

GAME INFORMER

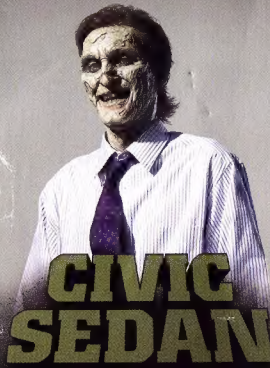




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ANDY McNAMARA
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
andy@gameinformer.com

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The Art of the First Level

I've known many a great developer over my time at *Game Informer*, so sadly I can't remember exactly who I should attribute this sage advice to (if I had to guess, it would be design legend Mark Cerny), but I'll try to paraphrase it to the best of my ability.

Make every other level in a game, then make your first level once you have mastered all the nuances of your design and completely understand the essence of your game experience, as the first level sets the table for everything to come. As the cliché states, "There is only one chance at a first impression."

This statement comes from the late '90s in the age of PlayStation, when games still had "levels" and triple-A game development didn't require months – if not years – of preproduction. The particulars of the message may not entirely align with today's high-budget products, but the main thrust of it is still relevant, and I can't imagine a day when the lesson doesn't have value.

The art of the first level most certainly isn't lost, but I believe the demands of big-publisher marketing and a desire to have "mass appeal" in a world of casual gamers, have created an environment where opening scenes aren't an introduction to a world where gamers can discover and explore, but a series of tutorial exercises that far too often bore or handhold to an absurd degree.

When *Halo* first had me look up or down to set whether inversion was true or false, I gasped at how such a simple idea had escaped video game creation for so many years. It was an elegant solution to address a jarring mechanic like game settings in a subtle way so that gamers never had to break narrative or exit the world in those crucial beginning moments when a gamer is birthed into his or her new pixelated paradise.

It's been over a decade since that eureka moment, yet games still have a love affair with explaining every X, triangle, or red button; driven home in a series of mundane tasks bulging with jarring instruction boxes or insipid dialogue.

I love that gaming has gone mainstream, but are gamers now considered so dumb that we can't be left to our own means to find and discover the powers that the circle button or left trigger can unleash? Is opening a door or jumping over a chasm that difficult of a concept to grasp?

Don't get me wrong, some developers out there are getting it right, but far too many get it wrong. Until the gaming industry finds a better way to bring games to life and engage the gamer in those opening moments, we will always be cutting the game experience short from the very second we hit start.

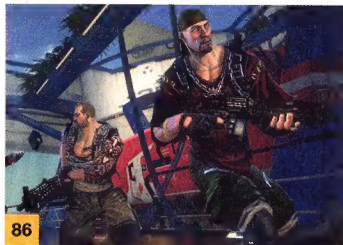
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Darksiders II

The horseman Death rallies to avenge his brother's honor in this follow up to *Vigil*'s breakout hit, *Darksiders*. In this sequel the overworld is more expansive, the side quests are more varied, and a detailed loot system will have players constantly on the hunt for new ways to improve their hero.

by Ben Reeves



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Final Fantasy XIII-2



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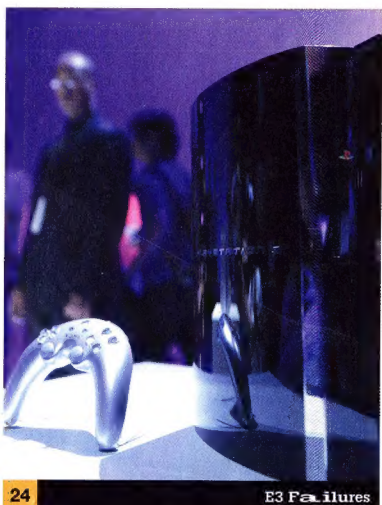
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Commander Shepard's dreamy hunkiness, the ever-popular military FPS genre, and Rift's MMO charms are hot topics with our readers this month.

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Get a full-color, two-page sneak peek at one of the art pieces picked as an Into the Pixel winner this year, from a little studio called Valve.

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Do you want to learn things about BioShock Infinite and Modern Warfare 3? Yes, yes you do.

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Sometimes, sequels are uninspired cash-in products. Other times, they're amped-up expansions of an already-great idea. Infamous fans should be happy with the direction Sucker Punch chose. **by Andrew Reiner**

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Some of gaming's greatest luminaries have surprising passions outside of the industry they help shape.



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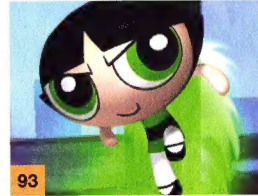


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Game Over



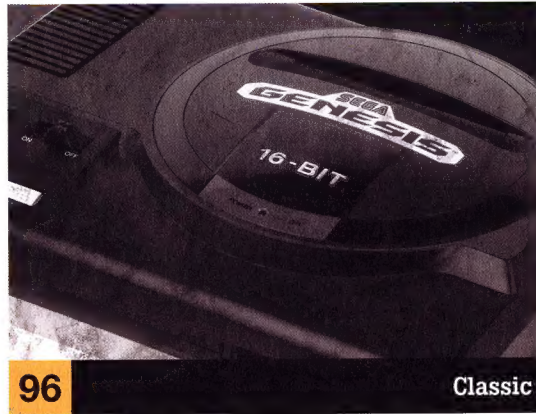
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Classic

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This month in Feedback, readers discuss the role of mobile gaming in the industry, select their favorite military first-person shooters, praise Rift's differences from WoW, and lament the ill-timed release of Portal 2 (for some, anyway).

A Commanding Cover

I just wanted to say kudos to whoever did issue 217's Mass Effect 3 cover art. I looked like Ralph getting his first Red Rider BB gun as my mom handed me the latest issue. I caught a glimpse of Commander Shepard at first, then turned the issue around to reveal an enormous fleet of Reapers ravaging Earth. Of course, Commander Shepard does not even look scared.

**Christian
Farmington, IA**

I wanted to say how happy I was to see the May cover of Game Informer, featuring the sexiest video game character ever, Commander Shepard. Not only am I an extreme fan of the ME series, but I was blown away at what me and my friends are calling the sexiest Game Informer cover ever! Yes, I have a crush on Commander Shepard and I am not embarrassed to say so.

**Christina Wedzik
Hemet, CA**

You might want to take a cold shower, Christina. BioWare recently announced that Mass Effect 3 has been delayed into early 2012, so you'll have a few more months before you're reunited with your hunky hero. If the promise of a better final game doesn't get you through the extra wait, just remember that distance makes the heart grow fonder – even if your dream guy is fictional.

On The Brink

F--- you guys. I love ya'll so much and truly take your reviews and info to heart. But when the May issue of GI arrived at my house and I looked at the cover and saw Mass Effect instead of Brink, I was heartbroken. I know you guys have certain requirements for the games you cover, but there has to be something ya'll could include about Brink. Either way, keep up the good work!

**Chris Dixon
Achille, OK**

Contact Us

feedback@gameinformer.com

I've been a subscriber since April, and I've only had one disappointment so far. I'm sure I'm one of the 10 people in America who is really excited for the release of Brink, and every month I've looked forward to any new information about the game. So far I've only seen a huge ad for it, and I would really love more on it before I buy it. Are you guys planning anything? Anyways, keep up the good work!

Trevor Dickson
Syracuse, UT

We have to hand it to Brink fans: At least they're polite. If you want to see how Brink stacks up to the other shooters on the market, check out our review on page 86.

Broken Record

I just want you to know that you four guys setting the Guinness World Record for the longest gaming marathon (Game Informer Editors Smash Their Way Into The Record Books, issue 217) has inspired me. Three of my friends and I are going to attempt to play Zombies mode on Black Ops for 42 hours straight. I just wanted you to know that you inspired me!

Jonathan Weldin
Cove City, NC

Congratulations on making your way into Guinness. That said, you are an insult to gamers everywhere. When gamers endeavor to accomplish epic feats of endurance and skill, they should fuel themselves with Cool Ranch Doritos, M&Ms, and Hot Pockets -- not strawberries, which you can clearly see on a blue plate on the ottoman. So, why strawberries?

Alexis Italia
Omaha, NE

Even the most hardcore gamers can succumb to scurvy, Alexis. But fear not: Despite a nutritious snack or two along the way, our quartet ate more than their share of junk food during the marathon. Seriously, it was disgusting.

Yep, You're A Weirdo

Maybe you guys can answer a question for me. All my friends make fun of me and call me a weirdo because I use an inverted control

scheme while playing shooting games. Does this make me a gaming weirdo, or are my friends just idiots and a lot of people use inverted controls? Oh, and Ben should be promoted to God. He is the greatest!

Randy Pullen
Rio Vista, TX

While inverted controls have become less popular over the years (you're not piloting an airplane, after all), using them doesn't make you a weirdo -- thinking Ben is the greatest does.

A Breed Apart

Obviously, Rovio executive Peter Vesterbacka's comment that "consoles are really a dying breed" (The Big Questions, issue 217) proves that he doesn't play video games. I understand his defense of his company's game, but mobile games are still casual experiences. The power afforded to consoles and PCs allows developers to create fully realized worlds that draw the player in and make them feel like they are part of the story. While Angry Birds may be fun and popular, mobile games are far from reaching the level of immersion and player interaction that consoles and PCs allow. I doubt any one of those players feels a personal connection to the birds they're flinging into buildings.

Aaron Bass
via email

We received more than a few letters from readers upset over Vesterbacka's comments, and while we agree that consoles aren't going anywhere soon, there's no denying that mobile games fill a void that consoles and traditional handhelds don't. Hardcore gamers may scoff at the trivial nature of mobile games, but as long as they entertain players in a way larger experiences don't, they will remain important to the future of gaming.

Respect For Rift

I thoroughly enjoyed reading Adam Blessener's "Rift's Compelling Case For Your MMO Allegiance" article (issue 217). The element that stuck out most was his candid point of view. It's apparent that he was not influenced by the

massive amounts of money WoW has made, or the millions of players currently subscribing. Most articles I read make a point to mention out-of-game elements that make WoW better than other games, but Adam stuck to the bare-bone gaming facts, and I applauded his honest approach.

Matthew Porter
Orange, CA



I have to say your article on Rift is one of the best I've read in a long time. I played World of Warcraft for many years and just stopped this month due to the lack of content in Cataclysm. I have to agree I enjoyed the game and the new content when it came out, but after three or four months of play, the game seemed to be the same thing over and over. As for Rift, I just started playing and while it does take some getting used to, overall your article was right on the money. Joining with other players is what makes it fun, and despite the fact that I'm a noob, I have yet to be kicked or told to leave. I'm not sure how long Rift will hold me and I may even go back to WoW sometime in the future, but for now Rift is a solid game, and I would tell anyone who is tired of the grind in WoW to give it a try.

Ray Duarte
Dubuque, IA

Short Answers to Readers' Burning Questions

"Is it just me, or did you guys just reuse a whole bunch of stuff for the May issue that you had used in a previous issue?"

It's you.

"How do you spell Claire McCaskill's name?"

Claire McCaskill.

"Can I get a Ben Reeves shirt to show my friends how cool I am?"

Nice try, Ben.

Patently False:

Several readers wrote in claiming that sexually explicit player cards in Black Ops are protected by the U.S. Constitution. They are not.

Quantified!

Of the continued letters we received this month regarding the casting of the Uncharted movie, the majority nominated Drake's voice actor, Nolan North, as their favored candidate.

Worst News Tip Of The Month:

"Dear gameinformer I figured out finally how to email you guys for feedback yessss."



(Left) Ben was at his coolest while sipping drinks with Activision's Vanessa Vanassin, Beenox's Mathieu Tremblay, and Activision's Kevin Umbrecht inside of an ice castle in Quebec. **(Right)** He was less cool when confronted with the waitresses of Austin's Bone Daddy's House of Smoke restaurant.

CANDID PHOTOS FROM THE VIDEO GAME INDUSTRY



GI SPY
continued on page 8

On Your Mind



Favorite Military FPS

In issue 217, we asked readers what their favorite military FPS franchise is. After discounting the fans who answered Halo (that's a sci-fi shooter, not military), the results were clear. Despite most readers assuming CoD would easily win, Battlefield received more votes than any other franchise. Here are some of the responses.

I think it is obvious that Call Of Duty is the best FPS franchise of all time. Every Call Of Duty is better than the one before it. Awesome graphics, easy controls, amazing campaign stories, and an unbelievable multiplayer experience are just a few of the many reasons that I buy every Call Of Duty game as soon as it comes out.

Matthew Prestage

No contest. Brothers In Arms has one of the best video game story lines I've ever experienced, and some of the best gameplay as well. All the other tactical shooters I've played have been clunky and slow, but BIA made it smooth and easy to control. On top of that the in-game maps are made directly from photos, old maps, and the developers visiting real locations. Awe-inspiring detail mixed with characters I actually want to know, and great gameplay put BIA above all other competitors.

Jack Lynch

There is a developer that captures war in such an incandescent way that I have been enraptured for countless hours. Their power comes from scale. Planes flying overhead, strafing and bombing; tanks rolling across massive deserts; snipers pulling off headshots from what seems like miles away; paratroopers landing behind enemy bases wreaking havoc; houses and buildings collapsing with any notion of cover being demolished as you sprint away. War was never brought so close to home, and we owe it all to DICE. Competitors make great games, but Battlefield is a step above all the others.

Alex Xi

Question Of The Month:

Which do you prefer: competitive multiplayer or co-op, and why?

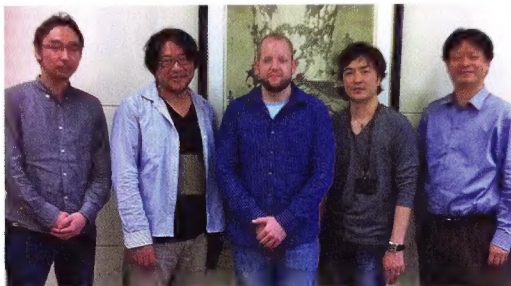


Too Cool For School?

I think it would be fair to say that a good chunk of Portal fans are college students, like myself. Do you think it is really fair of Valve to release Portal 2 right before college finals? I want to be able to enjoy the game without having to sacrifice my grades. I understand that a certain amount of self control is required in these situations, and I'm holding off until the end of the semester to play the game at all. But at the same time, I feel like Valve is being inconsiderate to their customers with Portal 2's release date. Do you guys think that game publishers should keep things like school schedules in mind when setting release dates?

Jake Summers
West Chester, PA

Publishers have enough financial and scheduling demands to worry about without throwing your finals into the mix. On the bright side, if your professor grades on a curve, then you should benefit from all the Portal 2 fans that lacked your self control. Unless your college course involves portal technology, in which case you're probably screwed.



[Left] Tim poses with Square Enix's Yuusuke Matsui, Isamu Kamikokuryo, Motomu Toriyama, and Yoshinori Kitase during his recent trip to Japan to see FF XIII-2. [Right] Tim also had his picture taken with a life-sized Cactuar - they didn't have the heart to tell him that it's not real...

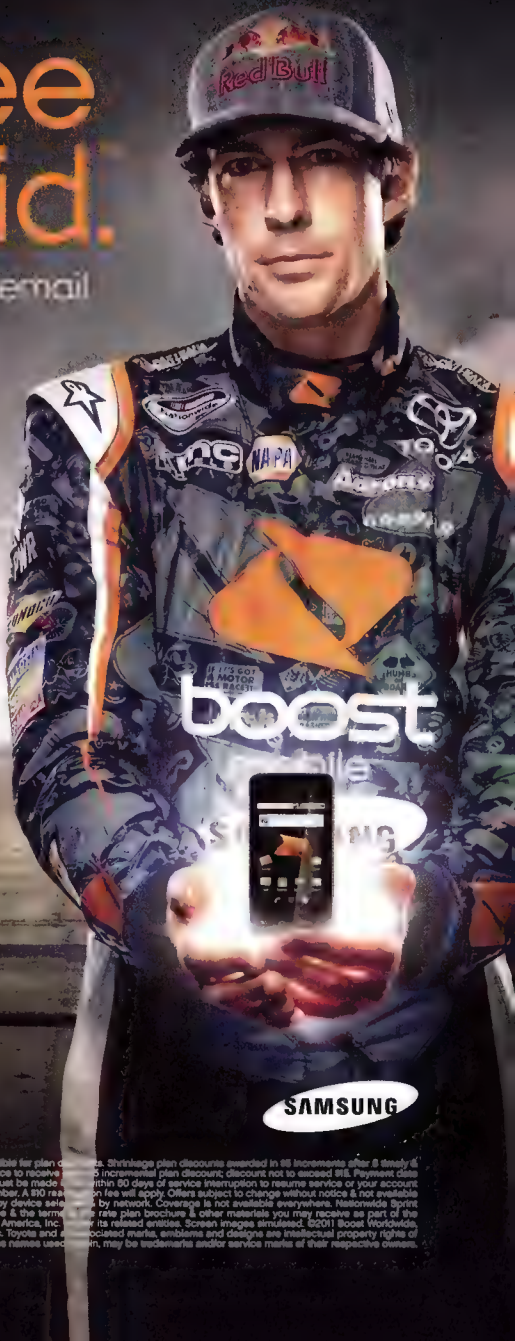
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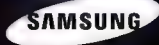
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Enter the Game Informer Reader Art Contest. All you need to do is draw, paint, scratch, spit, or carve the best darn art you can think of and send it to us. Please include your name, phone number, and return address. If you're the monthly winner, we'll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



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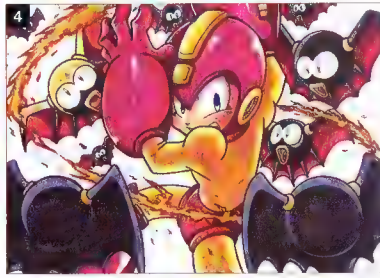
WINNER 1 Madeline Rauch - I don't remember Amaterasu laying eggs in Okami, but I'd imagine they'd be at least this cool if she did
2 Frankie Perez If you're going to go on a stroll through the woods, the forest full of man-eating trees probably isn't your best option
3 Nicole Greer Journey is about two monks trying to stand on top of a tower the longest so they can win a Jeep Grand Cherokee
4 Lamar Wells As he grows older, Mega Man's mission is less about killing robot masters and more about keeping bats out of his pantry



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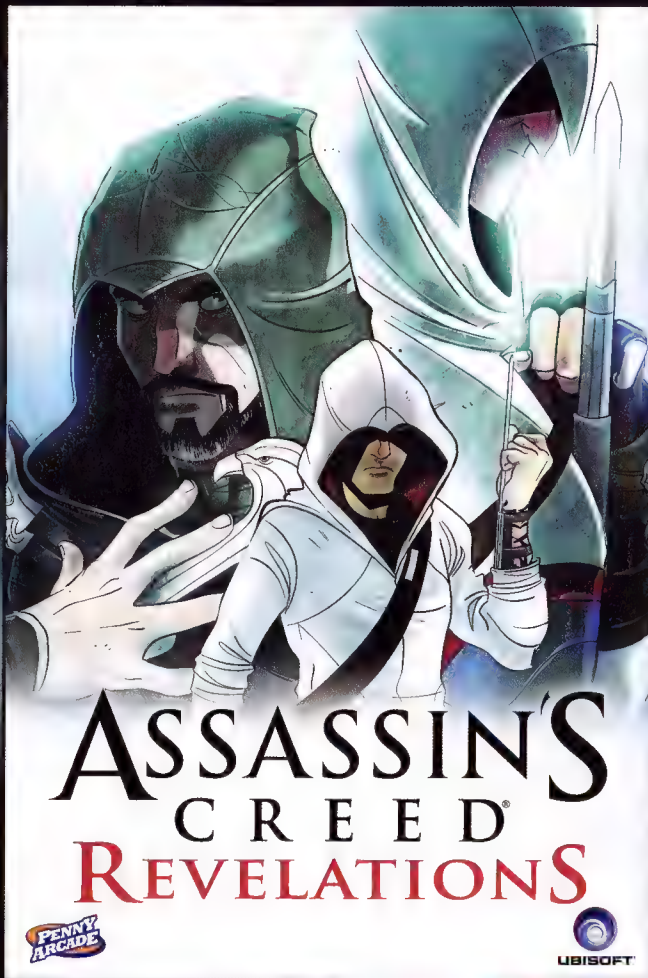
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(Left) Annette enjoys the francophone life with Ubisoft's Sarah Irvin and Rayman Origins team members Michel Ancel, Céline Teller, and Loïc Gounon. (Middle) Readers Chance Gibbs, Jerry Wang, and Ben Garringer toured the GI offices after placing the winning bids on our Play for Japan charity auctions. Thanks for helping out, guys! (Right) Adam hangs out with Twins catcher and MLB 11: The Show cover model Joe Mauer.



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UBISOFT

Disaster Report:

*PSN's Problems Could Be
Just the Beginning*

by Matthew Kato

NOTABLES

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For 25 consecutive days starting on April 19, Sony's PlayStation Network was shut down due to what the company calls an "external intrusion." Millions of gamers worldwide were deprived of the network's services, and the possibility of users' account and credit card info being stolen – and Sony's response to the situation – created widespread fear and anger. Currently Sony doesn't know who was behind the attack, but the damage has already been done.

Since nobody has claimed direct responsibility for the attack, the exact motives for the security breach remain unclear. Perhaps it was simply thievery. Or maybe the deeds espoused by the internet collective Anonymous against Sony created critical momentum for what culminated in PSN's outage. In the past, Anonymous has attacked the websites of major credit card companies and opponents of WikiLeaks over general freedom of speech principles. The group even destroyed data and posted company emails of security firm HBGary Federal after its CEO Aaron Barr threatened to "name and shame" some of Anonymous' top leaders. Anonymous has denied responsibility for the PSN attack, but since it's an organization that anyone can join, there is no way of knowing if members were involved.

Operation Sony

Back on April 4, Anonymous launched Operation Sony, which caused disruptions to some parts of PSN's service and denial of service attacks to PlayStation.com and other company websites. Anonymous also called for supporters to protest at their local Sony stores (which was a dud), and there were reports that members disseminated info on the families of Sony executives

Jack Tretton and Howard Stringer.

Anonymous executed Operation Sony for what it felt was Sony overstepping its bounds in suing George "GeoHot" Hotz and other hackers who cracked open the system so it could run homebrew applications by restoring the OtherOS feature (which allowed PS3 owners to run Linux) that had been removed for the PS3 slim redesign and from older models by a firmware update. Hotz discovered and distributed the PlayStation 3 root key. The root key tells the system what code is authentic, and therefore opens the console to homebrew development and piracy.

On January 27, Sony won a temporary restraining order against Hotz, fail0verflow (the group who originally opened the console), and others, and the following month it demanded that YouTube hand over Hotz's account info and usernames and IP addresses on anyone who posted or published comments on his videos on the root key. Sony also sought the fail0verflow team's personal info from Twitter. Funnyly enough, Sony itself disseminated the root key information when someone handling the Kevin Butler account accidentally re-tweeted the code back to the world.

Anonymous believes that Sony's courtroom maneuvers to try and silence Hotz's and other hackers' work on the console, as well as track those who went to Hotz's website, were "an unforgivable offense against free speech and Internet freedom," according to a statement from the group in its Anon News website.

Although Sony argued that it feared the potential piracy that opening up the system could bring, Anonymous sees this as an unalienable right of the console's owners. "Your corrupt business practices are indicative of a corporate philosophy that would deny consumers the right to use products they have paid for, and rightfully own, in the manner of their choosing. Perhaps you should alert your customers to the fact that they are apparently only renting your products?"



An 'External Intrusion'

By mid-April, Operation Sony was over and Sony and Hotz settled their case out of court. However, on April 19 four PSN servers in San Diego rebooted unexpectedly and were taken offline by Sony. The next day six more were compromised. It was at this time that Sony pulled the plug on PSN, and Kaz Hirai -- in a letter to Congress -- said that it had "the first credible indications that an intruder had been in the PlayStation Network systems." The company brought in waves of forensic teams to uncover

the full scope of the breach (which also included Sony Online Entertainment's servers), and by April 25 they identified that user's personal data for the 77 million PSN and Qriocity accounts had been taken. There also was the chance that credit card data was extracted from the 12.3 million accounts that had cards attached to them (of which 5.6 million were in the U.S.).

In the ensuing days after the initial April 19 discovery, Sony maintained that PSN was down, but it wasn't until April 22 when Patrick Seybold, senior director of corporate communications and social media, posted on Sony's official PlayStation blog that an "external intrusion" of the network had occurred, that the world began to understand the seriousness of the situation. Finally, on April 26, Seybold posted that users' credit card info may have been accessed. The info was encrypted and Sony didn't have evidence that card data was taken, but it also couldn't rule it out. Thankfully, it turned out that there were not major reports of major credit card fraud because of the attack. Seybold said that the company expected to have some services restored within a week.

Gamers were angry at Sony's silence and that it took the company until April 26 to notify customers that their card data may have been compromised. Connecticut senator Richard Blumenthal sent a letter to Sony of America president and CEO Jack Tretton questioning the company's handling of the crisis (he would later commend Sony on its response), and soon a class action lawsuit was filed in California. Both Hotz and Anonymous denied they were behind the attack, but due to the amorphous nature of Anonymous, nobody could know for sure.



In the beginning of May, Hirai told the world that parts of the service would be up by the end of the month in a worldwide phased restoration, and he also outlined a "Welcome Back" program (see sidebar for more) for PS3 owners when the service resumes. It wouldn't be until two weeks later on May 14 that parts of PSN would come back online.

"They are going to continue to get worse."

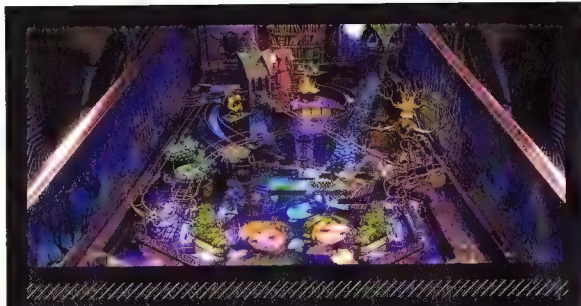
Despite the resumption of service and Sony's claims of increased security for the network, things weren't 100 percent smooth. The multitude of user's password reset requests jammed the system, the Japanese government halted the return of the service pending further assurances and information from Sony (which still hasn't happened as of the time of this writing), and there was even a password reset exploit that was briefly active that could allow a third party to block an original user from their account.

We talked to Eugene Spafford, chair of the USACM (U.S. Association for Computing Machinery – a policy council for the government and public in matters of information technology), who testified in front of a congressional subcommittee about data theft and the PSN situation. "These kinds of problems, these breaches and exposures," Spafford said, "aren't going to go away. They are going to continue to happen, and they are going to continue to get worse."

Spafford says that Sony "shouldn't necessarily be condemned that it took a few days for them to notify their customers," and overall thought that the company's response was "a classic example of trying to make a good-faith response without having a plan in place."

Different companies have security of varying effectiveness, and sometimes this comes down to money and a desire to understand the importance of security. "Security is a process," he told us, "and it doesn't really lead to increased sales or increased bottom line. It's an expense that you have to have on an ongoing basis, and that isn't very well understood in many environments. If you invest X more on security, you don't see that translated into Y more dollars in your bottom line."

Spafford wasn't aware of the exact status of Sony's security at the time of the attack (and Sony declined to talk to us for this article), but there may be evidence that Sony should have



Zen Studios' Sorcerer's Lair DLC for Zen Pinball was one of the games whose release was disrupted by the PSN hack. At the time of the writing, Zen Studios' vice president of marketing, Mel Kirk, says the company is working with Sony to get it released.

"We don't know if people are still excited."

Sony isn't the only one who's paid a price for the breach. New games out at the time like Portal 2, Mortal Kombat, and Sony's own MotorStorm Apocalypse and SOCOM 4 froze games out of their multiplayer while the outage persisted. Sony says that it expects the breach to cost the company over \$170 million through March of 2012, although Forbes Magazine estimates that the attack could cost Sony more than \$24 billion in the long term.

One of the companies directly affected was Marvel Pinball developer Zen Studios, which was preparing to release the

Sorcerer's Lair DLC for PSN's Zen Pinball when the outage occurred. Mel Kirk, vice president of marketing for Zen Studios, told us that the company found out about the security breach like everyone else did, and it was only days after the story broke that Sony contacted the developer. Even then Sony didn't provide new details on the matter, and as of the time of this writing the two sides were still talking about what comes next.

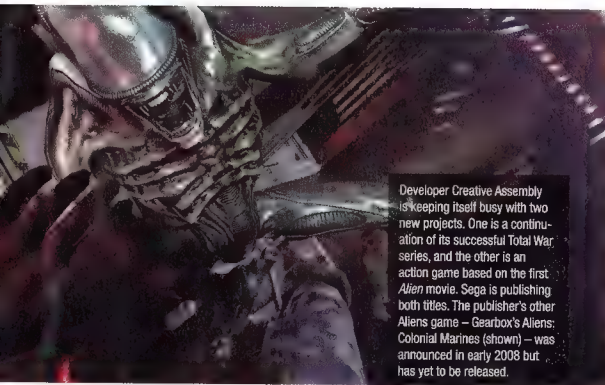
The damage to Zen Studios and other companies is incalculable, but Kirk said that its Sorcerer's Lair DLC may have lost something critical: momentum. Marketing efforts were put forth and the game was at "peak awareness" before the crash. "All that work becomes null and void," said Kirk, "and we don't know if people are still excited." Kirk is unaware if Zen's licensing agreement with Sony offers any recourse, but he told us that Zen is asking for additional promotion from Sony such as dashboard placement or being highlighted in possible product spotlights.

Despite the breach's collateral damage to Zen, Kirk thinks Sony is a great partner and believes the new security measures it is putting in place will work. In fact, Kirk said he wasn't surprised this occurred – a sentiment echoed by many, and a cold, hard observation that may reflect the reality we've been living in for years and which will persist for the foreseeable future. "This could have happened to Nintendo, it could have happened to Microsoft. It happens all the time on PC." ♦

Free Games a Part of Sony's Welcome Back

Sony has outlined its Welcome Back program, which goes into effect once the network is fully restored – which includes getting the PlayStation Store up and running.

- Two free PlayStation 3 games (*Dead Nation*, *InFamous*, *Little Big Planet*, *Super Stardust HD*, *Wipeout HD + Fury*)
 - Two free PSP games (*Little Big Planet PSP*, *ModNation Racers*, *Pursuit Force*, *Klonoa Liberation*)
 - Free movie rentals via the video service over one weekend (titles to be announced)
 - 30-day free PlayStation Plus membership for non-members, an additional 90 days for existing members
 - 100 virtual items for Home Users and additional free content such as an addition to the Home mansion and Obbleg's Alien Casino game
 - Free 30 days for existing Music Unlimited Premium Trial subscribers
 - Free 30 days and lost time for existing members of the Music Unlimited Premium/Basic subscribers
 - PlayStation Network users can also enroll in Debi's AllClear ID Plus Identity theft program for free for a year
- Users have until June 18th to sign up for the program.



