# gameinformer

THE WORLD'S #1 VIDEO GAME MAGAZINE

## HALO: REAC

>> **BUNGIE'S** ASTONISHING **PREQUEL** REVEALE

# For Great Justice

## Do we reward the best work, or does the best work reward itself?

**ANDY McNAMARA**
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
andy@gameinformer.com

*Read my column or comment on this letter at gameinformer.com/mag or follow @GI_AndyMc*

Whenever award season rolls into town, I find myself spending an excessive amount of time reevaluating the games I have played and thinking about where the industry sits and if the true artists are getting the accolades, mindshare, and ultimately dollars they deserve. In other words, is there justice in the video game industry?

This isn't an easy question to answer. For every example of justice, like Infinity Ward's success for all their hard work, I can think of a great injustice. The first one that comes to mind is Tim Schafer. Despite being one of the industry's brightest talents, he still can't find the pot of gold at the end of rainbow.

Then there are the games that find themselves sitting in the middle, like the critically praised Uncharted 2: Among Thieves. The game has sold well, but it certainly hasn't moved as many copies as a title of this caliber deserves. Yes, it is a PlayStation 3 exclusive, but that doesn't stop Halo from raking in the dollars on the Xbox 360.

So as we hand out our awards this year, please remember that the teams that make these games deserve more than awards, they deserve the reward of people buying and playing their games. I always take a look at what products are defining entertainment in movies, music, and TV and oftentimes, I can't believe how the lemmings follow and reward some of the worst entertainment drivel of the 21st century. When I read that *So You Think You Can Dance* continually ranks high in TV ratings, I rest easy knowing that gamers have better taste.

The video game developers continue to deliver on their end of the bargain, but let's make sure that we, the gamers, deliver on ours and reward (and award) the deserving. Cheers.

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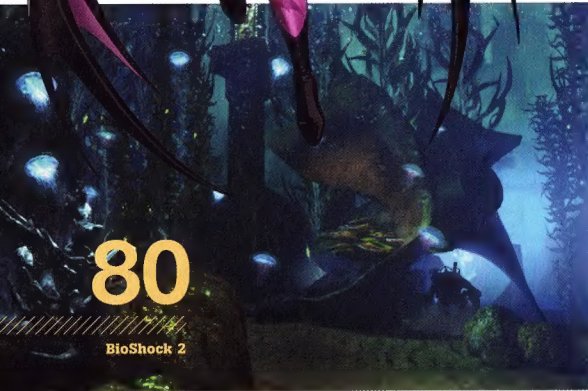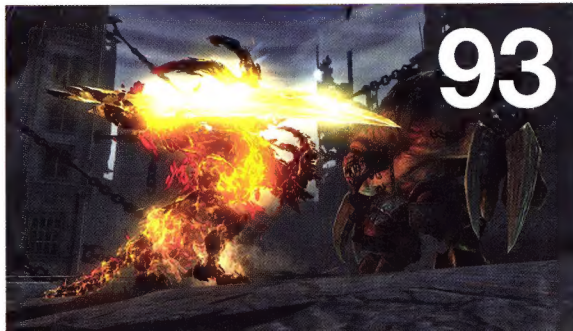
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# BAYONETTA

I JUST DROPPED BY TO SAY DIE.

COMING JANUARY 2010

BEST OF E3 WINNER 1UP.COM

"Best Action Game of E3."
"It's incredible"
-1UP.com

"Bayonetta redefines OVER THE TOP"
-Game Informer

"My entire face was blown off by maximum awesome"
-IGN

BAYONETTA.COM

XBOX 360   XBOX LIVE

PS3   PlayStation 3   PlayStation Network

SEGA

ISSUE
200

**T**his month in Feedback, readers complain about our Top 200 Games of All Time, lament the absence of local multiplayer, get owned by their four-year-old cousins, and speculate about Blizzard's unannounced projects.

## Same Old Freeman

When I opened my mailbox and saw my favorite crowbar-wielding hero staring me in the face as the cover story, I literally tore open the magazine in my car. I assumed Valve finally announced Half-Life 3. You can't tease a man like that.

**Michael Maurer**
**Cincinnati, OH**

Sorry, everyone – we didn't mean to get anyone's hopes up. Sadly, that isn't a picture of a Half-Life 3-era Gordon Freeman; it's a piece of Half-Life 2 concept art for the character Valve provided to commemorate the game's place on our Top 200 Games of All Time list. We were actually considering using an image of the crowbar for the Half-Life 2 cover, since it is just as iconic as any of the game's characters, but we eventually decided to put the spotlight on everyone's favorite bespectacled transdimensional alien killer.
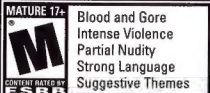
## Sharing the Love

From The Oasis Galley and the USS Halyburton FFG 40, we would like to thank you and congratulate you on your 200th issue – we hope to read 200 more. We're underway most of the time, and if it wasn't for Game Informer we wouldn't know about the great storyline of Metal Gear Solid 4, the cinematic drama of Uncharted 2, whooping ass in Madden NFL 10, or non-stop head shots in Modern Warfare 2. It's what keeps us going when the morale gets a little low. We personally wanted to email you to let you know that your work doesn't go unnoticed. Thank you and your staff for continuing to entertain us time after time.

**Richard Ward**
**USS Halyburton**

## Half-Pint Ninja

All I have ever heard is that Ninja Gaiden is the hardest-core, most gore-filled game ever. Until last Thanksgiving, when I was told that my four-year-old cousin is on the fifth level. Game Informer, I am so confused. Can Ninja Gaiden really be that hard?

**Adam Thiel**
**Grayling, MI**

First of all, your four-year-old cousin should not be playing Ninja Gaiden, unless it's the old-school NES version (good luck getting to the fifth level on that one, kid). Secondly, when people refer to the unforgiving difficulty of Ninja Gaiden, they are usually referring to the original Xbox release from 2004. The default setting in that iteration was challenging even for experienced gamers, earning the game its hardcore reputation. However, in follow-ups like Ninja Gaiden Black and Ninja Gaiden II, the addition of easier difficulty settings and other accommodations bring the title of master ninja within the reach of almost anybody. Well, anybody old enough to read, at least.

## Madman Or Genius?

I need to vent: My gripe comes with the comments made by Bobby Kotick. He has stated he would "raise prices further" on peripheral bundles. This comment, along with eliminating games such as Brütal Legend and Ghostbusters from Activision's lineup, makes me question his ability to keep the company viable. I suppose as long as people keep buying the inevitable Activision sequels the company will continue to profit, but this man seems to be out of touch with the gaming community as a whole. What are your thoughts on the matter?

**Barry Porter**
**South Point, OH**

Gamers probably have trouble respecting a man who says he wants to "take all the fun out of making video games," but you can't judge Bobby Kotick's leadership of Activision based solely on sound bites taken out of context. That isn't to say he's a completely misunderstood figure; his candid and shocking remarks often reflect a pragmatic understanding of the gaming industry as a business – and that tends to rile up those who see game creation as an art form. If you want a better perspective on Kotick's positions and opinions, turn to page 44 and read our interview with the man himself.



**Most Corrected Mistake**
In our entry for the Wii version of The Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess in our Top 200, we mistakenly used a screen from the GameCube version, as evidenced by Link holding his sword in his left hand (not his right, as he did on Wii). We do not regret the error. Seriously, get a life, GameCube fans!

got milk?

Perfect rebound.

How do I cool down after a hot workout? I bounce back with lowfat milk. The unique mix of nutrients helps refuel my body and the protein helps build muscle. It's an assist I never miss.

body BY milk

bodybymilk.com/chaunceybillups

## Top 5 Games Wanted in Our Top 200

**1** Myst
**2** Bejeweled
**3** Dragon Warrior
**4** Earthworm Jim
**5** Space Invaders

## Three-Year Plan

It's cool that Blizzard is trying to build up its classic franchises, but both Diablo III and StarCraft II are nearing completion. Do you think they'll try to bring back the Warcraft RTS anytime soon?

**Steven Vincent
Bainbridge Island, WA**

**Do we think Blizzard will develop a new Warcraft RTS? Yes. Will it be anytime soon? Absolutely not. Blizzard is currently managing a lot of projects: maintaining World of Warcraft and developing expansion packs, getting StarCraft II ready for 2010, and working on Diablo III for (probably) 2011. For both StarCraft and Diablo, the retail release of the games will come about three years after their announcements. Assuming Blizzard sticks to that pattern, even if WarCraft IV were announced tomorrow, you probably wouldn't be playing it until 2013.**

## Here We Go!

The absence of Space Invaders from your Top 200 Games of All Time list (issue 200) is a monumental oversight. You have six Legend of Zelda titles in the top 100, but Space Invaders doesn't make the list? Even more amazing is that Space Invaders wasn't even mentioned in the editors' lists online about their favorite games that got snubbed. In what way can you possibly rationalize this? In my opinion, it can't be done.

**Matt Johnson
Viroqua, WI**

My comments on your list will certainly make a lot of people angry. But here's the thing: Classics do not always equal the best games. Amazing for its time? Yes. Revolutionary? Of course. Innovative? Absolutely. But the best game of all time? No. Of course, I'm talking about The Legend of Zelda, which you put in first place. I'm a huge fan of Zelda, but we have to stop living in the past. Sure, few people will deny how much The Legend of Zelda changed video games, but the gameplay, the graphics, and the almost nonexistent story makes me wonder: "Really? The best game of all time?"

**Benjamin Lin
via email**

How could you forget about Dragon Quest in your list of the Top 200 games ever?! For all of the Final Fantasy games that made the list, you should at least show some respect to the series that made Final Fantasy possible. Over the years, yes, Final Fantasy has "evolved" and learned to pander to its emo tween demographic, and through this process has become a huge seller. There have been subtle advancements in gameplay, but for the most part, I'd say the games are still the linear, sob-story narrative grind-fests that their ancestors were. I know that the team at GI likes to hate on Dragon Quest for not catching up with the times so to speak, but is sticking to what makes your IP unique such a bad thing? Dragon Quest has kept the same charm and humor that made it a big seller (in Japan at least) in the first place, while still providing the fans with stories and characters that felt important and alive. Am I the only person in America that thinks the Dragon Quest games deserve some kind of recognition for basically shaping the JRPG as we know it?

**Jesse McGirr
Buffalo, NY**

**Lists are great, because no one ever agrees on them. This gives rise to thoughtful discussions, arguments, and (in some cases) judicious mudslinging. The aftermath of our Top 200 Games of All Time has been the best part, because we love seeing so many gamers passionately weighing the merits and failings of the industry's greatest accomplishments. If you just say "these are all excellent games," no one disagrees; if you say "this game is better than your favorite game," it tends to get people fired up. All you need to do is take a bunch of things, throw them in an arbitrary order, and watch the sparks fly. On an unrelated note, these are the top five sandwiches:**

1. Monte Cristo
2. Club
3. Roast Beef (without horseradish)
4. Roast Beef (with horseradish)
5. Ham and Swiss

## And The Award Goes To…

I liked your article on the discussion about the VGAs. Those award shows seem more concerned with appealing to an audience that isn't the hardcore gamer. Though there were a lot of things I didn't like about this year's show, I did respect it when they gave game developers their stage time and when they revealed some major game trailers. I agree that the VGAs don't have to be a snore fest like the Oscars, but I personally feel that they could have more serious tributes to current games and their studios. But the first step they need to take is toning down the celebrity appearances.

**Shawn Reynolds
Kernersville, NC**

**But if they tone down celebrity appearances, who will be there to accept the awards for best voice acting? The recognition may have to go to actual voice actors instead of celebrities who cash the check and phone in the performance!**



**(Left)** Sega stops by to show Game Informer some love
**(Right)** Nick gets as radical as any more human can with the Tony Hawk Ride board

## CANDID PHOTOS FROM THE VIDEO GAME INDUSTRY

GI SPY

Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2

## Bargain Game Informer

I recently went to my local game store, and I was browsing around in the pre-owned section, I stumbled upon a game with price of $13. I'm not going to tell you what it is, because you'll make fun of me, but when I got home and I started playing, I realized it wasn't all that bad. I do not think that the game warranted its $60 price tag when it first came out, but for a game on the cheap, it was kind of fun. Could you add a section for games that deserve a second look once they go down in price?

**Chuck D.**
**Staten Island, NY**
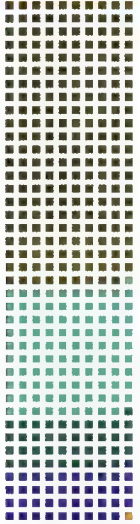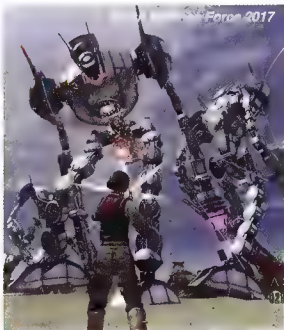
A below-average game is a below-average game; it isn't worth talking about no matter how much it costs. With all of the great titles on the horizon for 2010, why spend time dwelling on garbage from the past? Value is important, but you don't need to settle for bad games to get the most for your money. PS3 and Xbox 360 both have greatest hits programs, where you can get top-tier games for $30. Alternately, you can find plenty of awesome games in the $10 to $20 range on PlayStation Network and Xbox Live Arcade. There are too many good games out there at affordable prices – don't throw your money away on the crummy ones.

## Minus Online

[text obscured]

**Ryan Biggar**
**Morrisville, NC**

We're just as disappointed with the neglect of offline multiplayer as you are. In a recent online feature, we talked to developers like Valve, Epic Games, and Gearbox about the state of multiplayer – split-screen and otherwise – in gaming today. Head over to gameinformer.com to check it out. In the meantime, play Borderlands, Modern Warfare 2, Left 4 Dead 2, and Street Fighter IV – all of which provide great local multiplayer experiences.





**(Left)** The GI crew stops being polite, and starts getting real in our podcast studio. Check out our podcast every Thursday at 7 p.m. **(Right)** Bryan, Miller and Dan break out the heavy weaponry with the Halo: Reach team
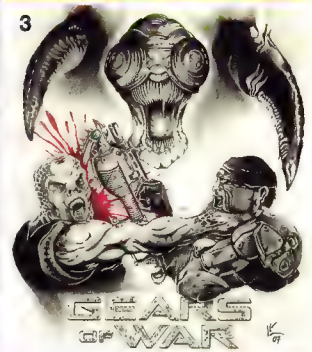
**WINNER** 1 Alex Cockburn: "Remember, remember, the fifth of November, 1478" 2 Yevgeny Sokolov: Yoshi's mastered hammer-murdering. Now he just needs to brush up on his grave-digging 3 Kevin Lingenfelser: Whoa! Is that the thing from Yar's Revenge back there? 4 Juan González: Too bad they don't teach Thai kickboxing in Spartan school 5 Beryl Allee: Prior to becoming the god of war, Kratos was the god of unlikely jumps
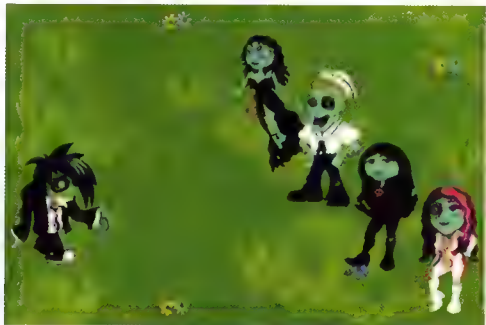










(Left) Meagan in digital form, seen floating as an undead bride in the Zombie Girlfriend Charity Pack for Pocket Zombie on the iPhone. The pack also features Destructoid's Chad Concelmo, IGN's Jessica Chobot and Freezepop's Liz Enthusiasm. Download to donate to each participant's charity of choice. (Meagan selected Child's Play) (Right) Jeff Marchiafava and Ben Reeves get some hands-on time with Splinter Cell courtesy of Ubisoft's Max Beland and Tim Cummins

feedback 11

connect

# The Road Ahead

Experts & insiders look ahead at 2010

by Matthew K.

## Prices

I think that we're going to start to see – maybe not in the next year, but in the near future – games go down the route of smaller up-front experiences and lower prices at the beginning, and then the ability to extend the game through episodic material or future feature material. I think that's a direction we're probably heading in. Games are getting more expensive, and times are tough, and it's getting harder to purchase every game you want. So how can we keep people playing and offer them more, but not have to make them break the bank to do it? It's going to be an interesting creative problem for us to solve.

**– Jason DeLong, senior producer, EA Canada**

I think in 2010 you'll see more games coming out at lower price points, but not the best games. The next sequel of "XYZ sports game," if those games have been in decline the last couple of years, then why not experiment with some different price points?

**– Colin Sebastian, senior vice president, Lazard Capital Markets**

### Price Drops

I would prefer that none of the consoles drop their price in 2010, and instead add differentiating features or upgrades in their hardware that will add more value – or at least retain the current value in the consoles. For example, instead of Microsoft dropping their Xbox 360 from $299 to $199, or even $249, I would prefer them to maybe upgrade their hard drive, maybe add some features, or maybe even include Project Natal as an add-in feature. I believe in 2011 that Project Natal will be a standard peripheral with every Xbox purchase.

**– Jesse Divnich, director of analyst services, EEDAR**

## Motion Controllers

I think in 2010 Project Natal and Sony's motion controller are going to add a new dynamic to the industry that's going to evolve motion-based gaming and hopefully bring back a lot of those non-traditional gamers that left in 2009.

**– Jesse Divnich**

It allows us as designers to surprise people in what they might consider to be a "standard game," where all of a sudden we throw in a feature, or minigame, or a sidequest that utilizes the motion controls in a way they weren't expecting. I'm really big on continuously surprising the player with new gameplay opportunities, and I think these give us the opportunity to do that, and we don't have to be heavy handed about it.

**– Jason DeLong**

## Predictions

I think we're going to hear about another Grand Theft Auto. I think there won't be any playable stuff. I think they'll give you some type of teaser, because we do think that a year from then in 2011 we're going to see another Grand Theft Auto. But I think E3 is mostly going to be centered around Project Natal and the Sony motion controller.

I don't foresee Microsoft or Sony attempting to obtain any type of exclusivity with the next Grand Theft Auto. Microsoft paid a lot of money for exclusivity on the downloadable content for GTA IV, which unfortunately did little to move consoles for Microsoft. Back in 2004, Grand Theft Auto was a huge brand, but only relative to the other brands that existed at the time. While the GTA brand is certainly bigger now than it was five years ago, others have emerged to reach similar levels of success, such as Call of Duty or Guitar Hero. In other words, if Sony gets an exclusive deal on GTA V, it would do little to disrupt Microsoft's ability to move hardware, and vice versa.

**– Jesse Divnich**

If I was to stick my neck out, [E3 should put] a lot of focus on the software that comes with the motion sensing controller [and] also on the handheld platforms. I think potentially we could see new handhelds announced by Nintendo and Sony, and then more – as usual – on the online front.

**– Colin Sebastian**

### Will the software launches of Natal and Sony's motion controller be comprised of traditional games or more introductory tutorial exercises?

I suspect it would be the latter at first, just to show people the basics of the controllers and what they can do. But I think these things are going to have a development life span where we continually discover new things about them. I don't think it will take long to get up to speed, but the intricacies of what they can do will take a long time to master for sure.

**– Jason DeLong**

# Hardware

## The Console Wars

I think the bigger issue we're seeing in 2010 is the market share shift among the consoles: Seeing the PS3 really gain some momentum, the Xbox remaining stable, and then Nintendo needing to breathe a bit of life into its own platforms.

**– Colin Sebastian**

I think it's going to be a very close race. I think the first half of 2010 will fall in Sony's favor just because it does have that momentum going, and they are releasing the motion controller presumably in the first half of 2010. Then, if I had to look past that, I think we might see things shift back to the Xbox with Project Natal.

**– Jesse Divnich**

## Can independent developers survive in 2010?

That's a tricky question. I think the definition [of what an independent studio is] is changing because there are many independent studios that are working for a specific publisher or developer, and I think you're starting to see more distributive development across titles, where multiple studios are contributing to a given title, and I think that is where we're going to see independent studios flourish.

**– Jason DeLong**

## New Consoles

I think it's a little further out. Nintendo has not been very forthcoming about their plans for a next-generation console. I think they're probably still looking at designs and thinking through what to do with faster processors and better graphics capabilities…but I think that Nintendo is the manufacturer that needs to address the next generation first. An HD Nintendo console is coming, but I don't know if it's an HD Wii.

**– Colin Sebastian**

# Software

## Will the Wii see better third-party software support in 2010?

The Nintendo consumer is a little different. They really don't preoccupy themselves with doing research before a game comes out. Mario Kart's been out a couple of years now [spring of 2008 – Ed.], and I think [it's] going to be one of the best-sellers in the 2009 holiday season, and if you ask anybody who bought Mario Kart what the release date was, they're not going to care.

**– Jesse Divnich**

You may see higher quality third-party [titles], but you'll see fewer of them. Electronic Arts, in its headcount reduction, a disproportionate [number] of those people came from Wii development teams. I think that the third parties are having a harder time justifying those investments.

**– Colin Sebastian**

## What's the state of licensed-based games vs. new intellectual properties in 2010?

When I look at the past couple of years, I don't see a distinctive trend between the two. I think we've had really strong entries from both camps. I think if we do see more licensed games, or at least the same number in 2010, I think you're going to see that they're of a higher quality than we've seen in the past because the bar has been raised, and that's a good thing. ◈

**– Jason DeLong**

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# The Best Laid Plans...

There is always a lot going on behind the scenes in the video game industry, and we try and share the rumors and scuttlebutt we hear about your favorite games, developers, and publishers. Loose Talk lets you in on what happens behind closed doors and what might be in store for the future.

## How Long for Half-Life?

Everyone wants to know when the next installment of Valve's Half-Life is coming out, but answering that question isn't easy. Loose Talk has learned that there won't be any game from the franchise in 2010, and what will finally come out is still unknown. Will it be Half-Life 2: Episode Three? Or will it be a full-on Half-Life 3? If it's the latter, we suspect that it might be a few years.

## NHL 2K Series Benched?

While EA's NHL series has been the toast of the town the last couple of years, the NHL 2K series from rival sports publisher 2K Sports has only gotten the face wash from hockey fans. Now, website Pastapadre.com points out that the next iteration in the franchise – NHL 2K11 – is missing from 2K's latest fiscal report, which includes the company's NBA 2K11 and Major League Baseball 2K11. Could this mean that 2K is dropping its NHL franchise? Historically, the company hasn't been shy about cutting its losses in low-performing areas. Its college hoops franchise has already been axed. While the NHL 2K series has been down the last couple of years, there would be no joy in seeing it gone. After all, not that long ago the tables were turned and EA had the bad NHL franchise.

## Sony's Premium Plans?

Sony has been talking about offering a pay-to-play premium online option for PlayStation 3 players, and some of the features within that structure are starting to take shape. According to an IPSOS online research questionnaire, Sony is considering offering a variety of premium features including PSone Classics, PSP Minis, cross-game voice chat, the ability to save game data online, beta games access, hour-long free trials, PSN store discounts, and more. The questionnaire lists four plans, three of which would cost $9.99 a month or $69.99 a year, and one that goes for $4.99 a month or $29.99 a year.

*Contact us with insider info at loosetalk@gameinformer.com and we'll be all ears*

Matt Korba

Paul Bellezza

# The STRANGE
## Tale of the
# ODD GENTLEMEN

How Two USC Students Turned Their Class Project
Into One of the Year's Most Anticipated
Xbox Live Arcade Games

BY MATT HELGESON

A FEW YEARS AGO, MATT KORBA AND PAUL BELLEZZA WERE JUST ANOTHER PAIR OF ASPIRING STUDENTS ENROLLED IN THE PRESTIGIOUS INTERACTIVE MEDIA PROGRAM AT USC. HOWEVER, ONE GREAT IDEA, A FLURRY OF HARD WORK, AND SOME GOOD FORTUNE HAVE QUICKLY PROPELLED THEM INTO THE WORLD OF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT. NOW, WITH A 2K GAMES DEAL AND A MUCH-ANTICIPATED XBLA GAME, THE ADVENTURES OF P.B. WINTERBOTTOM, SET FOR RELEASE, THE TWO LOOK BACK AT THEIR WHIRLWIND EXPERIENCE.
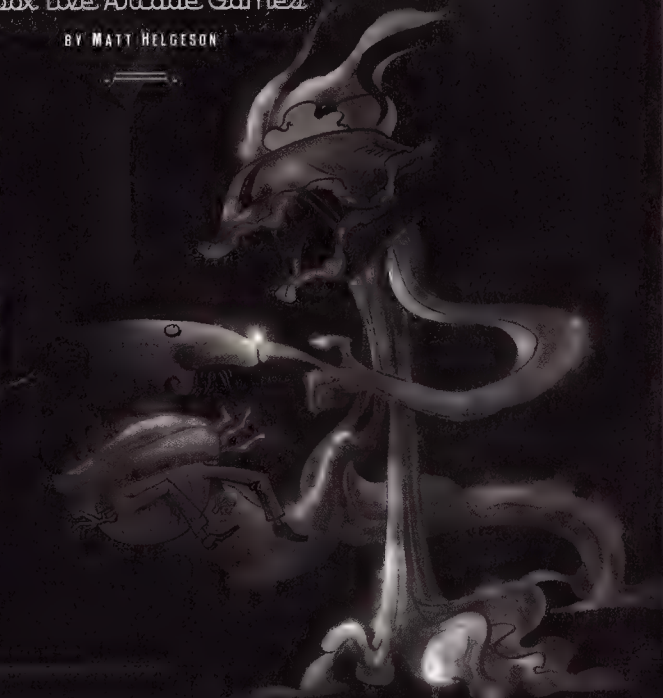
# 1. BEGINNINGS

*Although they come from diverse academic backgrounds, both Korba and Belleza were drawn to game design.*

**MATT KORBA:** I was a film student at Long Beach State. I applied to the Interactive Media Program at USC because I wanted to continue on in my film studies. I thought, "Hey, it's in the film department but they also do some interactive stuff – maybe I'll learn a little Flash code." I got here and started getting exposed to the game-making side and really liked it. I liked it better than movies.

**PAUL BELLEZA:** After I did my undergrad, I went to UC Berkeley. I studied psychology and education, and I became a high school biology teacher. I was doing that for a year while studying for grad school. I wanted to do genetic counseling – or that's what I thought I wanted to do. I had just gotten back into gaming in college. I was playing a lot of PC games and my brother got a PS2. I played Vice City, and I was like, "Holy s---, these games are awesome." I had stopped playing after the PSone era because I had been so involved in college and studying. But I got back into it and got really nerdy and obsessed, just like when I was a kid. I used to read every *Nintendo Power* and *GamePro*.

At some point while I was studying to go back to college and being a teacher, I realized that I hated science and I hated my life. I needed to do something else. So I went to this "how to get into the video game industry" seminar and realized that there was this whole industry that I didn't really know much about. I quit teaching and I worked at EB Games for a couple of months, eventually getting a [quality assurance] job at Vivendi Universal in Los Angeles. I worked there for a year, but I wanted to get into development. I knew I needed to get some skills. USC Interactive Media was the only graduate program that focused on design. I'm not a programmer or an artist, I'm just a guy that wanted to do design and producing. USC had those options for me. I applied and got in, and the rest is history.

# 2. THE BIG IDEA

*While at USC, Korba's background in film inspires him to begin work on an idea for a game that would emulate the classic era of silent film, while at the same time incorporate an ambitious, time-twisting play style. This idea formed the basis for The Adventures of P.B. Winterbottom.*

**MATT KORBA:** Throughout my course studies, I was playing around with these ideas of having alternate timelines and looping storylines. We were shown a video in our first year called Tango, a short experimental animation by Zbigniew Rybczski. It had some cool ideas in it and I thought I could make a game like it. So I started playing around with trying to do a game that would be similar to a silent film in a video game format.

# 3. JOINING FORCES

*Korba and Belleza, now both students at USC, meet and quickly become friends. The pair bond over Korba's idea, and form a fruitful partnership.*

**MATT KORBA:** The program [at USC] is actually very small. There were only 11 of us in the same classes. You went through three years with pretty much those same guys, so we knew everyone really well. Paul and I worked well together and filled out each other's weaknesses.

I think when [Paul] was in the program he started realizing that he was more interested in being on the producing side than the creative, designing side. At the same time, I'm totally unorganized and Paul is very organized. He can make things happen. I get too deep into the creative stuff. I knew that to do this project it was going to require a team. It was pretty ambitious. I had the concept before I met him, but it wasn't fleshed out. It was just, "Hey, I want to do this thing that's like a silent film." I was talking about all this crazy time travel stuff you were going to be able to do, and people -- even at the school – thought we were crazy. So, Paul helped me right off the bat. We got the pitch together, recruited the team, and started prototyping. That's where we really fleshed out the ideas. I had a high level concept, but I didn't have the gameplay yet.

# 4. BUILDING THE TEAM

*Now allied around the Winterbottom concept, Korba and Belleza begin the hard work of forming a team of students to work on the project. Along the way they get some positive feedback from some video game luminaries that helps pave the way for Winterbottom to become a reality. Belleza is then thrust into the producer role, having to coordinate not one, but two student teams.*

**MATT KORBA:** At a design school like USC the hardest thing to get is engineers, because everyone wants to be on the creative side. There was this class that, if we got into it, we would be set up with engineers. The first thing we had to do was audition for the class in front of some industry people. It was Doug Church from EA, Carl Schnurr from Activision, and Dan Arey from Ready at Dawn/ Naughty Dog. They had a panel we had to present the idea to. They really liked it and we ended up getting into the class. They were also very curious about how we were going to pull something like this off, because it sounded pretty crazy. We got in the class and we were actually doing dual development, which was insane in retrospect. They wouldn't let us do Flash in the class, because one of the professors had a big problem with it. He didn't think it would be challenging enough for the engineering team. So we were building it in XNA for the 360. At the same time, Paul and I had our own team that we had recruited from our department and we were building the entire game in Flash. We were able to prototype our ideas way faster in Flash.

**PAUL BELLEZA:** It was a challenge. I think my experience in teaching really helped. I had five classes and had to organize all their homework. In teaching, you have to set dates and you have to make sure certain concepts are taught before other things. A lot of that was brought into trying to structure the project.

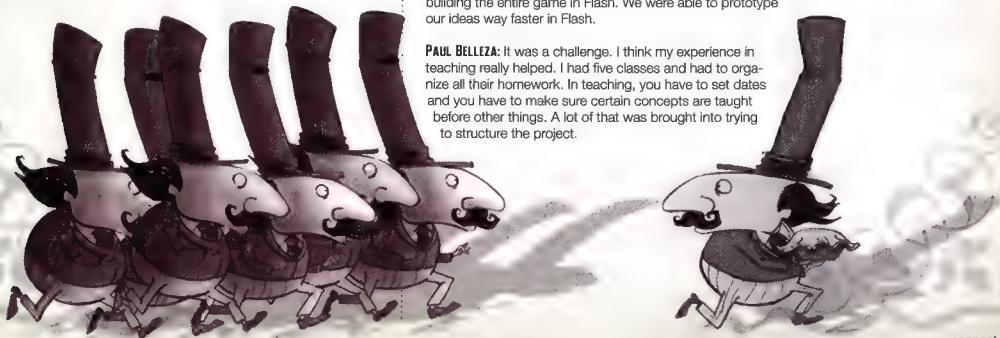...I STARTED PLAYING AROUND WITH TRYING TO DO A GAME THAT WOULD BE SIMILAR TO A SILENT FILM IN A VIDEO GAME FORMAT.

Déjà vu, Winterbum? Press X to smack switches.


They say self-sacrifice is the noblest virtue.

## 5. Development Struggles

As the team begins to make Winterbottom a playable reality, they struggle to put some of the game's more esoteric concepts into practice.

**MATT KORBA:** It's gone through tons of iterations. It is a pain in the butt to design. Of course, we didn't know that when we were getting into. If you think about it, you have this character that you could use as a platform any time you want. All the tricks of normal platforming games don't apply. If you put up a high wall, they can just clone themselves up there. If you put up a wall, they can just clone themselves around it. Trying to design puzzles in that world was difficult.... The best way we found to do that was actually working backward. I would think of some crazy chain reaction I wanted to see, like Winterbottom getting smacked here, then getting launched, then jumping on his head, and I would set up the pieces to make that happen. Kind of like the board game Mousetrap. We'd keep going over the puzzles until the most solutions were possible, hopefully while still feeling challenging.


Quite a dill pickle, sir.

## 6. Advice from a Role Model

During development, Korba receives some advice from Braid creator Jonathan Blow, a designer whose work he admires.

**MATT KORBA:** I saw Braid in 2006, after we had already started doing concept stuff for Winterbottom. I was like, "Oh…okay." It was really awesome and it actually made me stop working on Winterbottom for a while. They are both 2D games that deal with time. It wasn't similar necessarily in the mechanics or the theme, but I saw that and thought I should maybe work on something else because [Braid] was so awesome. But I couldn't get the ideas out of my head; I kept thinking of other stuff I wanted to play around with in areas I didn't think Braid was covering. When I wanted to do it for my thesis project, one of my professors said, "You should see if you could get Jonathan Blow to be one of your advisors." The professor set up an email chain and we talked for a while. He gave me some pointers.

We never talked about specific mechanics. He never said, "Hey you should try this kind of puzzle. You should do this crazy thing with time." He was more into what do you want to make the player feel? Have you tried these steps to make the player feel that way? He would ask me what I was going for. I was very lucky to be talking with him, because the guy is a genius. He gave me really good advice.
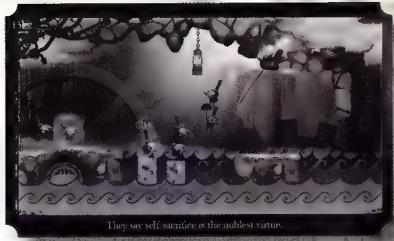
## 7. A Big Break

Encouraged by the game's progress, the Winterbottom team makes a last minute decision to submit the game to the Independent Games Festival. While making the deadline proves difficult, the show is a massive success for Winterbottom, and the game comes away with a healthy buzz.

**MATT KORBA:** We had only decided two weeks before, with my barebones prototype, that we were going to even try [to enter IGF]. I didn't know if I should submit that year or the next. I really wanted to submit then because it was my last year in school. I didn't want to wait to see what was going to happen with the game, so we worked like madmen. Luckily we got in.

It was amazing. We were so stoked when we got that email. They had delayed announcing who was in for two weeks, so it made the nervousness even worse. We found out over our Christmas break and everyone had to fly back to California because we had some people out on the East Coast who had to come back from break because we had to finish the game early. We worked our butts off. We were literally coding stuff the night before we went on the show floor.

**PAUL BELLEZA:** We actually had a laptop and if we saw a bug, we'd fix it immediately. It was in Flash, so we could fix it and save the executable and throw it up there. We have pictures of seven of us crammed in a hotel room, hunched over our computers putting the finishing touches on the game.

## 8. Heading to the Big Show

After the attention the game received at the Independent Games Festival, P.B. Winterbottom gets accepted to Indiecade, which allows the game to be shown at the annual E3 conference. At the show the game attracts attention from publishers, including 2K Games.

**MATT KORBA:** We got into Indiecade, and that was really good because they took us to E3. We got a lot of initial press and interest at IGF, but E3 really solidified it.

That was great because it was the year that E3 was small. We were in the same room as all the big games. Usually the halls are so big you might not be able to find the indie games. But because E3 was super small we were literally right next to Mirror's Edge and giant games like that.

We talked to some new [publishers] and followed up with some we had already talked to. 2K came back around. Everybody had different opinions on it. They loved the concept in general and loved the idea, but with some of the other companies we went to, you could tell they wanted to cut at it with scissors or poke at it. They wanted us to do things like put it in color or switch it to a mouse game

**PAUL BELLEZA:** Or put it in different movie periods.

**MATT KORBA:** Yeah, like, "Well, this is great for this game, but where does it go after that? I think Winterbottom should travel through Jurassic Park."

