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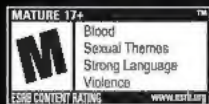
ASSASSIN'S CREED BROTHERHOOD

NOVEMBER 16



"One round in multiplayer has us sold"
- Game Informer

"The single-player looks like
the best in the series"
- Destructoid





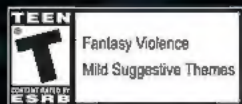
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Games With Character



ANDY McNAMARA

andy@gameinformer.com

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

Some games are simple in design, like the groundbreaking *Pong*. Others, like *Red Dead Redemption* or the *Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion*, are complex worlds filled with mini-games, sprawling narratives, artificially intelligent automatons, and vast landscapes. Is one more deserving than the other of praise? As a gamer, the answer is easy. A great game is a great game regardless of its budget, storytelling techniques, or rendering prowess.

However, story and characters can be extracted from the game experiences themselves and subjected to another layer of scrutiny. Their mere presence can define a game (an image of a stoic Master Chief comes immediately to mind), and these creations can live on in other forms of entertainment.

In the early days, game developers told stories using nothing but text and your imagination. With seasoned scriptwriters, lore masters, and an army of talented artists, the tools available to developers today are light years ahead of those formative years. As a result, the characters and their stories have matured alongside the power of the processors.

This issue's cover story highlights the most compelling characters of the last decade and chronicles the crucial role character development serves in interactive entertainment's present and future. It serves as a great reminder of how characters have changed over the last 10 years and opens the imagination to what will be possible 10 years from today. Game developers aren't just creating games; they are creating entire worlds for us to explore. It's more proof that games are the defining entertainment medium of our day.

Enjoy the issue.



46

The 30 Characters Who Defined A Decade

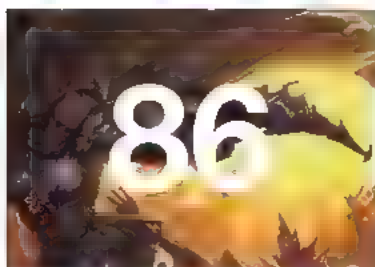
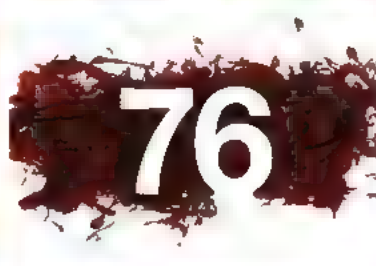
We compiled the greatest video game characters from the last decade, analyzed what makes them so influential, and ranked them for you to ponder and discuss. Who is number one?

by GI Staff

COLLECTOR'S EDITION COVERS

Game Informer wanted to create a unique cover design to commemorate this special issue, so we hired artist Sam Spratt to create three stylized covers that interact to create one giant snapshot of the characters who defined a decade.





regulars

» 12 Feedback

Readers shout a rallying cry to defend video games' first amendment rights and folks express how much drool was spilled over our BioShock Infinite covers

» 18 Connect

This year's Holiday Buying Guide spans everything from reasonably priced presents to lofty dream gifts. Why not show your love with an Enterprise pizza cutter or Star Wars wampa rug?

» 84 Previews

We know you are busy anticipating this year's hot holiday releases, but take some time to read about great games that are further out like Portal 2, Diablo III, and Pokémon Black & White.

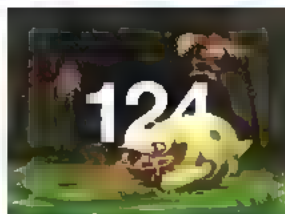
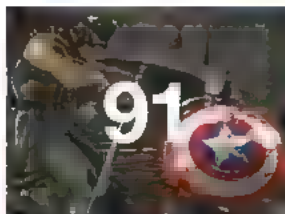
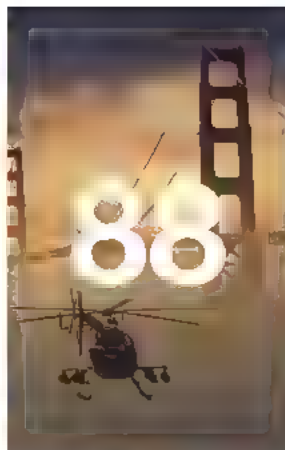
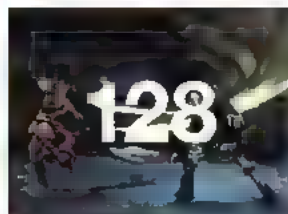
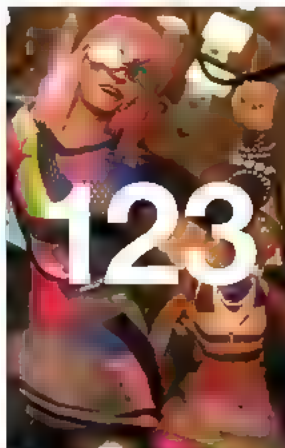
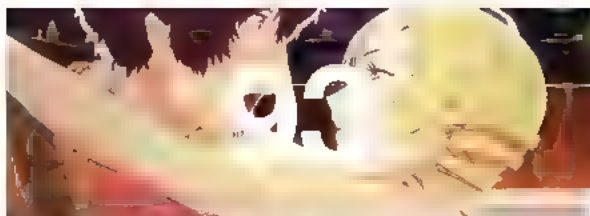
» 104 Reviews

Can an old ape learn new tricks in Donkey Kong Country Returns?
by Dan Ryckert

» 132 Game Over

Think Santa isn't paying attention to your gaming habits? Think again. Take this quiz to find out how much loot you'll score this holiday.

by Matt Helgeson



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Samsung Epic™ 4G
— Google

PCWorld

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September 5, 2010

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Other Terms:





his month in feedback we discuss California's ongoing video game legislation, debate the necessity of side quests in open world games, address the effect negative reviews have on game studios, and reveal what titles our readers are most looking forward to for the rest of the year

Infinite Happiness

Oh, how I flipped my living purple monkeys when I received the newest issue of GI. To say that I'm excited for BioShock Infinite is a definite understatement. I cracked open this issue and devoured it in one sitting, savoring every delicious morsel of goodness. Game Informer, you are the love of my life. Just don't tell my husband.

**Katie
Myrtle Beach, SC**

I just wanted to tell you that you did an awesome job on the BioShock Infinite cover for October! The entire front and back fit perfectly with the theme and coverage. Is there a chance that there will be more cover designs that tie in with the theme of the featured game?

**Daniel Tarpening
Via Email**

While we'd love to take all the credit, the amazing artwork you see on the covers of our magazine is the result of the hard-working artists that develop the games we feature. For more information on what goes into the creation of a GI cover, check out our extended magazine coverage at gameinformer.com.

About That Second Fridge

I want to thank Mr. Scott Jones for speaking out against the superfluous nature of open-world games in his opinion letter ("Can a Video Game Over-deliver?" issue 210). My only critique is that he is far too charitable. Games like GTA IV are so overwrought that they are no longer enjoyable. The game is so concerned with its own periphery that it skimps on core game design, and a huge chunk of time spent "playing" the game is com-

posed of mindless driving from point A to point B. Games like Red Faction, Guerrilla are equally frustrating. Why not simply make a linear third-person shooter with highly destructible environments? Yes, GTA III sparked a revolution with its level of interactivity, but that was nearly a decade ago, and the simple spectacle of an open world just doesn't cut it anymore.

**Mike Pellman
Via Email**

Some people are just not sandbox gamers but linear gamers. The worst thing any piece of media you pay for can be is short, whether it be movies or games. Modern Warfare 2 got all sorts of accolades, but a friend and I played through it on the first night! That is not acceptable! When you play a well done linear game like BioShock or Uncharted, you feel like you got to be the star in a big production adventure. In an open-world sandbox game, you are the director and the star - that is immersion. It took me over a year to squeeze every bit of content out of Fallout 3 (and Oblivion for that matter), and they have basically ruined weaker game experiences for me. With Rockstar and Bethesda you have the option to ignore the details, but please, please do not encourage the industry to omit them! Sandbox gamers appreciate them.

**Patrick
Via Email**

enjoyed Scott Jones' take on the subject of great games being tainted by an excessively open-ended nature and over-abundance of inane side quests. Despite my love and 100 percent completion - of most of the games used as examples of this "crime," my initial response was one of general agreement with the author's two-sarifragator thesis. It's a terrific analogy.

Then I read your Mafia II review in the very same issue. Your publication took a very thoughtful stance in addressing Mafia II's lack of fluff, but many other critics were also unhappy with the lack of variety. In short, a lot of people thought Mafia II was worse off for lacking the Mafoso equivalents of flag collecting, graffiti-clean-up, and animal skinning.

**Wanna That Game
Via Email**

We received a lot of mixed feelings about Mr. Jones' opinion piece. Some gamers love the extra content in open-world games, while others see it as an unnecessary distraction. The verdict? Don't force uninterested players into completing these ancillary tasks - make them strictly optional.

Contact Us

feedback@gameinformer.com



Above The Law

Your article on the attempted legislation to ban the sale of M-rated games to minors ("Enemy of the State" issue 2'10) was the best story I have ever read in GI, not to mention the cool picture that accompanied it. The most alarming part was finding out that Texas, my home state, is in favor of the law. Texas has always been in favor of supporting the Constitution (try to take our guns from us, I dare you), yet if the law passes in California, a similar one may pass in Texas. Am writing a letter to the senators and governor of Texas, stating how unhappy I am with their stance. As the story says at the end, we must make our voices heard, and that is why I am encouraging everyone to speak up! How will they know how we feel if we don't say anything? Thank you for the article.

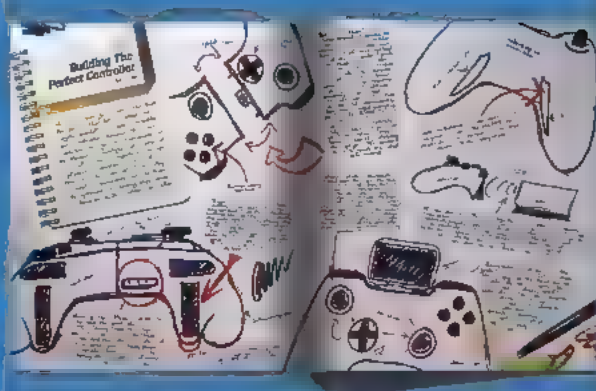
James Mckinnon
Texas

As a casual gamer and a future father I find it both disturbing and offensive that the state of California believes they can parent my children better than me. Instead of allowing me to decide what is appropriate for my child to play, they presume to decide for me, and then raise my taxes so they can enforce the new law.

The connection between video games and violent juveniles may be in dispute, but there is a well established link between violence and parental neglect, which is the true problem. Responsible parents are already ensuring that their children are protected from questionable content. As for the children of irresponsible parents, do we really believe that video games are what provide the final push toward violence when the child has not received any other form of adequate nurturing from their mothers and fathers?

Thank you, GI, for alerting us of this infringement of gamer and parental rights. I'm joining the fight to preserve freedom.

Josh Stone
Via Email



Controllers Evolved

...game controllers (Build no. the

Chris
Via Email

...that heats food on the way to your mouth.

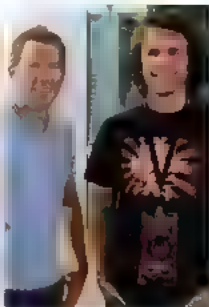
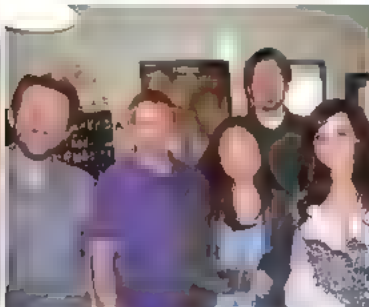
Reader Gibberish

"Halo 3 = 98 GI review Halo Reach 95 GI wah you trying to say?"

"You gotta try this Brain IQ puzzle saw on my FB mail I can't seem to freaking get greater score than like a 10!"

Worst News Tip Of The Month

"hey I ave played Halo Reach and think it's a good game but not game evn"



(Left) Ben tries his best to blend in with Sandbox Biral's Rob Fleischer, Cabela's Dangerous Hunt's producer, Chris Owen and Cabela's hunting guide duo Brander Wildvank and Parrot (Center) Miller and Meaghan pose with Square Enix's Soni-Im and Crystal Dynamics' Karl Stewart and Kyle Peschel in front of GI's figurine museum (right) a Meaghan's desk. (Right) Epic's Cliff Bleszinski was relieved to find out the hobo who had been bothering him at a recent Gears of War 3 event was actually Ben

2010's Must Haves

In issue 210, we asked gamers what their most anticipated game is for the rest of 2010. The results are in. *Fallout: New Vegas* was the most common response, followed closely by *Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood*, and *Call of Duty: Black Ops* trailing at a distant third. Here are some of the most enthusiastic (and disturbing) replies we received.

After thinking long about my most anticipated game this year, my vote is for *LittleBigPlanet 2*. I got the first one not knowing what to expect and was not anticipating how much fun me or my youngest child (age 8) would have playing such a phenomenal game.

Greg E.

If it has to be one game, I'll say *Rock Band 3* "Bohemian Rhapsody" on a keyboard! There will be a lot of head banging and Advil consumption that day.

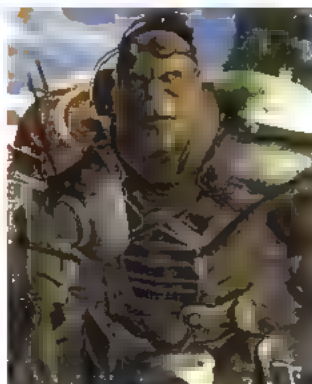
Nick Oliver

The game I'm most excited for is probably *Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood*. I'm sorry, but nothing says satisfaction like jumping off a roof and stabbing someone's brain.

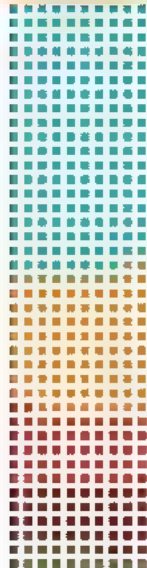
Tatjana Vojnovic

Fallout: New Vegas son! would literally eat my own legs to have it now!

Ricky Pendergrass



On Your Mind



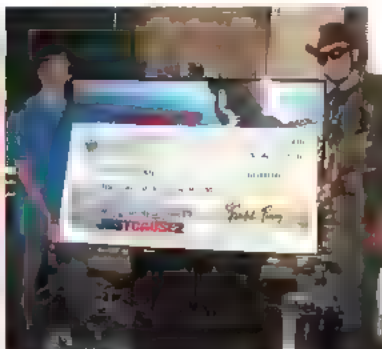
- Voters who registered **47%**
- Readers who said "I'll give you my vote" **25%**
- Comments that included "I'm excited for..." **13%**
- Comments that included "I'm not excited for..." **11%**
- Cheaters' complaints about getting banned for cheating **4%**



The Power Of Opinion



(Left) Geans of War executive producer Rod Ferguson demonstrates Epic's *Shine* (left) as we play in comparison (Center) Bethesda's *Pillars of Eternity* and Senior Community Manager Matt Grandstaff rock, enjoy Seattle's nightlife with GTV's Robi, (Right) *Just Cause 2* contest winner Daniel Steinberg accepts a year's pass from co-developer Sanbox. Strategas' rep John Kopp



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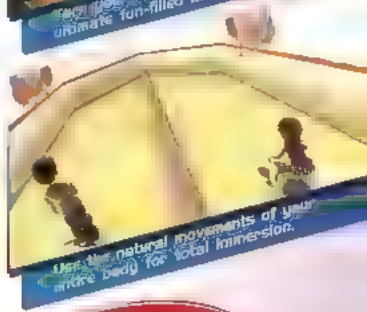
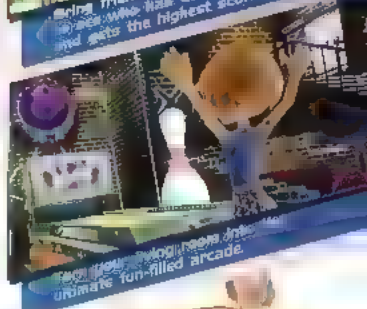
Alcohol Reference
Animated Blood
Comic Mischief
Fantasy Violence
Mild Language
Mild Suggestive Themes

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NINTENDO DS

GET THE PARTY STARTED!



GAME PARTY IN MOTION

16
CLASSIC ARCADE
GAMES



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Some Separately

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NEWS

Another Ho-Hum Holiday?

Even with big names, the holidays aren't what they used to be

by Matthew Kato

This holiday season is highlighted by the release of games like *Call of Duty: Black Ops* and *Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood*, but should there be more? Last year a number of high-profile games slipped out of the holiday season and moved their release dates to early 2010/spring. Though it followed a five-year high in 2008 when 590 titles came out, according to data from industry analysts EEDAR, 2009's September through December holiday season featured the smallest number of games released on home consoles since 2005. This year we could see a similar result if the numbers from September are any indication. Is this the way the holiday season is going to be from now on?

NOTABLES

- 24 **Interviews:** *Black Ops*
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- 40 **It's time to grow up**



1



2



3



4

The Call of Duty effect

In 2009, *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2* dropped like a grenade into the holiday season, with everyone trying to get away from its lethal retail blast radius. This year we are seeing the same effect with the release of *Call of Duty: Black Ops* on November 9. Jesse Dimich, EEDAR's vice president of capital research and communications, described the situation this way: "If you add it up, each iteration of *Call of Duty* and *Assassin's Creed* sells well over 30 million units combined worldwide, which is the equivalent to about 15 core video games. Or in other words, 15 core-targeted video games that purposely miss the holiday time period just simply because there isn't enough wallet share left to grab."

At E3 this year it looked like many publishers were avoiding the holiday season and preemptively holding back some of their cards for 2011. Games like *Portal 2*, *Dead Space 2* and *Mortal Kombat* avoided the holiday fray from the start. Whether this was to avoid other titles or not, Dimich says that well-known games like these don't have to worry about not having the holiday hype. "If we're talking about core-targeted video games, it does not matter when they are released. *Red Dead Redemption*, *Grand Theft Auto IV*, and *Mass Effect 2* are just some of the titles that have proven games can sell just as many units in the offseason as in the holiday."

Even with the move of some holiday games from 2009 into 2010, in general this year saw fewer releases than the preceding years. This could be because of numerous factors. Publishers are becoming less willing to take chances on possibly mediocre-selling games, and many of them have pared down large, bloated portfolios. Companies have adjusted their approach to multi-platform titles. The decline of the PSP and the non-viability of some franchises and genres on the Wii cut down on the sheer number of titles coming out as compared to a few years ago when the Wii was brand new.

Quantity vs. quality

The number of games isn't the only thing that is changing. So is the overall quality of the holiday period. If you take EEDAR's data for September 2010, where only 11 games received an aggregate score of eight or better and add our estimates for the missing months of October and November based on our own review scores (including an estimate for December), it looks like the number of games scoring 8 or higher for the 2010 holiday season is around 48. This is down from last year's mark of 63—even though this year features games like *Call of Duty: Black Ops*, *Fallout: New Vegas*, and *Fable III*. The balance of the quality titles in 2010 should tip in favor of the non-holiday season by a margin of 56 to 44 percent. In historical terms, that puts this year's holiday slate on the same level as 2006, which equals the lowest point in the past five years.

This period we're in is an ebb in the overall flow, and while things seem to be changing, there is also consistency. The holiday season will continue to be where the industry's big games come to rake in the big money. But publishers are also constantly trying to capture new audiences for their games and adapt to the new systems, peripherals and franchises. These new ways of approaching the business will impact the number and quality of titles that hit store shelves during the holidays. Gamers want great experiences no matter what time of year it is, and hopefully the relative decline of recent holiday seasons doesn't dampen your Christmas spirit, but rather shows that publishers are adjusting their schedules to make the rest of your year that much merrier.

For more on this holiday season, please turn the page.

- 1 *Fable III*
- 2 *Limbo*/*Bayonetta 2*
- 3 *Portal 2*
- 4 *Call of Duty: Black Ops*
- 5 *Marvel vs. Capcom 3: Fate of Two Worlds*

The coming flood

Once again publishers have moved games out of the holiday season to avoid overcrowding, and the result is an early 2011 spring naup that is jam-packed with high-profile games.

- Bulletstorm
- Crysis 2
- Dead Space 2
- Deus Ex
- Duke Nukem Forever
- Homefront
- Killzone 3
- Kingdom Hearts Re:coded
- LA Noire
- LittleBigPlanet 2
- Marvel vs. Capcom 3: Fate of Two Worlds
- Mass Effect 2 (PS3)
- Mortal Kombat
- PlayStation Move Heroes
- Portal 2
- SOCOM 4
- Test Drive Unlimited 2



Where is the first-party focus?

This holiday season has a clutch of great games to play, but when you compare this year's output from the first-party console makers with last year's, it's clear where Sony and Microsoft's focus has been — Move and Kinect.

PlayStation 3 owners not interested in Move's motion gaming don't have many first-party options this holiday season. Whereas last year they were treated to Uncharted 2: Among Thieves, Ratchet & Clank: A Crack in Time, and the God of War Collection, in 2010 there is only the Sly Collection and possibly Gran Turismo 5. As of the time of this writing, it's not even known for certain if GT 5 will be out in 2010.

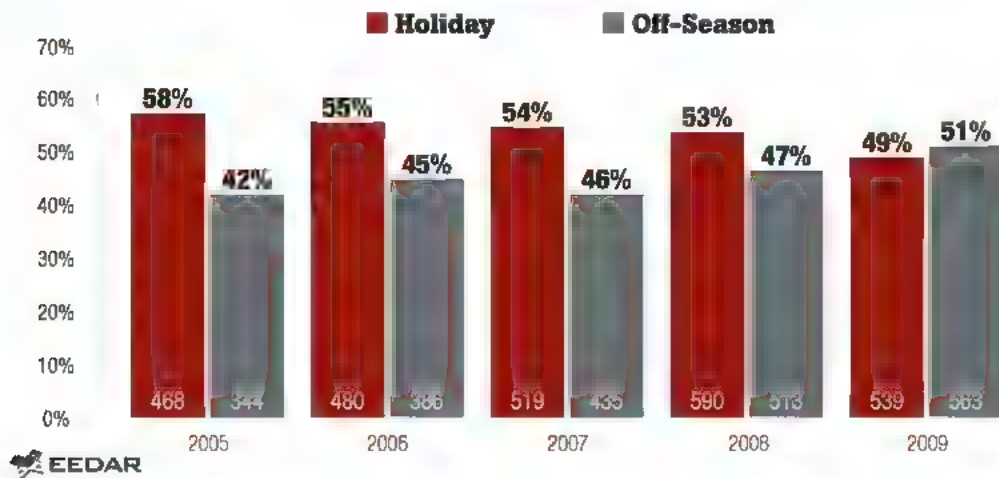
Nintendo has arguably benefited most from its competitor's divided attention. After getting hammered for not supporting core gamers the past couple of years, Nintendo's 2010 sub-game Wii slate in particular is very strong thanks to the likes of Kirby's Epic Yarn and Donkey Kong Country Returns. You also have to count Wii Party and Pokémon: Pikachu's Adventure in the overall tally.



Number of Holiday/Off-Season Video Games Released

All platforms • Physical releases • Quantities included • Excludes PC

Holiday is September through December



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even though you don't know her
from Adam (or Boris),
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The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

NEWS WITH A SARCASTIC SPIN

“



Bethesda hasn't given any details for Fallout: New Vegas' newly announced DLC, but this is still good news for Xbox 360 fans, who get first crack at the DLC when it comes out this holiday season. The game itself also appears on PlayStation 3 and PC, so we'd be surprised if those platforms didn't get the DLC at some point, but it always feels nice to come in first.



(ABOVE) Capcom fans' wildest fan-fiction dreams have come true with the announcement of Professor Layton vs. Phoenix Wright on the 3DS. One of the first shots for the game clearly shows the pair working together including Layton's sidekick Luke in some medieval setting, but the file seems to pit them against each other. The mind reels with the possibilities.



(ABOVE) The PS Go was sold on PS3. Go was a regular. Even though the device has undergone a price drop and is now \$99, this is believed to be just a step in clearing the way for the next PSP, which is heavily rumored, and could even come out next fall. The PSP Go never made a lot of sense, and \$99 is still a lot of money for a device that is already dead in the water.

(RIGHT) Things were looking good for Pirates of the Caribbean: Armada of the Damned, and then they weren't. The intriguing open-world title let you be a good or bad pirate and control your own ship. Unfortunately, publisher Disney Interactive pulled the plug on the game for unknown reasons, resulting in the loss of around 60 jobs at internal developer Propaganda (Turk).



(BELOW) Activision's Guitar Hero has gone from sold-out stadiums to bar night gigs. Early NPD numbers for Guitar Hero: Warriors of Rock aren't good. The Xbox 360, PlayStation 3, and Wii versions sold fewer than 100,000 copies combined. Is this the beginning of the end for music games or just a reflection on the Guitar Hero brand itself?



(ABOVE) EA Sports expect the total overhaul and new control scheme for NBA Elite 11, but not everything has gone as planned. The game has been delayed indefinitely, and industry analyst Michael Pachter estimates it'll cost EA as much as \$60 million. Players savaged the Elite game demo due to its numerous bugs and a lack of polish. The good news for EA basketball fans is that 360 and PS3 versions of NBA Jam are planned for this holiday season.

”

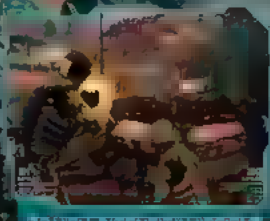


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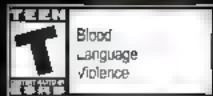
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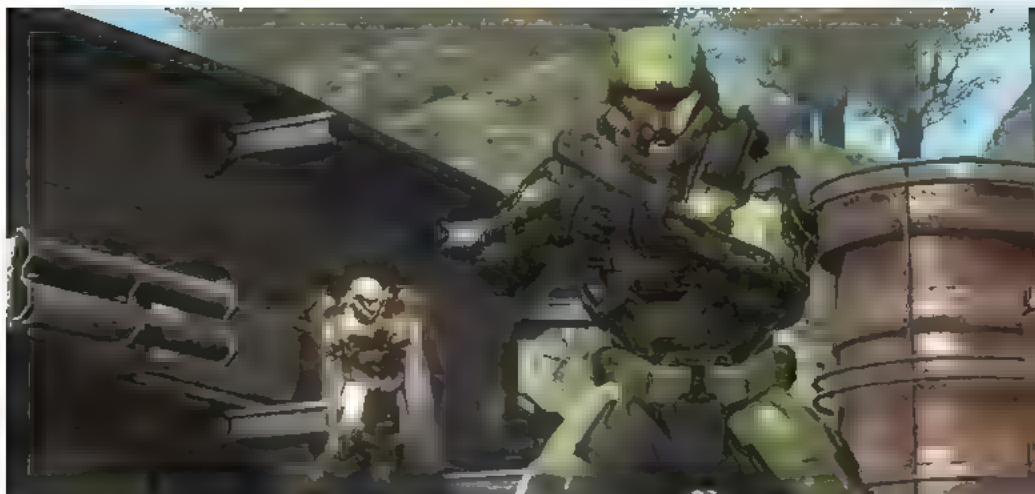


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UBISOFT



Halo: Reach

Halo: Reach may mark the end of Bungie's time with the series, but it turned into a phenomenon, and the developer certainly went out with a bang. Reach received critical acclaim and stellar sales numbers, and the vast majority of fans were left satisfied. Now that the game has been in the wild for a while, we had a few burning questions of Halo's creative director Marcus Lehto.

Did the team always know they wanted to go back to Reach, or was there discussion of making Halo 4?

We certainly looked at a number of opportunities before the project began, including events that would align with a "proper" Halo 4—the continuation of Master Chief's story. We listened to our own team members and our fans to understand what they would love to see next as well. After throwing many creative ideas up on the wall, Reach ultimately became a focal point for all our discussions because it was such a fantastic open canvas for story and gameplay.

Everyone loved the space combat section. Were there ever any plans to extend it or feature it in more than one mission?

The space mission is a perfect example of our focus, very early on in the project, to provide players with unique gameplay experiences throughout the campaign, even if that experience required a disproportionate amount of time and effort compared to other more ubiquitous features. We did this to ensure players engaged with the campaign and experienced something new when they least expected it. For space, we initially had plans to take the player up twice, but that felt redundant and unnecessary.

Was there ever any discussion about featuring space combat in multiplayer?

We talked about it from time to time and even had a rough version of it working very early on in development. But the mechanics of it were pretty silly, and we quickly realized that the resulting gameplay experience wouldn't hit the bar we were aiming for nor justify the amount of work required. With so many features and so much content already committed, Reach was an incredibly ambitious project on an already aggressive schedule.

Was there ever any substantial discussion about featuring Master Chief in a prominent role?

We were 100 percent unanimous that our old friend John-117 would not play any major role at all in Reach. This was to be a story about Noble team and what they sacrificed on the planet during the epic battle surrounding the planet's demise.

A Spartan in a pod can be seen near the end of the game if you look off to the right. Obviously, everyone is assuming that it's Master Chief. Care to confirm or deny this?

That is in fact the Master Chief. We felt that if he were to show up anywhere, this was the place to do it. Placing him in the "rusted casket" was the one way we felt his presence in Reach would be appropriate. Anything greater than that would have diminished the importance of Noble team, including yourself as the last remaining Spartan willing to stay

behind and fight on Reach to the very bitter end.

One of the many complaints about the Star Wars prequels was that the technology looked newer despite the fact that it should have been older. Did you guys come up with ideas for any weapons that had to be scrapped because the technology seemed too advanced?

Fortunately, Reach is set only a few months prior to Halo 1, so many of the fictional technology factors with returning sandboxes didn't become major issues. That said, we wanted to improve upon the foundation of our gameplay model, so we took some liberties to bend what had been done before with something like equipment in Halo 1 and convert it to armor abilities in Reach. It was a fun creative challenge for all of our artists to re-imagine familiar weapons from the Halo universe while still staying true to versions fans have come to know and love. Fictionally speaking, we would like to note since Reach was the heart of the UNSC military and home of the Spartan program, it was not uncommon to find all manner of prototypes and one-off weapons deployed to the field. Unfortunately, much of this tech was destroyed during the glassing of the planet and thus never made it into more widespread service.

Overall, what would you say the most used armor ability is

amongst the development team. Least used?

Sprint and evade are probably the most used because they are the default ability given to players and the most versatile in usability. However, it didn't take long for some to become masters with active camo and Jetpack as well as the others. We've got quite a few people here who are armor lock savants and can really give you a hard time online. Hologram was probably one of the least used because it came on so late in development, but seasoned players will find it invaluable in multiplayer or when playing the campaign on Legendary.

Why did you decide to have skulls unlocked from the beginning rather than having players search for them?

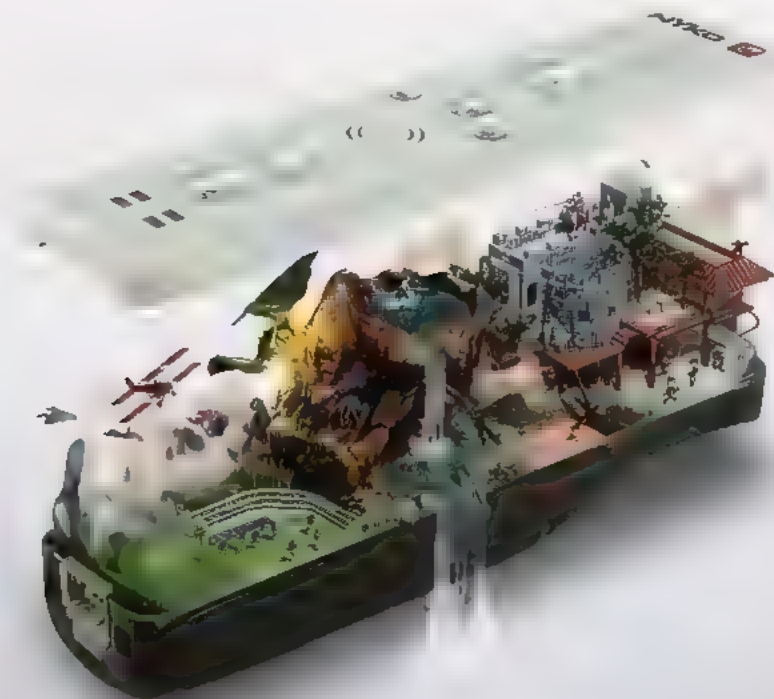
Mostly, it was about fun factor and making sure that the ability to modify gameplay with skulls is something everyone would be able to experience rather than making it exclusive to only a few people willing to find them all in the campaign. Skulls are also a big part of Firefight and needed to be there from the beginning in order to support the default and custom variants for maximum fun. Between the robust Armory and several hidden data pads, Reach still has plenty of content to unlock and search for.

Did any feedback from ODST alter plans during the development of Reach?

A little bit, but most of the foundation for Reach had been laid down long before ODST was done. We definitely took the addition of Firefight in ODST and integrated that in Reach and expanded it into an even nicer feature. ♦

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2D meets 3D in Fez. Ilo meets Milo in Iloilo, and X-Men meet awesome in the classic arcade brawler

by Matt Miller

I've had my eye on **Fez** for a long time, but the developers at Polytron have stayed mum on the game outside of the occasional convention appearance or trailer. At long last, the team delivered some new info on the little-known but hotly anticipated little. Fez stars a little guy named Gomez. Our fez-wearing protagonist happily lives in a 2D world until he realizes with alarm that the world exists in three dimensions. Gameplay is built around his exploration of this new discovery.

"Any time you want, you can rotate the world in 90 degree increments to four distinct points of view," explains developer Phil Fish. "So you can rotate once and go see the side of a structure, or rotate twice and go behind things, but always from a strictly 2D point of view." As you explore, there are scattered gold cubes, the collection of which serves as your primary goal. "The golden cubes are our Mario stars, or Zelda Triforce shards," Fish says. "There's a big non-linear open world to explore, plus a ton of over-elaborate secret stuff, meta-puzzles, and things like that." That experience of discovery and collection along a 2D plane in a 3D world is the meat of the game experience. "No enemies, no bosses, no health, no lives, no nothing," Fish tells us. The team at Polytron has found that the more they focus on the core experience, the better the game becomes. Fez looks phenomenal in motion, and there's a great sense of excitement watching the world transform with a

simple twist in perspective. Can't wait to get my hands on the game and learn more. Fez should arrive on Xbox Live Arcade in 2011.

Iloilo is cuter than any game has a right to be, and it don't use that descriptor lightly. The game deserves the praise and backs up its adorable cover sheen with a fascinating concept.

"Iloilo is a 3D puzzle game where the goal for each level is to reunite two friends named Ilo and Milo," explains Southend Interactive's studio manager Fredrik Eriandsson. "To do so the player will need to switch between the two characters and make them cooperate by moving cubes, pressing buttons and completing other actions." Each character can manipulate the environment, which often allows the other character to progress. In concept it shares much in common with the underappreciated *Adventures of Cookie & Cream* game on PS2, but here the game is built in a three-dimensional space with any number of ways to alter the environment to solve problems. Players can place new cubes that rotate the spaces they're standing on, allowing them to access other sides of the platform. Place a lantern cube, and you'll illuminate previously inaccessible areas. As players explore the patchwork world of the game, either alone or cooperatively with a friend, they'll be treated to the colorful art style and playful soundtrack. Between puzzles, two related stories play out in tandem. "The first story is told in the style of a children's storybook and is about

Ilo and Milo's epic quest of finding a way to stay together," Eriandsson says. "It is presented with still photos of actual handmade Ilo and Milo dolls, as well as handcrafted cardboard props. The other storyline is a meta story that takes place on another level of consciousness. It is communicated to the player in the form of letters and photos sent between a couple that has lost touch with each other. This meta story is unlocked by picking up special memory bits scattered on the levels." Iloilo releases on Xbox Live Arcade and Windows Phone 7 in the coming months.

After endless cries for its re-release by fans, the classic **X-Men Arcade** game is coming to PSN and XBLA. The game that devoured allowances in the early '90s has gotten a minor makeover and a few added features like online cooperative play, burned through the game a few times this month, and had a great time reliving those long hours in dim arcade parlors. A six-player widescreen version and a four-player standard display option offer authenticity to whichever version you played. All the boss fights are intact along with original music and re-recorded goofy dialogue. Texture smoothing can be turned on and off, and new difficulty settings promise to turn up the challenge after your first playthrough. Even the Japanese version is included, which includes power-ups and health packs, Cyclops, Colossus, Jazzer, Nightcrawler, Storm, and Wolverine return in the starring roles. Look for it in the coming months.



Want more on downloadable and independent games? Head over to [gameinformer.com/insider](#) to explore daily updates on the best downloadable titles. We're doing with the best of games. Or more, in this case, head over to [page 14](#) for our complete review to the special edition of the long-awaited Super Mario Galaxy 2. It's the best of the best.



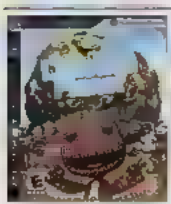
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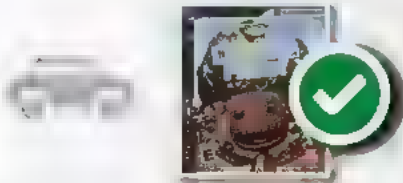
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Putting Kinect to the Test

Controller-free impressions of Microsoft's latest hardware

by Annette Gonzalez

When Microsoft first announced its motion-based interface two years ago, the company pitched a grandiose vision of a controller-free future in gaming. Along with a launch game lineup aimed largely toward the casual crowd (read: Wii owners), the team showcased innovative features such as scanning real life objects, interacting with a virtual boy named Milo, and the ability to play previously-released titles without a controller. While some of these ideas have been put on hold, Kinect still offers a number of solid features out of the box.



A new means of navigation

Setting up a Kinect unit is incredibly easy—just connect the power supply's USB cable into your 360, then plug the Kinect's USB connector into a port branching from the power supply cable and you're set. After a quick update prompted by hardware detection when you power up your 360, you'll notice a few changes to the dashboard. Aside from the new Xbox Live update that features a sleeker interface, you'll see a small square on the bottom right corner of the screen featuring a grayscale silhouette that accurately follows your movements. Contrary to some premature reports, you're free to sit during controller-free menu navigation.

Kinect offers a separate dashboard for Kinect-compatible features, displayed in a series of panels. You can navigate these panels using your hands or via voice commands, both of which feel responsive. A quick hand wave causes Kinect to recognize your movement, revealing a hand cursor on screen that you can use to move among panels. Hovering over a panel causes a quick circular gauge to fill, confirming your selection. Once you're within Kinect-specific menus such as the Avatar Editor, you can hover over selections and slide your hand left or right to confirm your choice.

Voice commands are equally easy to use. Prior to any voice command you have to say "Xbox" and then follow the simple on-screen prompts. For instance, from the main dashboard you can say "Xbox" then "Kinect" to enter the

Kinect-specific menu. From here, anything that you see on screen you can say and the mic will recognize your selections. If you want to check out your current achievements, simply say "Xbox" then "achievements" to enter the menu. Voice commands only work on the surface level of the Kinect menu, so once you're in the Avatar Editor or achievements menus you're limited to hand commands. The Kinect picked up my voice commands even at a mere whisper, so there's no need to yell. If your Xbox 360 is set up in a language other than English, Kinect unfortunately defaults to hand gestures. Hopefully support for voice commands in other languages will be implemented in a future patch.

Both hand and voice commands were very intuitive and responsive, giving us a glimpse of what could very well become a standard option in future consoles for menu navigation. If the technology works similarly well with the highly anticipated ESPN sports programming, Netflix movies, Zune, and Skype-style Video Kinect chat, this technology alone could make Kinect desirable for consumers interested in a new way to navigate. It's just a matter of whether you're willing to drop the \$160, not including the console's cost.

But how does it game?

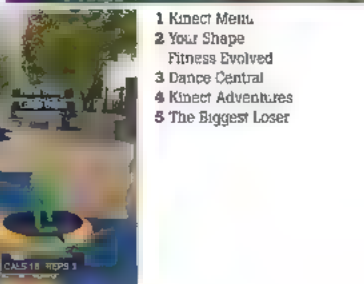
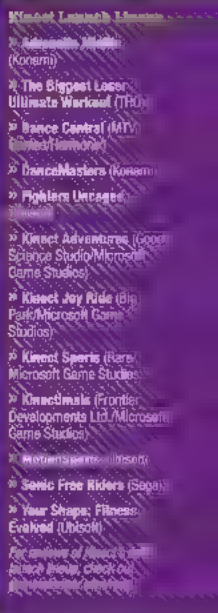
We can't make one blanket statement as to how well Kinect works with games, as you must consider it on a case-by-case basis. While games like Dance Central take full advan-

tage of the motion detection technology and nail body tracking, others perform sloppily making you feel like you have no control over the onscreen action.

One simple gameplay problem we noticed across the board is how you pause games. Several titles require you to hold out your left hand and wait for a circular gauge to fill before the game will pause, which doesn't always work. A simple solution would be to automatically pause the game when you step away from the camera, which some games have thankfully implemented, but in other cases the action continues whether or not your presence is detected.

Kinect's spatial requirement also needs to be considered. After the E3 demos, rumors spread that six feet of space is needed to play, and after spending some time with Kinect, many games require several feet of space to accurately scan your body. Unlike other motion control offerings that simply register arm movements, Kinect can scan your body whether you're running, jumping, squatting, doing sit-ups, or lying down. You just need a substantial amount of room to do so. This could very well keep Kinect out of homes where space is at a premium.

Launch problems aside, Kinect is an impressive piece of technology that has a high ceiling for growth. Even though the controller-free experience takes getting used to, it's a bold step into the future that's worth taking a closer look at before dismissing it as just another gimmick.



- 1 Kinect Menu
- 2 Your Shape: Fitness Evolved
- 3 Dance Central
- 4 Kinect Adventures
- 5 The Biggest Loser

WHAT GAMES WILL ZOMBIES INFECT NEXT?



It's tough to take two shambling steps in a game these days without tripping over a reanimated corpse. Even Rockstar's gritty, critically acclaimed western, *Red Dead Redemption*, has been invaded by zombies with the new *Undead Nightmare* DLC. So where does it spread from here?

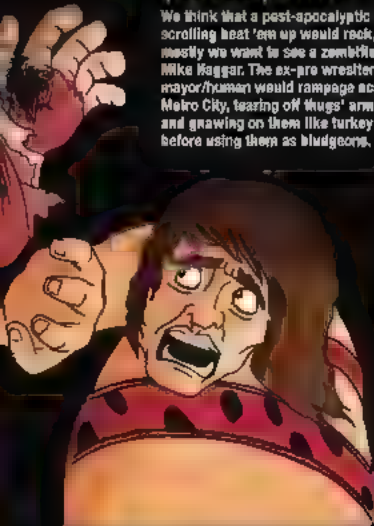
by Tim Turi with art contributions by Robert Mangsoang (a.k.a. Doom CMYK)

CABELA'S DANGEROUS HUNTS

We've all gunned down humeroid zombies with light guns, but it's high time we go on an undead safari. We imagine a game in which the hunter witnesses the animals he stalks mutate from prey to deadly, zombieified predators.