Developer Creative Assembly is keeping itself busy with two new projects. One is a continuation of its successful Total War series, and the other is an action game based on the first *Alien* movie. Sega is publishing both titles. The publisher's other Aliens game — Gearbox's *Aliens: Colonial Marines* (shown) — was announced in early 2008 but has yet to be released.

Good

Sony is bringing PSP classics to the PS3 via the PSP Remaster series. As the name implies, the games will be augmented for the console with additional content, new control schemes, HD graphics, cross-platform save swapping, and more. The first title announced in the series — for Japan, at any rate — is *Monster Hunter Portable 3rd*. No word on what games will come out in the States, but you have to believe that either *God of War* PSP game, whether that's *Chains of Olympus*, *Ghost of Sparta*, or both, will be a part of the series.



the Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

news with a sarcastic spin

Bad



We're as excited as anyone to hear reports that there will be a new *Alan Wake* title from developer Remedy, but it's too bad that it's not going to be a full retail release. XBLAfans.com has said that *Alan Wake: Night Springs* will be an XBLA-only title when it comes out at some undisclosed time in the future.



Square Enix posted a financial loss of 12 billion yen (almost \$150 million) due to factors including cancelled games (like *Gun Loco*), the Japanese earthquake/tsunami, and a "rapidly changing operating environment." Our tip to help the company: Release some of the 53 different *Final Fantasy* offshoots you've had in development for years. Or *Kingdom Hearts III*.



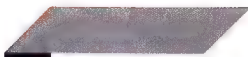
Test Drive Unlimited 2 developer Eden Studios staged a symbolic one-day strike to protest Atari's "mismanagement" and layoff of over 62 percent of Eden's 80-person workforce. Eden claims that Atari's recovery scenarios for previous cuts haven't come to pass, and claims the Atari brass "get rich despite financial difficulties."

In other unfortunate Atari news, the company is selling off *Champions Online* developer Cryptic in a move it says is part of a larger strategy to shift away from in-house developers and move toward casual online and mobile games.

Ugly



Even after some of the PlayStation Network services came back online, Sony was involved in another embarrassing security situation. For a short time, an exploitable URL problem with the password reset page on its website allowed a person to change another user's password and freeze out the original owner. Sony quickly fixed the page. It's unknown if it ever led to any real problems, but chalk it up as another PR blow to the company.



"We reported in a week. You're telling me my week wasn't fast enough?"

— Sony CEO Howard

Stringer defends his company's response to the PSN meltdown (see page 12 for more).



NOS

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Most Anticipated Games at E3



Uncharted 3: Drake's Deception



Battlefield 3



The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim



Mass Effect 3

drinkNOS.com

Games

Agent 47's New Assignment

IO Interactive hones in on Hitman's instincts

There have been lots of teases and viral marketing for the new Hitman game, and thankfully developer IO Interactive and Square Enix have put us out of our suspenseful misery by officially announcing Hitman: Absolution for the PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, and PC.

The game doesn't have an official release date yet, but in our brief look at a demo for Absolution, it seems to be on the right track in capturing the true power of Agent 47. One of the new gameplay elements is Instinct. When Agent 47 performs stealth kills, hides bodies, etc. he earns Instinct, which can be spent to do things like see guard search patterns, hear people's thoughts, or blend in. Blending in is different than just wearing a disguise, because you'll see Agent 47 perform actions like talking on a phone or using a computer in order to hide in plain sight and do more than just stand around in a disguise.

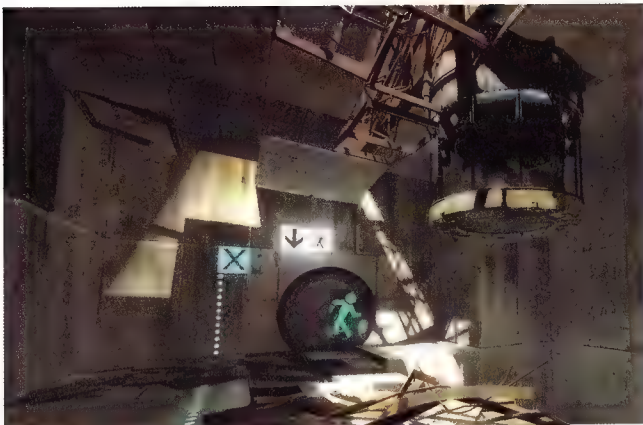
The demo showed all manner of gruesome ends for an entire squad of guards, including death by garrote wire, pulling foes off of ledges, choking, breaking necks with a baton, and using Instinct to orchestrate Red Dead Redemption-type shootouts where you tag multiple targets before you take them down.

Game director Tore Blystad says the game is a blend of new features like Instinct as well as classic Hitman elements. "For the first time we are taking Agent 47 on a personal journey which allows us to explore other parts of the Hitman fantasy. This is both a familiar and yet significantly different experience from other Hitman games; something our silent assassins will relish, as will all those new to the Hitman world."





HIGH PERFORMANCE ENERGY DRINK



Portal 2

No one knew what to expect when the original Portal released as part of The Orange Box in 2007. That all changed when players got their hands on one of the most humorous, endearing, and imaginative titles in gaming history. Expectations ran high for Valve's follow up, so in the aftermath of its release we probed the renowned developer about brainstorming Portal 2's new mechanics, keeping the series' humor fresh, and answering what happened to Pneumatic Diversity Vents.

When you guys first started conceptualizing Portal 2, you considered making a game without GLaDOS or portals. Was Cave Johnson intended to be the replacement for GLaDOS?
Erik Wolpaw (writer): It's true! The game was going to take place at Aperture in the 1950s, before GLaDOS came online. Cave Johnson would have been the antagonist, and the portal mechanic was going to be replaced with something we'd codenamed "F-Stop."

Chet Faliszek (writer): Since we never throw away good ideas, we aren't giving out any real details on F-Stop.

What is your writing process like? We can't imagine you sitting in a sterile conference room banging your heads together to come up with jokes. Do you have weird movie marathons or do anything else for comedic inspiration?

Faliszek: There are three of us that sit in the writing room — Erik Wolpaw, Jay Pinkerton and myself. We sit in a room together and spend countless hours needing each other. One of us always has a new sore spot the others can pick on for what ends up being your comedic enjoyment.

Jay Pinkerton (writer): Mostly it's Chet and Erik needing me. I'm the new guy on the writing team, so I get to be the de facto muse for

hilariously well-timed insults. Another aspect of our process? Lots and lots of walks. Any time we'd get blocked on a scene, we'd walk around Bellevue, Washington until inspiration struck. If you work in Bellevue and you've seen three guys walking around yelling at each other about space spheres and potatoes, that was us. If you saw us suddenly stop walking and race back to an office, that meant we came up with something good. If you saw us hijack a car and floor it back to the office at 100 mph, that meant it was something great.

More so than the first game, Portal 2 separates the story from the puzzles. Was there a reason you intentionally separated the talking from the gameplay?
Jesse Barnett (programmer): Through playtesting we find that players tend to only be able to focus on either the puzzles or the dialogue at one time. When there's dialogue in the middle of a level it either distracts players from solving the puzzle or gets ignored. The dialogue also works as a reward by telling the player when they've successfully progressed. We use dialogue in the middle of chambers when we can clearly show that the rules of the chamber or story are being changed around the player.

GLaDOS was hilarious, but the new characters Wheatley and Cave Johnson practically steal

the show. How much influence did the actors Stephen Merchant and J.K. Simmons have on the development of those characters?

Wolpaw: Stephen was great at improvising around the script, we gave him. Also, we wrote the dialogue with both actors' voices in our heads, so in that sense they had a huge influence.

Pinkerton: As for J.K. Simmons, he didn't improve much from the page. But he didn't have to, since we'd written the part specifically for him, pretty much as a love letter to his performance and acting style.

Earlier in the game's development, you showed off some videos featuring the Pneumatic Diversity Vents — giant tubes that sucked up every item in their path. Why was that feature cut from the game? Can we expect to see Pneumatic Diversity Vents in DLC under the roof?

Barnett: Pneumatic Diversity Vents looked promising at first, but ended up being a dead end in terms of puzzle design. It didn't have any interesting interactions with Hard Light Bridges, Thermal Discouragement Beams, or really any of the other game mechanics. It was sad to see it go, because it looked so cool in videos, but the reality is that it wasn't fun. We aren't willing to ship something we aren't completely

satisfied with just to pad out the length of the game. However, and I'll let you connect the dots yourself, it did inspire the game's epic ending. It also led to the creation of the excursion funnel mechanic, which became a much more adaptable and satisfying tool for the player.

GLaDOS doesn't interact with the player much once she is attached to Chell's gun. Was there once more dialogue planned for this section?

Pinkerton: In that section, GLaDOS has the epiphany that she needs you. If she wants to get Aperture back. Originally it took her a lot longer to come to this realization. GLaDOS was her same old bitter, soft, passive-aggressively ripping into you at every opportunity while you explored the ruins of Aperture.

But when we playtested, we found out that people loved hearing GLaDOS being cruel and vindictive as an omnipotent AI, but they strongly disliked her in that role when she was hanging powerless off your gun. I think from the player's perspective, the second you pick the potato up, you've agreed to this partnership, and then GLaDOS was spending the next half hour ignoring the deal. People wanted to pluck her off the gun and dropkick her off a ledge. So we rewrote her "change of heart" to happen a little faster, and segued right to the Caroline stuff.

You guys originally talked up a gel that would have allowed players to walk on walls. What happened to that feature?

Barnett: There were two things in the game that were "so realistic" that they had a negative physical affect on playtesters. One was the Stick Gel (or Sick Gel as we sometimes called it). The other, and I swear I'm not making this up, was when a playtester's nose started bleeding after he collided with a Weight Storage Cube in mid air. We decided to keep that, because it was easily the awesomest thing we'd ever seen. But the "Sick Gel" had to go.

With the original Portal, Valve released a patch that changed the ending of the game and set up the sequel. Do you think you'll do that again when the time comes for Portal 3?

Wolpaw: Wow, now that's a clever ploy to trick me into announcing Portal 3. It didn't work, but I applaud the effort.

Josh Weer (programmer): With the Portal 2 announcement we wanted to do two things: surprise players and let the fans know first that the game was coming. The ARG-type adventure we took them on was a fun way for us to do that, and we want to keep finding ways to surprise and engage our players like that, regardless of the title.

We have 87 science collaboration points. Where can we redeem them?

Faliszek: Sorry, you were supposed to avoid getting science collaboration points. ♦

"PURE ADRENALINE."

— Shawn Edwards, FOX-TV




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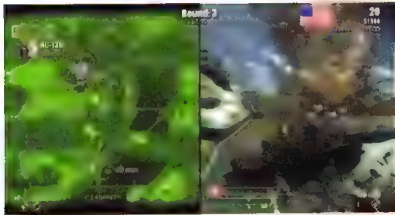


Toy Soldiers

fast-forwards



Toy Soldiers: Cold War
©2001 Love Aragorn



to the '80s for some explosive fun by Matt Miller

One of my favorite downloadable games of last year was *Toy Soldiers*, a stylish and clever melding of tower defense, RTS, and action set within an anachronistic world of WWI-era children's toys. I was stoked when I heard that Signal Studios' next project brings its franchise into the era of 1980s action figures with **Toy Soldiers: Cold War**. I chatted with Signal president and creative director D.R. Albright about what fans can expect from the new installment.

"It's much more colorful and campy than the first *Toy Soldiers*," Albright says. "The idea behind the game is the same—you're playing with your toys in a diorama in your room—but instead of antique lamps there's lava lamps, and instead of old radios there's View-Masters and cassette players. Instead of wind-up keys on the vehicles, they are remote control." As you might expect, the two opposing forces are the USA and the Soviet Union. The premise plays off the idea that the Berlin Wall never fell, and the world eroded into open

conflict—or at least the toy world did. Signal has reworked the game engine from the ground up to play faster and support all the modern weaponry and vehicles of the era. Albright promises a bevy of fun units to play around with, including Huey helicopters, MIGs, M1 Tanks, Patriot Missiles, chain guns, and F-14s. Players also have access to 18 unique turrets for each faction. Get an impressive string of kills, and you'll receive a special reward—a

unique unit or ability that can turn the tide of the fight.

"The big hit so far is the Commando," Albright says. "Basically, he's dropped into the game in a toy package and players can control him from a third-person perspective, dealing massive amounts of damage to their enemies. There are also artillery strikes, B-52 bombing runs, nukes, and my personal favorite, the AC-130 gunship."

The gameplay has also received system overhauls and minor tweaks. Players can now restart any given level from any wave they've already passed, so there's no need to go back to the beginning when you run into a powerful boss. The game now supports co-op play both locally and over Xbox Live, in addition to the expected head-to-head multiplayer. Several particularly cool weapons and features now have dedicated mini-games. "The really popular one right now is 'Missile Down the Highway'—you fly a TOW missile down a shaft and try to survive as long as you can without hitting the obstacles," Albright says. "Another one is just trying to kill as many units as you can in a minute with the AC-130."

Albright points to some fun inspiration for *Toy Soldiers: Cold War*. "When we opted for the '80s as a backdrop we actually started looking at the classic USA vs. USSR movies from that decade more than anything else—*Red Dawn*, *First Blood*, *Top Gun*, *Uncle Sam in Paris*. Those movies were pure awesome." I can't wait to dig into the toy box again this summer.

It's hard to think of a dev studio I'd rather see reinvent the vampire-themed sexy heroine *BloodRayne* than *A Boy and His Blob* developer WayForward. It may sound strange, but WayForward's past games include the likes of *Contra 4* and *Batman: Brave and the Bold*, so I'm confident it can nail the action vibe in ***BloodRayne: Betrayal***, a new 2D action game from publisher Majesco. The game finds Rayne headed into a mysterious castle deep in the woods to attend an elegant dance ball that is far more sinister than it first appears. The hack and slash action appears to have some depth this time around—players can mix up their assaults by using Rayne's signature arm blades, handgrips, and even some new special weapons like a light ray gun. WayForward is also keeping things interesting with a variety of enemies like

flying parasites, ghost-like wraiths, and vampire knights with giant swords. The 16-level game also includes a number of light environmental puzzles to break up the action. I'm impressed by the colorful visual style for *BloodRayne: Betrayal*, but I've yet to get my hands on the game to see how it plays. Here's hoping that the sleek, black-clad champy has another shot at stardom when the game releases this summer.

Renegade Ops is a brand new explosive military vehicle shooter via Avalanche Studios, the developers who brought us the ridiculous action of the *Just Cause* series. The new game embraces the tradition of old-school military action games, where the explosions are big and the story absurd. The game can be played alone, but that's missing the point; *Renegade Ops* supports two-player split screen or four player online co-op. Gameplay is built around controlling weaponized vehicles like jeeps, tanks, and helicopters. Players take on the roles of team specialists from around the world brought together by General Bryant to defeat Madman Inferno and his evil terrorist cronies. By defeat, I mean shoot an endless stream of bullets from Gatling guns and set up electromagnetic shock waves at regular intervals. I've seen the game in action, and it looks pretty crazy. *Renegade Ops* sounds like the GI Joe game I've always wanted to play, but without the license. Watch for the game this summer.

If you missed the original release of **Guardian Heroes** in 1996, Treasure is finally remaking the classic Saturn game for Xbox Live Arcade. Regarded as one of the great beat-'em-up brawlers, the new version of *Guardian Heroes* has entirely redrawn HD graphics. Online and local co-op options let you choose from five unique heroes to brawl with as you punch your way to one of the game's five different endings. The upgrade and leveling options are expanded for this re-release, beefing up the already hefty RPG elements in the game's storyline. Versus mode allows up to 12 players to throw down with each other at once, and other modes like time attack and arcade deliver additional replay. I can't wait to revisit this classic and check out how Treasure has fleshed out its work from 15 years earlier. The new and improved *Guardian Heroes* comes out this fall.

Looking for more downloadable and independent games? Check out *gameinformer.com/impulse* for daily updates and reviews on games as they release. For more on downloadable games in this issue, you can read our scores for *Bangai-O HD*, *Missile Fury*, *Dungeon Defenders*, *Dungeons & Dragons: Daggerdale*, *The Fancy Pants Adventures*, and *Gatling Gears* on p. 94

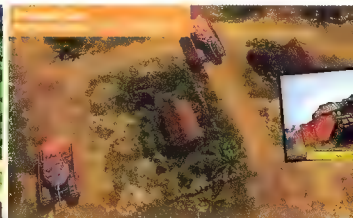
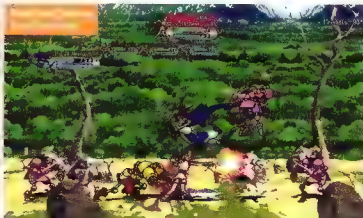




photo: Kara Leigh

Mortal Kombat

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

Justin Wong

Age
25

Location
Santa Monica, CA

Hobbies
Tom Brady, Floe,
Perfect Legend

interview by Bryan Vore

Accomplishments

Justin Wong beat his own training partner Ari "Floe" Weintraub to take first place in the PDP National Mortal Kombat 9 Tournament that took place in Las Vegas in May. In 2010, he won first place in four Street Fighter-related tournaments and took home the gold in the Evo World Championship for Marvel vs. Capcom 3. He appeared in our Gamer section back in issue 196 (October 2009) for his skills in Street Fighter IV.

MK Experience

Wong says he never played much Mortal Kombat until the most recent release, favoring the Street Fighter series. "I think Mortal Kombat's actually a really fun game and I'm glad that I played it a lot," he says. "I feel like it has little Street Fighter aspects in terms of all these enhanced moves and it even has supers now. They really thought this game through to make it very successful in the tournament community."

Training

Wong estimates that he put in about 20 hours a week focusing on practice mode and

dueling with training partner and top fighting game tourney veteran, Ari "Floe" Weintraub.

Character Select

Kung Lao was Wong's go-to character throughout the entire tournament. "Kung Lao's very offensive. He's always in your face," he says. "He's basically the Rufus of Mortal Kombat. That's who I played in Street Fighter. It felt just like home when I was playing Kung Lao, because I have so much control. I can get my opponents flustered because of my strong offensive rushdown, and his combos do way too much damage so it's a perfect combination. He was clearly the most over-picked character in the tournament." Other popular characters at the tournament included Ermac, Cyrax, and Raiden.

Non-Tourney Games

Now that the tournament is over, Wong is interested in exploring MK's story mode and challenge tower. He'd also like to play through Portal 2.

Control Method

"For the MK tournament I used the PDP MK Tournament Edition stick, but I think I'm going to stick to a regular controller because it's a lot easier,"

Wong says. "I was never an old MK player so I wasn't used to the arcade layout."

Strike First

"The thing about Mortal Kombat is that there's a lot of meter management," Wong says. "It's kind of hard to pull off X-rays because you want to save the meter for breakers so you don't eat 40 percent combos all the time. Some characters benefit a lot by using enhanced moves to add a lot more damage."

"The main strategy is in the first round you always want to get the first attack, [because] the game gives that person one full bar of the meter. You can always get a free breaker if they hit you first, but they can never break your combo if you hit them first. That tells you who's going to win the round usually. By the time the second round happens, the other guy will just start to get a breaker and you basically have a full X-ray ready to use."

"The thing about X-rays is that they do 40 percent damage alone already so that's a match ender combo. If they have like 70 percent of life left, just hit them first, do an X-ray, and then you automatically win the game. So you want to force your opponent to break

so they won't use their X-ray on you."

No Fatalities

One odd thing for an MK tournament finale was that neither side performed a fatality at the end of any of the matches. "In casuals I would definitely do fatalities, but I think in tournaments you get that rush," Wong says. "The fatalities take too long. If you just won, you want to keep your adrenaline going, making sure you have the advantage."

Life Outside of MK

Wong works at free-to-play MMO studio Nexon as the community representative for Dungeon Fighter Online.

What's Next

"The whole month of June is basically a bunch of Evolution qualifiers. Right now I'm preparing for all of those tournaments," he says. "Now it's going back to playing Street Fighter and Marvel vs. Capcom, and also playing Mortal Kombat at the same time. I have to juggle three games at once for the next three months. I don't mind it because I want to do my best and play a lot of games." ♦

Age of Empires Online

Someone got MMO all over my RTS!

by Adam Biesenar

I wasn't sure what to expect from this free-to-play reincarnation of the beloved Age of Empires franchise. It was a pleasant surprise indeed when it turned out to be an upscaled Age of Empires II, with MMO-like persistence, social aspects, and a heavy co-op focus.

Age of Empires Online is easiest to describe as an old-school real-time strategy game with the social and crafting elements of World of Warcraft grafted on between missions. It will never be as competitive at high levels as StarCraft, as it lacks the necessary relentless, endless balancing. It is not a perspective-altering reimagining of the genre like Total Annihilation or Supreme Commander. As a casual, lighthearted RTS that focuses on fun rather than chasing innovation or perfect competitive balance, it excels.

The gameplay feels like it was ripped directly from Age of Empires II. Villagers gather food, wood, gold, and stone to fuel the production of units and buildings. The relative lack of special abilities on units – and the general similarity of most unit types, compared to something like StarCraft – deemphasize micromanagement. The macro level of play is engrossing on its own between managing the four resources and the constant expansion that most maps demand. I welcome the fact that I can largely rely on attack-move commands for army management here without worrying about a faster opponent decimating my army with a dozen special abilities changing the landscape in two seconds flat.

I don't mean to imply that micromanagement is absent or useless in Age of Empires Online, but it's nowhere near the ballpark of StarCraft II in my experience. Many macro skills transfer – hotkeying buildings, not floating resources, good scouting, etc. – but I have yet to see the opportunity to build an army around heavy use of caster-type units, like a typical sentry/stalker Protoss mix in StarCraft II. While the two games share many mechanics, Age of Empires Online emphasizes a different side of the RTS coin.

The non-combat portion of the game takes place in a typical Age of Empires base, but there's no conflict. As you earn blueprints, you can place buildings within your capital that act as vendors, selling everything from crafting recipes to unit equipment for the various persistent currencies. You can also assign the points you earn as your empire levels up to the tech tree, unlocking new unit types and upgrades for purchase within missions. Most of your tasks here revolve around obtaining new equipment for your units and buildings once you've made it through the tutorials and unlocked the basics. Each unit type has four slots, and anything you equip there

has a persistent effect in any missions you undertake. If you favor spearmen, for example, you can pump them up with the best armor you can find and they'll have 20 percent or more bonus health and damage at all times.

You can specialize in two crafting disciplines, which function much like professions in any MMO, by taking resources and turning them into equipment and consumables. Instead of pumping up your archers' damage, perhaps you'd rather spend your resources creating an item that lets you spawn a gold mine on the map at the cost of a bundle of in-mission resources.

Your capital city is also where you take on quests, which range from repeatable "defeat an opponent in a 1v1 skirmish" PvP scenarios to sprawling solo storylines that take place over multiple levels. Every quest is its own instance;

the game is structured much like a traditional RTS in that regard, with your capital taking the place of a multiplayer lobby or campaign map.

On the business side, Age of Empires Online relies on microtransactions – but not the kind you're used to. For a one-time fee, you can own a "premium" civilization. This lets you unlock everything via gameplay: the whole tech tree, all the units and abilities, and tons more quests than a free player can access. Additionally, Microsoft is selling "boosters," which so far look to be content packs analogous to DLC for a traditional retail game. The one announced booster is a huge, multi-tiered single-player or co-op challenge where you and a buddy defend against ever-stronger waves of enemies.

Age of Empires Online features almost archaic gameplay ("old-school" if you're feeling charitable), yet it innovates within the RTS genre with its persistence and business model. It's a classical RTS that seeks to tap the same desire for persistent rewards that Call of Duty and World of Warcraft use so effectively. Though it's still in beta, I'm hopeful that this can break new ground in a genre that has been slowly falling off of the map for years now. ♦



Whatever Happened To...

A look back at **E3 announcements** that never materialized by the time the industry's epicenter. Nearly every major platform release and many Triple-A games have been unveiled at the annual event since the first E3 in 1995, and for good reason: The show brings people across the globe together to show their games to retailers and journalists. But not every announcement or promise at the event comes to fruition. Sometimes things die on the vine. With that in mind, take a look at a few of the E3 announcements that ended up fizzling out.

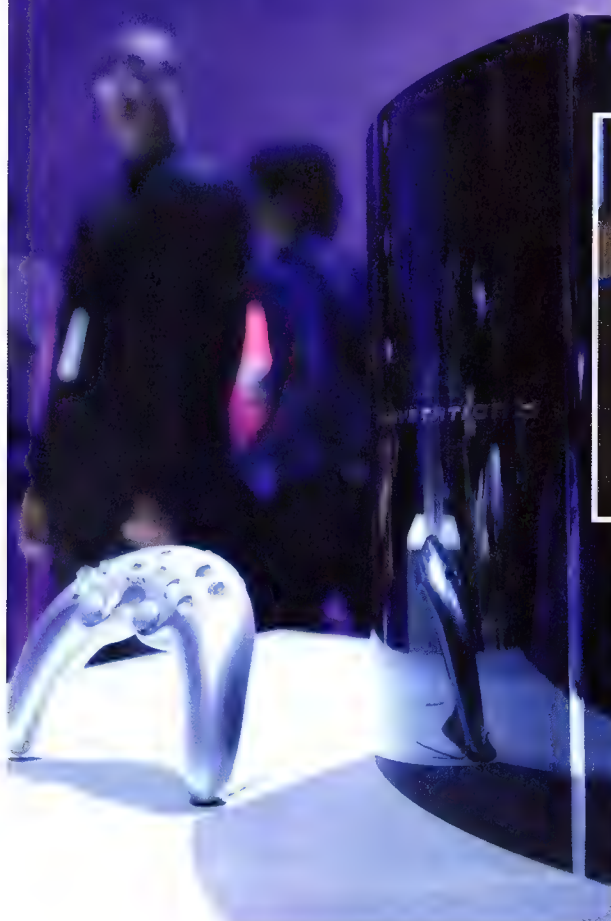
2004 The Phantom Proves It's Not Vaporware. Or Does It?

When EA's Phantom was first announced at E3 2004, it was hailed as the most ambitious and ambitious product reveals. E3 is the show brings people across the globe together to show their games to retailers and journalists. But not every announcement or promise at the event comes to fruition. Sometimes things die on the vine. With that in mind, take a look at a few of the E3 announcements that ended up fizzling out.



2005 PlayStation 3 Promises The World

The PlayStation 2 was the dominant force on the gaming landscape when Sony started talking about its successor. Over the course of a couple of E3s, Sony boasted about the then-upcoming system in a series of speeches that sounded more like fever dreams than product announcements. First, there was the Cyber World, which Sony CTO Masa Chatani outlined as a network that would allow people to jack into systems across the globe. Then came the system itself, which reportedly included three Ethernet ports, six USB slots and two HDMI outs – allowing gamers to connect two displays for 32:9 aspect ratio gaming. To cap it off, Sony showcased an odd-looking controller that was quickly dubbed the boomerang. Much of these early ideas were scrapped, scaled back, or, in the case of Cyber World, transformed into what is now known as PlayStation Home. *Draft*



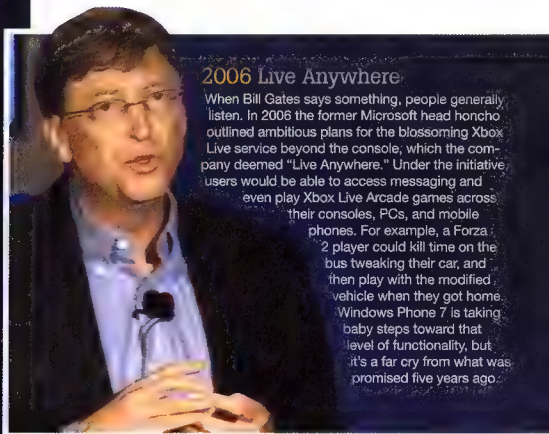
The Tale Of VelocityGirl

Microsoft used its 2005 E3 presentation as a coming out of sorts for Xbox Live. The service debuted on the original Xbox, but with the arrival of the Xbox 360 Redmond planned to expand the network capabilities in significant ways. One of the more notorious examples was a series of hypothetical 360 users that represented different types of gamers. "VelocityGirl" represented a casual player for whom gaming wasn't a part of her regular routine. According to Microsoft's J Allard, VelocityGirl would gravitate toward the Xbox Live ecosystem with the allure of crafting in-game goods. "Now, she might never pick up a controller, never take a run in the half-pipe, but she'll be able to design and sell stickers, shirts, boards, soundtracks and even design her own skate park for those hardcore gamers like [fellow fake user] Striker." Once Microsoft realized that it could make money itself by selling those same shirts, boards, and soundtracks, VelocityGirl mysteriously vanished, never to be spoken of again.



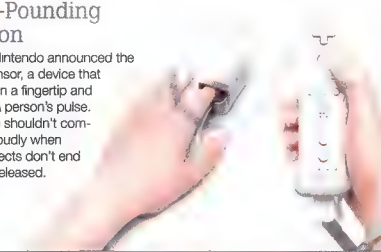
2006 Live Anywhere

When Bill Gates says something, people generally listen. In 2006 the former Microsoft head honcho outlined ambitious plans for the blossoming Xbox Live service beyond the console, which the company deemed "Live Anywhere." Under the initiative users would be able to access messaging and even play Xbox Live Arcade games across their consoles, PCs, and mobile phones. For example, a Forza 2 player could kill time on the bus tweaking their car, and then play with the modified vehicle when they got home. Windows Phone 7 is taking baby steps toward that level of functionality, but it's a far cry from what was promised five years ago.



2008 Nintendo's Pulse-Pounding Solution

In 2008, Nintendo announced the Vitality Sensor, a device that would fit on a fingertip and measure a person's pulse. Maybe we shouldn't complain too loudly when some projects don't end up being released.



FRAMING THE GAME

An Early Look At One Of Into The Pixel's 2011 Winners

As a form of interactive entertainment, video games require the effort of talented people from a variety of disciplines. Artists ensure that the graphics and art direction tie the gameplay experience together – but it isn't all about huge explosions, detailed environments, and dazzling special effects. When removed from the context of in-game action, the art can often stand on its own – not just as something cool to look at, but also as something worthy of displaying in a gallery.