You've reached the tip top... now get her tick tocking!



From pickle to stinkberry... worse and worse

## 9. Inking the Deal

After weighing several offers, the team decides to sign a deal to produce the game for Xbox Live Arcade with 2K Games, one of the first publishers that showed serious interest in the project.

**Matt Korba:** The first time we went to 2K, they were totally into it. It was obvious that they were really down for what we were trying to do. But they had to figure out the financials. They saw us again at E3 and the game was even farther along. They said, "We really have to talk to you guys."

They set us up with what we needed. They let us have total creative freedom. They've given us everything we need to make it happen and left us alone. We actually met with Strauss Zelnick, the head of 2K. He was at USC and we had a lunch with him. His philosophy is that creative people will make good stuff if you just leave them alone. If you love what your'e doing and there's passion in the project, you'll be able to tell. That was awesome to hear from the tip-top of the chain. They've let us do what we felt was right.

## 10. Going Pro

With the deal in place, the team begins the hard work of converting their Flash-developed project to Xbox Live. For the first time they are forced to deal with the pressure that comes with dealing with a large-scale publisher.

**Matt Korba:** I can't remember when the deal was signed, but we started in October 2008. We had to drop everything we did as students, because there's no magic button to take a Flash game and change it over to Xbox Live.

**Paul Belleza:** We're pretty much the same size we were as a student team, but everyone on that team was basically designers. We had to seek out engineers and artists and animators who could help us complete the game. Also, half the team was still in school. So they really couldn't do it. We do contract with a lot of the old team members.

**Matt Korba:** We kept as many of the student team members as we physically could to make the game happen. But like Paul says, I did all the art on the student game. That wasn't going to fly. I'm doing way too much stuff. I knew we needed an artist. We needed C++ engineers. We got two guys from Digipen to come down. They left their jobs in the industry to do this.

**Paul Belleza:** Going from a student team to a professional team, the challenge just ramped up. You're not playing in a space where you can leave things a little sloppy because you're a student game or a Flash game. When you're on a professional project, everything has to be perfect. I became the main point of contact between the team and 2K. They helped us come up with the milestone structure that worked best for us. They let us come up with goals and deadlines, and they worked to structure it in a way that they produced other games. We worked together to come up with a way that worked best for us.
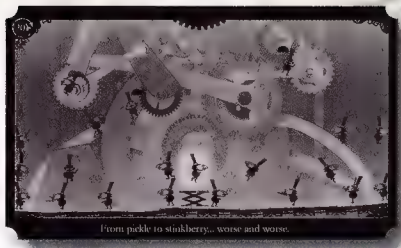
## 11. Rush Towards the Finish Line

With funding and a dedicated team in place, the Odd Gentlemen begin a hectic development schedule in order to meet their goal for an early 2010 release date.

**Matt Korba:** It's been crazy, partly because we're a new team and partly because we're perfectionists. We want to everything to be perfect. Everyone has put a lot of their heart and soul into the game.

**Paul Belleza:** Something we joke about is making the transition from a student team to a professional team. When you're a student, Matt can sit there for three days straight working then sleep for two days. But now, Matt's got to be up the next morning! [Laughs] We've learned that you have to cut yourself off at some point. You have to go home and sleep because it's diminishing returns. It's our baby, but we have to balance out our lives. You have to visit your girlfriend, and not have her murder you for not being home.

**Matt Korba:** I've been at the office for the last week and I don't think I've shaved in a month.

## 12. The End, New Beginnings

As the game reaches the finish line, the Odd Gentlemen begin to reflect on the last few years while looking towards the future.

**Matt Korba:** It's mixed bag for me. I'm really excited because we've worked so hard to get to this point, but it's hard to release something into the wild that we've worked on for so long. I'm super excited, but it's going to be sad to not be working on it anymore. We've run so fast towards the goal that we really haven't had time to reflect on going from students to being a professional company. I think that's my general feeling. I'm nervous. It's like letting your first child into the world. Are people going to like it? Is it going to do as well as it did as a student game?

**Paul Belleza:** I'm so focused on the next week and what we're getting done. There's the light at the end of the tunnel and that's going to be really sweet. I'm excited for that. But the present is always nagging at me, so I haven't had time to think about it. Maybe pretty soon we will, and I'll feel sad, but right now I'm just like "Let's get it done."

**Matt Korba:** This is what I want to do. Ever since I was in school I wanted to start my own thing. I don't think I could go work for another company. For what we want to do, smaller games just work out better, because we want to try new things. It's really hard to get a huge budget for some crazy idea that is totally unproven. We do have some ideas that are obviously not small games, they're disc titles. We'll see how we grow over the years.

**Paul Belleza:** I want us to grow in this space for a while. When we feel it's the right time to do something bigger, we'll figure that out. Right now, the games we want to do the most seem to fit this place. ◈

WE KEPT AS MANY OF THE STUDENT TEAM MEMBERS AS WE PHYSICALLY COULD TO MAKE THE GAME HAPPEN.

We're back... mind the numbers, you Buttwit.

# Winterbottom is devilishly fun, Puzzle Quest returns, and a trip to the Old West
*by Matt Miller*

I can't say enough good things about **The Misadventures of P.B. Winterbottom**, a subversive and challenging puzzler that I finally played a nearly completed version of this month. Players who recall the brain-twisting stages of Braid will find many familiar elements in Winterbottom, but the game has a striking vision and gameplay style all its own. Each level plays out like a scene from an old black and white silent movie short, complete with subtitles. Mustachioed villain/hero P.B. Winterbottom is irrationally fond of pie, and his quest after the tasty treats causes no end of trouble. Through some convoluted events, Winterbottom gains the ability to manipulate time. In particular, he can record a sequence of actions and thereby create a clone of himself, freeing the real P.B. to complete other onscreen tasks. The puzzles rapidly test your timing and critical thinking. Certain stages only allow a limited number of clones, while others demand you collect pies in a certain order around the screen. While the short but enigmatic stages aren't designed for impatient gamers, the reward for your devotion is a humorous and original game with an artistic and musical presentation that stands toe to toe with any recent title. Look for an XBLA release in early 2010, and make sure to check out our extended conversation with the development team on page 16.

If you're anything like me, the announcement of **Puzzle Quest II** has you chomping at the bit. Planned for a spring launch, the title returns to the gameplay of Challenge of the Warlords, but with an entirely new and different approach to the surrounding RPG experience. Where the first Puzzle Quest had your hero adventuring through a broad outdoor world, Puzzle Quest II delivers an equally expansive world, all within the environs of one massive dungeon complex. The class list includes the assassin, inquisitor, war mage, and barbarian, each with their own special abilities. Your character shows up in the town of Verloren to discover that a massive fortress lays buried in the ice nearby. Only its highest tower still remains above ground. From there, you descend into floor after floor of monster slaying and treasure looting, all the while investigating the mysterious disappearance of a beautiful female paladin who has been missing for years in the ice-encapsulated castle. The overworld now plays in a classic isometric view, from which you'll converse with townspeople, track down monsters, and find hidden passages. Special, story-specific challenges are now scattered about the world. I saw one where a villager's cottage was on fire, and only matching three buckets of water repeatedly could douse the flames. The central puzzle gameplay is nearly identical to the first. The only big change is the inclusion of gauntlet icons. These join spells as a fundamental damage-dealing mechanic. Match enough gauntlets, and you'll have the power to swing your weapon – and get all the bonuses connected to using that unique piece of equipment. From what I saw, the game is everything I wanted this sequel to be.

I'd be remiss to not mention another gem I encountered recently – **Lead & Gold: Gangs of the Wild West**. This multiplayer-focused third-person shooter has two teams vying for supremacy across windblown western towns and sandy desert canyons. Four classes each specialize their abilities, from the gunslinger's close range-pistols to the trapper's sniper-like distance shots. What distinguishes the game is its focus on teamwork and cooperation. As characters level up, they gain area buffs that affect all allies. Maintaining a close-knit and efficient fighting force across the map becomes the key to victory. A squad of fellow GI editors and myself battled it out for several hours one day this month, and much laughter (and cursing) ensued

*Want more downloadable games info? Read weekly updates on the latest Xbox Live Arcade, PlayStation Network, WiiWare, and PC titles at gameinformer.com/mag*


Puzzle Quest II
Xbox Live Arcade


Lead & Gold: Gangs of the Wild West
PlayStation Network, Xbox Live Arcade, PC

## Fieldrunners

This colorful time killer proves that tower defense rules on the iPhone. Developer Subatomic Studios helped set the standard of how the genre should perform on Apple's phone. With gameplay so solid and reliable, it's easy to see how hours can go by so easily.

### Oregon Trail

One of the most beloved games of our childhoods has been re-imagined by developer/publisher Gameloft The iPhone version may be the best edition of Oregon Trail ever. Hilarious characters and greatly expanded gameplay makes this a must-have.

Hi there, I'm the captain of this wagon train, so listen up.

### Wild West Pinball

Wild West Pinball plays better than almost every other pinball video game out there and even features global leaderboards. This is one of those titles that has us saying: "Just one more game."

### Geo-Defense

This tower defense title may look like a visual brother to Geometry Wars, but the gameplay couldn't be more different. The hyper-hectic gameplay and tough-yet-addictive difficulty actually works in its favor
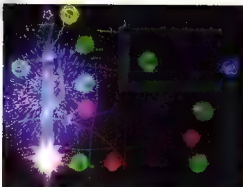
### Civilization Revolution

It's all here Literally everything from the console gem makes the port over to the smaller iPhone version. While the graphics have been changed to fit the small screen, the gameplay isn't missing a thing.

2500 BC

### Rolando 2

The first Rolando was a great LocoRoco-style platformer for the iPhone With the sequel, publisher ngmoco strikes gold with a bright, colorful game that mixes the humor of games like Katamari with its original and addictive gameplay
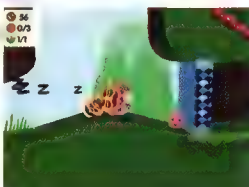
### Tiger Woods Golf

When it came to bringing a console game to the iPhone, EA clearly didn't want to whip together a sloppy port. Tiger Woods is a full-featured golf game with multiple courses, a single-player career, inventory, and even fully voiced commentary. The gameplay fits like a golf glove.

### Zenonia

Original RPGs for the iPhone are a rarity, but this gem instantly took us back to the golden years of 16-bit games. Everything from the top-down cartoony graphics to the epic "boy from a small village" story proves that the age-old formula can still be fun generations later.
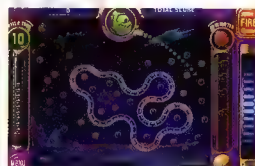
### Peggle

While it's tempting to wag our fingers at Popcap for porting Peggle to yet another platform, we're too busy having a total blast playing it. We may as well call her Old Faithful at this point.
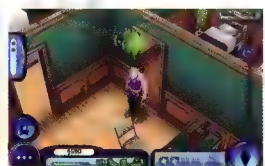
### The Sims 3

The Sims is one of the most impressive games on the iPhone. This version of the human simulator has almost as much detail as its PC counterpart We were blown away with the level of complexity in the overall gameplay and management tools.

# Primetime Showstoppers

Spike TV's VGAs Shows off Big Titles

**Halo: Reach**
(Microsoft Game Studios/Bungie)
**Platforms:** Xbox 360
**Release Date:** Fall 2010

**W**ith a hodge-podge of presenters including Tony Hawk, Zach Braff, Mike Tyson, and some of the cast from the too-terrible-to-be-true trainwreck that is MTV's reality show *Jersey Shore*, the VGAs proved that perhaps the only thing more awkward than gamers are the VGAs' presenters themselves.

Although Spike TV's Video Game Awards may still be trying to work out how to put on an awards show that is more entertaining than embarrassing, it does have one thing figured out: games. This year's show featured a number of first looks and announcements of some of the biggest games of 2010 including Halo: Reach (turn to page 52 for our in-depth coverage of the game), Medal of Honor, the sequel to Batman: Arkham Asylum, Prince of Persia: The Forgotten Sands, Star Wars: The Force Unleashed II, and more.

**Prince of Persia: The Forgotten Sands**
(Ubisoft/Ubisoft Montreal)
**Platforms:** PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, Wii, DS, PSP, PC
**Release Date:** May

**Batman: Arkham Asylum 2**
*(working title)*
(Warner Bros Games/ Rocksteady Studios)
**Platforms:** TBA
**Release Date:** TBA
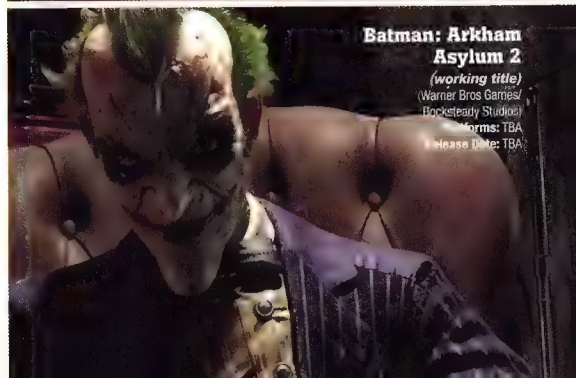
**Green Day: Rock Band**
(MTV Games & Electronic Arts/Harmonix)
**Platforms:** TBA
**Release Date:** TBA

**Spec Ops: The Line**
(2K Games/Yager Development)
**Platforms:** PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, PC
**Release Date:** Fall 2010
(see page 78 for our full preview)
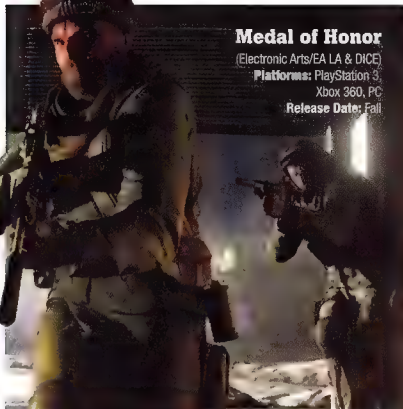
**Medal of Honor**
(Electronic Arts/EA LA & DICE)
**Platforms:** PlayStation 3,
Xbox 360, PC
**Release Date:** Fall
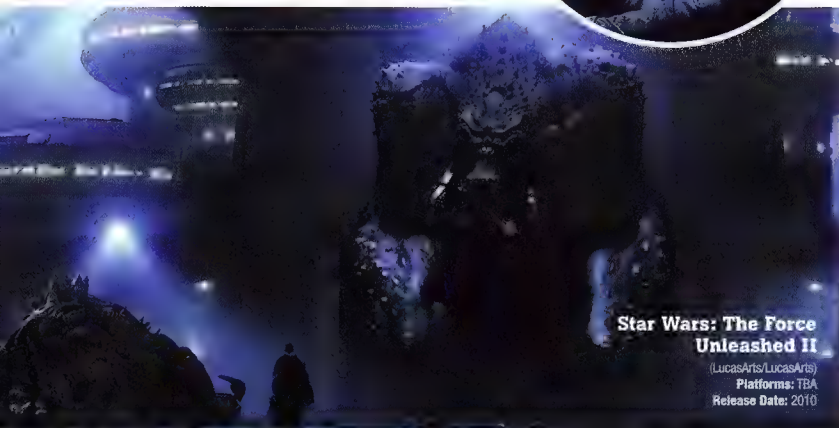


**Star Wars: The Force Unleashed II**
(LucasArts/LucasArts)
**Platforms:** TBA
**Release Date:** 2010



**Tron: Evolution**
(Disney Interactive Studios/Propaganda Games)
**Platforms:** PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, PC
**Release Date:** Holiday



**True Crime**
(Activision/United Front Games)
**Platforms:** PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, PC
**Release Date:** 2010



**UFC Undisputed 2010**
(THQ/Yuke's)
**Platforms:** TBA
**Release Date:** May 25

# DJ Hero

Game Informer scours the leaderboards in search of the best of the best to uncover the person behind the handle and learn his or her strategies. If you get a pesky message over Xbox Live or PlayStation Network, please don't delete it. You could be our next featured gamer. *by Bryan Vore*



## Mark Taylor

### Accomplishments:
As of press time, Mark Taylor held the number one spots on 18 different DJ Hero mixes on the Xbox Live leaderboards. On many of the other tracks he maintains a top 10 position.

### Origin of Skills:
Taylor has been a hardcore music game player since the first Guitar Hero entry. He was highly active in the ScoreHero.com community for several years and still goes on every once in a while to post high scores. "I heard they were coming out with DJ Hero and I was like, 'DJs are pretty cool,'" he says. "I love rhythm games, so I followed that around a little bit and I got it the day it came out." Taylor wasted no time with lower difficulty levels and went straight to Expert.

### Practice Time:
Taylor says he only plays an hour or two a day to maintain his high scores.

### DJ Tips:
"Pretty much as soon as I get a rewind I use it because that increases the chance of getting more rewinds, therefore increasing your score even more," Taylor says. "If I'm about to get a rewind I don't use euphoria because you don't really want to overwrite the 8X multiplier from that." He adds that players shouldn't worry as much about hitting the exact middle click on the crossfader to get it to register. Also, players should try to squeeze two different samples into the freestyle sections to earn extra points.

### Life Outside of DJ Hero:
Taylor attends community college full time and is considering a music education major. He plays trombone and is currently forming a jazz group with some friends. Whipping up delicious Blizzards at Dairy Queen is how he currently pays the bills.

### Other Favorite Games:
Street Fighter IV, Guitar Hero 5, Assassin's Creed II, Super Smash Bros. Melee

### Improving DJ Hero:
"Something that should – and probably will – be added to the next DJ Hero more than anything else is a practice mode," Taylor says. He'd also like to be able to listen to more than eight songs in a row in Party Mode, and hopes that someday players will be able to make their own mixes.

# Assassin's Creed II

**Assassin's Creed was nothing if not controversial** While many gamers lauded its unique setting, alluring protagonist, and intriguing climbing system, others derided the game structure's inherent monotony. With Assassin's Creed II, Ubisoft Montreal re-engineered the core experience to great success while at the same time introducing a new protagonist and brand new setting – no small order. The reception was overwhelmingly positive, but the game still has its points of contention. Using reader and staff generated questions, we asked the developers about your chief concerns.



**I loved the economy system but it was too easy to get rich right away in the game. Why did you decide to tune the monetary system in this way?**

Note that not every player gets rich very fast. We made playtests and looked at players and how they enjoyed and used the economic system. This tuning seemed to us to be the best balance. Besides, two things must be kept in mind. First, players want rewards and it feels good to receive money either when you finish a quest (memory) or when you venture around (chests). Second, it all boils down to what you can do with your money, really. All upgrades (weapons and armors) are not available everywhere and at any time in the game – we decided that by opening a new district and or sequence, new upgrades would be available in shops. This ensured us to be able to control the progression of the game difficulty. Also, your money does not only allow you to buy upgrades and weapons, but also paintings, new dyes for your clothes… we didn't want the player to bypass all this as well. Lastly, we wanted players to use the Villa and invest in it because this place shows cases this evolution in the game. So we exposed it early in the game and made sure the player could use it without having to make an impossible choice between upgrading himself or the Villa.
*- Benoit Lambert, game director*

**In The Truth there was an image of Ghandi with a piece of Eden. Was he in league with the Assassins?**

It is very unlikely. Those in the public eye are rarely Assassins. Assassins like to work in the shadows, influencing the course of history rather than participating in it. In terms of the Pieces of Eden, many people today who have no affiliation with either the Templars or the Assassins inherit them unknowingly. You might even want to check your attic.
*- Jeffrey Yohalem, scriptwriter*

**I loved searching for The Truth, but it paints some major historical figures like Henry Ford and Thomas Edison in a bad light. Were they really so devious?**

Yes, what we portrayed in the puzzles is largely fact. Thomas Edison was notorious for stealing other people's inventions. and in the case of Nikola Tesla, he waged all out war. Nikola Tesla invented alternating (AC) current, which was much better at traveling long distances and ran over thinner and cheaper wires than Edison's invention direct (DC) current. When Edison saw Tesla's method was better, he decided to destroy Tesla through propaganda. Edison invented the electric chair and powered it with AC current, to show people that AC could electrocute them. He electrocuted Topsy the elephant in public with AC current to prove the same thing. Before this "War of Currents," while Tesla still worked for Thomas Edison, Tesla invented radio, microwaves, and helped develop electricity. Edison took credit for all of these inventions. Then, when Tesla asked to be paid, Edison gave him a fraction of the $50,000 he was promised. After Tesla broke away to start his own career and to pursue his dream of giving free energy to the world, Edison and his company sought to destroy him, making sure free energy would never see the light of day. Definitely something a Templar would do. Edison's friend Henry Ford was an anti-Semite who was awarded Nazi Germany's highest honor, the Grand Cross of the German Eagle, for his anti-Jewish, anti-immigrant publications. Hitler hung a picture of Henry Ford on his wall, and Ford is the only American mentioned in Mein Kampf. Ford was opposed to labor unions, employing a Navy boxer to intimidate, and in many cases, beat up organizers. So, the history we are taught in high school classrooms is not the whole story.
*- Jeffrey Yohalem, scriptwriter*

**Some of the enemies seem impervious to counters. Why did you design them like that?**

We wanted to have more variety in our combat system. Some enemies can be countered and killed in one shot. Others need to be tired first to be countered and some cannot be countered with regular weapons. We decided that enemies with long or heavy weapons (spike and two-handed axes or swords) could only be counter killed with a long or heavy weapon… and made the use of the disarm a great strategy there. It also allowed us to add more variety in our animations. You will have rare but great looking counters with long and heavy weapons versus Brutes or Seekers.
*Benoit Lambert, game director*

**For the second straight game, I loved the Desmond segments,** but it makes up such a small portion of the game it feels like a lost opportunity. Will he take a greater role in an upcoming game?

I want him to, but it's not my choice. It's tough – some people love Desmond, and some people don't. This stuff has an influence. The one thing that annoys me is when people talk about how the Desmond sections ruin immersion, though. *What?* The premise of the game has you playing a guy who relives the genetic memories of his ancestors. How is playing the protagonist ruining immersion? Isn't it the opposite? I think these players want a different game. Not much I can do for them.

I am fine with people who say they don't like the present because I've done a crappy job. That's actionable intelligence. I can't help those who don't like the concept. It's integral to the game. It's not going anywhere. So I think we should be focusing on making the present even more appealing (I think we made progress in AC2) rather than just marginalizing it out of the picture. I know you can't please all of the people all of the time, but I'm going to at least try and please more of them more of the time. I think we're making progress. [There's a] lot less Desmond hate this time around. It will get better.
*- Corey May, scriptwriter*

**Why are the death speeches so much shorter in the sequel?**

I was told to make them much shorter by the team. Some people didn't like them in the first game. They thought they were boring. Other people thought they "didn't make sense" because you'd killed these people and suddenly they're chit-chatting about stuff. So I was told keep it short and keep it in context of dying. It was sort of a lost opportunity in terms of using them to flip your perspective on a character. It's hard to say a lot when you only have a couple of words.
*- Corey May, scriptwriter*

**In the first game you could infiltrate and kill all the targets without being detected. Is that possible for every target in the sequel?**

For most of them, yes, but the context (story and game pace) of the main assassinations varies far more from one to another…so, some targets know that you are there and fight or flee depending on their archetype.
*- Benoit Lambert, game director* ◈

# The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly
## NEWS WITH A SARCASTIC SPIN

(RIGHT) Almost any Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2 news is good news, right? It definitely is when it comes to non-specific info regarding developer Infinity Ward's plans for the title's DLC. Infinity Ward creative strategist Robert Bowling recently tweeted that the company is planning DLC for this spring. More Spec Ops missions? We sure hope so.



# the good

(RIGHT) Pandemic Studios is dead...long live Pandemic. Shortly after Electronic Arts closed the developer and brought some of its talent and titles to EA LA, the publisher announced a new game: Mercs Inc. The game will be put out under the Pandemic label, despite the studio's demise, and it appears the game is multiplayer focused.



# the bad



(ABOVE) One of the trends of 2009 was game delays, and it looks like the more things change, the more they stay the same. The new year is just kicking off and already Brink and Max Payne 3 (shown) have been delayed into fall.

## Bad?

Sony's talking a lot these days about charging a fee for some undefined premium content on its PlayStation Network. While company bigwig Kaz Hirai has also promised that multiplayer online gaming will remain free if there's a premium option, Sony's current lack of a monthly fee is a necessary distinguishing characteristic from Microsoft.

(RIGHT) Two of the biggest third-party publishers pronounce dismay at the Wii. Ubisoft CEO Yves Guillemot bemoaned his company's Wii software sales – while simultaneously promising solid future support for the motion controller efforts of Nintendo's competitors. Meanwhile, EA Montreal general manager Alain Tascan said the studio is going to focus its efforts more on the Xbox 360 and PS3 because the Wii market is "a little bit unpredictable these days." The studio previously released Wii titles such as SSX Blur, Skate It, and Need for Speed: Nitro.



# the ugly
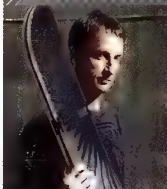
# TOP 50 GAMES OF 2009
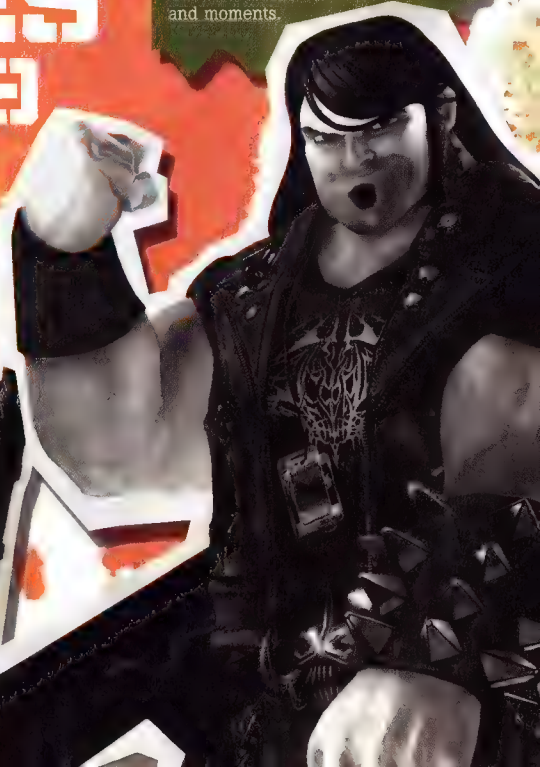
Mention the year 2009 to gamers or industry analysts and you're likely to hear a woeful tale of slipping sales, studio closures, and delayed blockbusters. While 2009 may have been hard on the bottom line for some gaming juggernauts, looking back after the dust settled makes it clear that gamers had a rich pool of groundbreaking games from which to choose. Rocksteady Studios broke the code to creating a great Batman game with Arkham Asylum. Gearbox Software successfully blended the first-person shooter genre with grind-heavy RPG elements in the co-op hit Borderlands. Even the normally under fire EA Sports found its sweet spot, delivering three outstanding sports titles. In the following pages, we reminisce over the year's most memorable titles and moments.

## SKATE 2

**Platform:** PlayStation 3, Xbox 360
**Release:** January 21

Sometimes the best do get better. If skating through San Vanelona impressed us, the Skate sequel rebuilds the city to deliver a brand new experience. The new and old architecture included in the level design offers a ton of skateboard-friendly areas, and players can use their imagination and drag objects to set up their own lines. The ability to run and the inclusion of more skate-friendly curbs also help us forget about the tragedy of Tony Hawk: Ride.

## RETRO GAME CHALLENGE

**Platform:** Nintendo DS
**Release:** February 10

Retro Game Challenge is one of the year's true cult classics, an eccentric yet heartfelt tribute to the 8-bit console era. Loosely based on a Japanese TV show, the game sends players on a strange trip through an alternate history of video games as you challenge the younger incarnation of game master Demon Arino. This is a classic game compilation with a catch: None of these games actually existed before. Thankfully these tributes to old-school genre staples like platforming, top-down shooting, and even RPGs are expertly made, and stand toe-to-toe with the games that inspired them.

## THE HOUSE OF THE DEAD: OVERKILL

**Platform:** Wii • **Release:** February 10

Many games take themselves too seriously these days. The House of the Dead: Overkill is not one of them. Sega's grindhouse flavored, on-rails shooter plays to the Wii's strengths perfectly, relying on the beautiful simplicity of pointing and shooting (freeing up a hand for a cold beverage). Combine this with intentionally campy dialogue, a hilariously dramatic narrator, and an unforgettable ending, and you've got a recipe for gory, mindless fun.

## FLOWER

**Platform:** PlayStation 3 • **Release:** February 12

If video games can be poems, this is the project to prove the point. Riding the wind, players experience a quiet meditation on the interaction between nature and technology. Sweeping up petals with a twist of the controller, the game offers a strangely absorbing gameplay experience – one which evolves over several levels, and leaves you contemplating its meaning for days after completion.

# STREET FIGHTER IV

**Platform:** PlayStation 3, Xbox 360

**Release:** February 17

More than mere nostalgia or fan service, Street Fighter IV takes everything that made SF II an all-time classic and reinvents itself to be exactly what you'd hope from the series. It may embrace the 2D plane like its predecessors, but a total graphical overhaul results in one of the most visually stunning fighting games ever made. Flashy and powerful Ultra attacks, colorful new characters, and fast and furious combat make SF IV the best fighting game of the year.

Best Fighting Game
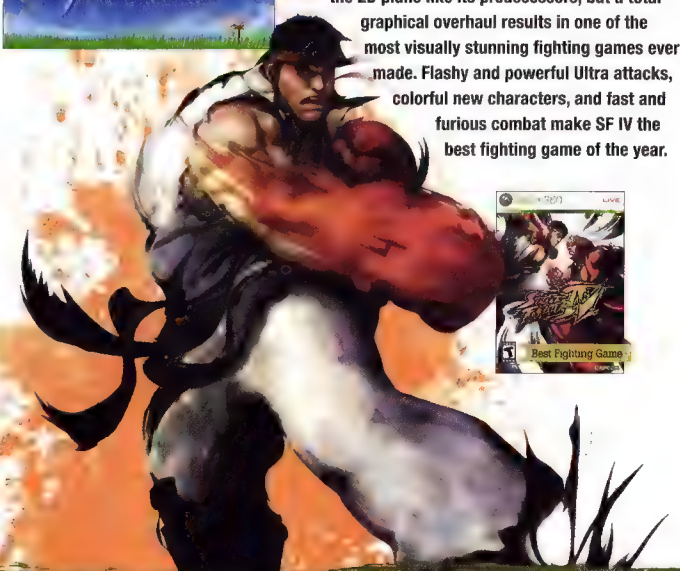
# TOP 10 HEROES OF 2009

**Nathan Drake** – UNCHARTED 2

AMONG THIEVES

Drake's second epic adventure reveals new layers to the roguish and charming protagonist of the Uncharted franchise. He's the type of hero players love to adopt – the guy men want to be, and the man that women want to be with. With the gunshot he just barely manages to make or the leap he almost misses, his treasure hunting escapades never fail to deliver thrills.

**Ezio Auditore** – ASSASSIN'S CREED II

Desmond's most recently revealed ancestor is a far cry from the stoic and arrogant Altair, but Ezio is equally exciting. He's brash and impulsive, cultured yet emotional, and ready to defend his family at any cost. In short, he's everything we want out of a 16th century Italian Casanova, and a perfect hero in the role of the titular assassin.

**Batman** – BATMAN: ARKHAM ASYLUM

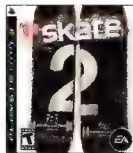Batman is one of the most complex and intriguing characters in all of comics, and now the same can be said about his video game counterpart. Arkham Asylum pulls back the veil to reveal what makes him so cool. Sure, he's a world-class martial artist with dozens of exciting gadgets. However, he's also the consummate detective, a dedicated champion of his own principles, and only a few steps away from being as disturbed as the criminals he hunts.

**Eddie Riggs** – BRÜTAL LEGEND

Eddie never wanted to be a hero – he was content to stay in the backstage shadows and let someone else take the credit. That's exactly what makes him such a great character. Eddie's arrival in the strange world of Brütal Legend turns the tide of the war, and finally gives him the chance to shine. His gruff deadpan humor carries the game's story forward, while his love of all things rock makes him the perfect savior to a land of heavy metal lore come to life.

**Bowser** – MARIO & LUIGI: BOWSER'S

INSIDE STORY

Mario and Luigi may have the market cornered on rescuing helpless princesses, but Bowser steals the show this time around. When in doubt, Bowser is more than willing to punch something first and ask questions later. His hilarious quest to win back his castle never ceases to entertain; the more impatient and bombastic he gets, the more we like him.

## WARHAMMER 40,000: DAWN OF WAR II

**Platform:** PC • **Release:** February 19

Not since Super Mario Bros. 2 has a sequel departed so dramatically from its predecessor. The chances Relic took with Dawn of War II paid off better than the U.S. release of Doki Doki Panic, though. Limiting players to a single squad and giving them RPG-like progression through a deep, player-driven campaign makes this a unique experience. Relic's top-notch RTS skills make it an enjoyable one. The same single-squad structure takes multiplayer in a new direction, offering online play that you can't get anywhere else. Dawn of War II is anything but another run-of-the-mill RTS, and we love it for that.

## KILLZONE 2

**Platform:** PlayStation 3
**Release:** February 27

We couldn't tell you much about its thin story, but Killzone 2's action set pieces are among the best we've seen. By matching the well-paced shooting of the Call of Duty franchise with a gritty sci-fi setting, the sequel lives up to the promise we've always hoped for with this series. The PS3 exclusive also introduced a unique online feature that allowed players to switch game types without switching maps, making for consistently varied and enjoyable multiplayer action.

## EMPIRE: TOTAL WAR

**Platform:** PC • **Release:** March 3

There are ambitious strategy games, and then there is Total War. This latest entry emphasizes the importance of map control by placing resource-producing, indefensible towns in the countryside. Warfare is no longer a nearly exclusively siege-oriented exercise in Empire, which is a great

**Best Strategy Game**

improvement. The usual graphical upgrades don't hurt, either; the game's presentation of massive battles is second to none. Technical problems marred Empire for many at launch, but developer Creative Assembly has since realized the game's full potential via patches.

# HALO WARS

**Platform:** Xbox 360 • **Release:** March 3

Halo's return to its long-forgotten real-time strategy roots found success thanks to developer Ensemble's clever use of the Xbox 360 gamepad. Like the original Halo: Combat Evolved, Halo Wars takes a PC stalwart genre and makes it work on console through adaptation rather than imitation. You won't find anything else on console nearly this close to the core of what makes the StarCraft experience great. Tons of Blur-rendered FMV footage showcasing the awesomeness of the Halo universe in detail is a great bonus tacked on top of an excellent game.

**Elena Fisher** – UNCHARTED 2: AMONG THIEVES
Elena makes her triumphant return in Among Thieves, and we somehow found the capacity to love her even more this time around. Far from the clichéd damsel in distress, Elena is the conscience that Nate Drake needs at his side. She ceaselessly champions the right thing to do, even at cost to her own life and limb. Newcomer Chloe may have nailed the femme fatale vibe, but Elena's the girl we all cheer for.
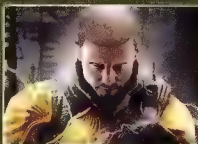
**Cole McGrath** – INFAMOUS
Few story devices succeed like the wrongfully accused man. Cole McGrath doesn't even know if he deserves all the anger and hatred directed at him. After being at the center of a city-wrecking disaster, Cole's ultimate path and fate is left up to the player. Any way you lead him, Cole, with his incredibly shocking powers, is always a blast to send careening across the urban cityscape.