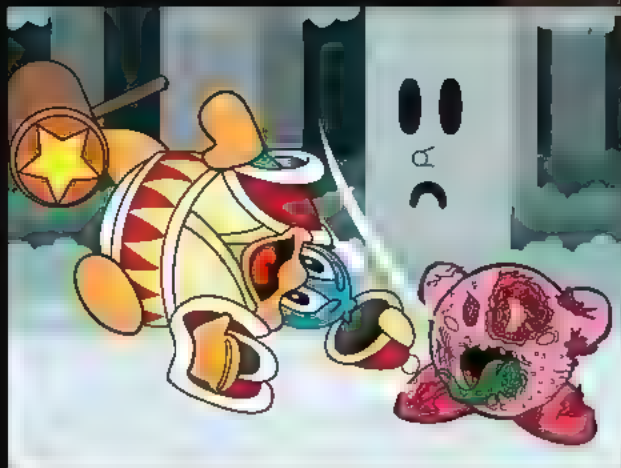
FINAL FIGHT

We think that a post-apocalyptic side-scrolling beat 'em up would rock, but mostly we want to see a zombieified Mike Haggar. The ex-pro wrestler/mayor/hero would rampage across Metro City, tearing off thugs' arms and gnawing on them like turkey legs before using them as bludgeons.



GRAND THEFT AUTO

Rockstar is the master of creating huge, living cities. Now we just need to replace the "living" part with undead. In this dream title, the usual cop-evading rags-to-riches story would be replaced with zombie-dodging survival. Who wouldn't want to accept a mission for a crazed billionaire survivor where you douse city blocks with napalm to protect his high rise?



KIRBY

The Kirby series has been sickeningly sweet for too long. This cutely cream-puff already consumes everything he sees, so why not turn Dreamland into Nightmareland and mutate Kirby into a purple zombie? Of course, he could still eat and absorb enemy powers, but now those foes become one of Kirby's undead followers.

To check out more of Robert Mangsoang's art, check out <http://doomscandy.tumblr.com/> and <http://doomscandy.deviantart.com/>

What Square Enix Needs To Fix In Final Fantasy XIV



Final Fantasy XIV has launched on PC to poor reviews. I've been playing the game for a month now, and despite beautiful graphics and some promising concepts, it's clear that Square Enix has a lot of work ahead if it wants the game to appeal to a wider audience by the time it arrives for PS3 in March. Here are some of the biggest issues that Square needs to tackle as soon as possible:

by Phil Kollar

Account setup: You think Square wouldn't want to leave a sour taste in gamers' mouths right from the start, but the account setup process in Final Fantasy XIV is archaic and incomprehensible. After trying to parse the difference between a "service account" and a "recurring service option," players need to choose between two equally sketchy payment methods: purchasing Crysta, a system similar to Microsoft Points that forces you to pay for more Crysta than you actually need for your subscription fee, or using ClickandBuy, a European third-party billing service that has a suspicious number of customer horror stories. Why can't we just pay Square directly?

Slow menu navigation: RPGs are slow by

nature, but plenty of gamers get past this by learning a game's menus and blasting through at hyperspeed. In Final Fantasy XIV, that isn't possible. For some technical reason that's beyond my understanding, menu loads are unbearably slow. Opening up your inventory, changing your skill loadout, accepting a new quest—every menu-based action eats up far more time than it should. Call me impatient, but I can't think of any other game with an inexplicable three to five-second lag between clicking an option on a menu and having the next menu pop into existence.

Story Gaps: In its current state, the most impressive part of Final Fantasy XIV is its story. Each of the three starting areas has an intriguing

plot that's more based in political and social complications than character-driven melodrama. The strong writing was more than enough motivation for me to keep playing, but there's just not enough of it. New story quests open up every five or 10 ranks. With the average story quest lasting an hour or less, you'll sometimes spend as long as 10 hours leveling for a mere 60 minutes of storytelling. It's hard not to be disappointed with such a paltry payoff.

Limited quests, unlimited grind:

FF XIV employs a unique questing system known as "guildleves." These simple, timed "kill X monster" quests helpfully alleviate some of the boredom of grinding. The problem? Each character can only take on eight guildleves for every 36 hours of real time. At early levels, this is more than enough to keep characters leveling up at a smooth rate, but by the time a player hits the 20s, it can take a week or longer to level up if guildleves are the primary means of experience. If Square wants gamers to devote a lot of time to leveling up, that's fine, but taking away the one thing that makes that grind easier to stomach is a terrible idea.

An economy more broken than the real world's:

FF XIV is more focused on crafting than any other MMO I've played. NPC shops sell an extremely limited variety of weapons and armor—for anything really desirable, you'll need to turn to other players and their crafting skills. Unfortunately, players are having a difficult time finding what they need or getting noticed if they have something worth selling.

instead of a traditional auction house. Square created a retainer system where players hire NPCs to sell their goods. These retainers live in special market wards in each city.

At launch, the wards were unorganized. Combined with the aforementioned slow menus, the task of digging through retainers to find the one item you wanted required an unimaginable level of patience. Square has since updated the market wards, separating them into areas explicitly designed to sell certain types of items. This is a step in the right direction, but what we really need is the ability to search across all retainers for a specific item. Supposedly this is coming in a future patch; let's hope it gets here soon. ♦

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Pushing the Envelope

Jeremiah Slaczkas is the creative visionary behind 5th Cell. The independent developer has delivered some of the most innovative memory-loading Drawn to Life and Scribblenauts. We recently spoke to Slaczkas about his design philosophy and 5th Cell's upcoming XBLA game Hybrid.

How did you hit upon the idea for Scribblenauts?

The DS was huge for us with Drawn to Life and Lock's Quest. I'd already done the drawing thing, and I didn't want us to be the "drawing" company. Once Drawn to Life was a hit, publishers kept asking us "Where's the drawing?" We'd done the building blocks thing with Lock's Quest, thought about what else we could do with the touchscreen, and [came up with] writing. But writing itself isn't fun. I looked at what you could do with the writing. At the beginning, you were actually writing full sentences like "The dog walks through the forest." Then, on the top screen a dog would drop down and start walking. But it wasn't fun, so I shelved the idea for a while.

Then I had this dream. This is the first time I ever had a dream for a game concept. I was in these rooms, and in each room there was a way to solve that room. In one room, there were three pictures hanging, and one was crooked. So, if I made the picture straight, an exit would appear and I'd go to the next room. I remember thinking it would be a cool idea for a game so I wrote it down late at night. A month later, I was working on that concept and thought, "It doesn't have replayability, because once you solve it once you know the answer." It didn't have a fresh hook. But what if you could use words to solve these puzzles? Then, all of a sudden, [the idea] came back to the other concept and everything clicked.

Do you put much stock in reviews or do you just have to trust your gut?

You always have to trust your gut. That's number one. Nobody knows what to do with a game except you. If you give someone a new game concept and say, "What do you want?" they won't know. That's not their job. My job is to get paid to guess what people want to do and make it as fun as possible. At the same time, you can't ignore when there's a common thread in what people are saying about things like controls.

You are working on a new XBLA game that uses the Source engine. Could you talk about it?

The game is called Hybrid. The trailer we're releasing shows that it's set in a post-apocalyptic world. It's pretty much the direct opposite of what Scribblenauts is, which is all these family-friendly graphics. This game is much more tuned to the core audience. It's for the Xbox. Just like with the DS, we said, "What is the DS and who is the market?" We're doing the same thing for the Xbox. Porting over Drawn to Life to the Xbox is a bad idea because no one is going to buy it. That's fine, we're all hardcore gamers. So Hybrid has guns and it's post-apocalyptic.

So it's more of a proper action game. Is it 3D?

Yes, it's 3D, high-res graphics. That's another

thing people think of us as a 2D company. We can do core titles as well with high-res art and stand with the best of them.

Given your history as a company, I'm assuming it's not just a bunch of guys with guns running around and shooting each other. There must be some conceptual hook that makes it different.

We have a philosophy at 5th Cell that we want to make sure we're the only ones that make the kind of games we make. The experiences that we create, you can only get from us. Scribblenauts is a good example. You can't go to a store and say, "I want to buy a game like Scribblenauts." You can't get that. So, even though Hybrid is 3D and has guns, it's a completely new experience. The controls and the way the game is, no one has ever played a game like this before.

Could you talk about the thing that makes it different?

I think our PR plan at the moment is to hold off on that. The trailer is only a one-minute teaser - just to say, "5th Cell is doing 3D and it's dark and it has guns." But, like you said, our M.O. is innovation and that's how it will always be. A lot of times, just because it's on XBLA and a shooter, developers will say, "It's like Modern Warfare but it's \$15." That's their hook. Well, I want Modern Warfare for \$80 because it's a better game. Why would someone buy our game instead of Modern Warfare? The reason you give us your hard-earned cash is because that you can't get that experience anywhere else.

Is Valve an inspiration for you? You've always said you've wanted to remain independent. What can you learn from them?

They are awesome. They are one of the companies that we aspire to be like. They remain independent and remain successful. They don't listen to other people. We're the same way. We don't want to follow the wave. Now everyone is saying, "Facebook games are awesome, let's make Farmville clones!" We're like, "Okay that's cool, but that's not where we're going to go." Valve is the same way. They had Steam and everyone thought that they were stupid for dumping so much money into it. Of course, now it's extremely successful and everyone's trying to copy it. They were innovators. Look at Half-Life. Look at Counter-Strike: that was a really innovative game. That's what we want to capture with Hybrid - an out of left field shooting game that is different but fun.

You've said you will remain independent. Sometimes, people read that and think, "Well, until someone offers you enough money." How strongly do you feel about that and what are the challenges of remaining independent?

We've turned down multiple offers before. They said, "Here's a bunch of money? Want it?" We've said no. A friend of mine used to work

for the Department of Defense. He was making good money and had a really nice car. He drove 30 minutes each way every day. For those 30 minutes he had fun in his shiny car, but for eight hours a day he hated it. So he said, "This isn't worth it." He was a programmer and went and got a game degree and got into gaming. I feel the same way.

Right now, I can say no to anything. We're pigeonholed as a 2D company. I'm sure a publisher would say, "We bought you because you're supposed to do 2D." Then, we want to do 3D. They would say, "We have 3D studios, we don't want that from you." That's the main reason we want to stay independent. We want control; this is a passion for us. We've done it for over seven years. So we should sell out and leave after a couple years like everyone else does? I don't want to do that. I'm getting old. [Laughs] I don't want to restart a new company. Will we ever sell out? When I want to retire, maybe. But hopefully I'll have kids and they'll want to take on the mantle.

I saw a video of you on Nintendo's site talking about the 3DS, saying it was a "set of artists' tools." Given that your ideas seem to come from the capability of the hardware, are you looking at the 3DS's features and coming up with ideas?

We're definitely looking at the system. We have people playing around with it. It is an artist's tool - with the online capabilities, 3D, and the 3D camera. The 3D camera is probably the most interesting thing that's the least talked about. I don't even know if there is a consumer camera out there that does 3D pictures. I don't know what we'll do with it, but I think it's cool. The more options you have the better it is. It has two screens, online, 3D and the camera. It's way more powerful than the DS. That was the biggest problem with the DS - it just wasn't powerful compared to other systems. Obviously, we made good games, but you can do so much more with more power.

Are you seriously looking at doing a 3DS game?

Yeah, we're pretty serious. We're more in the R&D phase, but it's probably going to happen.

Do Kinect and Move inspire your imagination at all?

Yeah, a little. I don't know 3DS is cooler in our opinion. When we were working on Hybrid we [had to] decide whether we wanted to do a Kinect game or a core title. Microsoft said, "You can do Kinect!" We checked it out, and decided we'd rather do this. It's great that we have that ability to say no. Move is okay. It's Wii Plus. It's good for what it is. Ultimately, it's all about the system. If the idea makes sense, then we can do it and we will. But it's all about the idea.

Interview by Matt Pezgon

CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

1999 AWAKENINGS

Slaczkas plays the first video game. The Legend of Zelda. Awakenings after getting a Game Boy. He loves at first sight!

1998 STEALTH ADVENTURES

Slaczkas (who didn't own many systems growing up) borrows a PlayStation from a friend to play Metal Gear Solid.

2000 DREAMWORKS

After dropping out of high school, Slaczkas starts a development studio that works with the original and the new DreamWorks message boards.

2000 GRAND AMBITIONS

Embarking on work or a project that you're excited about. The project ultimately proves too large and is eventually abandoned.

2001 SABBATICAL

While DreamWorks works on game development in Hong Kong, Slaczkas starts a freelance career.

2002 REUNITED

Original call from DreamWorks, convincing Slaczkas to form a new company with them. They pair up with 5th Cell, which can't compete on the burgeoning mobile market.

2004 UPWARD MOBILITY

5th Cell signs a publishing deal with THQ, which publishes the company's first three mobile games - Legend of Zelda and other franchises.

2007 TO THE DS

THQ agrees to publish Drawn to Life. 5th Cell's first DS game. The innovative title does on in over one million copies.

2008 LOCK IT UP

Lock's Quest. 5th Cell's first game on the energy genre. Released in post-mortem.

2009 A CLASSIC

5th Cell and Warner Bros. release Scribblenauts. The game allows players to write literally thousands of different items, objects, and creatures. It's listed in the Guinness Book of World Records.

2010 HYBRID SEQUEL

General disappointment that the sequel and the controls laws that plagued the original.

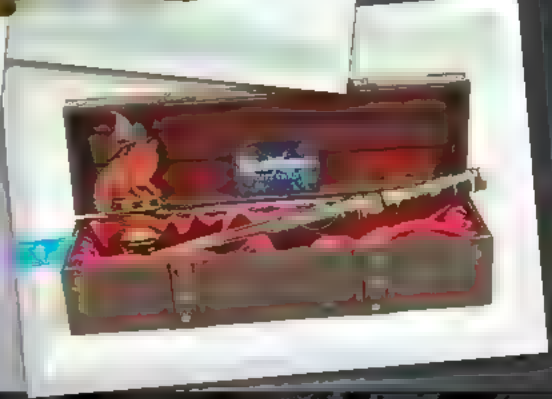
Check www.fox.com online for more tips, gadgets, games, and more for every item.



2010
HOLIDAY BUYING
GUIDE

It's never too late to start dropping hints about what you want for the holidays. Make a sandwich for your loved ones and slide a few cut outs of the items you want between the bread. Make a subliminal mixed tape where you read off your desires and gently play it for them while they're sleeping. Your family should be glad that you love them enough to help them love you better. Now all you need to know is what gifts you want, and that's our job. We've compiled a list of the coolest toys, tech, and entertainment that 2010 produced. Your friends and family shouldn't have any trouble emptying their bank accounts after this.

STOCKING STUFFERS UNDER \$30



1 **Star Trek: Enterprise: Phaser Gun** - A phaser gun with authentic detail and durability. It's a perfect stocking stuffer for your phaser fan. It's a collectible that will last for years. It's a solid zinc alloy premium plated body. It sounds almost as good as it looks. **\$24.99**

2 **Halo: Reach Original Soundtrack** \$16.99

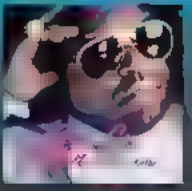
3 **World of Warcraft Series 6 Figures** - Building upon the already impressive WoW figure line, the new Sylvanas Windrunner, the Forsaken Quillen, Glaz Spaulding, the Goblin Magi Beggars, and the Dwarf King. The figures are especially respectful of the game's lore. **\$19.99**

4 **Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood Original Soundtrack** - A collection of music from the game. **\$16.99**

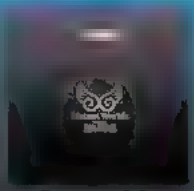
5 **The Nerd Machine Shirts** - A collection of shirts with various nerd-themed designs. **\$12.99**

6 **MagQuest Gift Set** - A collection of items including a wand, a book, and a gift box. **\$29.99**

media shelf



Do Lo Green: The Lady Killer
\$16.99



Elitist Women: Songs From The Fantasy
\$11.99



Amy Poehler Presents: Rejoice: The Two Lives of Sir
\$13.99



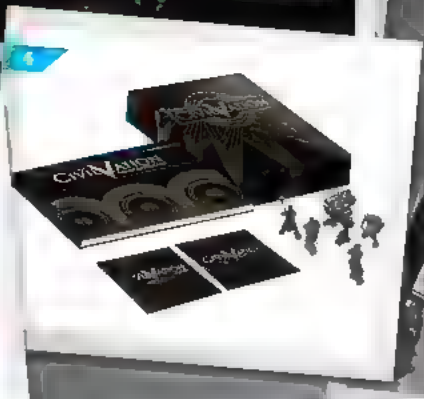
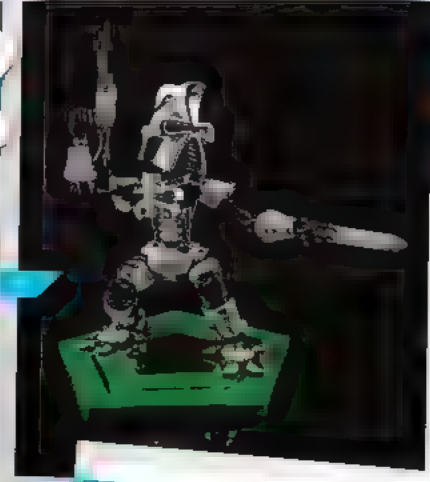
Ferragamo: Behind the Scenes
\$13.99



The Benny Hill & The Beatles 25th Anniversary Music Box
\$499.99

FRIENDS AND FAMILY

\$30-\$100



1 **Disney World Prospect Map** (Disney Store, \$44.99) This is the original prospect map, and it's a beautiful, colorful illustration of the park's early days. It's a great piece of memorabilia for anyone who loves Disney World. **2 Epic Mickey Wil Charging Station** (Epic Mickey Store, \$39.99) This is a great piece of memorabilia for anyone who loves Epic Mickey. It's a great piece of memorabilia for anyone who loves Epic Mickey.

3 **Little Frakkin' Toasters Classic Chrome Centurion** (Don't Let the Bees Eat You, \$39.99) This is a great piece of memorabilia for anyone who loves Halo. It's a great piece of memorabilia for anyone who loves Halo. **4 Civilization V Special Edition** (PC, \$79.99) This is a great piece of memorabilia for anyone who loves Civilization V. It's a great piece of memorabilia for anyone who loves Civilization V.

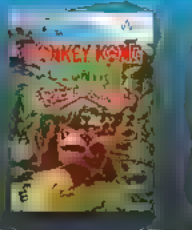
AMES



Assassin's Creed Brotherhood Collector's Edition
\$39.99 • PS3, 360



Halo Rising 2 Collector's Edition
\$79.99 • PS3, 360



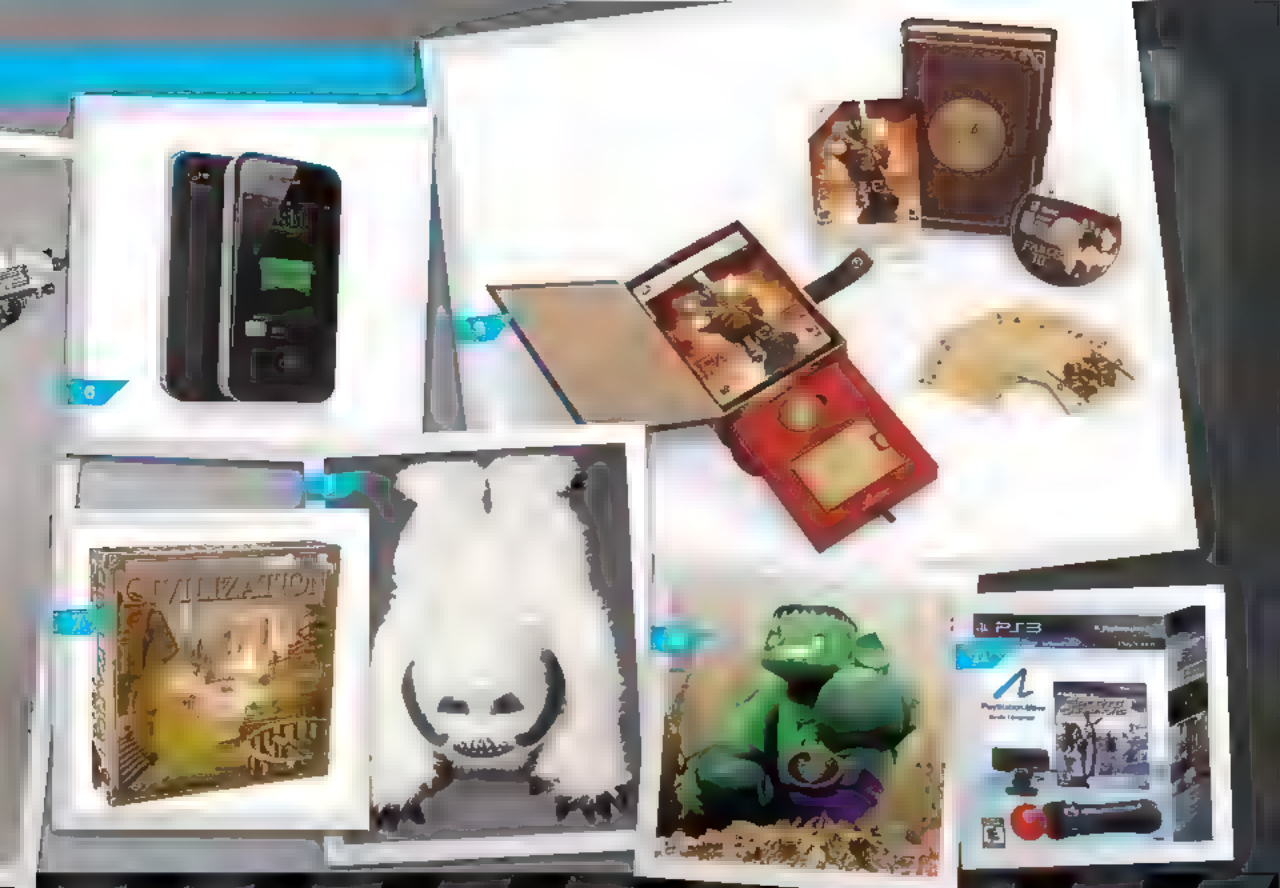
Monkey Kong Returns
\$49.99 • Wii



Epic Mickey Wil Charging Station
\$39.99 • Wii



Fallout: New Vegas Collector's Edition
\$79.99 • PS3, 360, PC



...the weapon... and... **\$49.99** **Smash Juice**...
Phase 4... kids... **\$39.99**...
7 Sid Meier's Civilization: The Board Game... **\$79.99**...
Smash Juice... **\$49.99**...
Smash Juice... **\$49.99**...

...The Em... **\$79.99**...
Smash Juice... **\$49.99**...
Smash Juice... **\$49.99**...

God of War: Ghost of Sparta
\$39.99 • PSP

Baby's First Steps
\$49.99 • Wii

NBA 2K11
\$39.99 • PS3, 360

Need for Speed: Hot Pursuit
\$39.99 • PS3, 360

Nintendo Layline and the Shattered Treasures
\$29.99 • DS

Rock Band 3
\$39.99 • PS3, 360



BECAUSE YOU CARE... A LITTLE TOO MUCH
\$100-\$300

1 **The Art of Uncharted 2: Among Thieves Limited Edition** \$300.00
 2 **Sony PlayStation Move Motion Controller** \$149.99
 3 **The Sims 3** \$19.99
 4 **DJ Hero 2** \$22.95
 5 **Sleeping Beauty** \$29.99

6 **Xbox 360 Kinect Sensor** \$149.99
 7 **The Sims 3: Ambitions** \$19.99
 8 **The Sims 3: Late July** \$19.99
 9 **The Sims 3: Showtime** \$19.99
 10 **The Sims 3: Supernatural** \$19.99
 11 **The Sims 3: University** \$19.99
 12 **The Sims 3: Into the Future** \$19.99



Valentine's Day
\$29.99

Tokyo Vice: An American Reporter on the Police Beat in Japan
by John Eddelein
\$16.99

Fragments & Dreams
by Tom Hasek
\$19.99

Little League Why Video Game Master
by Tom Hasek
\$22.95

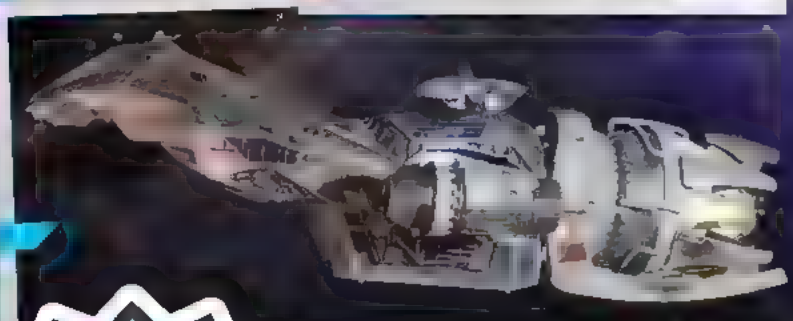
Locke & Key: Down in the Woods
by Joe Hill & Gabriel Rodriguez
\$24.99

Nightmare on Elm Street
by Geoff Johns
\$29.99



FANTASY GIFTS

\$1,000+



1 HP Envy 14 Reals Edition Today's music enthusiasts don't just need a laptop, they need a laptop that respects their music collection — they need a machine that respects their music. HP's answer? The Envy 14 Reals Edition. It's a laptop with an Intel Core i5 processor, 4GB of RAM, and a 500GB hard drive. It's also got a 14-inch display, a webcam, and a red backlit keyboard. The price? **\$1,149.99**

2 65" Samsung 8000 Series LED TV Samsung's 8000 series is the first LED TV with a 65-inch screen. It's also got a 1080p resolution, a crystal clear picture, and a lot of other features. The price? **\$1,499.99**

3 Serenity — The Big Damn Replica Few things are more amazing than Fox's dedication to cancel amazing television shows. One example is the replica of the Serenity ship from Joss Whedon's Firefly. Composed of more than 100 parts, including resin, brass, and acrylic, this 1:100 scale replica is nearly 18 inches tall. The price? **\$2,499.99**

4 Microsoft Surface You'd have to be a pretty hardcore gamer or a casual to spend this much on a piece of furniture, but Microsoft's Surface is so slick it's worth the price. The Surface's multi-touch interface is so intuitive that it seems to make itself. The price? **\$299.99**



Modern Family Season 1 Blu-ray • \$39.99

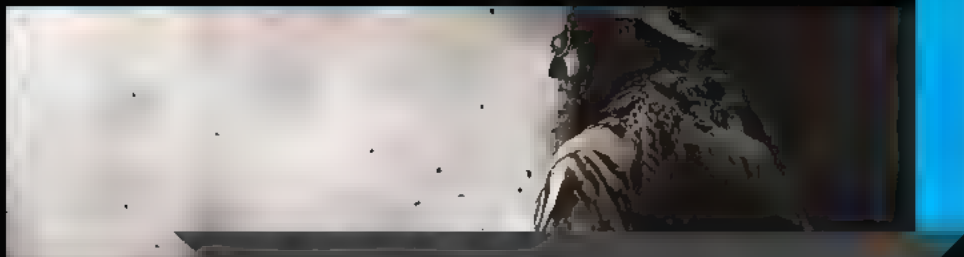
THE SIMPSONS 30th Anniversary Triple DVD Set • \$74.99

Back to the Future: The Motion Picture Anniversary Trilogy Blu-ray • \$79.99

Doctor Who: The Complete Fifth Series Blu-ray • \$89.99

The Simpsons Triple DVD Set • \$109.99

Video Games, It's Time To Grow Up



by Matt Heigold, senior editor, *Game Informer*

It was pathetic. That's the only way I can describe EA's mishandling of the Medal of Honor Taliban controversy. For those that didn't follow the story closely, here are the basics: EA's reboot of the Medal of Honor franchise takes place in current-day Afghanistan. Given the series' history of working closely with military consultants and generally reverent treatment of the U.S. Army, we had little reason to believe that this decision would garner much controversy. However, it was reported in the media that Medal of Honor's multiplayer component would allow gamers to play as Taliban forces – virtually gunning down U.S. and allied soldiers. Soon, everyone from Fox News to British Defense Secretary Liam Fox was outraged and calling for a ban on its sale.

Right from the start, I could tell EA was incapable of defending its game. Two contradictory statements were released, which perfectly illustrates the problem this industry has in how it thinks about games. Here they are:

EA official statement: "We give gamers the opportunity to play both sides. Most of us have been doing this since we were seven. If someone's the cop, someone's got to be the robber, someone's got to be the pirate, somebody's got to be the alien. In Medal Of Honor multiplayer, someone has to be the Taliban."

EA Games president Frank Gibeau: "At EA, we passionately believe games are an art form, and I don't know why films and books set in Afghanistan don't get flack, yet [games] do. Whether it's *Red Badge of Courage* or *The Hurt Locker*, the media of its time can be a platform for the people who wish to tell their stories. Games are becoming that platform."

The first response tries to diminish the importance of the issue. It's just virtual cops and robbers, right? Somebody's got to be the alien... or the Taliban. It's really just a more elaborate version of two kids playing cowboys and Indians in the backyard with toy guns.

Conversely, the second statement is a self-righteous, grandiose defense of games as art – complete with self-serving comparison to *The Hunt Locker* and *Red Badge of Courage* (both of which, I tell you, I checked, weren't mediocre Call of Duty rip-offs).

So which is it? Are games the important

Art Form of Today or a digital paintball game with arbitrary team names? Sadly, EA soon answered this question with the gutless decision to rename the Taliban the "opposing force" in multiplayer. The decision was apparently done after much deliberation and out of deep respect for our soldiers – and possibly the prospect of lost revenue due to a ban of the game's sale at military bases.

This incident perfectly illustrates the fundamental problem in how games are perceived. Everyone gets angry when pundits like Roger Ebert declare that video games aren't art, but the truth is that the industry itself wants to have it both ways. When it's a convenient way of deflecting criticism about its artistic choices, games are suddenly a vital and poignant art form. However, as soon as this stance appears to be cutting into the bottom line, games are just meaningless fun – a way to turn off your brain and kill some stuff.

If Medal of Honor really was made by people that "passionately believe games are an art form," wouldn't defending your artistic choices be important? It's akin to if the writer Nabokov, faced with criticism of the novel *Invitation to a Beheading*, suddenly decided to rename Dolores Haze 118 instead of 12 years old.

This problem isn't limited to EA. In these pages, BioShock creator Ken Levine, one of gaming's most intelligent and talented storytellers, responded to Roger Ebert by telling gamers to "Remove the best from your head..."

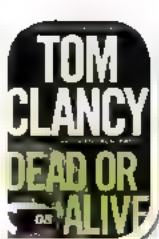
...loss your copy of Aristotle's *Poetics* [into the fire]...Crack open a two liter of Mountain Dew. Snap into a Slim Jim. Proceed to Xbox Live and shoot your best friend in the head with an M-16." While his piece was intended to tell gamers that they didn't have to be concerned with criticism from those that don't understand the medium, I was disappointed that he didn't attempt to address Mr. Ebert's view that games are not art directly. Especially considering that the chilly and cerebral BioShock – which tinged its commentary on the works of

political philosopher Ayn Rand – is far from the shallow experience Levine described. In my view, Levine is creating art as finely crafted as anything coming out of Hollywood today, and I wish he would have used his column to say so.

As today's dominant form of entertainment, games are beginning to demand a seat at the adult's table alongside movies, television, music, and literature. However, a seat at that table comes with a price. If you're going to make games that address controversial topics in a thoughtful manner, you have to be willing to accept the consequences and stand by your artistic decisions. I'm not saying every game has to be deadly serious. However, if games are an art form, then certainly it's one worth defending from our critics. When the industry sends out mixed messages, it only reinforces the view held by critics that games are just meaningless toys for children. There are reasons why this industry – not film or television – is readying itself to defend its Constitutional right to freedom of speech before the Supreme Court. One of those reasons is the generational bias and lack of understanding of games that still exists among those in power. But make no mistake – no one is going to give games the respect they deserve until the industry starts treating its own works of art with the same respect.

The views and opinions expressed on this page are solely those of the author and do not represent EA or Game Informer.

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



December

01 Spider-Man Seeks Fashion Designer... Again
If Spider-Man were his own boss, who on earth would he hire to design his suits? We're not talking about the suit he wears as a fictional superhero, but the real-life suit he wears as a real-life superhero. In *Spider-Man 3*, the hero's costume designer, John Cosentino, is the one who designs the suit. In *Spider-Man 3*, the hero's costume designer, John Cosentino, is the one who designs the suit. In *Spider-Man 3*, the hero's costume designer, John Cosentino, is the one who designs the suit.

07.1 New Releases
New titles include *Tron: Evolution* (DVD, Blu-ray), *World of Warcraft: Cataclysm* (PC), *Tom Clancy's Dead or Alive* (PS3, Xbox 360), *Return to Flynn's Arcade* (PC), *Trash Maria* (DVD), *21* (DVD), *Worst Trilogy Ever* (DVD), *A Third Trip to Marzha* (DVD), *Kick Off the New Year in Style* (DVD).

07.2 A Place For Kinect
Is your TV ready for the next generation? The Kinect sensor bar is the only way to play Xbox 360 games without a controller. It's a great way to play games like *Rock Band* and *Just Dance* without a controller. It's a great way to play games like *Rock Band* and *Just Dance* without a controller.

08 Tom Clancy's Jack Attack
Tom Clancy's *Jack* is back, and he's back with a vengeance. In *Tom Clancy's Jack*, the hero's back, and he's back with a vengeance. In *Tom Clancy's Jack*, the hero's back, and he's back with a vengeance. In *Tom Clancy's Jack*, the hero's back, and he's back with a vengeance.

10 A Third Trip To Marzha
Today marks the theatrical release of the third movie in the *Marzha* series. In *A Third Trip To Marzha*, the hero's back, and he's back with a vengeance. In *A Third Trip To Marzha*, the hero's back, and he's back with a vengeance.

11 And the Winner Is...
Spike TV's annual Video Game Awards kick off the holiday season with a bang. The awards ceremony is a great way to celebrate the best video games of the year. The awards ceremony is a great way to celebrate the best video games of the year.

17 Return To Flynn's Arcade
Remember that movie that based on the video game *Return to Flynn's Arcade*? Well, it's back. In *Return to Flynn's Arcade*, the hero's back, and he's back with a vengeance. In *Return to Flynn's Arcade*, the hero's back, and he's back with a vengeance.

21 New Releases
TrackMore: We've got you covered with the latest in new releases.

22 Worst Trilogy Ever
Today, meet the *Worst Trilogy Ever*. It's a comedy that's as bad as it gets. In *Worst Trilogy Ever*, the hero's back, and he's back with a vengeance. In *Worst Trilogy Ever*, the hero's back, and he's back with a vengeance.

29 Now Talking to Dead Fish
DC Comics' *Brightest Day* series has achieved the impossible: The comic book story has

turned Aquaman into a real character. Without Aquaman's return, a lot of the *Justice League* movies would have been a lot less interesting. In *Brightest Day*, the hero's back, and he's back with a vengeance. In *Brightest Day*, the hero's back, and he's back with a vengeance.

31 Kick Off the New Year in Style
If you want to watch champagne glasses clink each other in celebration, you'll want to watch *Kick Off the New Year in Style*. In *Kick Off the New Year in Style*, the hero's back, and he's back with a vengeance. In *Kick Off the New Year in Style*, the hero's back, and he's back with a vengeance.

The 50 Characters Who



The last decade has ushered in a new era of video game storytelling. A generation of game designers who cut their teeth in the '80s and '90s began to reach maturity, consoles like the Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3 gave them an unprecedented level of processing power with which to create. The result was an explosion of creativity unlike anything we've seen in the history of video games.

After years of being unfavorably compared to Hollywood, suddenly games are able to tell stories as deep and complex as their celluloid rivals. With next-gen graphics that enable developers to tap into the subtle communication of body language, game characters can emote in a way that was unthinkable just a decade ago. An increasing focus on strong writing has given these digital actors scripts filled with nuance. As we go along on amazing journeys with this new generation of gaming icons, we're often touched by the joy, pain, and regret they experience. With all

Above: Illustration by Sam Spratt

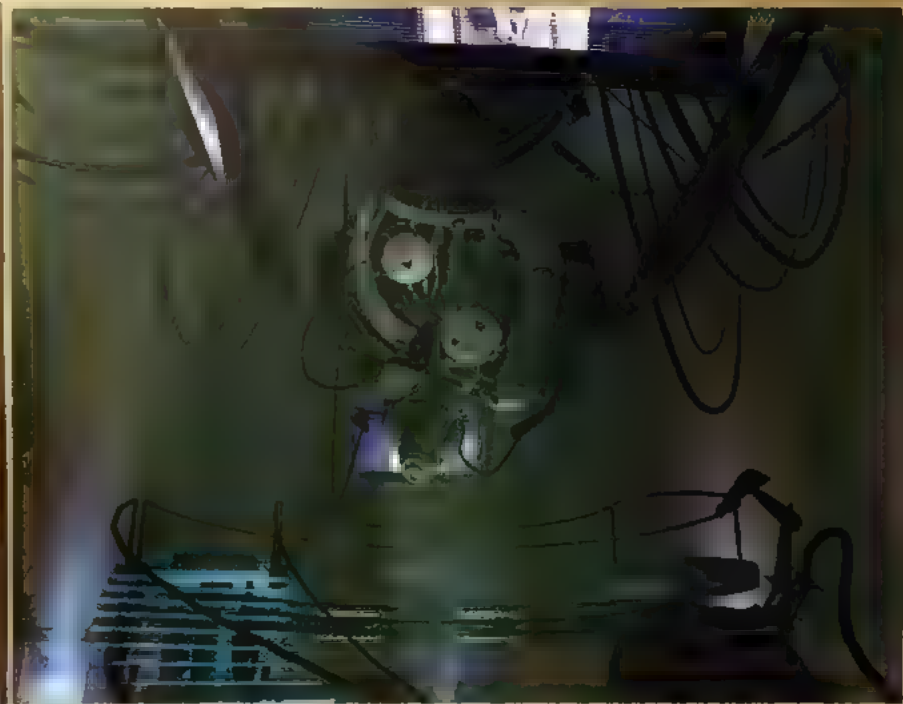
Defined A Decade



due respect to the heroes that helped build this industry into what it is today, modern games have the best, most fully realized characters we've ever seen.

ENTER EXHIBIT

In the following pages, Game Informer celebrates these virtual personalities. Whether it's the troubled, ambivalent Niko Bellic from *Grand Theft Auto IV* or the silent, enigmatic Wander from *Shadow of the Colossus*, today's games offer an amazing variety of intriguing characters. This list is our attempt to pay tribute to the 30 characters that have defined this decade [This "decade" being defined as 2000-2010, which is actually 11 years. But who's counting? - Ed.] As you might expect, it's every bit as diverse as the games we play.



1

GLaDOS *Portal*

Portal stands as one of the most memorable games of this generation, in no small part due to a star-making performance by GLaDOS, a neurotic and occasionally murderous AI being who flatters, stalks, and cajoles you during your harrowing journey through the diabolical test labs of Aperture Science.

GLaDOS is a fantastically successful work of fiction. While clearly inspired by HAL 9000, the sentient computer who turns on his masters in the classic sci-fi film 2001: A Space Odyssey, GLaDOS takes the archetype in surprising new directions, at turns slyly comic and malevolent. What's more impressive is that this characterization is done almost completely through good writing. Portal eschews so many of the things that usually help develop character. We see only glimpses of GLaDOS and the game's silent protagonist. GLaDOS herself speaks in a flat, mechanical delivery—only momentary

glitches and pitch shifts betray her growing rage. Through these sparse methods, GLaDOS becomes a remarkably well-drawn antagonist.

At first, she seems like little more than a benign advisor voiced by a slightly odd automated phone system. However, as Portal expertly unravels its multilayered puzzles, we begin to realize that GLaDOS might not have our best interests at heart. Perhaps it's the numerous times she tried to steer us to our death, all the while assuring us that nothing whatsoever was wrong. She promises cake, but delivers death by fire—the very definition of the unreliable narrator. After your escape, she attempts to shame you: "There was even going to be a party for you... I invited your best friend, the companion cube. Of course, he couldn't come because you murdered him... Your other friends couldn't come either, because you don't have any friends. Because of how unlikeable you are." Still, her hatred is colored by what

seems to be a strange form of AI puppy love. These contradictions help make this synthetic being feel genuine, more human than many supposedly human characters in games.

As the game progresses, GLaDOS becomes increasingly unhinged, alternating between melancholy and anger. Your refusal to die infuriates her. Events come to a head in the game's unforgettable last battle, where you finally come face-to-airb with GLaDOS. Even as you dismantle her, she continues to play with your head. "This isn't brave, this is murder. What did I ever do to you? The difference between us is that I feel pain."

After the final conflict, GLaDOS sends us away with a song, the tragicomic "Still Alive." Heartbroken, but unbowed, she sings, "Go ahead and leave me, I think I'd prefer to stay inside... Believe me, I'm Still Alive." Until the last note, GLaDOS remains one of the most fascinating characters in game history.



John Marston

Red Dead Redemption

2

Red Dead Redemption is the first to drop the sardonic veneer the company's past open-world games have hidden behind in a serious attempt at creating an emotionally resonant story. Previous Rockstar protagonists have been complex characters, but John Marston is the first to influence how we played through the game. This influence is not an accident: From the beginning, Rockstar establishes Marston as a character with morals, a stark contrast to his Wild West surroundings and the developer's previous offerings. John Marston is a man who remains faithful to his wife, politely declining the advances of flirtatious barmaids in every town he visits. He sympathizes with ranch hands and revolutionaries alike, often showing individuals more compassion than the law affords. His mission is to hunt down and murder his past acquaintances, but he does so for the sole purpose of returning to a quiet life with his wife and child, constantly showing contempt for the role in which he's been cast.

Even Marston's past is multifaceted. We know that as a member of Dutch's gang, Marston performed countless terrible deeds. But we also learn that he was misled by his charismatic leader, and after seeing the error of his ways, he fled with his wife and child to give them a different life. Despite leaving, Marston still doesn't apologize for his past, and seems as haunted by the good memories of his former life as he is by the bad ones. While most games never progress beyond a good vs. evil formula, Marston lives in a world of grey, and his character is better for it. Even before the opening credits, Marston has gone through more personal growth than some video game protagonists do over multiple games.

Ultimately, Marston is forced into the role of an errand boy, redeeming his past mistakes by making new ones, all the while painting himself into a corner he can't escape. Your reward for completing Marston's long and bloody road isn't a new, more powerful weapon, or a chest for infinite ammo: You're simply able to return to your family. The last few missions, which are the most mundane of an otherwise action-heavy game, flesh out Marston's role as a family man, and transform the role of his wife and child from an easily manipulated bullet point of a half-baked plot to the final piece in Marston's character. Because of this expert storytelling, Marston's final actions convey true sacrifice, both courageous and fragile for him, both rewarding and disappointing for the player. Thanks to his complexity, Red Dead Redemption strikes an emotional chord not often seen in video games.



3

Nathan Drake

Uncharted Series

Nathan Drake isn't the most original character. After the first showing of *Uncharted* at E3, he was immediately dubbed "Dude Raider" in the press. While the formula (Tomb Raider platforming + guy with Gap model looks + Indiana Jones action) was clear from the beginning, we didn't know how Naughty Dog was going to take this template and create one of the most incredible characters of this generation.

Using the company's formidable graphical and writing chops, Drake achieves something that was previously the domain of live actors: genuine charm. As an adventuring treasure hunter who explores the globe through a series of ever more impressive action sequences, Drake dispenses quips and one-liners with the ease of Harrison Ford in his prime. It's done so subtly and naturally that it's sometimes easy to overlook. While game writers fall over themselves to praise games like *Mass Effect* or *BioShock*, which trade on drama and epic scale, the truth is that light banter and comedy is often harder to accomplish.