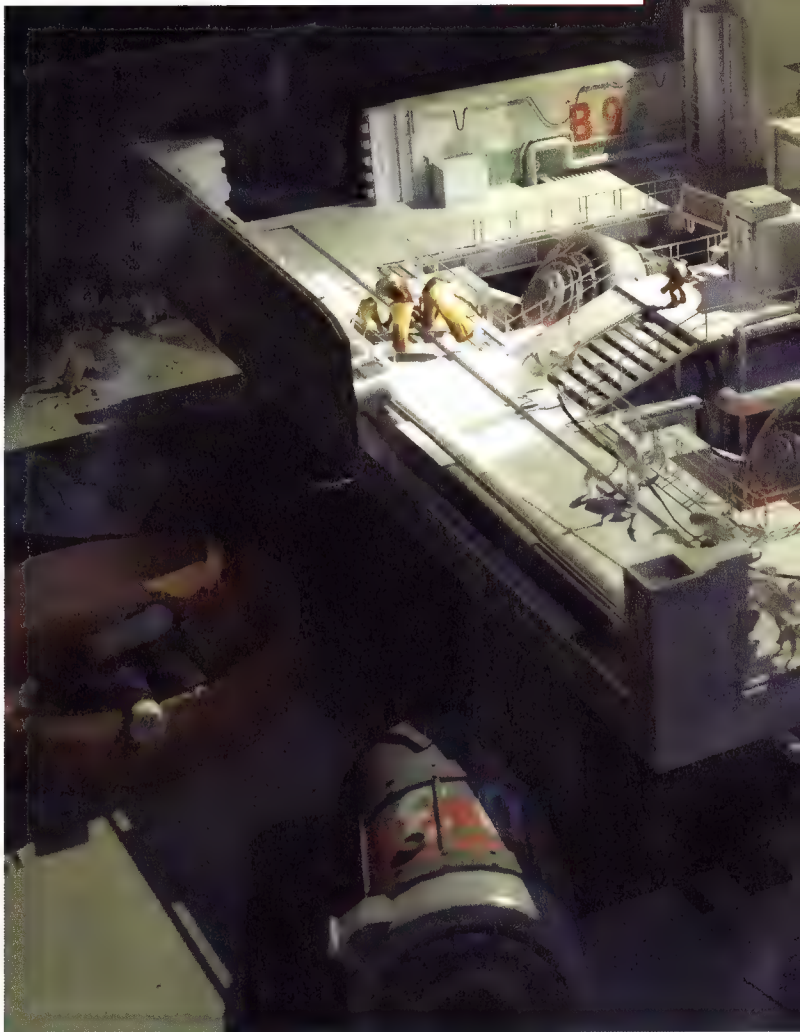
Organized by the Academy of Interactive Arts and Sciences along with the Entertainment Software Association, the Into the Pixel exhibition is one of

INTOPIXEL
In Celebration of the Art of the Video Game

the industry's most important avenues to

honor and highlight the work of visual artists in the gaming industry. Every year, artists working on games of all shapes and sizes submit their work, and a jury of respected professionals chooses a select few to become a part of the year's exhibit. The winners are unveiled each year at E3, and the pieces are then put on display around the world – often seen at art festivals along with industry events like DICE and GDC.

The piece on these pages, entitled "Incident at the Workshop," is just one of the 17 winners selected for the 2011 Into The Pixel exhibit. Despite the Half-Life logo, it's actually from a different Valve title: Alien Swarm. We spoke to artist Ivan Simoncini about the creation of the image and how it relates to the development of Alien Swarm. ♦





Ivan Simoncini

Why did you select the model theme?

We usually produce a fair amount of concept art whenever we tackle a new game. Those design studies are usually a good place to push boundaries and go to the far end of the spectrum. *Alien Swarm* uses a top-down camera view. This perspective tends to give everything a toy look. I decided to embrace it by showing one of those prefabbed rooms and hinting at the person who's assembling the model.

What process do you use to create a CG image like this?

The set was built and composited in a 3D program, Modo. Color corrections and paint-overs were added later using Photoshop.

What is the importance of including the real-world elements (like the cup and cigarettes) in the image?

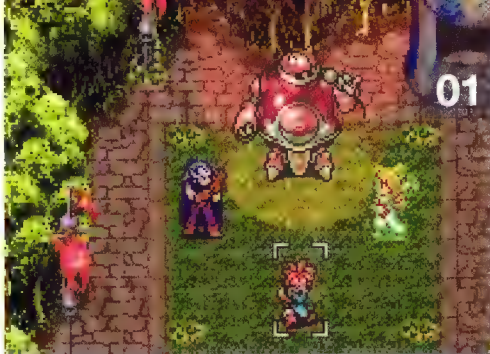
Most concept art only works if put in an interesting context. Including real-world objects helped establishing the desired scale and giving life to the finished piece.

Was this image created as a part of *Alien Swarm's* development?

Yes, it was part of the development. We use concept art to develop color keys, atmosphere, lighting style and detail density. And most of all: It hopefully inspires the team.

What do you like about the *Into the Pixel* showcase?

I'm extremely honored that my piece was chosen. As far as I can tell it's one of the highest recognitions you can get as a game artist. I was inspired by so many of the talents who submitted to the *Into the Pixel* contest over the years.



01

New Game + (Chrono Trigger)

By the time you've beaten Chrono Trigger, you've invested dozens of hours gaining levels, gathering items, and completing quests. What better way to acknowledge these accomplishments than by ensuring that you don't lose them? Unlocked after completing the game once, New Game + lets you start over at the beginning - but with all of your end-game equipment and skills. This fantastic feature gives gamers a hassle-free way to explore the classic adventure's multiple endings.

Spider-Man 2 (Tony Hawk 2)

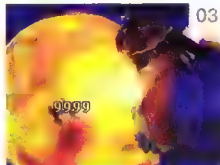
Even if you can't tell Bob Burnquist from Rune Glifberg, you can recognize this iconic character as he performs Spidey Flips and Spidey Grinds. Back before the superhero movie explosion, the opportunity to control Spider-Man in a good game was a rare opportunity, and his bag of tricks means he's one of the best skaters in the game.



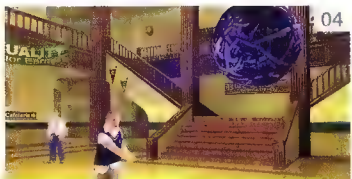
02

(Final Fantasy VII)

Yes, breeding chocobos is tedious. But if you persevere and manage to hatch a gold one, you can be the proud owner of this legendary matra. While the ridiculously long summon animation may be excessive by modern standards, we still love watching King Arthur and his 12 knights take turns hacking enemies to oblivion.



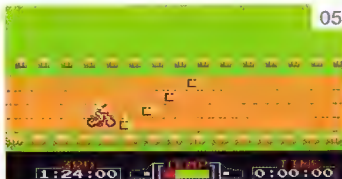
03



04

Rubber Band Ball (Bully)

You may be wondering whether scouring Bullworth and the surrounding town for 75 rubber bands is worth the hassle. Then you get the rubber band ball, and it all makes sense. Pelting your fellow students is fun enough, but the chaos caused by the ricocheting projectile makes you mischief incarnate.



05

Old Hills Games (Animal Crossing)

Animal Crossing let players unlock an array of fully playable NES games like Donkey Kong and Excitebike, and many gamers spent more time with them than Animal Crossing itself. Back before old-school classics were being re-released regularly, this chance to travel down memory lane was more than enough of a reward.



06

Martyrdom Perk (Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare)

This perk drops a short-fused grenade upon death, turning the immediate vicinity into a danger zone. By the time you earn the Martyrdom perk, you've probably already been blown to bits by it numerous times... which makes it all the sweeter when you finally reach level 17 and get to drop some grenades of your own.



07

For Once the Cats (Gran Turismo Sport)

They aren't called Endurance Races for nothing, these races take time and focus, but competing them is your ticket to getting the most awesome cars in the game. They don't qualify for every race, but when you can get behind the wheel of an F1, they leave the competition in the dust.



08

Stealth Camouflage (Metal Gear Solid)

Succeeding to Revolver Ocelot's torture results in more than Meryl's death. It gives Snake access to the amazing stealth camouflage after finishing the game. Suddenly, choosing who to save is a tough decision; Stealth camo makes Snake invisible to humans, opening the door to a vast world of humiliating enemy guards.



09

Climax Bracelet (Bayonetta)

Even though the action is absurd enough in Bayonetta's regular gameplay, this accessory takes your attacks to the next level. Available once you get every achievement/trophy and find every crown in the game, the Climax Bracelet transforms every one of your normal attacks into a giant astral boot, missile, or sword made out of witch hair.



10

For Once the Cats (Mortal Kombat Deception)

We've all heard fake "secrets" that involve being in obscure places at specific times to make something cool happen. Getting Zombie Liu Kang is like that, except it's for real. For jumping through all of the hoops, you get to control the classic Mortal Kombat hero. He just has more rotting skin and exposed organs than you remember.



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photo: Barry Stein

Championing Innovation In Indie Gaming's Golden Age

Chris Hecker is a video game renaissance man. In his career, he's done everything from pioneering 3D gaming on Windows to being a technical columnist for *Game Developer* magazine. After helping to create *Spore* at Maxis, Hecker has been hard at work on *SpyParty*, an intriguing new indie game that puts players in a one-on-one test of wits.

interview by Matt Helgeson

Talk about working on *Spore*. What did you learn from that project?

A lot of the things I'm doing with *SpyParty* are reactions to some of the ways things worked on *Spore*. We tried to innovate in three different ways. One of them was the technology for doing the creatures and the planets and making them come alive. That worked great. The other was the user interface, making the creature editor accessible. I think we did great there. The third way was gameplay, and we totally dropped the ball there. You play the game, and it's not at the same level of depth as the editor. It doesn't react to you.

Is the big publisher, triple-A game development model doing a good job of pushing the artform?

From a design perspective, you can play any game and find something interesting about it — some more than others, obviously. The problem is that it's a small, tiny thing because the investors want their money back. So you can push in little ways, but people are constrained because they have to have a return on investment. It's diluted by the fact that you have to make these 30 hours of gameplay, genre-based games that sell five million copies. I think triple-A games have to keep pushing. I try to talk often about interesting, innovative things in mainstream games. I talk about *ico* a lot, with the hand-holding mechanic. Looking at *ico* as a whole, it's a generic puzzle/platforming game. But the hand holding and calling the princess mechanic and helping her, that is just pure magic. That small, human-scale interaction is rarely seen in games.

How healthy do you think the independent game scene is right now?

I think it's great. This is the golden age of indie games right now; I hope it lasts until I ship *SpyParty*. [Laughs] A combination of things have made it a better place to make games than the mainstream with giant budgets. The most amazing thing about indie games right now, and hopefully this is sustainable, is that there is a really close correlation between quality and sales. That's not true of any other place in art and entertainment. If you make a good, triple-A indie game that you've poured a lot of love into and really polished, you will sell enough to make another one. It's hard to express how strange that is to have that linear relationship between sales and quality. I hope it lasts.

SpyParty is based on the "Turing test." Explain what the Turing test is and how it relates to the game.

There was this guy Alan Turing, a World War II-era computer scientist. Even back then, they started considering how computers could reason or become intelligent. He came up with this thought problem. Imagine you are sitting there with an instant messaging client, chatting onscreen with another person. If you can't tell whether it's a human or a computer, then that computer has passed the Turing test for intelligence. We're 50 or 100 years away from a computer passing that test. If you've ever used a chat-bot, they're pathetic. But I thought about the inverse Turing test. Have a person pretend to be an NPC, because people are totally flexible. By inverting the Turing test, it takes an unsolvable problem and turns it into gameplay. It turns out that it's compelling on both sides, the person pretending to act like an NPC and for the sniper trying to figure out which person it is.

SpyParty's website says it's a "game about subtle behavior." It strikes me that games have struggled to convey subtle behavior.

L.A. Noire does pretty well with subtle facial expressions, but I'm assuming you don't have that type of budget. How can you convey subtlety in a medium that's almost totally failed to do so in the past? That's a great question. I'm going to go back to *ico* as an example to show that it doesn't actually require a huge budget. The thing I'm calling "human-scale behavior" — you call the Princess over and she comes and holds your hand — those kinds of mechanics and actions and reactions don't require that much technology. *ico* shows it doesn't. It was a PS2 game. I don't have an L.A. Noire budget, but I don't need it. L.A. Noire is still pretty deep in the uncanny valley. It's better than *Heavy Rain*, but it's still deeply flawed. That shows that an infinite amount of money cannot solve the problem, so why even try? You can get away with a lot. I've found, even with my crappy characters and jerky animations. The subtlety [doesn't come] from the look. It's subtle because the players are playing it in a subtle way, not because I've got the right amount of specular lighting on the nose shader.

When I first saw *SpyParty*, I was reminded of a mission in an old Hitman game where you were a sniper getting information through a headset about your target at a party. Things like, "He's left handed, he smokes" etc. and you had to decide who to shoot.

I played some Hitman, but I haven't played that mission. There's another mission in an old Hitman where you dress as a waiter and walk through a party and try to be inconspicuous. Clue is [another] example of that deductive

gameplay. You eliminate targets. I have some of that deductive stuff, but I wanted to make sure that it wasn't completely solvable. I don't want you to figure it out completely. One of the themes of the game is making consequential decisions with partial information. I wanted the game to explore that. When a spy completes some missions, [the sniper] will eliminate some suspects. But they'll never get it all the way down — the sniper will have to make a leap of intuition.

It looks like the response to your paid beta program is going well. Did you have concerns that people wouldn't be willing to pay to be a part of the beta?

Well, first thing is they haven't paid yet. But I did say, "Please don't sign up if you're not going to pay" because I need to predict what the response is going to be. So hopefully it will be a high percentage. It will be great if I can both get the testing I need to get done accomplished and also fund the game through this and not have to take any investment. This new opportunity for "crowdfunding" games is great because it means no compromises. If you take money from an investor, your interests are not totally aligned. The investor wants you to make a good game, but they also want a return on their investment. The players just want the coolest game you can make, that's what they are paying their money for. Your interests are completely aligned. I hope to have the first beta invites out by mid-June.

What kind of graphical fidelity are you shooting for? You've said the graphics are placeholder right now.

I haven't picked the style yet, but the most obvious thing is a '60s, *Casino Royale*-type style. I'm purposely not picking the style until I have the gameplay totally there. But you could easily imagine a sort of *Team Fortress 2* type look, or the movie *The Incredibles*. It's timeless, retro yet futuristic. I want to have it polished but stylized. I don't have 400 artists and a motion capture studio. I want to set my sights like how *Braid* or *Castle Crashers* worked — pick an aesthetic that you can hit 100 percent, not do 75 percent of an aesthetic that was out of your reach.

Do you have a target for when the game will be finished?

My guess is a couple years. Like I said, I'm a bit of a perfectionist. The beta will have a huge influence on it. The version of the game in my head and the version of the game you can play right now are very different. I'm glad the beta thing will let off some of the steam. This will allow people to play it but allow me to work on it. That's one of the great things about indie games; I can take the time.

CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

**1983
HOME COMPUTING**
Hecker gets his first computer, a Commodore 64, and attempts to program his own games

**1988
THE ARTS**
Upon graduating high school, Hecker enrolls in the Parsons School of Design for drafting and art

**1990
A BIG BYTE**
After leaving Parsons, Hecker buys a copy of *Byte Magazine*, which reignites his fascination with computers and programming

**1993
WINDOWS TO THE WORLD**
Through his friendship with legendary programmer Michael Abrash, Hecker takes a job at Microsoft, working on the pioneering WinG programming interface, which allowed developers to begin porting games from DOS to Windows

**1994
THE SCRIBE**
Hecker begins to write articles for *Game Developer*. Several of his articles, on topics like physics and texture mapping, are considered canonical texts on the subjects

**1995
INDEPENDENCE**
Wanting to try his hand at development, Hecker leaves Microsoft and co-founds Definition Six, an independent game company. None of Definition Six's projects make it to market

**2003
CREATION**
Through his contacts with Will Wright, Hecker begins to work on Wright's groundbreaking *Spore* project

**2009
BACK TO INDIE**
With *Spore* completed, Hecker is laid off from his job at Maxis. He takes the opportunity to begin work on *SpyParty*, an idea that had been percolating in his head for some time

Roxio Game Capture Kit

Share your tips, tricks, and other video game exploits with the world via Roxio's intuitive software is a far cry from Apple's Final Cut Pro, but it gives you everything you need to put together a competent looking video, complete with video filters, commentary tracks, and text overlays. The box only records video at 480p and it isn't compatible with older consoles that don't have component outputs. There may be better capture boxes out there, but if you're looking for an affordable video capture solution that comes bundled with useful editing software, Roxio stands alone as a quick and easy way to show the world your gaming chops.

by Ben Reeves and Ben Hanson

\$99.99 (Console kit), \$49.99 (PC kit)
roxio.com





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1 N-Control Avenger

The N-Controller may look like it jumped out of the set of some crazy Tim Burton nightmare, but this Xbox 360 controller housing is designed to give players the ability to hit most of the controller buttons without moving their thumbs off the analog sticks. The elaborate lever system takes getting used to since you have to reprogram how your brain interacts with a controller, but after a half hour I noticed a slight improvement in my performance in shooters. Hardcore FPS fanatics and tournament players may want to experiment with this contraption, but most of us can live with the few extra milliseconds it takes to move our thumb that extra centimeter.

ENTERTAINMENT WEEKLY

\$49.99

avengercontroller.com

2 1Cade

Turn your gaming tablet into a miniature arcade with this Ion iPad adapter. Classic arcade games like Asteroids, Pac-Man, and Centipede feel authentic thanks to the iCade's full-sized joystick and eight arcade buttons. Over 100 Atari classics are compatible with the iCade, and each unit includes a free download code for one game within the Atari Greatest Hits app.

\$99.99

thinkgeek.com

3 Sackboy Superstars Blind Box Figurines

Media Molecule's burly mascot is well traveled. To prove it, this first series of LittleBigPlanet figures from Underground Toys features 12 different Sackboy figurines, all wearing themed clothes and accessories from their various trips around the world.

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The Incredible Shrinking RPG

As a longtime fan of role-playing games, most of my decisions regarding new console purchases were decided by which system had the best RPGs. Though I loved my SNES, I didn't think twice about abandoning Nintendo and buying a PlayStation instead of an N64. In retrospect, I absolutely made the right call. Acclaimed series like Final Fantasy, Wild Arms, Grandia, Suikoden, and Persona found their home on PlayStation, making it the unchallenged system of choice for role-playing fanatics.

Today, buying a home console based solely on this genre is practically impossible. The phrase "role-playing game" doesn't even mean the same thing; successful titles from North American developers like BioWare and Bethesda have become the term's standard-bearers, and genre boundaries have blurred as traditional RPG elements work their way into shooters, platformers, and fighters. The classic style of gameplay that once drove the juggernaut of the SNES and PlayStation era is now relegated to a sub-genre dubbed JRPG – a name that drives a wedge between Japan-developed titles and the market they once dominated.

Their niche status and declining presence on major systems have led some people to lament the death of the JRPG...but I don't buy it. The genre isn't dead, you just need to know where to look. Examine the plethora of titles available on DS and PSP and you'll see that

JRPGs are alive and well – they've just migrated to handhelds.

Like a once-famous film star resorting to primetime television cameos, some hardcore fans may see this transition as a "look how far they've fallen" tale. After all, less than 15 years ago Final Fantasy VII was a pivotal system-selling exclusive for the PlayStation. Today, that series is more active on handheld platforms than major consoles thanks to a stream of remakes and spin-offs. However, I don't see this shift as a step down for role-playing games; it allows the developers to focus on the things that made me fall in love with the genre in the first place.

For instance, take this year's release of Radiant Historia on DS. It doesn't have the flashy cinematics, breathtaking graphics, or jaw-dropping set piece moments that gamers would expect from a high-profile RPG on current home systems. Without having to contend with the

by Joe Juba
Senior Associate Editor,
Game Informer

complications that accompany a full console release, Atlas delivered a fantastic game that would have fit perfectly in the canon of 16-bit classics. Even without gleaming technical prowess, Radiant Historia had memorable characters, a clever story, and an inventive combat system – which are really the most important areas of any RPG.

I'm not saying that I don't enjoy the spectacle of big-budget releases like Lost Odyssey or Final Fantasy XIII. I love those types of games when they come around, but the reality of development means that these grandiose experiences take more time and money than ever before – all to develop a game with an uncertain future in a niche market. I'm not surprised or disappointed that the major JRPG publishers have started to see the allure of the handheld space. It allows them to release more games and spend less money without sacrificing the storytelling or gameplay at the heart of the genre.

Even franchises that established a fanbase on consoles have begun transitioning over to DS and PSP. I'm not just talking about throwaway spin-offs, either. Square Enix's Dragon Quest IX, Sega's Valkyria Chronicles II, and Atlas' Shin Megami Tensei: Strange Journey are all full-fledged entries in their respective series.

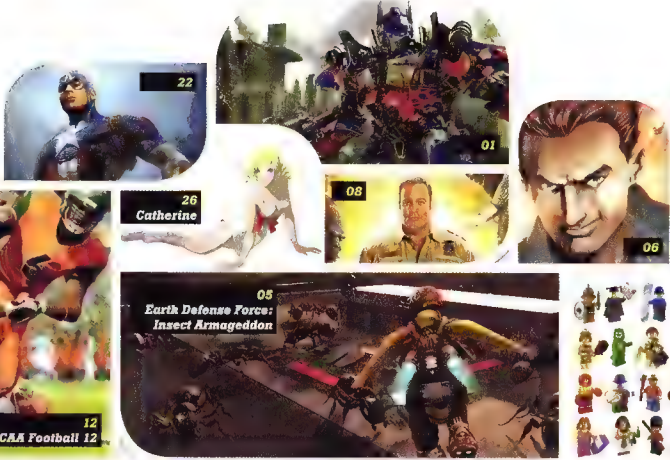
If the next big installment in the Half-Life or Assassin's Creed franchises were handheld-exclusive, fans would be disappointed. So why does this approach work so well for JRPGs? Genre devotees seem to have an unrivaled appetite for nostalgia, but I think it goes deeper than that.

The mechanics of these games age incredibly well; unlike FPS or open-world titles, the core experience of a JRPG didn't change drastically as technology evolved. Even with the 3D capabilities of the original PlayStation, many of my favorite JRPGs on the system – like Xenogears and Suikoden – stuck to their 2D heritage. Maybe that's why I find it easier to revisit role-playing games than any other genre; I never find myself cringing and asking "How could I have played this?" when popping in a classic 16-bit RPG. Even though the system might be different, I feel the same kind of familiarity and comfort playing one of these titles on a modern handheld.

The role-playing genre has over 20 years of history to draw from, which has resulted in some great original games alongside plenty of remakes and re-releases on GBA, DS, and PSP. The convergence of these titles on handhelds has made it a wonderful time to be a JRPG fan. But what about the years to come? The genre will probably never reach the home console saturation they enjoyed during the PS2 era, and high-profile blockbusters are only getting more expensive to develop. Even the well of remakes will eventually run dry. If we want more original JRPGs that retain the identity and appeal of their predecessors, we're going to have to be okay with thinking small.

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

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



July

01 Smells Like Bay Season

Director Michael Bay acknowledges that *Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen* was disappointing. He's taken steps to make the third installment better, including bigger lights, more iconic characters, and replacing Megan Fox with hotter Megan Fox (or whatever her name is). Laserbeak also makes an appearance in this film, probably to build a nest in Shia LaBeouf's hair.

05 New Releases

- BloodRayne: The Third Reich (DVD)
- Earth Defense Force: Insect Armageddon (PS3, 360)

06 If College Kids Created Super heroes...

Brian Michael Bender and Mark Bagley, the creative team behind the wildly popular *Ultimate Spider-Man* book, are kicking off a new Marvel Comics series called *Brilliant*. This story follows a handful of college-aged geniuses as they attempt to give human beings superpowers. What could possibly go wrong? If King Man or Bong Hi Wonder are not created by the fifth issue, consider this series a failure.

07 A Halo Infection Worth Scratching

McFarlane Toys' long running Halo action figure line has tapped almost every notable character from the Halo universe. We already have Master Chief, Arbiter, various Spartans, and...uh...did we already say Arbiter? McFarlane's latest series offers a cool variation we never thought we'd see. This series is based off Halo: Reach's Infection mode and the zombie Spartans within it. The three-pack hits store shelves today.

08 Paul Blart: Animal Tamer

No movie about talking animals will ever top *Milo & Otis*, but Zookeeper is sure trying. Kevin James really breaks out of his "regular schlub" image with this project, where he plays a regular schlub who is also a zookeeper. Expect plenty of physical humor, piss about how animals are smarter than humans, and at least one crack about a poop-scooper.

12 New Releases

- Ben 10 Collection (DS)
- Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows: Part 2 (PS3, 360, Wii, PC, DS)
- Mystery Quest: Curse of the Ancient Sports (DS)

- NCAA Football 12 (PS3, 360)
- Robot Chicken: Star Wars II (Blu-Ray, DVD)
- Zoo Resort (3DS)

15 Another Unnecessary Sequel

Since there are only seven Harry Potter books, we're going to assume that the eighth film, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows Part 2*, is a non-canon side story. Another movie seems completely unnecessary; the last movie ended perfectly, with the victory of Lord Voldemort over all of those Hogwarts dorks. Releasing a new, fake ending isn't going to change anything, people!

19 New Releases

- Captain America: Super Soldier (PS3, 360, Wii, DS)
- Doctor Who: The Sixth Sense - Part 1 (Blu-Ray, DVD)
- Otomedus Excellent (360)
- Smurfs (DS)
- Smurfs Dance Party (Wii)

20 Become a LEGO Maniac

Starting last year, LEGO introduced a delirious twist on collecting with its limited edition mini-figures.

You don't know which figure you'll get in a bag - it could be a caveman or a werewolf or even a dude sweating his studs off in a gorilla suit. Series five should start this month, adding characters such as a clown, boxer, and Clegairra. Get your butt to a LEGO shop before Jeff and Reiner buy them all.

22 Hugo Award

Captain America: The First Avenger opens today, but as far as we can tell, that isn't the right name for this movie. It should be called *Red Skull*. Hugo Weaving is *The F---ing Red Skull!* Seriously, even if you're sick of all these superhero movies, Hugo Weaving is like a planet, putting moviegods into his orbit. He may be the greatest actor of our time. If nothing else, he's the greatest actor to have co-starred with Keanu Reeves.

26 New Releases

- Catherine (PS3, 360)

29 Wild, Wild Alien

Daniel Craig (*Shocker: The Visitor*) and Harrison Ford (*War Force One: Saving Sam*) team up in *Cowboys and Aliens*, a film that is exactly what it sounds like.

2011



PlayStation 3
Xbox 360 • PC

ESRB Rating
M (Mature)

ESRB Rating
M (Mature)

ESRB Rating
M (Mature)

ESRB Rating
M (Mature)

ESRB Rating
M (Mature)

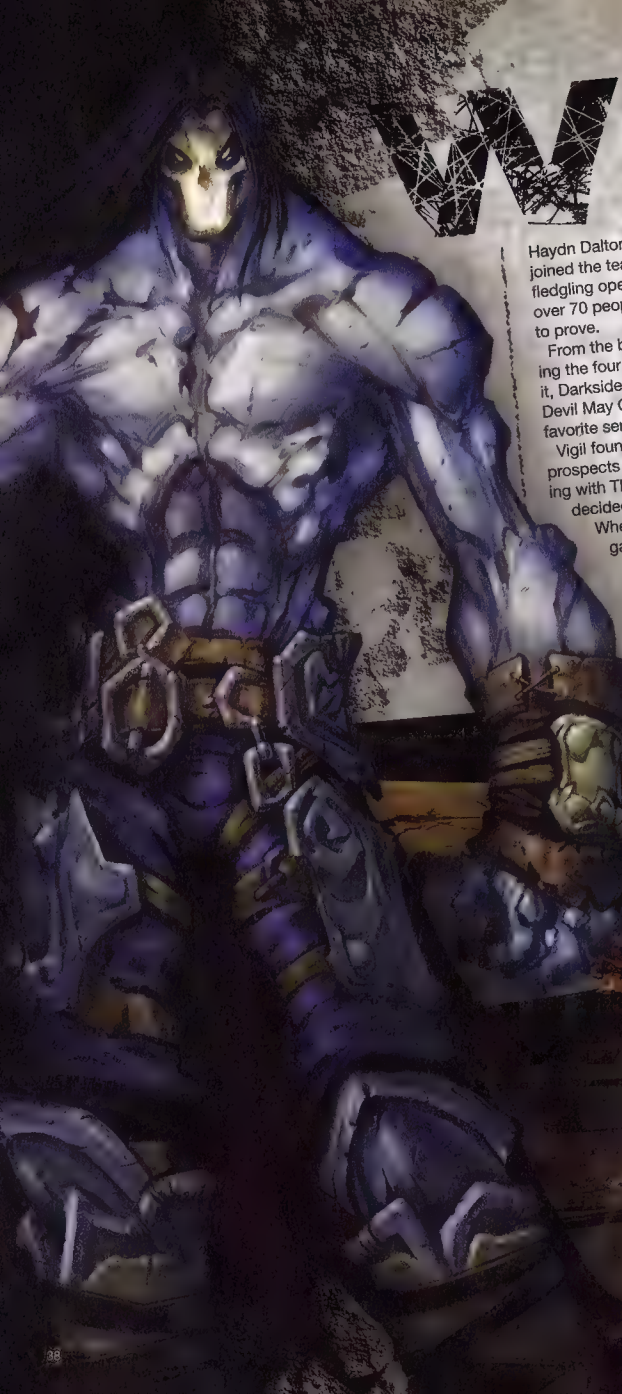
ESRB Rating
M (Mature)

DARK SIDERS II

UNDER THE SHADOW OF DEATH

Since the beginning of time, the universe has been embroiled in supernatural conflict. The kingdoms of Heaven and Hell fight brutally in an endless war for the throne of the cosmos. Amidst all this chaos, a power arises that seeks to enact justice and preserve order – a band of peerless warriors known as the four horsemen. In a mad bid for power, one of Heaven's archangels invoked the End War of the Apocalypse, eradicating the human race and framing the horseman War for the genocide. According to the ancient laws of the universe, War must be punished. Only one being is bold enough to stand up against this blind justice. Only one horseman is willing to risk his life and integrity to redeem his brother. Only one hopes to repair the damage done by Heaven's armies. His name is Death.

BY BEN REEVES



W

When Vigil Games first formed, the team consisted of four guys with a dream. Three of the founders, David Adams, Marvin Donald, and Ryan Stefanelli, had some experience in the game industry, but nothing that would make a publisher take note. To add some credibility to its name, the trio joined forces with comic book icon Joe Madureira, an artist who has shaped comic book design over the course of the last decade with his work on titles like *Uncanny X-Men* and *Battle Chasers*.

