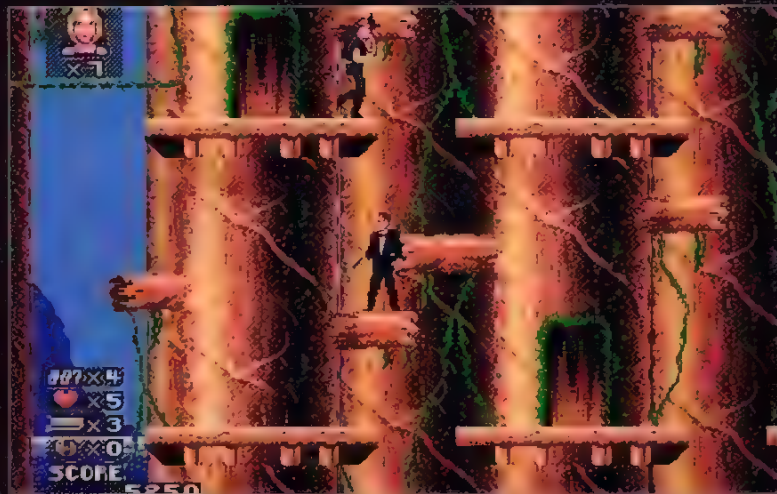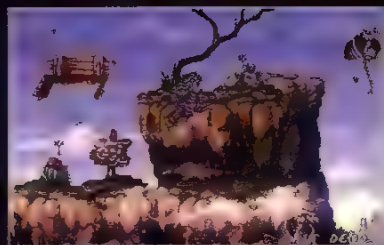
PSONE

THE ADVENTURES OF LOMAX

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION > **PUBLISHER** PSYGNOSIS > **DEVELOPER** PSYGNOSIS > **RELEASE** 1996

I n an attempt to capitalize on Lemmings, Psygnosis explored a couple of ways to spin off its hit franchise. The less said about Lemmings Paintball the better, but The Adventures of Lomax was another story. The action platformer looks great, with vibrant and imaginative environments and some stellar animation work. A standout musical score is bouncy, cartoony, and well composed all around. Even Lomax himself is a pretty entertaining lead – he's got a helmet that flies back to him like a boomerang, and he spins around in circles to your heart's content to attack his enemies. There's even an array of Lemmings-style abilities you'll tap into to solve environmental obstacles. Unfortunately, the game is too frustrating and difficult by half considering its colorful and childlike visuals. Constant insta-death drops, one-hit kills from enemies, and unfortunate jump timing make it hard to believe too many folks ever got to see all of the many gorgeous levels built for the game. It's too bad. This would have made for a clever franchise.

PSONE

PATRIOTIC PINBALL

> **STYLE** 1 TO 4-PLAYER ACTION > **PUBLISHER** GOTHAM GAMES > **DEVELOPER** WILDFIRE STUDIOS > **RELEASE** 2003

I know what you're thinking. How can a game that's only five years old count as a retro review? After only a few minutes of play, it's obvious that nothing in this late-to-the-party PSone title couldn't have been accomplished on Sega Genesis. The meager selection of two tables based on "the fight for freedom on air, land, and sea" and a cross country RV road trip may swap battleships and tanks for landmarks like the Hoover Dam and Golden Gate bridge, but the underlying designs are almost identical. The sound includes phrases such as "You're the pride of the fleet, seaman," a few notes of "Anchors Aweigh," and a classy rendition of "Taps" whenever you lose a ball. The physics are so awful that you can easily balance the ball on the tip of a raised bumper. Despite the chest-thumping Americanism developer Wildfire shoots for, it's easy to argue that they didn't go far enough. Way to exclude the Marines and Coast Guard, guys! And where's my "Star Spangled Banner"?

GENESIS

JAMES BOND 007 – THE DUEL

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION > **PUBLISHER** DOMARK > **DEVELOPER** DOMARK > **RELEASE** 1993

T imothy Dalton is about as welcome among James Bond fans as a case of the crabs, and this game (which he's on the cover of) doesn't do anything to endear him to the gaming crowd. The game's an action platformer in the vein of Namco's better Rolling Thunder, but The Duel's martini is neither shaken nor stirred – it's spilled. The game's gun controls (which include being able to shoot diagonally) and platforming are inconsistent, and trusting your life to an inconsistent platformer is like going under the knife with a drunk surgeon. The game does feature classic Bond villains such as Odd Job and Jaws through its four levels, but in an age where it was hard to translate license dreams into video game reality, The Duel is incapable of being anything more than a sub-par entry in an over-saturated genre filled with better products.

*Score given to the game when it first appeared in Game Informer. The Adventures of Lomax (GI # 45 01/97)

UNLIMITED LAUNCH: MAR. 15

ALPHA PROTOCOL

Watch our video interviews with Obsidian Entertainment founders Feargus Urquhart and Chris Parker to learn more about their ambitious covert action RPG.