Drake is cocky, funny, and sometimes foolish. Whether we're marveling at his sheer guts or chuckling as he gets knocked down a peg, he's never less than endearing—the proverbial “guy you'd love to have a beer with.” In *Uncharted 2*, our connection with him becomes deeper as he shows a new depth, struggling with a love triangle and his on-again, off-again relationship with Elena Fisher.

Of all the memorable moments in the *Uncharted* series, the one that sticks with us most is the end of *Uncharted 2*. After all the action-movie pyrotechnics, the game ends on sweet note, with Elena gently teasing Nathan about crying over her near-death. As the camera pans out to the Tibetan skyline, the pair's sly repartee continues, a touch of real human warmth that feels just as true as any movie.

4

Master Chief

Halo Series

Master Chief is a man of few words. Even after saving the galaxy three times during the course of the Halo trilogy, we still don't know much about this faceless hero. But this anonymity is in part what makes him such a significant character. Master Chief is the epitome of the hero archetype in video games. He provides the opportunity for the player to live out a classic power fantasy, to feel like you're saving the day without an unessential personality interfering with your experience.

What Master Chief lacks in personality he more than makes up for in presence. The moment he steps on the battlefield, Master Chief is greeted with reverence from his fellow soldiers. He is mankind's last hope for survival, and stepping into his big metal boots feels suitably empowering. Equally rousing is the response Master Chief garners from his enemies, who run away in uncontrollable fear at the very sight of the iconic soldier. His reputation as an alien-slaughtering badass precedes him everywhere he goes.

Thanks to Halo's innovative system for handling player damage — one now copied by virtually every modern first-person shooter on the market — playing as Master Chief makes you feel like an unstoppable tank, while still retaining Halo's challenging gameplay. This isn't the only aspect of Halo to be copied by other developers. Building on the foundation laid by games like *Half-Life* and *System Shock*, Halo's cinematic take on the genre cemented the shooter's place as a medium for storytelling. After its release, the anonymous, shooting galleries of the Doom era were dead.

No matter what the challenge or how dire the odds, Master Chief always comes through in the end. He is the definition of the reliable hero, and although he might not be gaming's most robust character, he has played as vital a role in the industry as he does in Halo's fiction. Master Chief isn't just the face of Xbox; he has defined the FPS genre for the past decade.



Niko Bellic

Grand Theft Auto IV

5

Before *Grand Theft Auto IV*, Rockstar protagonists were predominately shallow criminals driven by lustful desire for money and power. Niko Bellic is different.

An Eastern European immigrant, Niko leaves his checkered past behind and boards a ship for America at the behest of his cousin Roman. He arrives on the shores of Liberty City filled with regret over how his life has turned out. Over the course of the game we learn that Niko served in the Yugoslav Wars and afterwards fell into the amoral trades of human and drug trafficking. America offers him a new beginning, but while Roman's letters spoke of a glamorous lifestyle of fast cars and loose women, Niko finds the reality of the situation to be drastically different.

Before Niko even has time to look down a steady job, he gets drawn into Roman's personal problems. Roman's gambling debts have loansharks breathing down his neck. To bail his hapless relative out, Niko finds himself right back in the criminal underground from which he was trying to escape. The Liberty City Bratva employs him as an errand boy, a crooked cop cajoles him into cleaning up his messes, and an assortment of borough drug dealers help Niko scrape together some cash.

As Niko gets further removed from the idyllic American Dream, his past comes back to haunt him. His hesitation to embark on

these criminal activities is palpable, and he eventually opens up about his misgivings to the wife of a Russian crime boss. "When the war came, I did bad things, but after the war I thought nothing of doing bad things," he remembers. "I killed people, struggled people, sold people...After you walk into a village and you see 50 children, all sitting neatly in a row, against a church wall, each with their throats cut and their hands chopped off, you realize that the creature that could do this doesn't have a soul."

Through his dealings with the criminal underworld, Niko soon discovers that the man who betrayed his unit in the Bosnian War may be hiding in Liberty City. Sensing a chance to find redemption in avenging his fallen comrades, Niko makes it his life's goal to track down and kill the duplicitous traitor. Though Niko ultimately exacts his revenge, over the course of his rage-driven campaign he slowly realizes it doesn't make living with his past any easier.

Niko may have failed to exorcise his demons, but as the first Rockstar character with redeeming humanistic qualities, he demonstrates a growth in the storytelling that we've seen reflected with subsequent Rockstar protagonists like *Red Dead Redemption*'s John Marston, *The Lost and Damned*'s Johnny Klebitz, and *The Ballad of Gay Tony*'s Luis Lopez.

6

Alyx Vance *Half-Life 2*

Easy, good-looking Alyx came on screen with a wink and a smile, a point of light and hope in *Half-Life 2*'s dystopia. Any fears of her bubbly demeanor shoe-horning her into the well-worn flirty sidekick role are quickly dispelled. Sent through a cobbled-together transporter that inverted its last test subject — and which nearly explodes in the process of sending Alyx — she simply waves, gives her father a kiss on her cheek, and heads off to do the resistance's business. In a medium where female characters too often exist solely for their romantic relationship with a male protagonist, Alyx is strong, independent, and awesome without making a point out of it. It's just who she is.

Alyx is as qualified to smash a zombie in the face as anyone, but "badass chick" is easy to write. Creating a character that shows real tenderness toward a mute robot companion takes talent. Crafting a woman whose skills lie as much in leading a ragtag resistance group as slinging a shotgun is an accomplishment. Alyx effortlessly goes from laughing in appreciation at Gordon's skill in bringing down Combine gunships to covering his rear in the heat of battle or pretending to be a zombie to cut the tension of oppressive alien-infested darkness.

Most importantly, she does all this while presenting a consistent character. You see Alyx from a variety of angles over the course of *Half-Life 2* and its two subsequent episodes. Her responses to crisis, triumph and defeat feel genuine as they run the gamut: between rage, regret, and relief.

Alyx fulfills her obvious role within the narrative with style. She puts a human face on an otherwise abstract sci-fi story, she gives the story an emotional center, and she allows the writers to explicitly present complicated story elements. These roles aren't apparent at first viewing unless you're looking for them, though, and every time you think you've put Alyx's character in a box she slips out of it by showing a new facet of her personality. That's an impressive feat in any medium.

By the time you're halfway through *Half-Life 2*, Alyx feels like a friend. When she's critically wounded by a Hunter in Episode Two, the emotional impact is ten times that of seeing dozens of faceless resistance fighters gunned down. The wait for Valve to get around to releasing more *Half-Life* content is painful as much for seeing more of Alyx's story as it is for the ongoing struggle against the Combine for humanity's ultimate fate.

STYLE OVER SUBSTANCE

While the 30 characters on our list all made an impact on the industry, others are more about flash than depth. We may not look at the world in a new way after finishing their games, but odds are they did some pretty cool crap along the way.

Bayonetta (Bayonetta)

The titular heroine of *Bayonetta* isn't exactly a font of wisdom. You won't hear her going on about the nature of war and death like Solid Snake, but she does have a hair suit. What she lacks in depth is easily forgotten when you're breakdancing through a cemetery while your feet guns murder angels in every direction.



Amaterasu (Okami)



Okami is one of the most visually striking games of all time, and features some fantastic Zelda-esque gameplay. Protagonist Amaterasu certainly fits the visual aesthetic, but she isn't the most compelling character. Her companion Issun does all of the talking while we control a dog that just likes painting trees.

Travis Touchdown (No More Heroes)

If you want to make your character look like a badass, just give him a lightsaber. It's a surefire way to cover up for any lack of actual character development (we're looking at you, Starkiller). If it weren't for his sweet saber, Travis would just be some nerd that can't keep a steady job and spends too much time on the crapper.



Isaac (Dead Space)



If there's one thing we can learn from *Dead Space*'s protagonist, it's that space suits are going to look a whole lot more badass 500 years from now. His wool cheese creaser-esque helmet and awesome assortment of weapons ensure he'll look sweet on box art and magazine covers, but there isn't a whole lot more to him. Hopefully the events he endured in the first game will spark some emotion in him for the sequel.

Faith (Mirror's Edge)

Mirror's Edge did a great job of separating Faith from the stereotype of big-breasted, scantily clad female game characters. She has a distinct style (i.e. she's wearing clothes), and her parkour moves made platforming in a first person title fun for once. They may have succeeded on these points with the character, but few remember anything about Faith other than "that chick with the tattoos who jumps a lot."



7

Kratos *God of War Series*

The ancient Greek myths are populated with larger-than-life narcissists.

So it seems somewhat fitting that the main character in a game constructed out of these classical Greek myths would have a persona so engulfing that he steamrolls everyone he comes across, be they man, god, or titan.

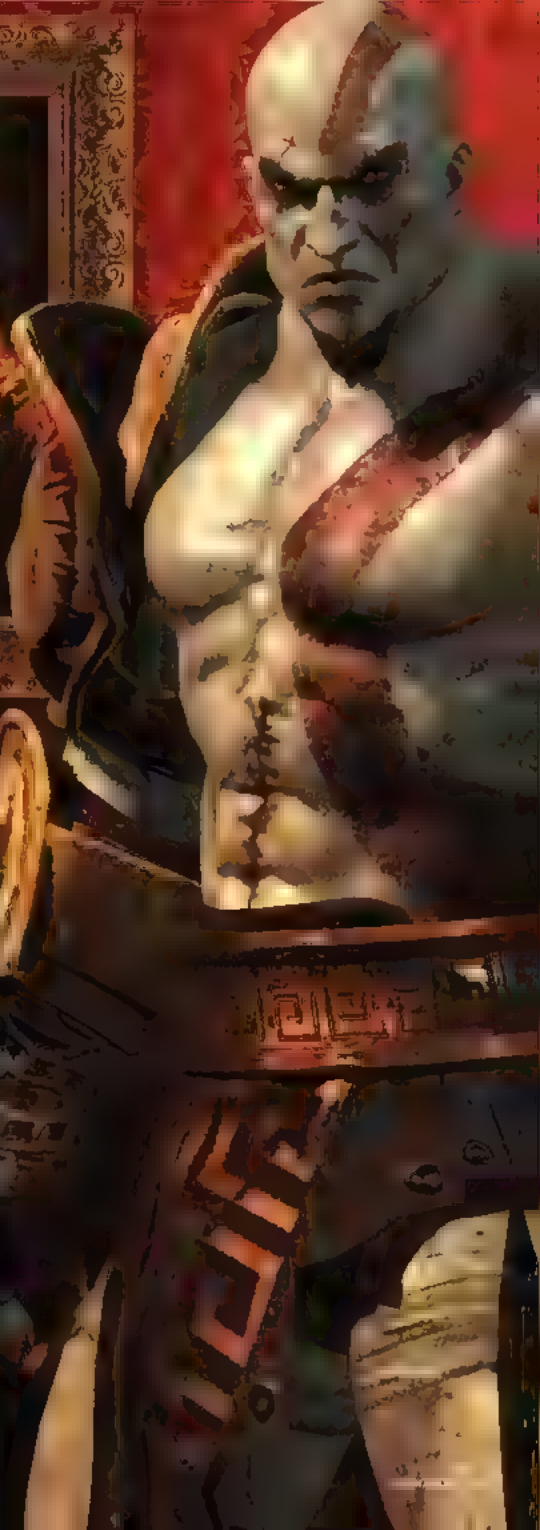
The God of War titles received a lot of fanfare for their excessive and cathartic violence. Some of this was due to the polished gameplay and controls, but much of it has to do with the series' protagonist. Kratos isn't necessarily a likable character, but he resonates with the human pathos. We understand anger, vengeance, and the need for justice, and Kratos personifies all of these emotions. He is an outlet of pure fury.

In many ways, Kratos is a contradiction. He is a character who expresses nothing but anger, yet he doesn't come across as a one-dimensional killing machine. Early on, we come to pity Kratos when we learn that the gods tricked him into killing his own family. Through this poetic narrative twist, we come to understand why Kratos is filled with a fury that even a descent into the madness of Hades can't quiet. By boiling Kratos down to his essence, the team

at Sony Santa Monica was able to explore a character that is more complex than the legendary figures he battles.

As the series progresses, Kratos falls into a spiral of vengeance and anger. Blinded by his emotions, he continues to destroy the world around him. Kratos may be a sympathetic antihero – the ultimate tragic figure – but he is also flawed. Kratos is filled with a rage that blinds him to compassion. He refuses to bow before the whims of the gods and becomes obsessed with destroying them. As he mates out justice for the sins of the gods, Kratos only seems to cause more death to the innocent bystanders that get in his way – Kratos is nothing if not a hurricane of destruction.

At one point in the first God of War, Ares turns to Kratos and says, "I have taught you many ways to kill a mortal. Flesh that burns, bones that break. But to break a man's spirit is to truly destroy him." This is likely Kratos's most impressive feat. Though he's had everything he loved taken from him, he's forced to wear the ashes of his mistakes on his skin, he has an indomitable spirit. He will not be broken.





Andrew Ryan *BioShock*

8

When *BioShock* released a few years ago, players were struck by the stunningly immersive city of Rapture. While Irrational Games is responsible for creating the game's unforgettable atmosphere, in the world of *BioShock*,

Andrew Ryan is the man behind the vision. Rapture is his child, its failure a testament to his personal flaws.

Ken Levine has described Andrew Ryan as part Ayn Rand, part Howard Hughes, and the philosophies of both figures are readily apparent in Ryan's criticisms to Jack. Subscribing to the belief that a man is beholden only to himself, Ryan continually chastises Jack for following the orders of his enemies, while encouraging him to make his own decisions. Throughout the city's decaying passageways, "Rapture reminders" continue to spread Andrew Ryan's philosophy to his doomed citizens. Among these audio messages is one that aptly describes Andrew Ryan, as well as his relationship with Jack: "We all make choices, but in the end, our choices make us."

Whether the player sees Andrew Ryan as an eccentric genius or an unethical monster, he is without question a man of his ideals. When confronted by Jack, Ryan sacrifices his life to improve his point, instilling one final lesson to the player with his dying words: "A man chooses, a slave obeys." Although you're not the one left holding the golf club at the end of the scene, Ryan still comes off as the victor, his stubbornness both infuriating and strangely endearing.

Not long after his death you find out that Ryan was right all along, and the gratification you received from defeating him is tempered by a certain sense of remorse. You have brutalized out the heart of the city, the man who made Rapture an independent utopia, and ushered in its horrifying conclusion. The lesson has been learned, but not soon enough to save him or his city. Does this make him a tragic character? Ryan wouldn't think so.

9

Loghain Mac Tir *Dragon Age: Origins*

Most video game villains have a cartoonishly fiendish endgame. A nemesis trying to open a portal to Hell or eradicate existence certainly keeps the stakes high, but only the most maniacal and unhinged opponents could desire such an outcome. While these kind of moustache-twirling antics are commonplace, they don't give rise to believable villains. BioWare ditched the outlandish plots for world domination when creating Loghain, instead opting for layers of history and tragedy that make *Dragon Age: Origins*' main antagonist memorable and sympathetic.

When Loghain withdraws from the Battle of Ostagar and leaves King Callan to die on the battlefield, one can't help but see him as a sinister turncoat. In the early stages of the game, players envision a final confrontation in which the usurper receives a bloody comeuppance. However, by the time the critical moment arrives, the Grey Warden has learned that all of Loghain's actions do not spring from a well of evil intent; he is a patriot first and foremost.

Over 30 years before *Dragon Age: Origins* begins, Ferelden was ruled by the tyranny of the nearby nation of Orlais. Loghain led the army that drove out the Orlesians and won back Ferelden's independence, cementing his reputation as a brilliant military strategist and a living legend. Though victorious, the experience left him damaged; he sees plots against his homeland everywhere, and his paranoia leads him to believe a new invasion from Orlais is imminent. Everything he does, from abandoning Callan to enacting the Grey Wardens (who he thinks are spies), he does in the name of keeping the people of his nation secure. You may not agree with his methods, but it's difficult to condemn his goal.

A typical cinematic encounter at the end of an RPG doesn't have room for sympathy. You just expect good to triumph over evil. In reality, things aren't that simple. No one sees themselves as evil, since people's actions are chosen based on context and personal motivations. By tapping into this notion with Loghain, BioWare made a multifaceted villain who was surprisingly hard to hate, despite all the blood on his hands.





10

Ezio Auditore da Firenze

Assassin's Creed series

From boy to man, student to master, Ezio Auditore da Firenze is one of the most dynamic characters in video games. We witness his transformation from guileless teenage hothead into history-altering leader. Ezio is brash, loyal, and exacting in his quests—first for revenge, and then for a greater goal that spans lifetimes.

When first we meet Ezio, it is hard to imagine his heroism. Infatuated with the beautiful women of Florence and embroiled in petty gang fights, he is a far cry from the disciplined assassin, Altair, from the first *Assassin's Creed*. However, few people show their true worth in youth; Ezio's initial inexperience is the very thing that makes his coming transformation so engrossing. Over the course of his journeys, we see Ezio grow from a boy to a man.

The loss of his family to Templar villainy spurs Ezio's drive to perfection within the Assassin order, but it is only after over 20 years that he begins to unravel the grand mystery that drove his ancestors. We watch friendships and rivalries that last for years. We see grief and loss as those closest to him are torn away, and observe as Ezio's anger is honed to a sharp point to strike back at the perpetrators. By the events of *Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood*, Ezio is more than an individual. He's a figurehead to an entire movement. To gamers, he's an ever-evolving, fascinating—a growing protagonist whose exploits stretch not across days or weeks, but entire decades.

11

Ethan Mars *Heavy Rain*

Video games often sell the concept that their protagonist is an everyman, but then he goes and defeats an alien invasion like a one-man army/superhero. *Heavy Rain's* Ethan Mars is one of those rare cases in video games where his ordinary nature is realistically defined – and it's what is appealing about him. As Mars tries to rebuild his life after the death of one of his sons and the subsequent separation from his wife, his attempts to lead a normal life are shattered by the Origami Killer. Ethan's desperation and failures are part of what help him succeed as a character.

Ethan's journey as a reluctant hero is grounded by his desire to conquer his depression and reconnect with his remaining son, Shaun, by being a good father – whether that's playing with him or making him do his homework. Ethan's desire to provide for Shaun as he couldn't for Jason makes going through the Origami Killer's sadistic trials all the more real.

During the course of performing these trials, Ethan has to put himself through the ringer, and he often comes out on the other side looking pathetic. But his battered state gives him a vulnerable realism that

makes Ethan more interesting than your average gun-jockey who can endlessly respawn. Most games are about achieving some absolute measure of success, and anything less is a game over. In Ethan, however, we still get a sense of film as a person when he fails: the Killer's increasingly difficult trials. At times Ethan must balance the pragmatism of survival versus more philosophical moral questions which complicates his ultimate mission to save his son, and helps us feel the weight on Ethan's shoulders.

GOOD FOR A LAUGH

While we can all appreciate a complex character at the core of a video game narrative, a good sense of humor can go a long way. If all characters ever did was wrestle with heavy emotional baggage, playing a game would be like sitting through an entire Eastern European film festival. Here, we salute our favorite characters that add levity to our gaming experience.

Fawful (Mario & Luigi series)

The handheld Mario & Luigi role-playing titles are already somewhat silly, but Fawful's ridiculous (and hilarious) turns of phrase make his rest of the game seem dead serious in comparison.

Classic lines like "I am the mustard of your doom," and "Fawful is beetless" make his every appearance a happy one, even if he's scheming against you.



Claptrap (Borderlands)

Life on Pandora can get pretty bleak. Between blasting skags and fighting back hordes of psychopaths, a treasure hunter doesn't have a lot of time to kick back. That's where the Clap-

traps come in handy. No matter how tough things get, an adorably upbeat robot dancing can always bring a smile to your face.



Bruce (Grand Theft Auto IV)

People like Bruce aren't funny in real life. In the world of GTA IV, however, he fits right in. He's an over-eager fitness freak pumped full of shark testosterone, and he illegally changed his middle name to "Motivation." His bro-speak and tireless efforts to convince the world of his heterosexuality easily make him Niko's most amusing associate.



Isaac Washington (The House of the Dead: Overkill)

We'd like to say that detective Washington has a razor-sharp wit or a snappy one-liner for every occasion. That's just not true. Most of Washington's entertainment value comes from the fact that he reacts to a horde of murderous zombies in the same way that many of us would: he swears, fires bullets indiscriminately, then swears some more.



12

Commander Shepard *Mass Effect series*

Players rarely have the opportunity to shape a character so fully as they do in *Mass Effect*. Shepard might have been a man or a woman. He or she might have been born in deep space, or a child of the human colonies. As a Spectre, Commander Shepard could be a ruthless and dangerous figure with few morals, or an ethical hero who models the best humanity has to offer. Shepard fascinates because we shape his or her motivations and means as players, but the ends are always the same – the salvation of the galaxy.

BioWare's remarkable feat in crafting Shepard isn't in the formation of a single character; it's the way that Shepard feels like a naturally progressing individual along any number of different story branches. Core personality traits of determination and efficiency act as a template on which players can build their hero. Beyond that, Shepard takes shape through relationships with others. Which teammate do you sacrifice? Who do you fall in love with? Will you seize the day for the human species, or work for the greater galactic good? Each decision helps us understand Shepard in a way that only video games can deliver – truly interactive character development.

Many games have offered choice and consequence, but it's rare that the character seems fully a part of those decisions. Commander Shepard serves as a model, not just because he or she is a great character, but because we made it so.

Sheogorath

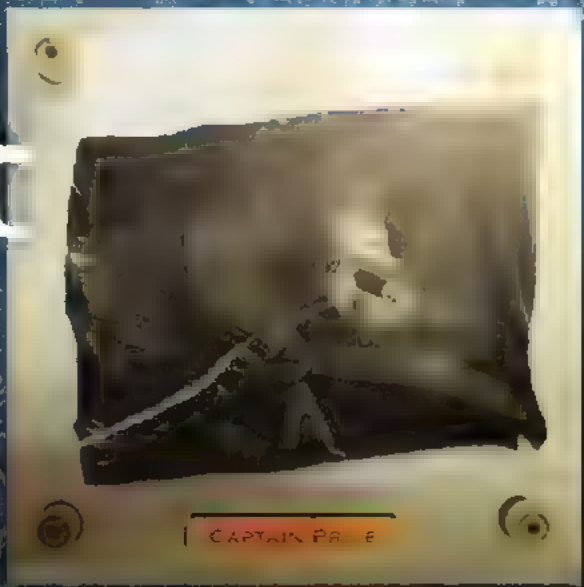
(The Elder Scrolls IV: Shivering Isles)

The daedric prince of madness

and speaks with an affable Scottish accent, but that isn't the funny part. The real laughs come when Sheogorath's manic cruelty surfaces in casual conversation as he joyfully discusses the sadistic punishments that await his enemies – and his gruesome plans for your brains, eyes, and intestines.



14



13

Jimmy Hopkins *Bully*



Idiots like anti-game crusader Jack Thompson proclaimed Rockstar's *Bully* a "Columbine simulator" before they'd even seen the game, so many were surprised when the finished product wasn't a shock-fest, but rather an intelligently written, loving tribute to adolescence. Jimmy Hopkins, *Bully*'s brilliantly imagined hero, is unlike so many of the heavily muscled men-of-action that populate video games. No mall-bred idol, his pug-like looks match his angry demeanor. Like so many of us during our teen years, Jimmy has got plenty to be angry about. Abandoned at snobbish Bullworth Academy by his disinterested mother, he's beset by trouble. Bullied by jocks, confused by girls, and betrayed by his scheming friend Gary, Jimmy's not out to conquer the galaxy — he's usually just happy to make it through another day unscathed.

As you might expect, he often acts out. Throughout *Bully*, Jimmy's a little brat, pulling stunt after hilarious stunt. From the teachers lounge to the girl's locker room, nowhere is safe from the wrath of a pissed-off kid. As the game progresses, we begin to understand that Jimmy's a lot more than just a juvenile delinquent. Despite his flaws, he's got his own (slightly skewed) sense of morality. Even at his worst, Jimmy's instinct is to stick up for those even lower on the social totem pole than himself; the nerds he initially picks on quickly become his allies against the larger forces of evil loose in Bullworth.

In the end, Jimmy isn't really good or bad — he's a little of both, just like most of us. Kudos to Rockstar for having the vision to eschew the industry's usual clichés and giving us a character that doesn't fit the mold.

Captain John Price

Call of Duty Series

The grumpy, deadpan soldier has been an archetype in war stories since before there were special forces. Captain John Price is a pure expression of the uber-badass that has been part of our species' violent myths: from Homer's *Iliad* to Ian Fleming's James Bond. When he's not shooting oppressive dictators from hundreds of meters away in a radioactive fallout zone, he's stopping black market arms dealers from supplying terrorists with finality. Captured by Russians after saving millions by preventing a nuclear strike on America's east coast, he doesn't miss a beat following months of imprisonment in a Siberian gulag. He gets right back to the business of stopping the Russian invasion of Washington, DC — by detonating a nuclear missile over the city, causing

an EMP blast that sends the high-tech Russian droids to their maker, obliterating the U.S. time line to boot.

Price is a supersoldier who does it with a dynamic emphasis on grit or star-crossed destiny. He is a man of war who longs for peace. Price plans himself, always the schemes of madmen who would bring our civilization crashing down for their own profit, simply because he believes in freedom and justice, as free as the sounds on paper. You have to admire anyone who assaults his commanding officer, knowing what it will likely cost him: his military career or force him into a life of hiding as a known war criminal, because of his unflinching conviction that protecting the innocent is the right thing to do, no matter the cost.

15

HK-47

Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic series

The Star Wars universe is filled with strange aliens, but it is the humanization of these characters that naturally endears them to us. Thus, one of the big achievements of BioWare's *Knights of the Old Republic* isn't simply that it is a fun Star Wars-themed RPG, but that it put its own stamp on Star Wars lore with a great story filled with memorable characters. HK-47 is the best of them, and his disdain for organic meatbags, juxtaposed with his loyalty and affection for his master Revan, makes him a hilarious and compelling character.

Darth Revan programmed HK-47 to help him keep order in the galaxy one assassination at a time, and his propensity towards killing has even led to him disposing of owners other than Revan. But HK-47 is not just a cold-blooded killer — far from it, in fact. He constantly delivers emotive lines that turn his hatred of organic life into comic gold. "Definition: 'Love' is making a shot to the knees of a target 120 kilometers away using an Aeltech sniper rifle with a tri-light scope. Not many meatbags could make such a shot, and strangely enough, not many meatbags would derive love from it."

HK-47's extreme misanthropic nature, nasty sense of

humor, and delight in human suffering betray some of our own violent desires in the game, hold a mirror to Revan's dual history with both sides of the Force, and highlight the overarching Star Wars theme of the potential for good and evil in all of us. "Query: Can I kill him now, master? I'd like ever so much to crush his neck. Just a little. It is a long-time fantasy of mine."

HK-47 continually refers to organics as meatbags. Nevertheless, HK-47 follows the human Revan and helps him on his mission to destroy the Star Forge. HK-47's devotion to his master is more than just the obedience of droid programming ("Commentary: How would you like to be the wholly owned servant to an organic meatbag? It's demeaning! If, uh, you weren't one yourself, I mean..."). HK-47 questions Revan's new compassion from the light side of the Force while still admiring and helping him in one of the contradictions within HK-47 that is humorous and which adds depth to the character. Layer on voice acting by Kristoffer Tabori (excelling in both dripping sarcasm and deadpan delivery) and a great script, and HK-47 becomes more than just a heartless killer robot.



16

Elena Fisher

Uncharted series

For all the strides the video game industry has made in storytelling, its inability to create compelling female characters is inexcusable. So let's give credit where credit is due to Naughty Dog (and writer Amy Hennig) for Elena Fisher. Far from a bimbo, Elena is a fiercely intelligent reporter, one whose career has frequently crossed paths with the series' hero Nathan Drake. In classic movie form, the two often clash in arguments that reveal some not-so-hidden romantic feelings for each other. Though not as cavalier as Drake, Elena is not afraid to put herself in harm's

way — to do what's right. Throughout the series, Elena's pluck and courage guide her through life-threatening situations.

She's everything a good character should be: smart, funny, brave, and not afraid to call Drake out when he's putting his own interests above doing the right thing. Over the course of the *Uncharted* games, their relationship — and our affection for Elena — deepens. This culminates in the emotional finale to *Uncharted 2*, when catastrophic events help Drake realize just how much she means to him. We feel the same way.



17

The Illusive Man

Mass Effect 2

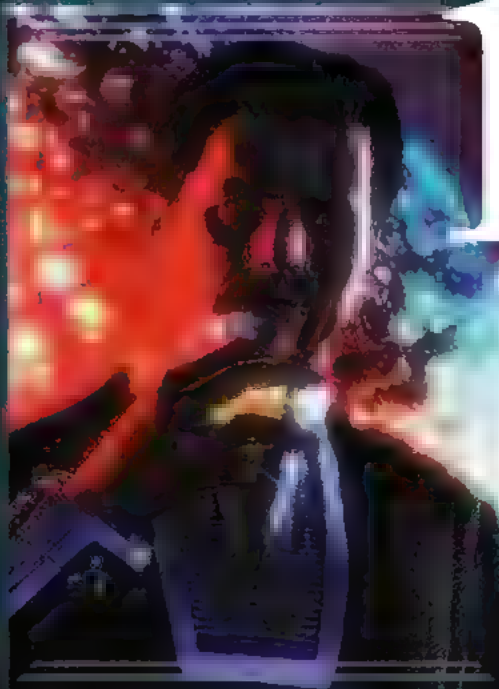
Mass Effect's Commander Shepard is a badass capable of saving the galaxy, but is there someone who is actually more powerful? Shepard does it with firepower, a talented crew, and his own physical abilities, but the Illusive Man is just as dangerous. His vast resources, and focused ambition make him a force to be reckoned with, and even capable of overcoming death itself. They say power is intoxicating, and the Illusive Man's influence in the Mass Effect universe makes him a very intriguing character.

The Illusive Man's sole aim is to ensure the ascendancy of the human race, and he has marshaled an extraordinary amount of resources and machinations to make sure that happens. His money and the power that is derived from it make him feared militarily and politically. Not only does he bring Commander Shepard back to life at the beginning of Mass Effect 2, but his extensive

Cerberus operation protects humanity at all corners of the galaxy.

Despite what we know about the Illusive Man, he's also intriguing for what's still unknown about him. During Mass Effect 2 he is constantly one step ahead of Shepard, pulling hidden strings to seemingly help the character, but you never feel comfortable with him and the info he is feeding you. He'll go to great lengths to protect humanity, and his blurring of the line between good and evil brings an air of dangerous unpredictability to his otherwise seemingly rational goals.

It's not until the end of Mass Effect 2 that we get the sense that Shepard has turned the tables on the Illusive Man and things are finally on Shepard's terms for once. Yet, we're sure the Illusive Man is still moving ahead of Shepard in a game in which he's just a pawn. It takes a lot of guts to try and use the galaxy's most dangerous hero as a mere puppet, but the Illusive Man has that kind of ambition,



18

Tommy Vercetti *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City*

Like the infamous real-life gangsters Pablo Escobar and Al Capone, *Vice City* star Tommy Vercetti acts with abandon and does not employ conventional means to get what he wants. Why play by the rules when you can simply take anything you desire?

Vercetti begins *Vice City* as a calculating ex-con looking to make a name in the oceanside metropolis, a municipality of excess overtly modeled on '80s Miami. After serving 15 years for swallowing the charges for multiple homicides at the behest of his mafia boss, Sonny Forelli, Vercetti is eager to jump back into the game. The drug deal he's sent to do by Sonny goes awry, and so begins Tommy's ascent up the criminal ladder.

Like a character in any mobster movie from the past 20 years, Vercetti is an abrasive personality that is simultaneously endearing and intimidating. Voiced by Ray Liotta of *Goodfellas* fame, Tommy's wry sense of humor comes across as

frequently as his proclivity for violence. When assuring his boss that he's going to find out who double-crossed him, he says: "Sonny, you have my personal assurance that I'm gonna get you your money back, and the drugs, and I'm gonna mail you the dicks of those responsible." Spoken like a man ripped straight out of a *Marlin* *Scorecase* film.

After serving so much time, Tommy's appetites far exceed his role as an underling. Like Tony Montana from *Scarface*, he eventually takes over the drug operations for the city, spends his money on legit businesses, and breaks away from the Forelli mob to form his own gang. His magnetic personality proves too big to be a crime boss who works in the shadows, and he soon finds himself mingling with porn stars and rock bands. Though video games have seen a fair share of wannabe mobsters, his grand ambitions, memorable quips, and sense of style help Vercetti stand atop the heap of likeable anthroes.

A PLACE TO REMEMBER

The last decade has delivered some of the most memorable characters in video game history, but sometimes the setting steals the show. Here are five locations permanently etched into our memories.

Rapture (BioShock)

From the moment we stepped foot in this underwater metropolis, we knew we were visiting a city unlike any other. Rapture was created as a safe haven for human endeavor free from the societal, religious, and political pressures of modern society, but as its citizens soon found out, a civilization unshackled from institutional restrictions isn't all it's cracked up to be. From Little Sisters and Big Daddies to Frank Fontaine and Andrew Ryan, *BioShock* has a great cast of memorable characters, but this brilliantly realized Art Deco-themed dystopia stole the show with its haunting aura of an ideology gone awry.



Renaissance Italy (Assassin's Creed II)



Students of history justifiably herald the Italian Renaissance for its unrivaled artistic output, stunning architecture, and illuminating thinkers. Ubisoft worked closely with medieval experts to develop a sandbox world that pays homage to these achievements while at the same time building a tale of intrigue around

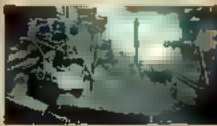
the political backstabbing and violent power struggles that defined the era. The result is a painstakingly accurate recreation of Renaissance Italy that gives you a better sense of the time than any Fodor's travel book ever could.

Liberty City (Grand Theft Auto IV)

Rockstar Games has made billions by crafting amazing open worlds. Its most fully realized sandbox destination is undoubtedly Liberty City. With shopping, internet cafes, bowling alleys, strip clubs, comedy clubs, bars, and even its own television stations, this virtual world perfectly captures the essence of New York City and modern America. The fact that Rockstar set three distinct tales in the city, each of which used the setting to its full effect, is a testament to this crowning achievement in world building.



Capital Wasteland (Fallout 3)



Misty games are set in the aftermath of a nuclear apocalypse, but none combined a sense of the familiar with a pervasive feeling of doom and regret quite like *Fallout 3*. Players emerged from Vault 101 to find a barren retro-futurist landscape riddled with decaying buildings, ruined landmarks, and destitute human settlements. This unwelcoming setting drove home the point that survival wouldn't be a cakewalk as mankind struggles to rebuild civilization; supplies and friends are hard to come by, and if the mutated beasts won't kill you, the radiation likely will.

Arkham Asylum

(Batman: Arkham Asylum)

We've seen Arkham before in comic books and cartoons, but it wasn't until Rocksteady's eye-opening recreation that the prison for Gotham's most notorious psychopaths came alive. Though the game was primarily an action brawler exploring the decrepit institution that holds a rogue's gallery of supervillains proved to be one of the biggest draws in the first game that finally got the Batman experience right.



19

The Boss

Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater



Sold Snake may be the face of Metal Gear, but the Boss is the point on which the entire series' mythology pivots. From Big Boss establishing Outer Heaven to Coelot squaring off against the Patriots, all of the events in the core series can be traced back to the Boss and her selfless actions during the events of Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater.

While she technically plays the role of Snake's rival, their relationship isn't adversarial. In fact, they share a complicated connection that mixes teacher and student, mother and son, and possibly even boyfriend and girlfriend. Despite her complicated feelings for Snake, her loyalty is ultimately to her mission — though what that mission entails is a secret she keeps until her death.

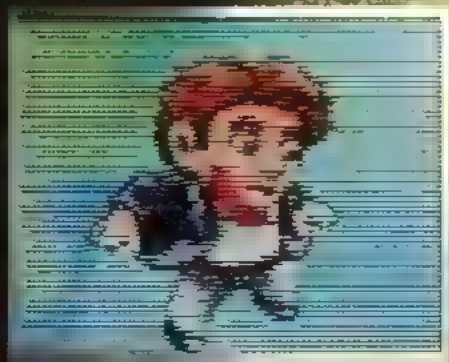
Outwardly, the Boss apparently betrays the United States and defects to the Soviet Union during the Cold War. In reality, the U.S. government has plots within plots aimed at forcing Snake to confront and kill the Boss. Aware she is being used, the Boss still follows her orders, seeing an opportunity to realize her dream of uniting the world.

She sacrifices her life in service to this goal, allowing herself to be killed by Snake (who is subsequently awarded the title Big Boss) in a field of white flowers. After her death, her desire for peace inspires Big Boss — along with others involved in Operation Snake Eater — to form the infamous Patriots. Unfortunately, differing interpretations of the Boss' ideals lead to conflicts within the Patriots, which in turn cause the struggle for power later in the timeline.

Despite being introduced late in the franchise, the Boss is the perfect cornerstone upon which to build the Metal Gear storyline. She is an unparalleled soldier and a principled champion for peace. More importantly, her place at the center of the series provides a glimmer of hope at the heart of constant warfare.

20

Tim
Braid



Tim is an anti-hero, which just means he's really appealing, not a lovable rogue who lightens the situation with a war-timed quip. With his freshly-scrubbed looks and conservative dress, he's not much of a bad boy, either. It's entirely possible to play through Braid and not have any sense of who Tim is, aside from a guy who can screw with time and has a princess complex.

In actuality, Tim is a pathetic narcissist who externalizes his own emotional shortcomings. At some point, he has made a terrible mistake, and rather than learn from it and move on, he idealizes the past while moving toward a make-believe goal with wrecking-ball efficiency. We learn through Braid's sparse text passages and a few static illustrations that Tim may have a drinking problem and doesn't show much remorse when it comes to loving and then abandoning others.

The game's stunner of an ending became one of Braid's talking points, but the journey that took Tim there – with only a touch of self-reflection – is just as compelling. His failings as a person make him much more interesting as a protagonist than Braid's 2D presentation might lead players to initially believe.

Auron
Final Fantasy X

21

The stoic swordsman is a popular archetype in role-playing games, which means that characters cast in this mold are rarely full of surprises. However, gamers expecting Auron to be another cookie-cutter slant type have another thing coming, as his backstory and motivations gradually unfold, he becomes one of the most complex RPG companions in gaming history.

As a master swordsman and former warrior monk, Auron is a valuable party member to have in battle, but his reasons for helping Tidus and company are what make him compelling. Haunted by his own failure to destroy the beast Sin and save the lives of his allies, Auron seeks to right the wrongs of the past and fulfill his last promises to his friends. These vows are what allow him to continue to exist; Auron was killed when he recklessly tried to avenge High Summoner Braska and Jeht (Tidus' father), but his fury

and a promise to watch over Tidus kept him tied to the world as an Unsent – a specter who hasn't passed on to the afterlife.

What remains of Auron's lingering life is spent with a singular purpose: atone for his failure by ushering in a new age of peace for the world of Spira. This final image of the character is a far cry from the clichéd "warrior with a huge sword" role he seems to fill at the beginning of *Final Fantasy X*. By slowly revealing Auron's past and weaving a sense of justice and duty into his personality (influences drawn from the ruin of feudal Japan), the team at Square created a character that helped redefine and expand the role of supporting cast members in RPGs for the coming decade. Auron proves that transcending the usual tropes of the genre can have fantastic results, and that the best character and the main character don't always need to be the same person.



22

Razputin "Raz" Aquato *Psychonauts*

Ppsychonaut's cast of characters is nothing if not memorable. Amid conspiracy-babbling milkmen, city-stomping lungfish, and other assorted oddballs, it's easy to lose sight of the game's comparatively mundane protagonist. That is, if you can possibly consider a 10-year-old psychic who was raised in a family of circus acrobats mundane.

Raz keeps *Psychonauts* and players grounded through his quiet determination and all-encompassing decency. Like many contemporary heroes, he has his share of problems – daddy issues in particular – but Raz goes out of his way to help others during his stay at Whispering Rock Psychic Summer Camp.

As with most fables and fairy tales, Raz's world is at times terrifying and the problems are scaled beyond his child-size understanding. However, Raz perseveres, showing his inner courage as he frees emotionally damaged people of their problems by entering their minds.

Raz's journey ends on a bittersweet note, teasing players about a sequel that never came. Still, we keep hoping that we haven't seen the last of Raz.



23

Kaim Argonar *Lost Odyssey*

After investing 100 hours or more in the characters of an RPG, you feel like you've spent a substantial amount of time with them. That isn't the case with the immortal Kaim Argonar. Even after beating *Lost Odyssey*, you get the sense that you've barely scratched the surface of Kaim's life, which spans 1,000 years and contains countless stories worth telling.

With a quiet and emotionless demeanor, Kaim stands apart from the sea of spiky-haired heroes that are usually tasked with saving the world. While his immortality is a novel idea for a protagonist, developer Mistwalker's approach to the concept is what establishes Kaim as a sophisticated character.

With his continued survival assured, Kaim doesn't seek fulfillment in fleeting material possessions. Instead, he finds joy in his seemingly small interactions with the people he has met during his life. Travelers on the road, a family at an inn, a decorated general – Kaim's encounters with these people reveal him to be a thoughtful warrior with a reverence for life's simple pleasures, and each one plays a role in shaping your perception of him.

Rather than rely on traditional cutscenes, *Lost Odyssey* presents these moments from Kaim's past through poetic and understated text interludes. While this may seem bizarre for a medium so focused on visuals and interactivity, the effective use of language conveys nuances that gameplay can't, building a rich parallel narrative alongside the game's core plot. Even though current technology allows for jaw-dropping cinematics, Kaim proves that words can occasionally speak louder than pictures.



Jade *Beyond Good & Evil*

24

An argument can be made that most video-game protagonists pull their motivations from a fairly limited list: revenge, glory, general heroism. Jade, the main character from Ubisoft's underappreciated PlayStation 2 action-adventure *Beyond Good & Evil*, has slightly more unique goals in her journey: protecting an orphanage of children and finding the truth. We're not talking about the "what is my real identity?" kind of truth (though there's a bit of that later on) – we mean unearthing political corruption and exposing the government.

Brute force can't accomplish that task, which also helps set Jade apart. She does her fair share of combat throughout the game – turns out she's

pretty good at swinging a stick around – but her primary method of enacting change is through photojournalism. Sneaking into a factory, a slaughterhouse, and eventually a base on the moon, Jade snaps pictures of the Alpha Sections' military forces and the DomZ aliens at their worst, slowly turning the tide of public opinion and exposing civilians to the truth.

Unlike so many female characters, Jade's most memorable traits are not physical (although her strange green lipstick does stick out a bit). Rather, the gamers who played B&E likely remember Jade for her dedication to the people she loves and her unwillingness to turn away or back down in the face of danger. Even when her "uncle" Pay

suggests that they return to safety, Jade keeps pushing ahead, often because she cares about him. Despite her bravado, she also isn't quick to trust people. Although Jade is skeptical of the Alpha Sections from the beginning, the rebel IRIS Network still have to prove themselves to her before she believes in them.

Jade's strong characterization and a great voiceover by Jodi Forrest helped raise *Beyond Good & Evil* from a colorful Zelda clone into a cult classic. We can only hope that the upcoming downloadable HD rerelease will introduce a wider audience to this fantastic personality.