Haydn Dalton, a designer with over two decades of experience, eventually joined the team as well. Under the guidance of this leadership group, the fledgling operation built its software tools from scratch as the team grew to over 70 people. Vigil had a growing talent pool, but the company still had a lot to prove.

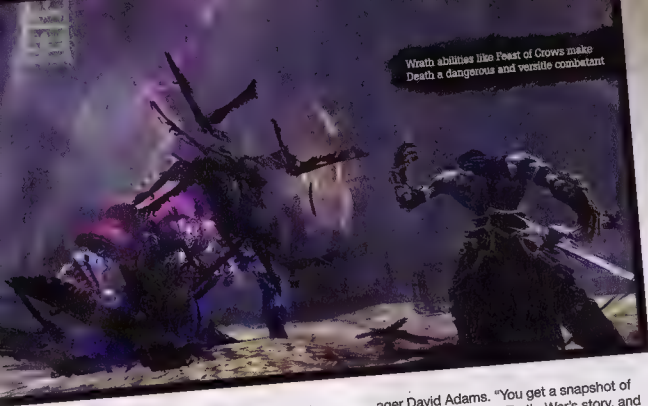
From the beginning, the studio wanted to create an apocalyptic epic featuring the four horsemen mentioned in the Book of Revelation. As the team saw it, *Darksiders* would shamelessly combine the fast-paced combat of titles like *Devil May Cry* with the exploration and puzzle solving of one of their other favorite series, *The Legend of Zelda*.

Vigil found few publishers who shared this dream. At one point, the studio's prospects looked so futile that the team almost skipped an E3 pitch meeting with THQ. But Vigil followed through with the meeting, and the publisher decided to take a gamble on the young studio, purchasing it a year later.

When *Darksiders* released in 2010, it struck a chord that resonated with gamers and critics alike. The gamble paid off.

Now both THQ and *Darksiders*' growing fan base have big aspirations for Vigil's follow-up work. To exceed these expectations, the studio felt it needed to build a game with a larger overworld, more dungeons, a detailed loot system, and a new hero who could help carry the franchise in bold new directions. *Darksiders II* aims to deliver on all fronts.





Wrath abilities like Feast of Crows make Death a dangerous and versatile combatant



The original Darksiders told the story of War, a noble horseman caught in the middle of a cosmic frame-up. While War eventually proved his innocence, a lot more happened behind the scenes during his adventure. Instead of picking up after Darksiders' cliff-hanger, the sequel follows the exploits of a second horseman during roughly the same time period.

"In Darksiders you get this very narrow view of what's going on," says Vigil general man-

ager David Adams. "You get a snapshot of what's happening on Earth, War's story, and all the betrayals that made that happen. But I think there is this whole context to what's going on, which is sort of the larger story. That's what you get through Darksiders II." By the end of Darksiders II, Vigil hopes play-

ers will have a more comprehensive view of the series' mythology. Players should have a better understanding of how the horsemen are involved in this eternal conflict, who the major players are, and the ultimate goals that drive them.

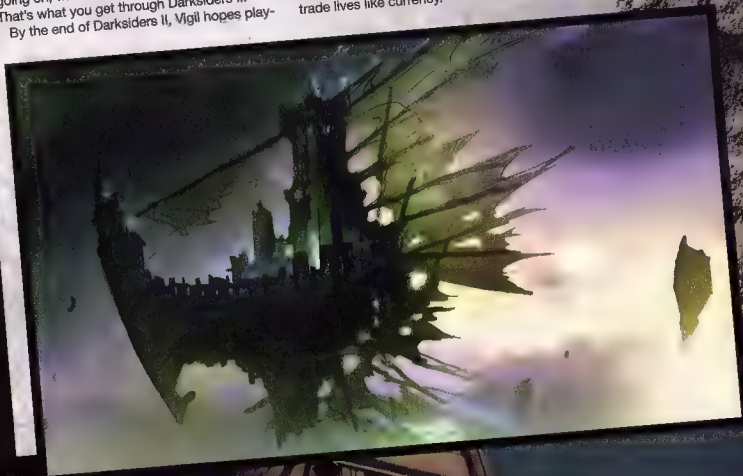
Darksiders II picks up after War is targeted as a scapegoat for the human genocide. This injustice sparks a controversy within the underworld, and War's brother, Death, is irate.

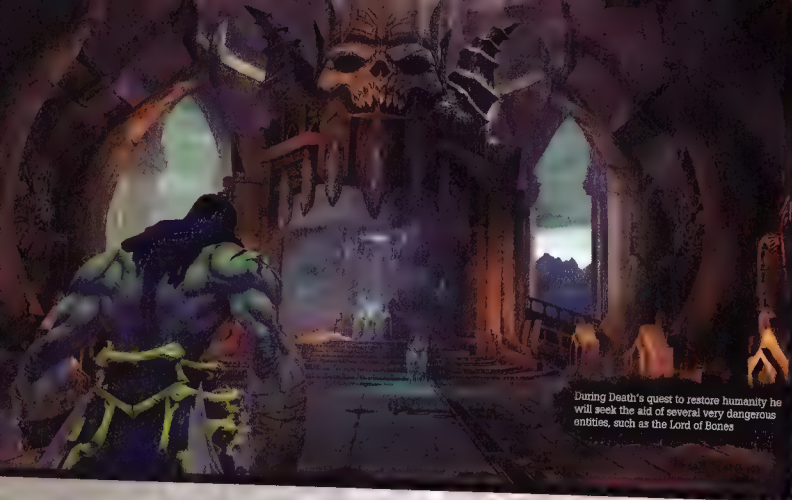
"Out of all the horsemen, War is the most honorable," Adams explains. "He would never break a rule. The guy would never cross the street unless it was at a crosswalk; he's just that kind of guy. Knowing this, Death is like, 'This is horse s---! I'm going to find out what happened.'"

Since War is blamed for the eradication of the human race, Death reasons that if he can restore humanity, he will redeem his brother. However, the resurrection of an entire species is no easy task. To do this Death must work in secret, interacting with some of the sneakiest and most secretive characters in the Underworld — powerful beings who operate outside of the universe's ancient laws and trade lives like currency.



Darksiders II will come packed with content, Vigil has promised that the first hub zone of Darksiders II will feature about as many dungeons as players encountered throughout the entirety of the original Darksiders





During Death's quest to restore humanity he will seek the aid of several very dangerous entities, such as the Lord of Bones

The world of Darksiders is much larger than anyone who played the first game might have guessed.

While the series' fiction uses traditional Judeo-Christian ideologies as a jumping off point to explore a war between the forces of Heaven and Hell, the larger Darksiders mythology has more in common with ancient Greek legends or our own modern fables like Star Wars.

Within Darksiders' fiction, the underworld isn't just a place people go when they die; it is a larger realm called the Abyss. This

world holds a variety of different environments, from barren desert wastelands to lush jungle forests.

"There are all these layers of history within the fiction," Adams explains. "There are worlds ruled by Heaven and Hell, and they are almost like feudal societies. But there are also older worlds — worlds that still exist in a high degree of decay.... Their time has passed, so their worlds are slowly dying."

In Darksiders II, Death explores many of these regions. "Since it doesn't take place on Earth, there are a lot more interesting areas

to explore," says Vigil creative director Joe Madureira. "It's not just collapsed buildings and parking garages. We had always planned to have a lot more fantasy elements in the first game. Now we can explore those."

The Abyss is also far more open than the earthly environments War trudged through in the first game. The overworld in Darksiders was room-based — every section of the game was contained within its own discrete area. Outdoor environmental stages were sometimes large, but every area was connected through doors and hallways. Vigil is ditching this approach with Darksiders II.

The team compares the Abyss to Rome from Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood. The expansive environment features rolling hills that stretch off in all directions, and players can freely explore the Abyss at their leisure. Death's horse, Despair (see sidebar), and a network of underground Serpent Holes (which act as shortcuts) help players traverse this large landmass. Given the caliber of the enemies Death comes across, he may occasionally find himself in need of a speedy exit.

The horsemen come from a race of beings called the Nephilim. They are the last of their kind. This is an important detail that Vigil plans to explore throughout the course of Darksiders II. While Death is committed to restoring his brother's honor, his past will force him to test his moral conviction.

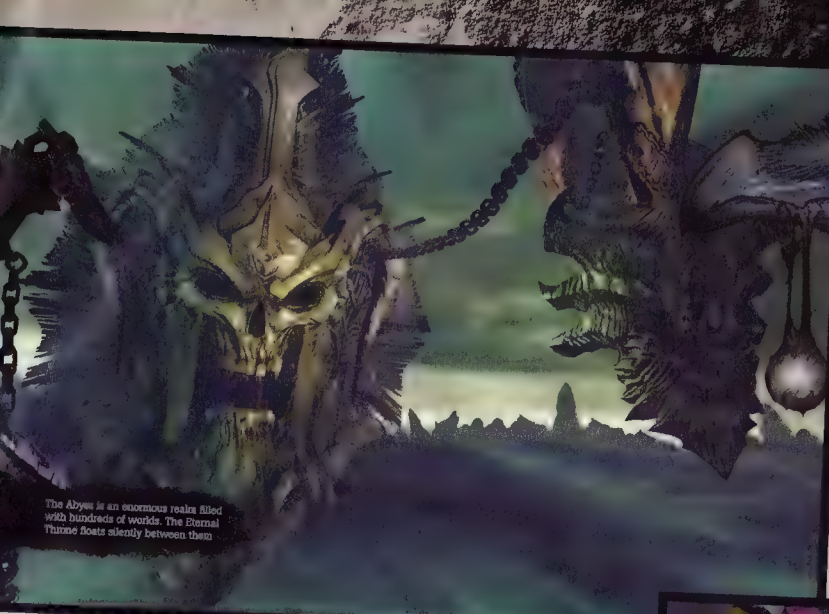
"Death was actually involved in the destruction of his race," Madureira explains. "When he gets the choice to bring back humanity, he has to deal with the fact that he could also erase this horrible thing that he's done and bring back the Nephilim instead."

"The horsemen are like forces of nature,"

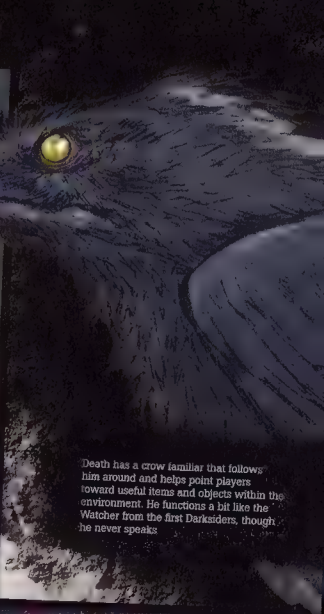
THE PALE RIDER

What is a horseman without a horse? Death's mount, Despair, plays a larger role in Darksiders II than War's trusty steed Ruin ever did thanks to Vigil's new approach to environmental design. "A lot of the levels in the first game weren't designed to have much need for War's horse," admits Vigil creative director Joe Madureira. "Because [the Darksiders II] world is so much bigger, it's designed for more horse traversal, and you'll have access to him from the beginning of the game."





The Abyss is an enormous realm filled with hundreds of worlds. The Eternal Throne floats silently between them.



Death has a crow familiar that follows him around and helps point players toward useful items and objects within the environment. He functions a bit like the Watcher from the first DarkSiders, though, he never speaks.

Adams adds, "That's why they are called War and Death. They're not really people. But because they've gone through these circumstances and they've been forced to deal with their mortality, they become more and more like real people."

Death's haunting past weighs on him as he traverses the Abyss to seek the council of a dangerous being called the Lord of Bones – the keeper of the souls of all dead mortals. The Lord of Bones lives on a giant airship called the Eternal Throne. Constructed from ancient wood and bone and powered by two serpents fastened to the ship's hull like chariot horses, the Eternal Throne floats through the ether of the underworld.

This giant vessel serves as one of DarkSiders II's city hubs. Within these hubs, Death can interact with NPCs, trade with merchants, and seek advice from combat trainers. Vigil plans to have at least four of these hub cities spread across the Abyss.

As Death makes his way toward the room, the Lord of Bones' chancellor stops him short.

"I see you, rider of Death," says the chancellor.

"I need to speak with the Lord of Bones," Death replies in a dry, emotionless tone.


After a threatening exchange, Death learns that the Lord of Bones is busy sorting out the eternal destinies of all the human souls murdered during the apocalypse – too busy to be bothered with annoying questions from the brother of a convicted criminal. If Death is going to gain audience with the lord, he will have to earn it.

"There is a place within our realm known as

the Gated Arena," says the chancellor. "Here mortals are offered one last chance to earn freedom from death – a boon that includes an audience with my lord. Journey to the arena, defeat its champion and return here with its head. Do this and my lord can refuse you no council."

"Where is this arena?" Death asks.

"Fret not," the chancellor chuckles as the hull of the ship trembles against the weight of a mighty dock. A sprinkling of dust showers down from the ceiling. "We have arrived."



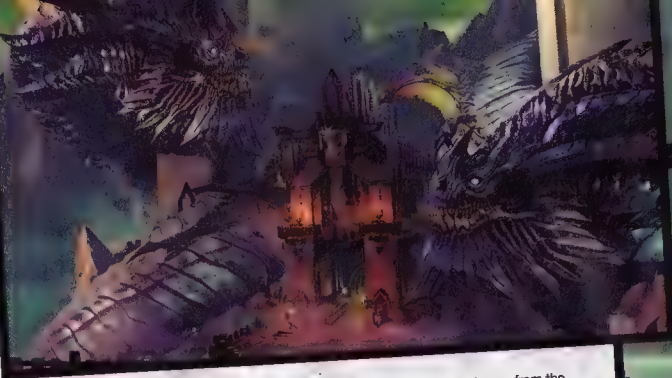
Death will be able to switch over to his secondary weapons, such as this heavy hammer, on the fly – even in the middle of combat.

Like the dungeons in the first game, Darksiders II's underworld zones all center on their own theme. Within the Gated Arena—a network of underground caverns connected to a central gothic coliseum—Death must find three missing horns and unite them in order to summon the arena champion. As Death journeys down a path to find his first horn, he enters a room featuring walls of bone. Suddenly the walls begin to shake and a horde of skeleton warriors crawls out from the cracks. Itching for a fight, Death draws two large scythes off his back.

War's sword got the job done in the first Darksiders, but it wasn't flashy enough for some of the Vigil team members. "The animators on the team wanted something that was more fun to play with and a little bit more expressive," recalls game director Marvin Donald. "So we came up with a weapon that could change form and shape depending on the attack, making Death feel more versatile. Sometimes he's dual wielding, and sometimes he's delivering heavier single blows."

Using a mix of combos, Death shreds through the skeleton warriors. Death is a more agile fighter than War, and unlike War, Death cannot block. Instead, Death must dodge most incoming attacks. Vigil believes being a mobile fighter is more in line with Death's personality, so he dances around the room, throwing enemies into the air before uniting his two scythes to form one double-bladed staff that minces enemies.

Death has more tools of destruction at his disposal than just two pieces of flashy steel.



At one point during the conflict several warriors close in on the horseman. He leans back and casts a wrath spell called Feast of Crows. Dozens of black birds emerge from smoke and begin pecking viciously at the opponents.

"Feast of Crows does a decent amount of damage," Adams says. "But the coolest thing it does is lock up all the enemies onscreen, which is where a lot of interplay between weapons and abilities comes into play."

Death takes advantage of the distraction to pull out one of his heavier sub-weapons, a large hammer. With this skull-crunching mallet, he sends the remaining skeletons skittering across the ground like rolled dice. Before long, Death is the last warrior standing. The horseman looks across the empty room.

The rewards for his effort shine up from the ground like a dozen glistening jewels.



Collecting loot is a major factor in Darksiders II, as it allows players to fine-tune and shape their own version of Death.

Players have roughly 12 different slots for equipping a variety of different armors, items, and secondary weapons. Different armor sets alter Death's appearance and also mitigate different types of damage. While some armor makes death more effective in combat against fire-based creatures, others might protect him from electrical attacks.

Additional loot will add bonus effects to Death's skills and attributes. For example, one



Death is a more agile fighter than his brother War, as observed by the fact that he cannot block but must dodge every attack

DARKSIDE QUESTS

The Darksiders world was a spectacle, but it felt largely vacant. Vigil says more non-player characters populate each hub world in the sequel than could be found throughout the entirety of the original game. Death can interact with these NPCs to learn more about the game's lore or to acquire side quests that will send him back out into the world. Vigil also promises more than your average fetch and kill quests.

"A lot of times in a game, a side quest is just go out into the world and kill something or go to a dungeon you've already been to and kill something," remarks Vigil general manager David Adams. "We have some of that, but some of our side quests open up new dungeons complete with their own theme, puzzle mechanics, and traversal sequences. The side quests are actually tied to some cool, compelling content."

New dungeons and extra story sequences should offer a motivating reason for players to explore the less frequented areas of Darksiders II.

pendant might give Death a 20 percent boost from healing potions, while a particular gauntlet could add two more crows to his Feast of Crows ability.

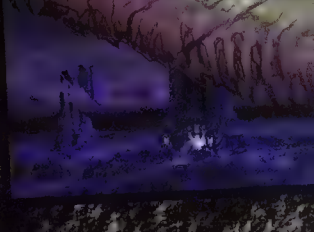
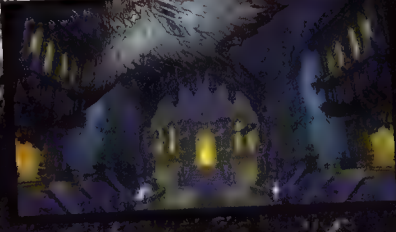
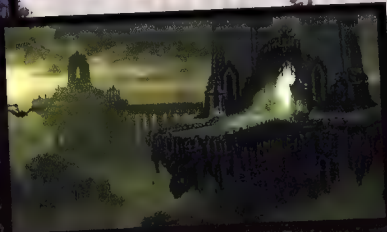
Through loot, Vigil hopes to encourage players to customize Death to fit their play style. If you like using heavier secondary weapons, seek out loot that makes Death more effective with hammers. On the other hand, if you prefer to rely on Death's wrath abilities, find or purchase items that significantly increase his skill in those dark arts.


Equipping new items isn't the only way to boost Death's stats. Darksiders II also features a brand new leveling system complete with skill trees. As players level up, they earn skill points that can be used to unlock new talents and abilities. Feast of Crows is an example of one of these abilities, but it's far from the only weapon in Death's arsenal. Players can unlock wrath abilities that deal large amounts of localized damage, boost Death's attack power, or afflict his enemies with a plague that deals damage over time.

"When you played as War in the first Darksiders, most players had the same basic experience," Donald says. "You acquired the same abilities, you didn't really make a lot of choices, and by the end of the game you basically had everything. That's not going to be the case in Darksiders II. You're going to have to make certain sacrifices."

By the end of the game, two different players could end up with vastly different versions of Death.

Death rings this bell in order to summon the Eternal Throne





Death's twin scythes can join together to form one double-bladed staff.

Physical combat isn't the only challenge that Death faces along his journey. The horseman must be agile and quick-witted to survive all the trials facing him during his quest across the Abyss.

The traversal sequences in *Darksiders II* are a far cry from what players experienced in the first game. War could climb walls and swing hand over fist across ropes, but Death is far more agile. He can wall-run over gaps in the floor, jog along tightropes, and perform other acrobatic feats that would send War plummeting into a bottomless pit.

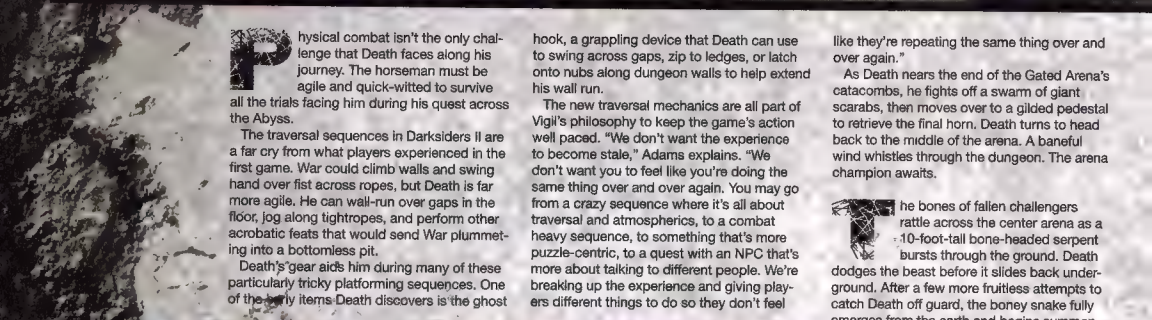
Death's gear aids him during many of these particularly tricky platforming sequences. One of the early items Death discovers is the ghost

hook, a grappling device that Death can use to swing across gaps, zip to ledges, or latch onto nubs along dungeon walls to help extend his wall run.

The new traversal mechanics are all part of Vigil's philosophy to keep the game's action well paced. "We don't want the experience to become stale," Adams explains. "We don't want you to feel like you're doing the same thing over and over again. You may go from a crazy sequence where it's all about traversal and atmospherics, to a combat heavy sequence, to something that's more puzzle-centric, to a quest with an NPC that's more about talking to different people. We're breaking up the experience and giving players different things to do so they don't feel

like they're repeating the same thing over and over again."

As Death nears the end of the Gated Arena's catacombs, he fights off a swarm of giant scarabs, then moves over to a gilded pedestal to retrieve the final horn. Death turns to head back to the middle of the arena. A baneful wind whistles through the dungeon. The arena champion awaits.




The bones of fallen challengers rattle across the center arena as a 10-foot-tall bone-headed serpent bursts through the ground. Death dodges the beast before it slides back underground. After a few more fruitless attempts to catch Death off guard, the boney snake fully emerges from the earth and begins summoning forth the nearby remains of its previous victims. What once appeared to be a snake is now revealed to be the vertebrae of a much larger skeletal monstrosity.

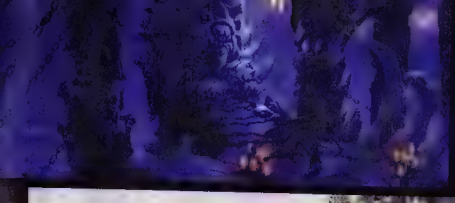
An overcast sky casts an eerie light on the arena. Two-story-high walls trap the combatants, preventing either warrior from fleeing. Above them rows of empty seats are the only witnesses for this deadly bout. Death's battle with the arena champion now begins in earnest.

The giant undead beast stumbles toward Death, but he dodges all of the creature's attacks. Spying an opening, Death latches onto its skull with his ghost hook and quickly closes the distance between them.

The ghost hook is just as useful in combat as it is during traversal. Death can pull smaller enemies directly to him, or he can use it to close the distance between himself and a much larger enemy like this boney giant. "For us it was really important to make creatures that reinforce the gear mechanics," Adams says.



When in doubt, aim for the giant glowing skull.



After a flurry of quick cuts to the eye of the beast, both Death and the creature come crashing to the ground. The serpent sinks back into the ground and then reemerges behind the horseman. To defeat this beast Death will have to unleash the full force of his fury.

As Death chains together combos he builds a chaos meter that ultimately allows him to transform into an unstoppable reaper for a short time. Unlike War, who had a similar talent, Death can use this ability before his meter completely fills. Certain combos bring out his reaper form, allowing him to deliver devastating final blows at the end of long combos.

"We are trying to use the reaper more," Adams explains. "He opens doors and picks up big objects, and even does interactive death sequences for larger enemies."

Death unleashes the full might of his reaper form on the bone giant. Several powerful attacks tear the bones from its body, and one final slice of the reaper's scythe sends the beast's skull clattering to the ground. Death's task is complete; he can return to the Lord of Bones with a gift and hopefully receive the answers he seeks.




Although it was generally well received, some criticized Darksiders for being too derivative. Titles like God of War and the

Legend of Zelda undoubtedly served as inspiration for the team, but Vigil says it has always been focused on making a game with its own unique style.

"Instead of being a genre-blending game, we really just want to establish our own genre of game," Adams says. "The general alchemy of combining the loot, the level advancement, the crazy puzzle solving, and this style of combat makes for an interesting combination. Darksiders II is unique to every other game out there."

If all these elements come together properly,




Loot will affect Death's look and add bonuses to his weapons and abilities

Vigil may have reason to boast. Few games have deftly mixed the various game types offered in the original Darksiders with as much success as Vigil. If the studio can improve on this volatile chemistry and produce a polished experience, the game could stand next to the iconic series that serve as its inspiration. ♦

Head to gameinformer.com/darksiders for an entire month of exclusive Darksiders II coverage, including the evolution of Death's design and a behind-the-scenes look at dungeon creation



Death's Reaper form is a fearsome sight



Darksiders II will have a wide variety of enemy types. Vigil doesn't even consider this giant scarab a miniboss; it's just one of the game's many larger enemies

FINAL FANTASY XIII-2



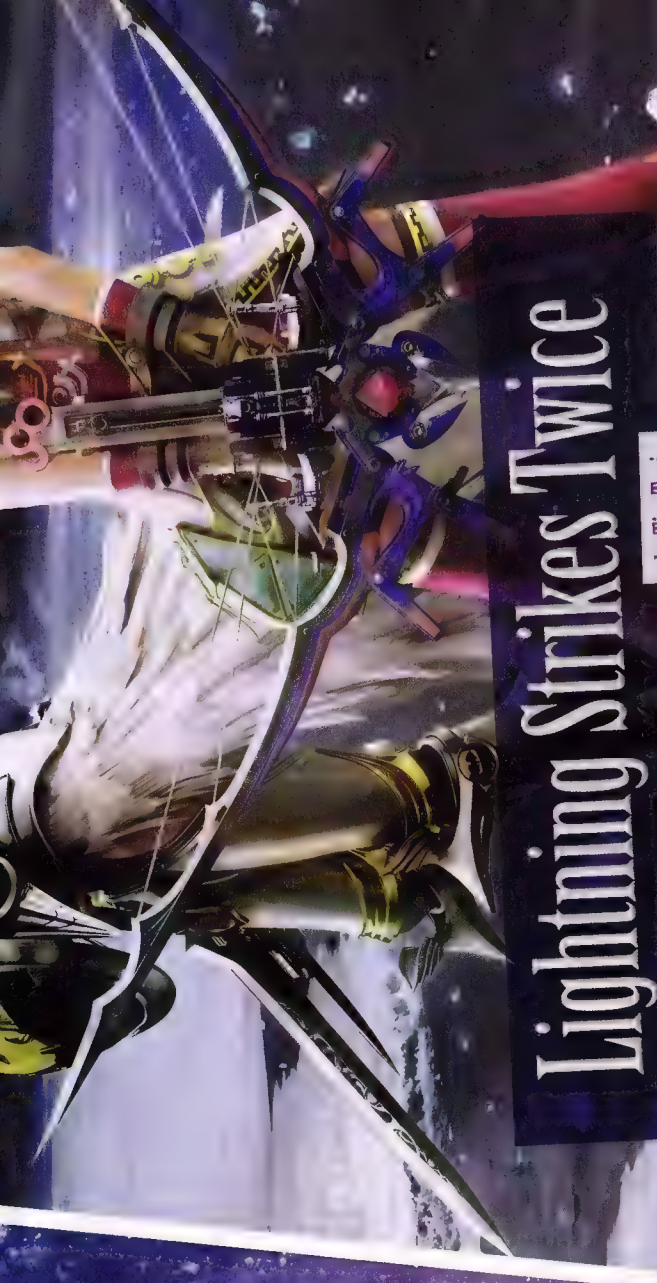
Platform
PlayStation 3 • Xbox 360

Style
1-Player Role-Playing

Publisher
Square Enix

Developer
Square Enix

Release
January 2012



Lightning Strikes Twice

by Tim Turi

Final Fantasy XIII was a good game. But for Square Enix, releasing anything less than a genre-defining entry in Final Fantasy's legendary main series line is unsatisfactory. FF XIII was almost universally praised for its engaging, fast-paced battle system, but many criticized the oversimplified level design and confusing story that was buried in backend menus. Square Enix recently posted a fiscal profit loss of 12 billion yen (roughly \$150,000,000 U.S. dollars), with CEO Yoichi Wada stating, "Our game development has

become weaker than expected." With profits down, it's more important than ever for the creators of Final Fantasy XIII-2 to tap into the series' core fan base. For this sequel, the team is addressing negative feedback, ditching the slow drip of new information, and passing on Japan-exclusive press coverage in favor of a globally distributed magazine. These are impactful departures from Square Enix's usual Final Fantasy treatment, and we couldn't be happier to deliver the first look at this much-improved sequel.





Much has happened to Lightning since we last saw her at the end of Final Fantasy XIII. In that saga, she and her friends destroyed Cocoon's corrupt power source, which in turn sent Lightning's home planet on a collision course with the gigantic world it orbits, Pulse. Two allies, Fang and Vanille, halted Cocoon's imminent destruction by tapping into their ancient power. The duo sheathed and braced the floating colony with a gigantic crystalline pillar, saving the majority of its inhabitants, but at the cost of entering stasis. In the epilogue novella, *Final Fantasy XIII Episode 1: Lightning* feels a mysterious power drawing her to an unexplored area of Gran Pulse, where she believes the key to saving Fang and Vanille awaits. What she discovers is a gloomy beach that serves as the setting for *Final Fantasy XIII-2*'s action-packed introduction.

Lightning told no one about her private quest to a mysterious land (see sidebar on page 49), and naturally her sister Serah becomes concerned when she can't find her sibling. Square wouldn't go into specifics about how Serah's search begins, but the publisher did let me get my hands on a segment later in the game where Serah and her new ally Noel are hunting for Lightning.

It begins with the pair tumbling through some sort of warp gate, electricity crackling within its rotating machinery. The rainy ruins of Bresha, a former sanctuary of Pulse-tainted refugees, greet them. The two adventurers turn their gazes skyward, and Serah exclaims that they must be on Cocoon. Noel seems uncertain, and Serah quickly points out the new cast member's home planet, Pulse, orbiting above.

"So this is how Cocoon looks like from the inside," Noel remarks.

"Oh, I forgot. This is your first time here."

Serah replies.

Noel is more than a fresh face in Final Fantasy XIII-2; he's also an entry point for players new to the universe. Having lived as a strong, self-sufficient hunter on Pulse his entire life, Noel is unaware of the happenings on Cocoon. Think of him as a country boy visiting the big city for the very first time. Square Enix wouldn't divulge details regarding how Serah and Noel meet or his role in the larger story, but he appears to be taking the lead at this point in the hunt for Lightning.