Guitar Hero: Aerosmith
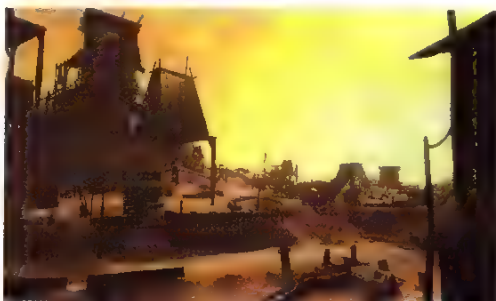Read our full interviews with Aerosmith legends Joe Perry and Tom Hamilton.

Boom Blox
Learn more about Steven Spielberg's first foray into gaming in our exclusive interview with Boom Blox producer Louis Castle.

Game Infarcer
A new batch of news stories, reviews, and previews from our stud cast of phony game journos.

Stargate Online
The team behind this highly anticipated MMORPG spills the beans on the Praxis, how the SGU is integrated, and how the balance of good and evil will unfold.

ALSO ONLINE THIS MONTH:
Game Informer Online keeps you abreast of the latest breaking news and game announcements.

VIDEO GAME TRIVIA

Did you know Ben has secret aspirations to be in movies? Well, you've got to start somewhere, and Ben's starting with games. To get started on his new career path, Ben has convinced us to run several photos of him starring in his favorite games. We tried to tell him it might be embarrassing, but he was insistent. Complete the following quiz to find out which role Ben should take on first.

1 Never has the video game landscape been so totally reshaped and reimagined as at the release of Redneck Rampage, a piece of art far ahead of its own time. Which of the following was not a target of your rampage?
A. Chickens
B. Turd Minions
C. Skinny Old Coot
D. The Liberal Media

2 It's easy to rattle off the protagonists in every game after Grand Theft Auto III, but who was the main character in GTA 2?
A. Salvatore Leone
B. Tommy Vercetti
C. Claude Speed
D. Carl Johnson

3 So you're a Mario fan, huh? What was that game Mario Clash about?
A. In this precursor to Super Smash Bros., characters from different Mario games met in the wrestling ring to do battle
B. Bad guys are crawling all over the pipes, and Mario needs to knock them off with Koopa shells
C. In an attempt to attract the young female demographic, Nintendo had Mario dress up in different outfits in this game, and the player must determine if the colors clash
D. I call bull. Mario Clash is not a real game.

4 No one in the Game Informer office has ever been ridiculed for liking *The Matrix* too much, so you can be confident that your enthusiasm for the project is cool with us. Who were the two main playable characters of 2003's Enter the Matrix?
A. Neo and Trinity
B. Neo and Morpheus
C. Ghost and Niobe
D. The Merovingian and Persephone

5 Who can look back on 1995 and not recall the glory of Ristar? What, you don't remember that one? Well then, how are you going to tell us the name of the main bad guy in that game?
A. Greedy
B. Meany
C. Teeny
D. Moe

6 In Super Mario Sunshine, Mario gained a new friend – a backpack that squirts water. What was its acronym?
A. F.L.O.O.D.
B. F.L.U.D.D.
C. F.L.O.D.D.
D. F.L.U.D.E.

7 In the short life of the franchise, Karaoke Revolution has included well over 200 songs on its various iterations. Which one of these wasn't on the set list for the first title in the series, which released on PlayStation 2 in 2003?
A. "Billie Jean"
B. "Like a Virgin"
C. "Son of a Preacher Man"
D. "Love Shack"

8 That whole LEGO vibe in video games is getting pretty big these days, what with Indiana Jones and Batman joining the fray. Which of these earlier LEGO games released on the N64 in 1999?
A. LEGO Racers
B. LEGO Loco
C. LEGO Rock Raiders
D. LEGO My Eggo

9 In one of the Atari 2600's most original and lauded games, Yar's Revenge, you maneuver something that looks like a _____ around the screen.
A. Spider
B. Fly
C. Spaceship
D. Knight

10 Do you prefer linear games with a single storyline that require no skill, or do you get into complex non-linear games that include lots of branching paths and options?
A. I like straightforward simplistic games that deliver no meaningful choices

BREAKDOWN

330,900 is the number of units of Call of Duty 4 that were sold on the Xbox 360 in January, according to NPD data. It was the top-selling game of the month

1 million units of Super Smash Bros. Brawl were sold in its first two weeks on the market in Japan

4 different U.S. retailers are being targeted by a Square Enix lawsuit for selling unlicensed replicas of Final Fantasy weapons. Isn't intellectual property law fun?

2012 is the year EA has extended its NFL contract license. In related news, several football fans just cursed aloud

80085 was a number that made us laugh when we inputted it in our calculator when we were younger. You know, like last week
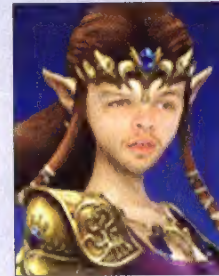
★ Trivia Score & Rank ★

0-1: Tails

2-3: Lemmings

4-5: Metroid

6-7: Zelda

8-9: R2-D2

10: Waluigi

Video Game Trivia Answers: 1. D 2. C 3. B 4. C 5. A 6. B 7. D 8. A 9. B 10. A