25

KOS-MOS *Xenosaga series*

KOS-MOS may look like a 17-year-old girl, but beneath the innocent exterior is an experimental cosmic superweapon that holds the key to humanity's salvation. Explaining more about her significance in the *Xenosaga* series practically requires advanced degrees in philosophy and religion, but you don't need to understand the intertwining themes to see what makes KOS-MOS a great character.

Taken at face value, KOS-MOS is just an unstoppable robotic war machine driven by cold logic. She acts without regard for her safety, relying on probability to optimize her performance and accomplish her missions. Her arm transforms into a sword, she summons giant machine guns from thin air, and her abdomen fires off a laser array that can wipe out an entire fleet of starships. These traits all add to her coolness factor, but even more impressive is how KOS-MOS is unpacked over the course of the ambitious three-game *Xenosaga* series.

Like a mystery on a modern television serial drama, the questions surrounding KOS-MOS are raised early, but the answers are delivered slowly (and often lead to more questions). Why does she protect her master, Shion, so faithfully? Why does she occasionally have blue eyes? What hidden directives are buried in her programming? Everything is clear only at the conclusion of the third game, where players are rewarded with satisfying solutions that shed light on all of the unexplained events.

Revealing a character in a deliberate and gradual way is risky, since many gamers expect an arc to be introduced, explored, and concluded within the span of a single game. The payoff was worth the risk in this case; for all of *Xenosaga's* ups and downs, KOS-MOS is the one aspect that never left fans disappointed.



26



Professor Layton

Professor Layton series

Knowledge is power, and that makes the Professor quite a powerful man. But Marshal Layton's brain isn't all brawn — he's a gentleman of the highest degree who has enough manners to not patronize his young protégé Luke and the other people he meets in their adventures. The professor is more than just a smarty-pants in a dapper top hat, and that's why we like him.

For three adventures running, Layton and Luke have indulged their love of puzzles and nose for mystery, and the professor has served as an excellent mentor to Luke. Helping his young friend without doing all the work himself, Layton is the best kind of teacher:

demanding but encouraging. His love of knowledge is infectious to those around him, and it even results in a magnanimity that extends to rivals like Don Paolo.

But Layton isn't just a brainiac. He is versatile enough to dash into the odd car chase or fencing duel, but beneath the hat is a real man still grieving over the loss of his deceased university sweetheart, Claire. Maybe his focus on puzzle solving is a way to cope with his grief and a way to keep a stiff upper lip. Regardless, his mix of both the cerebral and emotional makes him multi-dimensional and serves as a reminder that even in video games there are some problems you just can't solve.



27

Phoenix Wright

Ace Attorney Series

Even gamers who have never played any Ace Attorney games, know Phoenix Wright's trademark "Objection" finger point. On the surface, the defense lawyer's move gets laughs for its hilariously overblown presentation in a normally somber environment, but it ties in with a key aspect of his personality. In the courtroom, Phoenix hangs on by a thread, with the possibility of his client being found guilty or his career going up in flames at any moment. He clings desperately to the smallest thread of logic either to bury time or eventually lead the proceedings to the truth. Despite this unorthodox manner of doing things, he somehow always comes out on top in the end. More often than not, he simultaneously proves his client's innocence and unveils the real culprit.

Even though Phoenix has an amazing record in court, he still gets no respect. Rival prosecutors sling all manner of verbal and physical abuse his way (including whip lashings and flying hot coffee). Rather than rashly retaliate, he takes his lumps and gets revenge with a stunning court victory.

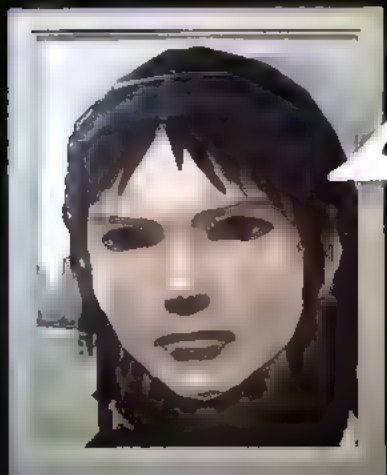
His close friends (almost all of whom he's defended in a murder trial at some point) endlessly pester him or make him pick up the tab for celebratory burgers. Phoenix usually replies with red cheeks, sweating, or some kind of sarcastic inner dialogue. Despite the teasing, he puts his friends above all else — dashing across a burning bridge to save Maya Fey and plummeting into the river below or putting his morals to the ultimate test when he had to choose between letting her die and defending a guilty client in another case.

Eventually, Phoenix is set up with false evidence during a trial, disbarred, and spends seven years plotting a way to clear his name and uncover the conspirators. Here he transforms into a completely different person, no longer taking crap from anyone and willing to do whatever it takes to bring the guilty to justice, including forging evidence. No longer on the front lines as a lawyer, he slides into the role of a behind-the-scenes string puller and manages to transform the entire legal system in one bold maneuver.

28

Wander

Shadow of the Colossus



Wander is a young man, motivated by love, who does some truly terrible things. In a desperate attempt to free his love from death's cold grip, he makes a seemingly baroque forward bargain: Destroy 16 giants who roam a forgotten landscape in exchange for her life. With that seemingly simple goal in mind, Wander sets out on his horse, armed with a magic sword, and starts his slaughter.

This is a quest born from loss and sadness, and a sense of unease penetrates nearly every one of Wander's actions. Who are these towering figures? Where did they come from? More importantly, why does Wander need to kill them? It's clear that Wander himself doesn't understand the deeper implications of

his actions, which makes his eventual realization all the more tragic.

As the colossi fall one by one, Wander's baroque, subtle metaphors turn to something inhuman and terrifying. It's clear that he's doing something that goes against the very rules of the world, and yet he continues on. Rather than give him a voice and explain the pain and confusion he's feeling, Team ICO took a more nuanced approach and let players and Wander discover this fact themselves. Before his inevitable fall, Wander is a broken man, able to carry on through sheer force of will. He conveys his inner turmoil through a silent performance that's at once touching, creepy, and absolutely believable — as fantastic as it is.

Bonnie MacFarlane

Red Dead Redemption

From her opening scene, Bonnie MacFarlane exhibits an intriguing mix of qualities not normally found in a Rockstar title. We see her as a caring human being, having taken Marston in and tended to his wounds after his gang left him for dead. At the same time, she is admirably tough, informing Marston that she expects him to work off the doctor's fees before he even has a chance to fully heal.

Bonnie MacFarlane defies our expectations by not falling into the opposite yet equally extreme roles female characters usually play in video games. She's not a helpless princess waiting to be saved, and she's not a buxom heroine who's supposed to be empowering simply because she can lick some ass. She's portrayed as a real woman, with both strengths and vulnerabilities. As Bonnie teaches the player the basic gameplay mechanics, her relationship with Marston evolves without conforming to the well-worn role of a romantic interest. Bonnie was created with a level of moderation we're not accustomed to seeing, and we found ourselves wanting to go back and visit Bonnie after our missions with her were complete.

The depth of Bonnie's character becomes apparent in one of the final missions of the game when Marston introduces Bonnie to his wife. Her complicated history with Marston is still apparent in her dialogue, but her tone is guarded in the presence of Abigail. The two women seem to approve of one another, but as Marston and his wife ride off, Bonnie hangs back in the distance, kicking the ground at what could have been. Throughout the game Bonnie displays a full range of emotions, some spoken, others subtly conveyed through body language and tone. We never would have guessed that one of Rockstar's most memorable characters would be the conservative daughter of a turn of the century rancher, but by not resorting to larger-than-life caricatures, the developer instilled a sense of realism in her personality that we hope to see from more games in the future.



29

30

King of All Cosmos *Katamari series*



From the very first cutscene of *Katamari Damacy*, we knew the King of All Cosmos was a little different than your average gaming icon. He looks like the Burger King with his head stuck in the middle of an African drum. He rocks a mean Van Dyke. He enjoys strumming acoustic guitar and hanging with dancing panda bears. He makes all the stars disappear and then forces his son to go about the tedious task of putting them back by rolling up giant balls of garbage – all the while tossing down imperious, passive-aggressive insults.

He's not the best father and dresses like a cast member of *The Icecapades Does Harriet... On Acid*. But from his cracked brains spew some of the most downright hilarious oddball dialogue in recent memory. From witty observations like "My, Earth is really full of things!" to the immortal description of the night sky as "rough and masculine, possibly sweetie" the King is the bard of our digital age. While *Katamari*'s graphics have not aged well, the King is like fine wine. Silly? Sure, but to quote the man himself: "Yes, we were naughty. Completely naughty. So, so very sorry. But just between you and us, it felt quite good." Indeed it did.

CHARACTERS WHO MISSED THEIR MARKS

While characterization in games is getting better as the medium evolves, we're still far from perfection. Over the past decade, we've endured more than our share of awful stereotypes, dreadful misfires, and cringe-worthy performances. These five characters left an impression on us, but for the wrong reasons.



Dante
(*Devil May Cry*)

Devil May Cry features some of the best controls and tightest gameplay seen in the hack-and-slash genre, while highlighting one of the game's main characters around. Dante is never without a wisecrack, even though most of the time he comes across as a two-bit

Peter Parker. Fortunately, he has the weapon skills to back up his shtick – otherwise he would be irredeemable.

Michael Thornton
(*Alpha Protocol*)

In games like *Mass Effect*, player choice affects the story and how players interact with the world at large. This game goes in *Alpha Protocol*, though the results are uniformly dull. Whether players choose to run into a situation with guns blazing or take a more stealthy approach, Michael Thornton does it while simultaneously sucking the energy from a room. The fact that he can make missions such as infiltrating a terrorist-filled boat completely



boring is a testament to how poorly this supposed paper-spy is implemented.

The Rookie (Halo 3: ODST)



It's not easy filling Master Chief's Mjolnir battle armor, which is something both players and ODST's protagonist quickly learned. Known only as The Rookie, he was a cipher with only trace elements of characterization. The fact that people still debate the character's gender is representative of how Bungie slipped in developing him. Master

Chief might not be particularly forthcoming, but players gain a sense of how important he is to the human race in his interactions with other UNSC soldiers. In contrast, the Rookie is essentially an underdeveloped passenger.

Tingle
(*The Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask*)
The Legend of *Zelda* series shows whimsy in bulk, but even Hyrule's residents have their limits. Tingle, a 35-year-old cartographer with an unhealthy obsession



obsitized by his father and the subject of gossip by other fairies.

That's for good reason, too. Between having to endure seeing his pudgy frame crammed into a bodysuit and his choice of a balloon for transportation, people are fed up with his nonsense. Unfortunately, Link (and the player) has to risk getting completely skeeved out by him if they want to buy his maps.

Shadow the Hedgehog

(*Shadow the Hedgehog*)
Since releasing *Sonic the Hedgehog* on the Genesis, Sega has systematically attempted to dismantle the series while testing the goodwill of its remaining fans. One of the more notorious tweaks to the *Sonic* formula came in the form of *Shadow the Hedgehog*.

Shadow rolled onto the scene packing heat. Sega tried to appeal to older audiences who probably were looking elsewhere – with a textbook case of forced edginess. Mature doesn't necessarily mean guns and darker color palettes, which is a lesson that the industry as a whole still needs to learn.





The Best Storyte *of the Decade*

Whether they're altruistic heroes or murderous psychopaths, the characters on our Top 30 Characters Who Defined a Decade list are ultimately memorable thanks to the talented writers behind the stories. Writing is what transforms a digital sandbox into a believable world, and provides the impetus for players to explore and interact with their environment in meaningful ways. Be it through playful dialogue, intriguing plot twists, or the realistic conveyance of human emotion, the following figures have emerged as the leading storytellers of our industry.

11ers



Ken Levine

When Ken Levine founded Irrational Games in 1997, the new studio's debut title managed to do something that had never been done before: It made gamers care about the storyline of a first-person shooter.

System Shock 2 gripped fans with an imaginative sci-fi plot that complemented the game's open-ended RPG elements and provided surprising twists. System Shock 2 also utilized many of Irrational's preferred methods of storytelling, including audio tapes that flesh out the game world, ghostly flashbacks that reveal the past actions of characters, and radio communications that instruct players towards their objectives.

Levine continued to hone his craft with the 2007 release of BioShock, which Irrational has described as a spiritual successor to System Shock 2. The two titles share a number of storytelling mechanics, including BioShock's surprising twists. Where BioShock differentiates itself from Irrational's previous work is through the strong sense of place that Rapture delivers. The underwater dystopia contains a host of intriguing characters and embodies a philosophical ideology that dictates (and sometimes conflicts with) the decisions the player is forced to make. In these ways, players become an active participant in the story, leaving their mark on the memorable setting.

With the recent announcement of BioShock Infinite, Irrational Games is back at the helm of its acclaimed series, and Levine continues to stress the importance of incorporating strong narratives into video games. Judging from our first look at Infinite's floating city and the emotionally charged rhetoric of some of Columbia's characters, we have no doubt Ken Levine and his team will continue to influence how video games tell stories in the decade to come.



Dan Houser

Even among the other writers on this list, Dan Houser's body of work is unparalleled. As one of the co-founders of Rockstar Games, Houser and his writing team have penned just about every one of the studio's blockbuster hits, including Grand Theft Auto III, Vice City, San Andreas, GTA IV, Bully, and Red Dead Redemption. The number of Rockstar characters on our top 50 list is a testament to Houser's talent.

The GTA series has seen more than its share of controversy over the years, but the franchise has succeeded in parodying American pop culture and politics with a proficiency that borders on prophetic. No topic or figurehead is safe from GTA's acerbic wit, and the series' scripts wouldn't be funny if Houser's underlying observations weren't couched in truth.

With Bully, Houser proved that Rockstar's signature sense of humor doesn't have to be M-rated to be enjoyable. While the game's mischievous hijinx mirrored GTA's more adult activities, Bully's academic sandbox was more playful in tone. The nostalgic schoolyard setting was easy to relate to, and the colorful characters of Bullworth struck the perfect balance between reality and caricature.

Red Dead Redemption tells a story far more serious than anything Rockstar has attempted in the past, from the opening scene to the final shootout. The game still has its share of exaggerated personalities and humorous moments, but the emotionally stirring plot and complicated characters make Redemption stand out as the pinnacle of storytelling in its genre.

Houser's impact at Rockstar Games (and in turn, Rockstar's impact on the video game industry) led *Time* to include him and his brother Sam on its 100 Most Influential People of 2008. Despite their success (and their early dreams of becoming actual rock stars), both Dan and Sam Houser have avoided the limelight, rarely agreeing to interviews. Instead, they let their work speak for them as they continue to shape the direction of the industry from behind the scenes.

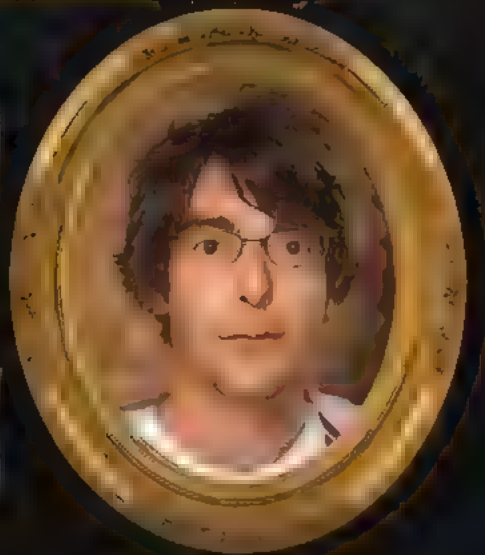


Patrice Désilets and Corey May

Creating a video game is always a collaborative effort shared between countless artists from a broad range of different backgrounds. In the case of the *Assassin's Creed* series, creative director Patrice Désilets and script writer Corey May have played two different yet equally integral roles in helping the franchise reach its full potential.

A self-proclaimed history buff, Désilets brought to the table the vision of creating an epic historical adventure spanning multiple protagonists, time periods, and locations. Working as creative director for *Assassin's Creed*, *Assassin's Creed 2*, and *Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood*, Désilets oversaw the stunning recreations of real-life cities like Jerusalem, Damascus, and Venice, and advocated injecting the franchise's fictional characters into historical events such as the Pazzi Conspiracy.

As the script writer for *Assassin's Creed 1* and *2*, May's job has been to tie all of Désilets' ideas into a cohesive narrative. The team solved this problem with the conception of the Animus, a machine that allows users to relive the past experiences of their ancestors. Not only did this mechanic allow the game to jump between the franchise's different areas and scenarios, but it also served as a clever explanation for restarting a mission when the player dies or performs an action that breaks the fiction. May's job as scriptwriter also involved a copious amount of historical research in order to infuse the franchise's science fiction with real-life figures and locations. While *Assassin's Creed 2*'s use of Leonardo da Vinci served as a practical explanation for introducing new tools into Ezio's repertoire, other characters from the series like Salah al-Din, Pope Alexander VI, and Caterina Sforza help imbue the adventures with a level of real-world authenticity not normally seen in video games.



Bret Karpshyn

An RPG is a lot like a video game anymore. It is an art form that can be translated into other forms of entertainment, including novels, books, novels, and movies. Bret Karpshyn is no stranger to this phenomenon. Having helped create the universes of two respected fictional worlds in the industry thanks to his job as a writer at BioWare, in his early years at BioWare, Karpshyn contributed to the storylines for legends like the heroes of *Deed* (and its companion novel) *The Winter of the Wolf* and its expansion pack, *Horde of the Underdark*.

His hard work earned him the first of his chances as lead writer on BioWare's critical hit *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic*. Despite working within the confines of LucasArts' KOTOR, he introduced a variety of interesting new characters into the *Star Wars* universe, including Darth Revan and the hilariously sarcastic HK-47. He has also written three *Star Wars* novels over the years — *Darth Bane: Path of Destruction*, *Wills of the Jedi*, and *Dynasty of Ebon* — and worked on the first of BioWare's original IP, *Jade Empire*.

With the *Mass Effect* series, BioWare has redefined how player choice can shape the outcome of a video game story. Karpshyn has been integral in shaping the franchise's fiction as lead writer of the original *Mass Effect* and the author of all three *Mass Effect* novels. Karpshyn and Hennig didn't just perform the most engaging self-fiction in video games; they had to adjust for every scenario possible based on the player's decisions.

Karpshyn helped further refine *Mass Effect*'s storytelling as co-lead writer for *Mass Effect 2*, along with the accomplished Mac Walters. The game offered a whole new crew of interesting characters to interact with, while offering the potential to continue stories from the previous game's cast depending on your actions. More than just a matter of a good, ended ending, the *Mass Effect 2* is one of the most malleable books of novels of any video game.

— [Bret Karpshyn](#)

Amy Hennig

Many video games draw inspiration from films and literature. In the case of *Naughty Dog's* *Uncharted* series, similarities to the Indiana Jones films make for an easy comparison between the two works. As creative director and writer for *Uncharted* and *Uncharted 2*, Amy Hennig's job has been to emulate the feeling of classic adventure stories while creating memorable characters and storylines.

While *Nathan Drake* often finds himself in outlandish, life-threatening situations, Hennig and her team have gone to great lengths to make the protagonist easy to relate to for the player. They achieve this not only by making him a fallible character, but also by surrounding him with a supporting cast that brings out different sides of his personality. These conflicting traits are conveyed through clever dialogue, which includes some of the most realistic conversations of any video game. Hennig also brought a sense of realism to the romanticized role of the treasure hunter, juxtaposing Indiana Jones's altruism ("It belongs in a museum!") with Drake's capitalistic sensibilities.

In addition to strong writing and character development, Hennig has advocated the importance of cinematic storytelling in video games, indicative of her time spent studying film at San Francisco State University before leaving to pursue a career in the video game industry. Hennig's work on *Uncharted 2* earned her a Writers Guild Award for best writing in the video game category. ♦





A SURVIVOR



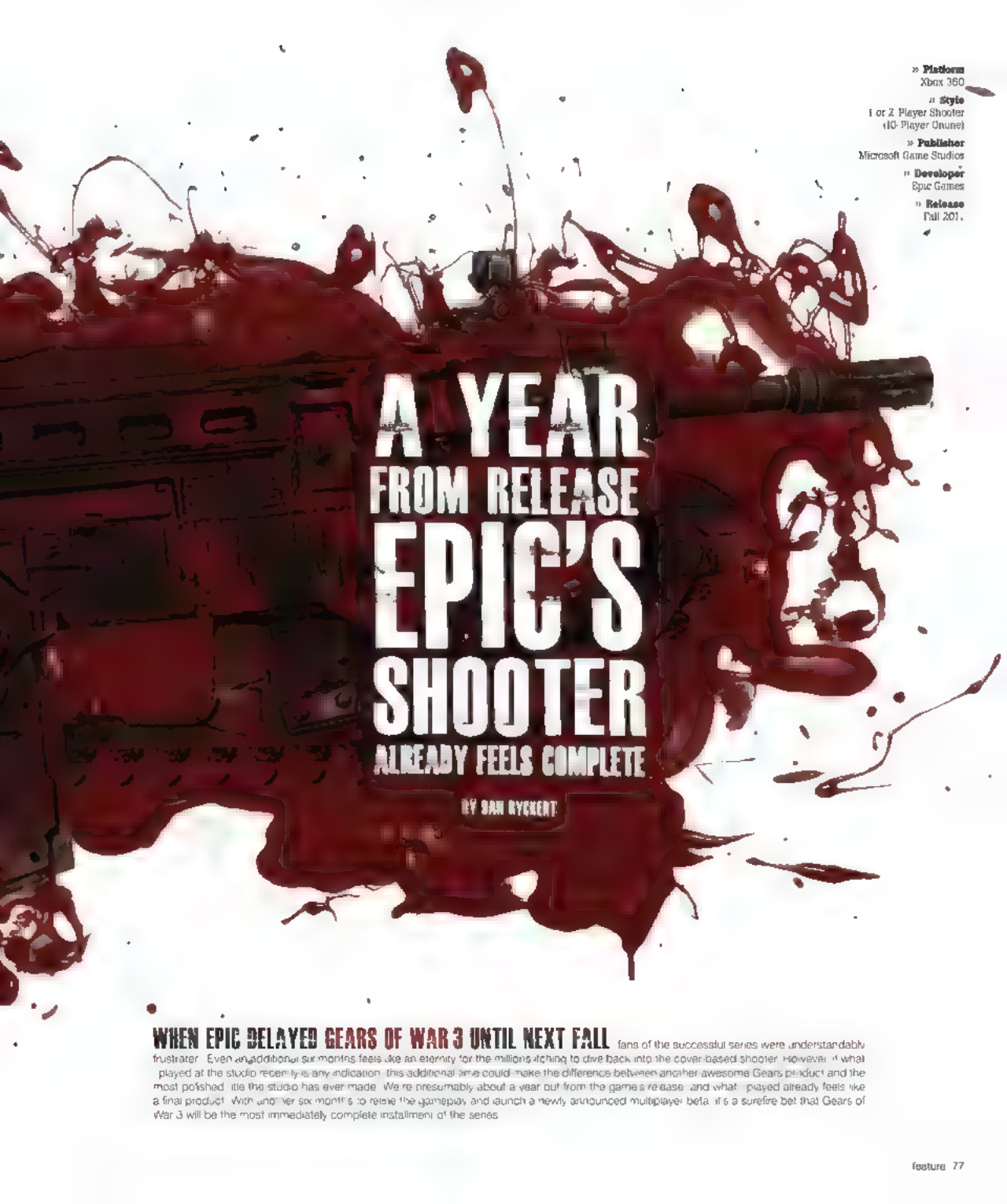
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NEXT ISSUE

Cover Reveal: December 6th

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CARBON FOOTPRINT FILED



» Platform
Xbox 360

» Style
1 or 2 Player Shooter
(10-Player Online)

» Publisher
Microsoft Game Studios

» Developer
Epic Games

» Release
Fall 2011

A YEAR FROM RELEASE EPIC'S SHOOTER ALREADY FEELS COMPLETE

BY DAN RYCKERT

WHEN EPIC DELAYED GEARS OF WAR 3 UNTIL NEXT FALL fans of the successful series were understandably frustrated. Even an additional six months feels like an eternity for the millions itching to dive back into the cover-based shooter. However, if what played at the studio recently is any indication, this additional time could make the difference between another awesome Gears product and the most polished title the studio has ever made. We're presumably about a year out from the game's release, and what played already feels like a final product. With another six months to refine the gameplay and launch a newly announced multiplayer beta, it's a surefire bet that Gears of War 3 will be the most immediately complete installment of the series.

Executive producer Rod Fergusson repeatedly used the word "optimization" to describe their approach to the game's competitive multiplayer. On paper, *Gears 3* doesn't feature any dramatic departures from what we've seen before in the series. We already know about the four-player campaign co-op and the new Beast mode, but competitive multiplayer doesn't feature many sweeping changes. However, it's a great example of a multitude of smaller tweaks adding up to a significantly improved experience.

If you were to simply look at the names of the game modes, you might think more has changed than really has. Epic realizes that gamers were oftentimes confused by the mode names in the first two games. "Annex" and "Submission" don't exactly spell out what you'll be doing. That's why modes in *Gears 3* will feature more obvious names: Capture the Leader is essentially Guardian plus Submission. Players must down the opposing team's leader (Charman Prescott leads the humans, Queen Myrrah the Locust) and use them as a meat shield. If you're able to keep the leader as a hostage for 30 seconds, the round is yours.

Team Deathmatch is a no-brainer, and Epic expects it to be the most popular mode. *Warzone* always featured a newcomer, but TDM opts instead for limited respawns. Each team begins with 20 respawns, and once they're depleted, the mode essentially turns into

Warzone. This helps ensure most rounds end dramatically, with one player attempting to fight off however many soldiers the opposing team has left.

While I enjoyed the new modes, it's the gameplay tweaks and additions that have me excited for the multiplayer experience. A dynamic reticule isn't a new concept, but it helps in realizing just how accurate your shots will be. If you're in an awkward standoff with someone on the other side of the same cover, pressing A will perform a mantle kick to your opponent, making him stumble back (and opening him up for a close-range shotgun blast or melee attack). Being able to set your default weapon and character means you won't have to select them every time. A new persistent party system streamlines the matchmaking process in a manner similar to *Halo: Reach*. Dedicated servers and host migration ensure less connectivity problems online. Overhead maps and the new Tac/Com vision filter help players become acquainted with weapon spawn locations.

A spotting system similar to the one in

CHANGING THE BATTLEFIELD

While the previous games featured maps that were well suited to a variety of modes, they never felt particularly alive with *Gears of War 3*. Some of the arenas you'll be battling in will feature unique characteristics that can affect gameplay. Multiplayer rounds on Trenches will be far for the course, until a massive sandstorm blankets your surroundings in a thick haze. I found that this was the perfect time to charge with a Recon Lancer bayonet. Your enemy may hear your battle cry as you sprint, but their decreased visibility will make it harder for them to escape a quick death. We've heard of Thrashball thanks to Cole Train's background, but he'll have a homefield advantage for the first time (thanks to the aptly named Thrashball map). Hovering above the court is a giant scoreboard that keeps track of kills (complete with airhorn-like sound effect), and it can be shot down, smashing anyone unfortunate enough to be below it. Others are visually striking without impacting gameplay. Overpass takes place on a section of highway that starts tilting and sinking in the middle of a round. CheckOut features bloody battles in the aisles of an abandoned grocery store. Every match begins with a shot of the overhead map, allowing for quicker memorization of weapon locations.

Battlefield: Bad Company 2 has been implemented, assisting in pointing out enemies to your team. None of these are huge attention-grabbing headlines, but they all work together to create a more polished multiplayer experience.

The *Gears of War* franchise has never lacked violent and creative ways to murder your enemies, but Epic is cranking up the gore even more this time around. My two favorites were the Dagger Launcher and the Pendulum-Era Lancer. The former is a rocket launcher that burrows underground towards your opponent. As it travels through the ground, it resembles old Looney Tunes cartoons when Bugs Bunny would dive into the earth to escape Elmer Fudd. It's pretty terrifying to see dirt and debris flying out of the ground in a straight line towards you, and the results of a direct hit are devastating. If it hits you dead-on, the rocket bores up through your





body and winds up in your head. As you would expect, your cranium explodes like a watermelon long after. Without a direct hit, the explosive pops up like a bouncing Betty, doing damage to any nearby foes.

Gears fans are familiar with the iconic Lancer, but now they'll have access to a prototype version of the weapon, in the extended fiction of the franchise, the Pendulum-Era Lancer (or Retro Lancer) featured a bayonet that would break off when it came into contact with a Locust, forcing the COG to add chainsaws underneath the barrel. Epic feels that a quality gameplay feature is worth breaking the fiction for, so these bayonets work just fine on humans and Locust alike. Rather than utilizing the same close-range melee mechanic that the standard Lancer does, you'll have to charge your enemies if you want to impale them on your bayonet. Holding B act-



vates what's essentially a modified roadie run and coming into contact with an enemy will flit them into the air with a supremely satisfying animation. One of my favorite tactics was to throw a smoke grenade near a group of enemies and charge through the fog with my bayonet before they realized "was coming."

Snipers looking for a more powerful alternative will love the Oneshot, a devastating long-range weapon that the Epic team initially referred to as the "elephant gun." It takes a while to get a shot ready, with a laser designating your target. It's powerful enough to pierce a Bloomer shield, and will decimate an opponent no matter where you hit them.

If you're bigger on the short-range game, the sawed-off shotgun is right up your alley. You need to be ridiculously close to your opponent for it to really damage them, but they'll be ripped to shreds if you're within range. Performing a mantle kick, followed by a blast from your sawed-off is a great one-two punch if you're looking for a surefire (and messy) kill.

Existing weapons are getting tweaks as well. Many gamers looking for an accurate mid-range weapon loved the Hammerburst, and you can now aim down its sights with a click of the right stick. The Gorgon pistol was previously one of the least popular sidearms, but it's now a fully automatic SMG. This means you can shoot automatic fire for the first time while holding magnet shields (useful in Capture the Leader). Incendiary grenades burn enemies to a crisp if they're unfortunate enough to be within their damage radius, and you can even throw them above enemies to rain fiery death from above. A new "bag and tag" maneuver allows you to stick grenades on meat shields and kick them into opposition.

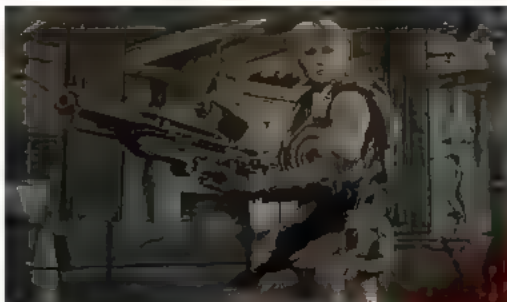
Most weapons can end enemies in a shower of gore even with their standard fire, but the new executions are even more sadistic. Each race features a base execution (humans perform the standard face smash, while the Locust nips arms off), and now every weapon features a unique kill. While the standard executions are still performed with X, Epic is taking things to the next level (and earning more XP) with the weapon-specific executions. You can bury a chainsaw into an enemy's chest with the Lancer, cave their skull in with repeated blows from the Hammerburst and snap their necks with your sawed-off shotgun. The flamethrower can be plunged into your foe's chest to fill them with fire, turning them into a flame-belching, charred mess. Press Y while holding a mortar launcher, and you'll thrust the

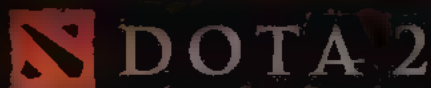
MORE THAN A NUMBER

While Gears of War 2 featured a leveling system, the number next to your name never had any tangible effect in-game. Epic doesn't approach Gears with the "higher level = more better weapons" mentality that other multiplayer franchises like Call of Duty or Battlefield have, but they still want your level to be more than a number. With Gears 3, players earn medals and unlock character variants, executions, weapon skins, and mutators as they rise through the ranks. The only variant we saw during our time with the game was Cole's Thrasher uniform, but design director Cliff Blasinski says each character has two on average. Weapon skins won't be as simple as the gold Lancers from 2, as they feature patterns and designs that time around. We only saw one mutator and I blew up characters' heads, arms, and feet to cartoonish proportions combined with the high-pitched voices the mutator adds. It's like an even more ridiculous version of GoldenEye 007's DK mode. Executive producer Rod Fergusson says that these mutators fall into three categories: those that make the game harder, those that make the game easier, and those that are simply for "zigs."

barrel directly onto your opponent's head. As you bring it back up, you'll actually see chunks of brain matter dripping from the weapon. The longer the duration of an execution, the more XP you'll get. It's even possible to unlock extended executions that pummel your opponents for a comically long time.

Epic isn't trying to reinvent the wheel with the competitive multiplayer in Gears of War 3. You'll be playing familiar modes with many familiar weapons and features, but the multitude of tweaks makes a significant difference. Whether it's utilizing a new attack like the mantle kick, collecting skins and medals as you level up, or excruciating foes with the awesome new weapons, it feels like more than just an incremental upgrade to Gears 2. With a multiplayer beta and a year of polish yet to come, there's no doubt Gears of War 3 should satisfy fans of the franchise. ♦



The logo for DOTA 2, featuring a square icon with a diagonal line and the text "DOTA 2" in a stylized font.

THE ARMORS AND SPECULATION
DAN CEASE: VALVE IS MAKING
DOTA 2. WE'VE PLAYED IT AND
IT'S ALREADY AMAZING EVEN
THOUGH IT'S NOT COMING OUT
UNTIL NEXT YEAR, AND WE
HAVEN'T YET LANE EYES ON DOTA
2'S BIGGEST INNOVATION: A
RADICAL APPROACH TO INTE-
GRATING THE COMMUNITY INTO
THE GAMEPLAY.

What's a Dota?

Dota 2 takes its name from the Warcraft III mod Defense of the Ancients: a drastic change to that stock real-time strategy title that pits two teams of five players against each other in highly competitive, 40-minute or longer matches. Unlike most RTS games, Dota has each player controlling a single hero who levels up and stockpiles gold to purchase powerful equipment and consumables. As computer-controlled armies continually spawn and rush the enemy's base, players are responsible for using their powerful heroes to turn the tide of the battle in their favor.

Dota quickly gained massive popularity on Blizzard's Battle.net service, with the growing community utilizing user-created channels and the rudimentary custom game browser to connect players. As mods tend to do, it branched into several variations as time passed. Eventually one rose to the top: Dota Allstars, originally created by Steve "Guns00" Freak (now employed with Riot Games' Juggling League of Legends). Allstars is currently maintained and updated by Icefrog (who declined to give his real name), who was hired by Valve in 2009 and is now working on Dota 2.

Dota enjoys such unprecedented popularity for a number of interconnected reasons. The game has a skill curve as long and wide as Counter Strike or StarCraft: expert players dominate matches with lesser-skilled individuals solely through manual dexterity and hard-won knowledge. Extensive upgrade paths allow players to combine items into more powerful versions, gaining thousands of hit points or powerful life-stealing attacks. Team play is rewarded: though the map's surge enough for all 10 players to spread out and fight creeps on their own without anyone engaging anyone else directly, late-game play is invariably centered around giant 3v3 or 5v5 team fights.

The mod has benefited from excellent long-running support in the form of constant updates

The logo for BLOODSEEKER, featuring the word "BLOODSEEKER" in a stylized, metallic font.

that add new content or address balance issues. Said balance is good enough that no dominant team composition or strategy has ever taken hold for long. The heroes are varied enough that a "strategic" learning, different team rosters can take on an entirely different character from the last.

The enormous following generated by Dota's deep gameplay is unprecedented. Today, years after its release, a third-party site hosting an update can get hammered by more than six million downloads in a day. The mod spawned a new subgenre, commonly referred to as "action RTS," including well-known titles like League of Legends, Heroes of Newerth, the unforlunate flop Demigod, as well as Dota Allstars itself. Valve Corporation, the company beloved for its Half-Life, Counter-Strike, Team Fortress, and Left 4 Dead series, as well as its outstanding Steam digital distribution and matchmaking platform, is making its entry into this growing genre next year with Dota 2.

WHAT DOES VALVE BRING?

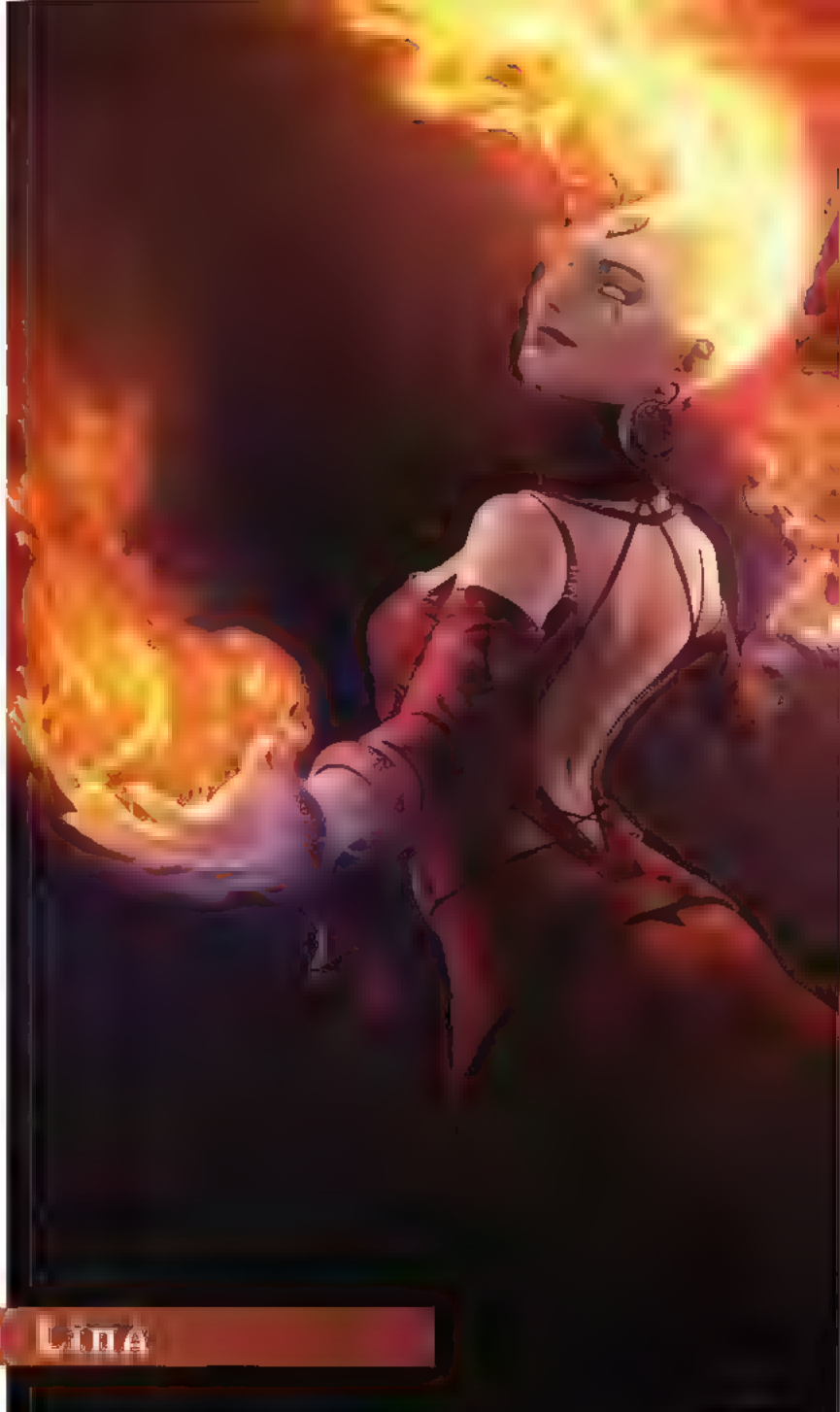
Valve's approach to Dota 2 is unusual in that the gameplay is remaining almost entirely untouched. "Our first reaction is to assume that [design elements are] here for a reason," project lead Erik Johnson explains. "IceFrog is one of the smartest designers we've ever met. He's made so many good decisions over the years in building the product. He virtually never makes a decision that doesn't have some reasoning behind it and a way to pick apart the logic behind it." This approach means that Dota 2 basically is Dota Allstars with new technology.

Dota Allstars' roster of 100-plus heroes is being brought over in its entirety. The single map games take place on a functionally identical to the one that you can download for free today in the Warcraft III mod. Items, skills, and upgrade paths are unchanged. Some hero skills work slightly better due to being freed from the now-ancient Warcraft III engine, but Dota 2 will be instantly familiar to any Dota player.

A few things make significant differences to players making the transition. Dota 2 uses Valve's Source engine, so the game is much prettier. Source itself is getting a few upgrades, including improved global lighting and true cloth simulation. Dota 2's integrated voice chat is a huge step-up from having to set up your own Ventriilo server, and the speed of voice communication is very, nearly a requirement for a game as team-focused as Dota.

AI bots can take over for disconnected players, and are available to play against in unranked training matches as well. However, don't get your hopes up for a full-fledged single-player game, Johnson says. "Our goal with the AI is just that their experience isn't destroyed just because one person couldn't finish the game."

The visual style is remarkable for retaining the somewhat cartoony feel that the Warcraft III version of Dota Allstars is built around, while going in a few different directions. "I think there are functional aspects to the art that are pretty significant to the players," Johnson says. The environment, particularly in the forests that fill in the map between the three lanes that the NPC armies follow, uses a desaturated color scheme to give the colorful heroes and abilities some visual pop. The stable art team is putting a lot of work into making the shapes and animations of each hero distinct to the point that players can



DOTA 2



DROW RANGER

instantly identify any hero they see and quickly gauge the threat level of any situation.

The game also features a ton of custom voice work. Heroes deliver lines as they deny the enemy team last. It is on creeps and champions who have backstory connections will trade quips when nearby.

The bulk of innovation in Dota 2, however, is ancillary to the gameplay itself. Valve is upgrading Steamworks (the company's backend technologies for matchmaking and other gameplay and community-related things) to allow in-game rewards for participating in the Dota 2 community. The idea is to have everything a player does in or out of game tie back into their online identity. Like the improvements to Source, the Steamworks upgrades will be available to third-party developers who choose to use Valve's tools when Dota 2 launches in 2011.

At a basic level, posting useful feedback or participating in constructive discussions on the forums will contribute to your standing in the community in a visible way. Valve doesn't have the specifics on how this will work nailed down yet. Will you get points that contribute to a visible ranking, like a GamerScore? Will your posts need to be recommended by other community members to count for anything? What counts as a constructive discussion? These questions are all being actively explored at the moment. Valve assures us that the designers have a slew of awesome ideas for how to implement rewards in a way that's visible to the rest of the community, but there are no details to announce yet. "When we talk about this identity that exists inside and outside the game, we don't think we're any where near it with what exists on Steam right now," Johnson admits.

If this was just about getting points for posting comments, though, we wouldn't waste your time by telling you about it. Dota 2 goes much farther than that. Everything from unlocking new skins for your favorite hero to getting a unique title for writing a strategy guide is on the table. Valve has ambitious plans for which, again, there are no specifics to share to host everything themselves and provide the best framework for the community to interact with each other. The idea is to reduce the social friction inherent in having to dig around a bunch of different fan sites and wikis to find what you're looking for.