Noel and Serah's fighting prowess is put to the test when an enormous disembodied hand bursts through a crumbling wall. The floating, glowing fist belongs to Atlas, an ancient weapon built by humans that has somehow gone maverick. Entering battle, Noel unsheathes his deadly dual swords and Serah readies her own blade. Though she's using a sword in this demo, Serah will acquire a compound bow later in the story (a weapon intended to preserve her femininity, according to Square Enix).

This initial encounter with Atlas offers the first opportunity to try out FF XIII-2's new Cinematic Action mechanic. Button cues appear on screen that, when pressed correctly, allow Noel to do fantastic things such as climb the behemoth's hand, scale its invisible body, and attempt to assault its translucent head. These new quicktime events fit in perfectly with Final Fantasy's trademark over-the-top action sequences.

The attack on Atlas fails. Its body appears to be invulnerable while invisible. Just as the battle seems lost, a battalion of gunships approaches overhead. Another Cinematic Action sequence begins, in which the player unleashes devastating artillery fire with rapid button presses - it appears not only lead characters can be controlled in these timing-based moments. The barrage proves successful, and Atlas retreats.

When the dust settles, Noel and Serah realize they need to somehow weaken Atlas before taking it out. With the juggernaut temporarily quelled, the two have an opportunity to explore the water-slickened Bresha Ruins. The dusky, debris-laden settlement may be a husk of what it used to be, but townsfolk still waddle the area on their daily routines.

The lack of towns' and citizen interactions in FF XIII disappointed fans, and Bresha is the first example of



Stock a set of commands focused on dealing damage.

Don't make a new 11th command, but make a new 11th command.

Double Trouble
PARADIGM SHIFT

COMMANDS

ATTACK

DEFENSE

ITEMS

Serah

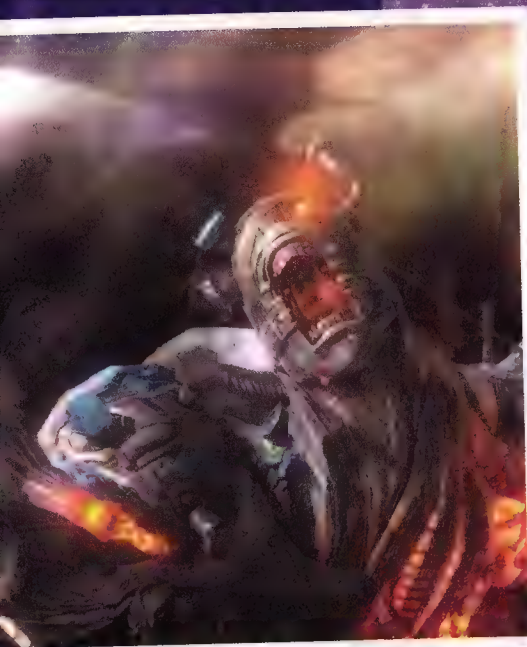
COM

HP

Noel

COM

HP



Where is Lightning?



The introduction of Final Fantasy XIII-2 features Lightning plummeting from the heavens toward the dark sands of a crystal-laden beach. She summons her mechanical horse Odin from the nether just in time to break her fall. Unfortunately, the deadly Bahamut is hot on her tail, tearing through the sky while spewing geysers of hot blue fire from its maw. The heroine calls down lightning strikes against the winged brute while galloping across the shore of a dreary sea. She eventually bolts up the side of a building to engage the winged beast head on in an outstanding display of her battle prowess. A high-flying quick time event culminates in a traditional battle, and that's when director Motomu Toriyama told me I'd have to wait until TGS to learn more about the scene. This dynamic horseback

battle is unlike anything we saw in FF XIII, and promises to be an entertaining opening for the game.

This dark new location of Final Fantasy XIII's universe is still very mysterious, and at one point in the demo I heard Noel and Serah mention that Lightning may be in a place called Valhalla. The recent trailer showcases her new metallic armor, shield, and single white wing. Getups like this are reminiscent of the Valkyries from Norse mythology, who were female angels tasked with retrieving fallen vikings and bringing them to Valhalla to prepare for Ragnarok. Could it all be a coincidence? What is she up to? We've still got a lot to learn, including who the enigmatic man Lightning battles in the trailer is, and how the goddess Etro plays into the story.

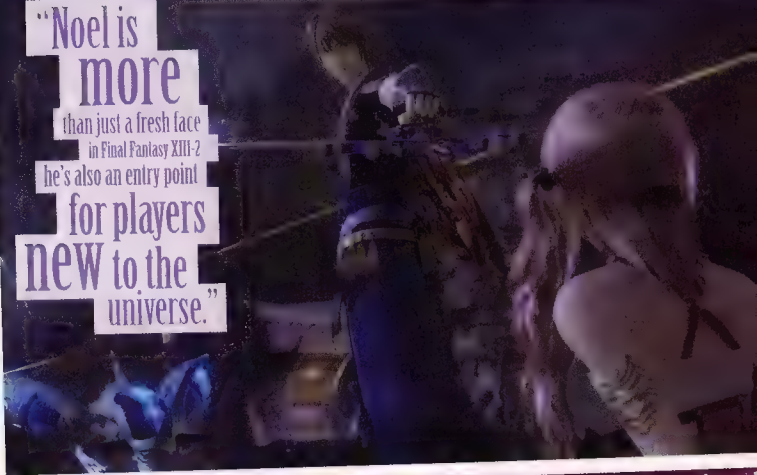
Square Enix's step back from that design. The Datalog still exists, but chatting with NPCs reveals interesting bits about the story without forcing the player deep into the menus. For example, one man assured us that Atlas is not a deadly fall'ole, and a lady named Alyssa claimed to know a way to control it. Alyssa volunteers to guide Noel and Serah via radio communication, pointing us in the direction of a cavernous sewer system.

If this were FF XIII, the road to the sewer would have likely been a straight shot littered with some hidden treasure and wandering monsters. Not in FF XIII-2. Viewing the map, I saw a handful of branching paths that led to various locations. Square Enix assured me that additional quests are available throughout the game, doing away with the previous title's mind-numbing linearity. Although no side quests were available in this brief demonstration, I took the opportunity to treasure hunt and become acquainted with the other new party member—a white creature sporting wings, a bobbling pom-pom on its head, and a cheery disposition.

Moogles only had a cameo role in FF XIII, but fans will be pleased to learn one of the critters flutters along with Noel and Serah throughout their quest. The cute critter's lovable demeanor and classic "kupo" catchphrase promise to offer comic relief against FF XIII-2's darker atmosphere. Much more than a comedian, the moogle's pom-pom throws a pleasant purple glow on any location it senses a hidden treasure chest. Watching the light of the moogle's beacon dance across the wet stone of Bresha reminded me of how much energy Square Enix puts into making its games gorgeous.

(continued on page 50)

"Noel is more than just a fresh face in Final Fantasy XIII-2—he's also an entry point for players new to the universe."



The Storytellers'

Favorite Fantasies



Yoshinori Kitase, producer

Favorite Game: Final Fantasy VII

Favorite Character: Cloud (FF VII)



Motomu Toriyama, director

Favorite Game: Final Fantasy X

Favorite Character: Lightning (FF XIII)



Isamu Komikokuryo, art director

Favorite Game: Final Fantasy III
(Japanese numbering)

Favorite Character: Fran (FF XII)



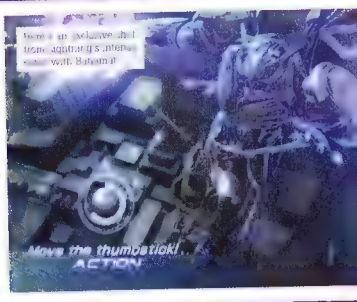
Yuusuke Matsui, battle director

Favorite Game: Final Fantasy XI

Favorite Character: Terra (FF VI)

My admiration for the scenery is cut short when a monster springs from the ground. In contrast to FF XIII's endlessly pacing monsters, FF XIII-2 has mobs that materialize in the environment, incorporating the element of surprise found in older Final Fantasy games. When a foe emerges, a circle appears around the party. This remains visible as long as the enemy is in range, which is helpful when attempting to flee. Even handier is the moogles' Mog Clock. When monsters appear in range, a timer pops up with a hand, ticking down a colored meter from green, to yellow, and finally to red. Confronting the mob and pressing a specific button launches an attack. Attack when the Mog Clock is green, and you will enter battle with an advantage. If you strike when the meter is yellow, the fight is normal. Wait to pounce until the meter is red, however, and you'll begin with a dangerous disadvantage. In one instance this handicap cursed the party with sluggish Active Time Battle bars and harder-hitting enemies. The Mog Clock is one of FF XIII-2's most exciting new features, lending a new tactical wrinkle to the already brilliant battle system.

Speaking of, the acclaimed battle system from FF XIII is intact. Characters unleash attacks as the ATB bar fills, and players shift between paradigms depending on whether they need to heal, cast spells, slice and dice, or tank. This section of the game only features



Noel and Serah, but that doesn't mean they're alone in their fight through Bresha. Defeating foes in combat wins the player crystals that can be used to summon domesticated monsters in combat. Each new ally comes with his or her own unique role, resulting in slightly different paradigm options. Selecting the Ravager paradigm calls on a feisty Flanabero to build an enemy's stagger meter with deadly black magic. Once staggered, shifting to the Cerberus paradigm beckons a husky Behemoth that allows Noel, Serah, and their new pet to unleash heavy hits for the kill. Monster allies also have a Fetal Link ability that triggers a button press prompt to unleash tide-turning onslaughts. These two beasts add a refreshing amount of variety to combat, and Square Enix says we can expect around 200 monsters.



After several heated battles, Alyssa chimes in on the radio saying she has discovered the location of a control device that can manipulate Atlas. Noel, Serah, and their moogles pause to consider their options. Nonlinearity is a major factor in FF XIII-2's story, allowing players to choose their party's course of action. In this instance I had several options – ask Alyssa or the moogles for advice, ignore the control device and rush into battle with Atlas, or remain indecisive. When the troupe asks Alyssa for her thoughts she says that using the control device will open up Atlas to physical attacks. When the moogles are offered a penalty for its thoughts, it quips “Um, I like Serah more than I like Noel. Kupo!” At this point in development, regardless of the decision made at this crossroads I was still able to alter my destiny after committing to one of the options. I chose to plunge into the sewers and track down the control device.

Enemy encounters increase dramatically when Noel and Serah descend into Bresha's underground. Many winding paths lead to treasure, while only one rewards the heroes with the control device. Square Enix promises that more of these dungeon-like segments are peppered in throughout FF XIII-2. Based off my time fighting through Pulsework soldiers and flan, you can look forward to exploring areas similar to the offshoot caves found in FF XIII's

expansive Gran Pulse. After engaging in numerous battles and avoiding a few thanks to the trusty Mog Clock, Noel and Serah uncover Atlas's control device.

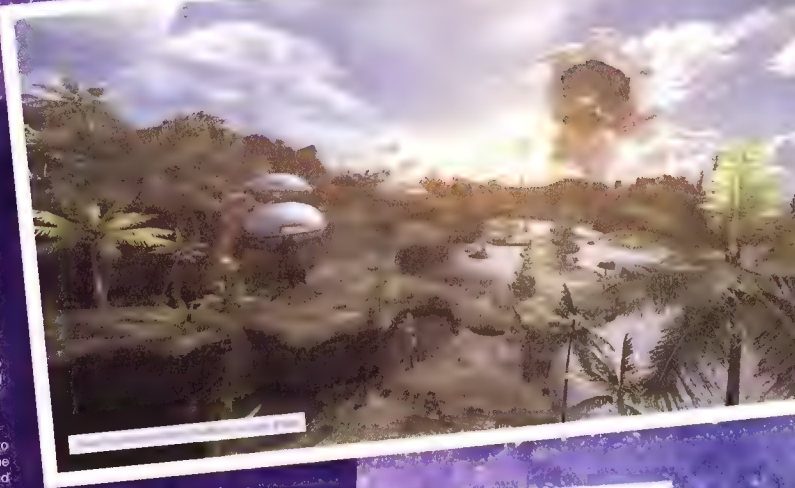
The team activates the mysterious device which transports them to a strange world. This bizarre, ethereal void is populated only by a floor composed of floating tiles and scattered crystals. Here, the player must navigate Noel along the tiles to collect every crystal. Backtracking is impossible, as each square Noel treads on disappears, forcing players to discover the critical path. After a few different puzzle stages Noel and company are back in the Bresha sewers.

“The machine is working!” Serah exclaims. Alyssa squawks over the radio that Atlas appears to be slowing down – “the perfect opportunity for a full-on assault. Atlas towers in the distance.

“There he is!” Serah shouts. “And not looking too happy,” Noel replies. Atlas's protective veil fades, finally revealing the hulking titan. The familiar rhythm of FF XIII's satisfying paradigm system is in full swing here; weaken Atlas by pelting him with magic, lay on the pain with Noel and Serah's swords, swap to a healing-focused formation, then repeat. After the murderous mountain receives enough damage, Noel is prompted to execute a final flashy flurry. My time with Final Fantasy XIII-2 ends with Noel's last furious blow, leaving me with the intense desire to see what happens next.

I poured nearly 50 hours into Final Fantasy XIII. The early E3 build Square Enix showed me of Final Fantasy XIII-2 lasted little more than half an hour. Rolling together all the time I've spent in the world of Cocoon and Pulse, I'm comfortable saying I enjoyed these fleeting 30 minutes the most. The game features enhancements to almost every aspect of an already solid formula, resulting in an enjoyable modern RPG experience. If my short time with FF XIII-2 is any indication of the final product, I can't wait to get my hands on this promising piece of digital redemption once more.

Visit gameinformer.com/mag to take a photo tour of Square Enix's Japan offices and see where your favorite universes are crafted.



The Vertical Element

In previous Final Fantasy titles, leaping has usually been reserved for context-sensitive situations. The cast of Final Fantasy XIII-2 removes its figurative lead boots and is finally endowed with the ability to jump. It may be a minor addition compared to the other great things being incorporated into FF XIII-2, but jumping when you want just feels right.

Downloadable Content

We asked Final Fantasy XIII director Tetsuya Nomura if Final Fantasy XIII-2 will have DLC. Here's his response:

“Final Fantasy XIII was planned as one complete game, and in FF XIII-2 DLC is planned to expand the story so that players can enjoy the game for a longer period of time. Because FF XIII-2 was planned to have DLC from the beginning, that's how development proceeded. We can't say how many DLC packs there will be, but they'll release for Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3.”



NEXT-GENERATION PORTABLE

by Phil Kollar

THE HARDWARE

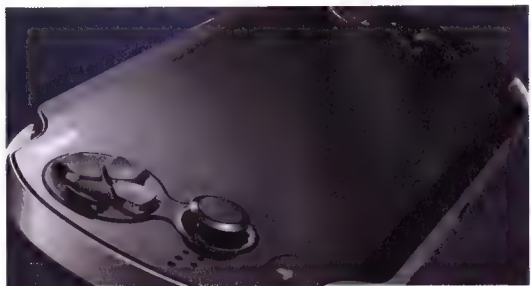
The NGP's new **OLE** screen is a major upgrade from the PSP, but the (aluminum) 171-gram handheld feels surprisingly light. Sony reps told us that the first version will actually be a bit heavier, but even so, it doesn't feel as heavy or bulky as early NGP models. The size is also impressive because of how clear the screen looks. Images are as clear and bright as anything on an HDTV — and a built-in HDMI port allows NGP users to output the system to HDTV as well. The handheld is packed with beautiful titles like *Uncharted*.

Of the myriad impressive NGP features, the most handy additions are the two touch pads — one on the screen face and one on the back of the device — and the addition of a second analog stick. Theoretically, this should allow the NGP to succeed better as a hardcore device while simultaneously offering better casual gaming experiences. Some writers attending the event complained it was difficult to tell where your fingers are placed on the smooth back pad, but I was confidently slipping it after getting my bearings.

While the addition of a second analog stick is worth praising alone, I was also impressed by the quality. Kiss the floppy analog nub of the PSP era goodbye; these feel and control much more like the analog sticks on a PS3 controller. The face buttons are positioned almost exactly as they are on an old-school PSP, making it easy for seasoned portable gamers to slide right into playing.

For the user interface, Sony has replaced the Xross Media Bar navigation from the PSP with new system called LiveArea, in addition to jumping between games and media. LiveArea includes message boards for each title and widgets that let you know when your friends have unlocked trophies or downloaded new content. Don't worry about creating a new friends list on your NGP; you can log in with your PSN account and see what your friends are up to across all the Sony platforms. Another GPS-based feature, called Near, tracks your location as you play games on the go and informs you who else is gaming in your vicinity, as well as what games they are playing. I didn't see either of these programs in action, but they seem like excellent additions for players with full friends lists or those who live in highly populated areas.

As with most Sony hardware, the NGP is an impressive piece of technology. Now that we've seen the handheld in action, the only questions left are how much does it cost and when it's coming out? Sony hasn't revealed these key details, but I did get a look at a few of the launch games.



Hands-on with Sony's PSP successor and its first batch of games

After months of anticipation following its announcement in Japan, I finally checked out the NGP and a handful of launch games. Read on for my first impressions of Sony's powerful new handheld gaming device.

THE SOFTWARE

Super Stardust Delta

Developer: Housemarque

Although Super Stardust for NGP is not a direct port of the PSN original, it maintains that game's simplicity and incredible visuals. Players use the tilt controls to move and avoid enemies. Launching a screen-clearing bomb is now as simple as tapping the screen while you're playing. This could end up being a no-brainer launch downloadable title for the handheld.

ModNation Racers

Developer: SCE San Diego Studio

While the gameplay of ModNation Racers for NGP is essentially the same as it was on the PSP and PS3, it features one major improvement: track creation augmented by touchscreen controls. You can now draw a road with your finger and create a simple track in seconds. Want to shift the height of the terrain? Push on the back touchpad to lift a mountain from the ground or push down on the front screen to create a valley.

Other breezy and impressive touchscreen creation options include grabbing the sun and dragging it across the sky to choose the time of day for your course and swiping across the world to paint in props (such as trees or houses) in high numbers.

Best of all, the NGP version of ModNation Racers is fully compatible with the PS3 version, meaning that on day one, NGP players

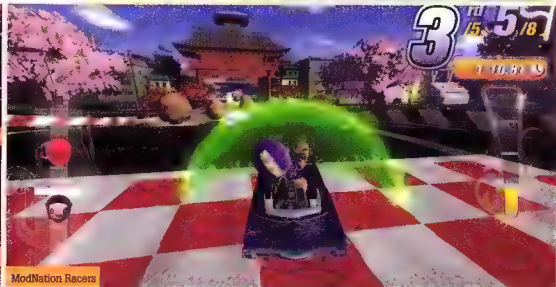
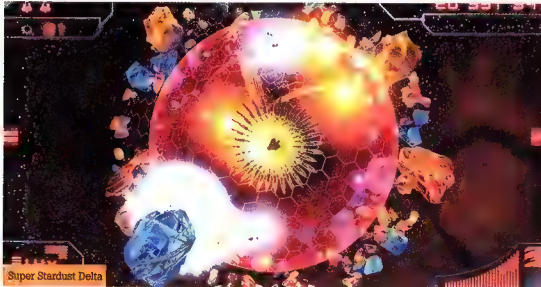
will have access to two million map and character creations. NGP users can also share their touchscreen-aided masterpieces with their console brethren.

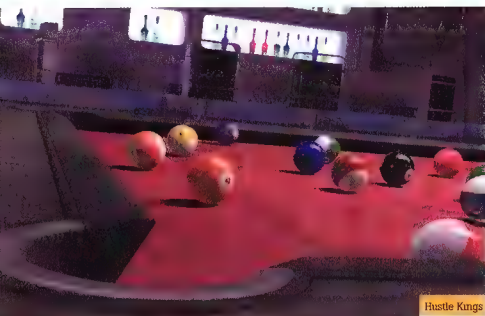
Little Deviants

Developer: Big Big

It was difficult to tell what Little Deviants was when Big Big announced the game in January, but after getting some hands-on time I understand that it's a collection of minigames that shows off the hot new NGP technology. For example, one game titled Depth Charge makes you twist and turn the handheld to help your on-screen character fall through caverns and collect stars. Another, named Bots Blast, is an alternate reality game that operates like Face Raiders on the 3DS. This simple shooter includes your actual environment as an arena.

In Roll Control, the mode Sony showed during the handheld announcement, players use the NGP's back touchpad to lift up the ground, causing balls to roll around and collect stars. Think of it as Super Monkey Ball, but you control the shape of the ground directly. The final mode I saw was House of Whacks, a whack-a-mole style game where you have to tap people on the front screen's touchpad if they're facing you and on the back touchpad if they're facing away. None of these games were particularly engaging on their own, but Little Deviants has a good chance of being popular as a tech demo if nothing else.





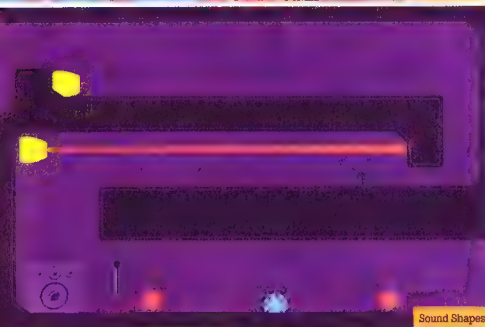
Hustle Kings



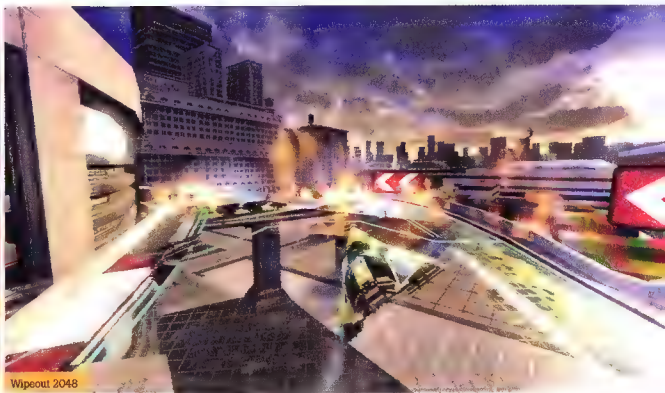
Hot Shots Golf



Reality Fighters



Sound Shapes



Wipeout 2048

Hustle Kings

Developer: VooFoo Studios

Hustle Kings taught me that there are more ways to play pool than I ever realized – I counted at least seven different game types. It offers the same content as the original PSN title, but developer VooFoo Studios completely reworked everything from the controls to the visuals for the NGP migration.

Players now have the option to change the direction of the pool cue by aiming using the system's touch screen. Smaller tweaks can be applied via the analog sticks, which seems the more accurate approach. Players use the touch-screen to pull the pool stick back and then push it forward to hit the ball. The game features three cue methods, including a casual mode that makes it a little more like pinball.

The most interesting feature in Hustle Kings is asynchronous multiplayer. Similar to Facebook games, Words with Friends, or chess by e-mail, asynchronous multiplayer lets you take your shot, turn off your NGP, and check back at any point in the future to see your opponent's move and respond.

Hot Shots Golf

Developer: Clap Hanz

This classic PlayStation franchise plays exactly as you'd expect on the new handheld – it's cartoony, fun, and easy to pick up. Players use the system's gyroscope to look around courses by manually moving the handheld, and shaking the NGP during the swing generates super shots. Enjoy those weird looks you get on the bus for acting like a crazy person.

Wipeout 2048

Developer: SCEA Liverpool Studios

While Wipeout HD will be playable on the NGP as well [see sidebar], Wipeout 2048 is the first new entry in the fast-paced racing franchise since 2007's Wipeout Pulse. This title features a bevy of new tracks themed around shooting through the heart of a bustling city rather than traditional race tracks.

While the track I played was standard Wipeout

fare – hitting boost panels to rocket to absurd speeds, feathering carefully around corners, and smashing headfirst into walls repeatedly because I suck – 2048 has at least one interesting wrinkle on the series' formula. In addition to regular offline races, players can test their skills in an online campaign.

Players go through the same sequence of events we expect from a Wipeout game in this mode, but now they must complete their objectives while racing against other people who have their own agendas. Players early in their career may only have to finish a race, while advanced (and theoretically better) players must take first place to succeed. Potential for serious frustration is there, but it's a unique way to breathe life into the endless racing game grind.

Reality Fighters

Developer: Novarama

One of the features Sony is pushing with the NGP is augmented reality, and Reality Fighters is the flagship title for this feature. Players scan in their faces to create fighters, choose one of 16 different fighting styles – including silly options like ballet or zombie – and then face opponents in real-life arenas.

Reality Fighter comes with an AR card that helps it read surfaces and produce more realistic locations. This card wasn't ready for the demo, so I just scanned the table in front of me and started fighting.

Button mashing goes a long way in Reality Fighters. Sony is "seeking a broader audience than Street Fighter or Mortal Kombat," so the simplistic gameplay is very approachable. The real challenge is following your characters as they move around the scene. You must use the NGP's gyroscope to shift your perspective in order to keep up with your fighters. Without the AR card, this meant a slow shuffle downward until they were fighting on my jeans and shoes.

Porting the NGP straight down like that wasn't particularly comfortable, but it sounds like this is the primary mode of play. I was told that the game's practice mode includes a lock that forces characters to stick to a smaller 2D plane, but they aren't yet sure if this option will be included in other modes.

Reality Fighters also focuses heavily on DLC



and social media. The game comes packed with around 300 costume pieces and 200 weapons for gearing up your character, and new pieces will become available for download. Sony may create and sell new fighting styles as well. On the social media side, players can post major victories and screenshots of their fighters in silly poses to Facebook and Twitter.

Sound Shapes

Developer: Qeasay Games

Sound Shapes is the surprise hit of the early NGP line-up. Coming from Jonathan Mak, the genius behind the ear-pleasing Everyday Shooter, Sound Shapes applies his brand of music mixed with gameplay to the platforming genre.

In Sound Shapes, there is no background music. Everything you see onscreen makes noise that contributes to the music. For example, a deadly laser trap will snoot on specific beats, adding a beefy hit of bass to the overall soundscape, while a spiky enemy rolls along on the ground making his own sharper noises.

The player controls a tiny blob that can stick to surfaces. As you work through each danger-filled screen, you must collect notes that add more and more layers onto the song. The game features 30 levels that each showcases a different two-to-seven-minute song. Mak is considering letting players export their performance as an MP3 if they're especially proud.

The music doesn't stop there, though. Sound Shapes also makes use of NGP's touch-screen for an incredibly easy-to-use level creator. A

blank level looks almost like an empty page of sheet music, and creative gamers can tap anywhere on the screen to add notes or drag and drop obstacles. You can jump from creating to playtesting your level with the tap of a button, and as you share it online, other players can provide their own "remixes," with metadata that reveals each individual PSN user who's played around with a map.

Uncharted: Golden Abyss

Developer: Sony Bend

PSP titles like God of War: Chains of Olympus proved Sony could deliver must-play handheld editions of its successful console franchises. My first look at Uncharted for NGP suggests that it may be the latest title to continue that trend. Golden Abyss is a standalone story that takes place before the original Uncharted. Although Naughty Dog isn't developing it, the studio is working closely alongside the project to make sure that it's an accurate portrayal of Nathan Drake and the various people in his life.

In this case, Drake has a partner who hasn't been in the series before: Jason Dante. This smarmy, arrogant treasure hunter is friends with Drake's pal Sully and has clearly adventured with the duo before, which makes me wonder what kind of awful fate awaits him. Developer Sony Bend isn't revealing much of the story yet, but it seems that Dante has embroiled Drake in a scenario involving a dangerous drug runner known as Guerrero.

Like Little Deviants, Uncharted serves as a great tech demo for all of the NGP's bells and whistles. While climbing ledges, you can simply tap the ledge you want Drake to go to next, and he'll slide over on his own. If he's hanging from a cliff and you need him to pull himself up, you can swipe up on his body. Rope climbing is achieved by alternating between swipes on the back touchpad, and you can even use the gyroscope to aim a gun in first person mode by physically moving the handheld.

If you're not interested in these alternative control schemes, the extra control methods can be turned off. Some puzzles require touch-screen controls, such as one where I had to rub the screen to reveal symbols on a piece of paper, but the moment-to-moment Uncharted gameplay can be enjoyed with traditional controls if desired. The only time I found myself sticking to touch controls was a segment where Drake jumped from plank to plank on a dilapidated bridge; the top-down camera angle for this segment made tapping which plank I wanted to jump to much easier than using the analog stick.

Both visually and from a storytelling perspective, Golden Abyss seems to have everything Uncharted fans want: a lengthy story with two hours of cinematics, real-time lighting, beautiful water and environments, console-level motion capture and sound, and a mix of polished gunplay, exploration, and puzzle-solving. The full game could surprise me and fail to be as engaging as its console brothers, but for the time being I'm excited to play more of Drake's first handheld adventure. ♦

CrossPlay and compatibility

Without a UMD drive, the NGP doesn't feature full backward compatibility in the traditional sense. However, players can download any PSP game available through PSN, and some of them are even being upgraded. At the Japanese NGP announcement in January, Sony demonstrated Monster Hunter Portable 3rd running on the device with camera control functionality added to the right analog stick. Sony is giving the same treatment to Resistance Retribution.

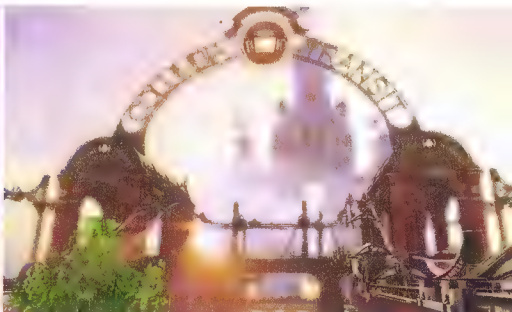
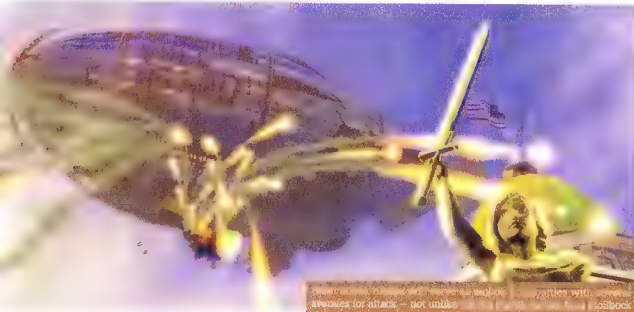
In addition to playing PSP classics, the NGP allows you to play a handful of PlayStation Network downloadable titles previously only available on the PS3. Sony showed off this new technology, titled CrossPlay, with Wipeout HD. This full, crisp-looking version of the game even features online matches against PS3 players. Sony hasn't revealed other CrossPlay titles yet, but it hinted that Wipeout 2048 could make the leap from NGP to PS3 at some point in the future.