**Detective Isaac Washington** – THE HOUSE OF THE DEAD: OVERKILL
Foul-mouthed, uncompromising, hard-drinking, and unceasingly funny, Isaac Washington keeps everything grounded when the world is going crazy all around him. With tongue set firmly in cheek, Washington is a stereotypical career cop who can't finish a sentence without a few expletives thrown in for color. He keeps the action going, and never fails to say what the player is thinking when the zombie outbreak gets out of hand.

**Sunflower** – PLANTS VS. ZOMBIES
Zombies are on your lawn. You don't want zombies on your lawn. The solution? She's just a sunflower, but she powers an entire infantry. Whether it's pumping out bursts of sunshine to fuel your war effort against the zombie plague, or singing you the cutest theme song in video game history, this smiling plant brightens your day every time.

**Jack Cayman** – MADWORLD
Jack Cayman has a retractable chainsaw that he uses exclusively to maim, dismember, and kill people. And, yes, he adopts a murderous, almost sociopathic attitude towards everyone he meets. So maybe he's not the consummate hero. But he sure is great to have around in a fight, edging him in past more traditionally gallant figures for the last slot on our list.

## MADWORLD

**Platform:** Wii
**Release:** March 10

Core gamers bitch and moan that there are no "real games" on the Wii, but then a badass title like MadWorld releases and no one buys the damn thing. What gives?! A nonstop highlight reel of comedic carnage, MadWorld cross-breeds the gladiator game show concept of movies like *Running Man* with the absurdist ultraviolence of Itchy & Scratchy to create an entertaining gorefest on a console severely lacking mature games. Contestant Jack Cayman can rely on his massive fists to mow down his enemies, but the real joy comes in using the various carnage-intensifying props strewn throughout the environments to entertain the bloodthirsty masses.

## RESIDENT EVIL 5

**Platform:** PlayStation 3, Xbox 360
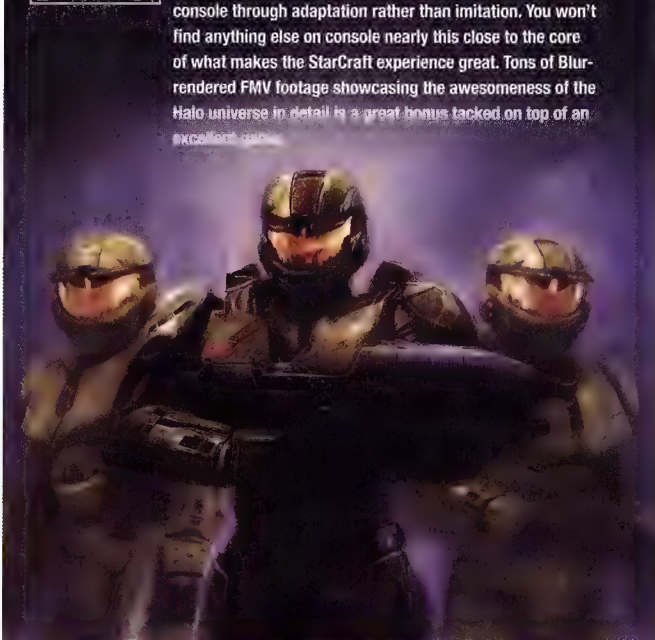**Release:** March 13

How do you make the monster-massacring action established in Resident Evil 4 even better? Bring a buddy. You and a friend play as Chris Redfield and Sheva Alomar as they blast their way across infected Africa in Resident Evil 5. Bigger set-piece moments, expanded weapons selections, and intense coordinated boss fights make for one of the best available co-op games of the year. As if that weren't enough, there's the infinite replayability of co-op Mercenaries Mode.

# GRAND THEFT AUTO: CHINATOWN WARS

**Platform:** PSP, Nintendo DS • **Release:** March 17

It feels weird calling a Grand Theft Auto game an under-the-radar hit, but since hardly anyone bothered to check out Chinatown Wars, here we are. Rivaling the most ambitious DS craftsmanship to date, Rockstar Leeds crammed an entire recreation of Liberty City into the diminutive handheld. Though it has a top-down view that harkens back to the series' roots, Chinatown Wars carves its own niche with creative minigames for hotwiring cars, making Molotov cocktails, and tattooing your Triad underlings. Antihero Huang Lee performs your standard array of GTA missions to restore his family's reputation as first-class criminals, but the star of the game is the addictive drug selling minigame that keeps Lee's pockets lined with spending money.

## GUITAR HERO: METALLICA

**Platform:** PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, Wii • **Release:** March 29

Some gamers want ever more family-friendly pop songs to fill their music game library. Guitar Hero: Metallica doesn't comply. Embracing the roots of the Guitar Hero franchise, Metallica offers blazing fast riffs, ultra-hard songs, and an uncompromising commitment to explore the band's entire career. Excellent motion capture work reveals the band as they act in concert, and matches well to individual moments within a given song. Like the band, Guitar Hero: Metallica is part of the old guard, but it holds up against newer pretenders.

## PLANTS VS. ZOMBIES

**Platform:** PC • **Release:** May 5

Plenty of games focus on the horrors of the zombie apocalypse, but only Plants vs. Zombies had the bulbs to make that theme cute. PopCap's version of lawn care may look a little like a tower defense game, but the mechanics of managing your grass lanes, figuring out which plant combinations work well together, and holding back the hordes of Michael Jackson "Thriller" zombies and Zombonis (zombies on zambonis, get it?!) made for an experience all its own.

# TOP 10 MOMENTS OF 2009

**The Truth** – ASSASSIN'S CREED II
After hours of tracking down glyphs and solving Da Vinci Code-style puzzles, players finally earn the right to watch the series of scenes in sequence. Once you unlock the truth, it blows the doors off the Assassin's Creed universe, making the previously confusing story elements come together in a way that blows your mind.

**The Morgue** – BATMAN: ARKHAM ASYLUM
As Batman navigates the dark halls of Arkham Asylum, he finds himself in a morgue with three body bags placed dead center. The Caped Crusader approaches each one and hesitantly unzips the bags to find... well, we won't tell you. Things become rather fuzzy as our disoriented Batman slowly proves himself up and turns around to witness the first of several mind-bending events.

**The Ride of Your Life** – UNCHARTED 2: AMONG THIEVES
One of the most volatile and memorable action set pieces in video game history begins with Drake jumping from a moving car onto a train. He doesn't have time to admire the Himalayan scenery as he advances car to car, taking down adversaries, dodging RPGs, and avoiding fire from a roving helicopter. The climactic ending of this jaw-dropping sequence brings light to the game's opener.

**Picking Up The Pieces** – SILENT HILL: SHATTERED MEMORIES
Car wrecks can be traumatic experiences. So much so that after Harry Mason and Cheryl were involved in one, psychological help was sought. Throughout Shattered Memories these probing psychoanalytical sessions work to unearth the truth around that mysterious accident in Silent Hill. When the therapy finally concludes, an unforgettable revelation quakes your perception of Harry's heartfelt quest.

**Bringing Down The House** – RED FACTION: GUERRILLA
The first time you hack away at the foundation of a building with a sledgehammer and then watch the structure crumble in Red Faction: Guerrilla you stop to admire your handiwork. That incredible feeling wanes once you realize toppling buildings can also kill you.

## PUNCH-OUT!!

**Platform:** Wii • **Release:** May 18

For fans of the classic boxing series, this is the perfect blend of fun old-school gameplay and new challenges with snazzy graphics and enhanced strategy. Aside from Mike Tyson, all of the iconic challengers from years past show up to give Little Mac a beat down in their own silly way. The new practice mode allows players to work out timing without the threat of a KO – a feature that becomes extremely important in the dastardly difficult second career.

## UFC UNDISPUTED 2009

**Platform:** PlayStation 3, Xbox 360
**Release:** May 19

WWE Smackdown vs. Raw 2010 polished an established product, but Yuke's UFC game surprised us by grounding and pounding its way to the top of the sweaty man heap. The animation and hit detection made even the most lethargic matches look great. Whether you were bouncing between an opponent's fists or kneeing them in the gut on the mat, Undisputed gave mixed martial arts fans the experience they'd been dreaming about for years.

## INFAMOUS

**Platform:** PlayStation 3
**Release:** May 26

Infamous proved that Sucker Punch is capable of creating more than cartoon-style platformers; the Sly Cooper developer blew away PlayStation 3 owners with an open world game of superhuman proportions. Thrust into the shoes of conflicted protagonist Cole MacGrath, Empire City becomes a playground crackling with electricity. Cole surfs on power lines, climbs to vertigo-inducing heights, and throws down an ever-evolving array of electrical powers – all the while carving his reputation as savior or dictator. Infamous' intriguing story and Empire City's limitless activities provide a lengthy and comprehensive foray into the struggles of one city – and one man.

## THE SIMS 3

**Platform:** PC
**Release:** June 2

More than just a bundle of extra furniture and social options, The Sims 3 allows players to interact with their virtual surroundings in brand new ways. Everyday actions are given meaning through moment-to-moment goals, while lifetime aspirations help keep your eye on the prize for the long term. The layered gameplay and increased focus on customization give The Sims 3 more depth than any of its predecessors, making it the best game of the series thus far.

## RED FACTION: GUERRILLA

**Platform:** PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, PC
**Release:** June 2

With Red Faction: Guerrilla, THQ and Volition successfully revived a franchise we didn't expect to care about again. We could live without the generic sci-fi rebellion plot, but a huge open world with tons of fully destructible buildings and a great arsenal of weapons to blow them up with made for a perfect summer blockbuster. The underrated multiplayer is extra gasoline to the explosive fire.

## FIGHT NIGHT ROUND 4

**Platform:** PlayStation 3, Xbox 360
**Release:** June 25

EA Canada delivered a knockout blow with the fourth edition of its Fight Night series, proving that there's a lot more life left in the sweet science. With improved physics that take into account both reach and height, Round 4 offered fans nearly everything they could ever want in a boxing game, including a who's who of pugilists, from Mike Tyson to Manny Pacquiao, and lightning fast online play. Fight Night Round 4 is a great example of how to make a great game even better.

## BATTLEFIELD 1943

**Platform:** ████████ █ (███ ███)
**Release:** ███ █

████'s ████████ ██████ is like a fine wine; it gets better with age. With this bold remake of the multiplayer innovator Battlefield 1942, the Swedes blend the original title's fantastic World War II level designs with destructible environments, squad structure, and class kit features from Bad Company. The downloadable title is the best selling console digital release of all time, and for good reason.

Best Downloadable Game

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### The Kessler Reveal – INFAMOUS

After an epic (and difficult) final showdown with Infamous' main antagonist, Kessler, he reveals his true identity – and it's a doozy. We'll spare you the spoilers, but this major twist is right at home in the comic book-inspired world of Infamous and is certainly worthy of a "WTF?!"

### Nuking Your Enemies – CALL OF DUTY: MODERN WARFARE 2

Modern Warfare 2 multiplayer delivers tons of memorable moments, but nothing stands out more than the first time you rack up a 25-kill streak, push the detonator, and watch everyone go up in smoke. It's the ultimate self sacrifice.

### Spartan Squad – HALO WARS

A lone Spartan is a force to reckon with. Put a few of them together and watch the Covenant get obliterated. The gorgeous bridge cinematic near the finale brings multiple Spartans together like a team of superheroes to fend off hordes of Covenant when things get desperate.

### Aha! – DJ HERO

Miss a note here. Overshoot the fader there. Then suddenly something happens: The "Poison" and "Intergalactic" mash-up finally starts to sound the way DJ AM intended. You've had your aha! moment with the control scheme and soon enough you'll pull off your first Rewind. As the song scribbles back you feel like a badass DJ ready to pull out a few club bangers through the wee hours of the morning.

### Returning To The Womb – THE HOUSE OF THE DEAD: OVERKILL

Hours of killing mutants in this over-the-top rail shooter culminates with an ending that even makes the jaws of the in-game characters drop. Let's just say a character wishes to return to his dead mother's womb and takes the south entrance. You, Agent G and Washington gag.

## LITTLE KING'S STORY

**Platform:** Wii
**Release:** July 21

Just because he's little doesn't mean you should overlook him; Little King's Story is a charming and rewarding title that deserves more attention. As a young king, players build a town, lead expeditions into the wilderness, and depose rival kings in neighboring lands. The adorable little liege leads players through an adventure that mixes simulation, action, and puzzle solving into a quirky, entertaining, and occasionally heartwarming package.

## THE BEATLES: ROCK BAND

**Platform:** PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, Wii
**Release:** August 9

This Beatles tribute takes something well worn and makes it shiny and new again, which is no small feat. The Beatles catalogue comes alive in the vivid interpretations of the songs, and the Fab Four lend a personality to the game that previous band-centric games lacked. The Beatles: Rock Band also introduces harmonies to the mix – an important component of the Beatles' music and a step forward for the genre. It once again makes you wonder where music would be without the Beatles.

## MADDEN NFL 10

**Platform:** PlayStation 3, Xbox 360
**Release:** August 14

This was the next-gen football game that fans wanted all along. All it took was the addition of the long sought after online franchise mode and a renewed dedication to realism to get football fans back on board the Madden bus. On the gridiron, EA Tiburon introduced a new gang-tackling system, rewrote the receiver-cornerback interactions, and tweaked the player rating system to more accurately reflect real-world tendencies. The presentation also received a boost with better camera work, post-game highlights, and a weekly wrap up show. Maybe now we can leave ESPN NFL 2K5 in the past?

# SHADOW COMPLEX

**Platform:** Xbox 360 • **Release:** August 19

Openly emulating ideas from a classic game isn't always a bad idea. The developers at Chair Entertainment embraced the ties to fantastic side-scrolling exploration games like Super Metroid while crafting Shadow Complex. The throwback gameplay that emerges is hard to put down, a sensation that is bolstered with gorgeous graphical presentation that blends 2D and 3D elements to great effect. Developers take note; we want more games that explore this old, but still fun, gameplay model.

## PROFESSOR LAYTON AND THE DIABOLICAL BOX

**Platform:** Nintendo DS • **Release:** August 24

In this popular puzzle sequel, Layton's mentor mysteriously dies after opening the ever-so-dangerous Elysian Box. It is up to Luke and Layton to investigate his death through intricate puzzle solving. The game introduces new and engaging brainteasers that require a lot of thought and make you feel like you deserve a pat on the back for solving them. Other puzzle titles should start taking notes.

# TOP 10 VILLAINS OF 2009



**Scarecrow** — BATMAN: ARKHAM ASYLUM
Dr. Crane caught gamers by surprise with his disturbing appearances in Arkham. From body-bag mind games to a hallway riddled with Bruce Wayne's twisted memories, each encounter with the hallucination-inducing maniac left a lasting impact.

**Joker** — BATMAN: ARKHAM ASYLUM
Being Arkham's master of ceremonies is the job Joker was born to do. Deadly booby traps, continue-screen mockery, and constant badgering over the asylum's PA system burdened the Bat every step of the way. Joker's embarrassingly bad finale is all that holds him back from number one.

**Loghain** — DRAGON AGE: ORIGINS
War heroes are a dime a dozen in fantasy RPGs, but few are so flawed that they become the enemy of your protagonist. Loghain cashes in on his legendary credibility in order to defend the cutthroat means to his own ends. Celebrities really can get away with murder.

**Makarov** — MODERN WARFARE 2
Some villains terrorize small towns or randomly murder strangers. Vladimir Makarov single-handedly ignites World War III. After murdering hundreds of unarmed civilians, the homicidal mastermind leaves a treacherous smoking gun which provokes the Russian invasion.
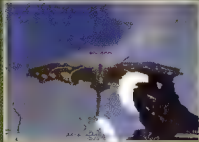
**Mothrakk** — BORDERLANDS
Pandora's winged terror deftly punishes any scavengers who neglect their y-axis. Many ill-fated travelers have suffered instant decimation from the oversized Rakk's fireballs raining down death from above. Grab three friends, and don't forget to watch the skies.

# BATMAN: ARKHAM ASYLUM

**Platform:** PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, PC

**Release:** August 25

With a mix of polished combat, intriguing characters, memorable environments, and fun side puzzles, Rocksteady created the best Batman game ever made. Most people who enter Arkham Asylum's twisted confines seldom escape. A place where the criminally insane call home, the island institution sets the stage for Joker's deranged antics against the Bat. While exploring the stomping ground for Joker's crazed cronies (with awesome guest appearances from characters in the comics), Batman mows through the opposition with his signature gadgets and detective abilities, not to mention a wealth of combo and stealth moves that can put the hurt on any adversary.

## DIRT 2

**Platform:** PlayStation 3, Xbox 360

**Release:** September 8

The follow up to Codemasters' first racing game of this generation shows why the company has an unmatched flair for racing games. High speeds mixed with exciting terrain make every race a white-knuckle ride. The developer also brings in some of the best features from its other series Grid, like name recognition and flashback feature, to make this one of the best off-road games we've ever played.

Best Racing Game

## TRINE

**Platform:** PlayStation 3, PC

**Release:** September 8

Trine is in many ways more concise and directed than many larger retail titles, standing out on the quality of its simple formula. Switching back and forth between three dramatically different characters, players juggle combat with ingenious platforming puzzles. A vibrant and hyper-saturated fantasy backdrop stands behind the adventure, and assures the gameplay and visuals are equally arresting.

## MARIO & LUIGI: BOWSER'S INSIDE STORY

**Platform:** Nintendo DS

**Release:** September 14

Many consider this entry in the Mario & Luigi series to be the best of the trilogy. The laugh-out-loud dialogue, return of the villain Fawful, and control of an over-the-top Bowser on the loose (see Top 10 Heroes) entertain from a narrative perspective. But the mix of Bowser's top-down exploration in the surface world and the brothers' side-scrolling escapades inside your rival's body is a brilliant idea that keeps the gameplay fresh as well.

## NHL 10

**Platform:** PlayStation 3, Xbox 360

**Release:** September 15

In a year where EA Sports put out a bunch of good games (just take a look at this list), NHL 10 is still the standout. EA Canada's inclusion of board play takes an already great game in NHL 09 and makes it better by adding a physical component that goes beyond just checking or getting into fights. Off the ice, the game's revamped GM mode adds a robust trade system that should be adopted in some form by other sports titles.

Best Sports Game

## SCRIBBLENAUTS

**Platform:** Nintendo DS

**Release:** September 15

In Scribblenauts, developer 5th Cell empowers players with the most powerful weapon in the universe: their imaginations. This DS title allows you to type any word into the DS, and have that object appear onscreen. It breaks the barriers of the puzzle genre, letting players pass levels by using a cornucopia of items, from mythical creatures to machine guns. While some complained about the admittedly loose controls, there's no question Scribblenauts is the year's most inventive game.

## HALO 3: ODST

**Platform:** Xbox 360

**Release:** September 22

The absence of Master Chief isn't the only twist players can expect from Bungie's latest offering. ODST trades in the linear level design of previous installments for an open city recreation of New Mombasa, and spices things up with a darker tone, new gameplay mechanics, and a more personal story. Longtime fans of the series might not appreciate all of the changes to the Halo formula, but the addition of a second disc devoted to multiplayer (including all of Halo 3's maps and DLC packs, plus a few new ones) and the insanely popular Firefight mode secured ODST a spot on our list.
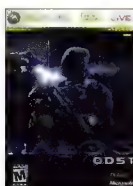
## Papa Caesar

THE HOUSE OF THE DEAD: OVERKILL

Many villains have unleashed genetic abominations and blown us up, but none did it while wearing a stylish ascot. Papa Caesar makes engineering the zombie apocalypse look good. Analogizing Isaac Washington's death to a sweet and sour Chinese dinner seals his position on the list.

## Flynn — UNCHARTED 2: AMONG THIEVES

Some traitorous weasels simply stab their partner in the back and bail. Harry Flynn calls Nathan Drake a fat-ass while marching him at gunpoint. Sarcastic snakes like Flynn are the kinds of guys you'd just love to see hold onto a grenade for a second too long.

## "The Spaniard" — ASSASSIN'S CREED II

Pulling the strings in Ezio's world while confidently stroking his beard, the adversary of Assassin's Creed II is one of the most intriguing villains of the year. "The Spaniard" is a manipulative, evil man who steps on anyone's backs (even those of his own men) to claim his prize. Eluding the assassin's wrist blades by mere inches throughout the game, The Spaniard's craftiness makes him a long sought-after target.

## Hidetaka Miyazaki — DEMON'S SOULS

Miyazaki is the malicious director behind Demon's Souls, and the villain responsible for the game's infamous level 5-2. This poisonous, treacherous bog is so deadly that its creator even struggles to survive it. Check out our www.gameinformer.com interview to read the confession of his evil deeds.

## Spitter — LEFT 4 DEAD 2

Sometimes when shooting waves of zombies gets hairy you and your friends want to take shelter in the back of a delivery truck. Left 4 Dead 2's Spitter vomits on your fleeting sanctuary, leaving you to wade through a pool of acidic green bile. What's worse, she looks like an undead version of someone you'd see in a Walmart at 2 a.m.

## DEMON'S SOULS

**Platform:** PlayStation 3
**Release:** October 7

Describing our relationship with Demon's Souls is difficult, not unlike the relationship with that on-again off-again ex you get into screaming matches with constantly but keep going back to. The frequent defeats are painful, but they make the highs of eventual conquest practically heavenly. Unique multiplayer and the ability to drop notes for other players help build an imposing atmosphere of doom where death lingers around every virtual corner.

## A BOY AND HIS BLOB

**Platform:** Wii
**Release:** October 13

More than a simple remake, Majesco's Boy and His Blob worms back into our hearts with its vastly improved foundation. A stunning art direction helps the game feel fresh, while refined gameplay elements facilitate familiarity. New jellybeans result in infinitely creative and challenging puzzles, allowing the boy and his blob to climb, bounce, and rocket their way back to Blobolonia. With a friendly learning curve and altruistic premise, A Boy and His Blob proves that heroes come in small (and amorphous) packages.

## BRÜTAL LEGEND

**Platform:** PlayStation 3, Xbox 360
**Release:** October 13

One part action, one part racing, one part strategy, and all parts rock – Double Fine's magnum opus to metal is a hilarious ride from beginning to end. Phenomenal voiceover work, one of the best soundtracks in game history, and a gigantic rock and roll metaphor setting help Brütal Legend stand apart from the crowd. In a medium filled with original fictions, Tim Schafer's endlessly creative game world is hard to beat

# UNCHARTED 2: AMONG THIEVES

**Platform:** PlayStation 3 • **Release:** October 13

Nathan Drake's quest to find Marco Polo's lost fleet sets players on a high-octane, action-packed journey that keeps our hearts pounding from one daring leap to the next. Uncharted 2 seamlessly blurs the line between cinematics and gameplay with incredible set pieces complemented by some of the most remarkable writing and voice acting seen in games. With a memorable cast, epic orchestral score, awe-inspiring exotic locales, and solid multiplayer component, Naughty Dog has not only shown what the PS3 is capable of, but also set the bar for action games to come.

Game of the Year
Best Action Game
Best PS3 Game

# BORDERLANDS

**Platform:** PlayStation 3, Xbox 360
**Release:** October 20

Best Co-op Game

Randy Pitchford and Gearbox Software wanted to create a hybrid of the first-person shooter and RPG genres, and the end result proves that they were definitely on to something. Borderlands successfully injects Diablo-esque looting and a robust experience system into first-person gun combat, and you can bring three friends along for the ride in the best co-op experience of the year. Whether you are playing alone or with buddies, the wastelands of Pandora provide the perfect shooting range for the millions of weapons it contains.

# TOP 10 DORKS OF 2009



**BIONIC COMMANDO**
We could talk about all the ways in which Spencer totally sucks, but we don't have that much space. Instead, we'll talk about the ways he doesn't suck. For instance his arms are... wait, that's no good. But his swimming skills can... nevermind. At least his arm isn't possessed by... oh. Well we tried.

**— BORDERLANDS**
Some people find Claptraps endearing. Those people are stupid. With all the nfamous charm of Jar-Jar Binks, these insufferable robots pollute the Borderlands experience with their grating antics. Sure they give you inventory upgrades, but at what cost? Yes, Claptrap, we see that you're dancing. Please die.

**B.J. Blazkowicz — WOLFENSTEIN**
The concept of "cool" changes with the times. If you were hot stuff in the '90s, you can't expect to inspire the same kind of awe today without a serious overhaul. This idea is what keeps B.J. Blazkowicz and Duke Nukem up at night. Duke has accepted fading into obscurity, but this year B.J. learned the hard way that no one cares anymore.

**— INFAMOUS**
A superhero needs a sidekick, but it isn't a good idea to blindly accept the first applicant. Zeke spouts nonsense conspiracy theories, uses his friendship with Cole to pick up girls, and almost destroys the city you're trying to save. You know those comic book arcs where the sidekick is killed, fueling the hero's desire for revenge? That's what we want in Infamous 2.

**G-Unit — 50 CENT: BLOOD ON THE SAND**
Fiddy may be in it for a diamond-encrusted skull, but G-Unit are just around for the free helicopter rides. Their job is to make 50 Cent look awesome by making themselves look lame, which means opening doors for him, pointing out obvious ladders, and carrying his... um, glaucoma medicine.

# DJ HERO

Best Rhythm/Music Game

**Platform:** PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, Wii

**Release:** October 27

The most intriguing music game of the year is also the newest concept. DJ Hero embraces the traditions of hip-hop and dance music to deliver a soundtrack of entirely new song mixes from some of the turntable's brightest luminaries. Combining the familiar descending note structure of Guitar Hero with a fun new peripheral and game mechanics, DJ Hero is a fantastic direction for the music genre to explore.

## FIFA 10

**Platform:** PlayStation 3, Xbox 360

**Release:** October 20

EA Sports' FIFA series isn't just about the licenses anymore. It's about gameplay and how well FIFA 10 performs on the pitch. After years of refinement, FIFA 10 gets the Beautiful Game right with responsive controls, an arsenal of moves and tactics, and a solid feature set – including full 10 vs. 10 online play.

## TROPICO 3

**Platform:** PC

**Release:** October 20

Setting a city simulation on small Caribbean islands isn't an inspiring idea in and of itself. Tropico 3 makes it work by including humorous, self-deprecating 1950s realpolitik and gameplay depth that puts other SimCity imitators to shame. The tension of trying to keep your people fed, housed, and prosperous is a fine enough line to walk without the U.S. and U.S.S.R. poking their noses into your business as they often do.

## RATCHET & CLANK FUTURE: A CRACK IN TIME

**Platform:** PlayStation 3

**Release:** October 27

Not many series match Ratchet & Clank when it comes to maintaining a consistent level of quality, and A Crack In Time continues Insomniac's long-running streak. All of the elements that gamers loved from the previous titles return, but the Clank segments impress the most. Breaking down the time-bending puzzles in your head prior to recording his movements introduces a great new gameplay mechanic. Coupled with the rest of the stellar action, beautiful visuals, and engaging story, this entry stands amongst Ratchet's best.

## FORZA MOTORSPORT 3

**Platform:** Xbox 360

**Release:** October 29

The world of sim racing seemed stale, but Forza 3 pulled up to the starting gate and stepped on the gas. The career mode features a revamped structure, while the emphasis on social networking and community also impresses with the marketplace, custom cars, and screenshot capture system.

## GRAND THEFT AUTO: EPISODES FROM LIBERTY CITY

**Platform:** Xbox 360

**Release:** October 29

Rockstar's GTA IV expansions, The Lost and Damned and The Ballad of Gay Tony, deliver diversity to Liberty City. Johnny Klebitz's gritty biker gang and Luis Lopez's high society social circle showcase two very different city subcultures. Rolling with a biker gang gave the city a *Sons of Anarchy* vibe, while club hopping with drug-fueled sociopaths proved that Liberty City's high society is as dysfunctional as Niko's broke cousin Roman.

## DRAGON AGE: ORIGINS

**Platform:** PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, PC

**Release:** November 3

Best Role-Playing Game

Best PC Game

Even after delivering some of the best RPG experiences in history, BioWare still manages to make Dragon Age original and engaging. After several dramatically different openings, the dark fantasy tale unfolds with constant nods back to your origin and decisions, while the challenging tactical battle system keeps players on their toes.



**The Rookie** – HALO 3: ODST
Behold the power of single wielding! The Rookie isn't a Spartan, and it shows: he spends most of ODST reliving other soldiers' awesome moments. "Wow, my sniper buddy sure did some cool stuff before he disappeared. Oh, well. Time for me to show up six hours too late somewhere else!"

**General Lionwhyte** – BRÜTAL LEGEND
Here's all you need to know about General Lionwhyte: He flies with his hair. We're talking take-off from a standing position, carried on the wind by his flowing mane. If there's a cool way to do that, we haven't seen it. He works for demons – couldn't they give him some badass bat wings or something?

**Yusuf** – GTA IV: THE BALLAD OF GAY TONY
GTA players are used to accepting tasks from dorks, but Yusuf takes it to a whole new level. Unequipped to deal with the real world, all Yusuf knows how to do is squander his family's oil money on doomed-to-fail "take over the city" schemes. He has high ambitions but no aptitude – a perfect recipe for a satisfying comeuppance.

**Dampierre** – SOULCALIBUR: BROKEN DESTINY
Have you ever used a character creator to make the most hideous and repulsive person imaginable? The developers of Soulcalibur: Broken Destiny have... and then they put him in their game. With his ludicrous moustache and French fighting spirit, Dampierre is a worthless and ill-fitting addition to the Soulcalibur universe.

**Alistair** – DRAGON AGE: ORIGINS
Also known as "new Carth," Alistair has two modes of communication: whining and crackling wise. His jokes aren't funny, and his whining is only entertaining when he's being a crybaby about you making fun of him. Sorry, Alistair – have fun sitting with Sten in the party camp, loser!

## DEVELOPERS OF 2009

## PUBLISHERS OF 2009



**1 Naughty Dog** – Last Year: #1
Naughty Dog takes this year's top developer honors for crafting the year's best game, its epic action potboiler Uncharted 2: Among Thieves. It's big budget game development at its finest, using all available resources to craft an experience that's bigger, better, and more fun than anything else that came out this year.

**2 Ubisoft Montreal** – Last Year: 8
In Assassin's Creed, Ubisoft Montreal created this generation's most successful new IP. It's a tribute to this studio's ability that the sequel not only matched the standard set by the original, but bested it in every way.

**3 Rocksteady Studios** – Last Year: N/A
It was a recipe for disaster: A superhero with a horrible track record in games, two struggling publishers, and a relatively unknown developer. The odds against it are all the more reason to celebrate the success of Batman: Arkham Asylum, a game that was good enough to make us forget all of Batman's past sins. Rocksteady, welcome to the big time.

**4 Infinity Ward** – Last Year: N/A
Infinity Ward managed to live up to Modern Warfare 2's huge hype with a game that once again offered a taut, gripping single-player campaign and multiplayer that will keep many of us busy for the next year. The hard work paid off with a record shattering $550 million in sales in the first five days.

**5 EA Canada** – Last Year: N/A
EA Canada boasts a whopping four games in our year-end Top 50: FIFA 10, NHL 10, Skate 2, and Fight Night Round 4. Taken together, they're a testament to this studio's tremendous scope and ability, a feat all the more impressive considering the constraining yearly timeframes inherent in the world of sports gaming.

**6 Gearbox Studios** – Last Year: N/A
After retooling Borderlands' graphics to the final cel-shaded look halfway through development, Gearbox made it into an irresistible package that combined the loot-lust of Diablo with the best of today's FPS gameplay.

**7 PopCap Games** – Last Year: N/A
PopCap's Peggle, released for PC in 2008, wowed consoles gamers of all stripes with releases for Nintendo DS, PlayStation 3, and Xbox 360. But that was just an addictive appetizer for Plants vs. Zombies, a wacky defense game that was one of the year's highlights.

**8 Sucker Punch Productions** – Last Year: N/A
Like Naughty Dog and Insomniac, Sucker Punch struck gold in this generation with a darker, more adult game. Infamous gave the superhero genre a deep, open-world experience far removed from the tights-wearing tradition of Marvel and DC.

**9 BioWare** – Last Year: N/A
BioWare doesn't know how to make small games. This year's epic Dragon Age: Origins is proof of that. In a fairly barren year for fans of true RPGs, Dragon Age was just what the doctor ordered.

**10 Ensemble Studios** – Last Year: N/A
The reward for creating the highly praised Halo Wars? Being dissolved by parent company Microsoft. It's a sad commentary on the times, but consider this our tribute to the company's fine history.

**1 Sony Computer Entertainment** – Last Year: 7
While much has been made of its PlayStation 3 and PSP struggles, Sony has quietly become the greatest game publisher in the world. The company frequently takes chances with arty projects that wouldn't make it past preproduction in many large companies, while giving its big games the love and money that makes for fantastic experiences like Uncharted 2 and Infamous.

**2 Electronic Arts** – Last Year: 
From cool downloadable revivals like Battlefield 1943 to some of the best sequels ever in its Madden, FIFA, and NHL franchises, EA delivered a lot of quality this year. Its EA Partners wing also continued to pay dividends with great publishing deals like Left 4 Dead 2 and Brütal Legend.

**3 Take Two** – Last Year: 5
This year Take Two added another solid IP to its stable, the sensation Borderlands, while also delivering the Rockstar faithful more goodness with Chinatown Wars, The Lost and the Damned, and the Ballad of Gay Tony. Topping it off was another solid iteration of the NBA 2K series.

**4 THQ** – Last Year: N/A
THQ delivered a wide range of genres and styles, including new editions of the Warhammer 40K and Red Faction franchises. It also shored up its popular WWE and UFC brands with stellar sequels, while taking time out to give us two of the year's oddball classics, 50 Cent: Blood on the Sand and the weirdo Wii game Deadly Creatures.

**5 Activision** – Last Year: 2
GH 5 (along with Metallica and Van Halen specific titles) gave us more than enough high quality shredding. DJ Hero gave us the year's best and most innovative music experience. Oh, and did we forget to mention those niche titles called Modern Warfare 2 and World of Warcraft?

**6 Nintendo** – Last Year: 6
While the highlight was New Super Mario Bros. Wii, Nintendo also served its casual audience with strong sequels to Wii Sports and Wii Fit. It also revitalized Punch-Out!! and brought us impressive handheld titles Professor Layton and the Diabolical Box and Mario and Luigi: Bowser's Inside Story.

**7 Microsoft Game Studios** – Last Year: 3
Microsoft had a strong year buttressed by two Halo products. Forza Motorsport 3 continued to cement that franchise's position as the world's preeminent realistic racing sim (sorry, Gran Turismo). The casual audience, on the other hand, was too busy playing the innovative 1 vs. 100 to notice.

**8 Warner Bros. Interactive** – Last Year: N/A
Warner's most notable success was Batman: Arkham Asylum (produced with Eidos), but it also gave us strong original content in the form of F.E.A.R. 2: Project Origins and the left-brain creative DS hit Scribblenauts.

**9 Ubisoft** – Last Year: 4
Assassin's Creed II is one of the year's most indelible experiences. Ubi also put out a surprisingly diverse lineup of titles, including Call of Juarez: Bound in Blood, Rabbids Go Home, and standout flight combat title HAWX.

**10 Capcom** – Last Year: 10
Even in a relatively fallow period, the Japanese powerhouse delivered two bona fide classics: Street Fighter IV and Resident Evil 5. Fans of its classic material were also happy to note its continuing support of Xbox Live Arcade, PSN, and WiiWare with a slew of classic ports and retooled titles.