RIDING THE SKILL CURVE

Getting owned sucks... it doesn't matter if you're the victim of a headshot in Counter-Strike, corner-trapped in Street Fighter, or swarmed under by Zerglings in StarCraft. Holding the short end of the skill stick in competitive games like these is rough. This problem is compounded in Dota and its clones by two factors. First, matches last around 40 minutes—that's a long time to spend getting your face kicked in. Second, dying not only takes you out of the game while your respawn timer counts down, but also directly benefits the other team by giving a big cash bounty to your killer.

At intermediate and higher levels of play, having a poor player on your team who dies frequently is worse than fighting with a man down, as the opposite team gets gobs of gold for picking off the newbie. This has fostered a legendarily newbie-hostile attitude within large swaths of the Dota community. As fun and rewarding as the game is when you're in a match of appropri-

ate skill level—and it can be one of the very best experiences in gaming, without exaggeration. Finding those matches has always been a night mare. It doesn't help that the game is so intense that Valve had to institute a "no talking about the match for an hour afterwards" rule for its internal playtests. The recent commercial titles that more or less cloned Dota have exacerbated this to some extent, but it is still often a huge problem.

Valve believes that the solution to the huge barrier to entry is threefold. The first, obvious solution is to have excellent skill-based matchmaking for both individuals and teams. Valve believes that the work going into Steamworks for Dota 2's release meets that requirement. Second, interactive guides will allow players to do more than just read a guide for their favorite hero that has been deemed helpful by the community at large. Valve plans to allow guide-makers to tie their work back into the game by doing things like highlighting suggested item purchases or displaying useful information during a match.

Finally, a coaching system is being jeopily integrated. By logging in as a coach, veteran players can do their part to help out newer folks. Valve hasn't decided on the specifics of how newbies and coaches will be matched up, but once they're together a few things happen. The coach sees the pupil's screen, and gets private voice and chat channels to communicate with them. The coach probably won't be able to take control of anything directly (once again, the details are currently under discussion), but information is power in Dota 2, and having a mentor whispering in your ear can make all the difference in the world.

The pupil will be able to rate the coach's helpfulness. Being a well-regarded coach will have explicit in-game rewards, just like writing useful guides, posting constructive feedback, or engaging in interesting strategy discussions. If the overwhelming response to Battle.net achievements is any indication, vanity rewards like these will be extremely effective in channeling the community's energies toward positive contributions.

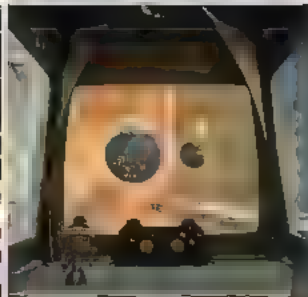
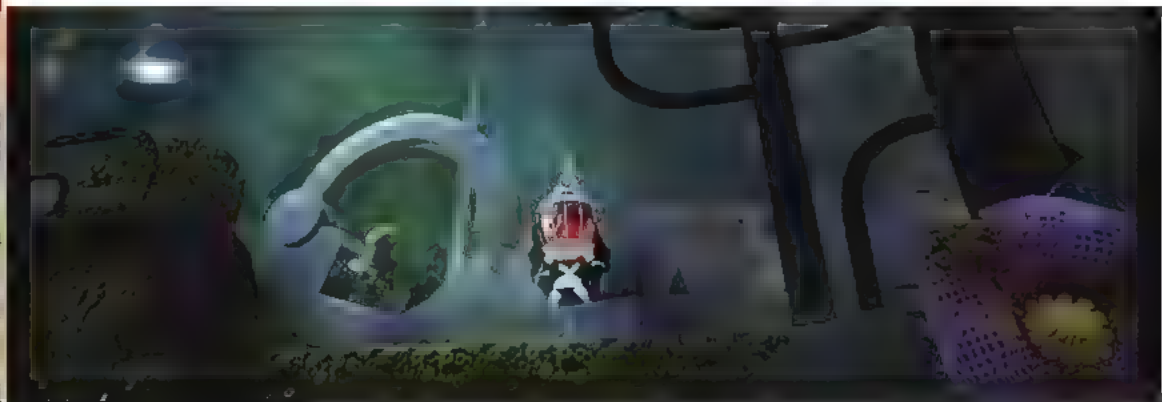
Valve founder and boss Gabe Newell thinks that ongoing service and value creation over a game's lifespan is the new reality of game development. "Joefrog was one of the smartest people we've ever met about doing that, and he was doing it with both hands tied behind his back," so to speak," Newell says. "The company plans on approaching Dota 2 with the same dedication that won it the fanatical devotion of the Team Fortress 2 community, pushing out dozens of updates that do everything from adding new hats to fixing balance issues to introducing entire new match types for free."

"I think the interesting thing is us adding a second layer where the community is a service to each other," Johnson proclaims. "That's the real shift that we're trying to build here. Valve is going to keep building software around Dota and around the community, and around Steamworks for Dota, but we're also going to build this system where the community can bring service to each other and be recognized for it." With a solid backbone of community-enabling systems and Valve's legendary support and technology behind it, Dota 2 has a chance to turn one of the most popular mods of all time into a full game on PC and Mac that compares favorably to any eight-figure-budget console blockbuster. ♦



MORPHING





LittleBigPlanet 2

Media Molecule lets users expand the scope of Sackboy's adventures

If the original *LittleBigPlanet* proved anything, it's that a community of gamers will do amazing things when provided with the right tools. While level editing tools have been around since *Excitebike*, no one has ever made creation as fun and user-friendly as Media Molecule. With *LittleBigPlanet 2*, the possibilities have grown by leaps and bounds. No longer limited to basic sidescrolling gameplay, Sackboy's fans are now free to make their own games that play however they choose.

A beta for the game is currently in progress and the results are amazing even at this early stage. Fans of the original game are familiar with recreations of sidescrollers like *Mario* and *Sonic*, but this first batch of *LBP 2* user creations showcases remakes that are far more advanced. *Ken's* famous stage from *Street Fighter II* has been remade, and the sack fighters can even perform hadoukens, dragon uppercuts, and sonic booms. While it doesn't feature the precise handling of the fighting classic, it's still charming to see it painstakingly recreated in Media Molecule's trademark "hand made" art style.

Another manages to mimic the basic gameplay of PSN's *Flower*. Almost every user level in the original *LBP* featured a visible Sackboy, but he's nowhere to be found in this. Rather, players control a petal floating on the wind from point to point. It may not be a full-scale 3D experience, but the core gameplay remains intact.

When I spoke to team members at Media Molecule earlier this year, they mentioned that

they wouldn't be surprised to see someone make a first person shooter with *LBP 2*.

While it's not exactly *Half-Life*, a functioning Vietnam-based stage has already popped up in the beta. It features onscreen ammo counts, a targeting reticule that turns red when hovering over enemies, and (of course) exploding barrels. There's even an adorable Sackboy arm holding the assault rifle.

Remakes are obviously one of the community's favorite uses of the creation tools, but original stages are where the best users can really shine. Media Molecule presents basic tools for anyone to play with, but it also includes advanced tools for those that want to really dig in. With customizable A.I. and control schemes, it will be fascinating to see what the community stages look like after the game is in the public's hands.

New to *LBP 2* are the grappling hook and bounce pads. Plenty of platforming-intensive levels feature these new gadgets, as Sackboy can now swing from the environment and bounce around stages with an ease that wasn't possible in the original. We're sure to see some Bionic Commando-inspired levels, but the door is open for unique creations as well.

With most games, your enjoyment level peaks within the first couple weeks of playing it. *LittleBigPlanet* is one of those rare exceptions that gets better over time. Considering how much more is possible in *LBP 2*, gamers should look forward to countless new experiences for quite some time. — Dan Ryckert

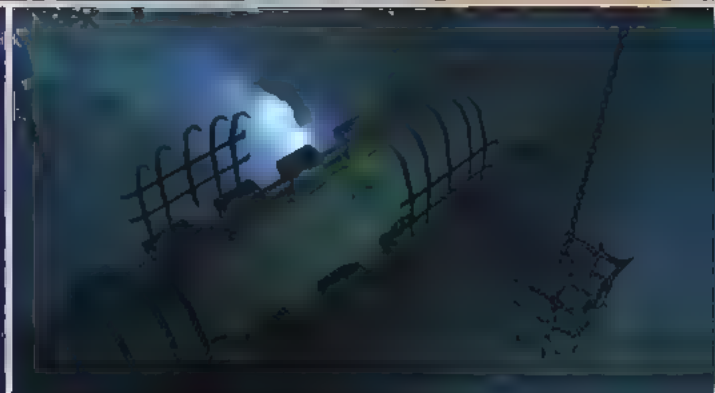
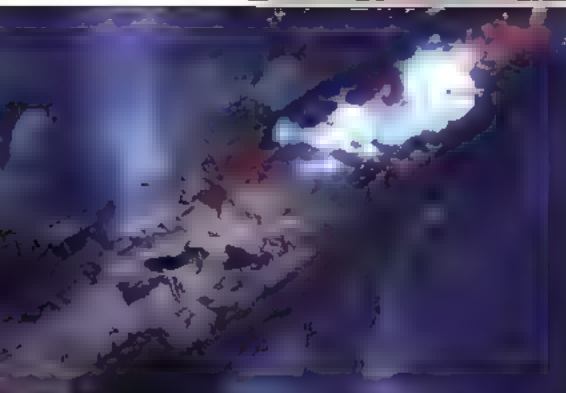
PlayStation 3

» **Style**
» to 4-Player Platform

» **Publisher**
Sony Computer Entertainment

» **Developer**
Media Molecule

» **Release**
January 18



Diablo III

Diablo II receives its final class and a new PvP multiplayer mode

» Platform
PC

» Style
1-Player Action/RPG
(Multiplayer TBA)

» Developer
Blizzard Entertainment

» Developer
Blizzard Entertainment

» Release
TBA

For many fans and press members alike, BlizzCon has become an annual opportunity to try out Diablo III, the much-anticipated action/RPG that gamers around the world have been salivating for since its announcement in 2008. This year, Blizzard took a major step toward the game's completion with the reveal of its fifth and final class: the demon hunter.

The demon hunter fulfills two major roles for Diablo that none of the previous classes fit: a darker anti-hero for the story and a sexier visual style. Only the female version has been revealed, but she's definitely badass, sporting a dark hood, vaguely demonic glowing eyes, and a bulky armguard. Diablo III director Jay Wilson

describes her as an "obsessed anti-hero," someone who knows more about demons than anyone else in the world and is willing to go to any lengths to kill them.

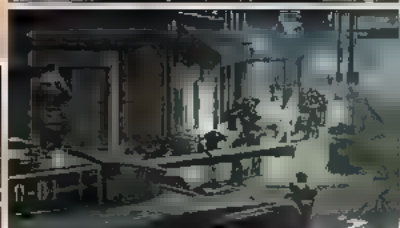
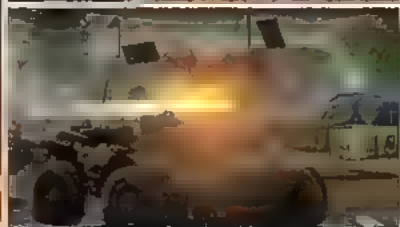
The demon hunter also has a unique gameplay role as a ranged fighter who employs traps and gadgets to accomplish all of the slaying she desires. Her current repertoire of skills includes an entangling shot that chains enemies together, an explosive bola shot that wraps around a bad guy before blowing up, and grenades that can be bounced off walls and tossed around corners. Her play style focuses on killing enemies, keeping them at a distance so you can continue demolishing them with crossbows, pistols, or traps.

In addition to showing off the demon hunter, Blizzard announced a lot of new skills for other classes and more general system updates. For example, barbarians now have a weak-angled attack for opening up battles from afar, while wizards wield a meteor spell, a fan favorite from Diablo.

On top of regular skill points from leveling, Diablo players must balance a new traits system. These operate similarly to talent points in World of Warcraft—you gain them every other level, and they help customize character builds. For example, a wizard could choose traits that increase elemental damage or a separate set that improves the effect of armor spells. As of right now, there are enough traits to eat up 90

Homefront

Kaos Studios provides a new take on modern combat



» **Platform**
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360 • PC

» **Style**
»-Player Action
(32-Player Online)

» **Publisher**
THQ

» **Developer**
Kaos Studios

» **Release**

The FPS genre is dominated by modern day military shooters. Franchises like Call of Duty: Modern Warfare and Battlefield: Bad Company offer gamers single-player campaigns packed with epic set pieces that would make Jerry Bruckheimer blush, complemented by robust, addictive multiplayer modes. To contend with the triple-A franchises, Kaos Studios isn't taking the action to the next level; it's bringing the war to your backyard.

Set in 2027, Homefront tells the story of a fallen America overrun by North Korean troops. Recent offerings from both Activision and EA have offered glimpses of an America invaded by Russian forces, but Homefront's focus is the experience of occupation. The game takes

place two years after North Korea sets foot on American soil. Kaos Studios has put a lot of effort into crafting a realistic world, and from the opening moments of our hands-on demo, we were surprised at how personal the storyline feels. Whereas Modern Warfare 2 has you fighting for the White House to preserve democracy, Homefront has you, fighting in your hometown to preserve the lives of your neighbors.

Kaos attributes this focus on a small, personal story to the input of Homefront's writer, John Milius, who steered the team away from their initial plan of the story featuring a more James Bond-style character. Milius is no stranger to telling war stories. The man who served as the inspiration for Walter Sobchak in *The Big Lebowski*

has impressive screenwriting credentials, including *Apocalypse Now*, the HBO series *Alone*, and Homefront's biggest inspiration, *Red Dawn*.

The collaboration with such an accomplished screenwriter and director appears to be paying off. The mission we play begins with Korean militants breaking down the protagonist's door and loading him onto a bus to be taken to a detention center. As the bus drives along the streets of his hometown, the effects of occupation are apparent. The Koreans have sectioned off the streets with chain-link fences, barbed wire, and roadblocks. Countless enemy patrols are gathering the other citizens, lining up the compliant and beating those who resist. As the bus slows down, we see a man and woman gunned down on the street corner as their child cries out, running to their corpses. Like the films Milius has worked on, Homefront doesn't pull any punches in how it depicts the horrors of war.

As the bus approaches its destination, the other prisoner on the bus whispers to us that we need to stick together when we get to the detention center. His words prove premature. As we enter the intersection, a semi speeds up the side street, crashing into the bus and flipping us upside down. Late stock of the situation as my vision fades in, the other prisoner is dead, and a figure has emerged from the smoke, stabbing one of the injured guards as he goes for his gun.

The resistance has arrived.

The rest of the mission features almost non-stop action, as we make our way through the back yards and alleyways of the town while trying to keep the falling military. The skirmishes we encounter demonstrate the story's focus on guerrilla warfare, requiring us to scavenge weapons off of dead soldiers and deal with some unconventional situations. In one area, we take refuge in a boarded-up home only to find that a mother is hiding inside with her crying baby. The objective shifts to defending the helpless civilians and as enemies begin to storm the house, we feel a greater sense of urgency than most military shooters evoke. Thankfully, Homefront's controls are on par with the genre's leading franchises, allowing us to swiftly repel the invading forces.

Although Homefront focuses on a more personal storyline, that doesn't mean it won't feature some epic moments too. As they progress through the game, players eventually meet up with the military, which introduces a beefier arsenal to help take back the country. The game also features vehicles that the player can pilot, and thanks to the near-future timeline, there will also be some controllable zones reminiscent of Kaos' previous title, *Frontlines: Fuel of War*. A later mission involves stepping into the gunner's seat on a helicopter. As the helicopter takes to the sky, Jim Hendrix begins blasting over the radio. This classic war story scene is turned on its side as we approach our destination—the Golden Gate Bridge. Kaos states that one of Homefront's themes is "the familiar becomes alien," and this scene demonstrates the concept well.

Kaos also intends for Homefront to be competitive in the multiplayer field, with a full ranking system, custom loadouts, and Perk-like abilities for both players and vehicles. Additionally, Homefront looks to set itself apart with an intuitive Battle Points system that allows players to use

their XP to purchase better weapons and vehicles in individual rounds. If that doesn't impress hardcore FPS fans, Homefront's 32-player limit and dedicated servers on all platforms should. Kaos says it's also planning to roll out DLC support soon after release, avoiding the mistake DICE has made with *Battlefield: Bad Company 2*.

We'll have to wait to see if Homefront's unique story will win over fans of military shooters, but so far it looks like Kaos Studios is heading in the right direction. —Jeff Marchusava



Earth Defense Force: Insect Armageddon

Send those bugs back home to space

PlayStation 3 • Xbox 360

» Style

1 Player Action (Up to 6-Player Online)

» Publisher
D3

» Developer
Vicious Cycle

» Release
Spring

Why are giant ants and killer robots attacking? Shut up! You're part of the Earth Defense Force now, and the time for questions has passed. All you need to know is that Ravagers are laying siege to the city of New Detroit, and your job is to obliterate them EDF style.

The success of Earth Defense Force 2017 may be difficult to understand. Released for Xbox 360 back in 2007, the game didn't have impressive graphics or cutting-edge gameplay. Instead, it offered a sea of alien insects for players to cooperatively destroy set against a hilarious B-movie backdrop. Even with low production values, EDF 2017 was shameless fun.

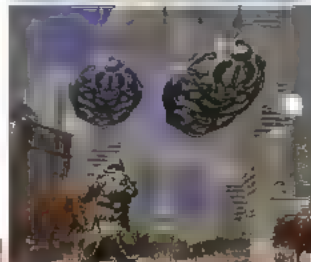
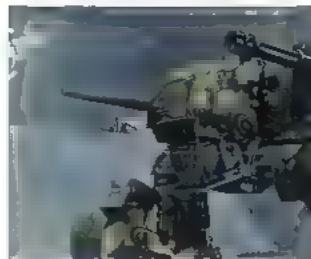
After spending some time playing the upcoming Insect Armageddon, we can safely say that developer Vicious Cycle understands what makes EDF so charming. Bugs swarm in from all directions, buildings collapse at the slightest impact, and the people around you spout ridiculous dialogue—but none of that is new. This time around, a few changes to the formula will keep you and your friends coming back to defend Earth again and again.

Taking control of a soldier designated Lightning Alpha, players now have more control

over how their abilities progress. As you complete missions and gain experience, you unlock new tiers of weapons for purchase (though some are still available as drops within a level). Eventually, you can even unlock new suits of armor, each of which has different abilities and weapons proficiencies.

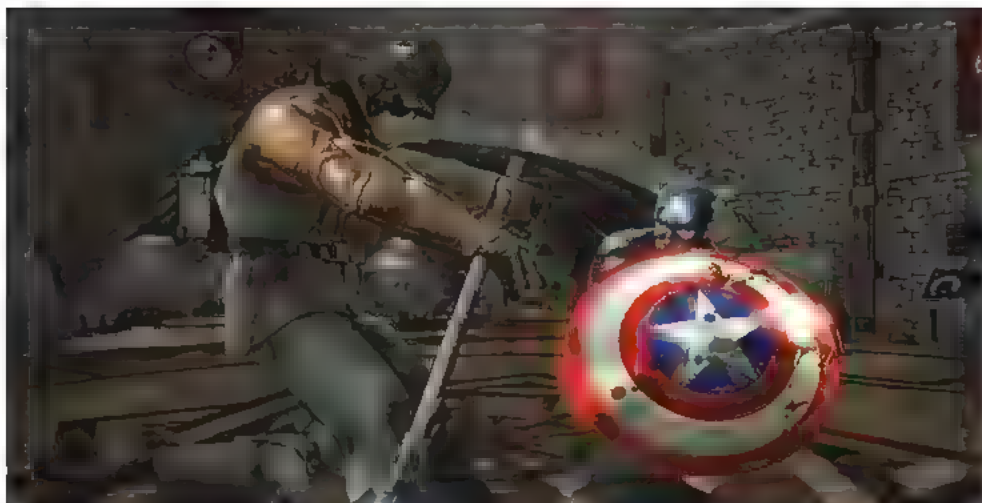
The default armor has the widest selection of weapons, while the battle armor is heavily fortified and focused on mortars and shotguns. The tactical armor gives you access to turrets, which are now a special ability instead of occupying a valuable weapon slot. The coolest of the bunch is the jet armor, which is highly maneuverable and gives you access to flight and an array of energy weapons.

To earn these upgrades, you can grind through the missions yourself (aided by AI companions), or team up with up to two other players online to complete the main campaign. Considering how much fun co-op was in the last entry, we can't wait to rope more friends into the fight—especially since you can now revive each other. When the spring rolls around, you and your buddies can re-enlist in the EDF and see how those bugs like the taste of your bullets. — Joe Juba



Earth Defense Force 2017 was notorious for its terrible achievements and a small area where you'll see a major overhaul in Insect Armageddon. We noticed that the title sees its allotted 90 achievements, and you'll get them for a variety of accomplishments, not just for completing each difficulty level.





Captain America: Super Soldier

Captain America takes on World War II

During the chaos of World War II, the world's superpowers were busy building devastating weapons that could cripple nations. With the Nazis researching the uranium bomb and experimenting with human genetics, the Allies were under the gun to come up with their own secret military weapon. The result was Operation Rebirth, a super-soldier program that transformed sickly army reject Steve Rogers into a genetically perfect soldier—the world's most articulate weapon of mass destruction.

Marvel's version of World War II is the backdrop for next summer's Captain America film and the companion video game from Sega. Like the movie, the game will detail Captain America's tour of duty during the war. However, with the film tackling Cap's origin, the game is free to fill in some gaps during the hero's formative war years. Television and comic writer Christos Gage (*Avengers: The Initiative*, *Civil War*, *House of M*, and *Avengers Academy*) will help with the story,

which pits Cap against foes like the scientist Arnim Zola.

Even if you don't follow the comics, you probably know that Captain America's signature tool is his shield. Cap can use it to block incoming gunfire, but it's far more exciting to send those bullets ricocheting back at his foes like a Jedi master or throw the shield into a group of enemies and watch it bounce around like an air hockey disc before returning to his arm. Sega says that the shield comes in handy during some of the game's Prince of Persia-style platforming sequences, but we haven't seen this functionality in action yet.

Captain America's peak physique makes him an imposing opponent in battle. He leaps over enemies to deliver a flurry of kidney-crushing punches from behind, and grabs foes before slamming them to the ground with more force than a WWE superstar. As Cap unleashes his arsenal of strikes, grabs, and counters, he fills

up a Crippling Strike meter. Once full, this meter allows him to perform special take-downs complete with sexy slow-motion camera tricks.

Captain America doesn't have any special eye powers in the comics, but the game's Tactical Vision mode highlights interactive objects, objectives, and other points of interest within the environment. It sounds a bit like Batman's detective mode from *Arkham Asylum*, but hopefully Sega finds a way to incorporate this ability into the fiction in a way that doesn't come across as hokey.

Sega first announced it had acquired the Captain America license early last year, but this is the first time the company has spoken about the game or its developer, Next Level Games. With any luck, Captain America will turn out more like the developer's 2009 project *Punch-Out!* and less like its last superhero title, *Spider-Man: Friend or Foe*. — Ben Reeves

» Platform
PlayStation 3 • Xbox 360

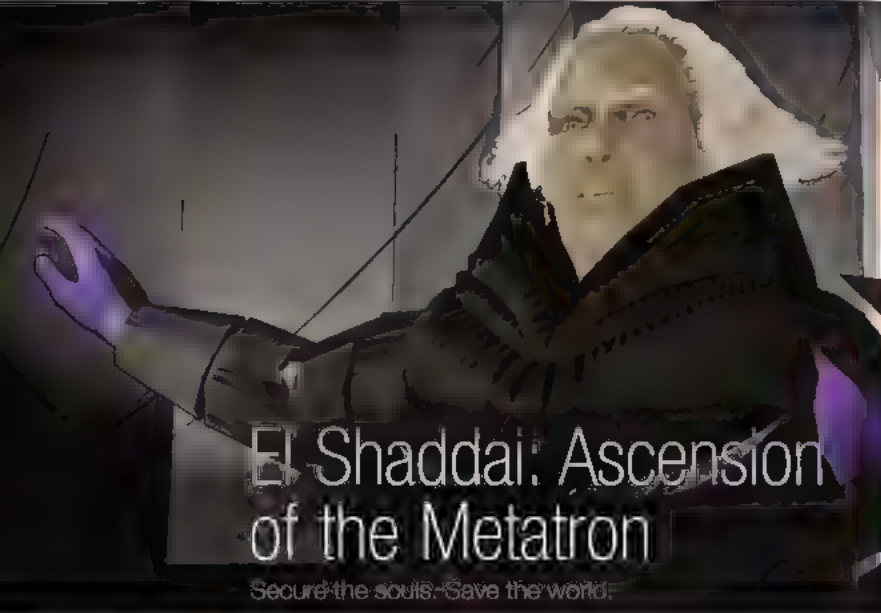
» Style
1 Player Action

» Publisher
Sega

» Developer
Next Level Games

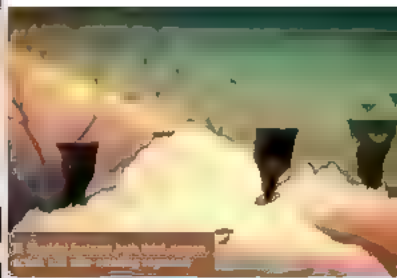
» Release
Summer





El Shaddai: Ascension of the Metatron

Secure the souls. Save the world.



» Platform
Playstation 3 • Xbox 360

» Style
-Player Action

» Publisher
Ignition Entertainment

» Developer
Ignition Entertainment

» Release
Spring 2011

A religious tale told through varying art styles, perspectives, and gameplay mechanics, *El Shaddai* is a dark horse to watch in 2011. The narrative itself is loosely derived from the Book of Enoch, which chronicles the scribe's exploits as he interacts with seven fallen angels.

Ignition's interpretation of the text begins with God appointing a group of angels as wardens of the world. Jubbeth the Grigori, their keen observation of Earth results in a fascination with humankind, and eventually they defect to live amongst and control the masses. To prevent such divine influence over mortals, God decides to flood the world, only halting when the strong-willed human scribe named Enoch objects.

Postponing his apocalyptic punishment, God grants Enoch a chance to capture the angels and save the world. Tasked as a protector, the darkly clad archangel Lucifer joins Enoch, having taken a liking to the altruistic, if slightly overconfident protagonist.

Tossing scriptural accuracy aside, Ignition is taking drastic liberties

with the presentation. Golden-locked Enoch is adorned with heavenly armor that shatters as he takes damage (acting as a substitute for a standard health bar) revealing what appears to be designer denim underneath. Lucifer is equally stylish, with his black ensemble accessorizing with a cellular phone he uses to keep in contact with Enoch.

Gameplay unfolds through a blend of third-person action and side-scrolling platforming, with combat broken into two distinct stages. Enoch begins his journey unnamed, but can job foes of their weapons through fluid melee attacks. Once in his possession, weapons must be purified with a power gifted to Enoch by God. The default weapon in *El Shaddai* appears to be the Arch, a relic stolen from heaven by the disloyal angels and corrupted by their betrayal. The blade must be cleansed in order for Enoch to return souls to heaven above.

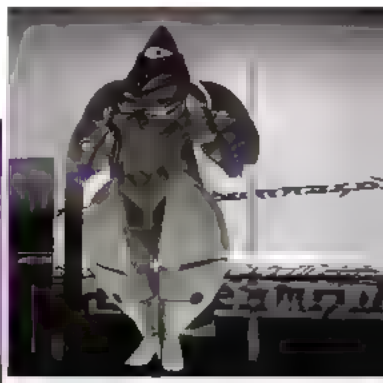
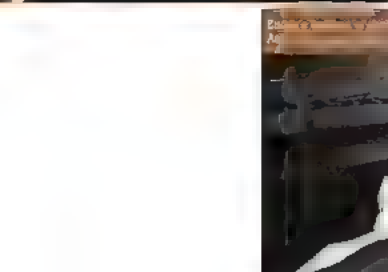
Ignition is promising multiple weapon types, all of which must be won through battle and replenished as they take damage. We had a brief chance to get our hands on the game, and can confirm the fluidity of combat. Enoch's attacks default to heavy and light, and can be modified to encompass aerial and timed variants. Increasingly intense combos require a level of skill intended to appeal to more seasoned gamers.

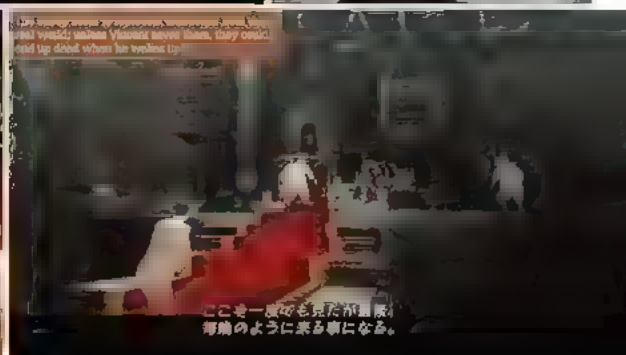
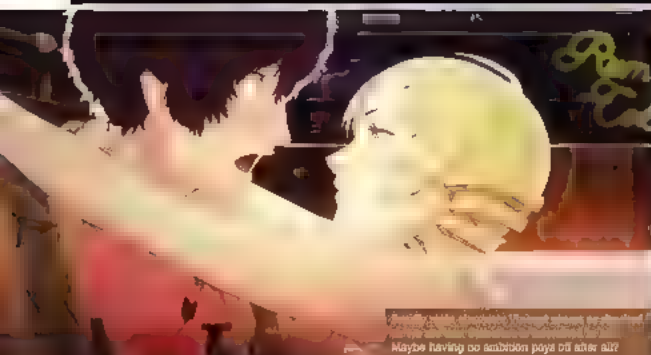
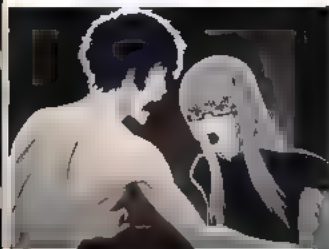
Above all, the art direction is where *El*

Shaddai shines. At times characters appear cel shaded, and at others more in the vein of a watercolor painting. The development team at Ignition features Takeyasu Sawaki, the helm, famous for his work as Capcom on *Devil May Cry* and *Okami*.

The setting showcases skylscapes with marbled veins of color. We've watched Enoch traverse unfurling clouds, the light transitioning from day to night to something else entirely. Enoch then becomes silhouetted against a vibrant stained-glass window before returning to a snowy vista with swans flying through indescant skies. These domains are all fashioned after the angels who possess them, promising several unique environments. The world of *El Shaddai* can only be described as transient at best.

At this point in time, *El Shaddai: Ascension of the Metatron* is still an enigma—but a captivating one at that. Seeking visuals can only go so far, so here's hoping we get to see more of *El Shaddai*'s core mechanics soon. » **Meagan VanBurklee**





Catherine

The Persona team goes HD in this risqué action-adventure

Earlier this year Atlus announced *Catherine*, the first HD game developed by the talented team behind the *Persona* series. The publisher has yet to confirm a North American release, but as one of the strangest, most promising titles to come from this quirky studio, we're hopeful that Atlus will do the right thing and bring it to our shores as well.

The first thing you should know is that *Catherine* eschews the hard-core RPG style of *Persona*. Despite the team's pedigree, this time Atlus set out to make an action-adventure title. Hopefully, this means *Catherine* will draw in a larger crowd of gamers who were intrigued by *Persona*'s stylish look but scared off by the intense time and skill commitment.

As with previous games by the team, *Catherine* does not tell a typical story starring typical protagonists. Players take on the role of Vincent, an unmotivated, insomniac salaryman who finds himself trapped in a nightmare world whenever he manages to fall asleep. The main hook of the game seems to be in the same vein

as *A Nightmare on Elm Street*: if you die in your dreams, you die in real life.

The action takes place in these nightmares, where Vincent has to avoid disgusting monstrosities to save his life. Some of the creatures shown so far include a giant pair of hands with a fork that tries to stab Vincent and a huge, tall robot baby with a chainsaw replacing one of its hands and a hook on the other. To escape from the evil dream, players have to navigate obstacles and work their way up a giant staircase.

Back in the real world, a bizarre mystery will unfold in Vincent's life through more adventure-style segments. Vincent has to contend with two women, the sultry Catherine and more grounded childhood friend Katherine. During these parts of the game, players can explore the town and interact with other characters, as well as check their email for messages from Vincent's two love interests.

Catherine raised many eyebrows with its highly suggestive first trailer. Despite some tantalizing imagery that caused imaginations to run

wild, *Catherine* will not be a full-on adult game. Sexuality is clearly one of the main topics being tackled, though, which makes the game all the more fascinating. Very few developers seem willing to address this touchy subject, but we're hopeful that Atlus can do so in an intelligent manner.

Depending on your actions, *Catherine* can take between 20 and 30 hours to play—a welcome relief from the 100-plus hours I've devoted to various *Persona* games. Of course, for those willing to spend more time, the game features multiple endings to discover. Based off the limited info available, *Catherine* has the potential to be a huge game-changer for Atlus both in moving beyond RPGs and engaging in more mature subject matter. With *Catherine* scheduled for release in Japan this winter, all that's left is to hope that it lives up to that potential—and that gamers outside of Japan get to find out as well. —Phi Kollar

PlayStation 3 • Xbox 360

- » **Style**
- » **Player Action**
- » **Publisher**
Atlus
- » **Developer**
Atlus
- » **Release**
TBA



Test Drive Unlimited 2

Test drive gets bigger & busier

Platform
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360 • PC

Style
1-Player Racing
(6-Player Online)

Publisher
Atari

Developer
Eden Studios

Release
Spring 2011

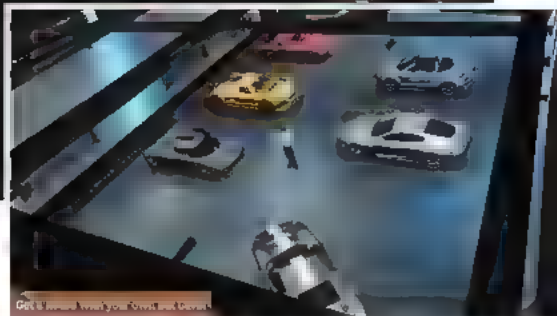
Test Drive Unlimited 2 was recently delayed into the first quarter of next year. It's probably a good thing, because Atari and developer Eden Studios have crammed a large chunk of content into the game. The first Test Drive Unlimited erased the division between online and offline racing, and this game goes a step further by not only offering more sheer content but by giving players more context to the world and tools to shape their experience.

TDU 2 adds a storyline, and its filminess is intentional but at least humorous. You're a valet at a posh hotel on the island of Ibiza who locks into a chance to become a race car driver by hijacking the Ferrari of your employer's daughter. As player film as it sounds, at least the story provides context to many of your challenges as you ascend the ranks and start to live the full TDU 2 lifestyle. Your driver can now get out of his or her car and walk around the world and socialize with other drivers. Of course, you're going to want to look your best and part of the game's lifestyle component is the ability to purchase new clothes, houses (with garages of varying sizes) and other changes to your appearance.

Other than the size of your mansion, your

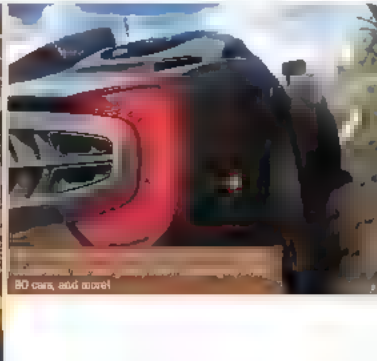
progress in the game is charted by a 0-70 level system that summarizes your Competition, Collection, Discovery, and Social skills (with each of these sub-categories containing 1-5 levels of their own). Various championship race events of differing objectives, duets with other drivers (including the chance to win their car), and multiplayer challenges fall into the Competition category, while more esoteric objectives like adding stickers to your cars or finding treasure-filled wrecks with a metal detector gain you experience for the Collection and Discovery categories, respectively. Even if you aren't actively involved in a challenge and are just driving around, you can still progress in the game by earning money for near misses, gaining air and drifting.

The game's social aspect is a major component, especially since you can dip into online play at any time. Apart from competitive races, players can become a cop and chase lawbreakers, and there are co-op challenges like Follow



the leader, where only the leader of the pack can see the next checkpoint gate. Best of all, you can once again create your own challenges with a suite of tools that lets you set up Speedtrap, radar guns, Time Attack checkpoints, rewards, traffic, and more—if you've been hopping out of your car and running around using the emotes, icons and voice chat options to make friends, then you should know enough people to start your own racing club and try to earn exclusive cars and pool club money.

The great thing about the first Test Drive was its sense of freedom. Ironically, it looks like developer Eden Studios might have improved the franchise by adding more structure to the title. Regardless of some of the tweaks, at its heart, this game is still about letting you live the life. — Mathew Kato





NASCAR The Game 2011

Restarting your race for the chase

Console NASCAR fans were black flagged a few years ago when Electronic Arts stopped its NASCAR franchise dead in its tracks, and since then those looking to trade some paint have been left wanting. The stock car association is represented in Gran Turismo 5, but this is merely a taste of the experience and not substantial. On the other end of the spectrum, the online racing league is so hardcore it's used as a simulation/training tool by the likes of Dale Earnhardt Jr. Now EA developer Eutechnyx is trying to pick up where EA left off and let the majority of NASCAR fans—those who just want to step in the shoes of their favorite driver and experience the season—get in some green-flag racing.

Eutechnyx is new to stock car racing, but it has a history of racing titles, including everything from Big Mutha Truckers to Euro-only titles like SuperCar Challenge. You can ignore the yellow stripe on the studio's bumper, however, as NASCAR The Game 2011 fits all the tracks in the Sprint Cup circuit, features a full 13-car field, observes all the flags, and lets you play as 43 drivers, including Nationwide part timer Danica Patrick.

Despite the inclusion of Ms. Patrick, this game

is focused on the Sprint Cup series, and you can start your career as your favorite driver or you can create your own, complete with a stock car with a custom paint job. Although the Career mode doesn't let you switch teams or offer much off-the-track depth (you can race in occasional, optional oval trials), the game tries to compensate by offering NXP for performance on track feats like winning the pole, for instance. NXP unlocks alternate paint schemes for your favorite drivers. Your progress is also charted by the mode's user interface, which is your garage on race day. As you become more successful, you'll see more fans hanging around, the banners of contingency sponsors hanging from your walls, and other chronicles of your accomplishments.

The game may not be tailored for hardcore sim racers, but that doesn't mean that it doesn't try to nail some specifics of the sport. Temperatures will change as day turns into night at tracks like at Richmond, and tracks will have multiple racing lines. Numerous aspects of your car can be tweaked, before the race and during, oil stops like track bar adjustments, adding wedge, tire pressure, and more. If you're not ambitious enough to try and act as your own crew chief, Eutechnyx

has smartly included almost a dozen custom racing setups for you to try.

For those of you reading this preview just for the crashes, you'll be delighted to hear that this title is full of those as well. Cars can flip, fire, can get cut because of dangling sheet metal (or if you drive over track debris), and the smoke and confusion of wrecks will have you gripping your steering wheel tight when "The Big One" unfolds right in front of you. Eutechnyx says that the AI of the drivers will be tuned to how they drive in real life, and while we have to see this to believe it first, at a minimum, the game does keep track of who you give respect to and who you abuse like some lapped field filler. Get into a guy a couple times and he'll dump you in turn four with a smile.

NASCAR The Game 2011 isn't trying to cover every aspect of the sport right out of the gate. That's bound to leave some fans disappointed, but developer Eutechnyx is trying to make sure it gets the basic racing right from the start. That said, this game has thrown in a few features that should get NASCAR fans interested in at least a few laps. **Mathew Kato**

» Platform
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360 • Wii

» Style
1 or 2 Player Racing
[16-Player Online]

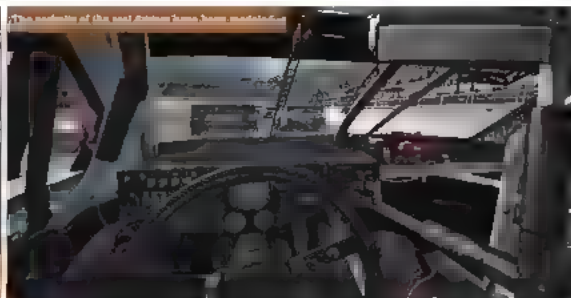
» Publisher
Activision

» Developer
Eutechnyx

» Release
February 2011



It's difficult to get to see a pit stop in action, and the wooden structure will be there for jobs there.



The points of the seat cushion have been modified.

Pokémon Black/White

The original dark monster collecting franchise evolves

» Platform
Nintendo DS

» style
Player Role-Playing

» Publisher
Nintendo/The
Pokémon Company

» Developer
Game Freak

» Release
Spring

After more than 10 years since the original Pokémon titles first hit Japan, the franchise has shown no sign of slowing down. Game Freak's remakes of Gold and Silver were evidence that the classic collecting mechanic and rock-paper-scissors style battle system hadn't lost their luster. Still, Pokémaniacs have anxiously waited for the franchise to take steps in a fresh direction. With the upcoming releases of Pokémon Black and White versions, these loyal fans won't have to wait much longer.

Pokémon Black and White versions immediately show off the fifth generation's new direction with an animated cutscene. An uncharacteristically dark scene reveals a crowning ceremony for a mysterious young man with no supporting details as to who he is and the role he'll play. The scene then jumps to a more upbeat scenario with the signature Pokémon theme song as the words "Hope," "Dream," and "Discovery" flash on screen, all the while expansive new environments of the Isthmian region and

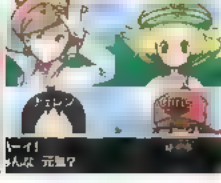
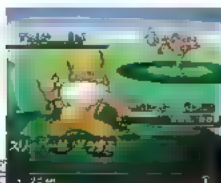
images of a ton of new Pokémon just waiting to be captured are revealed.

With a quick introduction by Pokémon expert Dr. Araragi, you're free to explore the bustling new world. While we know little about the plot at this point, you're still responsible for collecting badges and battling stray trainers, including confrontations with troublesome Team Plasma. After a few hours of exploring the Isthmian region, you'll notice more densely populated towns, tall housing structures spanning multiple floors, and the Pokémon Center and Poké Mart combined into a one-stop shop. Environments are colorful and detailed, with each new area featuring its own catchy soundtrack. Camera angles dynamically change while traveling, giving the three-dimensional space a sense of large scale. You'll have plenty of land to cover when seeking the 156 new Pokémon that appear in Black and White.

Players select among three new starter Pokémon: Tsujara (grass-type), Miumaru (water-

type), and Pokabu (fire-type), and begin traversing from one grass patch to the next to engage monsters in combat. The battle system has received a graphical overhaul, as creatures are far more detailed and better animated than the old pebbled sprites. Camera angles shift to give a greater sense of action and battle music intensifies when your Pokémon are low on health. Up to three Pokémon are able to participate in some battle scenarios, introducing an element of party-based combat. Even though the battle mechanics remain similar to one-on-one, figuring out which half of your six Pokémon to call upon while being mindful of elemental strengths and weaknesses shakes things up.

Pokémon Black and White have already been greeted with success in Japan, becoming the fastest-selling DS games of all time. We will just have to wait a bit longer, as Game Freak's latest entries launch next spring in North America. » Annette Gonzalez





Kingdom Hearts Re:coded

The lost chapter gets a remastered release

While some Kingdom Hearts fans are still trying to max out their levels or finish a Critical mode playthrough in September's Birth by Sleep on PSP, another entry in the series is coming much sooner than expected. Kingdom Hearts Re:coded is based off of Coded, which was originally released in episodic installments on mobile phones in Japan from late 2008 through early 2010. While the story reportedly stays true to the original (including a supposed lie-in to Birth by Sleep and the upcoming 3DS entry), the gameplay and graphics have been completely revamped for the DS.