The Vox Populi make up a second dangerous faction that Booker and Elizabeth must contend with on the streets of Columbia

BioShock Infinite

Discovering more of the intriguing powers and people behind the world of Columbia



When Irrational Games revealed BioShock Infinite last year after three years of silence, the game's colorful and controversial world left many gamers breathless with anticipation for more info. Now we've gone another nine months without any new info, but a new 10-minute live demo proves that the original video was barely scratching the surface.

As the demo picks up, main character Booker DeWitt steps into a shop full of patriotic tchotchkes with Elizabeth, the young woman he's been hired to rescue from the troubled floating city of Columbia. As the two pick through the piles of junk in the store, Booker is able to loot items in a manner similar to previous BioShock games. Be prepared to once more open every cash register and cabinet that you come across in your attempt to fill up on random items.

After exchanging some quips, Elizabeth and Booker find themselves in sudden danger. The building shakes, and a gigantic creature appears at the window with a shriek, placing a single open eye against the glass. This is Songbird, the flying menace that was referred to only as "Him" in the original BioShock Infinite gameplay demo. While it's difficult to tell what exactly Songbird is, its huge eye operates like a floodlight shining into the room. The duo hides behind a desk to avoid notice.

After sweeping the room several times with its blinding light, Songbird takes off, its harsh cries echoing through the city. Booker attempts to rouse a clearly shaken Elizabeth. "Promise me," she whispers. "Promise me that if it comes to it, you will not let him take me back." She places Booker's hands around her throat suggestively. Off-screen, BioShock mastermind Ken Levine explains that Songbird has been Elizabeth's "jailer, her only friend, and her guardian" since she was five years old.

Booker pulls his hands away. "It won't come to that," he responds.

The two exit the shop, entering the overly bright yet disturbingly empty streets of Columbia. Elizabeth has asked Booker to help her find Comstock, the leader of the ultra-nationalistic Founders and the one person in Columbia who may be able to help her learn to control her powers. Elizabeth hums "Hush, Little Baby" as she wanders absentmindedly around a corner.

Booker rushes after her. She has discovered a dying horse. Booker aims his gun at the animal, intending to put it out of its misery, but she stops him: "Wait, there's a tear."

The reason that Elizabeth is so important — and presumably the reason she's been locked away in Columbia for most of her life — is her ability to manipulate these so-called "tears." These rips in the fabric of reality are visible to everyone in Columbia, but only Elizabeth can put them to use. Her powers allow her to open a tear and briefly tap into other potential realities, bringing them into existence in Columbia.

In the case of this horse, Elizabeth concentrates hard, and for a few seconds the horse springs to life along with the grass underneath it. Then, suddenly, she loses control and the scene surrounding Elizabeth and Booker changes entirely. They're on an empty asphalt street. Lampposts light the road, and a movie theater nearby advertises a showing of *Revenge of the Jedi*. An ambulance comes screaming down the road toward them. Booker shouts for Elizabeth to close the tear, and she pulls it off mere seconds before the two are run down.

In addition to putting the duo into dramatic situations like this, tears will have a direct impact on gameplay. Later in the demo, as Booker faces down a legion of Vox Populi thugs, he notices a number of tears. Obviously the extent to which Elizabeth can control her powers are limited, so he's only able to choose one of the three tears to bring into reality: a large piece of cover for the shootout, a barrel full of guns and ammunition, or a door that Levine explains could lead away from the fight entirely...or to even greater trouble.

Speaking of the Vox Populi, if you thought the original BioShock's critique of Ayn Rand and Infinite's over-the-top jingoism of the Founders meant that Irrational Games is only looking to comment on ultra-right wing politics, this new fixation is here to prove you wrong. Beginning life as a workers' rights movement, the Vox now stand in opposition to the Founders, taking an opposite but equally extreme stance. They believe in the socialist ideal of everyone sharing everything, which eventually comes to mean that everything should belong to them. As one fanatic screams in the demo: "Your homes are ours! Your lives are ours! Your wives are ours! It

all belongs to the Vox!"

Booker's first lengthy fight with the Vox Populi in this demo also shows off more of one of the unique gameplay features that was revealed in the first video: skylines. These rollercoaster-esque railways connect the many floating platforms of Columbia and provide a quick route for traversing the environment during a heated firefight.

Watching Booker jump from line to line in first person is dizzying, and I wonder how easy it will be to pick up on where each track is taking you while you play. Irrational is aware of this concern. Director of product development Timothy Gerritsen tells me that the developer "wanted to kill that feature three or four times." He says the team spent a lot of time fine tuning it to make it easy to approach without it coming off as completely on-rails. "It's all about giving the player options," he explains.

One of the options skylines provide Booker is the ability to make his way over to a giant security blimp that begins bombarding him with missiles during the battle. Once onboard, he blasts his way below deck and blows up the engine before jumping off. Levine informs me that the blimp could also be taken out with a rocket launcher or other high-powered weapons from the exterior, but the method seen in the demo seems to provide a quicker kill.

As the demo nears its end, Booker and Elizabeth escape from the Vox Populi but are confronted by Songbird once again. The massive creature knocks Booker to the ground, lets out a powerful scream, and raises a claw, preparing to kill the helpless hero. Elizabeth throws herself in front of Booker and screams, "I'm sorry!" The apology apparently reaches the creature as it stops, looking quizzically at the girl. "I shouldn't have left," she says. "Take me home."

Songbird acquiesces, grabbing Elizabeth. She reaches a desperate hand out to Booker as she is ripped into the sky and away from him. According to Levine, this whole section is approximately a third of the way through BioShock Infinite, but clearly Booker's journey has only just started. It makes me wonder what other amazing secrets Irrational is still hiding about its game and the world of Columbia.

Phil Kollar

Platform
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360 • PC

Style
1-Player Action

Publisher
2K Games

Developer
Irrational Games

Release
2012



Mass Effect 3

Hands-on with Commander Shepard's latest weapons of war

Platform
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360 • PC

Style
1-Player Action/RPG

Publisher
Electronic Arts

Developer
BioWare

Release
2012

Though it was only a few months ago that we first saw Mass Effect 3 in action for our cover story, development must be moving right along, as EA allowed me to go hands-on with the title at a recent event. Guided by the game's director, Casey Hudson, I quickly discovered that although it's still in an early state, Mass Effect 3 already feels like a solid continuation of the sci-fi action of the previous game.

Having played Mass Effect 2 recently, it was very easy to jump into the third game, as the moment-to-moment gunplay is nearly identical. I begin in the middle of a mission taking place on

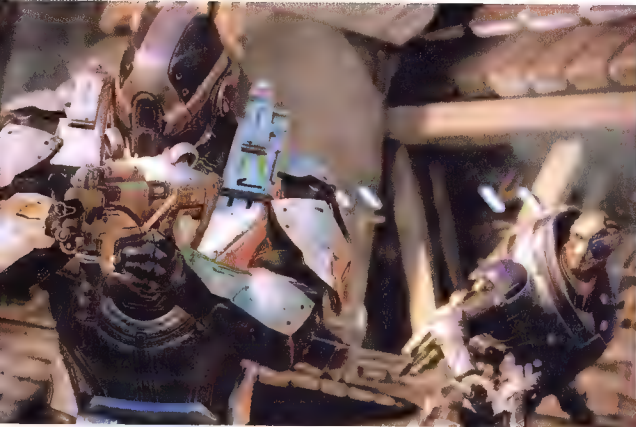
the salarian homeworld. Brilliant scientist Mordin Solus has called Shepard in to help him rescue an incredibly rare being in the Mass Effect universe: a female krogan. As one of the last of her species, this krogan is the key to creating an alliance between the salarians, turians, and krogan, a pact that is all but necessary if Shepard hopes to fight off the incoming reaper invasion.

While Mordin escorts the intricately garbed krogan through a pod with a containment shield to keep her from harm, Shepard is joined by Garrus and Liara. No sooner has Mordin finished explaining the situation than Cerberus operatives

crash the party. I ask Hudson to explain why Cerberus is attacking, but he's still not willing to give any clues. However, Shepard makes several remarks about the operatives being "indocinated," a term used in the Mass Effect universe to refer to beings who are mentally controlled by the reapers.

Whatever the reason for the Cerberus attack, they need to die. Thankfully, Mass Effect 3 provides a few new options for defending oneself. Shepard is now equipped with hand grenades that can be tossed with a tap of the right shoulder button. Unlike the sci-fi grenades of the first





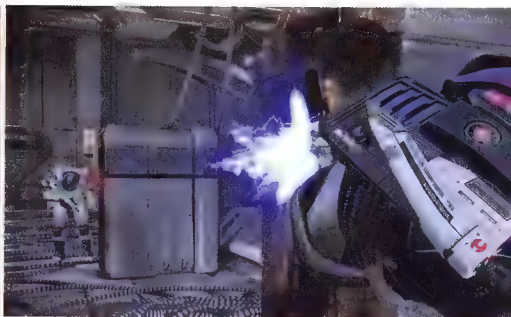
Mass Effect, these grenades blow up in a much more contained area, so it takes me a while to get used to lobbing them close enough to a target.

Shepard also has an awesome new melee weapon, suggesting a focus on more up-close combat in ME 3. The omni-blade, which sort of resembles Halo's plasma sword, can be used to attack from around corners or over cover by tapping B on the 360 controller. If you hold B, Shepard performs a heavy melee attack, which is unique to each class. In my case, as a soldier, he lunges forward with the omni-blade. While this attack was difficult to control—I found myself flying past my intended target and into the wall more often than not—it was powerful when it hit, cutting down shields in a single blow and instant-killing unshielded enemies.

Shepard also has more mobility via the combat roll. Hitting A sends Shepard into this evasive maneuver, which he can use to get into or out of cover. The combat roll is just one element making Shepard more mobile in general. Hudson says Mass Effect 3 will feature a lot

more climbing and jumping in its levels. I have to climb up several ladders throughout the mission I'm on. Although the act of climbing is automatic, it leads to more vertical shoot-outs and battles where height advantage must be taken into consideration. These fights are made even tenser by a health bar that appears on the bottom of the screen tracking "pod integrity." If that bar drains, the krogan will be captured or killed before we can get her to the waiting dropship piloted by Wrex.

As I progress through a series of cover-based showdowns, I come across a new type of enemy: a Cerberus operative that is carrying a giant shield that covers most of his body. Unlike enemies with normal shielding, these massive physical shields cannot be chipped away at. I play around and discover a few strategies for defeating them. A well-placed grenade behind the shield does damage and sends the enemy into a recovery animation, leaving him open to further fire. Likewise, I can use Lara's biotic abilities or a new power Garus has called the lift orb—essentially a grenade that uses the lift abil-



ity on any enemies caught in its radius.

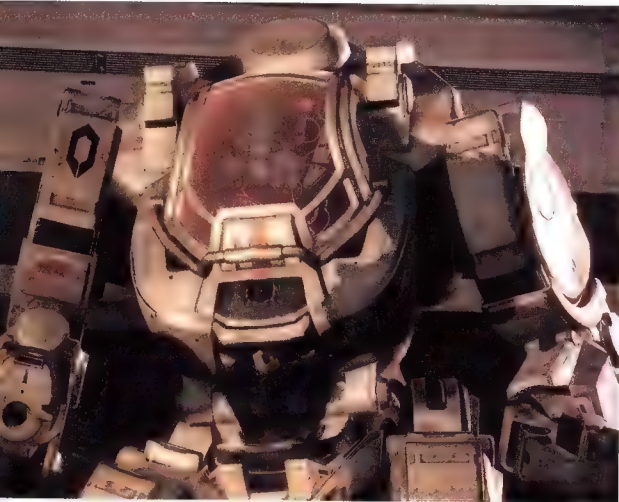
Nearing the end of the mission, I begin talking to Hudson about why I loved Mass Effect 2 so much. I explain how impressed I was by the circular nature of the game, the way that what you're doing through the whole game—recruiting and learning all about these team members—comes around at the end to become the main test of a player's skills during the climax. I ask him if Mass Effect 3 will have a similar hook.

"The commodity in Mass Effect 3 that ties everything together is the idea of the galaxy at war," says Hudson. "Whereas in Mass Effect 2 you're collecting people, in this case you're building a war plan and war assets. The larger-scale campaigns and even the smaller missions all contribute something to this war effort." He confirms that your degree of success on these missions will help decide what happens in the game's ending and "the amount of choice you have in determining the fate of the galaxy."

Finally having cleared out all the Cerberus operatives, Shepard moves to release the female krogan. Suddenly a blast of jets is heard and a giant robot descends from the sky. "That's an Atlas mech," Hudson explains as the demo ends without giving me the chance to take it down. In addition to fighting these massive foes, he says that if you shoot out the pilot before destroying the vehicle, Shepard can actually take control and use it to wreak havoc on other enemies.

As I consider the Atlas mech, the omni-blade, and the addition of hand grenades, I think back to a conversation from earlier in the demo. "If no krogan alliance with turians, reapers left unchallenged," Mordin says breathlessly.

"We'll do more than challenge them," Shepard responds. With the new arsenal of tools at his disposal, perhaps he has a point. Phil Kollar



Need For Speed: The Run

Out of the car, but not out of gas

Platform
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360 • Wii • PC

Style
1-Player Racing
(Online TBA)

Publisher
Electronic Arts

Developer
Black Box

Release
November 15

The Need for Speed franchise has expanded in the past few years, which has been good news for Need for Speed developer Black Box. Rather than grind on another yearly NFS title like it has since 2002's Hot Pursuit 2, the inclusion of NFS games by Criterion (Hot Pursuit) and Slightly Mad Studios (the Shift series) allowed Black Box to recharge itself and concentrate on a new kind of Need for Speed experience.

The Run is a San Francisco to New York race for big money that attracts well over a hundred entrants. Most are there just for the prize money, but your character Jack has his own reasons. Black Box wouldn't go into the plot's specifics, but with the mob interested in Jack's travels, you can bet he isn't racing just to see the country.

"One of the things we knew we wanted to do for this game was to provide more of a blockbuster, action/driving kind of experience — more than just a traditional racing experience," explains executive producer Jason DeLong. Far from being just an endurance run or a series of races, The Run punctuates its vehicle action with out-of-car sequences that DeLong says will take the player by surprise.

In a snippet we saw of the game, Jack is racing a pack of cars in the middle of the night through the streets of Chicago when he's unexpectedly T-boned at an intersection. Instead of the race starting over, Jack gets out of the car and starts running as he tries to escape a mob helicopter out to kill him. A fast parkour sequence across some buildings ensues, and Jack thinks he's found refuge in an alleyway until a cop car comes prowling.

Seeing it as his only chance to get back in the race, Jack jumps the officer and makes off with the cruiser. The mob chopper finds him once again and unleashes machine gun fire down on the speeding car, while police SWAT

teams search for the stolen vehicle. The chase ends with Jack's car flipping onto some train tracks while an oncoming train approaches. After coming to, Jack has only seconds to find a way out of the upside-down car, but his seat belt is jammed and he can't punch through the driver-side window. Is this the end of the race for Jack?

The Run's out-of-car controls are not meant to turn the game into an open-world action title, but instead merge the traditional NFS story cinematics with the races without producing a lull in the action. "We want to make sure that that adrenaline you get from racing, you also get when you're out of the car," DeLong says. Your controls are limited but varied. Mashing the A button in the rooftop sequence lets you run, and you interact with the

environment with other buttons. Sometimes the action unfolds with traditional quick time events, and others — like the escape from the oncoming train — let the player look around and figure out a solution. DeLong says that some events have branching paths so you don't automatically fail if you miss a few button presses.

DeLong isn't talking about the different race types in the game just yet, but he promises to mix up the experience as players move from city to city across the country. It sounds like you may be eliminating other racers from the contest or going up against them in head-to-head duels as you work your way up the pack, but that's speculation. It's a long way from San Francisco to New York, and a lot can happen. — Matthew Kato



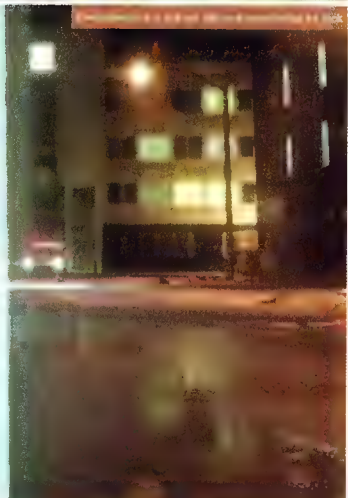
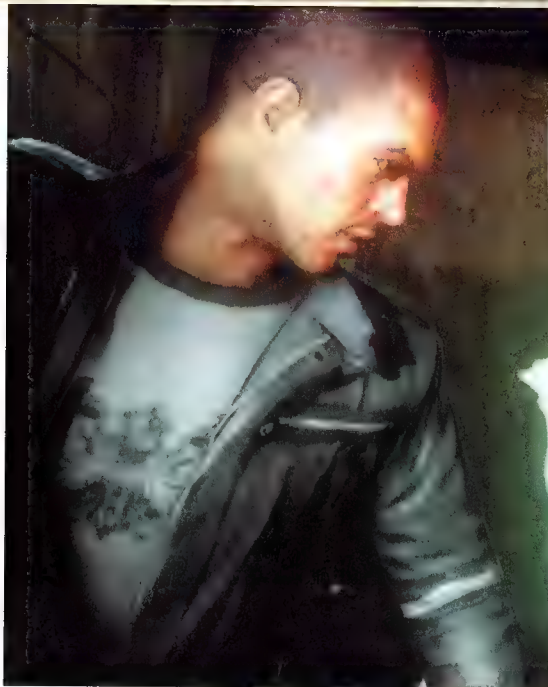
Get out of Chicago before the timer runs down, or the mob blows your stolen cop car to bits.



This concept art hopefully hints at a variety of race types within the game



The red car appears to be a BMW, which would indicate plenty of licensed cars





Batman: Arkham City

The cat comes out to play

Platform
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360 • PC

Style
1-Player Action

Publisher
Warner Bros. Interactive

Developer
Rocksteady Games

Release
October 18

We've heard speculation ever since Batman's intermittent feline companion first graced the cover of *Game Informer* last year, but Warner Bros. has finally confirmed what many expected: Catwoman is a playable character in Batman: Arkham City, and she is awesome.

Contrary to the hopes of some fans, Catwoman is not playable via a co-op mode. Rather, brief stretches during the single-player campaign switch to her perspective. "She's not a cameo, but she's not the main attraction," Rocksteady marketing manager Dax Ginn explains. "She's the in-between." He estimates that players will control Catwoman for around 10 percent of the game.

For the hands-on demo, I join the jewel-hungry Catwoman on a failed theft that ends with her being kidnapped by Two-Face. Before reaching that point, I see what Catwoman is made of in combat. While the basic controls are the same, Catwoman moves much faster than Batman, leaping over opponents' heads and jumping from enemy to enemy at lightning speed. For a game that was already praised for its swift combat, I'm impressed that Rocksteady has made it faster without losing the sense of control.

Catwoman also has a unique set of tools for solving puzzles and aiding in battle, such as a whip and claws. Since her starring role is smaller than Batman's, she won't gain new gadgets as the game progresses, but she has her full load-out from the start.

Following my short time with Catwoman, I step back into the cape and cowl. Beginning on a rooftop overlooking the slummy streets of Arkham City, I get acquainted with the new cape controls that allow Batman to gracefully glide through the city. By grabbing onto far-away ledges with the batclaw, players can now send Batman flying over the surface and into the air. Once airborne, some fairly complicated controls allow you to glide, dive, and pull yourself back up into the air. It's a lot to figure out in a 15-minute demo, but the nuanced navigation options will allow masterful players to fly through the city with ease — without even touching the ground if you're good enough.

After toying with the new controls, I glide down to street level and take out an unsuspecting thug. A group of nine or 10 buddies surrounding him immediately react, but I notice one of the goons is masked in an odd green glow. Ginn tells me that Batman has picked this bad guy out as

an ally of The Riddler, which means I have an opportunity to interrogate him if I can take out all of his pals without knocking him unconscious.

This objective change makes the ensuing battle remarkably different from any of the fights from Arkham Asylum. Instead of bouncing from foe to foe thoughtlessly, I have to carefully select each target and pull punches. I slip and accidentally hit the informant a couple of times, flinching and hoping that it's not enough to knock him down.

After a tense battle, the Riddler's man is the last one left standing. Batman grabs him by his collar and lifts him up, demanding to know where the villain is hiding. The muscle-bound thug is instantly reduced to a quivering wreck, and he spills the beans on the location of two Riddler trophies. These hidden items are more of a challenge to find than in Arkham Asylum, and some lead to more side missions involving Batman's intellectual foe.

One of the two trophies I need is hidden under a car in a nearby alleyway. The other is on a roof, set in the middle of a diabolical trap. In order to get it, I need to stand on a pressure plate nearby to disarm the trap and then grab it from a distance with the batclaw. Once I've

The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim

By [Chris Kohler](#) and [Alexis Deane](#)



Platform
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360 • PC

Style
1-Player Role-Playing

Publisher
Bethesda Softworks

Developer
Bethesda Game Studios

Release
November 11

When Bethesda decides it's time to show off one of its games, the gaming world is in for a treat. That's not just because its games, like the upcoming *Skyrim*, are among the most anticipated projects across the industry. It's because Bethesda's demos tend to be deep and rewarding dives into the gameplay and features of the project at hand. Most recently, game director Todd Howard walked us through the latest look at the sprawling world of *Skyrim*. While many elements of the demo echoed beats we'd seen during our recent cover story trip (see issue 214), Howard let several exciting new details slip.

Anyone who has been following the game is familiar with the concept of dragon shouts. These new magic-like powers are extremely potent abilities that can turn the tide of the most difficult fights through a word of power spoken by the hero. Howard

revealed several new shouts that we hadn't seen before. The whirlwind sprint ability had the hero zipping about the battlefield and past deadly traps like a superhero. Another shout let him breathe fire like a true dragon. A third particularly startling and exciting dragon shout calls down lightning and thunder in a roaring column of crackling energy.

This last ability was on display as Howard brought it to bear against a brand new dragon type. Howard has previously stated that the game will include several unique varieties of the magical beasts. That point was made clear when

he introduced the new frost dragon, a massive creature that breathes out scathing bursts of ice instead of fire.

Several other fun tidbits were also discussed during the extensive game demo. After much speculation, Howard confirmed three of the factions that will be in the game. The Thieves' Guild offers

the expected stealth options. The Companions are a fighting-oriented group. And the College of Winterhold will be the faction of choice for mages. Whether other factions will appear in the game has yet to be revealed.

Also on display were some intriguing features of the environment of *Skyrim* itself. A new tundra area was gorgeous to look at, filled with scraggly grass scrub blowing gently in the chill air. There upon the tundra sits the city of Whiterun, an edifice of stone and thatch rising from a rocky hill. We also saw mammoths – large creatures that wander in groups shepherded by the giants that live in the area. Howard also showed off an intriguing element of the world called dooms-stones. These strange obelisks allow a player to set and reset their hero's birthsign, which in turn can alter abilities and attributes.

As Howard explored the world of *Skyrim*, he also showed off one other welcome addition: the newly improved horse riding ability makes mounted movement more fluid and enjoyable than before. Little touches like these make us confident that Bethesda is noticing the devil in the details of a truly epic game like *Skyrim*. Whether you've explored the lands of the Elder Scrolls before or not, *Skyrim* should absolutely be on your radar as the winter months approach. [Read More](#)





One of the newly revealed factions are the Companions, a group that will be a favorite among melee fighters.



Though Skyrim is in the far north of the world, players can expect lots of variety to the appearance of environments.

Whisper is one of several major cities in the game.



Metro: Last Light

A warmer, more inviting underground



Dark Light adds some oomph to the Metro equation

Platform
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360 • PC

Style
1-Player Shooter
(Multiplayer TBA)

Publisher
THQ

Developer
4A Games

Release
2012



Most gamers relish the experience of discovering a cult classic – finding a flawed game that you love even though others are hung up on its problems. For me, last year's *Metro 2033* was just such a game. Many reviewers harped on its less-than-stellar AI and unintuitive stealth options; I couldn't stop thinking about Metro's immersive set pieces and well-realized post-apocalyptic world long enough to take much notice of those issues.

Despite the mixed impressions, *2033* performed surprisingly well for a new IP coming from an unheard-of foreign studio. As a response THQ announced the sequel, *Metro 2034*. That follow-up has now been renamed *Metro: Last Light*, cutting out the calendar naming convention and positioning itself away from the books by Dmitry Glukhovsky (though the author is still said to be "heavily involved in the creative process").

Last Light picks up at the end of the "bad" ending of *Metro 2033*, wherein protagonist Artyom enables a devastating attack on the mysterious race of supernatural beings known as the Dark Ones. Approximately 40,000 people are left struggling to survive in the subway tunnels beneath Moscow, quite possibly the last people alive on the planet.

As the demo begins, Artyom notes in a voiceover that conditions are finally beginning to improve on the surface – the sun can be seen on occasion, and in some places the snow is beginning to melt. Below the ground, though, the various factions of Metro remain in a constant power struggle, and Artyom warns of "a new threat from secrets long-buried by our fathers."

The action opens with Artyom and his companion Khan breaking into a Reich stronghold to rescue an important prisoner. THQ plays through the first scene multiple times to show off the validity of different approaches. Running and gunning – my method for completing *Metro 2033* – is even more viable this time around thanks to dynamically destructive environments. Blast away at a wall, a floor, or any other piece of thin cover, and pieces of it chip away realistically, creating holes that you can attack enemies through.

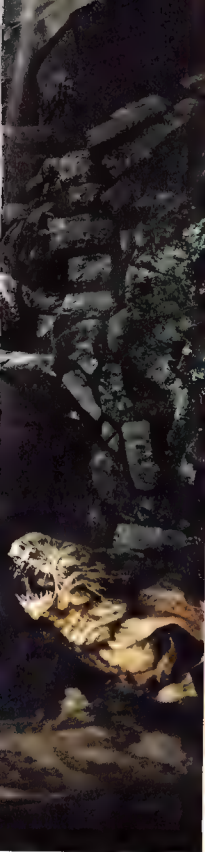
For those more interested in employing stealth – a painfully frustrating exercise in the first game – Ukrainian developer 4A Games is attempting to make it a more viable play style. As the studio sees it, the artificial intelligence was too smart and ambitious in the first game. Because enemies patrolled in unpredictable pat-

terns, players had trouble developing successful strategies to avoid being seen. Once Artyom was spotted, enemies were relentless, never backing down and basically forcing a reload for anyone committed to staying in the shadows.

In *Last Light*, it is easier to follow an enemy's course and devise a means to ambush them or slip past unnoticed. Metro global brand manager Mark Madsen says they do not view this change as dumbing the game down. Rather, they aim to "communicate the ideal path to players without removing the complexity."

Artyom has several new tools at his disposal to increase chances of success for stealth players. Since hiding in the shadows is crucial, players can swiftly and silently put out any lights that are within reach. For example, in the demo Artyom reaches up to unscrew lightbulbs and blows out candles. He also carries a lighter that allows him to distract enemies by setting the environment aflame. Begin burning a wooden box, and the fire will spread realistically, eventually drawing the attention of hostile forces. According to Madsen, high-level lighter-play allows players to set traps with exploding barrels.

After sneaking or shooting through a small number of Nazi forces, the demo jumps ahead



While the sun may be shining above the surface, the underground is as dangerous as ever.



to show off one of the giant, immersive set piece moments that made Metro 2033 shine. Artyom and Khan come upon a massive crowd of Reich soldiers listening to a speech in a giant hall. With no other options, the duo attempts to blend into the crowd, jostling forward inch by inch as they listen to the propaganda-filled tirade. The striking imagery and world building is exactly what made me fall in love with 2033, and I'm hoping Last Light has lots of it.

Inevitably, the peace is broken and the pair's cover is blown, leading to a chase sequence that ends in Khan dragging an injured Artyom onto a train for the first of many obligatory mine cart shootout sequences. I can't pinpoint during the demo how much of this section is actually being controlled by the player and how much is just a first-person cutscene, but if it's anything like 2033 the game leaves a good amount of control in our hands.

In a slightly more surprising change, Last Light adds boss battles. These sequences could add drama to the firefights or drain the game of its

atmosphere, depending on how they're handled.

The demo boss fight pits Artyom against a massive mutated creature known as the Rhino, a grotesque opponent that is the mother to the werewolf-esque nosalis enemies. Shooting Rhino's eyes sends her into a rage, during which she crashes through walls and calls upon her children to aid her. The battle felt eerily familiar to other shooter fights – such as the Berserker in Gears of War – but the demo wrapped before the end of the fight, so there could be a surprise twist to the proceedings.

Much remains to be discovered of Metro: Last Light, from more concrete story details to news of competitive multiplayer. As someone who enjoyed the previous game, this first look gets me excited, but I'm not yet convinced it will win over non-believers. Can THQ and 4A Games achieve that holy grail of pleasing the hardcore fans while simultaneously drawing in a new crowd? I remain hopeful, if only because I want to share the magic of Moscow's subway tunnels with more people. **Phil Kollar**



Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3

Can Infinity Ward win the war against all odds?



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

» **Style**
1-Player Shooter
(Multiplayer TBA)

» **Publisher**
Activision

» **Developer**
Infinity Ward/
Sledgehammer Games

» **Release**
November 8

Following a series of surprisingly thorough leaks, Activision has finally unveiled *Modern Warfare 3*, the follow-up to one of 2009's best-selling games and the first release from Infinity Ward since its founding members left along with a huge chunk of the team. There's very little doubt as to how well a new *Call of Duty* game is going to sell, but can it live up to the high expectations left by its predecessor despite all the drama surrounding its creation? My first look left this question frustratingly unanswered.

The first thing to note about *Modern Warfare 3* is that Activision made the smart and possibly necessary decision that Infinity Ward could not handle the development alone. Instead, the remnants of the studio that created *Call of Duty* are teaming up with Sledgehammer Games, a new Activision studio started by *Dead Space* creator Glen Schofield. Sledgehammer was previously said to be working on a third-person *Call of Duty* title that is presumably on hold while it helps with *Modern Warfare 3*.

MW 3 picks up shortly following the end of the second game, with the world embroiled in an intense conflict. Once again, players globetrot across continents during the single-player campaign. Exotic locations such as the Himalayas were mentioned, but the focus is on larger scale urban warfare in cities such as New York and London, the two locations shown off during the first demo.

The Manhattan level, titled "Black Tuesday," starts the player character in a crashed Humvee.

As he comes to and climbs out, he looks up at the crumbling New York skyline. Debris from collapsing buildings falls dangerously close. A lone hot dog cart stands in the ruins, looking absurd with its colorful umbrella amidst the dust and wreckage, ready to be used as cover for an inevitable firefight. Infinity Ward enjoyed playing with the idea of fighting on recognizable home turf in *Modern Warfare 2*, and it's running with that concept for this game as well.