Best Shooter Game

Best Competitive
Multiplayer Game
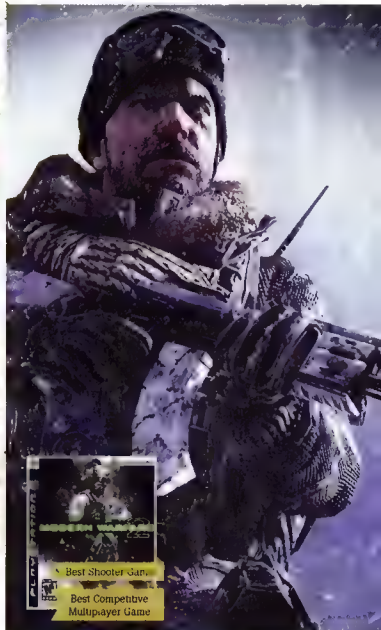
# CALL OF DUTY: MODERN WARFARE 2

**Platform:** PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, PC
**Release:** November 10

Modern Warfare 2 set records with the biggest launch in video game history and instantly took over as the multiplayer shooter of choice for millions of gamers. A controversial level of the single-player campaign was the most talked-about moment in gaming this year, and the server backend structure for the PC version sparked a level of reaction usually reserved for console launches. Modern Warfare 2 is a great game to most, game of the year to some, and a disaster to a certain vocal few. Whatever else it may be, though, it is one of the defining games of 2009.

# NEW SUPER MARIO BROS. WII

**Platform:** Wii • **Release:** November 15

It's hard to believe it took this long for Nintendo to bring four-player co-op to the classic side-scrolling Mario formula. Better late than never. New Super Mario Bros. Wii brings back fond memories of its classic predecessors, but doesn't shy away from new enemies, mechanics, and incredibly varied stages. Bring a few friends along and the game becomes a riotous multiplayer experience that's a blast whether you're a tightly knit team or teammate-stomping buffoons. Best of all, it introduces a new generation of gamers to the classic gameplay many of us grew up on.

**Best Wii Game**

# ASSASSIN'S CREED II

**Platform:** PlayStation 3, Xbox 360

**Release:** November 17

Ubisoft Montreal's huge open-world sequel is nothing if not ambitious. As players peel back the layers of conspiracy and murder across the sprawling Italian Renaissance, the massive scope of the franchise becomes increasingly clear. Assassin's Creed II gives to players a wide array of new activities and missions to explore while delivering on promises that its predecessor may not have met. The high quality design seamlessly integrates fiction into gameplay, and the result is a stunning entertainment experience.

**Best 360 Game**

## LEFT 4 DEAD 2

**Platform:** Xbox 360, PC
**Release:** November 17
Ever wonder how far you could make it through the zombie apocalypse with just a chainsaw and grenade launcher? Left 4 Dead 2 has your answer. Everything about Valve's sequel to last year's intense co-op FPS is amplified, with gratuitous gore, tons of melee weapons, intensified finales, and even more zombies. If you still think this sequel came too soon, then you haven't cracked a clown zombie in the face with a cricket bat while protecting a lawn gnome.

## KING'S BOUNTY: ARMORED PRINCESS

**Platform:** PC • **Release:** November 20
Melding turn-based hex-grid battles between legions of fantastic creatures and a solid adventure/RPG backbone, King's Bounty: Armored Princess is a brilliant evolution of an old formula. The addition of medals in this iteration, which give powerful rewards for accomplishing difficult achievements like winning a string of battles without taking a single loss, adds another layer of strategy to an already deep experience. If you've been pining for the glory days of Heroes of Might & Magic III, give King's Bounty a shot. You won't be disappointed.

This year, we've given special accolades to the best games in their respective genres. For the first time ever, we've given the readers a chance to weigh in as well. For 10 days, gameinformer.com visitors took part in a poll and made their voices heard. Some of the winners line up neatly with our picks, but there are some notable differences. Here are the complete results. We'd like to thank everyone who participated.

## GAME OF THE YEAR
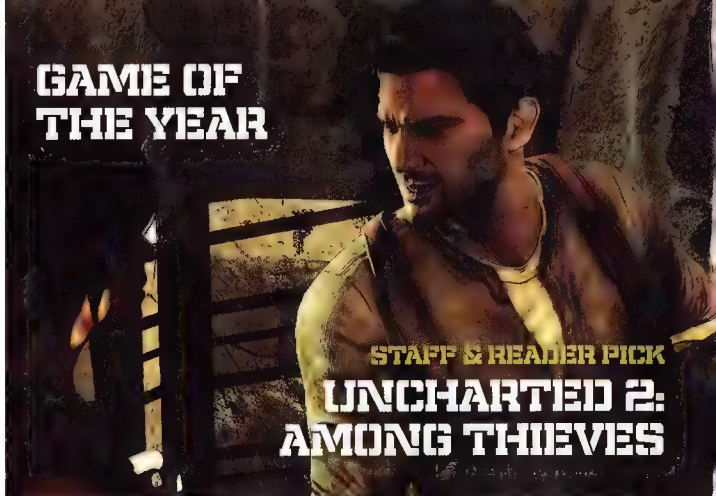
**STAFF & READER PICK**

# UNCHARTED 2: AMONG THIEVES

| STAFF | READER |
|-------|--------|

## BEST ACTION:

**Uncharted 2: Among Thieves** — **Uncharted 2: Among Thieves**

## BEST PUZZLE:

**Professor Layton and the Diabolical Box** — **Scribblenauts**

## BEST RHYTHM/MUSIC:

**DJ Hero** — **The Beatles: Rock Band**

| STAFF | READER |
|-------|--------|

## BEST FIGHTING:

**Street Fighter IV** — **Street Fighter IV**

## BEST RACING:

**Dirt 2** — **Forza Motorsport 3**

## BEST SHOOTER:

**Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2** — **Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2**

40

## BEST SPORTS



**NHL 10**



**Madden NFL 10**

## BEST STRATEGY



**Empire: Total War**
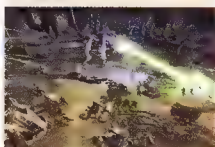


**Halo Wars**

## BEST ROLE-PLAYING



**Dragon Age: Origins**

**Dragon Age: Origins**

## BEST DOWNLOADABLE



**Battlefield 1943**



**Shadow Complex**

## BEST CO-OP



**Borderlands**

**Borderlands**

## BEST COMPETITIVE MULTIPLAYER



**Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2**

**Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2**

## BEST XBOX 360



**Assassin's Creed II**

**Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2**

## BEST PS3
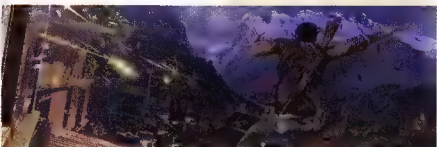


**Uncharted 2: Among Thieves**

**Uncharted 2: Among Thieves**

## BEST Wii
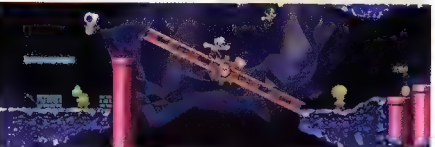


**New Super Mario Bros. Wii**

**New Super Mario Bros. Wii**

## BEST PC
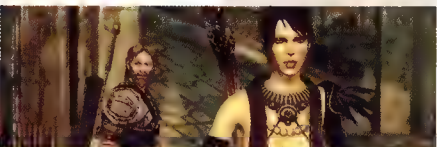


**Dragon Age: Origins**

**Dragon Age: Origins**

## BEST HANDHELD

**STAFF**



**Grand Theft Auto: Chinatown Wars**

**READER**



**The Legend of Zelda: Spirit Tracks**

### ANDY

| # | Pick |
|---|---|
| 1 | World of Warcraft |
| 2 | Assassin's Creed 2 |
| 3 | Uncharted 2: Among Thieves |
| 4 | Infamous |
| 5 | Borderlands |
| 6 | Batman: Arkham Asylum |
| 7 | DJ Hero |
| 8 | Ratchet & Clank: A Crack In Time |
| 9 | Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2 |
| 10 | Dragon Age: Origins |

### REINER

| # | Pick |
|---|---|
| 1 | Uncharted 2: Among Thieves |
| 2 | Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2 |
| 3 | Borderlands |
| 4 | Batman: Arkham Asylum |
| 5 | Assassin's Creed II |
| 6 | Dragon Age: Origins |
| 7 | Infamous |
| 8 | Left 4 Dead 2 |
| 9 | Ratchet & Clank Future: A Crack in Time |
| 10 | Red Faction: Guerrilla |

### MATT

| # | Pick |
|---|---|
| 1 | Uncharted 2: Among Thieves |
| 2 | DJ Hero |
| 3 | Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2 |
| 4 | Batman: Arkham Asylum |
| 5 | New Super Mario Bros. Wii |
| 6 | The Beatles: Rock Band |
| 7 | Mario & Luigi: Bowser's Inside Story |
| 8 | LittleBigPlanet PSP |
| 9 | Guitar Hero 5 |
| 10 | Retro Game Challenge |

### KATO

| # | Pick |
|---|---|
| 1 | Skate 2 |
| 2 | NHL 10 |
| 3 | Madden NFL 10 |
| 4 | Uncharted 2: Among Thieves |
| 5 | Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2 |
| 6 | The Beatles: Rock Band |
| 7 | Dragon Age: Origins |
| 8 | Excitebots: Trick Racing |
| 9 | Wheelman |
| 10 | Fight Night Round 4 |

### BRYAN

| # | Pick |
|---|---|
| 1 | Resident Evil 5 |
| 2 | Uncharted 2: Among Thieves |
| 3 | Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2 |
| 4 | Assassin's Creed II |
| 5 | Batman: Arkham Asylum |
| 6 | The Chronicles of Riddick: Assault on Dark Athena |
| 7 | The Beatles: Rock Band |
| 8 | New Super Mario Bros. Wii |
| 9 | X-Men Origins: Wolverine |
| 10 | Punch-Out!! |

### JEFF

| # | Pick |
|---|---|
| 1 | Assassin's Creed II |
| 2 | Borderlands |
| 3 | New Super Mario Bros. Wii |
| 4 | Red Faction: Guerrilla |
| 5 | Battlefield 1943 |
| 6 | Uncharted 2: Among Thieves |
| 7 | Retro Game Challenge |
| 8 | Sacred 2 |
| 9 | Batman: Arkham Asylum |
| 10 | Pinball Hall of Fame: The Williams Collection |

### NICK

| # | Pick |
|---|---|
| 1 | Borderlands |
| 2 | Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2 |
| 3 | Skate 2 |
| 4 | DJ Hero |
| 5 | Assassin's Creed II |
| 6 | Battlefield 1943 |
| 7 | Dirt 2 |
| 8 | Resident Evil 5 |
| 9 | Batman: Arkham Asylum |
| 10 | Sacred 2 |

### MEAGAN

| # | Pick |
|---|---|
| 1 | Uncharted 2: Among Thieves |
| 2 | Batman: Arkham Asylum |
| 3 | Resident Evil 5 |
| 4 | Borderlands |
| 5 | Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2 |
| 6 | Infamous |
| 7 | Left 4 Dead 2 |
| 8 | Dragon Age: Origins |
| 9 | The Sims 3 |
| 10 | Sol Survivor |

## ADAM

1. Dragon Age: Origins
2. Plants vs. Zombies
3. King's Bounty: Armored Princess
4. New Super Mario Bros. Wii
5. The Beatles: Rock Band
6. Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2
7. Left 4 Dead 2
8. Halo Wars
9. Trine
10. Cryostasis

## JOE

1. Uncharted 2: Among Thieves
2. Assassin's Creed II
3. Dragon Age: Origins
4. Resident Evil 5
5. Street Fighter IV
6. The Sims 3
7. Infamous
8. Professor Layton and the Diabolical Box
9. Borderlands
10. Punch-Out!!

## MILLER

1. Assassin's Creed II
2. Uncharted 2: Among Thieves
3. Batman: Arkham Asylum
4. DJ Hero
5. Dragon Age: Origins
6. Shadow Complex
7. New Super Mario Bros. Wii
8. The Sims 3
9. Flower
10. Halo Wars

## BERTZ

1. Assassin's Creed II
2. NHL 10
3. Batman: Arkham Asylum
4. Dragon Age: Origins
5. Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2
6. Battlefield 1943
7. Madden NFL 10
8. Uncharted 2: Among Thieves
9. Left 4 Dead 2
10. Grand Theft Auto: Episodes From Liberty City

## BEN

1. Assassin's Creed II
2. Batman: Arkham Asylum
3. Uncharted 2: Among Thieves
4. Plants vs. Zombies
5. New Super Mario Bros. Wii
6. Ratchet & Clank Future: A Crack in Time
7. Halo Wars
8. Borderlands
9. Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2
10. Sims 3

## JEFF M

1. Borderlands
2. Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2
3. Left 4 Dead 2
4. Batman: Arkham Asylum
5. New Super Mario Bros. Wii
6. Dragon Age: Origins
7. Battlefield 1943
8. Red Faction: Guerrilla
9. The Beatles: Rock Band
10. Halo 3: ODST

## TIM

1. Resident Evil 5
2. New Super Mario Bros. Wii
3. Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2
4. Left 4 Dead 2
5. Uncharted 2: Among Thieves
6. Infamous
7. Borderlands
8. Retro Game Challenge
9. Guitar Hero: Metallica
10. Batman: Arkham Asylum

## DAN

1. Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2
2. Uncharted 2: Among Thieves
3. Street Fighter IV
4. Infamous
5. Batman: Arkham Asylum
6. Borderlands
7. New Super Mario Bros. Wii
8. Mario & Luigi: Bowser's Inside Story
9. Ratchet & Clank Future: A Crack in Time
10. Left 4 Dead 2

## PHIL

1. Infamous
2. Batman: Arkham Asylum
3. Uncharted 2: Among Thieves
4. Assassin's Creed II
5. Dragon Age: Origins
6. Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2
7. Borderlands
8. Dragon Quest V: Hand of the Heavenly Bride
9. Red Faction: Guerrilla
10. Flower

## ANNETTE

1. Uncharted 2: Among Thieves
2. Batman: Arkham Asylum
3. Grand Theft Auto: Episodes from Liberty City
4. Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2
5. DJ Hero
6. Infamous
7. New Super Mario Bros. Wii
8. Plants vs. Zombies
9. Grand Theft Auto: Chinatown Wars
10. Flower

# Bobby Kotick Unplugged

Activision Blizzard CEO Bobby Kotick just might be the most powerful man in the video game industry. Since the merger that brought the two giant publishers together, Kotick has overseen Activision Blizzard's unprecedented growth, spurred on by super franchises like World of Warcraft, Call of Duty, and Guitar Hero. Recently, we had the chance to sit down with Kotick, getting some fascinating tales of his ramshackle beginnings and his outlook on Activision's future

**On his early days, breaking into the computer industry as a startup developer of PC productivity software:**

My roommate was French. [He] ended up working on the Lisa [a failed Apple PC that was the precursor to the Macintosh – Ed.] prototype. He said, "You know, there's this computer that was based on the Xerox Starworks station that has a mouse and iconic interface. We should make that for the Apple II." I was making word processor, spreadsheet, database [software] with a mouse interface.

That was actually our first product. I had a little office in Ann Arbor where we went to school. We hired some graduated students and started making this product. It didn't go that great. Mainly because I got addicted to [the Sierra adventure game] Mystery House.

[Later] I went to see the guys at Atari and started developing a version for Atari and a version for Commodore. We ended up publishing the products ourselves and we sold the Amiga rights to EA. That's when I became an EA developer. It was called "Deluxe Write." That was about '85. We were making productivity software for Broderbund and Simon & Schuster.

**On his aborted takeover of Commodore, a move that would have resulted in the world's first 16-bit gaming console:**

My best friend from growing up was a hedge fund manager. He had just gone to work for this really successful hedge fund guy. We had been doing contract work for EA and others. I couldn't understand why there weren't dedicated video game machines. From the collapse of Atari to the NES, there were no dedicated game systems. I convinced this guy to give me the money to go buy Commodore. The idea was to turn the Amiga into a 16-bit video game system – take away the keyboard and disc drive and make it a standalone video game system. It was a really good idea.

So we went to the chairman of Commodore, who I knew. I had him 85 percent convinced. He had a 20 percent stake, so if you got his stake, you'd have control. I almost had him talked into it, but for whatever reason he hired this guy from Pepsi to be his president. This guy looked at it as a bad deal. It was going to strip him of his opportunity. He said, "We're not going to the game direction – it's a bad business and Atari was a fad." That ruined my opportunity.

**On his first break into the video game industry:**

By total coincidence, my sister's high school boyfriend said, "My dad wants to talk to you. He has an idea for you." So I went to talk to him. He had a company called Leisure Concepts. Leisure Concepts was Nintendo's licensing agency. So if you did bed sheets or breakfast cereals – whatever had Mario on it – he was the licensing agent. I went up to his offices in New York and they had toys and Nintendo characters everywhere. He said, "I really don't want to be in the business anymore. I want to retire in the south of France. I want to sell my stake to someone that wants to run this company." I bought his stake, which gave me control.

**On the deal that resulted in Kotick buying a controlling interest in the struggling Activision:**

Eventually, I said to [future Nintendo chairman] Howard Lincoln, who was their lawyer at the time, not even chairman, "I don't really want to be the licensing agent. I'd rather be a licensee and make video games." Howard said, "We're not comfortable with that. If you're a licensing agent, that's one thing, but if you want to be a licensee, go buy a licensee or buy a company that already is one." I said, "Do you have any suggestions?" He said, "Why don't you go look at Mediagenic?" [Activision had been rebranded as Mediagenic at the time – Ed.]

This was 1988, and [Activision] wasn't really making a lot of games. But they had the first Nintendo license and the first Sega Master System license. So I looked up the company and saw they were losing tons of money. It was a $20 million dollar company. That was a lot of money to pay for a company that doesn't make money. A year later, they lost a patent infringement judgement to Philips, which – this goes a long time back – they had held since they did the Odyssey. That basically made them insolvent. So they didn't know what they should do. They were in violation of all their loans. I went to visit the guy and I bought a 25 percent stake in the company for $440,000. That was Christmas of 1990. I had the idea of turning the company's name back to Activision, not Mediagenic, and turning it into a game company.

**On the financial woes that dogged the new Activision in its early years:**

We had assumed that the financial statements reasonably reflected the financial condition of the company. Then we got there and realized they couldn't even make payroll for the next month. We literally had to sell furniture. We had a garage sale in the park.

This is a great story. We're at the company maybe a month, and the sheriff's marshals came to the lobby and said, "We're here to take your ASA IBM 400 mainframe." We're like, "Well the whole company runs on that." They said, "We don't care, you're in default and we're repossessing it. Tell us where it is." So there was this facilities guy who was a real character. He said, "Let me take care of this. We can't lose the mainframe." So we go back four hours later and ask him, "Okay Cal, what happened? How did you convince them not to take the mainframe?" He's like, "Well I didn't exactly. The funny thing about sheriff's marshals is they don't know the difference between an ASA 400 and a PDP-11." [the PDP-11 was an early, outdated model of mainframe – Ed.]

I said, "Where did you get the PDP-11?"

He said, "That was the original PDP-11 that hosted the Infocom [text adventure] games. When we had acquired Infocom, that's where all their games resided and we had recently backed it up on a PC. All of Infocom is on this PC I have, so I gave them the PDP-11." [Laughs]

**On the shady deal for a Knight Rider video game that saved Activision:**

We had a guy in Japan who was an intern in our Japanese office. A very aggressive guy – an American who spoke Japanese. He would sell things that we didn't actually have the rights to. The first one he did was *Knight Rider*. He went to one of the Japanese licensees of Nintendo and sold them the rights to make a game based on *Knight Rider*. We didn't own *Knight Rider*! The deal he did was, "You make the game, you get to publish it in Japan, and Activision gets to publish it everywhere else." So he calls us and says, "I just sold *Knight Rider*" – it was to Tecmo, I think. I said, "How much did you sell it for?" He said, "$400,000." I said, "That's incredible, but we don't own *Knight Rider*!" [Laughs] So we had to go get the *Knight Rider* rights.

It turned out that this was going to be our little business. We're going to sell rights of things that we could own, and the Japanese publisher will make the game, and we'll sell it to the rest of the world. We did a lot of these. The next one he did was this old '60s show *Combat!*. How we got this one, I don't know, but he got

another $200,000 advance. Then, the thing that kept the company alive for the rest of the year was Shanghai. We sold Shanghai to everyone. If you had an LCD screen on your microwave at home, we sold you Shanghai! [Laughs] That got us through the end of 1991.

**On allowing development studios to maintain their identity:**

[When I was a PC developer] I remember going to the EA developer summits and feeling like they were going to suck the energy and life out of us. There was a really oppressive clause in their contracts – it was called the "Schedule C." In our first company, every time anything bad happened we'd say, "Go to the Schedule C." And the "Schedule C" was basically like they owned you and owned everything about you. I didn't like it. I always said that whatever we do, whenever I'm in a position to be in business with other development talent, we're not going to do the oppressive things that they did. You realize later that it gets harder and harder the bigger you get and the more you actually have to have responsible corporate practices and policies. You have to work twice as hard to give people that feeling of independence. It can't just be a feeling either, it has to be a reality. If you look at our studios, generally they are run by the people that founded them. Their cultures

haven't changed; the furniture hasn't changed; the names haven't changed. I think that's been a big point of difference between us and what other people do.
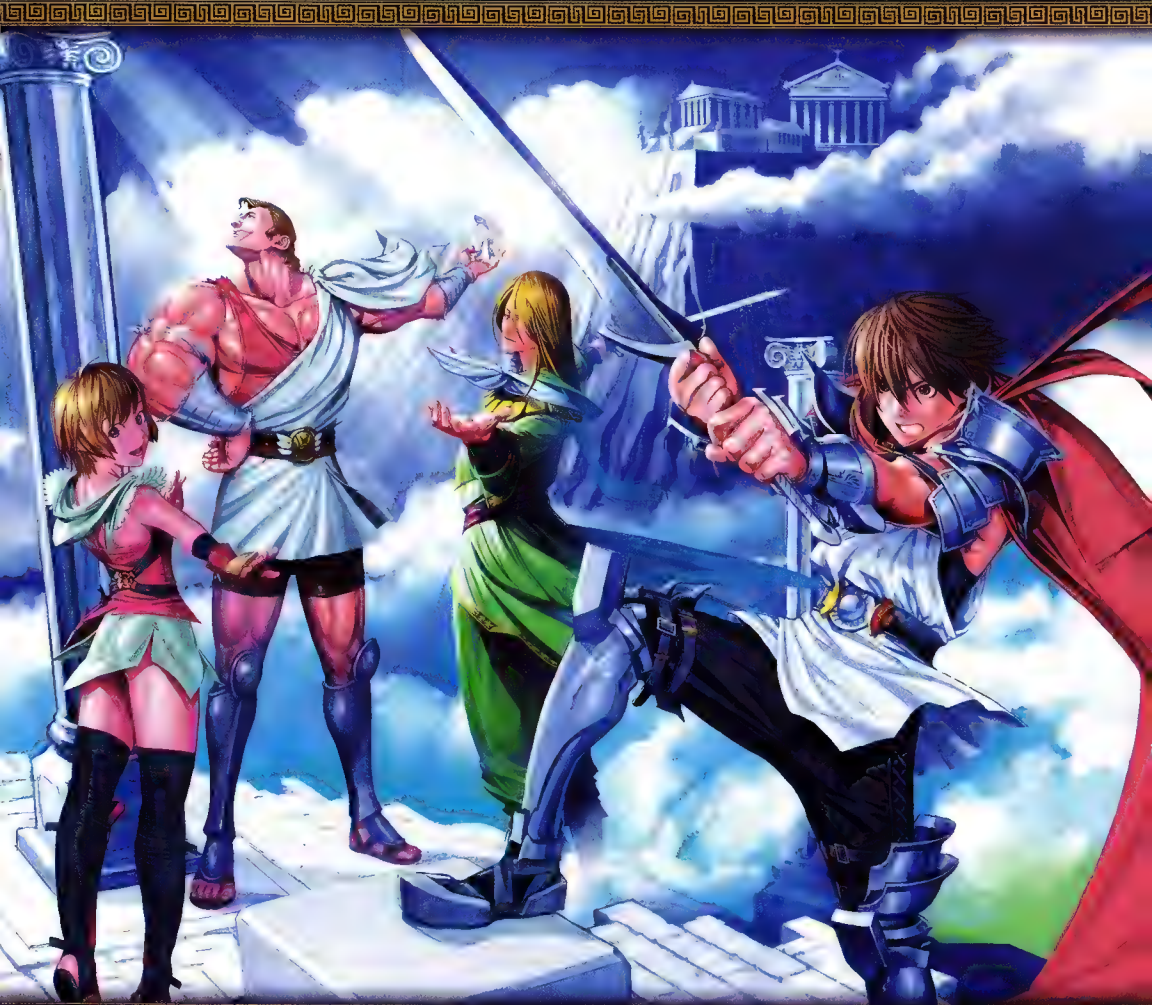
**On the value of established IP over new IP:**

Look at the last 20 years of history. 90 percent of the top 10 titles have always been based on proven franchises. Coming from my creative perspective, it was always "We've got to invent the new thing." But then you start to realize that the best way to actually make great games is not necessarily to invent the new franchise, it's to infuse the franchise with new ideas. That

discipline took us so long to figure out, that it's not just about the new IP. You know our history, we were doing new, new, new, new all the time. Until we realized that you get so much more insight from a customer that's playing an existing game and they can tell you, "This is what I'd like to see." That's the evolution of the franchise – you have a much better roadmap in a franchise than you do in something new. [For new games] you have to be really willing to say that you're going to take a long time and really polish it. You're going to get it right, test it, and change it. You're going to have to have the expectation that you're going to spend $100 million.

**On Blizzard:**

Bob Davidson and Jan Davidson had bought Blizzard in 1995. I was friends with the Davidsons from the '80s software business. I was going to have dinner with Bob and Jan, and I go to meet them and we go to dinner. They said, "We got into your business today. We got into games." I said, "What games business?" They said, "We bought Blizzard." I was like, "You bought Blizzard? Why? How much did you pay?"

That year Activision probably had 60 million in revenues. They said they paid seven million dollars for Blizzard. I'm like, "Are you out of your minds? They're like a contract developer! They have Warcraft but what else do they have? You paid SEVEN million! That's insane!" I was talking to [Blizzard founder] Mike Morhaime the other day and I said, "You know, I could have bought you for seven million and instead it was seven billion." [Laughs] He said, "Yeah, could you imagine if I had just held out for the seven billion instead of the seven million?"

I see this at Blizzard, the attention and the focus that they have on customer service. They did something that you would never have said a video game would have done 10 years ago. They hired this guy who ran customer service for Virgin Airways. They said, "You know what? We

want to find somebody who has been successful in an industry where it's so hard to satisfy the customer." In airlines, it's impossible to satisfy the customer." Their motto is "We're not happy until you're not happy." [Laughs] This guy came in, and he didn't know a lot about video games, but it was a total transformation. Blizzard is unusual, they are investing tens of millions of dollars in customer service. But those are things that video game companies didn't usually pay a lot of attention to. Nintendo did, but no one else did

**On committing to IP for the long term:**

The thing – and I think this is the challenge of new IP – is, if you're going to make a commitment to doing something original, the odds are that you're not going to get it right on the first chance. You have to be willing to say, "I'm not going to get it right on the first try, but I'm going to do everything to learn on the first one and then do it right on the second one." I think that's what happened with Infinity Ward and Treyarch. I could go through the list. Raven is a great example. When we got Raven they had just finished Heretic and Hexen for GT Interactive. They didn't do great. But then they had a chance to prove themselves. Even Neversoft, they did Apocalypse for us and it was not well-received.

I think DJ Hero is a really innovative product. I can't wait for you to see next year's. That's the thing; we're sticking with it. We'll stick with it and get it right. But it's going to be less games, better games. That's our strategy.

**On learning from Blizzard about having a commitment of quality:**

I'll tell you, the thing that was an interesting experience for me was three years ago going through the management presentations with Blizzard. We'd do our presentations, they'd do their presentations. We have a lot of properties, so we had people that were coming in and saying, on a kid's game for example, "Well, we're talking a 75-or 80-rated game and it's going to be X,Y, and Z." Mike Morhaime, Paul Sams, and Rob Pardo were like "Why would you ever target an 80-rated game?" The producers said, "Well it's a kid's game, you don't get the best ratings on a kid's game because reviewers aren't going to review them as favorably, so if you look at them objectively an 80 is actually a good rating for a kid's game or movie game." That was the other one – movie games were supposed to be an 80.

I remember walking out of the meeting saying, "Why would we make an 80-rated game?" [Laughs] Even adjusting for genre. Our guys would tell you, "Well, it's the adjustment for a Metacritic rating is that they are automatically going to be a lower rating." But I was thinking that when we did the great Spider-Man PlayStation game, we got a 95 rating. You can make a great game. Our Spider-Man games have sucked for the last five years. They are bad games. They were poorly rated because they were bad games. We went away from what is Spider-Man. It's about web-slinging. If you don't do web-slinging right, what is the fantasy of Spider-Man? But I think that was one of those wake-up calls. Even if you've been doing this a long time, you walk out saying, "That's a good question." [Laughs]



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196 "I think DJ Hero is a really innovative product. I can't wait for you to see next year's. We'll stick with it and get it right."
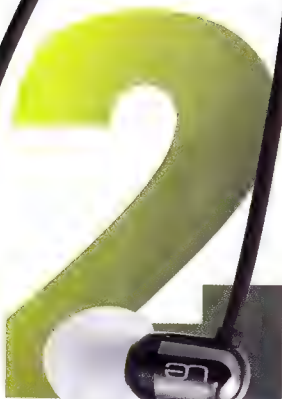
Upgrade Your Photog Skills

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## 1 | Allerta inPulse

The new inPulse from Allerta loves your BlackBerry as much as you do. Instead of the classic watch hands, this smartwatch sports a bright OLED screen and uses Bluetooth to stay connected to the world even when the phone is not glued to your palm. The inPulse is like having an assistant on your wrist, allowing you to read emails and text messages, check Twitter, and even get an alert when your phone receives an incoming call. Wrapped in a modern, pro-nerd design, Allerta has both casual and professional BlackBerry fans putting their phones away and checking their watch instead.
**$149.00**
getinpulse.com

## 2 | Ultimate Ears 700

. SUPERB

Music lovers and gamers alike will appreciate the level of quality that Ultimate Ears brings to the table. UE has been making professional musician ear monitors for years, and it shows in the consumer line. The 700s may look like a normal pair of earbuds, but putting them on and turning up the music instantly changed our minds. The impressive range of the tiny drivers inside made music stand out even at higher volume levels without distorting or hurting the ears. The earbuds also do an impressive job at noise cancelation without being powered, so playing DS or PSP on an airplane is no problem even if a baby is crying behind you. While the price tag is high, anyone on the go all the time should just call this one an investment.
**$199.00**
ultimateears.com

## 3 | Western Digital My Passport Elite

Hard drive specialists Western Digital have introduced a new line of external devices that shrinks its previous My Book drives down to a pocket-sized info vault. The My Passport Elite is the cream of the crop, with huge storage capacities and a handy mini dock for easy connection to your computer. With sizes ranging from 250GB all the way up to 640GB, you'd be hard-pressed to run out of space on these tiny powerhouses. A light on the front of the unit even shows you how much space you have left at a glance. Take your music, photos, or whatever you can fit with you, and never be without your files again.
**$119.99 – 169.99**
wdc.com

## 4 | Konnet Power Pyramid

AVERAGE

The wireless controller revolution solved the comfort issue with playing from anywhere you want, but now we're stuck worrying about battery charging. Many different solutions to controller charging are out there, but none are as stylish as Konnet's Power Pyramid for the Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3. With the ability to charge up to four controllers at once – two from each platform – gamers will never miss a moment due to annoying power loss. The Power Pyramid charges in a speedy manner, but the unit has its flaws. The pyramid is forced to sit off balance on the power cable, and removing the controllers from the chargers requires a bit of force.
**$49.99**
konnetonline.com

connect 49

# FAILURE TO COMMUNICATE

## If you want better games, it's time to embrace honest dialogue

**Traditionally, there has been no effective line of communication between those who make games and those who play them.** Who bears responsibility for this failure? What's being done about it? My answers are as follows: We have all contributed to this unfortunate state of affairs, but I remain optimistic that we can do something to improve things.

by Corey May
co-owner,
Sekretagent Productions

Almost all communication between a dev team and its audience passes through a filter. Sometimes that filter is the public relations department. Sometimes it's marketing. Sometimes it's the producer. For the games I've worked on, it's also myself. I measure my words. I revise even simple answers to soft questions. I self-censor (something I hope to avoid here). I do this because I'm afraid.

Here's why: Too many of my peers have had their words twisted or their meanings misinterpreted. Innocuous, off-the-cuff quotes have been turned into sensational headlines or obnoxious thread titles. In one case this happened because someone mistakenly used the present tense when they meant to use the past. Understandable since English isn't his first language. Another co-worker provided a substantial interview to a site that sought to give insight into the production process of a particular game. A great deal of snarky commentary followed as others picked up the interview and singled out *one* sentence amongst hundreds. It was assigned a meaning that neither the interviewer nor his subject intended. Worse still, most of the discussion that followed completely ignored the actual subject of the article.

Events like these create a chilling effect. Instead of insight, you get less exciting stuff: feature lists and marketing blurbs. We are discouraged from talking about interesting things. I'm not saying "Don't be critical of us. We are

soft little butterflies that can't stand having our fragile egos crushed." Criticism is important and useful. But venom, hyperbole, and sensationalism are counterproductive. I'm just asking for a little bit of maturity when it comes to discussing games.

I can't fault publishers and developers for being cautious. In the interest of full disclosure, know that I sent this column to my PR manager before it went to GI. It would be irresponsible for me not to. We are compelled to be careful when it comes to communication. There are often millions of dollars on the line. And these dollars don't just go into some suit's pocket. They pay the salaries of hundreds, if not thousands, of employees – people with husbands, wives, children, and mortgages. We can't take unnecessary risks. And that's the problem – talking about what we do shouldn't feel like taking a risk. But when there's so much at stake, better safe than sorry.

It's not just about poor communication. Some of you simply *don't* communicate. How can I know what you're thinking – what you want, what you like, what you don't like – if you don't speak up? It seems like only a small group of people who play the games I've worked on actually post on message boards or official forums. If I just measure post counts against sales figures, the percentage is really low. The other problem is many posters have trouble articulating their thoughts. Sometimes it's

hyperbole. Things are either TERRIBLE or THE BEST EVAR. Sometimes it's simply incomplete: "I LOVE THIS GAME!!" or "I HATE THIS GAME!!" followed by no explanation as to why. And then there are people who choose to let reviewers speak for them. Communication for some posters consists of repeating review text – sometimes word for word – often prefaced by "I haven't even played the game yet, but I agree." I can't use this information. It's exaggerated, repetitive, incomplete, or incomprehensible.

But not always, and this is what gives me hope. Increasingly, consumers and critics are becoming not just more outspoken, but more well spoken. Feedback is thoughtful and comprehensive. Developers and publishers are improving as well. They are creating new positions dedicated to community interaction and starting blogs where questions are answered and production processes are detailed.

That's all I'm asking for, really. Speak up! Developers: let the people who buy your games know that you hear them – whether it's news on a patch, explanation of a feature, or insight into the production process. And players: when you have concerns or questions, articulate them clearly. Be constructive with your criticism. I promise we're listening. As trust increases and we all learn to interact more effectively, transparency and understanding will increase as well. The end result will be better games. Last year saw the release of some incredible titles, and 2010 looks to maintain the trend. Keep those lines of communication open and things will only continue to improve.
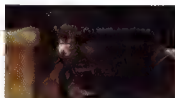
## New Releases
- Dawn of Heroes *(DS)*
- Imagine: Reporter *(DS)*
- Lunar: Silver Star Harmony *(PSP)*
- Puzzle Chronicles *(PSP, DS)*
- R.U.S.E. *(PS3, 360, PC)*
- The Sims: High-End Loft Stuff *(PC)*
- Star Trek Online *(PC)*
- Sushi Go Round *(Wii, DS)*
- Tropico 3 *(360)*
- White Knight Chronicles *(PS3)*
- Yu-Gi-Oh! World Tournament 2010 *(DS)*

Star Trek Online

### It Started With A Plane Crash
The final season of *Lost* begins tonight. This 18-hour finale will reveal the answers you've been dying to know since you watched your first episode. What is the smoke monster? Does the island have magical powers? How are people moving through time? Why doesn't this fiction make any sense? All will be answered

**02** tue

### Mass Effect Comic
Seeing how EA handles DLC these days, we wouldn't be surprised if Mass Effect 2's story is interrupted with "The remainder of this plot thread won't make any sense unless you first read the Mass Effect: Redemption comic book, on sale now at all funny book retailers!" This comic series is penned by Mass Effect 2's lead writer Mac Walters, and is said to flesh out one of Mass Effect 2's big plot points. Sounds like we should read it.