Re:coded just recently came out in Japan, and we imported it for an extended hands-on session. The game starts up a little while after Kingdom Hearts II inside Disney Castle. Jimmy Cricket is looking over his journals from the first two games and is still confounded by the book from Kingdom Hearts I. Fans will remember that Naminé seemingly cleared the journal during Chain of Memories along with Sora, Donald, Goofy, and Jimmy's memories. To remember their old lives, the team decided to let Naminé rebuild their memories at the expense of forgetting everything from the events in CoM, including Naminé. The last thing Jimmy wrote in his seemingly empty journal before the procedure was "Thank Naminé."

Later, during the opening scene of Re:coded, he opens the journal to look at the entry, still forgetting why he wrote it and who Naminé is. He flips through the rest of the blank pages and finds a new mysterious message that reads, "We must return to free them from their torment." Jimmy is sure he didn't write it and runs to tell King Mickey, Donald, Goofy, Mickey, and Jimmy scan the journal into Chip and Dale's giant fancy computer to get more info on the new entry and find out who needs help. Loads of hidden data flashes onscreen. The only problem is that it's all corrupted. To navigate and repair the data, Mickey activates a virtual Sora from inside the journal. Players control this digital Sora as he cleans up the corrupted Kingdom Hearts I worlds inside the journal. Everybody caught up now? Good!

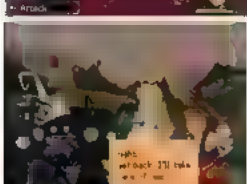
I ran around for a few hours in Destiny Islands, Traverse Town, and Wonderland initially. I was concerned that it would suck to play through these maps all over yet again, but somehow it feels different. The corrupted worlds are filled with floating glitch blocks you use to platform to higher areas and grab special items. The only way to fix the worlds is to find hidden portals to Matrix-like code rooms and clear them of enemies. This debugs the area and can make bridges reappear or change a stone wall into a doorway. Missions are short and sweet, with new boss battles and gameplay offshoots. For example, I played through a 2D side-scrolling platforming section and saw hints of classic turn-based RPG and rail shooter segments.

The surprisingly unique battle mechanics are distinct from other entries in the series. As you attack enemies, a new multi-layered overlock gauge fills up on the top screen while a corresponding ability tree activates on the bottom screen. The gauge can fill up to four times during combat and each time it activates a stacking passive ability like added magic defense, faster melee attacks, or an auto dodge. Each keyblade has a different ability tree, and you can open new options the more you use it. Once the gauge has activated all four abilities, you can fill it once last time to unleash a devastating finisher.

Leveling up takes place on what looks like a giant motherboard. You'll start near a CPU and place chips down to bring power to new areas of the board. These chips include straight level ups or specific strength, magic, and health boosts. The most beneficial move is to link up two CPUs to double the effects of every chip in between. At one point, I jumped four levels alone just by placing the final chip.

While it doesn't offer any direct multiplayer, Re:coded does have something called an Avatar Menu. Here you can customize an avatar with all kinds of accessories you unlock from characters and enemies, and use the DS's tag mode to send challenges and cards to friends. I wasn't able to do much in this mode, but I'm curious about how it'll work in the J.S. version. —Bryan Vore

- » Platform: Nintendo DS
- » Style: Player Action/RPG
- » Publisher: Square Enix
- » Developer: Square Enix/n.a.n.d
- » Release: January 11



Yoostar 2

Think you've got star potential?

» Platform
PlayStation 3 • Xbox 360

» Style
1 to 4-Player Party

» Publisher
Yoostar Entertainment

» Developer
Blitz Games Studios

» Release
Early 2011

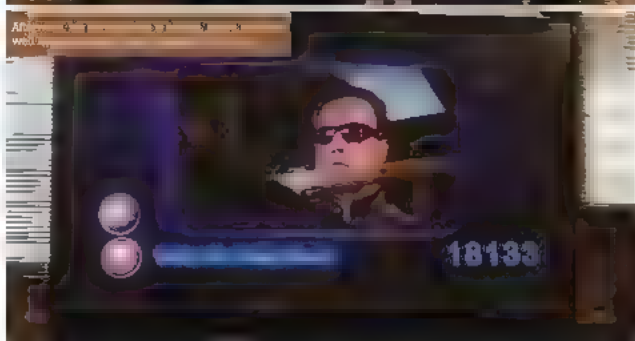
If you've ever wanted to act alongside some of Hollywood's biggest stars, Yoostar 2 could make that dream a reality. The game allows would-be actors to insert themselves into a wide variety of classic movie moments, act their hearts out, and then see how the results stack up. Better still, there's no worry about blowing a scene and ruining a production or getting in drunken fights with paparazzi between projects.

Yoostar 2 offers a variety of gameplay modes, including quick play and a goal-driven campaign, but the overall experience is essentially the same. Using Kinect or the PlayStation Eye, Yoostar 2's software generates a green-screen effect without the need for hanging a sheet in your living room. We spent a few hours with the Xbox 360 version of the game, and while the effect isn't flawless, it's leagues above what products like You're in the Movies have offered in the past.

Film clips include scenes for one or two participants, with the original actors filling their roles if a friend isn't handy. After picking a scene from a wide variety of comedies, dramas, classics, and TV shows, players choose which of the predetermined roles they want to take on. From there, it's a simple matter of stepping into position and reciting lines via a karaoke-style scroller. After each scene is completed, players watch their scene and earn stars depending on how well they delivered their lines, whether or not they stuck to their marks, or if they interrupted other characters.

Once they've had a few minutes to bask in the adulation of their fans, players can upload their videos to the Yoostar network. After being screened for content by moderators, other players can view and rate approved performances. There's also a social-networking component, with Facebook and Twitter integration, and the developer says it's hoping to add YouTube support. Video quality is somewhat dependent on your lighting, and even after making adjustments you're not going to mistake your inserted actors for part of the original scene, but it's definitely acceptable.

Yoostar 2 is not a game for people who take themselves too seriously, but it has loads of party-game potential. Setting up playlists of clips is easy and gives people a chance to test the waters, and the fact that there's no controller to worry about makes it accessible to hams everywhere. The Kinect version also does a decent job of filtering out and ignoring background activity, so you don't need to treat your living room like a quarantine zone during shoots. If your friends aren't allergic to fun, though, chances are they'll want to take on a starring role instead of lingering in the back of the room, anyway. — Jeff Cork



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Bloodline Champions

A new form of action/RTS

Platform
 PC
Style
 1-Player Action
 10-Player Online
Publisher
 Funcom
Developer
 Slurlock Studios
Release Date
 December

This student project-turned-full-game out of Sweden is easy to pick up and play, but is there room on PC for a drastically different subgenre of competitive PvP?

You might assume at first glance that this is another Defense of the Ancients clone, like League of Legends or Heroes of Newerth. You'd be wrong, though the highly competitive five-on-five battles share a similar top-down, RTS-like view.

Beyond the team sizes, the cutthroat nature, and the viewpoint, this has little in common with those titles. Bloodline Champions is much more direct than DotA-like games. There are no minions or creeps to fight, just other players. Randomness does not exist: there are no critical strikes, dice-roll dodges, or even damage ranges. Thankfully, rounds are closer to five minutes than the 40-minute slogs that DotA-likes can often be.

Your view and targeting follow the mouse cursor, while you move with WASD and fire off powers with your two mouse buttons plus the space and q-e-r-f keys. There is no auto attack, to do anything at all you must use your powers. Fortunately, you don't have anything like a mana bar to worry about. Power use is regulated solely by cooldowns.

Every ability in the game—fireballs, spear throws, plague clouds, even healing spells

must actually connect with its target in order to do anything. Your shots will go exactly to your mouse cursor's position when the power is invoked, but nearly everything has a travel time or a charge-up delay (or both, for particularly nasty effects). You've got to have the skills to get your moves to land.

Bloodlines have a variety of core skills along with both a movement and a defensive power. The fire mage, for example, has an inteno shield that makes him invulnerable for a few seconds and pushes back any enemy nearby when it fades. He can also do a fiery dash that leaves a burning trail in his wake, damaging enemies who get too close. This diversity is key: it allows every player in the game to pull off some truly amazing feats of skill if they have the dexterity.

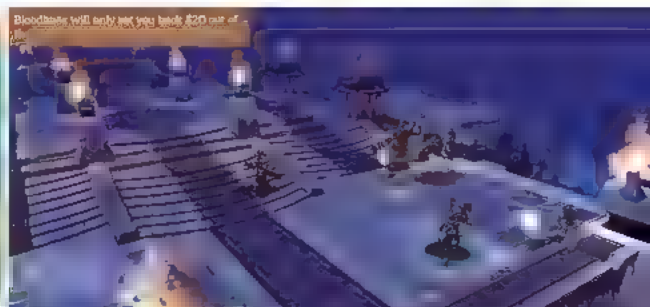
The basic 5v5 deathmatch gametype is the core experience here, but two alternate respawn enabled modes exist as well. Capture the Artifact is a variant of capture-the-flag, where your team has to hold two artifacts simultaneously in its scoring zone. Conquest requires teams to control two separate bases to stop the other team from respawning.

Also unlike DotA-like games, Bloodline Champions has no equipment procurement or leveling up within the match. In the build played, the bloodline you choose during match prep is what you have for the entire thing. Further dis-

tancing itself from that subgenre, the game will ship with over a dozen maps, most of which are only for arena matches.

Bloodline Champions has a unique business model. The core game will cost around \$20, and a high-end version with more bloodlines and some cosmetic extras will sell for \$50-60. There is no subscription fee to play, but Funcom will be offering a bunch of items for cash purchase including new bloodlines and further cosmetic stuff. Some of these extras, including all of the new bloodlines introduced during the game's lifetime, will be unlockable through play as well as by paying. At the moment, Funcom plans to only sell the game through digital channels, with no presence at physical retail.

The currently running closed beta plays well. Funcom is hosting dedicated servers to minimize the effects of lag and host advantage, which Bloodline Champions is extremely sensitive to given its unique targeting mechanism. The core gameplay is already fast, fun, and a thousand times more approachable than many competitor-oriented titles. If Slurlock Studios can create an engaging framework around it—something currently lacking in the closed beta, as a ranking system and basic clan support are the extent of the persistence here—I could see the young studio building quite a name for itself in the years to come. —Adam Bressner





Includes Federer, Nadal, and Andy Murray

Virtua Tennis 4

New tennis title features Move and 3D support

Virtua Tennis, the longest running tennis series in history, is returning next year exclusively on PlayStation 3. The reason for this exclusivity is simple: The game is going to include support for Sony's two latest technological initiatives - the Move controller and 3D television support. Sega stopped by the Game Informer offices to let me get a taste of what tennis looks and feels like with a virtual racket and 3D glasses. After clearing out some space in the conference room, I donned my space goggles, grabbed the Move, and started a match.

Obviously, as a sports game, it's not the most dramatic usage of the 3D effect - there are no tennis balls flying out of the screen like a bloody hatchet in a B-grade 3D horror flick. Still, there's a noticeable sense of depth. Even better, it didn't give me a headache like my previous experience with 3D gaming (Ubisoft's Avatar did). Thus far, it seems like a fun - but hardly essential - addition to the game. However, if you own a 3D television, it does add some appeal to a style of game that is hardly known for visual fireworks.

On the other hand, Virtua Tennis' Move support represents a fundamental change to a series that has remained in stasis for years. It functions exactly as you'd expect: Your Move controller is your racket. After we got it calibrated correctly, it worked well. Sony's claims about the accuracy of the Move appear to be true, though this build of the game was far from perfect. I was still able to execute top spin and slice shots just as I would in real life. It was also a bit of a workout - hitting a cross court winner requires you to position your body sideways and put some real oomph in your swing. It was also important to get a good feel for timing - no more preloading your swing as we've all done on the Wii. My biggest problems came in executing overhead smashes. Judging the position of the virtual racket in relation to the ball coming down onscreen was often difficult.

The build I played handled your onscreen player's movement automatically. However, there will be an expert mode that allows you to control your onscreen avatar with the Move's navigation controller.

Though it has a good ways to go in terms of polish before it comes out next year, I'm certainly intrigued by the possibilities of the Move controls. Let's hope that an equal amount of work is going into improving and changing Virtua Tennis' stagnant career mode and minigames. » Matt Helgeson

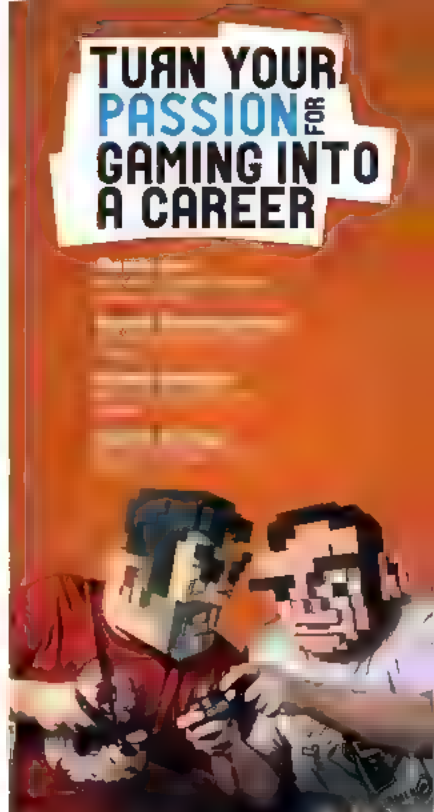
» Platform
PlayStation 3

» Style
1 to 4-Player Sports
(Date TBA)

» Publisher
Sega

» Developer
Sega

» Release
2011



Campus Degrees

- » Entertainment Business
- » Game Design

Bachelor's

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- » Entertainment Business
- » Film
- » Game Art
- » Game Development
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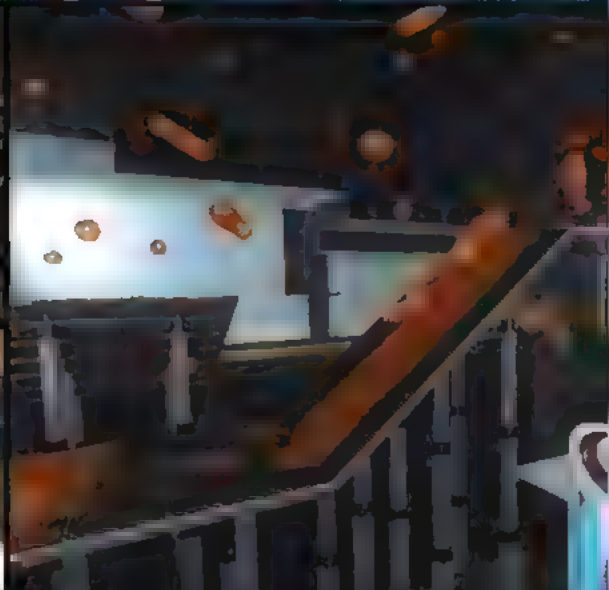
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Portal 2

The new gameplay devices of Portal 2

When we first showed off Portal 2 back in April, Valve wasn't ready to talk about many aspects of the game. Our feature had plenty of information on the new storyline, including the return of everyone's favorite evil artificially intelligent computer system GLaDOS, but we had to rely on a handful of humorous diagrams to explain the new testing elements.

Since the reveal, Valve has become more forthcoming with what Portal 2's amped-up gameplay entails, releasing over half a dozen videos showcasing what's new in this ambitious sequel. You can watch all of these videos for yourself at gameinformer.com, but in the meantime, here are some examples of how each of these game-changing elements will work.

Excursion Funnels

Described as churning funnels of liquid asbestos, these gravity-defying tractor beams allow the player to travel to unreachable areas, as well as transport objects such as Weighted Storage Cubes and enemy turrets. While this may sound rather mundane, throwing portals into the mix makes for some ingenious gameplay. After identifying where it was being generated, the player in the video jumps into the Excursion Funnel and shoots a portal on the wall where the funnel ends. By shooting the exit portal onto different surfaces, the player is then able to change where the funnel leads to; shoot the exit portal on a surface below you, and the funnel instantly redirects, emerging from the floor and carrying you upwards. Thanks to this functionality, the player was able to traverse multiple twists and turns, and then levitate a cube upwards to press a button on the ceiling.

Aerial Faith Plates

Aerial Faith Plates function similarly to jump pads found in many FPS titles. Upon contact, the plates automatically hurl players or objects towards a predetermined location. The demonstration video shows a chain of Aerial Faith Plates being used to catapult the player through the environment, with each plate changing the direction the player is headed. The trick comes at the end of the series, when the final plate propels the player towards a bare wall; shooting a portal at the last second transforms the dead end into an opening that allows the player to use their momentum to reach a previously unattainable ledge.

Thermal Discouragement Beam

Valve's humorous term for a laser, the Thermal Discouragement Beam can be used as both a weapon and a mechanic for solving puzzles. By using Redirection Cubes, the player can guide the laser towards enemies or special switches. Simply hold the cube like any other object and angle its built-in mirror into the laser, aiming the deadly beam at whatever you want to activate (or burn). Lasers will also travel through portals. In the video, the player was able to attack a turret around the corner by shooting one portal onto a wall adjacent to the enemy, then using a Redirection Cube to divert the laser through the other portal. The turret wasn't even visible, but its auto-tuned screams and the resulting explosion alerted the player to a job well done.

Pneumatic Diversity Vents

Similar to Excursion Funnels, the Pneumatic Diversity Vents are tubes that can be used to transport objects. These tubes can't be extended via portals, but by placing a portal at the mouth of the vent, players can use their suction to manipulate the environment. The demo shows a well-placed portal sucking up an entire room full of turrets, and then funneling them in an endless loop by placing the second portal at the other end of the vent. In a second example, the suction from the vents not only pulled a turret in a narrow hallway through the portal, but also ripped the ceiling tiles off of the adjacent wall, exposing what appeared to be a hidden area.

Repulsion Gel

Originally referred to as blue paint in our cover story, Repulsion Gel has the ability to propel players and objects through the air. Repulsion Gel drips out of dispensers in certain locations, but thanks to its ability to travel through portals as amorphous blobs, it can be transferred all over the level. In order to reach a high ledge, the player in the demo shoots one portal under the dispenser, and places the other on the floor below the unobtainable cliff. As the ball of gel springs upwards from the second portal, the player removes the gateway, leaving bare floor. A moment later the gel splashes on the ground, allowing the player to effortlessly bounce up to the ledge. A second video shows the player using an Excursion Funnel to divert an entire stream of Repulsion Gel above a row of turrets. Removing the portals causes the funnel to break, leaving the blue gel to pour down upon the turrets, sending them ricocheting around the environment.

Propulsion Gel

Propulsion Gel allows the player to speed across any surface that's painted with the orange liquid. Like Repulsion Gel, this substance drips out of dispensers within the level. In the demo, the player must use the gel to pass through a gauntlet of spiked plates that close too quickly to run through. To do this, the player places a portal underneath a falling stream of Propulsion Gel, and then shoots the second portal onto an angled platform. This results in the gel emerging from the second portal in a high arc, soaring across a deadly gap and covering the platform containing the deadly plates. With Propulsion Gel already covering the floor in front of them, the player is able to speed through the portal, make the jump, and fly past the spike plates just before they snap shut.

Although based on simple concepts, each of the new elements together adds an exciting facet to Portal's proven gameplay, and mixing these different mechanics (not to mention the introduction of a second player in the game's new co-op mode) should result in a lot of mind-boggling puzzles. That said, the most startling revelation for the series so far hasn't been a new gameplay element, but rather Valve's announcement that Portal 2 will also be available on the PlayStation 3, with Valve's managing director (and former PS3 hater) Gabe Newell stating that Sony's offering will be "the best version on any console." What makes the PS3 version so special? We'll have to wait until next year to find out. — Jeff Marchant/ave

Platform
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360 • PC • Mac

Style
1 or 2-Player Puzzle
(2-Player Online)

Publisher
Valve

Developer
Valve

Release
2011

Views

DONKEY KONG COUNTRY RETURNS

gameformer
GAME OF THE MONTH

124 Donkey Kong Country Returns

Choosing the best among our highest scoring games this month was like a parent choosing their favorite child—Donkey Kong Country Returns, Kirby's Epic Yarn, and God of War: Ghost of Sparta all deserve their accolades, but the return of Nintendo's great ape wins the game of the month with its tight controls, challenging platforming, and unprecedented level variety.

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	Fleeted. It may be obvious that the game has lots of potential, but its most engaging features could be uninterestingly flawed or not integrated into the experience.
9	Excellent. Just shy of getting nirvana, this score is a high recommendation because the game reviewed is head-and-shoulders above its competition.	4	Mild. While some things work as planned, the majority of the title either misfires 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	Pointed. 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 it's nothing that even casual players haven't seen before. A decent game from beginning to end.	2	Broken. Basically unplayable. This game is so incoherent 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	It'll take the limp of oak, thanku.

AWARDS

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

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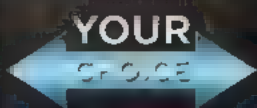
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Call of Duty: Black Ops

The broadest Cal so far

9

PS3 • 360 • PC

► **Concept**

Remember Modern Warfare? Yeah, like that but in 1968

► **Graphics**

Call of Duty remains at the top of the visual heap, not least because of the always-excellent framerate

► **Sound**

Outstanding voice work brings the story to life

► **Playability**

The control scheme hasn't changed. This is still the gold standard for console FPS

► **Entertainment**

This may be going through the same established motions, but that's one dance I'm more than happy to repeat

► **Replay Value**

High



Style 1 or 2-Player Action (16-Player Online) Publisher Activision Developer Treyarch Release November 9 ESRB M



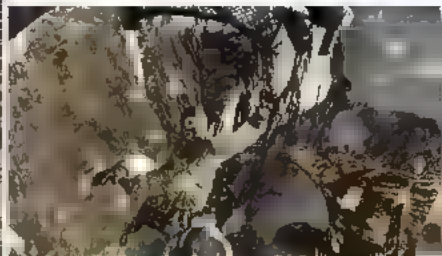
You can't keep Black Ops out from under the microscope after the high-profile departure of the creative minds that drove the Call of Duty franchise at Infinity Ward earlier this year. Can Treyarch come through with a blockbuster hit in the vein of Modern Warfare, not just a by-the-numbers off-year title like the studio has churned out in the past? Yes and no, but Black Ops is the best game Treyarch has made, and a hell of a good time no matter how you slice it.

The series has always hung its single-player hat on creating spectacular moments that players remember for years. It didn't matter if you couldn't remember the name of the faceless Army Ranger you're playing as, because oh my god they just dropped an EMP on the White House! Black Ops tips this equation around. The story is coherent, and the characters are more than cardboard cutouts. I wanted to keep playing to find out how the plot ends up, not just to see what crazy situation is around the next corner. On the other hand, as Black Ops makes gains in characterization and storytelling, it loses spectacle. Outside of the excellent prison break level, the "wow" moments fall flat. Even blowing up what appeared to be half of Vietnam with an attack chopper failed to elicit much of a response from me beyond making me swear at the controls. Far too much of the roughly seven-hour campaign is spent running through the same pop-and-shoot motions we've been doing for years. At least my companions were less interested in running directly into my line of fire this time. Be sure to stick around after the credits, though - the best bit of the game is hidden there.

The campaign puts players neck-deep in the close-up brutality of combat. Limbs shatter disgustingly as bullets rip apart flesh and bone. Gore flies in all directions as combatants are popped like meat balloons by the vicious weaponry of the '60s. In one uncomfortable sequence, the player has to torture a restrained prisoner. This is an emphatically mature game (in the ESRB sense, anyway). Everyone should make their own judgment on what they are comfortable with, but Black Ops crossed my personal line in its bloody depictions of violence, particularly the torture sequences. I wasn't able to compartmentalize it as enjoyable cartoon violence like I have with so many games over the years. Call me a wuss if you want, but the realistic gore is distasteful in the absence of a discussion of what should be a careful decision to employ lethal force. I realize that Treyarch isn't trying to put on a morality play here, but Black Ops pushes the lines of good taste.

None of this carries over to online play, where the faster pace fosters a certain detachment from the violence. For my money, Treyarch has crafted the finest Call of Duty multiplayer game to date. The maps are fantastic and offer great variety in size, aesthetics, verticality, and paths. The core design is largely unchanged; it features the same modes, perks, and a similar arsenal to Modern Warfare. The action is as responsive, technically impressive, and engrossing as it has been since Infinity Ward pioneered it three years ago. However, Treyarch has made a ton of improvements in the margins. Unlocking new perks in the order you want rather than a pre-set sequence is just the start.

Wager matches exist parallel to the standard



XP-based progression These (ahh) six player free-for-all matches are throwbacks to the old days of Quake deathmatches in a lot of ways. All of the game types (each of which has unusual rules that work exceptionally well, like forced weapon cycling or one-shot kills with extremely limited ammo) put a huge emphasis on each kill. This breeds an intensity I haven't felt since playing free-for-all railgun-only Quake. The titular wagering of the in-game currency that you use to buy weapon attachments, perks, and emblem elements only adds to the tension. The only knock is that wager matches are by nature incredibly lag sensitive. If you get stuck with a bad host or your connection is being Comcasted, get ready for some frustration.

Contracts are unlocked early on, and allow you to purchase a challenge that remains active for a certain amount of time while playing. A simple contract might ask you to knife a dude in the back, while a more expensive, higher-level one might call for a dozen headshots with a specific pistol. Succeed and you can triple (or better)

your money, fail and those points are gone. Treyarch will regularly cycle the pool of contracts available for purchase, and you can only take a shot at any given one once in a specified time period (in the case of the contracts I tried, one real-life day). I have mixed feelings about the system. On the one hand, the new challenges spice up the gameplay and encourage players to try different tactics. That said, I'm going to blow a gasket when my team gets torn apart because half of our players are gunning for some dumb contract instead of trying to win the match. Did we learn nothing from the Halo 3 online achievement debacle?

The fan-favorite Zombies mode returns as well with players cooperating against the undead hordes on two vastly different maps—it works well enough, but Zombies is far down on my co-op FPS list. The objectives and strategies are so far removed from making intuitive sense that I can't get into it, though segments of the community obviously feel differently—I do love the secret zombie-themed minigame, Geometry Wars with

zombies, more or less—and its four-player online co-op, though.

I can't wait to see what the community creates with the new chapter. The ability to save matches, review them from any point of view, detach the camera for free-flying shots, edit clips together, and then share them as a movie all from within the game is incredible. This is a great learning tool as well, since you can see your accuracy chart on a paper doll as well as the heat map of deaths overlaid on the level.

It is tough to hate on something as skillfully executed as Black Ops. Call of Duty remains the smoothest, most approachable first-person shooter out there, and I had a blast playing it. On the other hand, it's disappointing that Treyarch's much-hyped, huge-budget entry in the franchise feels like Modern Warfare 2.5. Activision hasn't Tony Hawked Call of Duty yet, though, and I'm happy to get a refined update. This year, anyway. —Adam Bressner

Majin and the Forsaken Kingdom

Game Republic tells a classic tale

8

PS3 = 360

» **Concept**

The world has been corrupted and only you and your pet-like Majin can heal it and bring prosperity back to the land

» **Graphics**

A lot of creative character design are in this game, but the graphics aren't detailed enough to let the unique art style shine

» **Sound**

Majin has a cool soundtrack, but I wish they had stuck with subtitles for the dialogue. The voice acting is terrible

» **Playability**

The combat system is fairly basic but a few of the puzzles will take time to piece together

» **Entertainment**

If you can put up with all the backtracking and sometimes tedious combat, Majin offers a rich adventure

» **Replay Value**
Moderate



Style 1-Player Action/Puzzle Publisher Namco Bandai Developer Gaijin Republic Release November 23 ESRB T

Some stories are eternal. Legends like Homer's epic poems, Aesop's fables, or Grimm's fairy tales have infected our pop culture to such a degree that you probably know the details of their stories even if you've never read them. As the ages have marched on, however, countless other tales have been carried away by the wind. Majin will likely float away before long, and its redemptive story about a corrupted land will eventually be forgotten, which is a shame, because parts of Majin are worth remembering.

This fable begins with an idyllic kingdom—a land that flourished for centuries until a dark far began to seep out from the royal castle. Overnight the mighty civilization was swallowed by the dark. Tainted warriors rose up out of the ground, consuming the kingdom and its inhabitants. Only a few roving bands survived in the bordering wastelands. One day, a young boy with the ability to talk to animals decided to sneak back into the heart of darkness and

unchain the world's only remaining hope, a gigantic protector called the Majin.

The story of Majin is epic in concept alone; it's unfortunate that some of its storytelling elements aren't as refined as we've come to expect from modern narration. The main protagonist doesn't have much personality, merely reacting to events as he is carried forward. Never got a sense for who he was or why I should care about him. You spend much of the game talking with small forest animals such as mice and birds, but the voice acting for these creatures is so juvenile that I was reminded of a librarian reading *Fun with Dick and Jane* to a group of toddlers.

Story aside, most of the gameplay revolves around the relationship you form with the gigantic Majin. When you first encounter this intelligent beast, he is weak from a century of captivity but like a loyal pet he follows you around and obeys your commands. As you begin to rid the curse from the land, the Majin grows stronger and learns new abilities that aid you in both puzzle-solving and combat.

Help the Majin regain his wind ability and he'll blow obstructions from your path or knock enemies off their perch with a blow. Restore the Majin's electrical powers and he'll slay enemies with lightning blasts or power electrical devices that help you reach new areas.

The environmental puzzles are often clever enough that solving them feels like a rewarding achievement, but enjoyed the light puzzle elements that seeped into combat: the most. You can

charge headfirst into battles and overpower your foes with your combined might, but that isn't always the best approach. It's worth scouting areas ahead of time and laying traps for your foes. For example, you might be able to sneak to the top of a parapet and take out a few archers from behind, then lure the remaining foes into a canyon where your Majin is waiting to roll a boulder over their heads.

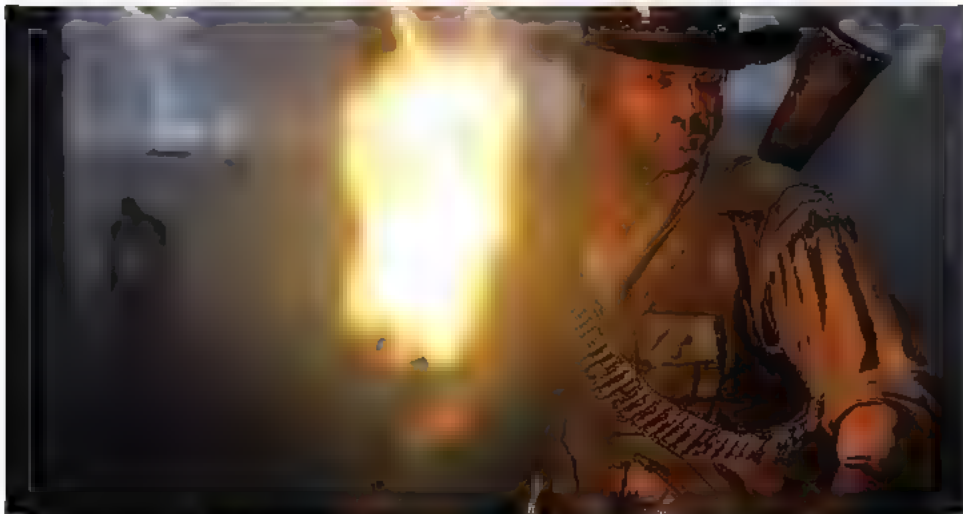
Majin reminds me of the companion adventures in games like *ICO*. The notable difference here is that you are the weaker entity. This is a dynamic you'll appreciate all the more during the brief sequences you have to separate from the Majin. While you might take on a dozen enemies or so as a team, fighting more than two foes by yourself is a trial. Sneaking becomes very important once you crawl into environments that the Majin can't access, and while the enemy pathing is relatively basic and the AI immediately forgets about you, once you are out of eyesight, these sequences provide a nice change of pace from the rest of the game.

Like an ancient manuscript from a bygone era, some moments feel like they were designed two console generations ago. The world is fair, but on a giant grid, so the environment feels fairly artificial and lacks a certain amount of believability. There is also a fair amount of backtracking, and the game doesn't always point you in the right direction, which is more annoying when you accidentally leave one area for a few seconds only to come back and find that the enemies you just beat have magically returned. If these kind of ancient gaming weaknesses don't bother you, then Majin will deliver an experience that you won't soon forget, even if the rest of the world does. — Ben Reeves



Red Dead Redemption: Undead Nightmare

Zombies aren't the scariest thing in Marston's West anymore



Style | Player Action (4-Player Online) Publisher Rockstar Games Developer Rockstar San Diego Release October 26 2010 MSRP \$



PS3 • 360

- » **Concept**
Introduce a radical (and supernatural) change to the world of Red Dead Redemption
- » **Graphics**
Characters look as great as ever, and the cutscenes are fantastic
- » **Sound**
More Hollywood-caliber voice acting, and there's even a zombie-themed surf rock tune at one point
- » **Playability**
Aming at quick enemies can be frustrating, but it's the only step down in the control department
- » **Entertainment**
Without a doubt the best Red Dead Redemption DLC offering, but it doesn't stand up to the GTA IV expansions
- » **Replay Value**
Moderate

With *The Lost and Damned* and *The Ballad of Gay Tony*, Rockstar proved that its DLC could stand on equal footing with its critically acclaimed retail releases. The company has created numerous add-on packs for Red Dead Redemption, but none of them have been as substantial as the GTA IV offerings. *Undead Nightmare* is the first to offer a single-player addition, and it's easily the best thus far.

Players access *Undead Nightmare* via the main menu, rather than an in-world trigger. This is a wise decision on Rockstar's part, since being presented with zombie-centric missions within the framework of the single-player story would be a jarring change in tone. Everyone you run into blames someone else for the sudden zombie outbreak—the immigrants, the Jews, the homosexuals, the government, the Catholics, and even the British. No one knows for sure, and though it's explained in the end, Rockstar doesn't waste too much time trying to make sense of this inherently silly plot.

Instead of taking on bandits and federal agents, Marston now has waves of the undead to mow through. Most towns you encounter are in the midst of a full-scale zombie attack, with a handful of survivors trying to hold them back from the roots of saloons and general stores. You can supply these frightened folk with ammo, but your best bet is to jump into Dead Eye and take aim at the zombies' heads.

The shift in enemy type makes a big impact on gameplay, forcing you to fend off clusters of foes that shoot straight at you rather than outlaws that shoot from cover. More advanced enemies can spit acid or run close to the ground, taking

you down quickly if you don't stop them early enough. Shotguns are great if you want to go all *Evil Dead* on your enemies, and the new blunderbuss weapon turns them into a fine red mist, regardless of where you hit them. New throwable items are available as well, including holy water and the extremely useful zombie ball (which can later be rigged with dynamite).

One of *Undead Nightmare*'s biggest flaws is the quick enemies that rely on melee attacks. Considering Red Dead's engine is built for mid-to-long range shootouts, things get squirrely when you're trying to target a fast-moving zombie attempting to eat you. Aiming is difficult in these situations, especially when they're battering you while running in circles around your feet.

The lack of variety in mission objectives is also disappointing. Red Dead Redemption featured some great set-piece moments, but many of *Undead Nightmare*'s objectives are glorified fetch quests: Whether it's collecting plants for Nigel West Dickens or helping Landon Ricketts build a new weapon, these "go to this place, shoot a bunch of zombies, and pick up this thing" missions grow tiresome. While these bored me, there are a few quests that stand up to Red Dead's level of quality (my favorite involving Sasquatch).

All of Rockstar's open-world games feature plenty of sidequests and fun distractions, and *Undead Nightmare* is no different. One of the coolest is the inclusion of the four horses of the apocalypse. These aren't tied to any mission, and seem to pop up randomly as you explore. You'll be notified that "a mythical beast has been seen in the area," and subsequently must lasso



and break them just like any other horse. Each has its own unique ability: War can set enemies on fire, and Famine has infinite stamina.

While some of the missions seem uninspired, the fun of Red Dead Redemption is still there: Its colorful characters and fantastic cutscenes are as engaging as ever, with a wicked sense of humor this time around. Clearing towns and fetching items becomes tedious, but it's still a blast to pop into Dead Eye and take the heads off six zombies in one lightning-quick flurry. After spending the seven hours required to finish everything in story mode, the online *Undead Overrun* horde mode will keep you busy for a while longer. Fans of John Marston's first adventure shouldn't hesitate to saddle up and take on his new foes. — Dan Ryckert

8.75

PS3 • 360 • PC

» **Concept:**

Gain notoriety as Seacrest County's Most Wanted or Ultimate Enforcer

» **Graphics:**

The striking levels are diverse, although some recycling occurs. They derive longevity from varying shapes of day. The cars aren't

» **Sound:**

A quality track list that soars with too much repetition

» **Playability:**

An impressive stable of cars means everyone will find the perfect fit

» **Entertainment:**

Sim specialists and arcade enthusiasts will find merit in Hot Pursuit's array of cars, mission types, and multiplayer modes

» **Replay Value:**

High



Need For Speed Hot Pursuit

Criterion races into pole position

Taking the reins from longtime-NFS specialist Black Box, Burnout creator Criterion brings its love of fast cars and intense action to EA's iconic racing franchise. Hot Pursuit's most ambitious feature is twin career modes that give players a chance to become either the most notorious racer or most renowned cop in Seacrest County. Progression is entirely in your hands, as you can dynamically switch from racer to cop as desired, even allowing you to strike a balance between donning the badge and defying it. This keeps the game fresh due to the diverse events, weapons, and cars exclusive to each campaign.

Renegade racers test their grit in traditional races, duels, time trials, and previews of hot new cars. Cop missions switch between rapid response missions, tracking down renegade racers sporting powerful sports cars in interceptor mode, and test-driving new vehicles in the police fleet. Both campaigns feature Hot Pursuit mode, in which you have access to offensive weapons and defensive equipment to use against the lawless racers or law enforcers. Both cops and racers can deploy spike strips and EMPs. For special abilities, racers have access to a turbo boost and radar jammers, and cops can radio in a support helicopter or police road-



blocks. These tools add strategy to each race and make Hot Pursuit, as one would expect, the standout mode in Criterion's Need for Speed debut.

Evolution is constant in Need for Speed Hot Pursuit: the sense of progression is pivotal in pushing you through more difficult missions. Ranking up unlocks new events and vehicles or upgrades to your equipment and weapons. Even if you don't place, racers and cops are still rewarded bounty for reaching driving milestones and for drifting, drafting, near misses, and more. As a result, I never felt my time on the asphalt was wasted.

The further your career progresses, it gets notably more punishing. As a racer, cops get increasingly aggressive with EMPs and spike strips, and often tag team and flank you. As a cop, racers become more erratic and unpredictable, hitting the e-brake and abruptly changing directions, or scrambling your radar and escaping off-road under the veil of night. Thankfully, the difficulty increase never feels unfair. Need for Speed doesn't fall victim to rubber-banding and other problems that consistently plague the genre. My placement was always tied to my skill level rather than blind

luck. The AI is intelligent, never drafting too long behind you to avoid a blown out tire when you employ a spike strip, and even falling back to let you crash through a roadblock and follow in your wake. Even ambient traffic is realistically unpredictable; some drivers stick to the course when you barrel into oncoming traffic, while others panic, hitting their brakes and spinning out into your path.

Long after you've bested the campaigns, Hot Pursuit's impressive Autolog feature will have you revisiting Seacrest

frequently. The seamlessly integrated system facilitates intense and constant competition, updating you when friends have bested your times. A simple pull of the trigger launches you into an event to attempt to reclaim your ranking. I fell into a habit of surveying my standings immediately upon logging in and addressing any challenges before returning to my single-player aspirations.

Though Hot Pursuit impresses, minor annoyances appear from time to time. Camera cut-aways show the epic crash caused by your driving prowess, but sometimes cut back to the road at a high speed with your car aimed directly at a median. Sometimes direct hits to a competing car don't seem to register damage, which is especially frustrating when getting in close proximity to the vehicle is a mission in and of itself.

While I wished the single-player campaign featured more combat-intensive Hot Pursuit missions, multiplayer thankfully sates this hunger. You can indulge in traditional races and one-on-one interceptor missions, but the eight-player Hot Pursuit races are the star mode, many of which devolve into utter madness.

To say that Criterion has successfully taken over the Need for Speed series and reinvigorated it with a modern take on the Hot Pursuit formula is an understatement. Fans of white-knuckle racing games, both online and off, will find immense satisfaction on the roads of Seacrest County. » *Morgan VanBurkleo*



EA Sports MMA

EA's boxing game training pays off

Style 1 or 2-Player Sports (2-Player Online) Publisher Electronic Arts
Developer EA Tiburon Release October 19 ESRB T

MMA fighters have to be fairly well-rounded to survive in the world of mixed martial arts. It's hard, let's say, for a boxer to jump into an MMA ring and dominate the competition without first practicing his ground game. Comparably, the fact that EA Sports MMA was built out of the *Fight Night* boxing engine may mean that the game has fast hands, but does it mean that it's well rounded enough to win the title belt?

Every fighter has to start at the bottom, and MMA's career mode is no different. After creating your own fighter from EA's detailed creation software, you're introduced to the hilarious Bas Rutten, who guides your fighter through a series of training camp routines, international league invitations, and a variety of tough opponents. It's a possible excuse to string a bunch of MMA matches together and build up a boxer using fight RPG elements, but the meat of the game is still found in the ring.

With two MMA titles currently on the market it's hard not to compare this with THQ's game. EA offers up a faster-paced, less-detailed fighter and it doesn't seem to care how much you already know about the sport. Its analog-

based combat allows fighters to jab hook, and uppercut by throwing the stick through different rotations. This makes the action a little more about feeling out your opponent's weaknesses and responding to his attacks than it does about memorizing a stock set of pre-scripted attacks. The game also allows you to employ a certain level of strategy. For example, if your opponent is running all over the mat so that you can't get a lock on him, you can focus your attacks on one of his legs until it becomes dead weight that he has to carry around the ring.

After taking your opponent to the mat, MMA becomes a strategy game where you're trying to balance your stamina against your opponent's as you fight for better positioning. With the simple press of a button, you transition forward towards a posture that will set you up for a submission hold, choke, or the ground-and-pound. Your opponent can block or reverse your maneuvering if he acts fast enough, but you can also throw a few punches at his head to throw him off his game. It's a fairly simple system, but the nuances of knowing when to attack, when to

block, and when to shoot for the risky double transition gives the game some complexity that is especially exciting when you're facing a human opponent.