Infinity Ward isn't spilling many details on *Modern Warfare 3*'s plot, but the Russians still seem to be the key bad guys. In "Black Tuesday," the player has to fight through a sea of enemies to get to Wall Street. He runs and guns alongside characters with names like Sandman and Grinch – the goofy kind of codenames that you'd expect your *Call of Duty* buddies to be burdened with.

If there's anything remarkable about the actual gameplay in *Modern Warfare 3*, it's that it's pretty unremarkable. You follow your AI partners along a linear path that winds through busted city streets and into a skyscraper that a helicopter has crashed into. In each new area, players come upon a handful of enemies, aim down the iron sights, and take them out. Shooting looks to be as frantic and fun as it's always been in the *Call of Duty* games, but nothing struck me as particularly new aside from the unexciting ability to flip a scope on and off your gun at will.

Later in the level, you gain access to the Reaper drone, which allows you to attack rooftop enemies

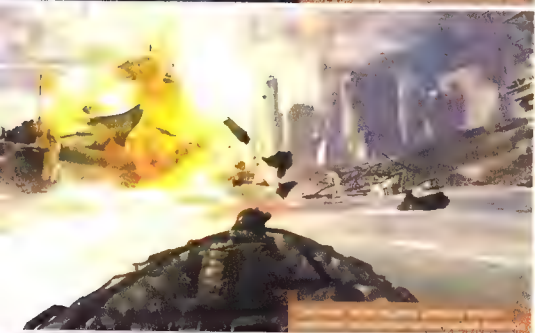
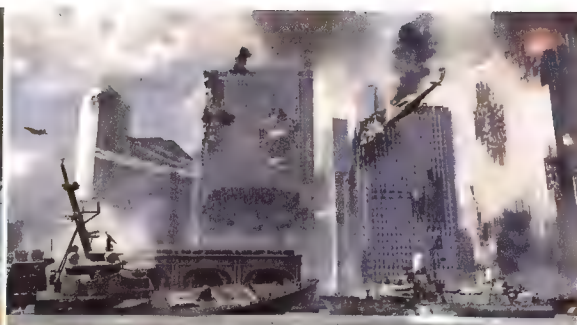
and helicopters from an aerial viewpoint. While the change of pace was nice and the explosions look great, even this segment has a very been-there-done-that feel, especially since it's followed by an obligatory helicopter ride where you man the turret.

The London level, which begins on the city's grimy docks, was similarly underwhelming until halfway through, when the player jumps into the back of a truck that then takes off down the subway tracks. Although gameplay-wise it's just another on-rails section, the truck makes for a great set piece, flying past a subway platform full of screaming civilians and narrowly dodging out of the way of overturned subway cars until it finally flips over.

While the single-player portion left me a little cold, Infinity Ward is promising major innovation in *Modern Warfare 3*'s multiplayer mode [see sidebar] and a return of Spec Ops. The popular co-op mode was not shown in action, but it sounds like it will remain two-player and feature some new game modes.

It's hard to critique Infinity Ward and Sledgehammer for sticking to the successful formula with *Modern Warfare 3*. On the other hand, I wonder if I would have been shown something more exciting and unique if the team responsible for making this series a hit hadn't been so thoroughly disrupted last year. Luckily, they still have time to blow us away before the game comes out later this year. **Phil Kollar**

Visit gameinformer.com/mag for further details on *Call of Duty: E310*



Multiplayer Goes Elite

Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2's multiplayer is a masterpiece of design, a perfect storm of ideas that has taken the world by storm. It's a game that has redefined the genre, and it's a game that has inspired a new generation of players.

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Starhawk

Construct your own war in LightBox's return to the sky

Platform
PlayStation 3

Style
1 to 4-Player Action
(32-Player Online)

Publisher
Sony Computer
Entertainment

Developer
LightBox Interactive

Release
2012

When it released in 2007, Incoognito's Warhawk gave PS3 owners a multi-player-only experience that spent equal time on land and in the sky. Players could lay prone on a hill and snipe opponents before they captured a flag, or they could pilot a hawk and perform strafing runs on the enemy base. After its release, many members of the team formed LightBox Interactive. The studio's first title is Starhawk, a spiritual follow-up to the team's previous effort. Combat still rages on the ground and in the air, but their new Build & Battle system ensures an experience all its own.

Whereas Warhawk placed gamers on maps with pre-determined locations for hawks, ground vehicles, and base defenses, Starhawk allows players to lay out the team base. During each of the multiplayer matches I played, our team started with a blank slate of land at our spawn location. Each player starts with a certain amount of rift energy (see sidebar), which is used to purchase garages for ground vehicles, launch pads for the hawks, turrets, walls, and more.

Playing well will earn you more rift energy to purchase more structures and vehicles. As LightBox president Dylan Jobe puts it, Starhawk's gameplay is all about "build to kill, and kill to build." Once a launch pad is built, you have to pay for a hawk as well before you can take to the skies. Like in Warhawk, you can use these aircraft to quickly transport yourself to an enemy base or fly around the battlefield, taking enemies down from the sky. Unlike the previous game, these hawks can transform with a single button press, allowing them to stomp around on



the ground in mech form.

New structures drop down immediately from the sky, which allows for an additional strategy if your base is being ransacked by tanks and bipedal hawks. During one round, a hawk was causing trouble within the walls of our base. A quick-thinking teammate placed the spawn beacon for a bunker directly over the enemy's head. Our bullets and grenades were slowly chipping away at his armor, but a bunker crashing onto his frame from space turned out to be a far more effective method of destruction, causing him to explode in a shower of debris.

For the first time since the series' 1995 PSone

debut, Starhawk also features a full single-player mode. The missions are a series of combat sandboxes that mix the RTS-like Build & Battle system with tower defense elements. The mission I played involved protecting a structure that was mining rift energy. Enemy locations and spawn points are not pre-determined, but a HUD beacon will alert you which directions enemies are approaching from and a timer indicates when you can expect company. When you know hawks are approaching from the south and ground vehicles are coming from the east, you have a better idea of where to place your various defenses.

The battles are wide open enough that there isn't just one right way to complete your mission. If you're a defensive-minded player, you can prepare for the rush by placing a ton of beam turrets around your base and man one of them to hold off the attack. If you feel like engaging the enemy more directly, you can spend some money on turrets and drop pods filled with friendly AI, then cash in the rest on a launch pad and your own hawk. Letting your AI buddies handle the ground battle while you take enemy hawks down from the sky may be a better option for players who prefer offense, and it can be just as effective.

Warhawk allowed for a wide variety of play styles, but Starhawk looks to handily trump it in this regard. You can still play on foot, get behind the controls of a tank, or hop in the cockpit of a nimble hawk, but the promising Build & Battle system adds yet another strategic layer to what was already a fantastic experience.

Dan Ryckert

Visit gameinformer.com/mag to read an interview with LightBox president Dylan Jobe

The Currency of a New Frontier



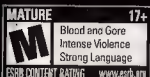
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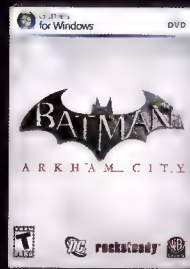


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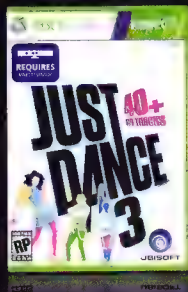
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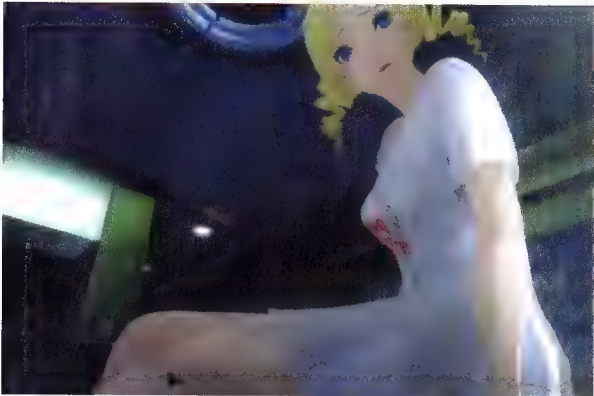


KINECT for XBOX 360 XBOX LIVE

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Catherine

Relationships are an uphill climb



Many things about Catherine are bizarre. The main character, Vincent, is attracted to two women with phonetically identical names: Catherine and Katherine. At night, Vincent fights his way through nightmares populated by sheep and monsters with butts for faces. To make it worse, death in the nightmare means death in reality. While these strange elements ensure that Catherine isn't a normal game, they also ensure that it is a provocative one.

If you've seen any previous coverage of Catherine, you've probably gathered that its story plays a large role in the experience. Impressive animated sequences tell the story of Vincent, a somewhat-lovable dirtbag who cheats on his longtime girlfriend Katherine (who may also be pregnant) with the spunky young blonde Catherine. The ensuing love triangle pulls him in several directions, and puts Vincent in a number of awkward scenarios.

Vincent's response in these situations isn't handled through normal dialogue. Instead, players influence a morality meter by taking certain actions and answering questions posed by other characters. For example, you may be asked, "Does life begin or end with marriage?" Depending on your response, you'll nudge the meter toward the extremes of law and chaos.

Where you're currently at on that spectrum dictates Vincent's response to stressful situations, but he seems to come off like a loser no matter what. In my hands-on time, I leaned towards chaos, which led to a less-than-classy response when Katherine told Vincent she might be pregnant.

As his life falls apart during the day, Vincent's world literally crumbles at night. When he goes to sleep, Vincent is transported to a nightmarish realm where he must climb tall structures by moving blocks and hopping between them — all while the bottom layers are continually dropping away. These puzzle towers comprise the entirety of Catherine's non-story gameplay, despite the fact that the development team is known for its work on the Shin Megami Tensei series, you won't find a trace of RPG mechanics.

The challenge initially comes from arranging blocks into makeshift staircases, but as you progress a variety of trick blocks are introduced. Lethal spike blocks and slow-moving heavy blocks complicate your ascent, not to mention occasional bosses. You're still climbing during the boss encounters, but the beasts are always close behind you, and have unique moves to make things harder. After completing a few normal stages, I fought a creature called the Immortal Beast (the aforementioned butt-for-face

monster), who periodically spits out a pink mist that reverses all of the controller inputs. This can be a huge problem when you're scrambling up the blocks, considering one wrong step can send you into a spike trap.

When Catherine came out in Japan, one of the main criticisms was the game's punishing difficulty. For the North American release, these issues are being addressed with numerous tweaks to reduce frustration. Atlas tells us that the easiest difficulty setting should allow anyone to experience the story without worrying about getting stuck on the tower levels.

Though Atlas has put Catherine's cast of characters and mature-themed story in the spotlight, my time with the game revealed a fair split between plot and gameplay. Some gamers may want a more robust puzzle game, while others might hope for a smoother narrative. From what I played, I'd advise you to check your expectations and accept Catherine for what it is: a unique hybrid of the adventure, action, and puzzle genres with a generous infusion of occasionally disturbing occult craziness. — Joe Juba

Platform
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360

Style
1-Player Action/Puzzle

Publisher
Atlas

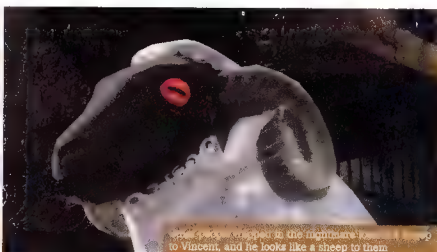
Developer
Atlas

Release
July 26

Go to gameinformer.com/mag to see a video of the first few levels of Catherine in action



With normal and nightmare difficulty, you can choose between them where Vincent can talk to the other sheep.



That pink mist is tied to the nightmare beast, and to Vincent, and he looks like a sheep to them.



The Sims 3: Pets

The fun of having pets without the hassle

Platform
PS3 • Xbox 360 • PC

Style
1-Player Simulation

Publisher
Electronic Arts

Developer
The Sims Studio

Release
Fall

Pets are nothing new to the Sims series. Both of the previous installments received expansions that added four-legged friends, so *The Sims 3: Pets* was probably inevitable. Like its predecessors, this entry adds a handful of animals to your virtual world, but the team at EA is expanding how players interact with their pets, as well as including some special perks if you're playing with Kinect.

Pets is a standalone release on consoles, meaning that you don't need to own *The Sims 3* to play it. However, the team aims to deliver a console experience that closely follows the PC style of gameplay. *Pets* on PS3 and 360 isn't going back to the simplified approach of the last generation's console iterations; it adds dogs and cats into the classic formula.

Where this entry differs from previous pet-based expansions is that players can control their furry companions directly. Previously, sims could only interact with pets, but now the dogs and cats basically become full-fledged sims. "Pets can have careers, and by controlling your pet you are able to socialize and make friends

and enemies by either being the most loving dog or perhaps the most destructive canine in town," says executive producer Ben Bell. Since you can customize your pets' traits and personalities, this allows you to shape them into characters rather than accessories.

If you happen to be playing *Pets* with Kinect, you can experiment with another new feature: voice controls. "Our use of Kinect focuses on user voice controls that allow a player to use verbal controls for their Sims and for navigating UI menus," Bell explains. "One can queue up social actions for their sims when they say, 'be romantic,' 'be mean,' and 'apologize.' Sending your sim to the toilet just got even easier when all you have to say is 'Use the toilet' and off they go to do your bidding."

EA has not announced any special PS3-exclusive features, though the PC release has a few key differences (see sidebar). Ultimately, no matter which version you choose, you can count on getting some new virtual companions to brighten up your sim's life. • **Joe Juba**

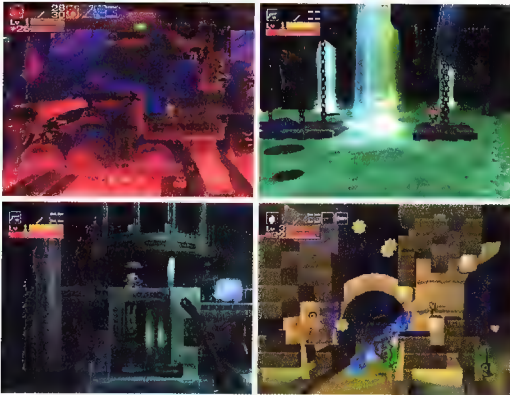
Pets on PC

The Sims 3: Pets on PC offers a control experience back to the console era that was not available on consoles. "I don't think there would have been a better way to design a console game that would have been better than what we've done here," says EA's executive producer Steve Eberhart. "We wanted to make expansions that are on every platform," says executive producer Steve Eberhart. "It really makes for a more consistent experience if it was a platform-independent title." Apart from some differences in game features, like the ability to directly control your pet's main, and a few other details.



Cave Story

The tale retold in a new dimension



Previously only available in downloadable format, this Metroid-style indie gem is finally coming to a handheld near you. To the delight or horror of its rabid fanbase, Cave Story is being transformed from a 2D pixelated world to a 3D polygonal setting to take advantage of the 3DS hardware. Some may cringe at any tinkering with the game's purposely old-school aesthetic, while others are excited to experience the game in a whole new way. One thing both sides can agree on, however, is the need for high quality titles on a system that's sorely lacking them.

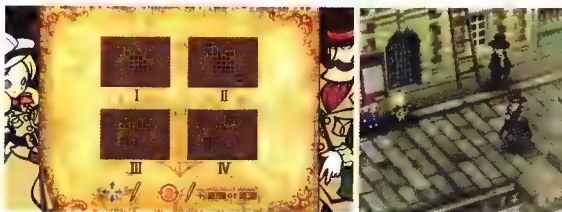
For those unfamiliar with Cave Story, Daisuke Amaya (a.k.a. Ptex) developed the game by himself over the course of five years and released it for free on the Internet in 2004. As it became more popular, Western fans banded together to translate the original Japanese text into English. Developer Nicalis saw the potential in polishing the game and porting it to consoles, releasing the game on WiiWare a year ago, and again on DSiWare last November to widespread critical acclaim.

You still guide the amnesia-ridden protagonist along a 2D plane in the 3DS version, yet the environment around him is rendered in 3D and loaded with new details. The maps feel innately familiar and foreign at the same time; it's almost like peering into a moving diorama with the characters interacting in the far back wall while details like street lamps and branches pop out in the foreground.

The introduction is identical to the original, with our waking with no memory while everyone is looking for someone named Sue. He meets some anthropomorphic rabbits and obtains his first weapon, the Polar Star. The most immediate change outside of the visuals is the new map system. Whereas the DSi version made players pause to check the map for some reason, it now displays your location in real time on the lower screen.

NIS wouldn't confirm if the 2D version is included as well, but did reveal that players can toggle on the 2D character models and that there is an NIS-related bonus in the game (most likely company mascot Priny). » **Bryan Vore**

- » Platform: 3DS
- » Style: 1-Player Action
- » Publisher: NIS America
- » Developer: Nicalis
- » Release: August 9



Doctor Lautrec and the Forgotten Knights

Another puzzle-solving professor is on the case

It was only a matter of time before someone took the winning formula from Level-5's Professor Layton series and gave it their own spin. After all, North America is two games behind Japan in Layton entries, and newcomer Doctor Jean-Pierre Lautrec seems more than willing to step in and fill the gap.

The game is set in Paris near the end of the 19th century while the Eiffel Tower is still under construction. Lautrec works at the Museum of Natural History as a lecturer who's always looking for another mystery to solve. One day, a young girl named Marie visits his office with a device that points the way to a massive treasure belonging to Louis XIV of the House of Bourbon. With the help of his assistant Sophie, Lautrec hits the streets of Paris to seek the treasure while evading rival Vidocq and the Knights of the Iron Mask.

I played an early Japanese version to get a sense of the gameplay. The adventure begins in a catacomb beneath Paris as Lautrec and Sophie search out some treasure. Inside this dungeon, you control him in a third-person isometric view and must sneak past guards without alerting them.

The first puzzle is essentially a simplified word game where you have to drag different words into a grid and make them fit together. Players get three light bulbs to tap for hints, or they can touch a white flag icon to give up. At the end of the dungeon, Lautrec comes upon a ghostly blue monster floating out of an ornate egg. This triggers a Pokémon-style battle in which you send out your own floating spirits to fight. Later, Lautrec is free to run around the streets of Paris and visit famous landmarks to look for clues and chat with people.

Compared to Layton, Lautrec comes off as a lot less jovial, leaning more in the Indiana Jones direction. In some of the early cutscenes, he kicks a desk into an assailant, pinning him against the wall. Lautrec then drives off in a steam-powered car as two goons give chase. After racing through the streets, he drops a banana into the following vehicle's exhaust port and leaves them in the dust.

While we need more time with the good doctor to see how he stacks up, so far Lautrec is differentiating himself enough to stand outside of the looming shadow of Professor Layton. » **Bryan Vore**

- » Platform: 3DS
- » Style: 1-Player Puzzle
- » Publisher: Konami
- » Developer: Konami
- » Release: Summer



NHL 12

Establishing a physical presence in front of the net



» Platform
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360

» Style
1 to 4-Player Sports
(12-Player Online)

» Publisher
EA Sports

» Developer
EA Canada

» Release
Fall

In the past few years the NHL series increased its physicality with board play skirmishes and mid-ice hits, but there's always been an element missing: the crease battles between defenders and forwards. These tussles aren't as glorious as one-timers, but they create the garbage goals that power forwards pay for by taking bruising cross-checks in the back while trying to screen the goalie. NHL 12 continues its quest for realism by introducing jostling in front of the net, along with its different effects. While this alone would be a welcome addition, it's just one way in which the players and teams are improving.

When an opposing forward camps out in front of your goalie it can cause all kinds of problems.

A defender has to engage him and try to move him further out so he can't redirect shots or screen the goalie from oncoming pucks. Having a player in the goalie's face can also create dangerous situations where everyone's scrambling in front of the net for a loose rebound off a deflection.

NHL 12 tries to encompass all of these possibilities with its player-jostling physics down in front of the net or in the slot. These actions are not initiated with any new controls, but fall under NHL's standard "left stick controls the body, right stick controls the hockey stick" controls. Thus, you're free to move around and gain better positioning with your body or stick while you're tied up in a battle for the real estate in front of the net.

The development team at EA Canada has tried to encompass how this kind of grit affects other players on the ice. Goalers can now be run into or bumped, and nets will come off their moorings. Goalers poke their heads around screens and show more desperation when the puck is bouncing around the net, which should hopefully result in more garbage goals from down front if you can get your stick on the puck. This should also make power forwards, who gamers shied away from in previous years thanks to their lumbering pace, actually useful to your team.

Overall, your team could play and feel differently if the developer's AI tweaks and player tendencies come to the surface. EA Canada wants to make it so that players like Sidney Crosby drive the net like they do in real life and grinders



finish their checks. The teams themselves should play differently thanks to the hood strategy tuning, and breakouts through the neutral zone will be varied due to a renewed player positioning logic. EA Canada says players are more aware of teammates, whether that's anticipating a headman pass or straddling the blue line to stay onside.

Hockey is a sport where sheer energy and determination can trump skill. It's cool to see sick dekes and highlight-caliber goalie saves, but sometimes you have to do the dirty work to get the job done. The effort EA Canada is putting into its player jostling and team/player behavior should hopefully light the lamp in NHL 12. » Matthew Kato





Michael Phelps: Push the Limit

Turn your living room into an Olympic-sized pool

At the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games, American swimmer Michael Phelps brought home eight gold medals, a record-shattering feat that made him a world-renowned superstar. Three years and countless endorsement deals later, Phelps stars in a competitive swimming title under development by Kinect veteran Blitz Games Studios that allows players to dive into the underwater action.

Michael Phelps: Push the Limit offers career, quick play, and multiplayer modes where players engage in swim matches in six venues around the world. Qualifying in swim matches during career mode will unlock more venues, secure your place on leaderboards, and once you've proven yourself, lead to a race against Phelps himself.

Using Kinect's body tracking capabilities,

players perform a variety of moves to successfully compete in races. Prior to each race, players can hype the crowd with ridiculous body movements. This in turn builds the crowd meter that provides you with additional stamina during the race. You then lean over to prepare for the dive, quickly stand up straight to leap into the pool, and begin moving your arms based on the type of stroke chosen for the race (breast stroke, back stroke, butterfly stroke, etc.).

As you make your way across the pool, you need to keep an eye on your stroke meter, which assists in keeping a steady pace to determine whether or not your arm flailing is too fast or too slow. Maintain a good pace to earn a boost in speed (triggered by yelling "boost") which will give you an edge over the competition. After the flip turn at the end of the pool, you eventually

"push the limit," where you perform strokes as quickly as you physically can to sprint toward the finish. When you arrive at the end of your lane, you reach your arm out to claim your place at the edge of the pool.

Races in multiplayer follow the same steps as single player mode. Up to eight friends can take part in competition with split screen multiplayer. Two players can race against each other the same time and can be rotated in and out after each lap. Players can also challenge other competitive swimming hopefuls across Xbox Live, however this feature has yet to be detailed.

If you want to get the sensation of swimming in the comfort of your home sans chlorine and uncomfortable swimwear, check out Michael Phelps: Push the Limit this fall.

» **Annette Gonzalez**

» **Platform**
Xbox 360

» **Style**
1 to 8-Player Sports

» **Publisher**
505 Games

» **Developer**
Blitz Games Studios

» **Release**
Fall

Risen 2: Dark Waters

This ambitious RPG sequel packs a proper console version

Risen exemplified many of the virtues of Piranha Bytes' previous open-world RPG franchise. Gothic, without the crippling bugs and technical problems that often plagued that series. The result was one of the better RPGs of 2009, though the 2010 console port was lackluster at best. That game's success has given Piranha Bytes the opportunity to build a bigger, higher-fidelity sequel in Risen 2: Dark Waters—and the ability to start console development on day one for a much better experience on those platforms.

The unnamed hero is a grim savior for a grim world. Having sacrificed his eye in the final

struggle to banish the fire titan that threatened the world in the first game, he has received neither fame nor fortune for his trouble. Worse, the rest of the world outside Risen's single island is under siege by more godlike titans. Only the pirates that still brave the seas have had any luck evading and battling the monsters who rule the wild. It's among those scallywags plying the magically fortified port of Caldera, one of civilization's last strongholds, that our hero starts his quest in Risen 2.

The setting, which replaces bows and arrows with guns and cannons, is the biggest change in the sequel. The rest of the game we've seen

so far looks like an enlarged, upscaled version of its predecessor. You still have a lot of freedom to go where you like and do what you want within the wide path that the narrative places you on.

The world is finely detailed and thickly populated with NPCs who have their own schedules and jobs to do. Plenty of RPG standards, from extensive character progression to a deep item crafting system, give the experience depth. Piranha Bytes is promising more "combat tricks" to spice up the staid battles of the original, though if Risen 2 is anything like the last game you'll spend maybe a quarter of your time in combat situations.

The structural and gameplay similarities are nothing to complain about; variety in everything from environments to characters to combat should go a long way to improving the Risen formula. If Piranha Bytes can bring the same level of nonlinearity, polish, and interactions to Risen 2 in addition to the improved production values and larger scope, RPG fans will have something to look forward to in 2012. » **Adam Biessener**

» **Platform**
PS3 • Xbox 360 • PC

» **Style**
1-Player Role-Playing

» **Publisher**
Deep Silver

» **Developer**
Piranha Bytes

» **Release**
2012





X-Men: Destiny

Silicon Knights lets players choose their destiny

» **Platform**
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360

» **Style**
1-Player Action/RPG
(Online TBA)

» **Publisher**
Activision

» **Developer**
Silicon Knights

» **Release**
Holiday

Last year at New York Comic Con, Silicon Knights announced it was working with Activision on a brand new X-Men title. Fans were told that X-Men: Destiny would be an action/RPG that evolved dramatically based on player choice, and that three brand new playable mutants were being created for the game. Little else has been revealed about the game, so we pried a few more facts out of Silicon Knights.

Comic writer and current *X-Men: Legacy* author Mike Carey wrote the script for X-Men: Destiny – a narrative that takes place in an alternate reality in which X-Men founder Professor Charles Xavier is dead. The remnants of the X-Men have gathered in San Francisco under the leadership of Cyclops, but recent natural disasters have changed the city's landscape and caused human/mutant relations to reach a volatile climax. The nation is set to declare war against mutant-kind, and it's up to a select group of young mutants to uncover a growing conspiracy as they stop anti-mutant Purifiers from committing mutant genocide.

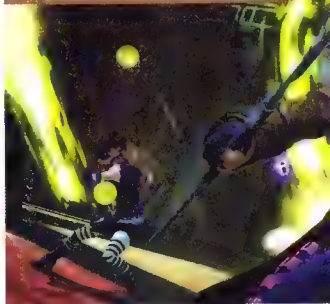
The game begins at a peace rally being held in memory of Professor X. Players get to choose one of three new mutants who they'll shape over the course of the game. The studio shared some basic details about each of these three characters with us. The first is Aimi, a young teenager from Japan who came to America to escape her family's persecution. Adrian, on the other hand, is the son of a local San Francisco activist; he was raised to discriminate against mutants, but then

he found out that he was one himself. Finally there is Grant Alexander, an aspiring football player from Sandersville, Georgia who grew up oblivious to the human/mutant controversies until he discovered his own mutant powers. "Marvel really stepped up in offering great feedback and support while we worked on shaping these characters," says Heder. "They really helped ensure that these new characters had a strong look, personality, and a back story that hit all the standards Marvel applies to any new character they introduce."

While comic fans can't play as any of their favorite X-Men, they will run into a host of familiar faces. These well-known X-Men and Brotherhood of Mutants characters will opt to fight alongside or against them depending on player actions. "Since your character hasn't yet chosen his or her allegiance, you can bet that each of the franchise characters you meet along the way will do their part to persuade you to join their cause," Heder says. Silicon Knights is calling many of these interactive story sequences "destiny moments" that shape the story and each character's power set.

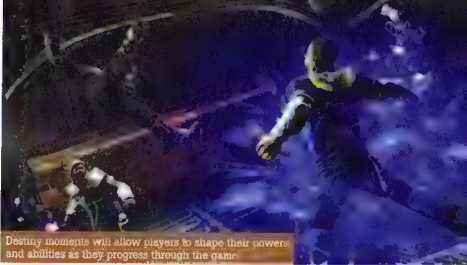
Through a destiny moment at the beginning of the game, players pick their core power set. "Each of these power sets provides the canvas for your mutant's abilities and the core nature of your powers," Heder says. "For example, you may choose energy projection to harness the power of the sun and release a variety of powerful shocks of solar energy to incapacitate oncoming enemies. Or you may choose density

(Silicon Knights has promised that we can expect to meet plenty of popular X-Men and Brotherhood characters as well as ones who have never been seen in a video game before.)



control to manipulate matter and your own body mass into an impenetrable rock-like substance." A core power set is only a template for what a character can become, and players can substantially modify their characters.

Players acquire X-Genes as they interact with mutants throughout the Marvel Universe. These X-Genes are extracted genetic code from popular X-Men characters, and they modify your character's powers in wild ways. For example, Surge (a young mutant and member of the comic book team New Mutants) has the ability to absorb electricity and rechannel it into lightning blasts or



Destiny moments will allow players to shape their powers and abilities as they progress through the game.

Alma...



...but, the mutant power of the X-Men is a double-edged sword. After the discovery of mutants, but got swept up in the human/mutant controversy when he discovered his own mutant power.



enhanced speed. "Say I have energy projection as my core power set," Heder explains. "By adding Surge's X-Gene, my solar-based energy attacks now become high-voltage electrical attacks. Electrical attacks not only output more damage, but provide resistance to other electrical-based attacks." A solar-based character who equips a lightning X-Gene could also perform a chain lightning attack. Since players can equip up to three different X-Genes at once, it will take a lot of experimenting to discover all of X-Men: Destiny's different power combinations. » Ben Reeves

Reviews

gamestar
GAME OF THE MONTH



91

The Witcher 2: Assassins of Kings

gamestar
GAME OF THE MONTH

83 **L.A. Noire**

Rockstar and Team Bondi's long-awaited L.A. Noire is finally here, and the finished product is a beguiling mix of open-world action and adventure game investigations. As detective Cole Phelps, you'll experience the seedy world of 1940s Los Angeles, as L.A. Noire tells a complex story of corruption, betrayal, and redemption.