**03** wed

## New Releases
- Bejeweled Twist *(DS)*
- BioShock 2 *(PS3, 360, PC)*
- Dante's Inferno *(PS3, 360)*
- Scene It? Twilight *(DS)*
- Star Ocean: Last Hope International *(PS3)*
- Super Monkey Ball: Step & Roll *(Wii)*
- Windchaser *(PC)*

Dante's Inferno

**09** tue

### The Wolfman
Finally! Another *Teen Wolf* movie! The long-awaited third chapter in the trilogy about growing up with lycanthropy, *The Wolfman*, opens in theaters today. We don't know if Michael J. Fox or Jason Bateman are involved, but Benicio Del Toro plays some dude in it. Strangely, the trailer indicates the movie is more of a suspenseful thriller, which is probably just to fill space between wolf-style slam dunks and funny jokes about hairballs.

**12** fri

## New Releases
- Ace Attorney Investigations: Miles Edgeworth *(DS)*
- Aliens vs. Predator *(PS3, 360, PC)*
- Blur *(PS3, 360, PC)*
- Dementium II *(DS)*
- Dynasty Warriors: Strikeforce *(PS3, 360)*
- Everquest II: Sentinels Fate *(PC)*
- Freerunning *(Wii)*
- Galaxy Racers *(DS)*
- Ragnarok *(DS)*
- Red Steel 2 *(Wii)*
- Singularity *(PS3, 360, PC)*
- World of Outlaws: Sprint Cars *(360)*

Red Steel 2

**15** mon

### "It's Tentacle Chief!!!"
Halo's mythology can now be experienced in anime form. *Halo Legends*, available on DVD, Blu-ray, and download starting today, offers seven different stories from Japan's top animation studios including Bones and Studio 4°C. Many of these short stories bend the fiction in ways fans haven't seen before. You'll even get to see a face beneath a Spartan helmet!

**16** tue

HALO LEGENDS

**18** thu

### Gaming's Getaway Cruiser
Samus Aran's gunship has appeared in almost every Metroid game, but outside drooling on its sleek god exterior, we have gotten a good look at it. First 4 Figures' detailed statue allows fans to take a closer examination. The look is authenticated with 50 different lights that glow just like they in the games.

### Meet The News Kids
In a world full of blockbuster releases and big-name talent, it's nice to see an independent film get a shot at box office glory. *Shutter Island*, which opens today, stars newcomer Leonardo DiCaprio in his first role since *Growing Pains*. The film is the directorial debut of George Lucas' friend Martin Scorsese. Also, imdb.com was down as we were writing this entry.

**19** fri

**23** tue

### New Releases
- Deadly Premonition *(360)*
- Dead to Rights: Retribution *(PS3, 360)*
- Foto Showdown DSI *(DS)*
- Heavy Rain *(PS3)*
- Napoleon: Total War *(PC)*
- Sonic & Sega All-Stars Racing *(PS3, 360, Wii, DS)*
- Splinter Cell: Conviction *(360)*

Heavy

Napoleon: Total

### Harvest Your Own Adam
We call them the next Ken and Barbie. Most people know them as Big Daddy and Big Sister. Although they do spend most of their time shooting at each other, this couple looks fantastic together on a shelf. Both of these figures should be available at retail today, and yes, Big Sister looks great in the Barbie car.

**24** wed

Splinter Cell: Conv

connect

# HALO
## REACH

BY MATT MILLER

In 2552, the planet of Reach is humanity's best hope for victory over an overwhelming alien threat. It houses a huge stockpile of military assets, from training facilities to industrial mineral production. It is an impenetrable fortress planet bristling with UNSC forces and surrounded by orbital defense platforms. Its enormous tactical and strategic importance is hidden deep behind dozens of outer colony worlds, and well obscured from enemy infiltration. It's not enough. This symbol of humanity's military might falls in that same year, overwhelmed by a massive Covenant force that turns the surface of the planet to glass. A lucky few, like the Spartan II known as Master Chief, will escape. For everyone else on the surface, the end is a foregone conclusion. Reach will fall. And we'll be there to see it.

H alo: Reach is not a retelling of Eric Nylund's 2001 novel, *The Fall of Reach.* In that prequel tale, readers learned the origin of Master Chief and the Spartan IIs, witnessed their training, and came to understand the tragic tale of how Master Chief ends up fighting as a lone Spartan through the three games that follow. That story has been told.

Halo: Reach is something new. Though it's set in those same final days before Reach's destruction by the Covenant, the characters and story depicted in this game have never been seen before. "Reach has such a rich history in our fictional canon," says creative director Marcus Lehto. "We're going deep, chronicling the events leading up to Halo 1. We're in the trenches with the Spartans, and witnessing the sacrifice they go through."

The game tells the story of Noble Team, a six-person squad of (mostly) Spartan IIIs who have the misfortune of being on the planet when the Covenant forces find it. Spartan IIIs were created after Master Chief and the other Spartan IIs. The third-generation Spartans were cheaper to train and produce, and the military would often use them as the "fire-and-forget solution" to a problem. In other words, they were expendable.

Somehow, Noble Team survives against the odds. Mission after mission, the squad keeps coming back from suicide assignments. "They're a little bit more tenacious than the usual Spartan," Lehto says, with a smile. When one of their members falls in the line of duty, a new squad member is brought in as a replacement. The new arrival has an impressive list of accomplishments to his combat record, including a tendency to strike out on his own more often than his superiors might like. This mysterious replacement soldier is Halo: Reach's new hero. "You are Noble 6, a new addition to the team," Lehto tells us. "Your background is shrouded in some pretty dark secrets."

The other members of Noble Team have been around far longer, and each has his or her own place on the team. "They all have their own unique flavors, without being caricatures," Lehto says. "They're not corny, but they're extreme in their own right, so that each one of them is likeable in their own way. There's a variety of characteristics within each of these Spartans that I think our fans can connect to." Carter-259 leads the elite squad and has pulled them out of enough impossible scrapes to earn the loyalty of his teammates. His second-in-command is Kat-320, a female Spartan who is fiercely loyal to Carter and the team – a devotion that cost her right arm, which has since been replaced by a robotic implant. Carter and Kat are the only two survivors of the original team, and share a close bond as a result. Jorge-052 is the heavy weapons specialist and the only Spartan II on the team. Consequently, he's bigger and bulkier, and he's fought countless battles to survive as long as he has. Emile-239 is the silent type. His helmet is painted with the visage of a skull, and he lets his actions speak for him. Jun-266 fills out the lineup. This thoughtful and taciturn soldier tackles sniping duties when the up-close approach won't do.

The final central character, at least in the minds of the development team at Bungie, is the planet of Reach itself. "The planet of Reach is definitely a character in its own right that we are bringing to life in a number of ways," Lehto says. "We get to see its natural environments, as well as the cultures that live upon it, and the ambient life. All of this is really important for us to capture, because the whole point of this game is to show the fall of Reach. By the end of the game, we're going to see the planet in its death throes. It was essential that we made it feel like a real living place at the beginning of the game, so we can see it go through the stages of its death towards the end."

Reach has never been visualized before in Halo fiction, though the planet has been an important part of the canon for years. This game offered the opportunity to flesh out its culture, terrain, and people. The resultant game environment is a departure for the Halo series. "We wanted to have a darker tone overall," Lehto says. "Things aren't as bright. But we're not going for that desaturated, modern war movie vibe, either." While there are still elements of the colorful palette that players have come to expect from the franchise, Reach comes across as a rugged and harsh wilderness filled with towering mountains and weather-beaten forests.

Though Reach has since become the central military installation planet for humanity, colonists only settled it 100 years earlier. It's a young, tortured planet that was inhospitable to humanity long before the Covenant tracked down its location. It's also a massive world with dozens of unique locales, many of which Bungie plans

## CARTER

| | |
|---|---|
| RANK: | CDR |
| SERVICE #: | S-259 |
| (P) MOS: | 180A |
| BORN: | 8/27/2520 |
| BIRTHPLACE: | DURBAN, BIKO |
| HEIGHT: | 208.3 CM |
| WEIGHT: | 113.4 KG |

## JORGE

| | |
|---|---|
| RANK: | CWO |
| SERVICE #: | S-052 |
| (P) MOS: | SO |
| BORN: | 3/5/2511 |
| BIRTHPLACE: | PÁLHÁZA, REACH |
| HEIGHT: | 223.5 CM |
| WEIGHT: | 145.2 KG |

## KAT

| | |
|---|---|
| RANK: | LCDR |
| SERVICE #: | S-320 |
| (P) MOS: | 18E |
| BORN: | 1/30/2530 |
| BIRTHPLACE: | MONASTIR, NEW HARMONY |
| HEIGHT: | 205.7 CM |
| WEIGHT: | 97.5 KG |

Every Spartan has a unique appearance in Halo Reach, and players will have a degree of control over the appearance of the main character

## EMILE

| | |
|---|---|
| RANK: | WO |
| SERVICE #: | S-239 |
| (P) MOS: | 180B |
| BORN: | 3/11/2523 |
| BIRTHPLACE: | LUXOR, ERIDANUS II |
| HEIGHT: | 208.4 CM |
| WEIGHT: | 106.5 KG |

## JUN

| | |
|---|---|
| RANK: | WO |
| SERVICE: | S-266 |
| (P) MOS: | 180B |
| BORN: | 2/28/2524 |
| BIRTHPLACE: | TYUMEN, NEW HARMONY |
| HEIGHT: | 210.5 CM |
| WEIGHT: | 111.1 KG |

Spartans fighting as a team make
for quite the sight to behold

to explore in the game. From secret military ONI hard sites and homes of the early colonists to gritty industrial installations and sprawling open vistas, Halo: Reach offers plenty of locations to explore.

As our demo begins, Noble Team is called in to investigate a disturbance at the communications array that keeps the planet connected to the rest of the UNSC. Human insurrectionists are suspected. When Noble Team moves in to determine the truth, the pieces of the puzzle don't add up. Investigating abandoned homes of outlying colonists near the array, there are no rebels to be found, but plasma burns mark the walls and ceilings. It's a sure sign of trouble. Humans don't use plasma weapons – the Covenant do. Noble Team has stumbled into the advance invasion force. Within moments of the discovery, an assault team of enemy aliens starts firing.

A big focus for the gameplay of Halo: Reach is on making the Covenant dangerous and frightening once more. Over the course of several games, players have slowly been introduced to the culture and personalities behind the alien

threat, whether through Grunts who crack jokes in English as you charge them, or by inhabiting one of the Elites as a player. Along the way, the Covenant enemies have lost the menacing qualities that first made them such threatening bad guys.

Halo: Reach is set before all those events, when the terror of the Covenant is still fresh, and Bungie plans to reconnect players with the savage and otherworldly appeal of these foes. "We're taking a meaner approach to the Covenant overall," Lehto says. "At this point in the fictional timeline, the Covenant are fairly new to this group of soldiers. We've been at war with them for some time, but it's the first time that a lot of these people have even seen the Covenant. So it was our opportunity to re-introduce them as this terrifying enemy."

Covenant enemies now perpetually speak their own languages, in low guttural voices. They are vicious and unrelenting attackers. A new species also joins the familiar antagonists: a cousin of the Jackals called the Skirmishers, who are deadly and cunning enemies that attack in packs

Skirmishers are a new enemy type
Cousins to the Jackal, the Skirmisher
travels in packs and flanks their targets



W hile the story of Noble Team is a dramatic departure for the Halo franchise, many players will be far more interested in how far Bungie's technology has moved forward. The answer? A great deal.

"We basically hit every single piece of the engine, making things better across the board," creative director Marcus Lehto explains. The new tech engine starts with a refined approach to distance and detail that allows for a dramatically expanded number of enemies, light sources, and other details.

Bungie describes the technology as "imposter" tech – a devoted system for Halo: Reach that iterates off of a common programming technique. "The new LOD [level of detail] system allows us to build and populate much larger spaces for exploration," Lehto emphasizes. In simple terms, distant objects are rendered at far lower polygon counts and with cheaper shaders. These imposters still look great from a distance, and the detail on the objects increases the closer you get to them. This means there's less chance of pop-up and stippling, as environmental geometry, plants, buildings, enemies, or anything else can be placed into the visual field at extreme distances without a profound hit to system performance. Furthermore, at extremely close range, items can be rendered with incredible detail. We saw a wall from inches away, where the tiny rivet textures in the metal popped on the screen with near perfect clarity.

Indirectly, the imposter system frees up memory that Bungie can devote to other in-game technical challenges. Chief among these technical hurdles is lighting. In Halo 3, Bungie could include three or four dynamic lights onscreen at any one time. Depending

HALO 3      HALO: REACH



HALO 3      HALO: REACH



HALO 3
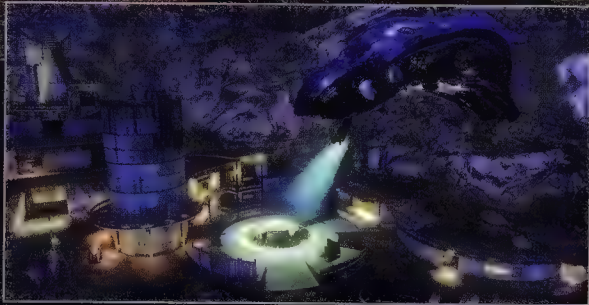


HALO: REACH

on the situation, Halo: Reach can present 20 to 40 dynamic lights at one time. The most notable in-game result of this technology is on weapon effects. As plasma bolts come searing past, they move across the screen with their own independent light source, casting color and shadow about the space to remarkable effect. On the back of a Warthog, we see a chain gun fire at a wall. Hundreds of real sparks fly from the stone. Even more impressive, the particles interact not just with the geometry of the wall, but with its normal map as well. The particles that scatter down onto a nearby vehicle react with its curves and lines. The sparks actually bounce and flow along the tiny textured surface.

A new weather system sends rain pouring down on many of the missions, adding to the atmosphere of foreboding tragedy that pervades the experience. When the rain isn't blocking the view, far above the battlefield, the sky isn't a simple "skybox." In many games, including the previous Halo games, the sky above is little more than an illusion – a huge painted dome above the game world that isn't a real space. Halo: Reach employs the opposite approach. The sky is a true space in the world, which means that

as a ship descends from orbit and towards the player, you can watch it come in all the way as a real object descending toward you.

Animation features a similar level of advancement. For the first time, Bungie has implemented motion capture. A majority of the cinematic sequences are based on captured actions. Onscreen characters exhibit an animation technique called variable gait blending. Simply put, it means that as a character changes speed, the animation of walking blends seamlessly into running, which likewise blends into sprinting. When turning on a pivot (think holding left or right on the right analog stick), players no longer appear to stand still and simply turn in a circle. In Halo: Reach, they move realistically as they pivot, lifting their feet and moving their bodies in reaction. For facial work, Bungie enlisted the aid of Image Metrics, a company some gamers may recall from their remarkable "Emily" video in 2008. With their aid, human faces now appear dramatically more lifelike than in previous Halo games.

Taken together, it's easy to see the generational leap in quality between previous games and Reach.

and flank secured positions. Perhaps most importantly, the Elites return as the unrelenting leaders of the enemy forces. Their ferocious combat skills will be brought to bear against players as the central nemeses of the game.

In our demo, as Noble Team fans out to deal with the sudden and vicious Covenant assault, we witness for the first time something Halo fans have clamored after for years – multiple Spartans fighting together through the story. In the later years of the fiction, Master Chief throws down against whole squads of enemy troops by himself. With six times as many Spartans on the field, the battles of Halo: Reach are often massive affairs. In the ensuing skirmish after the Covenant reveal themselves, Noble Team tears across a broad hillside, dropping a steady flow of enemy troops as they pour in from all directions. According to Bungie, this scene is only a taste of some of the huge scale combat in store for players.

In a brief glimpse of an unfinished cinematic, we spy a battle where a line of fast-moving Warthogs skim across the ground as a full squadron of enemy Banshees descend on their location. "We had somewhere around 20 AI at a time in Halo 3. Now we can populate our encounters with up to 40 AI, and 20 vehicles," Lehto says. "Our big battles are a major new push – something new that we're adding to this game that allows us to not only see the localized battles we're engaged in, but the battles that are out and around us as well. We really get the sense that Reach is under siege." These expansive battle scenes lend the game an air of broad-scope warfare that earlier games in the series could rarely communicate.

The sense of being in the midst of a wider war is another major goal for the team at Bungie. From a storytelling perspective, it's the biggest shift in tone we've seen from the series. Gone are the long, sweeping camera shots of previous Halo games, replaced by a cinematic tone that evokes up close and personal war journalism. If there's an airborne shot, it's because there's a ship filming from above. If a scene has the camera moving low along the ground at high speed, it will bump and jar like it's being held in the hands of a runner. This grittier cinematic sensibility extends to encompass the wider character and plot development. Striking away from the superhero mentality of Master Chief, the members of Noble Team are fleshed out as vulnerable human protagonists, even if they happen to be wrapped in hundreds of pounds of high-powered armor and weaponry. "We definitely want to take a more serious approach to the franchise with Reach," Lehto explains. "We wanted to delve a little deeper into our characters themselves – into the Spartans. That they're not perfect – they're susceptible to damage."

Along the path to investigate the sabotaged communications array, Noble Team splits up. Most of the team continues toward a locked door in the nearby outpost connected to the array, while the player (as Noble 6) and Carter head off to look for surviving Reach troopers in the area. As the two Spartans fight their way through more knots of enemy soldiers, there's ample opportunity to observe what's changed in the basic combat structure.

In what might be an homage to the first Halo game – which is set only days after this game concludes – players once again have a health bar that is drained after their recharging shield is depleted. "In a lot of ways, we're being conscious of the connection between Reach and Halo 1," Lehto remarks. "We're looking back at some of the things we did really well in that first game, and then got lost in Halo 2 and 3. We're bringing some of those things back that encouraged a little more exploration, like wondering where that health pack is. We wanted to impart this need of self-preservation to the player." While Noble 6 won't be as fragile as the ODST troopers of last year's franchise entry, he'll likely have to seek health kits to stay alive against the unrelenting Covenant attackers.

Noble 6 also has some brand new weapons. As he defeats the last skirmisher in a group, he and Carter find some dead planetary troopers and a brand new Designated Marksman Rifle (DMR) among the equipment. The single shot DMR fits somewhere between the sniper rifle and the battle rifle. It's deadly at range, but a quick trigger finger and careful aim assure that even at medium to short distances it packs a punch. "The DMR is definitely my favorite new weapon right now," Lehto comments. "The single powerful shot, when you nail a headshot, is super satisfying."

Joining this newcomer are several old UNSC favorites, many of which are modeled after their original incarnations from Halo 1 for continuity's sake. The sniper rifle, assault rifle, and magnum pistol all make appearences during the heated battle. As Noble 6 takes down another Covenant attacker, he picks up a new toy from the enemy arsenal as well. The needle rifle is a mid-range headshot weapon, combining the fun mechanics of the needler with greater flexibility and accuracy. Three individual hits from the needle rifle will super-combine and explode Returning with this new addition is the plasma pistol, sword, and needler, among others.

One other HUD element catches our eye as the demo unfolds – players only have access to the two original grenade types. "Spike grenades and flame grenades are out," explains sandbox design lead Sage Merrill. "They both have a very similar gameplay result as existing grenades. Additionally, we want to keep the complexity of managing your inventory down. In Halo 3, you were constantly switching, or accidentally throwing the kind you were saving. So for now, we're sticking with the two standards – the frag and the plasma."

After showing us some weapon selections, Bungie jumps ahead to show us a nighttime engagement during which Noble Team is tasked with assessing enemy troop strength.

## TOOLS OF WAR
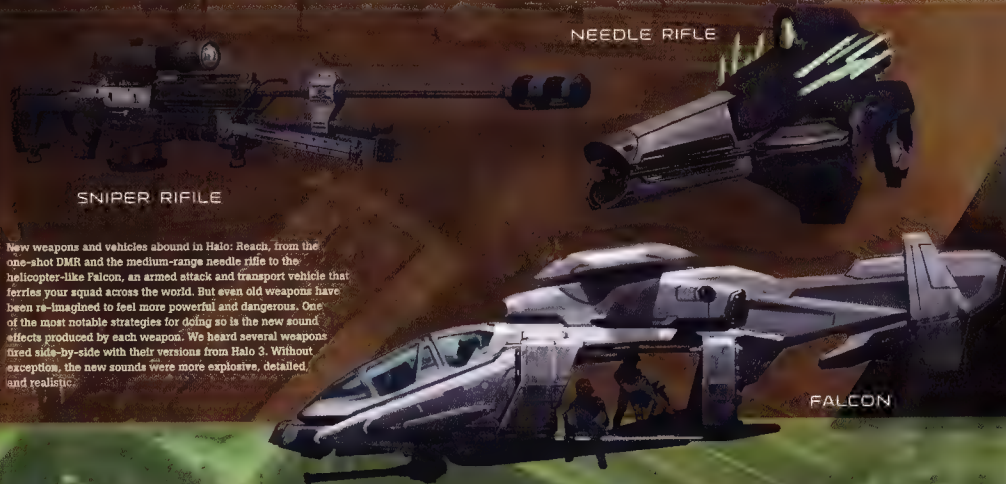
NEEDLE RIFLE

SNIPER RIFLE

New weapons and vehicles abound in Halo: Reach, from the one-shot DMR and the medium-range needle rifle to the helicopter-like Falcon, an armed attack and transport vehicle that ferries your squad across the world. But even old weapons have been re-imagined to feel more powerful and dangerous. One of the most notable strategies for doing so is the new sound effects produced by each weapon. We heard several weapons fired side-by-side with their versions from Halo 3. Without exception, the new sounds were more explosive, detailed, and realistic.

FALCON

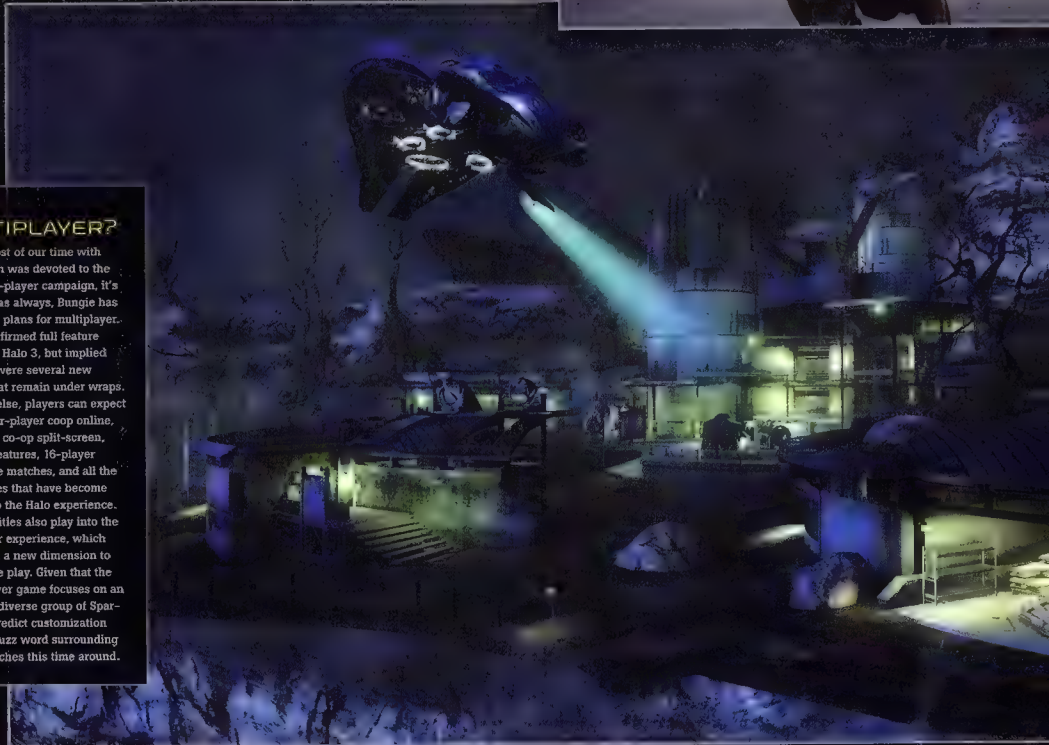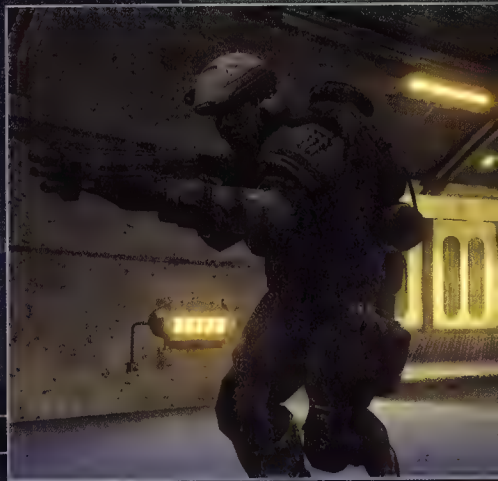Battles can include up to 40 fully active AI characters, resulting in epic fights


Civilian vehicles can now be driven if found on the field

Assassinations are a new mechanic to Halo: Reach. There's now an alternative on some missions to going in with all guns blazing.





## MULTIPLAYER?

Though most of our time with Halo: Reach was devoted to the new single-player campaign, it's clear that, as always, Bungie has equally big plans for multiplayer. Bungie confirmed full feature parity with Halo 3, but implied that there were several new features that remain under wraps. If nothing else, players can expect at least four-player coop online, two-player co-op split-screen, save film features, 16-player competitive matches, and all the other modes that have become standard to the Halo experience. Armor abilities also play into the multiplayer experience, which should add a new dimension to competitive play. Given that the single-player game focuses on an extremely diverse group of Spartans, we predict customization to be the buzz word surrounding online matches this time around.
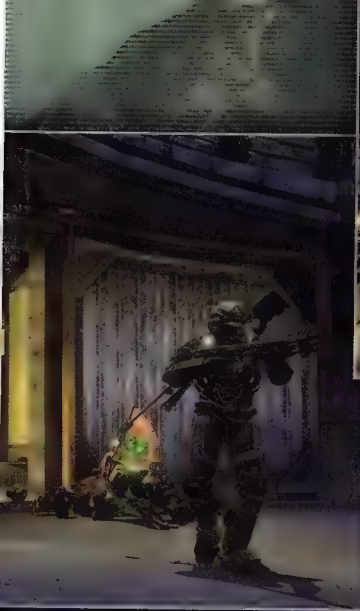
The game affords players the chance to see and experience the architecture and culture of the colony planet of Reach in the days before its annihilation

By now, the military brass have called winter contingency – Covenant troops are on the ground, and full planetwide evacuation has begun. Fellow Spartan Jun accompanies Noble 6, and they sneak into camp, revealing two more cool additions to the traditional Halo formula. Sneaking along a mountainous path, they spot an Elite patrolling ahead, carefully monitoring the open plain beyond. Flanking behind him, Noble 6 draws his combat knife and assassinates the powerful foe. These new melee assassinations are completed by holding down the melee button while near an opponent. If they remain unaware of your presence, your Spartan will initiate a context-sensitive stealth kill. As the Elite slumps to the ground, a nearby equipment cache becomes visible beyond, and Noble 6 opts to alter his armor abilities.

Armor abilities are a fundamentally new mechanic, replacing equipment features from previous games while simultaneously offering a new way for players to customize their game style. "There was a problem with equipment in the earlier games," Lehto says. "You would pick a piece up, you didn't really understand what it was, and then you'd use it and waste it." Armor abilities change all that. Each Spartan can only have one of these special pieces equipped at a time, but they can be traded out much like weapons. No matter the ability you equip, it's always governed by a meter that recharges after use.

As Noble 6 arrives at the equipment cache, he is using the sprint ability. With it, he can run at high speed for short periods, crossing in front of

a blaze of plasma fire, or closing the gap between an enemy to slash out with an energy sword. However, in this night mission, a more subtle approach is required. Consequently, Noble 6 drops his sprint ability and exchanges it for active camouflage. Plugging it into his armor, he now has short bursts of virtual invisibility as he drops in on other unsuspecting foes. The mission from here on out becomes a choice between a slow, measured sneak into enemy territory or a throwdown of bullets and explosions.

As Bungie closes the nighttime demo level with one last furious fight, a few things are apparent. Whether it's the terrifying danger of facing down a well-shielded Elite, or the wonder of turning a corner to be greeted by a breathtaking panorama of mountains and forests, Halo: Reach embraces the sense of mystery and excitement the franchise was founded upon. Simultaneously, the game is unafraid to blaze new trails and depart from familiar concepts in the name of better gameplay and storytelling. The story of Noble Team has a darker emotional core behind it, set as it is among characters and upon a world that we already know will be destroyed by the game's conclusion. The technology accompanying that storytelling is a profound step up from anything the gaming world has yet seen from Bungie. But at the same time, Bungie continues to ascribe to the mantra upon which it founded the franchise. Halo: Reach is the combat and excitement that players the world over have come to love, evolved. ◈
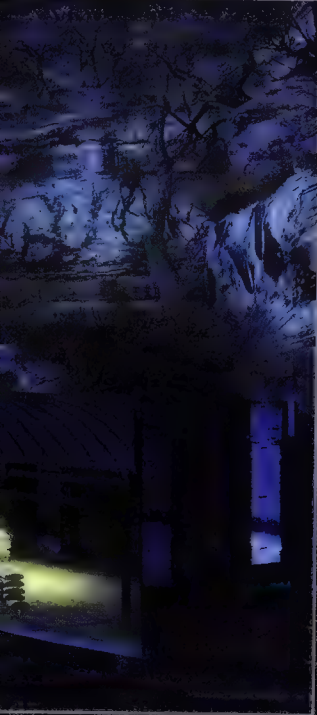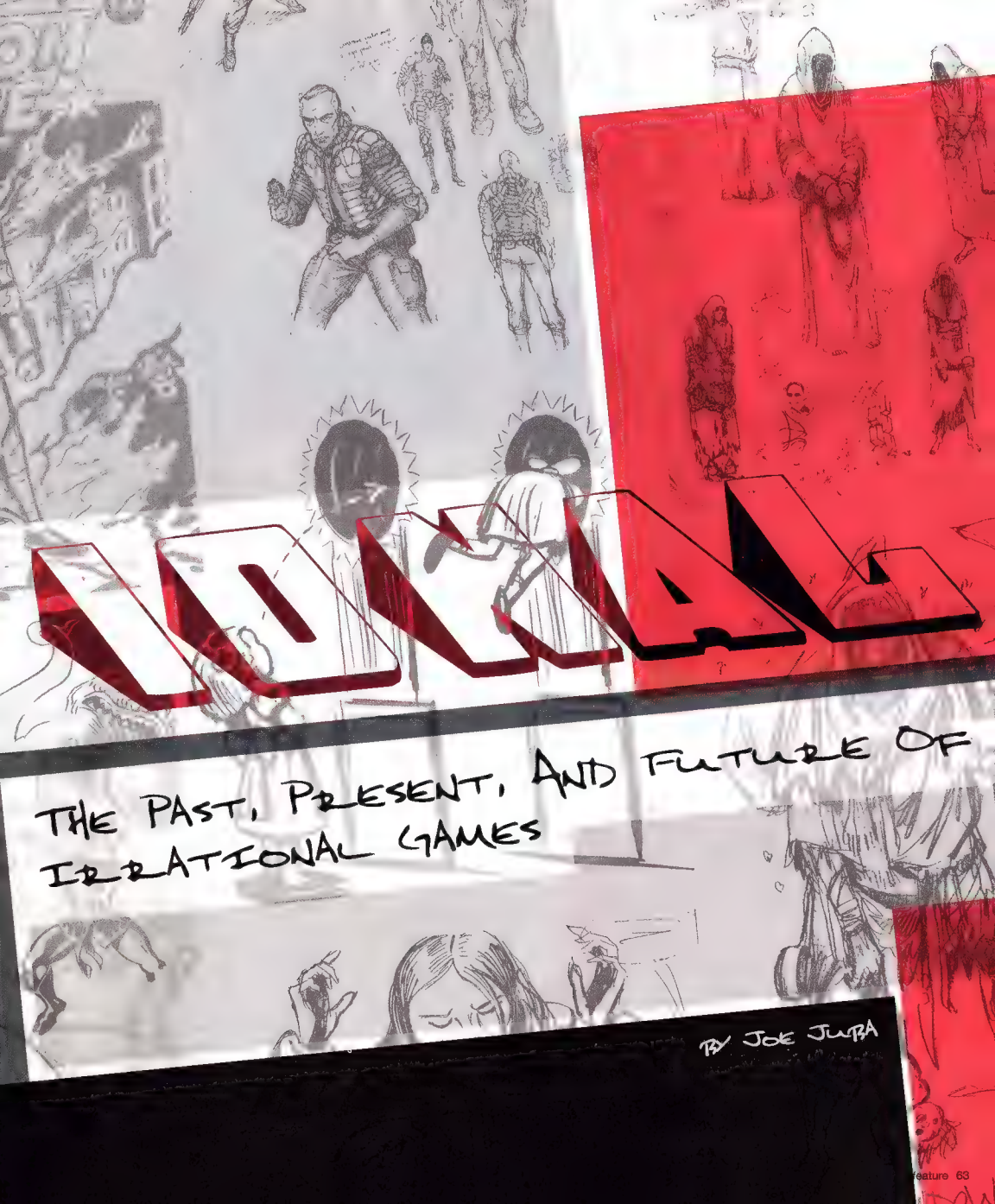


## REPORT FOR DUTY

Looking for more Halo: Reach details? Throughout this month, gameinformer.com features expanded content on Reach and the wider Halo franchise. We have an in-depth look at the music of Halo: Reach, a conversation with the game's lead developers about what it's like working at Bungie, a detailed introduction to the fiction of the Halo universe, and more. For all our exclusive articles, videos, and art, go to gameinformer.com/halo throughout January and February.
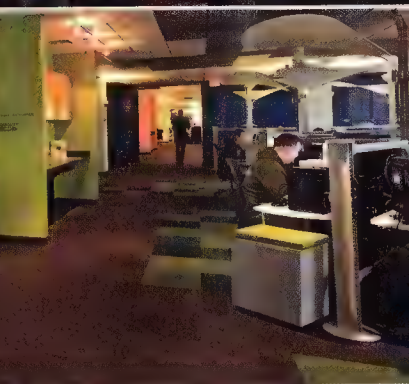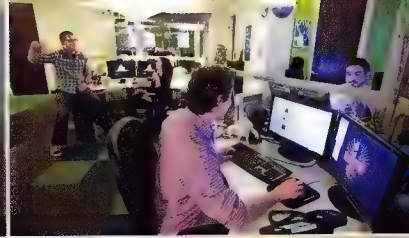
# UNDERSTANDING THE URRAT

# LOCAL

## THE PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE OF IRRATIONAL GAMES

BY JOE JUBA

I walk into a room with dozens of enve-
lopes hanging from the walls and ceiling. ... ne hangs
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... er smile a ... essed in period clothing purpose-
fully moves be ... esks. He scribbles something
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## A FAMILIAR NAME

You probably know them as the creators of BioShock. The landmark title, which released to wide-
spread enthusiasm, turned Irrational Games into a major force on the gaming landscape. While
BioShock is the reason so many gamers are familiar with Irrational today, its success isn't an isolated
lightning strike; the project was the culmination of years of development experience that had already
produced a string of cult hits and established Irrational's reputation for quality and meticulous attention
to detail. Games like System Shock 2 and Freedom Force didn't put up blockbuster sales numbers,
but both were met with critical acclaim.