EA's first attempt on the mixed martial arts scene heads back to its corner looking pretty strong but there are still a few holes in its defense, one of which is the game's roster. There are some great fighters in this game - such as Fedor Emelianenko, Sotou Kiraoka, and Randy Couture - but without the UFC license and many of its most potent combatants, there is a large hole in the game's roster. The game's presentation also lacks a bit of the spectacle and style found in real broadcasts. I'd also like to see some refinement to the submission system as the ringgames you use to put the hurt on your opponents feel a little gimmicky. Despite these issues, EA Sports MMA is still a powerful brawler and another year or two in the gym should turn it into a true monster. » Ben Reeves

8.5

PS3 = 360

» **Concept**
Takes the bones from *Fight Night*, flesh out the ground game, and then add MMA fighters from around the world

» **Graphics**
Not only are MMA's character models incredibly detailed, but their animations are uncannily lifelike

» **Sound**
MMA's commentators have a real grasp on the in-ring action, and bring up important stats and details about your fighter's history during career mode

» **Playability**
The simplified control scheme makes it easy to get out of bad situations, which keeps the action fast and forces you to think on your feet or with your back against the mat

» **Entertainment**
MMA isn't the most life-like fighter on the market, but its fast pace and easy-to-grasp control scheme make you feel like a real mixed martial artist

» **Replay Value**
Moderately High



WWE Smackdown vs. Raw 2011

8.5 **Control** work grapples with inconsistent new modes

PS3 = 360

» **Concept**
Flips out Road to WrestleMania with backstage segments and introduce a persistent, ongoing schedule with WWE Universe mode

» **Graphics**
Most character models are spot-on, and the moves look just like they do on Monday nights

» **Sound**
Solid voiceover work from the big names, but some of the talent promos they're rarely given a live mic

» **Playability**
Exploring backstage feels like a buggy PSone title, but the in-ring controls are tighter than ever

» **Entertainment**
If you can look past the backstage frustrations, you'll find plenty to love once you're within the squared circle

» **Replay Value**
Moderately High

Style 1 to 4-Player Fighting (6-Player Online) Publisher THQ
Developer Yuke's Release October 26 ESRB T

Any longtime fan of professional wrestling knows that the product is as much about soap opera shenanigans as it is the in-ring athletics. A storyline featuring Paul Beazer's return is just as important to the WWE experience as a high-flying, technically sound match featuring Daniel Bryan or Evan Bourne. Previous *Smackdown vs. Raw* titles have featured full storylines within the Road to WrestleMania mode, but 2011's edition attempts to flesh it out with fully interactive backstage segments between each bout.

These behind-the-scenes segments are initially an intriguing change of pace from the standard story mode, but it quickly becomes apparent that the new Road to WrestleMania could use quite a bit of polish. Lip syncing is entirely broken with characters humorously trapping their jaws long after their lines conclude. The camera is slow and awkward, and annoyingly locks into place when you happen to pass by conversations backstage, forcing you to watch the entire exchange. While most of the backstage experience feels stilted and unnatural, the actual

storylines are solid and fun to play through.

Those looking for a less scripted experience will love the new WWE Universe mode. It's essentially a hybrid of previous title's career and GM modes, and it's especially great if you're into micromanaging stables, heel/face status, brand alliance, and rivalries. I spent most of my time within the ropes taking my created superstar up through the ranks in an effort to win a world championship, but it was nice to be able to play other matches when needed a break.

These new modes wouldn't amount to much if the in-ring action wasn't solid. Thankfully, subtle improvements to the already solid foundation make the wrestling in *Smackdown vs. Raw* better than ever. Directional grapples allow you to change your facing in mid-move, you can choose whether a move transitions into a pin as you perform it, and modifiers are no longer necessary to perform strong grapples. All grapples are state-based in 2011, meaning that you'll perform weak grapples on healthy opponents and strong grapples if they're groggy. It feels more like an actual match this way, considering WWE

wrestlers don't come right out of the gate with giant powerbombs and finishes.

Smackdown vs. Raw 2011 certainly isn't perfect - A.I. is sometimes inconsistent, the announcers can be wildly inaccurate, and in one instance the behavior of my tag team partner made it almost impossible to finish a table match. Despite these hiccups, the wrestling game at its core is still great fun for fans who appreciate the attempt to flesh out Road to WrestleMania, even if it feels a bit inconsistent in this early stage. WWE Universe mode is my favorite addition this year, and it could easily be the new marquee mode if they improve it in future titles. Certain elements of the game are rough around the edges, but these annoyances aren't enough to bring down the experience as a whole. Wrestling fans can look past some backstage issues as long as the talent makes a solid in-ring showing, and it's no different here. » Dan Ryckert

For our extended review, go to gameplanet.com/mw



Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood

New features steal the show in a familiar setting

9.25

PS3 • X360

» **Concept**
Return to the Italian Renaissance for the second part of Ezio's story

» **Graphics**
Incredible detail brings the city of Rome to life, and animation work continues to impress

» **Sound**
Excellent voice work and a strong score add drama and excitement

» **Playability**
Brotherhood refines the existing mechanics and features much improved combat

» **Entertainment**
A thrilling follow-up for series faithful, but new recruits should start with the earlier games

» **Replay Value**
Moderately High



Style | Player Action (8-Player Online) Publisher Ubisoft Developer Ubisoft Montreal Release November 16 ESRB M

I stride through the cobbled streets of Rome as the Pantheon rises to my left, majestic and ancient. Citizens crowd around me, providing cover as I move closer to my target. He stands speaking to a group of guards, oblivious to the danger stalking him. His role in the conspiracy is a minor one – hardly worth my notice. But he must pay for his crimes against my family, no matter how indirectly he was involved. I raise my hand in signal. The woman I recruited earlier drops from the rooftop where no one nor anyone else saw her hiding. Her hidden blade cuts deep into his neck, and the man falls before he knows what has happened. A slowly building roar rolls across the crowd as my trainee leaps onto a nearby horse and gallops off. I turn without a word and melt into the crowd.

Ezio Auditore is a master assassin, but before

now his missions were almost always completed in isolation. As its name implies, Brotherhood introduces a new wrinkle: The power Ezio now exerts reaches far beyond what he can touch with his sword or strike with a throwing knife. The Assassins are spreading their influence across an entire continent, and he sits at the head of the movement.

The themes of leadership carry over directly into gameplay. It starts by clearing your enemy's influence over the city. As you kill the Borgia family's minions and burn down their fortresses, the populace becomes rebellious and more willing to aid your cause. Particularly angry citizens will even strike back at the villains themselves. Aid these lone rebels, and they'll join your cause. Once they've given you their allegiance, these fervent recruits will act upon your directives, striking from the shadows or leaping into melee at

your side. Ezio can also send them out on missions across Europe and Asia. When they return, you can upgrade their equipment to create even more powerful allies. The progression system is easy to grasp, and has just enough complexity to be interesting without overshadowing the action proper. By the end, the men and women you pulled from the streets will stand at your side as fully initiated members of the order. These figures are a great addition to the gameplay, if not entirely necessary. They hold their own in melee, or strike targets that are far away with deadly precision. Levelled-up assassins not only look cooler, but last longer in a fight as well. Most importantly, the sense of power they offer the player is sensational.

Even without these new brothers and sisters, Ubisoft addressed one of my biggest complaints from the last game – combat. The satisfying action strikes the perfect balance between careful defensive counters of the past games and the new lethal offensive capabilities. The ability to chain kills gives Ezio an edge that's hard to beat, but it still takes skill and timing to master. One-sinka executions string together in a vicious dance, and combining taps and holds of the attack button let you mix different weapons in one flurry. Every weapon is fun to wield. I found myself changing up my loadout just to see the masterful animations that accompanied each implement.

Ezio's menu-driven villa upgrades have also been overhauled and transformed into a more robust economic simulation. When Ezio comes to Rome, it has fallen into decay through the abuses of the villainous Borgia family. As Ezio retakes the city, he can revive the metropolis





by investing in shops and banks and repairing broken aqueducts and monuments. These renovations open up new shopping opportunities, and you'll see the results of your efforts reflected in the people and buildings of the world. A boarded-up square of storefronts once populated with kneeling beggars will become a bustling marketplace perused by finely dressed ladies.

Though there aren't a huge number of story missions, each one is meticulously designed to offer a unique encounter. Mission structures are more choreographed than in past Assassin's games, asking you to follow particular checkpoints on the way to a target. The loss of freedom is worth it for the great scenes that those paths enable, like the dangerous assault on the Castel Sant'Angelo that has Ezio infiltrating Rome's most well-guarded stronghold. Every mission now has a "full sync" challenge attached, like killing a target with a certain weapon, or reaching the end without being detected. Since you can now replay missions, there are plenty of reasons to go back to nail that perfect kill. Many of the secondary missions are equally engrossing, from the puzzle-laden lairs of Romulus beneath the streets of Rome to the trips beyond the city borders to aid Leonardo with his engineering dilemmas.

Though the story may be short and the plot

isn't as impressive as the last game, the cast of characters is captivating, especially the devious and incestuous intrigue of the Borgia family. Most of the game centers on building your forces, with the latter missions a predictable drive to eliminate the bad guys. The game ends abruptly, and it feels like *Brotherhood* could have had several more sequences. Players also spend more time with Desmond and his buddies as they dig through Ezio's memories, with a couple of fun platforming levels and the ability to explore a few of the locations from *Assassin's Creed II* 500 years later.

If you thought the end of *Assassin's Creed II* was confusing, you haven't seen anything yet. Between another installment of *The Truth* and some surprising twists with Desmond's story, you'll be shaking your head in frustration by the end. I love the conspiracy at the heart of *Assassin's Creed*, but Ubisoft needs to be careful that it doesn't get too caught up in its own fiction. There's a fine line between a good mystery and overly obscure nonsense.

Layered on top of this massive single-player experience is a story-tied multiplayer game unlike any other we've played. The Templars are using their Animus machines to train new recruits, and players adopt the role of these trainees to wander the streets of Renaissance Italy as they learn the arts of subtlety, cunning, and murder. In

the tense and highly replayable Wanted mode, players each have one target and one pursuer. Naturally, you must kill your target while avoiding the pursuit of your hunter. This simple paradigm gains complexity by encouraging stealth, rewarding well-executed kills, and demanding smart strategic movement over twitch mechanics. Matches rapidly transform from wild runs around the map to careful mind games against your opponents. The progression system awards your exploits with new character skins, abilities, score bonuses, and even game modes. These additional modes are basically variations on the original concept, but still make for a nice change of pace.

Filled with new gameplay, storylines, mechanical improvements, and multiplayer, *Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood* is far more than an expansion. Though *Brotherhood* lacks some of the sense of discovery and newness that characterized *Assassin's Creed II*, if you look past the surface similarities you'll uncover a host of new hills. The series remains one of the most exciting properties in video games, and *Brotherhood* fills an essential step in the plot as the conspiracy-laden story continues. The moment you finish the game, you'll be chomping at the bit for the inevitable *Assassin's Creed III*. — Matt Miller

James Bond 007: Blood Stone

Bizarre Creations nails the feel of the franchise, but some moments have gone rogue

Style 1 Player Action (2 to 16-Player Online) Publisher Activision Developer Bizarre Creations Release November 5 2008 \$79.99

7.5

PS3 • 360 • PC

» **Concept**
Deliver an all-new James Bond adventure with familiar faces and the series' signature action

» **Graphics**
They're about as pretty as Oldjob, but they get the job done

» **Sound**
Fans of wah-wah trumpets and the James Bond theme are in for a treat

» **Playability**
A decent blend of action, though the driving sections could have been better

» **Entertainment**
It could be a while until the next Bond film hits theaters, and *Blood Stone* definitely scratches that itch. Add in a decent objective-based multiplayer mode and you've got at least a weekend's worth of fun

» **Replay Value**
Moderately high

The fate of MGM's James Bond series is in limbo, even after a pair of successful films starring Daniel Craig. While the studio's financial troubles could mean a new film won't be hitting theaters in the foreseeable future, Activision has come to the rescue: James Bond 007: *Blood Stone* delivers a solid dose of the agent, with the same exotic locations, over-the-top action sequences, and enough double-crosses to keep fans busy for a while.

Activision made a great choice in tapping Bizarre Creations for the all-new Bond adventure. The studio built its reputation on racing games like the *Project Gotham* series, but it also showed its potential in the shooter genre with the criminally overlooked *The Club*. *Blood Stone* divides its gameplay between on-foot action and vehicle-based sequences, and the shooting segments are surprisingly the stronger of the two styles. The vehicular sections are overly long with slippery controls and spotty collision detection. You'd expect to have a few issues with ice grip on a Siberian ice floe, but the cars seem equally squirmy on the streets of Bangkok.

Bizarre took its cue from the latest incarnation of the character, which focuses on the brutality lurking just underneath Bond's polished veneer. While he still looks good in a tuxedo, this Bond is just as happy snapping necks and hyperextending arms as he is sipping cocktails at a bacarat table. Thanks to his prowess as a melee fighter (and his quickly regenerating health), Bond can rush into firefights, disable a nearby enemy in hand-to-hand combat, and finish the encounter by popping off a few guards in the background with a silenced pistol.

I was tempted to lean on the melee attacks because the guns feel underpowered. That carries over to the multiplayer segments as well. In both modes, melee attacks earn players focus and shots. In single-player, they're essentially instant kills, slowing down time and firing up headshots at the press of a button. In multiplayer (time isn't slowed for obvious reasons, but opponents are still lined up nicely).

As with any self-respecting Bond game, the action takes place in a variety of locations across the globe. Some, such as the Monaco casino



from *Casino Royale* and a Burmese dam, are bound to inspire feelings of déjà vu, but the action is generally good enough to make it worth double-stamping your passport. The story was written by GoldenEye scribe Bruce Fairstein, and he packed some excellent aspicue moments into *Blood Stone*. One memorable chase takes place in Bangkok, with Bond pursuing an earth-mover through traffic as it knocks cars and

highway structures asunder. And when Bond meets a contact in a crowded aquarium, wouldn't you know that assassins are ready to crash the party?

The whole experience is pecked with moments like this. Any game can have you systematically work your way through a villain's fortified lair. Doing so while he taunts you over the instabator's loudspeakers is classic Bond.

Many gamers have fond memories of multiplayer matches starring James Bond, and *Blood Stone* ventures into that arena, too. Up to 16 players can compete as either MI6 agents or mercenaries

across eight maps. Aside from team deathmatch and last man standing modes, multiplayer offers a pair of objective-based challenges. Each side either works through a series of three objectives (which culminate in satisfyingly large explosions) or do their best to prevent the other from completing the task. It's a lot of fun, though it's a showcase for just how powerful the melee attacks can be. The animations aren't as intricate in multiplayer, but they're just as effective. Unfortunately, they lack the satisfying crack of Halo's melee attacks, even when it was victorious in the frequent melee battles, it felt as though I was swatting at air.

Players also earn ranks as they play multiplayer, unlocking new skins and weapons. One cool gimmick has the leading player from each team take on the skin of their side's respective hero—James Bond or the evil mastermind Rak. It doesn't grant any special abilities, but it's a showy way to prove your worth.

Bizarre clearly set out to make *Blood Stone* feel like a part of Bond's movie canon, and it's certainly successful on that front. The weapons are anemic, and the driving sections can be dodgy, but it delivers a dose of spectacle and intrigue worthy of the character. —Jeff Cook





You don't mind if life's not that pretty

DJ Hero 2

DJ Hero comes back stronger than ever



Style 1 to 3-Player Rhythm/Music
(4-Player Online) Publisher Activision
Developer FreeStyle Games Release October 19 ESRB T

9.25

PS3 • 360 • W

- » **Concept**
Make some smart gameplay improvements to an already great music title
- » **Graphics**
The presentation is much better: the clubs are impressively detailed. Still has snip-d characters
- » **Sound**
Exceeds the first game's crackles in both quantity and quality
- » **Playability**
New freestyle segments for nearly every aspect of gameplay makes this feel even closer to the real thing
- » **Entertainment**
With all due respect to Rock Band 3, this is my music game of the year
- » **Replay Value**
High

People like to disparage sequels, but the truth is they are often a great opportunity for developers. You've built a strong foundation, but a number of obvious flaws in the first game can be easily corrected. You also have a list of great features that you didn't have the time or budget to implement in the first game. DJ Hero was my favorite music game of 2009, and this sequel bests its predecessor in nearly every way.

The big innovation is the new freestyle segments. Previously, these were limited to a small handful of samples you could deploy with the middle turntable button. They were mostly lame, so everyone knew ended up using Flavor Flav's "yesesessah, boy!" exclusively. Now, the samples are tailored to the track, often singing out a cool element or sample that you can use to enhance the beat. Developer FreeStyle Games also added freestyle scratching and freestyle crossfading sections. Freestyle scratch lets you scratch your own rhythms, adding an element of creativity to the mix. Freestyle crossfade lets you bounce between the tracks. For example, you can isolate an acapella vocal, then suddenly slam back to a busing beat. The game grades you on how musical and unique your freestyles are, transforming a corny gimmick into an integral part of the experience. I felt like I was crafting the mix, not just hitting buttons in time. Speaking of button presses, DJ Hero 2 also features new "held" notes, much like those from Guitar Hero – yet another nice addition to the gameplay.

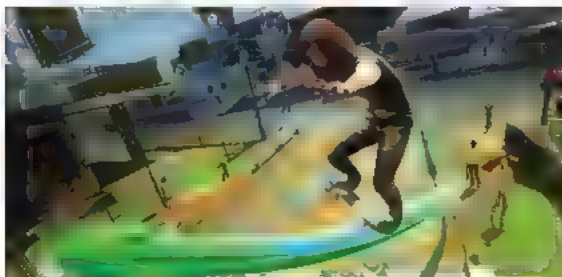
Thankfully, FreeStyle Games killed the guitar/DJ duel songs I never found that mode fun, and it resulted in track slots being devoted to terrific rock/hip-hop mash-ups. I'm glad they are gone. However, the new vocal mode isn't much better. The vocal lines are so out-of-place and jumbled that it feels like playing a karaoke game in the grips of a seizure. Still, it does no harm, as it's just an addition to the songs that are already there. And who knows? Maybe someone less cumbered (or more inebriated) than myself will have fun with it. On the other hand, I enjoyed all of the two-turntable multi-player modes.

The mixes themselves are uniformly great. The track list expertly balances superstars like 50 Cent, Kanye West, and Lady Gaga with respected producers like DJ Shadow and Chemical Brothers, plus outstanding tracks by lesser-known artists.

While there's still work to be done (a more meaningful career mode and some sort of mix creation tool would be great), at its best DJ Hero 2 is thrilling. As you crossfade, scratch, and manipulate the mixes, the feeling is akin to riding a musical wave. In some ways, I feel a greater connection to the music than I do when playing Guitar Hero or Rock Band. Hopefully this game will have the success it deserves, allowing FreeStyle Games to keep searching for that perfect beat. —Matt Heigson

Shaun White Skateboarding

No need to bail on this skater



Style 1 or 2-Player Action/Sports (8-Player Online)
Publisher Ubisoft Developer Ubisoft Montreal
Release October 24 ESRB E10+

7.75

PS3 • 360

- » **Concept**
Free the citizens of the city with your skating
- » **Graphics**
Seeing the environments come to life with color is cool, but overall the graphics are average
- » **Sound**
Even though the script can be suspect, the various voice actors certainly give it their all
- » **Playability**
The HUD can be a little busy and the trick system occasional falters, but 8WS is a solid experience
- » **Entertainment**
Shaun White a world is like a big playground to unleash skate moves on, but it runs out of steam
- » **Replay Value**
Moderate

Skateboarding is all about taking chances. Considering that most people almost break their necks when they just step on a board, you have to appreciate the risks that skaters take doing the most routine actions. Shaun White had every opportunity to fall on his face, whether you compare it to EA's Skata, the lackluster Shaun White Snowboarding franchise, or even the challenge of starting up a world full of player-created rails. I'm glad that Ubisoft took a chance on this game.

I had fun with Shaun White, and that's because the trick system works pretty well. I was surprised at the variety of tricks it pulls off with controls that are easier than Skale's, but still require skill. It's not as combo intensive or wain-five as Skale, but Shaun White does deliver a payoff. Transforming the Ministry's drab world with your tricks is one way to do it, but this change in the environment also occurs on another level. Sometimes I was having a hard time getting gold medals for a challenge, but by terraforming the environment and creating a better skating line, I was able to post a better score. While I may seem cheap that you have to buy new tricks, I was spurred by the need to earn XP and liked reaping the reward.

Although you take down the Ministry's gray world, that doesn't mean that the game is full of life. The lack of an open world is conspicuous, but what

of the game's challenges. While not bad, they're the standard fare of fetch quests and score challenges, similarly wasn't inspired by much of the non-story based quests. Even though you're able to shape rails and gain access to new places, don't feel like the game takes enough advantage of the cool world that's been created. The online options are customary, with the Shaping Battle mode the lone standout. Here you do tricks to fill up your Flow Meter and whoever does that first gets to shape the world however they want for 30 seconds.

In skating terms, this game's success is more than just dropping in on a vert ramp for the first time without eating it face first. Shaun White Skateboarding has some tricks in its back pocket and look forward to it expanding its arsenal in the future. —Matthew Kato

Second Opinion 8

Shaun White Skateboarding seems to make a valiant effort to break the monotony with slick style and meaningful substance. The longer you ride the malleable rails of New Harmony however, the more you'll find that a unique set reforming mechanic and respectable trick roster do little to mask the variety of the world itself. Most of the rail and rapid NPCs that shoot up the scene are unimpressive. Features like difficulty levels are equal, but they are not on par with the more complex, multi-tiered, and more varied difficulty levels of other titles. The game's success is more a result of some strong work at its core, but it's not quite up to the level of the best of the genre. Every once in a while, when the city falls quiet and you're left with a perfect rail, it feels like a triumph. The game's presentation and replay value are both average, but the game is enjoyable. —Meagan VanBuren

Fallout: New Vegas

War, War never changes. And neither does Fallout.

8.5

PS3 • 360 • PC

» Concept

A sequel that makes few strides forward, yet retains almost everything that was great from its predecessor

» Graphics

Losing yourself in New Vegas' massive world is easy, but the believability of the world is stripped away whenever a stiffly acted character appears onscreen. Unexpected freezing can occur due to framerate drops in bustling areas

» Sound

The voice cast, weapon sound effects, ambient noise (which can sometimes sound like it's coming from a mile away), and Vegas-themed score are all top notch. The sound design really couldn't be much better

» Playability

If you played Fallout 3, you've also played Fallout: New Vegas. Targeting is still unreliable, but v.A.T.S. still packs a satisfying punch

» Entertainment

The missions and storytelling lack the creativity and augee post moments of Fallout 3. Exploration and applying your touch to the experience are even deeper

» Replay Value

High



Style 1-Player Action/RPG Publisher Bethesda Softworks Developer Obsidian Entertainment Release October 19 ESRB M

The video game industry treats the Fallout property like a hot potato. Black Isle Studios kicked off the series with *Fallout* and *Fallout 2*. After Black Isle closed its doors, Bethesda Softworks purchased the rights from Interplay and developed *Fallout 3*. Although Bethesda still acts as publisher, *Fallout: New Vegas'* development reins were handed to Obsidian Entertainment, the studio most recently known for the disastrously received *RPG Alpha Protocol*.

While the *Fallout* series suffers from a lack of consistency in its development teams, it is surprisingly stable. All four games offer must

play experiences, and despite a dramatic shift in gameplay design between *Fallout 2* and *3*, remain true to this series' heritage and fiction.

Although Obsidian Entertainment employs a number of Black Isle Studios refugees, *Fallout: New Vegas* is born of the same blueprint established by Bethesda Softworks. The vision shared between these two creative teams is the same. As a result, *Fallout: New Vegas* shouldn't be viewed as a true successor or something new but rather more *Fallout 3*. And that's not a bad designation to have.

In terms of its place in this hardware generation, few games offer an experience as deep or

as rewarding as *Fallout 3*. Over 200 hours of my life were spent exploring the irradiated ruins of the Capital Wasteland, and if more content were offered, I'd return in a heartbeat. That's essentially what *New Vegas* offers - new experiences for the *Fallout 3* fanatic.

The gloomy grey tones of Washington, D.C. have been replaced with the sun-soaked golden hues of Nevada. The game takes place three years after *Fallout 3's* final moments, and 204 years after the Great War of 2077. Unlike D.C. Nevada wasn't hit by a nuke. The Vegas strip is largely intact, and the civilizations spread across the Mojave Desert are thriving (to the extent a culture can thrive in a post-apocalyptic world). The governing bodies in each faction you'll come across are vying for power and control. The length to which they'll go to raise their standing in the world is what makes *New Vegas* an enthralling and decidedly different experience.

Your role in this madness is not defined. The game begins with a structured story for your character, called "the courier," figuring out who put a bullet in your head, leaving you for dead. After the introductory moments, the quest quickly opens up, allowing you to mold the experience to your liking. The amount of interaction you have in this tale is the same as *Fallout 3's*, but many of the decisions you make come with severe consequences, much like the nuking of Megaton. If you agree to work for one of the factions in the world - be it Caesar's Legion, the New California Republic, the Brotherhood of Steel, the Great Khans, or a lovable robot named Yes Man - you may in turn close off missions offered by other factions.

Just being friendly with one faction could shut





down an entire thread of missions. If you're a completist and you want to see everything Fallout: New Vegas has to offer, you'll have to play through the game three or a half times.

Each path takes the player over many of the same land-pole-pole points, but these recurring set-ups are few and far between in a way. New Vegas could be viewed as three games in one package. Knowing that fulfilling a request for a character could close off entire threads of missions made me sit back and really think about the forces at play in the world, and how my tinkering with them could alter the road ahead. This structure goes beyond the standard "good and evil" approach. You really have to look ahead and try to predict what could happen. You may also have to turn your back on people in need just to make sure a tyrant doesn't get the upper hand.

In just the missions and story, New Vegas offers a nearly unprecedented level of depth. When you throw in the weapon modifications, companion recruitment, and attribute sculpting for your character, it delivers a true sense of ownership over the experience and gives you thousands of reasons why you should come back and play it again and again.

Now the bad news. Although Obsidian's writing is top notch (especially the dialogue), I was never once blown away by a single moment. Sure, I laughed when I ran into a cross-dressing

super mutant and thought to myself "what have I done?" when I deployed an orbital laser directly above an NCR military base—but none of the missions or battles stand out as memorable. Most of the action and plot points are enjoyable, but I never once said, "Wow. That was great." This is a stark contrast to Fallout 3, a game that did deliver big moments all the way through. Nothing in New Vegas is on the same level as Fallout 3's black and white VR sequence or its communist-hating robot.

Despite being set in the glitz of Sin City, this part of the world didn't hold my interest. The casinos, as ridiculously colorful as they are, are overly cavernous, mostly vacant, and lacking that over-the-top Vegas charm. The Mojave Desert is, well, a desert. While it delivers that sense of helplessness that all Fallout games should, the locales spread across it are pedestrian. The most notable find is a large dinosaur giftshop. Everything else screams rural Nevada.

The bleak surroundings are made worse by the fact that New Vegas lacks polish. Mid-battle a foe may suddenly plummet through the game world or get stuck on a rock, making for an easy kill. The pathing for AI characters wandering the wastes often takes them into the side of buildings or parked vehicles. When enemies die, some of them will float a good five feet in the air. I even ran into a reoccurring bug where my gun wouldn't stop firing after a loading sequence.

To top it off, I broke the east boss by hiding on a rock. He just stood there as I unloaded 300 bullets into him.

But even with bugs, glitches, framerate drops, and mundane moments, Fallout: New Vegas is great fun. The gunplay (even with a new iron sight targeting system) is as flawed and inaccurate as before, but combat through V.A.T.S. remains one of my favorite things to do in a game. I love the strategy tied to it, and the payoff (usually in the form of a head exploding in slow motion) always feels great. When it comes down to combat encounters, Obsidian delivered in a big way. Fights are tough and the encounters are varied nicely as the adventure progresses. The thrill of survival is heightened even further through the awesome new Hardcore mode. If you are looking for a challenge, this mode will kick your ass up and down the Vegas strip.

Maybe Obsidian's lack of familiarity with Bethesda's technology resulted in New Vegas plateauing. Maybe Bethesda barked orders to make it identical to Fallout 3. In any case, gamers should expect more of the same from this follow-up. If Fallout 3 holds a place among your top 10 games of this generation like it does for me, another rewarding 200-plus hours of survival awaits you. —Andrew Reiner

to see 40 minutes of uncut Fallout: New Vegas gameplay narrated by Reiner and Pile go to [www.gamesplanet.com/nyv](#)

Super Meat Boy

Team Meat's addictive adventure offers plenty of content to chew on

9

Genre: Platformer
ESRB: E

Style: 1-Player Action/Platformer Publisher: Team Meat Developer: Team Meat Release: October 20 ESRB: T

360

Concept

Create a nostalgic platformer with an unapologetic degree of difficulty

Graphics

Meat Boy's characters are ridiculously cute, and the retro levels will warp you back to the '80s

Sound

The sound effects are satisfactory, but the chiptune music steals the show

Playability

I was impressed with how tight and nuanced the controls are

Entertainment

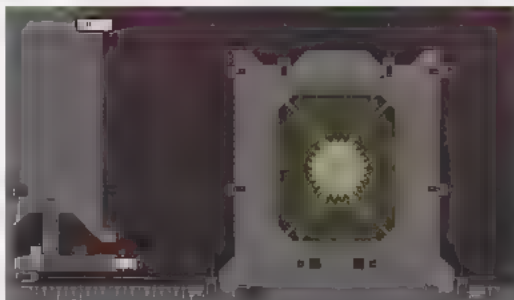
The game's later levels will torture you with punishing difficulty, but the payoff is almost always worth it

Replay Value

High

probably died more times playing Super Meat Boy than the combined deaths of every other video game I've played in my life. Aside from the opening handful of the game's 300+ levels, Super Meat Boy refuses to handle the player with kid gloves, in stark contrast to more family-friendly 2D offerings. By the time you reach the final world, you will die countless deaths if your aim is not pixel perfect or if your timing is off by a millisecond. With most games this would be a recipe for disaster, but SMB's flawless controls and lighthearted demeanor make this the most entertaining title challenge-hungry gamers can play.

Super Meat Boy is a downloadable title that breathes new life into a well-worn genre, most notably in its gameplay mechanics. The controls offer an unexpected level of depth, allowing you to propel yourself through the game's byzantine levels with a stunning proficiency that would be impossible for Nintendo's Italian plumber. Even if you master Meat Boy's moves, the game's collectibles unlock a large supporting cast of



playable characters (taken from other indie titles, such as Tim from Brad and Commander Video from the Bit Trip series), each with their own mechanics and a special ability to perfect.

Even with this robust cast at your disposal, make no mistake: Unless you are some kind of gaming savant, Super Meat Boy will become too difficult for you, at some point. Thankfully, SMB minimizes frustration with some smart design decisions. Each level is forgivingly short, respawning after death is instantaneous, and you have an infinite number of lives on the main levels.

(some Warp levels have a limit, and are in turn much more frustrating).

The game also sports a novel replay feature, which displays not only your successful playthrough of a level, but also every death simultaneously. This also makes dying a billion times on a level easier to swallow: as watching the ensuing Meat Boy slaughter is always entertaining.

I'd be lying if I said I didn't have a few meltdowns while playing Super Meat Boy, but the entertaining storyline, detailing Meat Boy's continual attempts to save Bandage Girl from the evil Dr.

Fetus, cut my frustration short with plenty of left-field chuckles. With a healthy dose of patience, most gamers can see the game through to its charming and hilarious ending. Even after you've hit your difficulty threshold, the game's most impressive feature, a system for adding free new level packs based on the PC version's level editor, should offer plenty of extra entertainment. With Super Meat Boy's concoction of offerings and irresistible charm, you'd be hard-pressed not to get your money's worth out of this title. » Jeff Marchiatava

Costume Quest

Too much trick, not enough treat

6

Genre: 1-Player Role-Playing Publisher: THQ Developer: Double Fine Release: October 19 (PSN), October 20 (XBLA), ESRB: E, 10+

PS3 = 360

Concept

Go from door to door with a variety of costumes, collecting candy and fighting monsters

Graphics

Visuals are simple, but the cohesive style means everything looks like it belongs

Sound

Some voiced dialogue instead of scrolling text would have helped

Playability

Features like a minimap and save points are nifty, adding needless complication

Entertainment

Good dialogue isn't enough to save the experience from a tedious combat system

Replay Value

Moderate

As the developer behind unique titles like Psychonauts and Brütal Legend, Double Fine has earned the respect of gamers with clever writing and likable characters. When it comes to making games that are also fun to play, that good will only goes so far. Costume Quest would have made a fantastic cartoon, I enjoyed the cute dialogue, charming art style, and quirky cast in the Halloween-themed adventure. Unfortunately, everything in the package that qualifies Costume Quest as a game falls short.

With the trick-or-treat theme, kids-save-the-day plot, and abundant candy worship, assumed that this downloadable game was aimed at attracting a young crowd. Once I got a taste of the tedious combat, I had to question that assumption. The turn-based battles are far too

simple for their own good: you just hit, attack, and then follow

a brief button prompt to maximize damage (or wait to defend). You won't find any magic, healing items, or anything else that could add entertainment. The animations for the attacks can be funny at first, but you'll get sick of them in no time.

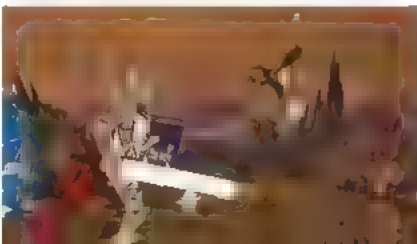
You'd think the simplicity would make combat more accessible, but instead it becomes more difficult. All strategy, and variety are stripped away, so all you can do is hope that you succeed at the button prompts. If you fail a couple times in row, you're screwed, and you can't do anything about it. You'll collect a bunch of costumes with different special moves, but none of them fully address this issue or the tediousness of the battle system in general.



plenty of comedic gems. While advancing through each area doesn't amount to much more than a few fetch quests and simple puzzles, I'd opt out of the battles in each section for as long as possible to enjoy the atmosphere – but you need to go through the encounters eventually.

Other annoyances make it hard to fully enjoy Costume Quest's bizarre world. Without objective markers or a minimap, finding your next goal is an occasional problem. The save system is an even bigger problem. Lacking any manual options, you need to rely on the autosave to retain your progress, but it only kicks in under certain conditions that are difficult to force. You can't just decide you're done and quit playing; you need to complete a quest, pick up a new quest, or change areas. In one case, I lost about 45 minutes of progress because I quit after fighting a bunch of battles that didn't trigger a save event (and even leveled up during that time!).

Costume Quest is cute and funny, so it may look like a good game for kids. Let me assure you: After completing the adventure (which took me about five hours), I can't recommend Costume Quest to gamers of any age. » Joe Juba



Arcania: Gothic 4

Explore, but don't overstay your welcome

Style 1-Player Role-Playing **Publisher** Dreamcatcher Games
Developer Spellbound Entertainment **Release** October 19 **ESRB** T



6.75

360 • PC

Concept
Continue the long-running Gothic series in name only with a short, linear adventure replacing the sprawling player-driven worlds of the past

Graphics
If there's a better-looking fantasy world out there, I haven't seen it. Too bad there are about six character models, and four of them are ugly

Sound
The main character's voice acting is the only reason to have the sound on at all

Playability
Combat controls slightly better on 360, but the graphics and UI are better on PC

Entertainment
As long as you don't care about things like player choice, character development, or plot in your RPGs, you can find value here

Replay Value
Low

ve got no problem with one-dimensional games so long as they are up-front about it. Marc makes no bones about being anything more than a game about running and jumping on things. Arcania: Gothic 4, on the other hand, goes to great lengths to convince you that it's got a storyline and characters. It doesn't. It barely holds together as a loot-collecting exploration vehicle.

It's not impossible to have a good time with Arcania. The world is gorgeous, with real-time shadows cast by the sun passing overhead and hidden secrets waiting to be discovered in hundreds of hand-crafted nooks and crannies. Sentry towers keep watch over the crashing tides. Trees shiver and toss in anticipation of coming storms, which crash down with thunderous fury when they finally materialize. Dozens of touches like this give Arcania's world a convincing illusion of life, and lend a pure joy to exploring it.

Defending yourself against the threats that blanket the land is

trivially easy, to the point where any experienced player should start out on Hard or even Gothic difficulty. Swordplay has an easy flow to it, with simple timing-based combos and evasive rolls giving skilled players enough to do without requiring Devil May Cry levels of precision or depth. Switching between magic, melee, and ranged attacks is clunky, though.

Placing the skill points you gain as you level is one of just two avenues of customizing your

avatar, and neither is nor the equipment game even enough meat to hold my interest. Neither do the storyline, characters, or dialogue. The writing is sophomoric. The NPCs are by turns eye-rolling stereotypes and so bland they're hard to remember after exiting the dialogue. The plot? Ugh. Everything about the role-playing part of the game is awful, save the main character's visibly growing frustration at having to navigate every RPG trope of the last 20 years just to get some revenge on the mad king who torched his hometown. Feel you, brother.

Arcania isn't what anyone thought Gothic 4 would be. It's a marginally competent action/RPG with all the depth of a kiddie pool, not the huge open-world of role-playing epics for which the series was previously known. At least it isn't afflicted by the plague of bugs that crippled Gothic 3 at release; I didn't hate my time with it, and it's possible to find some value here. Just know what you're getting into before taking the plunge. —Adam Bressetter



The Sims 3

Sims secure good karma on consoles

9

ESRB E10+

Style 1-Player Simulation **Publisher** Electronic Arts
Developer The Sims Studio **Release** October 25 **ESRB** T

PS3 • 360

Concept
Strip The Sims 3 to consoles with engaging new features such as karma powers, challenges, and a seamless exchange system

Graphics
From the skyscrapers to the scum on your sim's toilet, the visual presentation continues to impress

Sound
While the success of the sound design largely depends on your tolerance of Smash, the music is as charming as ever

Playability
The Sims Studio did a fantastic job translating controls for consoles, implementing a refined interface and snappily menus

Entertainment
Augmenting an already impressive game with new features makes The Sims 3 more compelling than ever

Replay Value
High

When The Sims 3 released last June, it quickly became the most successful week one PC launch in EA's long and venerable history, leaving sizable standards for its console brethren to live up to. While the core functionality of the game remains unchanged, noteworthy additions give Sims 3 on console new gleam enough to merit a bit of envy from PC loyalists.

The console edition of Sims 3 plays just like its PC predecessor, a deviation from past ports that constrained players to modified linear play. EA did a fantastic job of addressing control issues, making navigation as organic as possible without a mouse and keyboard. Commands are intuitively mapped and the streamlined interface is easy to use. Selecting objects isn't as precise as with a pointer, but a popup menu will present you with options if several items are in close proximity.

The Karma system is the most intriguing addition, and one I found myself exploiting often, even to the detriment of my little tenant. Using "super satisfy" to max out my sim's

needs allowed her to power through a night of reading unhindered, but after using the boost several times, karma came back to bite me. A localized quake broke pipes in both my bath and sink, but the bad luck didn't deter me from using that karma ability again. Karma's applications to both good and evil ends are an exciting variable for those who tend to play carefully and controlled.

If karma ushers in the unexpected, challenges personal, career-oriented, or otherwise help to focus the player. Completing a challenge

rewards your sim with challenge points, which can be exchanged for karma powers, new outfits, household objects, and more. Some challenges are simple, such as attending a sporting event in Moonlight Bay. Others are more complex, like having twins. However, all challenges facilitate exploration and guide you, to experience every thing Sims 3 has to offer.

The new exchange system is sure to satiate players with an endless supply of user-generated content. From the exchange hub you can customize a personal profile, search for products that meet your needs, favorite items, manage your own custom content, and more. Its usefulness ultimately depends on the creativity of the community, but that has never been a problem for the series in the past.

With Sims 3, console gamers finally get a true translation of the gameplay that has made the PC entries such a hit. Engaging new content and intuitive design makes picking up the console port of EA's digital dollhouse a no-brainer. —Meagan VanBuren



Fable III

One hero to rule them all

9

300 • PC

► **Concept**
Let players lead a revolution against a tyrannical king and eventually wear the crown themselves

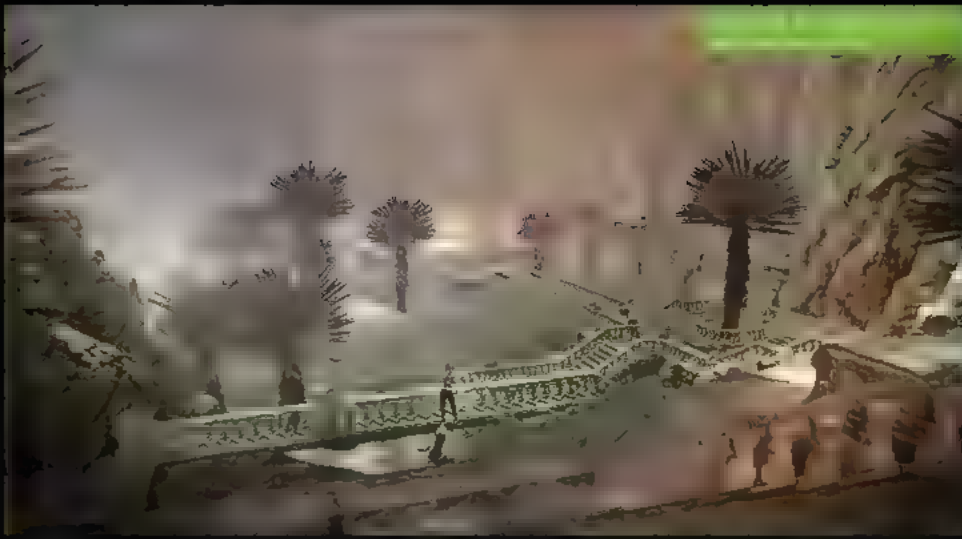
► **Graphics**
Albion's steampunk update looks great, and the characters are intricately detailed

► **Sound**
The score is soaring when it needs to be, seething when the action calls for it, and atmospheric most other times

► **Playability**
Lionhead has stripped controls down to the core, which is sometimes detrimental

► **Reinvention**
There's still a lot to do in Albion, and the package is alluring enough to make you want to actually do it again and again

by Dwayne Woods
High



When Mel Brooks said, "It's good to be the king," he was only talking about one facet of the job. Sure, the parties can be fantastic and the furnishings are exquisite, but being in command of a kingdom is more of a royal pain than anything else.

When you first start *Fable III*, you don't get that impression. As the youngest child of a legendary hero, you've heard the vague ruminations from the rabble that your brother, King Logan, is a tyrannical maniac. Maybe it's the random executions. Perhaps the high taxes and child labor have left negative impressions on the citizenry. Regardless, those kinds of complaints are beneath your station in life—but that changes quickly after a tragic turn of events. Soon you're scrambling to assemble an army. Enough is enough! It's time for a revolution, baby!

As the prince or princess, you travel the lands of Albion with your mentor, Walter Beck. As luck (or fate) would have it, Walter just so happens to be friendly with a variety of assorted rifraff, rebels, and revolutionaries. Those factions have one important thing in common: They cannot stand King Logan, and they will do whatever it takes to overthrow him. Since you're a member of the royal family, though, you have to win over each of those leaders by performing acts of heroism and doing a few favors.

Most of those missions are variations of the typical "go here, kill this, retrieve that" formula that we're accustomed to in our adventure games. Fortunately, *Fable III* has more than a few tricks up its sleeves.

Fable III is the latest example of Lionhead's battle against cluttered interfaces. Much of the

HUD has been stripped away, and combat is similarly bare. At least, that's how it seems at first. There are three main types of attacks in the game—melee, firearm, magic—and each is performed by pressing the button that's permanently attached to it. You could conceivably get away with mashing away, but players who time the attacks to correspond to the action and charge attacks at the right time are treated to devastating finishers that show you flattening your opponent's head or perforating their backs in a dramatic slow-motion closeup. I had fun with it, but combat isn't a wildly different experience from *Fable II*: you press a button, swing your sword or cast your spell, and move on.