"The classic Irrational game was 92 percent meta rating with 200,000 sales, which is really depress-
ing," explains Joe McDonagh, director of creative development. "When something like BioShock hap-
pens, people forget what you did before, and it's like 'Wow, BioShock! Where did that come from?
What studio did this?' But I think we're just as proud of all the games we've ever made."

Looking back on Irrational's catalogue, several design tenets run through every title. When viewed
from a distance, these threads become excellent indicators of a consistent design philosophy that
has carried the studio through its creative endeavors. At the heart of each experience is a rich world;
whether it's an entire comic book universe or an underwater utopia, the team at Irrational is skilled at
building fiction and allowing players to engage with it to whatever degree they choose.

Another key component to Irrational's games is narrative. The story isn't always told through
cutscenes, but the surroundings, dialogue, supplementary texts often convey key events that tie
back into and support the underlying fiction. The player stumbling upon the body of Dr. Polito gives
Shodan's words greater power ("The Polito form is dead, insect. Are you afraid?"), and who could
forget "Would you kindly"?

Finally, Irrational Games craves challenge. While it may seem counter-intuitive, the core studio
members don't like taking on a project when all of the goals seem immediately obtainable. "When we
decide not to do a game, I think it's because we look at it and say, 'Yeah, we know exactly how to do
that,'" says creative director Ken Levine. "That's a bad sign. You can end up making the same game,

and we don't ever want to do that."

These philosophical tenets – and the studio's pride in its heritage – are integral to the culture at Irrational Games. This probably left many fans confused when the name changed to 2K Boston only weeks before BioShock's August 2007 release. If the game was, as McDonagh puts it, "the culmination of 10 years of bloody hard work," why was Irrational unable to release it under the identity that had defined the company's entire catalogue?

"We were acquired by Take-Two," says Levine. "They wanted to change the name – they funded the project and believed in it. They funded the dream…. It wasn't my idea to change the name necessarily, but they wanted to do it and I thought 'OK.'"

That was in 2007, and an interesting phenomenon has surfaced in the years since. While Irrational was willing to go along with the name change, members of the gaming community – whether they were aware of it or not – seemed resistant to acknowledge the new identity.

"I don't know if it affected us internally as much." Levine says. "We still came to work, even though the name had changed, and it was still the same place and the same people every day. I think it was made clear to us by our fans and the journalist community that this was something that mattered to people…We heard it a lot from the press and from the fans – '2K Boston, formerly Irrational Games.' I think we realized that there was value and importance there."

In retrospect, this desire to clarify the connection seems natural. Irrational Games had built a reputation over the years, and the name 2K Boston created a barrier between the studio and its legacy – a barrier that no longer exists. BioShock will be the only game released under the 2K Boston label; Irrational Games is back.

### RECONNECTING

Irrational Games' desire to return to its roots manifests in more ways than an old name and a new logo – it is part of a larger effort to reconnect with its heritage and the community. The team wants its fans – new and old – to get a glimpse of the inner workings of the studio and understand the people and personality that Irrational believes forms the core of its identity.

"Studios are like a black box, generally. You don't know what happens," McDonagh observes. "The information is really controlled, and you don't know what it's like to make games. It's actually a lot of fun, and there are some really interesting and different people here. We thought people might like to see what that's like."

Few gamers wouldn't be tempted by the prospect of peeking behind the curtain of Irrational, but the concept has a slight complication: Irrational currently has a game in production that no one is willing to talk about yet. The traditional framework for developers interacting with its community revolves around discussing its latest title, which puts the team members in an interesting position. How can they reestablish a relationship with their fans without breaking their silence on Project Icarus? The answer lies in the relaunch of irrationalgames.com.

Serving as more than an online portal for the upcoming titles, Irrational's new website is the destination for anyone who wants behind-the-scenes info on the games that comprise the studio's history. "Increasingly, game makers have a discussion with the people who play their games," McDonagh says. "You look at the best game makers in the world, like Blizzard and Valve, and they really embrace that. They understand that it's

more than just getting a game, knocking it out, getting it on the shelf, and people buying it. It's a real interaction."

People who visit Irrational's site have likely already been won over; the team believes that if they weren't already fans, they wouldn't be interested. The goal is to provide those fans with unique content that will offer entertainment and insight they can't get anywhere else. The tidbits on these pages are just a taste of the information fans can expect: long-lost stories about bizarre inspirations, concept art for unused characters, as well as frank discussions about things that went wrong.

"The website isn't just about 'buy this game,'" Levine says. "It's about getting people into the process and making them a part of it." A monthly podcast (produced by Shawn Elliott, formerly of 1up.com ) allows the community to become familiar with the people behind Irrational's success; forums give fans and the team a place to share their thoughts, and users are rewarded with badges and achievements for their participation. All of these incentives and regularly updated content is designed to draw in users and encourage them to become contributing members of the community – and it's all available right now at irrationalgames.com.

### GOING DARK

With the outpouring of new information and the studio's heightened profile, even more eyes will be watching Irrational Games in the coming year. But even with all the exclusive details Irrational's website reveals to the public, one subject is still being kept under lock and key: Project Icarus.

Gamers have undoubtedly noticed Irrational's relative silence since the release of BioShock – a very intentional move on the company's part. "We've been dark for a long time, and we're going to be dark on the project we're working on for a little while longer," Levine says. "We appreciate everyone's patience."

While Irrational isn't talking about Icarus in any concrete terms, some facts can still be pieced together. In development since 2007, this mysterious project defines the studio's recent activity and occupies the span of time since BioShock's release. It is also the studio's first project to use a code name – primarily because, according to Levine, "nobody cared that much, so we weren't really worried about it."

With a code name as familiar as Icarus, gamers will certainly try to speculate and draw parallels based on the project's overly ambitious namesake. "I wouldn't necessarily take anything away from the word 'Icarus,'" Levine cautions. Art director Nate Wells chimes in, "Because then we're setting ourselves up for catastrophic failure. Our reach will exceed our grasp and we will fall to the Earth."

"I think what people will take away is that we're not a different company," says Levine. "We're the same company. Perhaps our ambitions grow with each project. Perhaps our confidence grows and we can try things. Maybe we'll fly too close to the sun, maybe we won't. This product – it will come as a complete surprise, and it won't be a surprise at all, in some ways."

Irrational's return to its roots isn't just a stunt to promote a single upcoming game. The notion of staying true to its identity is a philosophy that binds the studio together, and the team intends to adhere to it for all future projects. "My hope is that we continue to get better," Levine says. "That doesn't mean we have a different mission. That mission is still to create these worlds and put people in them and make those worlds believable and take them to a place they can't go in any other medium. That's what I hope the Irrational brand means: 'I want to go to that place.'" ◈

The relaunch of irrationalgames.com gives users inside info and unique content about the studio and its games

### THE BRAIN TRUST

Creating a game requires the contributions of many individuals, but often a single person speaks for the group. Surrounding the release of BioShock, creative director Ken Levine became the mouthpiece for the studio, promoting the game and discussing the development process. While Levine is the most visible member of Irrational, the company has what it calls the "brain trust" – a team of long-time employees responsible for leading the various teams and determining the direction of the developer as a whole. From left to right, the Irrational brain trust is: Joe McDonagh (director of creative development), Ken Levine (president and creative director), Nate Wells (art director), Chris Kline (technical director), Shawn Robertson (lead artist), Scott Sinclair (principal level builder), John Abercrombie (lead programmer), Stephen Alexander (senior effects artist), Bill Gardner (lead designer)

IRRATIONAL GAMES

# THE GAMES





The Freedom Force universe is populated with original superpowered beings with their own backstories



A story-driven Tribes title? It happened, courtesy of Irrational Games

## TRIBES: VENGEANCE (2004)

"Tribes: Vengeance, I think, was our worst game," Levine states frankly. "I don't think we loved or understood the franchise. It's one of those cases where you take a job – because you're a business and you need to take a job – and I don't think we did a great service to the Tribes community."

Irrational was hired to create a single-player, story-based Tribes game. As any fan of the Tribes will tell you, this core concept is incompatible with the spirit of Tribes and what made the games popular. Regardless, that was what publisher Vivendi wanted, and that was what Irrational delivered with Tribes: Vengeance. It wasn't actually a bad game – it was just at odds with the community's expectations.

"You never know how something is going to be received," Wells observes. "Sometimes its easy to misjudge a small but extremely vocal group of superfans."

Levine adds: "In terms of our portfolio, I look at all the other titles and I see where they fit, and I still don't understand really where Tribes fits in."



## FREEDOM FORCE (2002)
## FREEDOM FORCE VS. THE THIRD REICH (2005)

"Freedom Force was originally regarded to X-COM," Levine recalls. "That's what we called it, but we couldn't convince the publisher that turn-based was a viable option." What players got instead of superhero X-COM was a clever real-time tactical role-playing game deeply rooted in the aesthetics of 1960s-era comic books.

"We had this opportunity after System Shock 2 for us to say, What do you guys want to make?'" recalls Levine. "I've always been a huge comic book nerd, and I think that was a really good thing and a really bad thing for the project in some ways, because I think our love for comic books potentially limited our audience."

"Though it was the biggest-selling PC superhero game until City of Heroes," McDonagh adds. It was also arguably the only PC superhero game at the time.

In order to create a convincing universe, Irrational needed an expansive and original comic book universe populated with characters, origin stories, and rivalries. While Levine crafted the fiction, the characters' designs are largely the work of Robb Waters, the company's artist who created nearly 300 heroes and villains for the project.

"It was great to come in and see what Robb had come up with," laughs Robertson. "Some of them are serious, and some you could tell that he was just getting fried so he was making up, like – I remember 'Ant-Human' and that."

With plenty of characters – some more feasible than others – and an established universe, Irrational went forward with another entry in the series. "The second title, Freedom Force vs. The 3rd Reich, we self-published. We paid for it ourselves, got a distribution deal from Vivendi, and it was very disappointing for us," Levine says. "We ended up making our money back – just about – making it because I sold international rights. We learned a lot, but the biggest disappointment is that we didn't get to make any more of them. That was tough, having this thing you love and thinking that you're going to keep making it. We always planned on doing future ones."

The Lost was completely finished before Irrational decided not to release it due to quality concerns
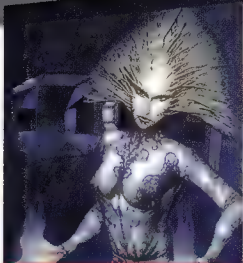
## THE LOST
### (2003) cancelled

Some projects never get off the ground, but games rarely get completed and still fail to see the light of day. The Lost is one of them.

"After we did System Shock 2, we had an idea to do a game which was essentially System Shock 2 but in the nine circles of hell," Levine says. "I always thought Dante's Inferno was a natural setting for a game: nine levels of different monsters, bosses, and there are so many stories to tell about all these people in hell."

The Lost was finished in 2003, but Irrational was unsatisfied with the game's quality and decided that releasing the game and damaging the company's reputation would be worse than absorbing the cost that went into its development. Many of The Lost's shortcomings can be attributed to the ever-constricting technical capabilities tied to the licensed engine, but Irrational is willing to take its share of the blame. "There were two real failings," observes Wells. "One was naiveté; if you look at the early design documents, you'd see how preposterously ambitious they were. But we really didn't know that because of how naïve we were about console development. The other one was just flat-out understaffing. We just didn't have enough people to do a game like this. I think a lot of the core concepts were really great, but we just didn't have enough people to put them into practice."

"We thought, because it was on a console, that it had to be a certain kind of game," Levine says. "That isn't really us. That isn't the kind of game we make. Sadly enough, the after-school message is 'Be Yourself.'"

If it had released, gamers would have seen that The Lost was like a cross between Legend of Zelda and Silent Hill. The main character – a woman named Amanda – would fight off creatures and solve puzzles as she tried to retrieve her daughter Beatrice from the inferno, and the story dealt heavily with themes of loss. While the premise sounds intriguing, the gameplay wasn't up to the studio's standards, and The Lost died on the vine.

Remember Citadel

Search corpse
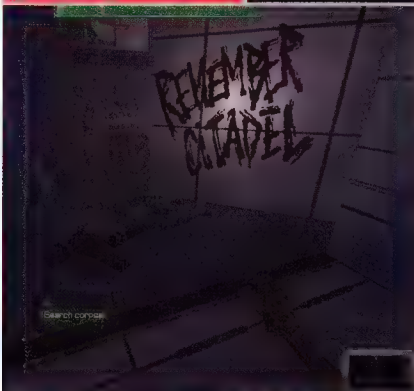
## SYSTEM SHOCK 2 (1999)

The first game Irrational released, System Shock 2, wasn't the first game it started; that honor belongs to a short-lived project intended to be a single-player version of the 1997 multiplayer shooter Fireteam. "That game got cancelled a month after we started the company," says Levine. "We almost went out of business." Thankfully, Irrational secured the System Shock 2 project a month later, and the developer's legacy began.

"When we originally got the job, we said 'What can we do here?'" Levine explains. "We wanted to make a shooter, but we looked at Quake and Duke Nukem, and thought we wouldn't be able to compete with that. That's where the idea to bring the RPG elements into it came from. We were all big RPG nerds, and we had this idea that no one had really done at that point, but it was strictly out of necessity."

Many of Irrational's old-school fans have pointed out that the formula of System Shock 2 – gunplay mixed with special abilities in a dark and atmospheric setting – is repeated in BioShock. This relationship is often referenced to discredit BioShock's quality, as though Irrational wasn't aware that it was borrowing from its previous work. "Well, the 'Shock' is in the name," jokes lead artist Shawn Robertson.

With different settings, atmosphere, and characters, BioShock and System Shock 2 are distinct experiences, though they clearly share a similar framework (and even a story twist or two). "We thought that if you could make it a little more polished and a little more accessible in terms of getting them into the game, why is it not a valid model to have a world-centric RPG shooter?" asks Levine. "We always thought that System Shock 2's lack of success in the marketplace was a function of a lot of things besides the validity of the model."

system shock

# BIOSHOCK (2007)

"BioShock is a game that we always wanted to do," Levine states. "It had many iterations; we did lots of prototypes internally, and there were similarities in the game that existed in all iterations of it. There was always the notion of a plane crash at the beginning. You end up on the equivalent of a desert island, whether that's literally a desert island..."

Wells interrupts: "It was at one point!"

"With Nazis," adds McDonagh.

It took many forms during development, but ultimately the vision for BioShock was the result of a team of creative individuals collaborating and reconciling aesthetics and gameplay. "Once we did the deal with Take-Two and had time to focus, we came upon the notion that this thing would really be aesthetically driven," says Levine. "Nate had done a lot of the cool industrial design like the Big Daddy. Scott started really integrating the deco motifs. Steve did the water... It just occurred to me that it was something no one had really utilized in the video game space before."

Given the background of the team members, BioShock's propensity for visual flair doesn't come as a surprise. "It's about our art first," says principal level builder Scott Sinclair.

Robertson elaborates: "We're a collective of artists, largely, that came from traditional media backgrounds. Most of us went to school together and focused on painting and illustration."

"When BioShock became successful, we were so surprised, because our games have always been based on our weird interests," Levine explains. "Whether it's 1960s comic books or art deco and Objectivism — I mean, what the f—? Seriously? I'm still kind of amazed that it had such a broad appeal."



## THE SEQUEL

Irrational Games is not making BioShock 2. Some gamers want to believe that this has something to do with a grand falling out, or a rift between Ken Levine and the team members who eventually formed the core of BioShock 2 developer 2K Marin. According to Irrational, there is no truth to these rumors; the new studio was a product of business decisions, not personal vendettas.

"It was a little frustrating for us, because it made it appear that there was some kind of situation that there just wasn't," Levine clarifies. "Take-Two had a business need to build a studio, and they wanted to expand development capacity. BioShock 2 wasn't the project for us, and it wasn't like they weren't going to make BioShock 2 — they need to make BioShock 2. So we chose five people...for us, it was important that the people who had been with us for a long time – that we protected that group of people so we could have our core here. They needed a person who could lead that group creatively, and I think Jordan [Thomas] is definitely the guy that can do that...Jordan is a real talent."
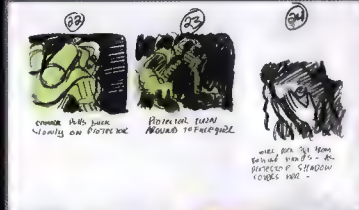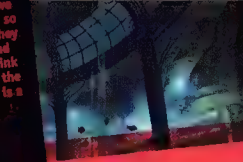



Facing melee-focused brute, but the team decided to axe the character because it just wasn't any fun to fight.
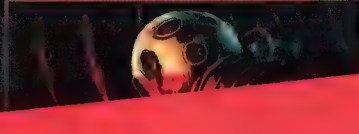

Cover lineup
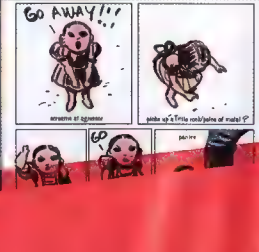
# SWAT 4 (2004)

A squad-based real-world shooter may sound like it falls into the same category as The Lost – a genre outside Irrational's typical purview. However, with the opportunity to tell a story through the derelict environments and allow players to explore the world, the team views SWAT 4 as a success story that ultimately paved the way for BioShock.

"The art bible for SWAT was one whiteboard drawing with three bullet points," says technical director Chris Kline. "Everyone in the world is miserable, the spaces they occupy are uncomfortable, and the world is universally too bright or too dark."

By creating a version of reality that swung to extremes, the team developed skills and knowledge that would eventually create the world of Rapture. SWAT 4 was more than just a training ground for later success, though.

"SWAT holds a special place in my heart because it was kind of the last stand of garage development – here, anyway," says lead designer Bill Gardner. "I remember the kind of stuff I could never get away with on BioShock, like literally making last-minute changes. On BioShock there was this huge approvals process. With SWAT, it was just a bunch of dudes in an office."

"It was a product that prepared us and honed our skills, because the product we had done before had really almost killed the team," Levine admits. "This saved us and put us together and made us ready."

# DIVISION 9 (UNRELEASED)

During the final phases of SWAT 4, Vivendi approached Irrational about continuing the series with SWAT 5. "I looked around and thought 'What else have we got to say about this game?'" says Levine. "We didn't really have anything else to add to what we did. But I wanted the money really badly."

In an effort to land the deal while still creating a game that would challenge the studio, a bizarre proposal became the prime contender for Irrational's vision of SWAT 5. "Nate and I were toying around with a pitch for a game called The Infected, which we brought to Ken, and we basically had the idea to turn it into Zombie SWAT," lead artist Shawn Robertson remembers. "Vivendi was like, 'What's your pitch for SWAT 5?' 'Zombie SWAT.' Crickets."

After creating a convincing demo and changing the game's name to Division 9, Vivendi was actually ready to buy in. However, the studio's acquisition by Take-Two ultimately put the brakes on the project. If it had released, gamers would have experienced several concepts in Division 9 that would eventually form the core of Left 4 Dead; it was a first-person squad-based shooter about a small group of survivors fighting through the zombie apocalypse. A never-ending wave of undead made the world dangerous, and players would venture outside of their bases to gather resources and rescue other survivors. "The real innovation was the concept that the zombies never stop," says Wells. "The zombies are infinite. And now, just a few years later, there are plenty of games that treat zombies that way."

"Before there was Left 4 Dead, I remember going around pitching [Division 9] and the person would be 'Zombies? Who wants to play a zombie game?' Levine laughs. McDonagh adds, "Someone said to me, 'We don't think zombies will be big in 2005.'"




In many ways, creating SWAT 4 prepared the team at Irrational to undertake the ambitious BioShock

SWAT 4 SWAT Virtual Design

SWAT 4 Convenience Store


Division 9 was Left 4 Dead before there was Left 4 Dead

THE GAMES

THIRD ECHELON

# TOM CLANCY'S
# SPLINTER CELL
## CONVICTION

Sam Fisher's life will never be simple. Years after retiring from the military to a life of wandering solitude, he finds himself hounded by government agents begging for his expertise, hunted by terrorists who fear what he can do, and haunted by the knowledge that his daughter's death might not have been an accident. A game this big has a lot of moving pieces — just the first five hours reveal is a rollercoaster ride of government cover-ups, assassination plots, black-market weapons dealers, mysterious phone calls, stolen weapons of mass destruction, and back alley interrogations. Sam's journey to discover the truth amidst this chaos will force him to rely on people he no longer trusts, bend the boundaries of the law, and question his every conviction.

SAM FISHER

# A SHADOW IN THE DARK

## EXPLORING THE FIRST FIVE HOURS OF
## UBISOFT MONTREAL'S STEALTH/ACTION REBOOT

BY BEN REEVES

## SNEAKING THROUGH SPLINTER CELL'S SINGLE-PLAYER

Those who played the last few Splinter Cell titles know Ubisoft hasn't been kind to its stealthy hero. In 2006's Double Agent we learned that Sam's daughter – and only remaining family member – was tragically killed in a car accident. Grief-stricken, Sam joined a covert military op, was publicly labeled a terrorist, and was ultimately forced to kill one of his few remaining friends, Colonel Irving Lambert. Afterwards, Sam left the country he'd felt betrayed by to aimlessly wander the Earth.

Conviction finds Sam on the Mediterranean island of Malta as he receives an unexpected call from an old colleague looking for help. Anna Grimsdóttír (A.K.A. Grim) is the technical operations manager for Sam's old boss, Third Echelon. She tells Sam that she's uncovered a plot that threatens the president of the United States, and she wants his help investigating a private military contractor called Black Arrow. To catch Sam's interest, Grim tells him that his daughter's death wasn't an accident. She's willing to help him uncover the truth, but he needs to scratch her back in return.

Motivated by revenge, Sam gets involved in this global conspiracy, but he doesn't trust Grim. It's not altogether clear who she really works for, so he might not always do what she wants. "Because he's not working for the government, it's like he makes his own rules," Conviction's creative director Max Beland tells us. "That allowed us to change the game's rules a little bit. If you're seen, it's not game over. It's okay to leave traces of your presence – to leave bodies behind."

The bodies began to pile up before we've even reached our first destination – a mansion belonging to a local arms dealer, Andre Kobin. Sam sneaks up and approaches enemies through the shadows, and Ubisoft Montreal has devised some clever stealth systems to help players stay hidden. Conviction uses a cover system similar to Rainbow Six Vegas, in which Sam snaps to the nearest piece of cover the second you press the left trigger (it's probably not a coincidence that Vegas was Beland's last game). Sam's movements have real weight; he rolls, dives, and slides between cover points with the ease and grace of a ninja. To signify that he's in cover, the screen dims to a black and white hue every time Sam is hidden from enemy sight. With all of these systems working together,
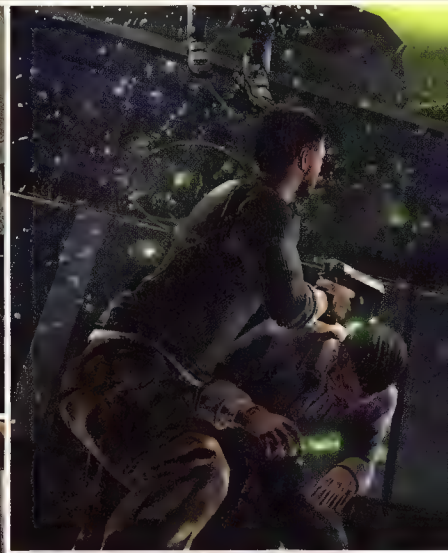






Sam can jump on enemies from above, and when he does he earns a mark and execute

sticking to the shadows and sneaking up behind your opponents is as frustration-free as possible.

The game's new mark and execute system is the reward for all your shadow stalking. As demonstrated at E3, every time Sam initiates a close-quarters kill he earns the ability to perform a mark and execute maneuver. At the start of the game, Sam can mark up to two targets. Then, with the touch of a button, he'll automatically execute the unsuspecting baddies. This system's versatility is impressive. At one point, we come across a control booth housing three armed guards. We don't have any mark and executes saved up, but after climbing a pipe and looking through the room's glass ceiling, we formulate a plan. We mark two of the guards ahead of time, then

crash through the ceiling and land on the third. Using that third guard's skull to cushion our fall awards us an execution, which we immediately use on the two targets we'd marked earlier. By the time the glass ceiling finishes showering to the floor, all three of our targets are dead.

This section of the game could be approached any number of ways, as Conviction's levels are set up to encourage players to find creative ways to utilize the mark and execute feature. Covert operatives who explore their surroundings and plan their attacks will be rewarded with some truly spectacular action sequences.

Every mission in Conviction is designed around a different theme. In one level we sneak across an airfield planting C4. In

another, we climb across the architecture of a scientific research facility spying on scientists. One of the last missions we play has us meeting an old Navy S.E.A.L. contact in the middle of a county fair. As we approach the meeting point, however, we realize that three men in suits are following our friend. Only after sneaking up behind them, dragging them into the shadows, and repeatedly smashing their faces into hard objects did they divulge the name of their employer.

If the first five hours of the game are any indication, Splinter Cell: Conviction is going to be a wild ride, leaving players unsure of what to expect next.

The goal of Conviction is to deliver a game in one single shot. You shouldn't see any loading screens while playing, and cutscenes help string together a seamless narrative


MOVE COVER TO COVER
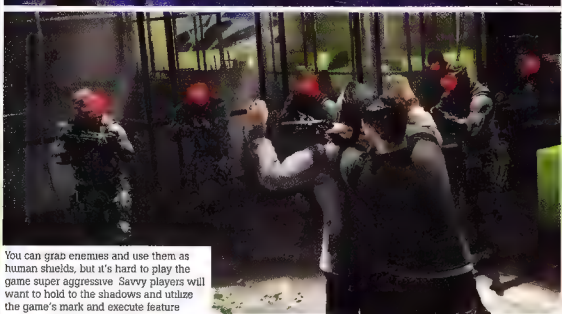

You can grab enemies and use them as human shields, but it's hard to play the game super aggressive. Savvy players will want to hold to the shadows and utilize the game's mark and execute feature
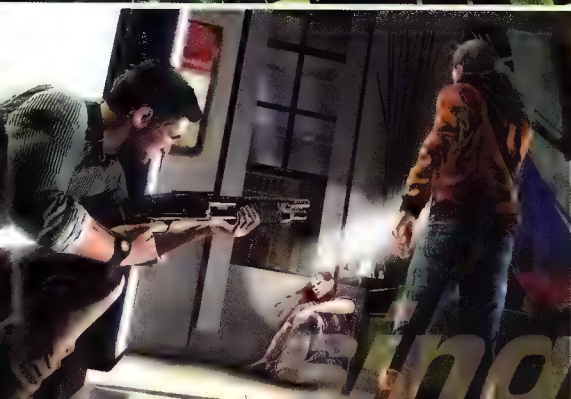
# TAG TEAMING CONVICTION'S CO-OP CAMPAIGN



**S**am Fisher's quest to discover the truth about his daughter might be the game's main draw, but it doesn't tell Conviction's full story. "Part of the plot of the single-player is about four EMP bombs that threaten to blow up Washington," says creative director Max Beland. "Co-op is about how those EMPs came to the U.S." Players who play this six-hour, four-mission campaign step into the shoes of a Third Echelon agent named Archer and his Russian counterpart, a man by the name of Kestrel. Their hunt for the WMDs sends them across the globe to places like Saint Petersburg Square and the U.S. Russian Embassy.

We pick up the game as the duo is on the trail of a man named Major Rebko. Rumors within the Russian black market hint that the Major knows the whereabouts of our four EMP weapons. We track Rebko to a place called the Yastreb Complex – a web of abandoned subway tunnels buried under the Red Square. As we make our way past the rusting subway cars, we see the flashlights of Rebko's armed guards coming down the tunnel, preparing to smoke us out.

Our mission gets off to a rough start. As we come around an old subway car, an enemy grabs us from behind and starts using us as a human shield. Our partner could try to shoot our capturer, but since many of our vital organs are in the way, it's a dangerous proposition. Just because we are caught in a chokehold doesn't mean we are useless. We elbow our captor in the ribs, causing him to stagger back and become momentarily exposed. This gives our partner the opportunity he needs to take the target out. It isn't the smoothest introduction to Conviction's co-op campaign, but the events emphasize the importance of coordinating actions with your partner. If players want to make it through Conviction's co-op campaign, they'll have to stay in constant communication with their teammate.

Every combat skill Sam shows off in Conviction's single player is available to Archer and Kestrel in co-op. More importantly, these two operatives can use these techniques in new
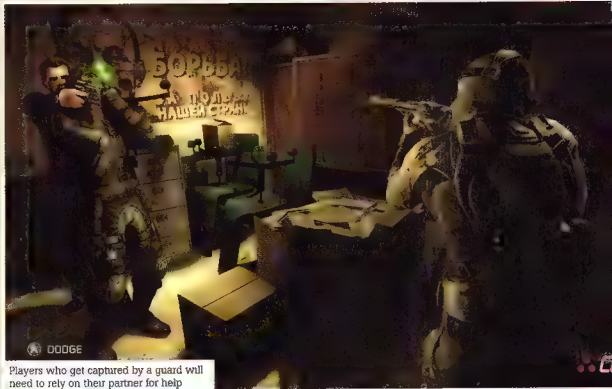


Players who get captured by a guard will need to rely on their partner for help

Who needs good cop, bad cop when you have two bad cops? Players will take turns torturing their target during Conviction's co-op interrogations



74

Splinter Cell's longstanding Spies vs. Mercenaries mode unfortunately won't be returning for Conviction, but the game's co-op mode won't be the only reason you'll want to hop online.

- ► **Hunter** – Two players team up to take out all the AI enemies placed across a map.
- ► **Infiltration** – Similar to Hunter, however now players are required to take out all their targets using stealth tactics.
- ► **Last Stand** – Similar to popular modes like Gears of War's Horde or Halo's Firefight, one EMP bomb is placed in the middle of a map and two partners join forces to protect it from the onslaught of an army of AI bots.
- ► **Face Off** – Two players and a collection of AI bots set on each other in this free-for-all. Savvy players will learn to use the AI enemies as bait for the other human player.

In co-op, you'll be able to lure guards into traps where your ally is waiting to strike
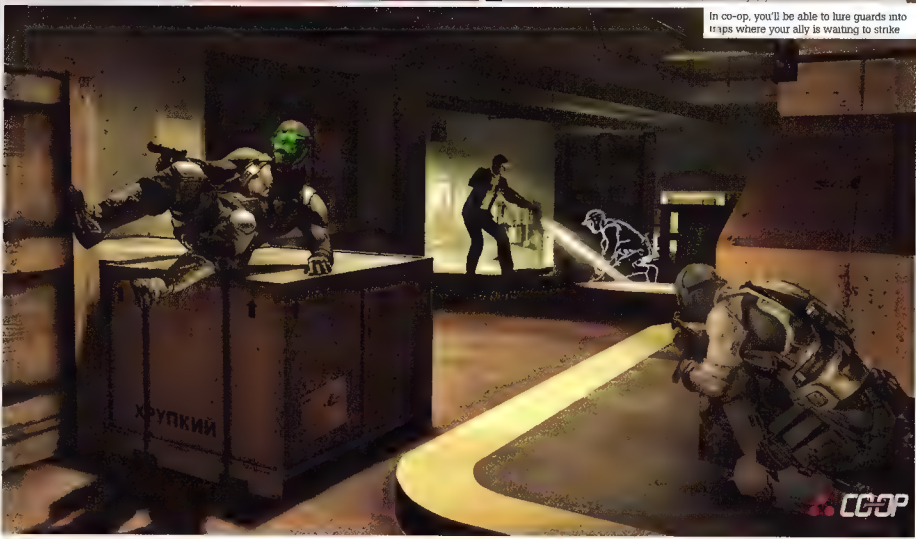
and creative ways. After breaching one of the subway walls, we discover that Rebko is holed up in an old WWII bunker being guarded by a dozen armed men. We decide to divide and conquer. After climbing a pipe and crawling through some of the building's ceiling tiles, we use a pair of sonic goggles that allow us to see through the complex's walls. Since Archer and Kestrel can share each other's mark and executes, we shout out enemy positions and mark targets while our partner weaves through the rooms below, executing targets at his discretion. These events aren't scripted; players can get through this bunker however they choose, climbing into the rafters together or avoiding the high road completely.

When we reach the final room of the complex, things get a little hairy. A firefight erupts, and our partner takes a few bullets. When your partner is downed, you have a limited amount of time to run over and resurrect the fallen teammate. Meanwhile, the downed comrade can either play dead or prop himself up on one elbow to help clear a path for his partner. Sometimes playing dead is the best option; if you are surrounded by five guards who will open fire on you the second you turn off the safety, it's probably best to keep your face glued to the floor until help arrives. On the other hand, if your partner is a little too eager and

gets grabbed by an enemy on his way to your position, you'll have to pop up and help out your buddy before he can return the favor.

Lone wolf glory tactics won't get you very far in Conviction's co-op campaign. The enemies are too skilled, and the missions are not forgiving enough for players to ignore one another's needs. Partners who fail to share their strategies will find themselves fighting an uphill battle. However, teammates who lean on each other's skills and talents will likely find that they are also sharing one of the most rewarding co-op experiences of 2010. ◈

Rumours. If you're looking for more of a narrative framework to the action, it's there for the taking
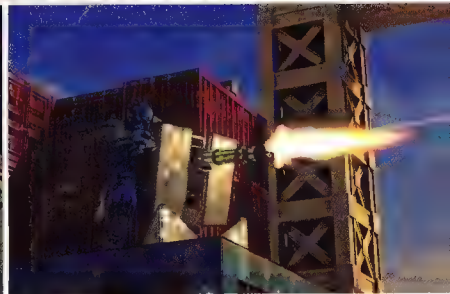




## An Agent's Arsenal

As a reward for unfaltering obedience, the Agency provides its field operatives with new firearms and vehicles. Since Crackdown 2 retains the original's freeform gameplay, your gadget loadout can dictate your gameplay experience. Crackdown 2 producer James Cope shares some of the tools of the trade, illustrating the tools Agents can use to take back Pacific City and eradicate the Freak infection

### The Buggy

"The Agency Buggy is an evolution of the original Agency prototype, and therefore shares very similar characteristics: fast, incredibly agile, superb air control — and in comparison to the SUV, incredibly compact. These traits give the Buggy unparalleled acceleration and great off-road capabilities. This is the ideal vehicle for hit and run raids in Pacific City's more secluded areas."

### The Truck

"Necessity is the mother of invention. The Cell, with their very existence threatened and crippled with limited resources, had to devise methods to protect themselves. The Volk's demise left a number of heavy duty trucks scattered around Pacific City. The Cell realized the truck's haulage potential could be used to carry armour and turreted weaponry. Thus The Cell's primary armoured vehicle was conceived."

### The Supercar

"The Agency detailed a simple brief: Create a high speed interception vehicle with minimum resources. The Mk. II Supercar was born. Borrowing from classic sports car design and utilizing composite materials throughout the body, chassis, transmission, and engine, the Mk. II offers unrivalled acceleration, control, protection, and speed for a vehicle of its compact size and is able to scoop vehicles into the air so nothing gets in the way."

# Crackdown 2

## Ruffian details the pillars of play – the Agency, the Cell, and the Freaks

Ruffian Games, the inheritor of the Crackdown series, is staying tight-lipped when it comes to new details about its pet project. In a recent interview following up on our October cover story, the team was hesitant to reveal too many concrete gameplay details. We did, however, learn some interesting tidbits about the dynamic between the three factions in Crackdown 2 – the Agency, the Cell, and the Freaks.