Other genre mainstays are tweaked significantly, though sometimes it feels as though Lionhead is tinkering with things simply because it can. Character progression echoes a traditional leveling system in favor of a more literal experience system dubbed the Road to Rule. In the beginning, the hero faces down a winding path that ends at the castle. Gates block your progression, and are unlocked one by one after completing important story-based tasks. As players work their way through the path, they can spend Guild Seals (essentially XP) to open chests. Those chests contain things like combat upgrades, emotion packs, dye for clothing, and new spells. It's a nice way to present leveling up, though it doesn't fundamentally change the mechanics beneath such systems. The same can be said for the player's home base, called the Sanctuary. Staffed by Jasper the butler (voiced by John Cleese), it's an all-in-one visual replacement for the various menus players usu-

ally zip through to equip gear, fast travel, and change appearance.

Lionhead's efforts to replace abstract gaming concepts with more literal interpretations is interesting, but the overall effect is one of getting a flashy paint job instead of an arguably unnecessary overhaul. Sure, menus are wielded gamier things, but there's a reason they work—they're faster than walking into a virtual closet. The interface doesn't take anything away, but it doesn't add anything extra to the experience, either.

Fable III's focus on simplicity sometimes comes at a cost. Previously, players could choose from a variety of different actions when interacting with the townsfolk. Now, you're limited to random selections that represent good, evil, and rude actions. Not being able to choose means that my prince had to do a lot of pelvic-grinding dance moves and games of patty cake with other men in order to become friends with them. It certainly doesn't break the game, but I was disappointed that a game lumping player choice takes a significant step backward from *Fable II*'s level of NPC interaction.

The story is grim at times, but that's not to say that it isn't also one of the funniest games of the year. The writing is top notch, and there are at least three or four quests that rank among my favorite missions I've ever played. One highlight has the hero joining in a bickering trio's Dungeons & Dragons-type game, complete with hoary descriptions and every RPG cliché you can imagine. Other times you might be asked to break up a doomed marriage or even try your hand at acting. You'll find plenty of variety and choices to make.



Eventually, after working through the game's storyline (and Road to Rule), the revolution is at hand. After assembling an army, making a promise or two, and saving the day dozens of times, you think that would be the end of things—you know, pop on the crown, sit on the throne, and call it a day. That's where you'd be wrong.

Before you take a seat on the king's chair and doze off, Logan fills you in on a few key things. Albion is facing a horrible threat, and the nation's defense is in peril. As he tells it, that's why he had to make the tough decisions he had to make—and be branded a tyrant because of them.

As king, players have an accelerated year to establish a strong defense before the invasion comes. Thankfully, you're a hands-on leader, and you'll occasionally exit the stuffy confines of your castle to discover valuable artifacts and mingle with the riffraff. Other times, you'll have to sort out the worst kinds of problems: other people's problems. Remember those promises? Well, people expect you to keep them. As you hold court, a parade of familiar faces comes in and asks for your help—which most often comes in the form of money. A lot of time is spent in your court, though I found the situations that arose every bit as riveting as beating back highwaymen or slaughtering groups of hobbes.

The *Fable* series has always focused on morality, and *Fable III* is no different. This time, however, the choices are far beyond the typical

"kiss the baby or kick the baby" extremes that we've faced in the past. My first playthrough I was as evil as evil could be, and I broke my word at every opportunity. Every decision I made was born from greed, and I lined my bank account and bought up every square inch of available property. When the time of reckoning came, the kingdom suffered because of my greed.

On my second attempt, I decided I would be daddy's little angel. I went out of my way to be good to everyone, and I kept every promise. My advisor warned me that popularity would be fleeting if everyone died because of the kingdom's insolvency, but I didn't care. People cheered when I entered the throne room, and it felt great (particularly compared to my earlier reception). And wouldn't you know it? Just about everyone died.

You can't be everything to everyone in Albion. Some people are going to be disappointed in you. No easy answers exist, and there aren't any last-second lawyers to bail you out from your poor planning. After playing through the game twice, I know more than ever that I'm not cut out for public office.

Even after you "beat" the game, new quests, locations,

and characters open up. And those decisions you made as king? They'll affect the way the world looks and behaves, too. Without spoiling anything, let's just say that when I said just about everybody died, I wasn't kidding. From raising a family, becoming a lord baron, and even partnering up with friends locally or online, this is the most fully realized version of Albion yet. It's a must-play for fans of adventure or anyone who thinks they can run things better than those bums in Washington. Good luck. —Jill Cork



Biggest Loser Ultimate Workout

Reinvented as a worthy competitor

Style 1-Player Lifestyle (4-Player Online) Publisher THQ Developer Ritz Game Studios Release November 4 ESRB E

8

360

» **Concept**
Create a fitness game around The Biggest Loser brand that offers a full fitness program and quick play options

» **Graphics**
Workout locations are bland, but character models move fluidly

» **Sound**
The music sounds like anything you've heard in standard home fitness videos

» **Playability**
Menu navigation is a pain, but the body detection is impressive

» **Entertainment**
Plenty of customization options will keep you coming back for more

» **Replay Value**
High

When *The Biggest Loser* made its video game debut on the Wii, it offered a suitable workout experience, but was overshadowed by the likes of best-selling titles *Wii Fit* and *EA Sports Active*. Now, with impressive utilization of Kinect's full-body motion-detection capabilities, *The Biggest Loser Ultimate Workout* takes fitness a step further with customizable workouts and robust health features that make it a worthy competitor.

Creating a custom fitness program in *Ultimate Workout* is easy, requiring a fitness test and use of the game's body analyzer that determines the intensity of your program and areas to focus on. The body analyzer is a helpful tool to keep track of your progress over the course of your regimen, since it uses the Kinect camera to perform a surprisingly accurate scan that calculates measurements for neck, waist, and hips. If you're unsatisfied with the program the game generates for you, you can make modifications, but wading through the menus is an exercise in frustration



thanks to the questionable controller-free navigation. Thankfully, spotty movement detection only applies to menu screens.

Ultimate Workout offers a wide variety of workout styles ranging from interval training to yoga. Even with more elaborate exercises, such as getting down in a plank position and quickly jumping back up into a standing pose, the Kinect camera never lost sight of me. Your silhouette appears alongside the trainer of your choice (either Bob Harper or Jillian Michaels) and looks like it's

covered in slime for motion fluidity. The silhouette follows you perfectly as you perform moves, making it easy to compare your form with the trainer. On-screen prompts nudge you, if you need to correct your form, and the trainer provides some verbal feedback as well. Some of the trainer commentary fails to correlate with your actions, if you leave the room for a water break. Bob or Jillian may comment you on your form. The trainer will occasionally ask to see how you are holding up, providing multiple options on screen that you can repeat

often. If you're feeling tired or need water, just say so during these segments and the workout will pause accordingly. Other features, such as the ability to record video diaries, a calorie counter and intake log, lean recipes, and more make the entire package a worthwhile fitness program. Even though all Kinect titles offer some degree of exercise, *The Biggest Loser Ultimate Workout* gets you on the right path to a healthy new start. — Annette Gonzalez



Sonic Free Riders

The Blue Blur's latest roller-fairish sport isn't being a winner

Style 1 to 4 Player Racing (8-Player Online) Publisher Sega Developer Sonic Team Release November 4 ESRB E

360

» **Concept**
Sonic stars in another mediocre racing game; this title exclusively for Kinect

» **Graphics**
Courses, characters, and cutscenes are bright and polished

» **Sound**
The voice acting, laughable metal theme song, and repetitive tracks are uninspiring

» **Playability**
Inconsistent movement recognition makes controlling characters a challenge

» **Entertainment**
Tighter controls could have made this a more enjoyable experience

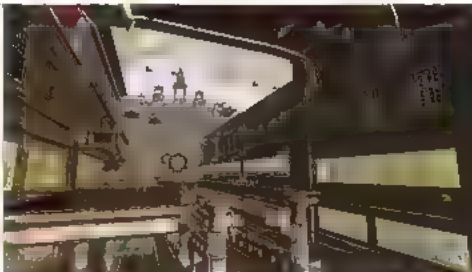
» **Replay Value**
Moderately low

With a reputation of being one of the fastest creatures in the gaming universe, Sonic is no stranger to the racing genre. Hoping to emulate the success of Nintendo's popular kart racers, Sonic's mediocre entries in the *Sonic Riders* franchise consistently fall short of winning first place. The latest attempt, *Sonic Free Riders*, uses Microsoft's Kinect technology, placing you in the Sonic universe as you zip around a limited number of courses—or at least try to. Spotty body detection turns what could have been a unique racing experience

into a flaming wreck.

The bulk of *Sonic Free Riders* is broken up into missions, each one preceded by cutscenes (which you should skip) featuring grating dialogue between characters. What's worse is that you're required to go through a calibration exercise before every mission, which involves standing sideways as if you are on an Extreme Gear board, and leaning back and forth to make your way around a series of cones. As far as I could tell, this process doesn't contribute to solidifying controls whatsoever and only serves to delay the action.

Missions include standard races, timed challenges, coin collection, trick execution, and gaining as much air as possible, though that's easier said than done. Successfully completing rumps and sharp turns on more complex tracks is hit-and-miss, since your



movements don't always register. This results in a lot of wall grinding and unintentional trips down side paths. Power-ups, a necessary evil in arcade racers, are plentiful and require unique arm movements to activate. Gestures like shaking your arm in the air to rattle up a soda can for a rocket boost or a football throw for a missile launch don't always work when you need them to and can cost you place in a race.

Occasionally, characters break away from the board for mine cart, swimming, and water skiing sequences. One character uses a motor bike, which requires facing forward in a squat position. These segments are by far the most responsive, give a true sense of speed, and are the most fun. Unfortunately, they only make limited appearances.

Sonic Free Riders, though an ambitious attempt to bring a controller-free entry to the racing genre, is a challenge to enjoy. Here's a word of advice: Sonic. Ditch the board and stick to your platforming roots. — Annette Gonzalez



Dance Central

Harmonix dances circles around the competition



8.75

360

- » **Concept**
A dance game unlike anything you've ever experienced
- » **Graphics**
Avatars and stages are polished and detailed. Dance flash cards are easy to decipher
- » **Sound**
More than 30 dance tracks cater to a wide range of styles from old school to new to get your body moving
- » **Playability**
Kinect is responsive to full body movements and menu navigation. You may need to rearrange your living room for optimized dance space
- » **Entertainment**
An authentic and fun dance experience that will keep you coming back for more
- » **Replay Value**
High

GameRank

Style 1 or 2 Player Rhythm/Music Publisher MTV Games Developer Harmonix Release November 4 ESRB T

From dance pads to motion controllers, the dance game genre is undeniably evolving. Last year, Ubisoft's *Just Dance* made a surprising splash on the Wii, boasting incredible sales numbers and proving there is still an audience for dance games. These titles have been mediocre at best—until now. With Kinect's *Dance Central*, Harmonix took a risk on a new piece of technology and succeeded in creating the most authentic and entertaining virtual dance experience to date.

Dance Central tracks the movements of each individual limb as you mirror the movements of your onscreen avatar. Kick with the wrong leg or miss an arm wave and the avatar's respective limbs will turn red to acknowledge the error. Aside from a few tracking mishaps with moves requiring rapid arm motions, the Kinect camera was surprisingly accurate and didn't miss a beat even in low light. Menu navigation is equally slick, even if this is your first time using Kinect: the controller-free interface feels natural and the clean menus makes it easy to jump right into your first routine.

Unlike Harmonix's other music offerings, *Dance Central* lacks the genre-standard career mode and instead provides a track list broken up into sections that increase in difficulty with progression. Don't worry about not being able to make it past a set; you cannot fail any song, making the game accessible to players of all skill levels who want to jump right in. Otherwise, training in *Dance Central*'s intuitive Break It Down mode is an excellent resource to learn and perfect moves if you're shooting for high scores in Break It Down mode: flash cards that

feature move names and images of dancer silhouettes are presented on the right side of the screen. These images' simple-yet-clear designs make them easy to decipher at first glance.

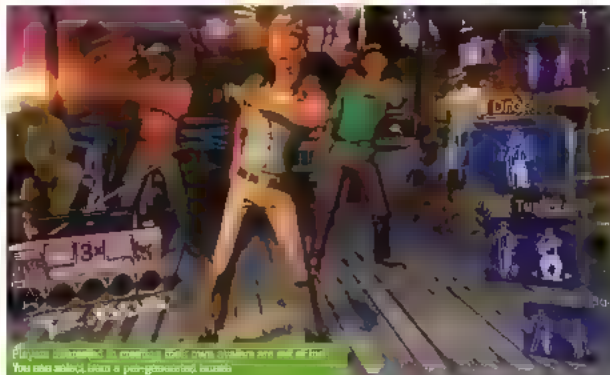
I was usually able to guess what each move would entail with one look at a flash card without a demonstration. As the moves make multiple appearances across routines, they become easier to recognize and execute during scored performances. Failing a move in this mode allows you to repeat the motion several times and goes as far as letting you slow down the demonstration to nail your technique. Unfortunately, you're required to go through the entirety of a song's breakdown to practice a specific move.

I wish I had access to a move bank where I could just focus on moves I was struggling with as opposed to repeatedly going through an entire track. I have otherwise mastered.

Dance Central's track list lends itself well to different dance styles, offering something for everyone. Bust out breaking moves with "Don't Sweat the Technique," add a little Spanish flavor with "I Know You Want Me (Calle Ocho)," pop rock with "Satisfaction," or kick it old-school with "Brick House." As you perform tracks, the game takes funny snapshots during your performance, and the screen eventually clears showing you instead of the avatar, prompting you to freestyle. Other friends in

the room can join the fun during these sections, which are instantly played back for amusing results. If a friend wants to dance with you, you can take turns completing sections of a song and compete for the high score, but both dancers can't perform simultaneously.

With *Dance Central*, Harmonix has set the bar for the future of dance games. Investing hours in a game that rewards you for some degree of athleticism and coordination is not only an incredible workout, but ultimately makes you feel like a better dancer in the end. *Dance Central* shines among Kinect's otherwise bleak launch lineup and is undoubtedly a step in the right direction for the hardware. —Annette Gonzalez



Donkey Kong Country Returns

Retro's DK revival recaptures the original

9.5

Wii

► **Concept**
Retro Studios revises the Donkey Kong Country series and makes it better than ever

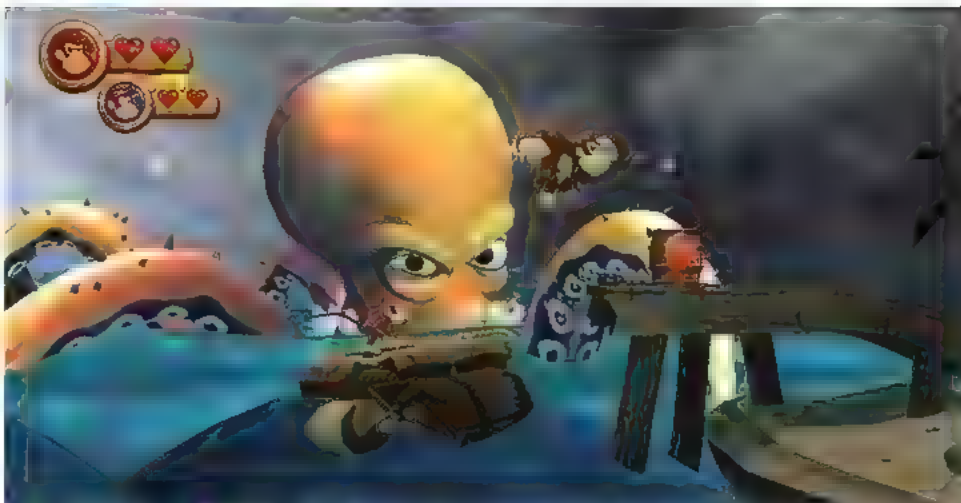
► **Graphics**
Gorgeous characters and stages from beginning to end, with some awesome silhouetted areas sprinkled throughout

► **Sound**
Familiar tunes are updated, and the new tracks fit perfectly

► **Playability**
Shaking the Wii remote to roll can be frustrating, but it's a rare blemish in a near-perfect experience

► **Entertainment**
One of the best platformers ever made, and it certainly resides amongst the Wii's top titles

► **Replay Value**
Moderately High



GameRanker
GAMES MONTH
IGN

Style 1 or 2-Player Platform Publisher Nintendo Developer Retro Studios Release November 21 ESRB E

The Donkey Kong Country series on SNES is remembered more for its graphical achievements than anything else. Donkey Kong may have featured the most attractive character models of the 16-bit era, but Mario always held the gameplay crown. Flash forward three console generations, and DK and Mario have both received 2D returns to form. New Super Mario Bros. Wii was fantastic, but Donkey Kong Country Returns manages to push the smile above his plumber rival in virtually every category.

A wave of nostalgia swept over me when I booted up Donkey Kong Country Returns. You'll

hear familiar tunes as you bust out of your jungle hut, and before long you're collecting bananas, snagging red balloons, and teaming up with your pal Diddy. Many will buy this game for the nostalgic value alone, but as I progressed, I realized that the merits of gameplay carry the adventure more than anything else. This could have been stripped of recognizable characters and renamed Steve the Gorilla's BananaQuest and would have enjoyed it just as much.

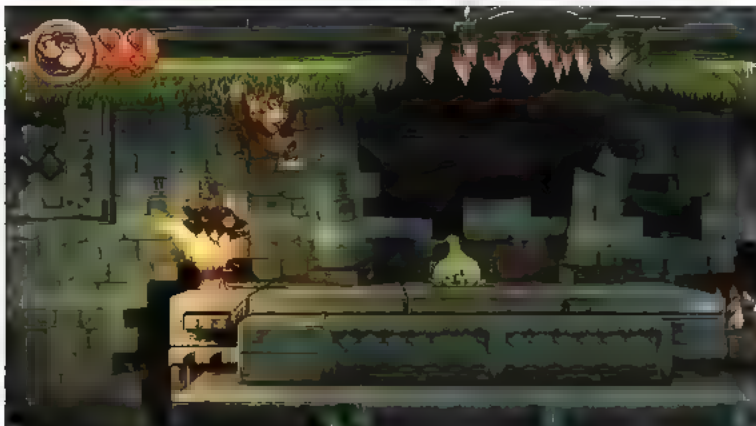
It's not all fan service. You won't see the Kremings, the only animal you'll be riding is Rambi the rhino, and appearances from DK's family members are kept to a bare minimum.

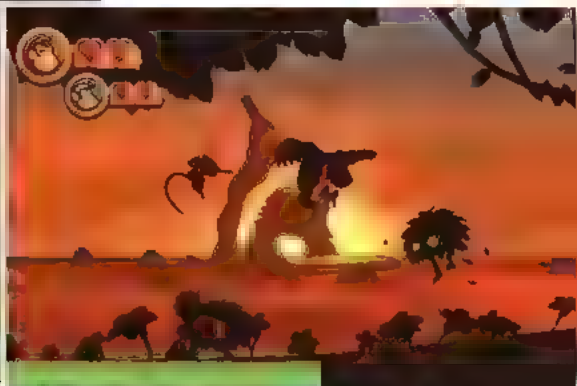
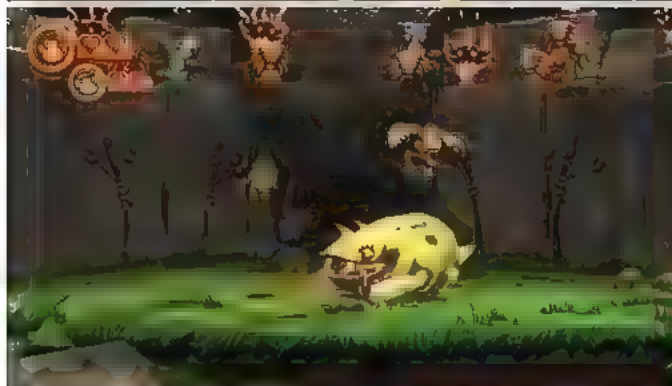
Rather than bombard fans with familiar faces and gameplay elements, Retro focuses on presenting new and dramatic scenarios. Mine cart levels were a staple from the original trilogy, but now they are far more exciting than ever. In one "don't you dare blink" moment, your cart bashes through a giant egg and causes it to roll down the track. As the egg spins through the level, you remain in your cart, avoiding rocks that break through the shell (and the holes they leave) as you loop around inside. For this entire segment you have to be aware of the environment outside of the egg while simultaneously making sure you jump its cracks as they approach you.

These mine cart levels left me breathless, but they're not the only stages that cause that effect. You'll outrun a wall of insects as they attempt to eat you, scale the insides of a volcano as lava rapidly rises, and pilot a barrel rocket through a cave as a giant bat shoots cones at you. As you progress, you'll breathe a heavy sigh of relief every time you arrive at a checkpoint.

Donkey Kong Country games have never been a walk in the park, but Returns is easily the hardest in the series' history. Many of the later stages had me burning through 15-plus lives before reaching the end, but never due to cheapness. You just need to hone your platforming skills, be patient, and pay attention. After beating them once, I found I could usually go through the toughest levels without dying, thanks to all the time I had spent practicing the various maneuvers needed to avoid traps and enemies.

My journey through the eight worlds wasn't without a few minor issues. Shaking the Wii remote to roll isn't as responsive as the classic method, and can send you off a cliff if the Wii detects an unintentional shake. Having a





second player join in as Diddy Kong can be fun, but it is also frustrating in more difficult levels. Considering the amount of speed and precise jumping required late in the game, two players is one too many.

Beating the game is already a substantial challenge, but getting 100 percent requires impeccable platforming skills. Collecting all of the "Kong" letters in each of the eight worlds opens up trophy levels that are even more demanding than the standard stages, and beating all eight of these is the only way to see everything—including the contents of the secret Golden Temple.

"I've been looking forward to this game for months, but the final product blew me away. Its gorgeous visuals, awesome boss battles, varied stages, and cleverly hidden secrets guarantee gamers will have a good time revisiting this classic franchise. It's not only the best Donkey Kong Country, it's also one of the best platformers I've ever played." — Dan Ryckert



Kirby's Epic Yarn

A cuter Kirby than all gamers can enjoy

9.5

Wii

» Concept

Somehow make fullball Kirby even cuter by turning him and his surroundings into craftworks

» Graphics

The stripped-down style of Kirby's various fabrics and some amazing fog/footfall effects make for one of the best-looking games on the Wii

» Sound

Crunchy squeaky noises from Kirby and Prince Fluff are worth putting up with for the fun, upbeat soundtrack

» Playability

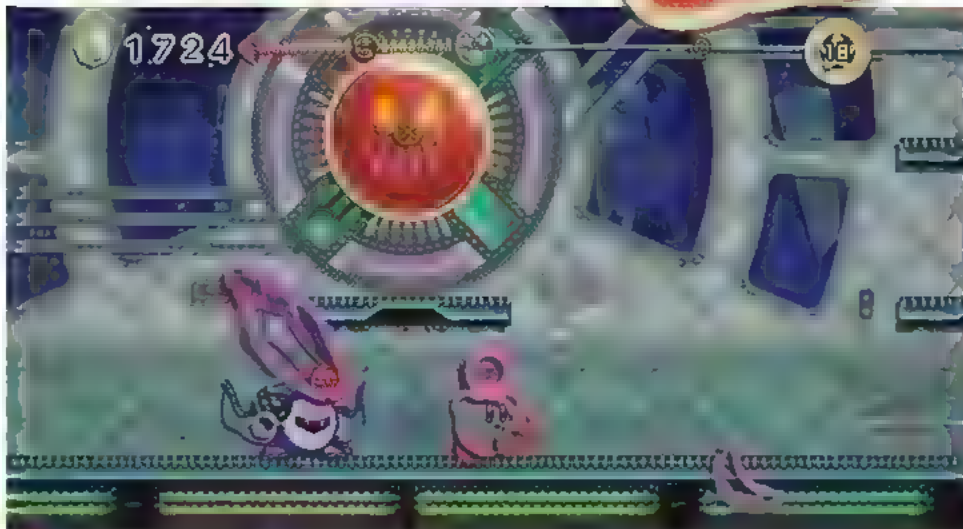
A classic, simple 2D platformer control scheme using a single Wii remote means virtually anybody should be able to pick it up

» Entertainment

Fantastic level design and a constant flow of inventive new ideas make for a satisfying experience

» Replay Value

Moderate



gameformer.com

Style 1 or 2-Player Platforming Publisher Nintendo Developer Good-Feel/HAL Laboratory Release October 17 2008 E

The debate over whether or not Nintendo has abandoned its hardcore fans in favor of the new casual market has been raging for years, and Kirby's Epic Yarn is the latest first-party release sure to stoke the fire of that jangling argument. This isn't the textbook example of an overly cute, just-for-kids game that it might look like though: Kirby's latest adventure is a perfect reminder of what a Nintendo game is at its best—something anyone can appreciate that leaves plenty of room for skill and mastery.

Kirby fans will notice two big changes in Epic Yarn. Firstly, because of his change into yarn form, Kirby has lost the ability to suck up enemies. This has been replaced with a useful whp/lasso that he uses to unwind his opponents or grab onto patches. Secondly, though previous

Kirby games tended to be extremely easy, Epic Yarn maintains a surprising difficulty balance. Although Kirby and co-op buddy Prince Fluff can't actually die, making the game breezy for anyone who wants to rush through it, you'll have to spend time mastering each level if you want to see all the game has to offer.

As Kirby progresses through a level, he collects beads by unraveling enemies and uncovering secrets. The beads are tallied at the end of each area, and you're awarded medals (and sometimes open up bonus levels if you did well enough). Collecting beads isn't all you need to worry about—keeping them in your possession is an even greater challenge. Like Sonic and his rings, whenever Kirby is hit by an enemy or falls into a pit, he drops a massive number of his precious collectibles.

The light platforming becomes tricky enough that the tension of trying to hold onto a huge stash of beads feels dangerous, even if you cannot technically fail the level. Nintendo seems to have discovered a very elegant solution for bridging the gap between casual and hardcore here. Less intense gamers can drift through levels, taking hits and receiving smaller rewards, while others can find a challenge in learning the levels well enough to end with a full pocket of beads. Beating the game is a relatively painless task, but getting 100 percent will take dedication and skill.

You'll want to go for that full completion and make sure you see everything, though. Epic Yarn is bursting at the seams with original ideas that make each new level a delightful discovery. One moment I was pulling at a loose thread that

crunched the background together and moved a far-away platform closer. Then I transformed into a tank to blow the crap out of woodland creatures with motion-controlled yarn missiles. Then it was on to JFO saucer mode, where I had to suck up enough enemies and items to power up my destructive electrical shot. Even the underwater levels ended up making me smile when Kirby and Prince Fluff were changed into dolphin form.

Kirby also features a two-player co-op mode. The risk/reward balance for adding a buddy reminds me of New Super Mario Bros. Wii and LittleBigPlanet. Hidden treasures and beads are easier to access with a friend to toss over to them, but throwing your partner into a pit remains a constant temptation, even if you'll lose progress. The only downside to letting someone play as Prince Fluff is that you'll likely accidentally grab your co-op partner on occasion when trying to lasso an enemy or a button in the environment.

Honestly, the only crowd that I can imagine not enjoying Kirby is aided gamers who are too cool for something so whimsical. Maybe they didn't grow up with the equally family-friendly Nintendo games of the '80s and '90s, or maybe they've just forgotten their roots amidst the constant flow of first-person shooters and gory action games. Whatever the case, they're missing out on a colorful, unique game that reminds me of why I fell in love with gaming back on my NES: imagination, challenge, and fun. —Phil Kollar

Check out a video of Renner and Phil playing through a few levels of Kirby's Epic Yarn at www.gameformer.com/nyg



Second Opinion 9.5

On the video game cuteness scale, Kirby's Epic Yarn achieves the designation "capable of instilling unadulterated joy into any soul." Case in point: When I close my eyes to reflect on it, I see Kirby sinking down a pastel-colored rainbow singing "I love you, Renner!" as a festive Charlie Brown-like piano melody rings out. Watching a ball of yarn unravel and transform into a dragon is mesmerizing in its own right, but seeing how Nintendo sews that fiber into gameplay is where Kirby's Epic Yarn really impresses. Epic Yarn reminds me more of a great Mario platformer than it does a traditional Kirby game. The action moves at a brisk pace mixing skillful platforming with creative yarn-based interactions: he's pulling apart an enemy at the seams with Kirby or deep sea diving as a dolphin. The design choices to not let Kirby die at any point didn't bother me at all. In fact, it's brilliant: everyone can get through the game, but only skilled players will be able to get gold medals. With nifty cooperative play and classic platforming that will make Super Nintendo fans weak in the knees, Kirby's Epic Yarn is one of the best caponanzas you'll find on Wii. —Andrew Reiner



GoldenEye 007

A NINTENDO WII GAME BY EA GAMES

Publisher Activision Developer Eurocom Release November 2 2008 ESRB T

Activision's re-imagining of Rare's GoldenEye is an attempt to scrub his tarnished franchise clean but what he's left with is a lackluster game that fails to hit the same high notes of the original, or keep pace with modern shooters.

Playing with the Wii remote and nunchuk feels tighter than The Conduit's touchy controls, but you'll want to go the dual-analog stick route with the Classic Controller Pro. While using a Wii peripheral that emulates the average controller makes sprinting, meleeing, and tonight aiming easier, nothing saves you from the ridiculous blur effect that happens with every reload. This gimmick makes the fuzzy graphics look worse and punishes gamers who like to relax: often and line up their next shot while doing so.

Playing updated versions of the original Dam and Facility levels in the single-player campaign is a fun experience at first, but the game as a whole suffers from generic level design, awful quick-time events, and

a terrible final boss fight. Local four-player split-screen is a blurry mess that can't even be salvaged by good friends and a high-definition TV. Fortunately, the worthwhile eight-player online experience delivers the best FPS multiplayer experience available on the Wii. My favorite is Heroes mode, in which one player from each team can transform into a powered-up Bond character, but at the risk of giving the enemy more points if defeated.

GoldenEye 007 doesn't feel like the retro dream it's meant to be. This Bond game is lost in limbo somewhere between last generation and modern day shooters. Only veteran Bond or FPS fans with nothing but a Wii should bother picking this one up. Everyone else with fond memories of the N64 title should relieve the game from their shelf, blow off the dust, smile fondly at it, and find peace in their fuzzy memories upon putting it back where it belongs. —Tom Tunney

6.5

W:

» **Concept**
Attempt to recapture the glory of gaming's first beloved console FPS

» **Graphics**
The single-player presentation is better than most Wii games, but falls apart in split-screen

» **Sound**
Daniel Craig's visceral Bond persona is exchanged for dull monotone voiceover, but the music is solid

» **Playability**
Don't bother playing this without a Classic Controller Pro

» **Entertainment**
One of the better single-player FPS experiences on the Wii, but that doesn't say much

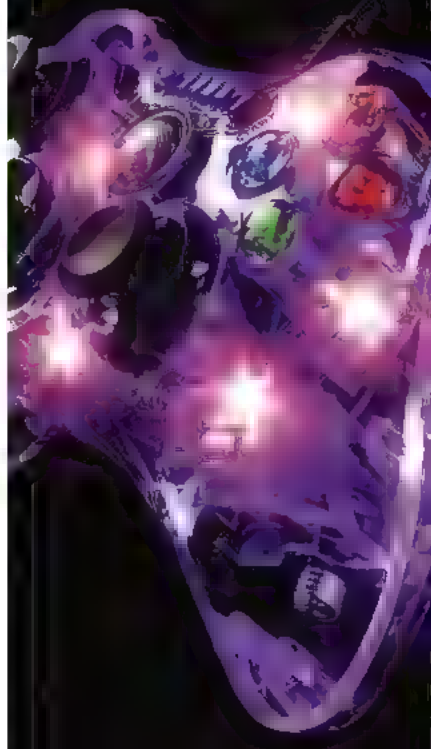
» **Replay Value**
Moderately Low



Remake Or Not?

This is a question that has been asked many times over the years. However, the answer is always the same: No. There is no need for a remake of GoldenEye 007. The game is still one of the best FPS games ever made, and it's still available on the Wii. If you're looking for a new FPS game, look no further than the Wii. There are plenty of other FPS games out there, but none are as good as GoldenEye 007. So, no, there is no need for a remake.

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God of War: Ghost of Sparta

Kratos delivers more epic hand-to-hand action

9.5

PSP

» **Concept**
Another astounding handheld adventure from the team that brought you *Chains of Olympus*

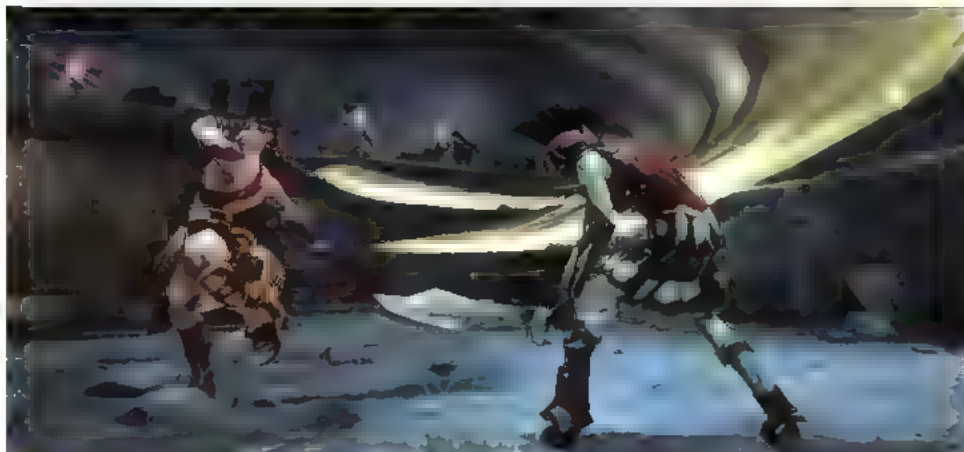
» **Graphics**
I had no idea the PSP was capable of this. The gorgeous visuals, fluid action, and cool cinematics are all impressive

» **Sound**
No surprises here – solid voice work, an epic musical score, and lots of squishy blood sounds

» **Playability**
The shoulder button dodge still makes me wish for another analog stick, but everything else feels great

» **Entertainment**
This is pure *God of War*, but smaller

» **Baywatch Value**
Moderately High



Style 1 Player Action Publisher Sony Computer Entertainment Developer Ready At Dawn Studios Release October 26 ESRB M

Whether he's scaling Titans, traversing the underworld, or killing gods, Kratos is defined by his epic exploits. When Ready at Dawn released *Chains of Olympus* for PSP in 2008, the studio proved that these larger-than-life deeds can be packed onto a small screen while retaining *God of War*'s signature style. Even in light of that accomplishment, *Chains of Olympus* looks like a practice run compared to *Ghost of Sparta*. From the dynamic combat to the cool story, every aspect of this follow-up has been enhanced, creating an experience that is more than just "good for a PSP game." *Ghost of Sparta* is a standout entry in an already amazing franchise.

After appearing in four games spanning three consoles, you'd think Kratos would have run out of ways to keep his repertoire interesting. Instead, *Ghost of Sparta* has some of my favorite combat innovations in the series to date. Like the addition of a fire meter underneath the standard health and magic bars. This ability allows you

to set Kratos' blades ablaze, which deals more damage and plants delayed-blast explosives with certain strikes. Even better, the meter recharges rapidly, so the flames are an ever-present aspect of your strategy. *God of War III* had a similar idea where a bar for items like the fire bow replenished, but the key difference here is that the flames aren't a separate weapon, they are just an augmentation to your normal attacks, which makes it easy and fun to integrate the power into your combos.

The other core fighting mechanics are familiar, but the tweaks go a long way toward improving gameplay. A new run and tackle move makes Kratos feel more brutal and maneuverable than ever, and the spear/shield weapon is a great addition to the arsenal. My biggest complaint and this is a holdover from *Chains of Olympus* is that mapping the evade roll to the two shoulder buttons still feels clunky and unreliable. Also, I found that large enemies, like a cyclops, can block your view of Kratos and smaller foes, making it difficult to see and react to the action in some encounters. However, these are small concerns when weighed against the layers Ready at Dawn has added to the formula.

For all of the blade-singing, *Ghost of Sparta*'s story is what surpassed me the most. Set between the first and second games, the seemingly forgotten prologue about Kratos' brother (featured in the special features of the original *God of War*) takes center stage. I won't ruin anything by going into details, but I was impressed how



connected this storyline feels to the rest of the series. Events that are later referenced in *God of War III*, along with a handful of visual cues (like the design of Kratos' god armor in the second game) make it feel like this adventure was built into the mythology from the beginning.

Ghost of Sparta doesn't have any mind-blowing moments of sheer magnitude like the console entries, but it compensates with a handful of cool special sequences that fill in parts of Kratos' history and character. Watching him train alongside his brother as a child and strut through Sparta as the newly ascended god of war show a side of Kratos that is more than shouting and stabbing. Though the spectacle is obviously diminished when compared to the PS3 entry, *Ghost of Sparta* still amazes with its visual quality and unique contextual sequences that break up the action. If you thought *Chains of Olympus* was pushing the limits of what the PSP could accomplish, you'll be blown away by what Ready at Dawn has done here. This isn't an optional side story; *Ghost of Sparta* is a must-play for *God of War* fans. — Joe Juha





Mario vs. Donkey Kong: Mini-Land Mayhem

Theater of the Puzzles with a twist

Style 1-Player Puzzle Publisher Nintendo Developer NST Release November 14 ESRB E

The Mario vs. Donkey Kong franchise isn't up there with the heavy hitters in Nintendo's stable, but it's been a consistently quality puzzle series. Players guide mechanical mini Nintendo characters through a puzzle board to an exit door in a style similar to the classic Lemmings games. Donkey Kong steals away, with something or someone (in this case Parakee from the original DK) and Mario has to go after him with his region of toys.

Once you start up a Mini Mario, it keeps moving until you clear the puzzle in MvDK 2 you'd have to swipe them to move, flick up to jump, and tap on them to make them stop. Now you can count on them to perform these actions themselves, and it makes a big difference in how much more in control you feel. Another great move is the switch to stretchy steel grids, allowing you to effortlessly draw lines between platforms instead of tapping an unreliable grid. This also allows for better boss battles against DK in which you build platforms to get minis up to the mischievous gorilla so they can electrocute or drop bombs on him. It's nice to play battles with the main mechanics rather than a weird cannon minigame like in MvDK 2 (though the cannon does return briefly).

The main career mode isn't all that difficult. I never found myself racking my brains for a puzzle solution. Getting from point A to B is quite straightforward, but figuring out how to quickly grab every pickup scattered throughout the board can be tricky. Guess it's good that a casual player can get through easily while the puzzle expert can try to see every thing and then unlock the many bonus stages. Fortunately, there is a plus mode for puzzle pros that allows you to go

through all the stages over again with the added difficulty of getting minis through the door in a specific order.

Level creation and sharing returns, improving on the advancements made in Minis March Again on DS. You can store up to 180 levels that you or other creators have made (including plenty from Nintendo itself). Scanning through stages is easy and you can download one in seconds and start playing it. After completing the stage you can rate or even decide to "follow" the creator to keep track of his or her future levels. There's also a weekly challenge from Nintendo in which players are given a template of limited objects to create something unique. This endless stream of player levels mixed with plenty of unlockable stages will keep MvDK fans busy for quite a while. — Bryan Vore



8.25

DS

- » **Concept**
Streamline the puzzle mechanics from MvDK 2 and build upon some concepts from last year's DS-only entry Minis March Again.
- » **Graphics**
The wind-up minifigures are as cute as ever. Look out for the new Mini Pauline.
- » **Sound**
A great mix of new songs and reuses of old Mario tunes.
- » **Playability**
The focus on manipulating the environment rather than controlling ivory minis action is quite welcome.
- » **Entertainment**
While this leans a little towards the easy side, constantly changing gimmicks keep it interesting.
- » **Replay Value**
Moderately High.

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Are You a Naughty or Nice Gamer?

The holiday season is upon us, and it's time to contemplate the important things in life. No, not your family, your health, world peace, or any of that stuff – we're talking about presents! Because we here at Game Informer still wholeheartedly and completely believe in Santa Claus (despite what some spreaders of dangerous misinformation – a.k.a. Joe Juba – have been whispering to us), we know that the quality of the loot you receive depends on how naughty and/or nice you've been in the last calendar year. As you might expect, Santa pays particular attention to your gaming-related behavior. Take this quiz to find out whether you're a naughty or nice gamer, and what kind of present you can expect under the tree this year.

1. Where do you get your games?

- A big box retailer
- A specialty game store
- I download pirated games
- A classmate's locker

2. A teammate steals your kill. Do you:

- Sarcastically congratulate them on their mad skills in voice chat
- Grumble to yourself and continue on
- Quit in a fit of rage
- Shoot them in the back of the head and teabag their corpse, score be damned

3. Who do like best: Shadow the Hedgehog, Silver the Hedgehog, or Sonic the Werehog?

4. Do you send out Farmville invites on Facebook?

5. Two part question: a) Have you ever cheated in a Gamerscore contest with a co-worker, then called it off after you got caught (and it was clear you were going to lose anyway)? b) Is your name Dan Ryckert? Answer Yes or No.

6. An NPC is giving an important speech, do you:

- Listen intently
- Mercilessly pistol whip the NPC

- Tweet on your iPhone
- Go to the kitchen for a new bag of Cheetos

7. Does your Xbox Live Gamertag include any of the following: "cccc", "69", "420", or "666"?

8. In your gaming career how many controllers have you broken?

- 0
- 1-3
- 3-7
- More than 7

9. Who's your favorite classic Nintendo character?

- Mario
- Wario
- Luigi
- Waluigi

10. An enemy drops some loot in Borderlands, you:

- Take more for yourself, but still leave some good stuff for your buddies
- Dole it out to your party based on the greater good of the team
- Steal all the loot, then kill your teammates

Scorecard

Add up all points. Individual point scores are awarded for each answer.

- A-1, B-1, C-1, D-6
- A-2, B-1, C-3, D-5
- Trick question! If you like any of these characters award yourself 10 points
- If you answered "Yes," add 10 points. If "No," subtract 1 point
- A) If you answered "Yes," add 10 points. B) If you answered "Yes," add 1,000 points
- A-1, B-6, C-10, D-3
- If you answered yes, add 10 points to your score. Also, *seriously* take a look at yourself in the mirror. Is this how you want to spend your life?
- A-0, B-3, C-6, D-8
- A-1, B-5, C-4, D-1,000
- A-4, B-1, C-7

Results

4 Points – The Nicest

You are such a good [boy/girl/transgender person]. Santa is so impressed with you, he took the best year's worth of those fancy new thin LED HDTVs and the game system of your dreams.

5-9 points – Pretty Darn Good

You're not perfect, but who is? Either way, Santa still thinks you're pretty. In fact, he brought you a sackful of all this year's hottest game releases.

10-19 – Okay, But You're Pushing It

In honor of your middle-of-the-road behavior, Santa's giving you the world's great noncommittal present – a gift certificate!

20-29 – Watch It, Buddy

Santa's onto you! Don't even think about trying it. Here, take this GBA. No, not the good GBA, the original one where the screen wasn't even backlit.

30+ Problem Child

You got a 30? Listen punk, Santa shouldn't give you anything, but since he's such a nice guy here are some random back issues of Top Cow's Tomb Raider comic book.

1000+ Okay, WTF, Kid?

WHAT??! 1000??? Forget about presents, be glad Santa doesn't call the cops!

2000+ STOP! PUT YOUR HANDS ABOVE YOUR HEAD!

You are Dan Ryckert. Do not move. We have already called the authorities. Any sudden movement will be interpreted as a hostile action.

SMASH HIT.

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