Unlike the first Crackdown, where various gangs formed a singular pool of waste for you to dispose of, the relationship between these three groups inherently changes the way you play. Progression isn't about killing kingpins by carving a path through underlings anymore; you can act as a saboteur, setting events in motion that will do the dirty work for you. Of course, you can still kick down the door with guns blazing if you prefer.

Considering that the Agency ultimately sought to suppress freedom for the sake of order, Ruffian Games initially described the organization's main foe – the Cell – in a fairly sympathetic light. They are survivors of a terrible outbreak – how can players reconcile mowing down civilians fighting for their lives? It turns out the Cell isn't quite as innocent as we were led to believe.

"They are the bad guys – they are the ones that attacked the Agency throughout the 10 years that spanned between Crackdown and Crackdown 2," clarifies lead designer Billy Thomson. "It pretty much comes down to them as to how the Freak virus got out of control. The

Agency had measures put in place to keep the virus in certain areas, but the Cell stopped that by taking out the Agent program. The Cell is responsible for everything." Of course, the Cell is still fighting against the iron-fisted totalitarian control of the Agency, so there still could be some shades of gray to their motives.

The Cell wiped out the Agent program, including every living Agent and the technology used to create them. At the beginning of Crackdown 2, the Agency relaunches the program, and you are one of the first off the production line. Your directive? Reclaiming the city from the Cell.

While Ruffian is still staying quiet on the exact formula to cleaning up Pacific City, we do know that taking down Cell strongholds is key to the Agency's progression. These strongholds are placed at strategic locations on the map, and overrunning the bases will dish out major advantages to players once secured. Taking control of all the tactical locations within a Cell stronghold – and protecting them long enough to capture it – transforms the stronghold into an Agency supply point. Here the Agency can drop off choppers, store vehicles, and stockpile weapons, giving players access to their resources at any time.

You'll need those resources when night falls. What little we do know about Crackdown 2's endgame is that the ultimate goal is to eradicate the Freaks and the virus that caused them. The Freaks' overwhelming numbers have ravaged the civilian population, leaving the innocent populace to scavenge for resources during the

day and go into hiding at dusk. At night the city is overrun with mutated beings. While Ruffian admits the Freaks amount to little more than gun fodder, they still pose a threat. A diverse group, some Freaks are as agile as Agents and can bound across building, while others use their hulking size and strength to pick up objects and use them for weapons. It's up to you to decide how to dispose of them.

"We don't say you have to cut their limbs off or you have to shoot them in the head to kill them," explained producer James Cope. "We don't work like that. For us it's like, 'Here are these people, or these Freaks rather, and it's up to you to figure out how you want to take out them out.'"

When night falls, players can choose to ignore Crackdown's key objectives and instead massacre wave after wave of infected, inspiring creativity in carnage. Here is where the dynamic nature of play really shines. Unable to withstand UV light, Freaks remain nocturnal creatures. UV spotlights halt an onslaught of Freaks from infiltrating Cell strongholds. So do you divide and conquer? Go after the Cell during the day and Freak population at night? Or do you work behind the scenes, taking out the Cell's defenses and pitting the factions against each other as a result? Pacific City is your playground, and its inhabitants your pawns. **» Meagan VanBurkleo**

*Read the full interview with Ruffian's James Cope and Billy Thomson at gameinformer.com/mag*

### The Rocket Launcher

"The Watson HE120 is the pinnacle of rocket launcher technology. Its predecessor, the Watson HE99-X Firefly, was used to great effect in the Great Gang War of Pacific City by both the Shai-Gen Corporation and the Agency. This proven technology was used as a basis for the HE120, with the inclusion of an eight chamber rotary feed mechanism and Watson's improved auto targeting system. This formidable weapon can fire all eight high-explosive, shaped charge rounds at static or moving targets in just under 10 seconds."
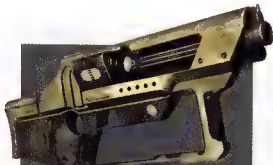
### The UV Shotgun

"Standard caliber projectile weapons just didn't have the stopping power required for Freaks. The Agency looked to its scientists, and they did not disappoint; the UV shotgun was born. It uses an electromagnetic burst to project a massive shockwave. This shockwave rips Freaks apart at the molecular level, yet not humans. However, the kinetic energy produced definitely has side effects."

### The Turreted Minigun

"The Agency, realizing the need for heavy ordinance to combat the Freak menace, commissioned their weapon designers to devise a heavy ordinance platform that anyone could use. Their solution was ingenious; a turreted weapon system. This allowed Agents to have the same heavy weaponry that allowed peacekeepers to use it turreted: The Mini-Gun being the most powerful of them all. It's slightly unfortunate that The Cell managed to steal the technology and appropriate it into their own arsenal. Agents beware."

# Spec Ops: The Line

2K Games takes a moribund franchise in a bold new direction

The Spec Ops franchise isn't known for quality. After a string of poorly received games in the late '90s and early aughts, the tactical shooter went into hibernation. Buoyed by the success of its narrative-driven shooter BioShock, 2K Games has tapped relative unknown developer Yager to raise the franchise from the ashes and bring Spec Ops back into the ultracompetitive military shooter arena.

Before you write off Spec Ops as another half-assed budget shooter, lead designer Cory Davis is quick to point out that "some of the greatest games each year come from unlikely sources. For example, Rocksteady Studios, the developers of Batman: Arkham Asylum, hadn't shipped a game since last-gen either and still created one of the best games in 2009. Cases like that, of course, are an inspiration to us."

In development since 2007, Spec Ops: The Line takes many thematic cues from the famed Joseph Conrad novella *Heart of Darkness* and the Francis Ford Coppola Vietnam adaptation *Apocalypse Now*. A series of catastrophic sand-storms have decimated the once-extravagant desert city of Dubai, leading to a citywide evacu-ation. But not everyone left the city before the storm. Colonel John Konrad, a founding member of Delta Force, refused orders to abandon his training post in Dubai, and it's Captain Martin Walker's job to find the elusive and charismatic soldier in the chaotic aftermath.

With half the luxurious city buried in sand, Yager gives players an intriguing world to explore. "The fantastic real-world architecture found in Dubai presents us with an amazing vari-ety of spaces to support the unique combat style as well as the narrative of The Line," says Davis. "From massively vertical skyscraper combat, to opulent, entombed interiors, to wide-open desert spaces and vistas, there are a great variety of locations within this setting." Oppressive sand-storms will sometimes rob players of visibility and gun accuracy, contributing to the dire mood that runs throughout the experience.

As Captain Walker, players lead a small squad of soldiers through the deserted city, coming across packs of helpless refugees and hostile enemy forces as they try to locate Konrad. Like the tactical games Ghost Recon and Rainbow Six, players can order their squad to attack, regroup, or perform contextual actions. "We want the player to feel like the captain of an elite team that responds expertly to orders but doesn't need to be micromanaged either," Davis explains. With Yager relying on the narrative to carry the gamer though the experience, these won't just be faceless grunts, either. "Your rela-tionship with the squad will evolve as the events of the game play out, which you'll notice through how your squad mates' responses to your com-mands start to differ over time," Davis remarks.

Spec Ops' unique setting and the narrative's uneasy sense of foreboding go a long way to removing the stink of the series' checkered past. Time will tell if the gameplay can rise to the chal-lenge as well. » Matt Bertz

*Read our extended interview with Spec Ops lead designer Cory Davis at www.gameinformer.com/mag*

## Bury Your Troubles in The Sand

Bullets aren't the only way to eliminate the hostiles in the ruins of Dubai. When engaged in a firefight in one of the many buried glass structures throughout the city, quick thinking players can bury opposing forces in thousands of tons of sand with a few well placed bullets into the stressed glass panes.
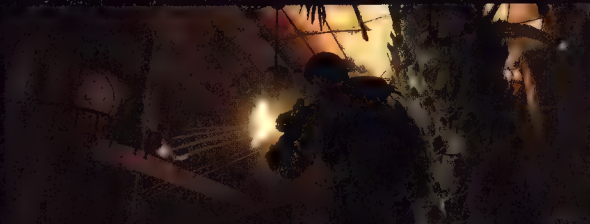
Boy Scouts take note — some senior patrol leaders don't take kindly to hanging the flag upside down

Finally a video game that realizes our desire to watch dudes shoot other dudes

## The Line of Mediocrity

2K Games hopes The Line can break the trend of poorly performing Spec Ops titles. The critical reception was so poor no major gaming press outlet even bothered reviewing the last game in the series

| GAME | YEAR | PLATFORM | GAMERANKINGS SCORE |
|---|---|---|---|
| Spec Ops: Rangers Lead The Way | 1998 | PC | 76.50 |
| Spec Ops: Ranger Team Bravo | 1998 | PC | 59.25 |
| Spec Ops 2: Green Berets | 1999 | PC | 52.75 |
| Spec Ops: Stealth Patrol | 2000 | PlayStation | 45.13 |
| Spec Ops II: Omega Squad | 2000 | Dreamcast | 48.67 |
| Spec Ops: Ranger Elite | 2001 | PlayStation | 51.95 |
| Spec Ops: Airborne Commando | 2002 | PlayStation | N/A |
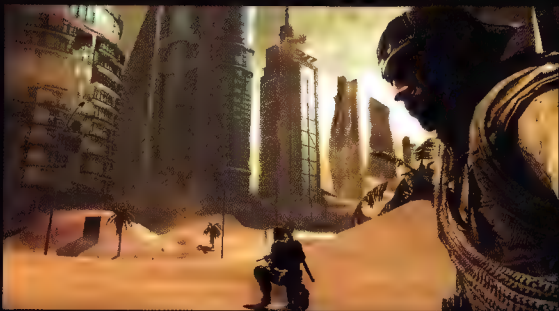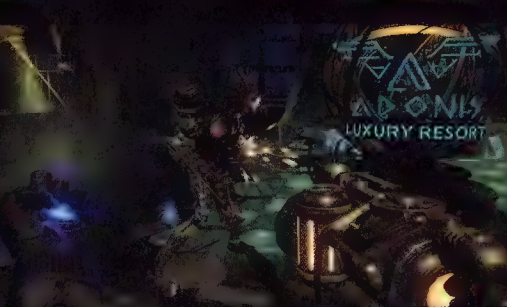
# BioShock 2

Latest visit to Rapture reveals bountiful change in gameplay

BioShock 2 puts us in the diving suit of Subject Delta, the original Big Daddy, who has been awakened after 10 years of unconsciousness. The only clue to his identity is a delta symbol branded on his left glove. Rapture's new leader, Dr. Sofia Lamb, has caught wind of Delta's presence and will stop at nothing to keep this Big Daddy from interfering with Rapture's rebirth. While skeptics worry BioShock 2 will be more of the same, we picked up on a few notable gameplay changes during our latest visit to Rapture.

### Walk On The Water Side
One of Lamb's dirty tricks involves flooding your current location to hinder your progress. Pipes rapidly burst across the level, eventually causing surrounding windows to shatter under pressure and turning the area into a fish tank. In these moments the HUD disappears and you're immune to harm since the helpless Splicers drown. As you walk among the floating corpses you have a chance to loot them. Other sections of the game allow you to explore the ocean floor, where you can look into the windows of Rapture to watch a Big Daddy ripping Splicers to shreds. You may even venture past a few sharks and a school of fish during your underwater adventures.

### More Sources Of Adam
While extracting Adam from Little Sisters is still an option in BioShock 2, there are now more ways to collect the precious material. Look carefully and you'll find Adam slugs stuck to various surfaces of the ocean floor. Simply pick them up for a small dose. Another small hit of

Adam can be extracted from Big Sisters (yes, there is more than one!). After clearing all Little Sisters from a level, a Big Sister arrives as the last line of defense for Rapture's Adam supply. Once a Big Sister is defeated, you can loot the twiggy, mechanical corpse for the slug. Every bit counts.

### Face-To-Face Interactions
BioShock 2 gives players the opportunity to meet the characters who constantly bark orders over the radio. The first we came across was mother goose herself, Bridgette Tenenbaum. She returns to Rapture because she suspects the disappearance of children along the Atlantic means someone may be attempting to continue the research she regretfully started. She needs your help to stop it. Tenenbaum turned us over to businessman extraordinaire Augustus Sinclair, who serves as Delta's guide through the initial levels just as "Atlas" was to Jack. Our third interaction involved a new non-spliced character, Grace Holloway, a jazz performer blacklisted during Ryan's reign for singing against him. She holds an override key and a grudge against Delta. The way to get the key needed to progress is up to us: we could either kill her or let her live. Our decision here went on to affect the remainder of our playthrough. We won't spoil it, but this is one of a multitude of choices with consequences you have make in the sequel.

### Tougher Enemies, Better AI
You've already heard about the new baddies of Rapture – Big Sister, Rumbler Big Daddy and Brute Splicer. But what about the underwater city's previous inhabitants? The AI has signifi-

cantly improved, making these Splicers faster, stronger, and smarter than before. The new, larger levels often span multiple floors, giving Splicers plenty of cover, which they put to good use. Thuggish and Leadhead Splicers attack in droves, while Spider Splicers throw blades in rapid succession as they scurry in and out of surrounding vents. Now that more levels span multiple floors, Splicers attack from all directions so it's crucial to make good use of the Hack Tool to get your surroundings to work in your favor.

### New Toys
The most satisfying new tool is the Spear Gun that allows you to impale Splicers. Aim it properly and it will pin your opponent against a wall. You can then approach the Splicer as it hangs and reclaim your bloodied spear for later use. We also experimented with Power to the People machines for weapon upgrades, which provide more than just a power boost. Multiple shots from our fully upgraded Rivet Gun caused Splicers to burst into flames. To damage Splicers further, the Research Camera is back and enhanced with video recording capabilities. Start rolling the camera, then quickly fire weapons and Plasmids to study the foes' attacks and earn research points. To continue researching an already recorded foe, you'll need to come up with a different plan of attack to get proper credit. Fully researched enemies earn the player useful new abilities like the signature Drill Dash, which delivers a powerful melee blast.
» **Annette Gonzalez**

*For an extensive hands-on preview for single- and multiplayer, head over to gameinformer.com/mag*

# Heavy Rain

## Quantic Dream further unravels its haunting and intriguing murder mystery

Back at E3 2006, one of the highlights of the PlayStation booth was an early tech demo showcasing an actress auditioning for a role. Her realistic facial animations nearly crossed over the Uncanny Valley, and this brief look made it clear that there was some serious hardware behind Sony's console. However impressive the demo, it didn't shed a lot of light on what kind of game Heavy Rain would be. Over three years later, I've played several of the opening chapters and still don't know exactly how to describe it. Within standard game definitions, it probably fits in the adventure genre, but it plays much more like an interactive movie. Not in the "Uncharted 2 feels like playing an Indiana Jones movie!" kind of way. Rather, Heavy Rain feels like a mixture of serious drama à la *American Beauty* and a murder mystery.

The game starts with a lot of routine day-to-day activities. Waking up in the morning as architect Ethan Mars, players do everything from brushing his teeth using Sixaxis motion to eating grapes while talking to his wife (God of War this is not). Those who enjoyed the large variety of these activities in games like Shenmue are sure to have a great time exploring the different actions your characters can perform. These seemingly menial activities aren't gimmicks; they help in getting you into the shoes of the characters. You don't play as a demon hunter or the last hope for humanity...you're an architect and private investigator, amongst others.

These small actions make a noticeable difference in your experience. When Ethan is watching his kid, you can play with him, feed him, encourage him to do homework, or you can do what I did...creepily sit in a dark corner and drink beer. If you'd rather feel like a competent parent, you can feed him dinner and tuck him into bed. If being a neglectful father is more your thing, you're free to shoot hoops in the rain while your son has to pull a chair up to the cupboard to grab a bag of chips for dinner.

Simultaneously intriguing and depressing, the beginning of Heavy Rain's story is centered around the crimes of the Origami Killer as they affect the lives of several playable characters. Little is given away about his identity early on, but we do learn that the killer's calling card is an orchid and origami swan left on the victim's body. Playing as investigator Norman Jayden, you'll slowly comb over the scene of one of his crimes looking for footprints and blood splatter. Whereas the Ethan segments feel like a simulator of suburban life (at least early on), this Norman chapter feels more like a scene from *Dexter*. The game does a great job of transitioning between the grief and depression-filled Ethan levels to the calculated and mathematical murder investigations.

One aspect of the game that takes getting used to is its unique control scheme. Rather than simply pushing the analog stick in the direction you want to walk, you have to hold the R2 button to move forward and then select your direction with the stick. It's an odd movement method, and even after a couple hours of playing I still found myself missing doorways and walking in unintended directions. Like the original Resident Evil's "tank controls," Heavy Rain's control scheme will likely receive many love-it-or-hate-it reactions from gamers. Since you're not dodging harpies or landing Muay Thai combos in this game, it may not turn out to be too much of an issue.

Considering the public's first look at the game was a tech demo three years ago, Heavy Rain has done a great job of staying visually stunning over three years later. Load screens feature extreme close-ups of faces, and the level of detail is amazing (and borderline creepy at times). In-game animations and backgrounds are incredibly realistic, whether you're playing in the backyard with your kids or investigating a murder in a prostitute's seedy hotel room. Each area fits the mood of the chapter, from the initial cheery

suburban life of Ethan to the grim and bloody crime scenes later on.

Heavy Rain probably won't be a game for everyone. ADD-riddled gamers who only play constant-action experiences like Halo multiplayer or Grand Theft Auto probably won't get into the slow pacing and depressing nature of Quantic Dream's newest title. For those who love the idea of interacting with a well-written and intriguing murder mystery, Heavy Rain looks to be in a league of its own in terms of presentation and atmosphere. » Dan Ryckert

1 bomber


Air support plays a huge role in both recon and combat


The focus on macro-level strategic planning minimizes RTS gamepad control's shortcomings

# R.U.S.E.

## A new take on console real-time strategy shows promise

First impressions can be misleading. Never mind the stupid name, the mediocre presentation, and the bad E3 showing. Spending some time messing around with this World War II real-time strategy title's skirmish mode made it clear to me that there is something worth paying attention to here. R.U.S.E. is a more conventional RTS than was apparent at first glance, but the particulars of its design are interesting.

Roads are critical in R.U.S.E. Buildings can only be placed along them, supplies flow down them, and many units travel faster on pavement. This gives huge advantages to players who control intersections and chokepoints along the road network. Map features like cities, forests, and hills play large roles as well, giving bonuses to defense, concealment, or scouting. Planning your strategies around the terrain is much more of a part of R.U.S.E. than any other mainstream RTS.

The scale of the maps emphasizes high-level thinking and intelligence gathering. Knowing what your enemy is up to allows you to effectively counter their strategy via the game's strong rock-paper-scissors model (AT guns blow up tanks, which wreck infantry, which stomp on AT guns). Obtaining accurate information is the tricky part.

The diverse toolbox for both scouting and counter-intelligence make the recon game more than a sideshow. By default, you get a general idea of what your opponent is doing via basic markers on the map showing his forces. This is where the Ruse powers come into play. Deploying camouflage netting will disguise your buildings from anything but direct line-of-sight recon for a time, while enforcing radio silence does the same for your troops. On the flip side, you can temporarily deploy spies or decrypt enemy communications to get a more detailed picture of what's going on.

Ruses allow the execution of complex, rewarding strategies beyond what you typically see in an RTS. For starters, consider this. You could feint an assault on an outlying supply depot with Decoy Troops, use a combination of Blitz and Radio Silence to sneak in a group of light tanks to toast the enemy's rear supply lines, and drop Camouflage Nets to stealthily set up a


Spending the extra resources to develop prototypes like these rockets can be a game-changer

forward factory position while the opposition is distracted. You only have a handful of Ruse activations available, though, which are replenished at a rate of one per minute. If you can survive on the receiving end of something like the above, your enemy's Ruse supply will be empty and you'll have the upper hand.

Pulling off much in the way of small-scale tactical maneuvers isn't going to happen with the questionable pathing and unit AI here, but that's not what the game is about. The illusion of controlling an entire battlefront rather than a tiny slice of a larger conflict is remarkable. Dismissing R.U.S.E. on account of its shortcomings does a grave disservice to the genuine gameplay innovation present » **Adam Biessener**

# Shin Megami Tensei: Strange Journey

## Atlus journeys back to its RPG roots

After six years of building the Shin Megami Tensei brand with popular spin-offs in the Persona and Devil Summoner lines, Atlus is returning to the SMT series proper with Strange Journey. Despite being heralded as a return to the series' roots, though, Strange Journey moves this hardcore RPG staple in a surprising new direction.

The first move you'll notice is physical: Strange Journey doesn't take place in Tokyo, nor in Japan at all. Instead, it begins with a cutscene showing four large vehicles journeying into the Antarctic. Your character is aboard one of the vehicles, the Red Sprite. You're part of a half-military, half-research-focused task force being sent to the South Pole to investigate the Schwarzvelt, a mysterious anomaly that is slowly expanding.

Upon entering the Schwarzvelt, things go bad quickly. All four vehicles crash land and lose touch with each other. You're now trapped in a cavernous region of the Schwarzvelt known as Antlia, and it will take all your demon-summoning skills to escape.

Unlike PS2's Shin Megami Tensei: Nocturne, Strange Journey returns to the classic first-person view for exploration and combat. As you walk through the passageways of Antlia's ice caves, the map on the lower screen automatically fills in. Players need to explore the majority of each map in order to complete missions, which will move the story forward and allow you to find equipment that slowly brings the Red Sprite back to full operating power

The atmosphere of Antlia recalls sci-fi horror classics such as Alien and The Thing – you have a crew on the ship, but many of them are slowly hunted down and killed by demons, and you spend most of the game alone. To make up for your lack of human support, you can talk to and recruit demons to your cause…if you can give them enough items or money to convince them to join.

After only the first few hours, Strange Journey's mix of sci-fi mumbo-jumbo, creepy ambience, and classic RPG gameplay has me eager to get through the next doorway and see what twists await in each new area of the Schwarzvelt. » Phil Kollar

» **Platform**
Nintendo DS

» **Style**
1-Player RPG

» **Publisher**
Atlus

» **Developer**
Atlus

» **Release**
March 23

*Check out gameinformer.com/mag for an updated preview of our continuing adventures with Strange Journey*

The overworld has interactive nodes that serve as element to exploration

# Resonance of Fate

## Flashy gunplay and unique ideas break the JRPG mold

Resonance of Fate (known as End of Eternity in Japan) represents Tri-Ace's brief break from longtime publisher Square Enix. It appears Sega might score a winner here as the game takes an interesting departure from the developer's recent traditional JRPGs like Infinite Undiscovery and Star Ocean: The Last Hope in favor of an intriguing and unique world, and high-flying gun-based combat.

Resonance takes place on a massive tower that serves as the last inhabitable place on the planet while it purifies widespread air pollution. Main character Vashyron, complete with ponytail and leather jacket, runs his own Private Military Firm and recruits Zephyr, a cocky young guy, and Leanne, a young lady, to help complete his missions for hire. As the game begins, the purifying tower stops working and the gang gets wrapped up uncovering a plot by behind-the-scenes players in the state and church.

Combat blends elements of turn-based and active battling. Once one of your characters is ready, they can freely run around the environment until their "fuel" bar runs out, similar to Valkyria Chronicles. When it's time to attack, you hold down a button and a circular gauge charges over your target. This can refill several times for a more powerful attack, but if you wait too long the move could be interrupted by an enemy strike.

All three characters use guns and explosives rather than traditional melee weapons. Zephyr's twin submachine guns take off a lot of health, but it's all considered "scratch" damage, which can replenish over time. Other weapons, like Vashyron's handguns, cause permanent direct damage that's more effective when hitting a target that's already been scratched. By spending jewel icons located at the bottom of the screen, you can initiate cinematic specials featuring over-the-top acrobatic gun blast combos. To set it up, you line up a glowing dotted line to determine the character's movement path and then just sit back and watch the show as they flip through the air unloading a ridiculous amount of bullets. If you aim the line at other party members, you can also perform deadly team attacks.

Overworld movement is entirely hex-based. You'll earn Tetris-esque shapes from battles and place them on the path ahead to open up battlefields, dungeons, and towns. Sometimes treasure chests will randomly pop up as well, so completionists will have good incentive to unlock all of the hexes along the way.

Once in town, the perspective shifts to a 2.5D side-scrolling perspective. The backgrounds we've seen so far are incredibly detailed and offer a nice sense of depth. Full day and night cycles alter the look of these areas, and some missions are only available at certain times of day.

Shops in these areas offer multitudes of customization options for both guns and character appearance. New stocks, scopes, and silencers affect stats and allow players to hone the weapons to their own offensive style. The character editor contains loads of clothing options, hair and eye color modifiers, and accessories like glasses or wacky cat ears. All modifications you make to your characters are reflected in cutscenes instead of snapping back to their default outfits.

Resonance of Fate is certainly impressing at this stage. We just hope that Sega schedules its release far away from March 9 so that it doesn't get steamrolled by Final Fantasy XIII. » **Bryan Vore**



Towns are presented in a 2.5D side-scrolling style



In Japan, Leanne is named Reanbell. WTF?
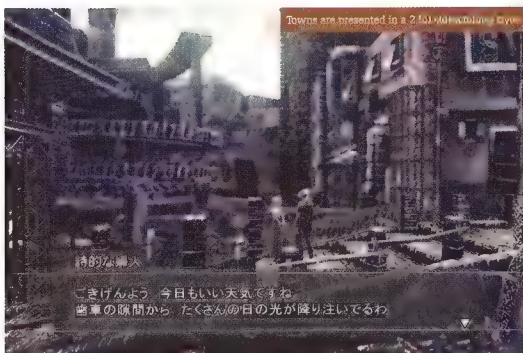
# Napoleon: Total War

Total War franchise attempts storytelling with syphilitic Frenchman







The sound and the fury, indeed

M ore of a standalone expansion to Empire: Total War than an evolution of the franchise, Napoleon: Total War lets players rise to prominence with the famed conqueror through three distinct campaigns. A shorter two-week turn cycle and the more zoomed-in strategic map make Napoleon a more finely grained experience than the traditional Total War expansions. Most importantly, multiplayer campaigns are available from the get-go.

The playing fields for Napoleonic campaigns in northern Italy and Africa are as large as a Eurasia-spanning Grand Campaign, even though they take place within a smaller section of land. Combined with the addition of terrain effects on armies – it's dangerous to cross a desert or a mountain range, for instance – geographical features like misty valleys have real gameplay effects. The severity of non-combat attrition is also deter-

mined by your distance from a supply center like a town, so players must pay close attention to the lay of the land before planning offensives.

Unlike Empire, multiplayer for each of the Napoleonic campaigns (the two previously mentioned plus the final Grand European campaign) is available out of the box. More interestingly, if you enable drop-in battles in a single-player campaign, the game will try to find other Napoleon: Total War players to command the armies of any enemies you engage. Given Total War's often-questionable AI, this could be a significant improvement. Of course, you can always play standalone battles against other humans – and Creative Assembly has included each major historical engagement in Napoleon's bloody career for players to relive.

Generals have new abilities on the battlefield in this edition of Total War. They passively increase

the effectiveness and morale of troops physically near them, and have special abilities that can be fired off to dramatically alter the course of battle. We saw an Austrian commander inspire his artillery to unleash even greater destruction on Napoleon's forces, for example. This makes clever use of your own general and careful observation of the enemy's leader even more important than before.

Based on the Empire: Total War engine (albeit version 1.5, which is significantly less buggy than the release version), Napoleon features the usual slew of incremental improvements. Improved lighting, new weather effects, better detail on troops, and more all add up to the best-looking Total War game yet. Its release is nearly upon us, so stay tuned to gameinformer.com for the full review soon » **Adam Biessener**

Hanging out in hostile climes like mountains or deserts is tough on armies

# Aliens vs. Predator

## Hands-on with all three campaigns

We recently got the chance to try the marine, predator, and alien campaigns in Aliens vs. Predator. We're told that each one averages around four hours to complete, leading to a pretty standard total game length in shooter genre terms. From what we've played, the combat variety and story perspective change things up enough to keep things interesting.

Players can attack the campaign in any order they choose, so we started with the marines. This campaign has you running around helping out your fellow soldiers – that is, until they get brutally slaughtered by aliens. The signature motion tracker ping gives you somewhat of a warning when something's coming, but quick reaction time with your pistol, pulse rifle, and flamethrower is what will keep you alive.

Predators are obviously more of a sneaky hunter species. If you've seen the movies, you know what kind of combat options are available. Cloaking, heat vision, a spear, shoulder cannon, voice mimicking, and a throwing disc are all here. You'll play a young predator trying to prove yourself to the elders – just like in every predator story. We used the species' impressive jumping abilities to get into some jungle trees, and hopped down for some gory up-close finishers. When that's not an option, a fully charged shoulder cannon provides some nice ranged flexibility.

The aliens actually have a story as well. You play as Specimen 6, raised in captivity by humans. Something goes wrong and you manage to escape, joining up with other aliens and generally ruining everyone's day. This species is the fastest of the bunch, but also the weakest. Sneaking up and impaling enemies with your tail or biting their faces with your tiny extendo-mouth is the way to go. Climbing on the walls and ceiling can be disorienting at first, but an indicator on the reticle helps remind you which way is down.

Since we had to quit out and move onto the next species right when we were getting the hang of things, it's tough to tell how the campaigns will fare in the long run. We just hope the game turns out better than the movies. » **Bryan Vore**

## Multiplayer

Multiplayer carefully balances all three groups in standard deathmatch and team deathmatch competitions. Infestation mode starts one player out as an alien against several marines. As each human dies, they respawn as an alien until everyone is turned or time runs out. Predator Hunt rotates the role of a single predator against a squad of marines throughout the match. Survivor pits up to four marines against waves of aliens, similarly to Horde mode in Gears of War 2.


Never [...] when there [...]






Gory scenes like this will get [...] banned in Australia
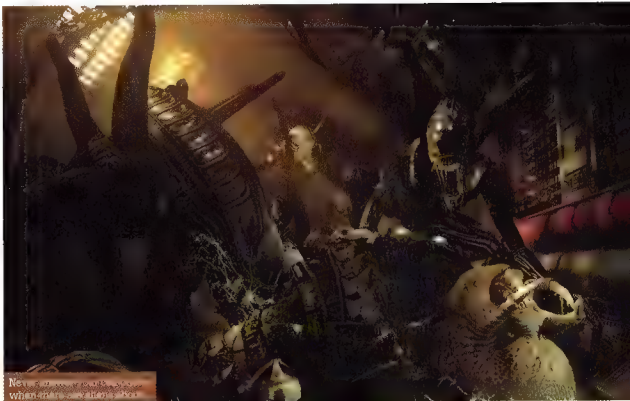
Gameplay is reminiscent of old sliding piece puzzles

# Rooms: The Main Building

## Korean developer gives us room to move around

Surprise gifts are often the most exciting, but Mr. X, the bewildered protagonist of Hudson's new puzzle game, receives a mysterious birthday present he wishes he'd never unwrapped. When an anonymous gift unexpectedly appears on his doorstep, it instantly transports him to a place called Rooms Mansion, a magical realm where books talk and any room he stands in miraculously shifts around. If Mr. X wants to return home, he'll need to rearrange all the mansion's scattered puzzle rooms and collect all its hidden keys.

Rooms Mansion is a giant structure made of sliding rooms that function similar to the sliding puzzles you may have played with as a kid. The goal of each room is to travel from one end to its exit, avoiding obstacles along the way by shifting the pieces of each room around a square grid. The challenge of Rooms' puzzles comes from the fact that Mr. X can only move the sections of room in which he's standing. Immovable walls and locked doors require Mr. X to shift several sections of the room around before he can access the exit. Telephones function as a kind of transporter system. If Mr. X finds one, he can jump into the phone's wires via a Matrix-like vanish and quickly travel to otherwise inaccessible sections of each room.

Rooms is like several small brainteasers inside one giant puzzle. Many of the rooms have multiple solutions, so even if Mr. X reaches a room's exit that doesn't mean there wasn't a more elegant solution. Mr. X can progress past any room he's exited, but in order to collect new items that will help him unlock other areas of the mansion he'll need to find the perfect solution to each room. Based on our time with the game, Professor Layton fans will want to keep their eye on this unique puzzle title. » **Ben Reeves**

» **Platform**
Wii • Nintendo DS

» **Style**
1-Player Puzzle

» **Publisher**
Hudson Entertainment

» **Developer**
HandMade Game

» **Release**
Spring
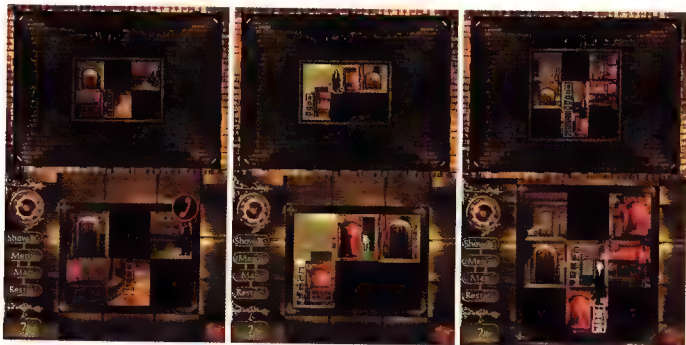
# Final Fantasy XIII

## Hans-on with the Japanese import


Expect to fight plenty of overpowered enemies

New entries in the core Final Fantasy series are among the most highly anticipated in the video game world, and Final Fantasy XIII has been building hype for years. Now that it is finally out in Japan, the wait until the game's U.S. release on March 9 is going to be even more excruciating. To help make the wait bearable, we're offering up one last Final Fantasy fix; we've played countless hours of our Japanese import copy, and although our translation skills are a little rusty, we've got a fresh batch of impressions on the new gameplay mechanics, combat, and characters for you to devour – all spoiler-free.

### Active Time Battle

Final Fantasy's new battle system yields some of the fastest combat the series has seen yet. Players queue moves one at a time into their Active Time Battle (ATB) bar, which fills as time passes. The chain of commands can be executed at any time, allowing you to quickly perform single attacks or wait for the bar to fill completely to perform more powerful moves or combo attacks. While waiting the extra few seconds is usually your best bet, sometimes a quick

strike can nullify an enemy's impending attack (or vice versa if you're not careful). The result is a tense alternative to turn-based battle systems, where the timing of your attacks and even your enemy's position on the battlefield must be taken into account to succeed. The battles seem overly simple for the first couple of hours, but as you open up more ATB slots and learn new abilities the complexity of the new system begins to shine.

The new combat system can also be downright brutal; if your character falls during a battle, it's instantly game over. AI characters can't revive you (though they can heal if assigned the proper role). You also can't flee battles – but because all enemies appear in the levels, you have the opportunity to avoid confrontation via an invisibility buff or by running past enemies when they're not looking. Additionally, you can ambush enemies from behind, which allows you to perform a preemptive strike before combat begins, sometimes putting enemies into a break state

### Break State

Chain attacks add even more urgency to bat-

tles. In addition to the usual hit point bar, every enemy has a chain gauge. Stringing together attacks increases the gauge, and if you fill it completely the enemy will enter a break state. This allows you to inflict major damage for a short period of time. The number of attacks you must chain together and how quickly an enemy will recover differs with every enemy, requiring smart management of your Optima roles. The chain gauge adds another layer of complexity to the combat, as some enemies will virtually require being broken in order to be defeated, figuring out how to get tougher enemies into a break state is a battle in and of itself.

### Optima System

The battle system's quicker pace comes with a considerable tradeoff: You can only control the actions of the party leader, leaving the other members under the command of the game's AI. While it feels odd not controlling all of the characters during battle, the Optima system allows you to assign basic roles to your party members, such as Attacker, Enhancer, and Healer There are six roles, all of which are eventually available to each character. The key to success
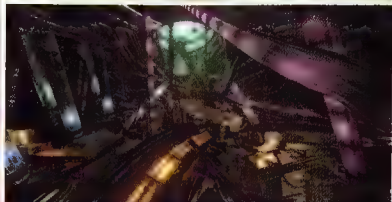
The chain gauge in the upper right shows how close an enemy is to its break state

is smartly assigning these roles during combat, which can be changed on the fly.

An early boss fight with a nasty looking robot provides an apt example: I set my party members to Blaster (a role which specializes in chain attacks), Defender, and Healer to whittle away at the enemy's chain gauge while fending off his overpowered attacks. My pitiful blows don't even make a dent to his HP bar – but once he enters a break state, I switch all three party members to Attacker roles and quickly dismantle him with attacks hitting for 30x damage.

### Crystarium
Players unlock abilities in the Crystarium, the most convoluted visual representation of a skill tree ever designed. It allows you to move down branching paths to unlock upgraded stats and new combat abilities using Crystarium points gained in battle (essentially replacing traditional experience points). The abilities are specific to Optima roles, while the stat upgrades are universal. Although the Crystarium system is more linear than XII's license system, the Crystarium lets you see the branching upgrade paths without committing points, and instills a desire to

keep working towards that next ability on the horizon.

### Summons
What Final Fantasy would be complete without summons? In FF XIII, summons are not only the most impressive aspect of battles, they provide the most difficult battles as well. To gain the ability to summon a monster, you must first defeat it. Each one initiates a doom counter at the beginning of the battle that ends the game when it reaches zero. Not only do players have to stay alive, they must defeat the creature before time runs out. The fights can be downright frustrating, requiring several attempts to uncover a successful tactic. That said, they're totally worth it.

Like past Final Fantasy games, summoned creatures are introduced via mind-blowing cutscenes. They continue the series' trend of fighting beside you as a temporary teammate, and do massive damage to your enemies. However, each summon can also change into a driveable form, including Shiva's ability to turn into a motorcycle. It looks as absurd as it sounds, but riding your summon gives you

complete control of its attacks and opens up more powerful moves, so we doubt too many players will complain. Summons also replenish your party's HP and cure status ailments upon leaving the battle.

### A Gang of Misfits
The Final Fantasy series has always been about the characters, and FF XIII is no exception. Some of them are more than they appear, while others fail to impress. Hope spends most of his time running away from danger and making awkward noises whenever a girl touches him. Snow rarely speaks a sentence that doesn't mention his girlfriend Sera or his desire to protect Cocoon city. Vanille is cheery to the point where I think she knows less about what's going on than I do. They all have annoying traits, but their hardships create genuine empathy, and their backstories run far deeper than gimmicks like the chocobo in Sazh's afro. » Jeff Marchiafava

Go to gameinformer.com for a list of things you should know about Final Fantasy XIII.

gameinformer
**GAME OF THE MONTH**

## 92 Bayonetta

Bayonetta is a 500-year-old witch who magically shapes her hair into skin-tight clothes, fights her way through heaven's armies, and transforms into a panther. If you think that sounds ridiculous, just wait until you see her wicked attacks in motion. Platinum Games has taken over-the-top action to new heights, infusing every second with absurd feats and allowing players to direct the chaos with ease. If you've always thought Dante and Kratos were too tame or just not stylish enough, you're going to fall in love with Bayonetta.

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## 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. | **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. |
| **9** | Superb. Just shy of gaming nirvana, this score is a high recommendation because the game reviewed is head-and-shoulders above its competition. | **4** | Bad. While some things work as planned, the majority of this title either malfunctions or it is so dull that the game falls short as a whole. |
| **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. | **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. |
| **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. | **2** | Broken. Basically unplayable. This game is so insufficient in execution that any value would be derived in extremely small quantities, if at all. |
| **6** | Limited Appeal. Although there may be fans of games receiving this score, many will be left yearning for a more rewarding game experience. | **1** | First! |

### AWARDS

| | |
|---|---|
| gameinformer **PLATINUM** | Awarded to games that score between 9.75 and 10 |
| gameinformer **GOLD** | Awarded to games that score between 9 and 9.5 |
| gameinformer **SILVER** | Awarded to games that score between 8.5 and 8.75 |
| gameinformer **GAME OF THE MONTH** | The award for the most outstanding game in the issue |

# Bayonetta

## Platinum games pushes action to absurdity



**9**

**PS3 • 360**

**» Concept**
Take Devil May Cry, make the combat even better, and replace Dante with every fetish you can think of

**» Graphics**
Character and enemy models are remarkably detailed. Some of the environments are a bit bland, but others are downright beautiful

**» Sound**
The fluffy, poppy soundtrack is a fun and amusing deviation from the genre's generic metal tendencies

**» Playability**
During standard combat, the controls are airtight. Things get sloppier during the one-off novelty sequences

**» Entertainment**
Cutting through foes with outrageous combos is consistently awesome, and it just gets better as the game's complexity unfolds

**» Replay**
Moderate

GAME of the MONTH — GOLD

**Style** 1-Player Action **Publisher** Sega **Developer** Platinum Games **Release** January 5 **ESRB** M

### Second Opinion 9

As the game's intriguing story about the Umbra Witches and Lumen Sages unfolds, Bayonetta reveals more than just the skin underneath her hair and heels. Our limber heroine is a magic power-house with a mind-boggling amount of extravagant combo moves and seamless animal transformations that give Kratos a run for his money. From Breakdance to Wicked Weave attacks, these moves are as fun to execute as they are to watch. The large-scale battles make excellent use of the game's unique stages as Bayonetta uses her lethal locks to hurl environmental objects at her adversaries and deliver powerful finishing blows. While lengthy vehicle and on-rails shooter sequences don't exhibit the same amount of polish, the rest of the game is so good that it's easy to overlook. From the game's flashy opening to the gotcha ending, Bayonetta puts on one hell of a show. » **Annette Gonzalez**

All of the ridiculous hijinks reserved for over-the-top cutscenes in most games are right at your fingertips during every moment of Bayonetta. Breakdancing and firing off a flurry of bullets, teleport-kicking your enemies from a magic portal, and summoning enormous lethal devices from thin air are just a few of the moves in your standard arsenal – and that's before things get really crazy. However, don't let all of the game's showboating fool you into thinking that it is devoid of substance; with a fluid combat system and incredibly responsive controls, Bayonetta delivers improbable action with unprecedented style.

You may be slightly overwhelmed at first. With foes coming at you from all directions and magically charged attacks firing off everywhere, it can be challenging to make sense of the chaos. Once you master the intricacies of battle, however, you'll be conducting the flow of destruction like a symphony. Perform a well-timed dodge to initiate a few seconds of slo-mo, lay into the nearest creature using your sword and boot-mounted shotguns, then finish it off by conjuring a medieval torture device. Not only are these combos visually stunning and endlessly entertaining, they're a breeze to execute thanks to the precise controls.

Anyone familiar with the Devil May Cry series will feel right at home with Bayonetta's control scheme. That shouldn't be a surprise; Bayonetta director Hideki Kamiya created Devil May Cry while working at Capcom. Now with Platinum Games, Kamiya has refined the genre he helped

invent by pushing it to the limit, giving players a ludicrous amount of power and flexibility, and making each stage a playground to showcase their prowess. Each enemy type requires different tactics to defeat, which gets especially interesting when they start appearing in mixed groups in enclosed spaces. Most of the bosses – which are amazing in both scale and detail – require quick reactions and your undivided attention to take down. Providing you don't set the difficulty to easy automatic mode (which can literally be played with one hand), you're in for a satisfying challenge, though it certainly isn't as unforgiving as the likes of Ninja Gaiden or Devil May Cry 3.

Though you can expect a lot from the combat in Bayonetta, the same cannot be said of the story. The game's nonsense plot is only important insofar as it occasionally pits Bayonetta against her nemesis and fellow witch, Jeanne. Along the way, Bayonetta struts her stuff and spouts various tawdry and suggestive phrases.

#### The Edge

There is no contest between the two versions of Bayonetta. If you have the option, play it on Xbox 360. When compared side-by-side, the PS3 release clearly falls short in visuals, framerate, and loading times. These technical hiccups don't degrade the experience so badly that it feels like a different game, but there's no reason to put up with them if you don't have to.

Thankfully, the sexuality is so comically over-blown that it never takes on the creepy voyeuristic qualities of games like Dead or Alive. This title is conscious of its own silliness, and treats its leading lady and her exploits with an appropriate tongue-in-cheek tone.

Not every high-heeled step of the way is a right one; the weakest points of Bayonetta are the handful of one-off sequences that replace the normally taut battles with shoddy and repetitive novelty gameplay. Driving a motorcycle or blasting flying enemies while riding a missile may change up the routine, but the segments last too long for how poorly they control. People will play Bayonetta because they want a particular brand of action, and that doesn't include lame and simplistic turret gunning. The sequences aren't numerous enough to kill the mood, but they are back-loaded; parts of the final chapters – where you should be exercising the full extent of your power – are bound to these mediocre events instead of the combat the game does so well.

When you're chaining combos together, switching between weapons, and punishing otherworldly opponents, Bayonetta is the epitome of its breed. It isn't so much an evolution of the genre as a well-tuned and highly polished culmination of its history. From this point forward, something about stylish action games will need to change, because I have trouble imagining how a developer could use the tried-and-true formula to create anything more delightfully excessive than Bayonetta. » **Joe Juba**

# Darksiders

## Why does the apocalypse feel so familiar?





"thrills are delivered through combat

It's not that playing as a horseman of the apocalypse (the sword-wielding War) is an empowering experience (he gnashes his teeth, communicates almost solely through threats, yet ends up being a transparent "who needs backstory?" guide through the end of days). Darksiders' allure comes from the homage it pays to Zelda and God of War. Upstart developer Vigil Games does nothing to disguise the fact that both aforementioned games are channeled to the fullest extent.

Though it doesn't go so far as to place War in tight green spandex, Darksiders might as well be set in Hyrule. A subtle nod occurs when War's health is nearly depleted, and players are alerted of impending doom by a faint-yet annoying-repeated beep. More obvious homage is paid through dungeon exploration. Vigil follows Shigeru Miyamoto's blueprint down to the last detail, including maps that reveal all chest locations and the boss room signified with a large red skull. The Zelda observations dip into the realm of "can they really get away with this?" through many of War's gadgets and weapons. A hookshot-like device grants War passage across large expanses, and a boomerang-like object can chain multiple targets together with a single throw. If you're not sold on the similarities yet, War navigates the overworld via horseback, obtains additional health containers at the conclusion of each dungeon, and is on a quest to reassemble a rare artifact that will bring peace to the world. Need I go on?

Miyamoto isn't the only one who may demand a cut of the take. If Vigil decides to release a Darksiders prequel, most of the game would likely show War palling around with God of War's protagonist Kratos. The horseman's attacks channel the same fiery orange trails and an elegant, yet violent beauty. Defeated foes don't simply fall to the ground. They stand dazed with a flashing icon over their head, alerting War that he can finish them off with a brutal (and visually satisfying) strike. When the body explodes into blood, War is rewarded with colored souls that regenerate his health and mana, and are also used as currency at stores to purchase new attacks, weapons, and upgrades. As Kratos' understudy, War is also overly abusive towards doors and chests.

For one level, Darksiders doesn't hump God of War or Zelda's leg. It instead shifts its admiration of great games to the most unlikely of candidates: Portal. Yes, War wields the portal gun. And yes, if you fire it once, it makes a blue doorway. Fire it again to create an orange exit. As strange of a fit as it may be, Vigil makes it work well with the context of the game. Some of the game's greatest moments are tied to this device.

All of the familiar mechanics and designs are handled with care, almost making me think that the Zelda, Portal, and God of War teams were involved with Darksiders' creation. From the complexity of the dungeon designs to the finesse of combat, Vigil shows us that it is capable of much more than imitation – it can twist decade-old ideas into new experiences, and make every battle a sweat-inducing affair.

These elements come together to create an engaging adventure that kept me in a state of wonder most of the way. Exploring the dungeons and solving their many riddles was the highlight. The combat system, although periodically bothered by camera tracking issues, controls admirably, and offers depth in combos, weapon choice, and tactics.

While succeeding in design, Darksiders doesn't keep gamers engaged with the narrative. War isn't the only character that delivers a transparent performance. Almost every character feels like he or she was assigned a cameo role, as you never can quite grasp their importance to the tale at hand. The plot bounces around recklessly and doesn't open itself up enough to make you believe the apocalypse is a worldwide event. From what I could tell, it happened in a city the size of Baltimore, and affected the lives of 200 people and/or demons. The "big" players in the story – if you can call them that – also go down like chumps through boss fights consisting of repetitious tactics that are intended to require experimentation to solve, but are telegraphed far too clearly.

Even without a clear narrative purpose, Darksiders never wavers from being an enjoyable adventure. I had a blast playing it, and strangely enough, the obvious nods to other games added to the fun. Despite a lame last boss fight, the setup planted for the sequel has me counting the days until it arrives. » **Andrew Reiner**

*See exclusive Darksiders videos and long-lost horsemen designs at gameinformer.com/mag*

**Style** 1-Player Action **Publisher** THQ **Developer** Vigil Games **Release** January 5 **ERSB** M

# Army of Two: The 40th Day

EA tones down the frat boy one-liners, but fails to turn up the action

## 6.5

PS3 • 360

» **Concept**
Shoot your way out of a crumbling city with your broseph

» **Graphics**
After the explosive destruction of the Shanghai skyline, you're mainly left with mundane, clichéd shooter environments

» **Sound**
EA thankfully toned down the frat boy talk, but Salem and Rios still utter the occasional wince-inducing one-liner

» **Playability**
The touchy cover system still has issues, and EA questionably mapped the run and heal partner functions on the same button

» **Entertainment**
Players who liked the first Army of Two may find enjoyment, but The 40th Day does nothing to win over dissenters

» **Replay Value**
Moderate

**Style** 1 or 2-Player Shooter (10-Player Online) **Publisher** Electronic Arts **Developer** EA Montreal **Release** January 28 **ESRB** M

### Second Opinion 6.25

The 40th Day's attempt at a meaningful co-op experience falls flat due to clunky controls and the utter absence of a storyline. I appreciated the fact that I wasn't just playing as a cloned version of the main protagonist like in many half-baked co-op modes, but I had a harder time battling the controls than my onscreen enemies. The mechanics punish you if you don't stick close to your partner, yet numerous segments split the duo up anyway, leading to cheap deaths and shared feelings of helplessness (or resentment). After a while, we stopped attempting even the simplest of flanking strategies and resorted to the irritating grind of picking off enemies from afar. Apart from a few decent multiplayer modes, you and your buddy won't miss much skipping the 40th Day. » **Jeff Machiafava**

When we look back on this console generation years down the line, the co-op renaissance will stand out as one of the most important developments of the era. After years of players turning the sights on each other in online multiplayer, developers like Epic Games and Valve brought gamers together to fend off Locust hordes and zombies. Publishing powerhouse EA joined the co-op revolution with Army of Two, an over-the-top send-up of gratuitous violence starring two frat-boys-turned-mercenaries. The lure of co-op helped the game sell well, but its sophomoric brand of humor and lackluster gunplay did it no favors. The sequel, The 40th Day, does little to distinguish itself from its predecessor.

Wisecracking goons Salem and Rios return with their strange masks in tow, but EA thankfully turned down the dial on the heinous attempts at comedy in favor of a more somber setup. While the two are on a routine mission in Shanghai,

the city comes under attack from an unknown private military contractor. As skyscrapers fall around them and citizens flee in panic, our two mercs have one objective – escape the city by any means necessary. Though this seems a good setup for a harrowing survival story, the plot is largely buried in radio logs players access from the pause screen. In its place, EA Montreal inserts a series of standalone "save the civilian hostages" scenarios and ethical dilemmas where players can make arbitrary moral choices with no context. Without the necessary background to inform your decision, these moments come off as shallow, and the comedic twists in the subsequent cutscenes do little to make you care.

When the masked mercs aren't flexing their pea brains with ethical decisions, they're flexing their trigger fingers in a series of close quarters battles. The Shanghai environments give players just enough room to use the game's superfluous and quizzical Aggro system, in which one player fires at enemies to draw their attention to turn the other player invisible. This makes pulling off flanking maneuvers a breeze, but expect to get flanked yourself by shotgun-wielding super baddies who ruthlessly spawn in areas you thought were already clear.

The core combat mechanic performs admirably, but also suffers from a sketchy

contextual cover system and a lack of button customization. The most irksome problem is the poor control mapping. When your partner goes down (which happens frequently thanks to the uninformative damage indicator), you must run up to him and hold the A button to revive him. Unfortunately, the A button also handles the running functionality, which means your character may accidentally start running or execute a combat roll when you're trying to revive your partner in a frantic situation.

The hindrances don't end there. Army of Two's terrible checkpoint system saves far too infrequently, forcing you to rewatch cutscenes and re-fight large groups of enemies before returning you to the situation that was giving you trouble. It also fails to save after you go into weapons customization, which means you have to repurchase all your weapons and upgrades every time you restart after dying.

The multiplayer fares better with its four enjoyable game modes – most notably the Horde-like Extraction mode that tasks four players with fending off waves of enemies. Why EA Montreal failed to integrate rankings, a progression system, and weapons customization into the multiplayer experience is the most puzzling decision the developer made, especially considering the fantastic arsenal options the single-player campaign offers. Instead, players are left with a handful of weapon presets.

With so many great co-op experiences available to gamers, it's tough to recommend The 40th Day. Lacking a cohesive story, solid controls, key multiplayer features, and polish, this sequel fails to close the gap of mediocrity running through its core game design. » **Matt Bertz**

Dialogue & Watcher ship-thing

you from the touchy flight controls

# Dark Void

## Poor pacing and a tangled plot ensnare free-flying gameplay

**Style** 1-Player Action **Publisher** Capcom **Developer** Airtight Games **Release** January 19 **ESRB** T

Capcom's newest franchise echoes the same issues that plagued Bionic Commando's attempt at reclaiming glory earlier this year; innovative gameplay entombed in a mediocre game. Unfortunately, as Dark Void's protagonist has a jetpack strapped to his back, the would-be video game legend has much farther to fall.

Ludicrous plot twists and a dubious narrative about a dimension-warped pilot named Will fighting alien robots in the Bermuda Triangle struggle to keep things even half-interesting. Once you've got Tesla's jetpack strapped to your shoulders, you're free to blast far away from the story's laughable twists and groan-inducing ending.

Will's jetpack is the star of the game, augmenting what would otherwise be a by-the-numbers,

cover-based third-person-shooter. Don't expect to be blasting through the clouds right away, though, as the game eases you into the jetpack's functions at an excruciatingly slow pace. When you do gain hover and flight abilities, however, it all feels worth it. Flying behind enemy cover while riddling foes with explosive machine gun rounds is as fun as it sounds. Better yet, you can do high-caliber machine gun runs with your jetpack's artillery. If you take too much enemy fire due to the game's too-subtle damage indicator, simply fly away from the action.

Becoming proficient with the jetpack is a challenging yet rewarding experience, but the game fails to take full advantage of its signature mechanic. Few levels fully tap your newfound jet-setting skills. Just when Tesla's toy begins to

feel like a part of you, the game falls back on the old trope of temporarily stripping away your flying power. As if this little hiccup weren't annoying enough, the game ends rather abruptly after you regain your jetpack and you're left feeling as if you never fully stretched your wings.

I wanted desperately to love Dark Void. All the pieces were in place to provide a visceral, freeing, shoot-'em-up-and-blast-off experience. Unfortunately, the shining strengths of the game are buried underneath a thick layer of rust that only the thirstiest of air-junkies should bother chipping through. » **Tim Turi**

*Read expanded impressions and see videos of the game in action on gameinformer.com/mag*

# Avatar

## Mediocrity invades the planet of Pandora

**Style** 1-Player Action/Adventure (16-Player Online)
**Publisher** Ubisoft **Developer** Ubisoft Montreal
**Release** December 1 **ESRB** T

Avatar entices players with promises of depth and thoughtful storytelling. In an epic interspecies war on the planet of Pandora, players must side with either the human RDA or the blue-skinned Na'vi. With different gameplay mechanics, storyline twists, and environments to explore based on your affiliation, Avatar is essentially two games in one. The only problem? Neither are very good.

The first few missions introduce your human character and Na'vi equivalent, as well as the wide range of differences between the characters (weapons, armor, vehicles, and skills all differ). They also introduce Pandora's large and wildly creative environments, which are easily the game's best selling point – you won't need a 3D display to appreciate their splendor. After you decide between the two factions, however, the game's weaknesses begin to surface.

While the Na'vi's size and natural abilities make them appear powerful, their tribal society is no match for the humans. How well do you think armor made out of animal hides and blades made from bones stack up against bullets and missiles? Not well. And using melee weapons against gun-toting enemies results in plenty of

cheap deaths despite brain-dead enemy AI. Playing as the RDA is a little more exciting, but aside from a few enter-

taining moments that come from blasting apart the jungle Predator-style, the human faction is mediocre as well.

Avatar's biggest problems lie with the narrative. The moral choices are clearly black and white, and the missions are mind-numbingly bland. Avatar boils down to an unending string of pointless fetch quests, with NPCs barking more insults than explanations as to why you're collecting/killing something for the umpteenth time. Both endings (one a cheap boss battle, the other a non-interactive cutscene) are infuriatingly bad.

These shortcomings are a shame considering the game's interesting gameplay twists. Avatar features a solid RPG element that unlocks weapons and skills (i.e. buffs) at a steady pace. Standard multiplayer options are also included,

plus a turn-based strategy meta-game that boosts your character in the main campaign. These innovations offer much-needed depth and enjoyment, and point to interesting avenues for future genre mash-ups.

In the end, however, these extra layers can't fix the subpar combat and disappointing storyline at the game's core, leaving Avatar a lackluster, though not entirely unpleasant, experience. While forgiving sci-fi fans might still appreciate this intergalactic romp, the average gamer is left with an easy choice: This game is a rental at best. » **Jeff Marchiafava**

*For our in-depth review, check out gameinformer.com/mag*

# Tatsunoko vs. Capcom: Ultimate All-Stars

Simplified mechanics make flashy combat accessible



**8**

Wii

» **Concept**
Pit Capcom's gaming icons against anime legends from Tatsunoko Productions

» **Graphics**
The art style looks great for the fighters, but some stages feature background characters that resemble the pixelated crowd from NBA Jam

» **Sound**
Music that sounds like it's from any Japanese fighting game ever made, and Street Fighter sound effects you've been hearing for the better part of two decades

» **Playability**
Simplified controls make even the most insane moves accessible, and playing with an arcade stick or GameCube controller is a fantastic alternative to the fighter-unfriendly Wii remote

» **Entertainment**
Succeeds as a fast-paced, uncomplicated brawler with all the flash of Marvel vs. Capcom, but none of the necessary fighting expertise

» **Replay Value**
Moderate
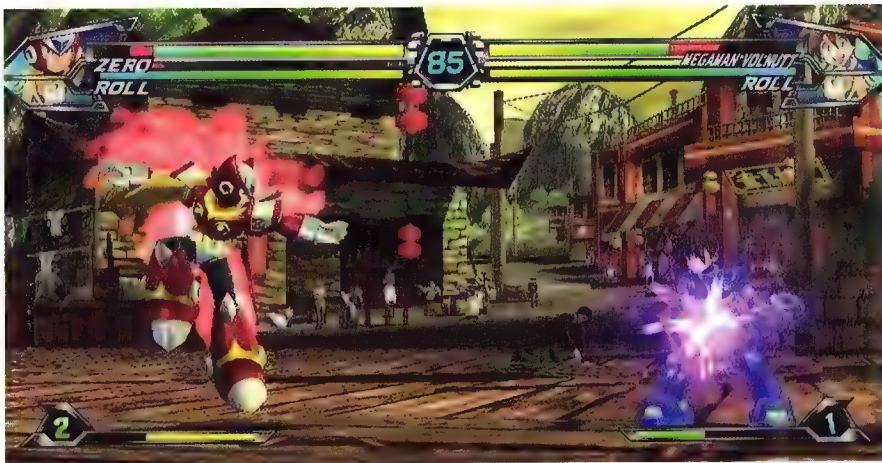
**Style** 1 or 2-Player Fighting **Publisher** Capcom **Developer** Eighting Co. **Release** January 26 **ESRB** T

Capcom has a long tradition of fast-paced, flashy beat-em-ups adored by fighting game fans. Most of these require a great deal of practice, timing, and memorization if you want to excel. If you don't believe me, load up an online bout of Street Fighter IV and see how far button mashing gets you. With Tatsunoko vs. Capcom, the company is going with a different approach. They've condensed the standard six-button layout into three context-sensitive attack buttons, allowing for some more wiggle room in terms of combo memorization. Traditional fighting game fans may scoff at the simplification, but it makes the experience more fun for those wanting to just jump in and land some Hyper Combos.

It shouldn't be a surprise that the Wii remote

isn't held in the highest regard among fighting game fans. Even with Smash Bros. Brawl, many gamers preferred to play with the eight-year-old GameCube controller than with the awkward remote and nunchuk option. Thankfully, TvC features complete support for the classic controller, GameCube pad, and Wii arcade stick. With just three attack buttons, it's easy to pull off all your frequently used moves.

Offense is the name of the game, with little to no focus on parries or reversals. Combat is heavily focused on stringing together special moves, with many displaying arbitrarily ridiculous damage stats (12,000,000,000 damage!!!). Aerial combat occurs from time to time, but it's hardly a frequent occurrence in this combat system.

Fighters on the Capcom side of the fence feature more traditional Street Fighter-esque button inputs. You'll be performing Shoryuken upper-cuts, decimating your opponents with Hyper Combos, and throwing every kind of projectile you can imagine with the standard half-circle and quarter-circle inputs that have become a staple in the company's fighters. This is mostly true with the anime characters from Tatsunoko, but
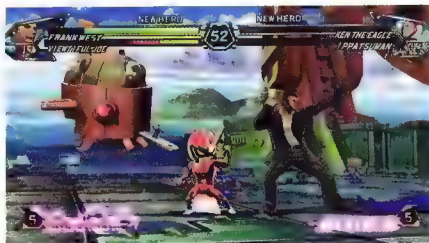


some characters like Polimar and Doronjo have unconventional attack methods, including the latter's spawning of her henchmen Boyacky and Tonzra. Most Americans won't recognize this half of the roster, but that shouldn't stop them from enjoying the calculated style of Karas or the ludicrous size and novelty value of Gold Lightan (essentially a gigantic 200-ton golden lighter)

Fighting genre fans who spent countless hours mastering the intricacies of the Street Fighter Alpha, Guilty Gear, or King of Fighters series may find Tatsunoko vs. Capcom's control layout to be too forgiving and easily learned, but at the very least it gives casual fans a taste of the maniacal action that they never experienced with the more hardcore titles. » **Dan Ryckert**

**7.75 | Bookworm**

**Platform** Nintendo DS **Release** December 1 **ESRB** E

Playing Bookworm on DS is sort of the video game equivalent of reading a dictionary. The experience may stimulate your brain, but you can probably find better ways to get what you're looking for. – Phil Kollar

URL: www.gameinformer.com/mag

**1.5 | Rogue Warrior**

**Platform** PS3, 360 **Release** November 3 **ESRB** T

Even male genitalia references are handled poorly, making you think protagonist Dick Marcinko is hitting on the enemy rather than taunting them. With bad gunplay and the story coming across as a six-year-old's interpretation of Cold War events, the only fun comes from the possibility of stepping into the shoes of gay Rambo. – Andrew Reiner

URL: www.gameinformer.com/mag

**7.75 | Gyromancer**

**Platform** Xbox 360, PC **Release** November 18 **ESRB** T

Gyromancer steals the Bejeweled Twist mechanic and dresses it up in a monster-summoning wizard's robe. The result grabs your attention with fun gameplay and flashy visuals, but remains too simplistic to offer the long-term enjoyment of the similarly structured Puzzle Quest franchise. –Matt Miller

URL: www.gameinformer.com/mag

**6 | Jurassic: The Hunted**

**Platform** PS3, 360, Wii **Release** November 3 **ESRB** T

Jurassic is neither awful enough to be enjoyed solely as a grade Z experience, nor sophisticated enough to be taken seriously. As it is, it straddles an uncomfortable position and ends up chafing. – Jeff Cork

URL: www.gameinformer.com/mag

# From Athkatla to Ostagar:

Exploring Dragon Age's roots in the Baldur's Gate series

by Adam Swerlow

Electronic Arts' and BioWare's marketing departments were only too happy to hammer home the "spiritual successor to Baldur's Gate II" angle in the run-up to Dragon Age: Origins' release. As much as we all love Dragon Age, that's a tall order. How well do major design elements correlate between these two epic fantasy RPGs? We break down the similarities and differences.

## Combat

The 2nd Edition Dungeons & Dragons ruleset that Baldur's Gate is based on is a sprawling, complex system that allows great freedom in character progression and combat tactics. A few rules were trimmed down, simplified, or removed in order to make it work on the PC, but battles are close to a pure D&D experience. The end result is fabulous. The isometric perspective and varied settings and opponents created dozens of hours of unique battles. Between the many possible compositions of party members and the complete freedom to design your main character from the ground up, there are hundreds of winning strategies in Baldur's Gate – and thousands more ways to die.

Turning its designers loose to create their own combat and progression systems for Dragon Age was an excellent decision on BioWare's part. Losing the legacy issues inherent in tabletop-focused D&D is no loss at all. D&D's greatest strength is its expansive, eclectic magic system, but Dragon Age's ably fulfills that role. Its one deficiency is in non-combat applications of magic, like invisibility-aided stealth or trap and monster detection. Would you trade managing all those buffs and spells per day – not to mention BG's tedious mage duels – for a few utility abilities? Dragon Age has tactical depth to spare and streamlines a double handful of quality of life issues like non-combat regeneration. The evolution of combat is close to the best-case scenario for any kind of spiritual successor.

## Party Member Interactions

Baldur's Gate blazed a bold trail by having players interact with party members on a level far beyond giving orders in combat. Who can forget assisting Edwin along the path to ever-greater power – and laughing at him when dabbling in ancient magic inadvertently switched his gender? Tiptoeing through the minefield of Jaheira's grief over her husband's death is a role-playing experience with emotional weight. The dialogue selection mechanic was old even then, but excellent writing and the sheer breadth of the conversation trees still astound.

In this area, Dragon Age is less of a spiritual successor and more of a straight-up retread of Baldur's Gate. Alistair and Leliana will never hold a candle to Korgan and Minsc (and Boo!), but Claudia Black's outstanding performance of the well-written Morrigan role brings that character to life like few others in gaming. The mechanics of conversation are identical in Dragon Age. Again, the skill and dedication of BioWare's scribes makes the fact that it's an archaic system irrelevant.
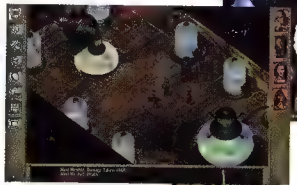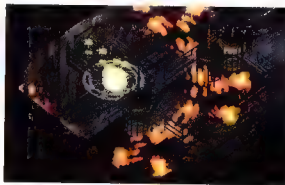






## World Structure & Story

Stop me if you've heard this one before: After a short easy scenario where you learn the game's concepts and controls, you're thrust into a dramatic scene that sets up the main plotline by establishing the backstory and the motivations of the story's main players. You're given the choice of a few paths when the dust settles, each of which will need to be completed to move into the third act. Those threads all converge in a whirlwind of action, with a surprising twist just before the climax.

Congratulations, you've just written a BioWare game! Kidding aside, this formula works well enough to serve as the backbone of many beloved RPGs, Baldur's Gate and Dragon Age included. The scale is smaller in Dragon Age, but the idea is the same. We're no closer to the ideal situation of a story that is completely shaped by the player's actions, but with no feasible way to make that happen, the BioWare approach is solid.

## Progression

Closely related to combat, character progression between the two games went a similar direction. In Baldur's Gate, you have to deal with arcane rules for everything from ability score bonuses (what does an 18/32 strength give me to hit and to damage, again?) to multi-classing (which works completely differently for humans and demi-humans, for no good reason).

Dragon Age gives you fewer, more meaningful choices. This makes it harder to come up with unusual hybrid characters and leads to more defined class roles, but also obviates the need to delve into pages of obscure D&D arcana. If you already know the THAC0 tables for a multiclass fighter/thief/mage, the broad D&D implementation in Baldur's Gate is great. The rest of us will take Dragon Age's simpler approach any day.

## Morality

This is one area where BioWare has made significant progress in recent years. The majority of the moral choices presented in Baldur's Gate are of the "help the old lady across the road" vs. "beat up grandma and steal her retirement savings" mold. Dragon Age (mostly) continues down the Mass Effect path, where the overriding necessity of saving the world means that morally questionable choices sometimes make sense. There are vestiges of the old design to be found, particularly in Morrigan's irritating tendency to throw a fit any time you agree to help someone. On the whole, though, Dragon Age does a far superior job of making players make tough decisions with no easy answers. ◈

# FIRST-PERSON TRIVIA

With all the talk of Halo: Reach this issue, this is the perfect time to test your knowledge of the FPS genre. See how you handle these questions to determine if you're the gamer equivalent of Duke Nukem or just a lowly headcrab.

**1. Free Radical Design consisted of several members of the GoldenEye and Perfect Dark development team. Which of these series was developed by them?**

a. F.E.A.R.
b. No One Lives Forever
c. TimeSplitters
d. Far Cry

**2. Who created Arcadia in BioShock's Rapture?**

a. Julie Langford
b. Andrew Ryan
c. Augustus Sinclair
d. Sander Cohen

**3. What is the name of the first chapter in the original Doom?**

a. Inferno
b. Knee-Deep in the Dead
c. The Shores of Hell
d. Die Fuhrer, Die!

**4. Which game featured the Cerebral Bore weapon, which literally drilled into your enemies' brains?**

a. Thief
b. Turok 2: Seeds of Evil
c. Medal of Honor
d. Doom 3

**5. Which of these was a difficulty setting for Wolfenstein 3D?**

a. Damn I'm Good
b. I'm Too Young To Die
c. I Am Death Incarnate!
d. Ultra-Violence

**6. Which movie is playing at the theater in the first level of Duke Nukem 3D?**

a. The Nightmarish Wandering Commando Priest
b. Reign of the Sinister Sweat Hobo
c. Wrath of the Wild Euro-Slugs from Deep Space
d. Attack of the Bleached Blonde Biker Bimbos

**7. In 1996, which of these games was included as a prize in cereal boxes and utilized the Doom engine?**

a. Froot Loops Jungle Adventure
b. Cap'n Crunch's Soggy Slaughterhouse
c. Count Chocula's Marshmallow Madhouse
d. Chex Quest

**8. Which prolific character actor voiced the Arbiter in Halo 2 and Sgt. Foley in Modern Warfare 2, among other voice work in Mass Effect, Saints Row, and Dissidia?**

a. Keith David
b. Peter Stormare
c. Luis Guzman
d. Brad Dourif

**9. What disease does your protagonist suffer from in Far Cry 2?**

a. Solanum
b. Motaba
c. Malaria
d. Astigmatism

**10. Which one of these games featured voiceover work from comedian David Cross?**

a. Eat Lead: The Return of Matt Hazard
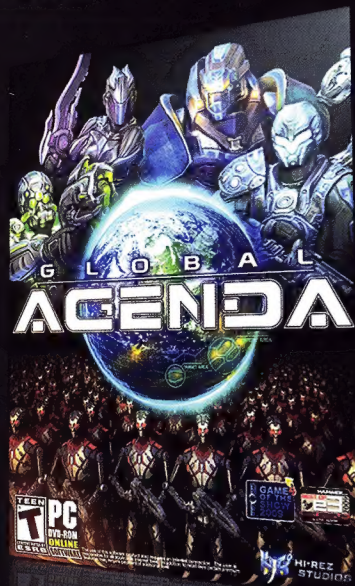b. Halo 2
c. Prey
d. The Darkness

■ ■ ■
ANSWERS:
1-c, 2-a, 3-b, 4-b, 5-c, 6-d,
7-d, 8-a, 9-c, 10-b