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	Flawed. It may be obvious that the game has lots of potential, but its most engaging features could be undeniably flawed or not integrated into the experience.
9	Superb. Just shy of gaming nirvana, this score is a high recommendation because the game reviewed is head-and-shoulders above its competition.	4	Bad. While some things work as planned, the majority of this title either malfunctions or it is so dull that the game falls short as a whole.
8	Very Good. Innovative, but perhaps not the right choice for everyone. This score indicates that there are many good things to be had, but arguably so.	3	Painful. If there is anything that's redemptive in a game of this caliber, it's buried beneath agonizing gameplay and uneven execution in its features or theme.
7	Average. The game's features may work, but are nothing that even casual players haven't seen before. A decent game from beginning to end.	2	Broken. Basically unplayable. This game is so insufficient in execution that any value would be derived in extremely small quantities, if at all.
6	Limited Appeal. Although there may be fans of games receiving this score, many will be left yearning for a more rewarding game experience.	1	"I'm in space!" A game so corrupted it must be ejected into the vacuum between planets.

AWARDS

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

L.A. Noire

Rockstar's compelling yet flawed epic fascinates



IGN **GAME OF THE MONTH**

IGN **SILVER**

Style 1-Player Action/Adventure **Publisher** Rockstar Games **Developer** Team Bondi/Rockstar Games
Release May 17 **ESRB** M

L.A. Noire is ambitious. It throws the player headlong into a complex, emotional detective saga set in 1947 Los Angeles. Team Bondi doesn't conceal the game's literary and film influences; allusions to classic noir abound, and the game succeeds in capturing the dark, morally ambiguous atmosphere that is the hallmark of the genre. It's a game unlike anything else I've played, one that uses Rockstar's familiar open-world template as a jumping off point to deliver a deliberately paced adventure game that stresses conversation over gunplay.

Much has been made of Team Bondi's groundbreaking facial motion capture technology, which allowed the developers to effectively "film" real actors as 3D models and put their expression and dialogue straight into the game. The results of this experiment are striking; never before have digital characters conveyed so much real emotion in a video game. In comparison to L.A. Noire, the characters in Heavy Rain and the Mass Effect series appear wooden. In addition, the casting of real-life actors like Aaron Staton (Ken Cosgrove from *Mad Men*) and John Noble (Walter Bishop from *Fringe*) pays off; this game hasn't conquered the uncanny valley, but at times I began to accept these characters as real, breathing human beings.

As in any good film noir, appearances can be deceiving. Players take the role of detective Cole Phelps, a decorated war hero and new LAPD detective who must navigate the tense underworld of Los Angeles, negotiating the often-blurry line between cop and criminal. Cole Phelps is an honest man, but he's often impetuous, selfish, and haunted by the events he experienced in WWII. While feted as a war hero, the truth of what happened to him in the war is tragic and complicated, and the echoes of those deeds reverberate throughout L.A. Noire. Investigating a series of murders that tie into the real-life Black Dahlia killings, Cole begins to understand that the appearance of justice is all that's desired by his superiors. While working vice, he also learns that the difference between gangster and police officer is sometimes little more than a uniform. Eventually, the web of deceit and corruption widens, implicating those at the highest levels of society and government. I don't want to spoil any revelations, but the events of the last third come to an explosive head, culminating in a sad,

conflicted final scene that will stick with you long after the credits roll.

As masterful as the storytelling is, games are meant to be played. In this regard, I'm conflicted. Phelps's career is divided into a series of cases that spread across the beat patrol, traffic, homicide, vice, and arson desks (the fact that arson is the last is not a misprint; it is close to some surprising story events). The formula for most cases is uniform: You and your partner roll up to the crime scene, gather clues, and interview witnesses and people of interest. It's best to gather as much physical evidence as possible, as each clue you log in your notebook opens up new lines of inquiry. At first, I relished the investigations. Any breaking in the environment could give you a big hint in the case, from a ring to a prop shrunken head in a Hollywood production studio. However, over the course of the game's 20 hours the repetitive search mechanic wears thin. Walking around waiting for a controller rumble to alert you to an item of interest feels more like an Easter egg hunt than an actual investigation. In a nod to old-school adventure games, many items you are prompted to pick up are meaningless as well; I'm pretty sure I examined every hairbrush in the greater L.A. area. The cases occasionally challenge your deductive skills, but it's mostly just a case of walking around until you find all the relevant items.

L.A. Noire could have used more action sequences to break up the monotonous investigating, but aside from a couple of frantic moments toward the end of the Black Dahlia plotline, most of the action vignettes are simple foot or car chases. That would be fine if they weren't so predictable and repetitive. Honestly, if one more suspect bolted right as I was about to start my questioning, I was going to shoot him or her. The few shootouts the game does have play out well enough, but suffer from occasional problems coming in and out of cover.

The interrogations, which showcase the amazing facial animations, are the most compelling aspect of L.A. Noire. As you read your suspect's face for signs of subterfuge you can react by either believing their statement, expressing doubt, or accusing them of lying. If you throw out an accusation, be prepared to back it up with some hard evidence. If you don't have something convincing or incriminating you'll

likely cause them to shut down entirely, which prevents you from extracting further information. Thanks to the animations and superb acting, these scenes are fraught with tension, especially when you're juggling two suspects at once, each accusing the other. In these moments, L.A. Noire shines, providing a real sense of human drama. However, unlike in Heavy Rain or the Mass Effect series, the outcome of the case has no bearing on the larger plot. Sure, you might miss out on some dialogue or facts, but you still proceed from point A to point B. In a game that supposedly tests your decision-making, your determinations ultimately play no role in the story outcome.

The open city itself is drop-dead gorgeous — L.A. never looked so beautiful. Rockstar's attention to detail is evident everywhere; even shop windows are filled with fully rendered product displays. However, there's not much to do other than some unremarkable street crime side missions. So much effort went into recreating this historical Los Angeles, and I wish the city felt as alive and interactive as GTA IV's Liberty City. Mostly, it just serves as scenery as you drive to the next cutscene.

At times, L.A. Noire is one of the most vivid, gripping game experiences I've had. Other times, it can be plain boring. As in much noir fiction, the truth lies in the gray area between those two extremes. It's an adventure I won't soon forget, filled with characters as fascinating as they are flawed — a bit like the game itself. **— Matt Helgeson**

8.75

PS3 • 360

11 **Concept**
A sprawling, epic journey into the dark heart of 1940s L.A. that borrows equally from Rockstar's open-world titles and classic adventure games

12 **Graphics**
The facial animations are second to none and the city is gorgeously rendered. Couple this with cinematic lighting and cinematography and you have a game that dazzles

13 **Sound**
One of the best games I've ever played in terms of audio, with high quality voice acting and a soundtrack that deftly balances a mournful score with a treasure trove of vintage jazz songs

14 **Playability**
This game is about the interrogations and investigations, which are accomplished through a well-designed "notebook" interface. The gunplay is merely adequate, and the driving is competent but lacks excitement

15 **Entertainment**
At its best, it's a novel and gripping drama that melds open-world action with classic adventure gameplay. At its worst, it's a dull and repetitive game you watch as much as play

16 **Replay Value**
Moderate



Dungeon Siege III

Old-school action with a few new twists

8

Style 1 or 2-Player Action/RPG (4-Player Online) Publisher Square Enix Developer Obsidian Entertainment Release June 21 ESRB T

PS3 • 360 • PC

» Concept

Journey across a magical land on a mission to save the world, while running loads of errands along the way

» Graphics

The screen is often filled with a dazzling array of spells, traps, and other flashy eye candy; character models look great when you zoom in

» Sound

The music and ambient sounds are fantastic, though the voice acting leans toward the renaissance fair side of the spectrum

» Playability

The camera occasionally jams into awkward angles, but overall everything works well

» Entertainment

If you're looking for a fun, old-school dungeon crawler, you can stop looking now

» Replay Value

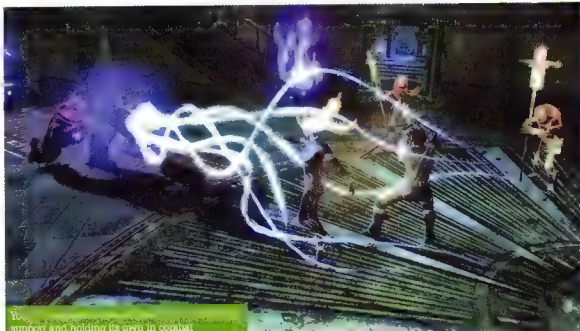
Moderately High

With *Dungeon Siege III*, developer Obsidian Entertainment brings the hack-and-slash RPG series to consoles for the first time. The game is firmly entrenched in old-school tropes, but it does add a few more contemporary enhancements.

The story is set in the kingdom of Ehb, though you don't have to be a *Dungeon Siege* work to get what's going on. The 10th Legion has been routed, and it's up to you and your party to remobilize it and prevent Jeyne Kassidy from killing its descendants. Dialogue is handled through a *Mass Effect*-like conversation wheel, though players are largely guided through preset conversations rather than having multiple choices during verbal encounters. You make decisions in a few key moments—and can see the effects of those choices—but I never felt I was making significant waves in the world. Considering how generic the overall conflict felt, I'm perfectly satisfied with that.

Fortunately, the action feels more immediate and engaging than typical games in the genre thanks to Obsidian's approach to combat. Rather than merely hammering on the attack button and waiting for a spirit gauge or mana bar to replenish automatically, you have to be an active participant in battles to pull off flashy moves. As you attack enemies, a will meter fills with each successful blow. That meter is tied to all of your character's abilities. In a typical encounter with my archon character, Anjali, I'd pick away at enemies with ranged fire blasts, and then summon my fire jackal when I had scraped together enough will. As it baited and attacked my foes, I was free to scorch them with pillars of flame or area effect infernos. When I got hurt, I couldn't rely on a few quaffs from a potion to cure my wounds instantly, either. Each of the four characters has some form of healing ability, though they replenish health over time rather than in one instant chunk.

As a gamer who appreciated the action part of action/RPGs, I enjoyed how *Dungeon Siege III* kept me involved in battles. You don't reap any benefits from hanging away from combat, so I had to reexamine my usual strategy of nuking groups of bad guys, running away, and then turtling as I waited in seclusion for



Weapons are a key element of support and holding its own in combat

a mana bar to max out again. Instead, I often found myself weaving in and out of groups of enemies, dodging and blocking their attacks as I got my lumps. Each character has two stances, which affect their offensive and defensive abilities. For example, Anjali's fire form lets her use those powerful flame-based attacks, while her human form focuses more on staff-based physical damage.

Character customization is satisfyingly deep, and players can tweak each character's abilities through proficiencies. For instance, Anjali's fire jackal can be tweaked to do more damage or have a bigger pool of hit points. Each ability has five slots for proficiencies, so you have to make some tough decisions. Beyond that, talents offer ability neutral buffs to characters, such as improved healing or additional damage.

In the single-player campaign you fight side-by-side with an AI companion. I found that having Legion swordsman Lucas Montbaron at my side made life significantly easier, thanks to his tanking abilities that complemented my more mage-like skillset. I didn't have any direct control over Lucas, though I got to upgrade his abilities and equipment. I was surprised (and impressed) by the amount of autonomy he displayed. He used his various abilities effectively, waiting for

enemies to cluster together before attacking groups with his special sword slashes, or making sure that the area was clear before attempting to revive me if I was down. He even picked up gold on his own at the end of skirmishes, though he left the loot on the ground.

Alas, loot management is a major weak spot, which is a problem for a game that showers players with all manner of weapons, armor, and goodies. Weapons are ranked in a variety of attribute-enhancing categories, but optimizing between piles of gear can quickly become a headache. You can compare items

against what you have equipped, but you can't sort your gear according to different bonuses, which would have been a tremendous help. After a few hours, I stopped looking forward to incrementally better gear, which is a problem when nearly every chest or enemy encounter fills your sack with more. If you like playing with a spreadsheet in your lap, however, more power to you.

Multiplayer is a big draw for *Dungeon Siege III*, and it's handled fairly well. Players are tethered to one another, whether in the two-player local co-op or through four-player online matches. Because of the small size of some of the areas, it can feel constraining at times—especially when there isn't consensus on which direction to explore next. It's also easy to lose your character amid the various spell effects and trap displays. It doesn't help matters when the targeting system occasionally has a mind of its own; in a few battles I aimed at where I thought the enemies were and hoped for the best.

The story didn't bowl me over, but I enjoyed the setting and characters. Obsidian brings a neat steampunk vibe to the proceedings, with automatons, firearms, and graphical embellishments that make the world feel unique without being self-conscious about it. You can check most of the usual fantasy settings off your list, too, such as a haunted forest, frozen wasteland, and murky swamp, but there are enough little touches to keep it interesting. For instance, as you make your way across a mountain pass, enemy cannons are firing on you, striking your party and causing the occasional rockslide. It makes the world feel more dynamic, which is great.

I recommend *Dungeon Siege III* to anyone who wants to connect with friends and kill a whole mess of monsters together. Thanks to the strong AI, even the single-player campaign is worth a look if you can't wrangle up a party. It's one of the best hack-and-slash options out there for consoles, and it's no slouch on the PC front, either. — Jeff Cork



Enemies are a key element of support and holding its own in combat

Alice: Madness Returns

A shaky trip back down the rabbit hole



Style 1-Player Action/Adventure Publisher Electronic Arts Developer Spicy Horse Release June 14 ESRB M

American McGee's Alice wowed gamers a decade ago with its bizarre visual spin on Lewis Carroll's *Wonderland*. The title predated Tim Burton's gaudy reimagining of the classic property, so the concept of a classic tale turned macabre was fresh and exciting. The sequel, *Alice: Madness Returns*, arrives with the signature dark flair of the original, but stripping off the stylish straightjacket reveals unstable gameplay that will disappoint all but the staunchest fans of the original.

The story picks up 10 years after the events of the first game, with an asylum-committed Alice attempting to piece together her family's death in her tainted mind. The majority of the story takes place in Alice's Imaginary Wonderland, with bits of the narrative strung together with reality checks in England. Guiding Alice through the gray, impoverished city streets is a nice contrast to her over-stimulating make-believe land, but these real life sections are used so sparingly and briefly that they are easily forgotten.

Gamers half familiar with *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* will appreciate early references to the absurd tale, such as interactions with the white rabbit, dormouse, and infamous Mad Hatter. I enjoyed leaping on mushrooms in classic *Wonderland* and surviving the deadly machinery of Hatter Industries. These entertaining stages unfortunately give way to generic locales like a pirate-filled underwater world and a slice of ancient Japan smattered with samurai wasps. These later areas all but ditch the series' trademark grim art style, with the exception of one section which relies on creepy clichés like

eyeless doll heads and 666s to set the mood. Aside from some chilling moments early on, the attempts to make players uncomfortable are largely predictable and bland.

Art style aside, *Alice: Madness Returns* is an exercise in graphical mediocrity with the exception of Alice herself. The heroine's character model is wonderfully rendered. Her raven hair realistically flutters around her porcelain face, and her collection of stylish dresses flap as she glides through the air. The world she inhabits isn't nearly as pretty. Enemies appear to be missing a few animations, resulting in unintentionally stilted movements. The game encourages exploration, which means you'll be examining the environment closely. It's too bad that all that searching pays off with bland textures and seams in the game's construction.

Though poorly put together, the denizens of *Wonderland* pose a threat to Alice. She defends herself with a butcher's blade and other creative weaponry like a weaponized pepper grinder, tea kettle, and hobby horse. I loved chopping apart gremlins and other close range fiends with the knife, then switching to the Gatling gun-like pepper grinder to drop flying foes. Projectile weapons are on a cooldown timer, which forces players to constantly swap between attack styles. I adored the variety the unique arsenal fostered, and unlike other action titles, I actually enjoyed using and upgrading every weapon. On the other hand, *God of War* or *Devil May Cry* fans looking for a deep combat system should look elsewhere. Let me put the simplicity of Alice's movement this way: she can't attack while jumping.

Speaking of jumping, you'll spend much of your time leaping and floating across *Wonderland*. Alice packs a generous triple jump and glide ability, resulting in platforming similar to *Spyro*. Navigating moving platforms and lava pits is simple early on, but later stages require you to steer the camera while milking every centimeter from Alice's glides. Combine this with frequent snags on the scenery and the fact that Alice can't grab ledges, and you've got a recipe for some infuriating deaths.

In an effort to cleanse gamers' palates of the repetitive fighting and exploration, several minigames sprout up. A handful of spots in the game require you to hunt down pieces of a puzzle or press buttons in rhythm with a selection of music. These puzzles are laughably formulaic, but fortunately players can skip the nursery school exercises altogether. They seem ingenious, however, compared to diversions such as a side scrolling shooter segment and odd ball head-rolling game. These half-baked gameplay mix-ups are absolute nightmares, and you'll groan every time you encounter one.

What starts out as a promising romp through a demented *Wonderland* devolves into a few good ideas stretched across redundant gameplay. Like any game based on a popular property, there will be those who can overlook *Madness Returns*'s shortcomings and scrape together a good time. To anyone considering picking up *Spycoy* Hor's latest in hopes of a rewarding adventure coated in psychedelic scenery, Alice's encore is a disappointment. — **Tim Turi**

6.75

PS3 • 360 • PC

Concept
Return to *Wonderland* for a trek through a slightly older Alice's twisted psyche

Graphics
Alice looks beautiful, and the bizarre worlds are gorgeous from a distance, but up close ugly textures and poorly-animated creatures mar the visuals

Sound
The voice acting occasionally supports the solid writing

Playability
The combat becomes boring but remains reliable throughout. The nastiest gameplay flaws are found in trivial minigames and sloppy platforming segments

Entertainment
You've done everything in this game before, and probably had more fun doing it then

Replay Value
Moderately Low

Brink

An identity crisis keeps Brink from reaching its potential

6.75

PS3 • 360 • PC

» **Concept:** Blend an Enemy Territory-style multiplayer experience with a shallow near-future story that pits the establishment against a revolutionary group

» **Graphics:** The caricature faces seem at odds with the more traditional environmental art style. With so much information on your HUD, you won't be soaking in the setting too much anyway

» **Sound:** Unsatisfying weapon effects, and way too much chatter from your superior about objectives

» **Playability:** The new parkour-style SMART navigation system is a subtle but welcome improvement to movement, but the gunplay is lacking

» **Entertainment:** With only eight maps and 20 progression levels, this multiplayer-centric game doesn't have the depth you expect

» **Replay Value:** Moderate

When Splash Damage first announced Brink, the veteran first-person shooter developer promised a game that would seamlessly blend the single-player, co-op, and multiplayer experiences. Little did we know that this meant "your garden variety multiplayer game, now with bot matches."

Despite its claims to the contrary, Brink is not a proper single-player game. Don't be fooled by the paper-thin plot that pits the powers-that-be against a rebellious gang on a near-future floating city—this "campaign" is comprised of multiplayer maps populated with brainless bots. These dolts often run around without purpose, wait to shoot back at oncoming enemies, neglect objectives, and fail to coordinate attacks.

Splash Damage makes it nearly impossible to leave the single-player behind when you jump online. You're still inundated with the overly dramatic voiceovers and outscenes during each match, and most of the versus modes mix bots with players. Only when you drill into the Freeplay match settings do you unearth the two poorly labeled game varieties that allow you to leave the bots behind (Old Skool and Competition, for those keeping score).

Once you ditch the AI and hop online with friends, Brink starts to feel like a proper multiplayer shooter. Like Battlefield, players choose from one of four classes at the beginning of each match—soldier, engineer, medic, and operative—each of which earns experience points for performing specialized actions in a way that naturally forces players to work together. As you rack up experience, you unlock new skins for your avatar and perk-like abilities.



Players can switch classes mid-match at a command post to reconfigure the tactics for the objective at hand. This comes in handy when you're transitioning from an assault objective, where you may need several operatives to hack a safe quickly, to an escort mission, where a multitude of medics gives you the best chance of getting the VIP out alive without getting caught in a choke point.

Splash Damage is best known for its work on the Enemy Territory series, where the studio built maps that require players to think and act strategically to find success. This philosophy carries over into Brink; these aren't wide-open Battlefield zones or cramped Call of Duty maps. Most of Brink's env and bullets are exchanged. Your objectives are standard fare—plant explosives, escort a VIP, hack doors, repair mission-critical machinery, or defend an area. Secondary missions populate the maps as well; some grant team bonuses like supply and health boosts,

while others allow you to create a shortcut to the main objective. As you gain familiarity with the maps, you begin to appreciate how many tactical approaches are available for completing your mission. Finding the best places to ambush your enemies with turrets, slow their progress with landmines, or flank the objective and then executing your plan is what this game is all about. This requires timing and coordination, so Brink is best played with a group of mic'd up friends.

The one element where Brink distinguishes itself from the multiplayer pack is

the SMART movement, a contextual navigation button that lets you run and climb effortlessly through the environment. Characters move too slowly for my liking (even with the smaller body type that increases your parkour abilities), but I enjoyed the streamlined freedom of movement. It seems like a subtle change, but when I booted up another shooter I found myself wishing my soldier would automatically vault small obstacles as I held down the sprint button.

The gunplay isn't as memorable. Brink features your standard arsenal of weapons, most of which are unlocked along with attachments, by completing boring challenges in an otherwise forgettable separate game mode. Weapons within the same class don't distinguish themselves in any meaningful way, and shooting them is hardly satisfying. Every gun suffers from an inordinate amount of recoil, headshots are not one-shot kills, and even grenades and mines don't do mortal damage.

Most disappointing of all are the myriad rookie mistakes Splash Damage made in the front end. Brink lacks a pre-game lobby where you can gather all your friends before looking for a match—a major faux pas on consoles these days. You also can't equip new abilities you just unlocked between matches without dropping out to the main menu. Without dedicated servers, the in-game performance is dependent upon the host's connection quality, and I frequently experienced an unplayable level of lag.

Brink is not a bad game. If Splash Damage can stabilize the performance and fix some glaring omissions (like a pre-game lobby) with a patch, I'd gladly spend more time with it. But with only eight multiplayer maps, 20 progression levels, no clan support, and average gunplay, it's not a good value proposition. Especially considering many Xbox Live games offer a similar amount of content for a fraction of the price. » **Matt Bertz**



Dirt 3

Gymkhana and more off-road racing



gameformer
SILVER

Style 1 or 2-Player Racing (8-Players Online) Publisher Codemasters Developer Codemasters Release May 24 ESRB T

The Dirt series ostensibly encompasses the large world of off-road racing in all its forms. This philosophy was whittled down slightly with fewer vehicle types year after year since the franchise's 2007 debut, and Dirt 3 is the most focused entry yet. The addition of Gymkhana and the prominence of various rally racing events – with trucks, co-pilots Trailblazer runs in head-to-head finale events, or even in multi-car races – makes this the most thrilling collection of Dirt racing to date. But there's a price to be paid for the abundance of rally racing, as the series loses momentum in its career mode.

I love Codemasters' decision to focus on rally racing and offshoots like Gymkhana, even if it's at the expense of some of the series vehicles, like semis, and previous events, like Hill Climb. The rally racing, whether it's with or without a co-pilot (Trailblazer) or even with other cars (RallyCross), is an exhilarating interplay of timing and subtlety between your cars' acceleration, steering, brakes, and e-brake that makes every turn either a chance to make up lost time or a race-ending disaster. This is where the rewind tokens come in handy.

Gymkhana appears both as a free ride play-ground (complete with specific, but optional,

tasks) and a part of the career via fun events like Sprints (tackling tricks like drift slides under tight gaps in a specific order), freestyle matches where order isn't important, and freeform contests. Online Multiplayer also includes Gymkhana among the more traditional race types, with capture the flag-esque Transporter events and infected-style Outbreak races. The addition of Gymkhana is great – I particularly like how the free ride area at London's Battersea Power Station keeps growing as you unlock new sections.

But even with this exciting new content, the game misses an opportunity to improve its career mode structure. Your career managers are nothing more than laborious voiceovers for the simple progression path. Losing the camper hub makes the HUD even more unexciting, and the rudimentary car upgrades have been stripped out. Players' attachment to their cars is lessened since damage doesn't have to be repaired between rally stages, and the sponsorships you earn are really nothing more than new liveries. Thus, there's not a lot of career management going on. What was once an interesting and evolving part of the franchise – that feeling that you were living an actual racing career – has been neutered.

Codemasters has made a good name for itself with this franchise's heart-pounding racing and arresting graphics – which are even more striking with the inclusion of night driving and falling snow. The renewed focus on rally racing and the addition of Gymkhana keeps it in good shape, even as it pares down some of its previously interesting career aspects. — Matthew Kato

8.75

PS3 • 360

» Concept
Include more rally racing and incorporate new Gymkhana events

» Graphics
The new night racing and falling snow look great, and they also help spice up the selection of races

» Sound
Classic rally cars have throatier exhaust and engine sounds

» Playability
Along with the normal driving assists, a trick assist feature helps with the drift and donut-centric Gymkhana events. Thankfully it doesn't make things too easy

» Entertainment
Dirt 3's racing and Gymkhana carry the day, even if the career structure has devolved

» Replay Value
Moderately High



Red Faction: Armageddon

Mars' secrets were just the beginning!

7.25

PS3 • 360

» Concept
A linear and overly repetitive alien shooter set in subterranean Mars

» Graphics
The playfield is usually cluttered with tumbling debris and vibrant particle effects. As beautiful as this game is, the aliens look like humans in insect costumes, and do little to elicit fear

» Sound
Sometimes protagonists should remain silent. Darius runs his mouth whenever he can, and most of his dialogue appears to be from the book *How to Sound Like a Whiny Space Cowboy*

» Playability
The gunplay is rock solid, and most of the weapons blow huge holes in walls. The combat scenarios all feel the same, and usually fall into the repetitive cycle of clearing a room and moving on to the next

» Entertainment
Fails to hit the high marks set by its predecessors. It's such a departure that it feels like it belongs in a different series

» Replay Value
Moderately Low

Second Opinion 6.75

Linearity gets a bad rap in gaming. By tightly controlling a player's path through a game, developers can take players on thrilling, well-paced rides. Unfortunately, Volition fails to do this with *Red Faction: Armageddon*. In a critical misstep, the team took away the sense of exploration and freedom that the series offered with *Guerrilla* and replaced it with the forgettable tale of Darius Mason and his battle against the same five or six space bugs. Destruction still plays a role in the game, but putting the action in a claustrophobia-inducing cave network limits its scope. Part of the fun in *Guerrilla* was driving around, finding something big, and then blasting it apart. That's largely gone. Instead, I walked along tunnels waiting for the inevitable alien ambush to trigger. Afterward, I used my nanoforge to repair the walkways and bridges I wrecked and the cycle repeated. Some moments take place above the surface, but as soon as Mason gulps a few breaths of fresh Martian air he finds an excuse to dig back in. The score-based Run mode is a reminder of what made its predecessor so much fun, simultaneously making the disappointment that *Armageddon* delivers even worse. » **Jeff Cook**



Style 1-Player Action (4-Player Online) Publisher THQ Developer Volition Release June 7 ESRB M

Protagonist Darius Mason tries to make *Red Faction: Armageddon* an exhilarating adventure. He wields a gun that fires scientifically implausible singularities, pilots a spider mech that "accidentally" tramples an entire underground city, curb stomps anyone that dares stand in his proximity, and knows just when to spit out an angst-filled taunt at an alien that clearly doesn't understand English. For an encore, he uses a unicorn's flatulence as a weapon of mass destruction. All of these awesome experiences can be yours if you don't mind choking down hours upon hours of repetitive gunplay.

I spent most of my time annihilating five or six different alien types within caverns that all look strikingly alike. I started getting far too excited over the most insignificant environmental differences, like one cavern having a crystalline stalactite formation or another replacing the typical rock path I'd traversed with destructible steel grating. The environment, as drab as it is, provides creative ways to attack foes—such as the magnet gun's ability to hurl large chunks of metal across vast chasms— but I had to go out of my way to make the firefights entertaining. Most of the aliens, who look like

giant insects from a Roger Corman science fiction movie, can be downed with little effort. This includes widely flailing a hammer.

The genocidal repetition is periodically broken up with a great vehicular sequence. Darius jumps into an Iron Man-like suit that packs plenty of firepower and can lower its shoulder to dash through heavily fortified structures. A few levels take place exclusively from a mech's cockpit, where Darius rains swarm missiles down upon armies and their fortresses. The most surprising vehicle is a spacecraft heavily inspired by *Descent* (another of the company's beloved franchises). The time I spent in the vehicles was my favorite part of this game. Challenge is practically non-existent in these moments, but each craft controls beautifully and the vast amounts of destruction they unleash created dazzling spectacles.

Most of the destruction is crammed into suffocating caverns, so you won't see as many giant towers toppling over as you did in *Red Faction: Guerrilla*. That said, weapons like the singularity cannon and magnet gun still allow players to artistically pick apart buildings and set up carnage-filled chain reactions. The arsenal packs more of a punch than *Guerrilla*'s, and the destruction it delivers is more satisfying, but most of the game's structural damage is not tied to objectives. *Guerrilla*'s amazing demolition puzzles and faction-crippling structural assaults against the EDF are nowhere to be found in this game.

Guerrilla favored open-world exploration and side quests. *Armageddon* is a linear shooter bogged down by mundane gunplay. Although it is a sequel of sorts, it's a much different game, sharing more in common with a *Call of Duty* campaign than any other *Red Faction* game. Should Darius somehow lose his way on a

narrow, straight path, or, heaven forbid, spend a few seconds gawking at the gorgeous texture work and detailed space-age technologies, large, glowing arrows appear in front of him, leading to the next uninspired alien bug fight. Even the game's newest addition, the ability to repair objects, is used mostly to fix stars and bridges along this linear path. It's cool tech, but little fun comes from it.

If you're hoping this bumpy ride might be worth enduring for the story, which has historically been one of the series' weaker points, I have bad news. This tale is an incomprehensible mess. The singular highlight occurs early on, when humanity discovers it is not alone on Mars. Once the aliens scurry from the depths of the red planet, the plot unravels into a testosterone-filled "kill 'em all" set-up. I couldn't tell you what happened, although it does include an alien queen and a character that looks like an out-of-place *Star Wars* Sith Lord.

In addition to the campaign, *Armageddon* offers an enjoyable score-based challenge in Run mode. Here, players are tasked with blowing up as much stuff as they can in a set amount of time on five tiny maps. Another mode, called *Horde mode*, plays out just like *Gears of War 2*'s *Horde mode*. Infestation lasts for 30 waves, and progressively gets more challenging after each one is completed. Volition makes these challenges true tests of skill, but there isn't much reason to sink more than a few hours into these modes.

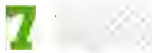
Armageddon is an unimaginative shooter, showing more creativity in Darius' tribal tattoos than in any of its combat scenarios. If you're looking for a memorable *Red Faction* experience, you're better off playing *Guerrilla* again. » **Andrew Reintz**



LEGO Pirates of the Caribbean

Plundered from past installments

Style 1 or 2-Player Action **Publisher** Warner Bros. Interactive **Developer** Traveller's Tales **Release** May 10 ESRB E10+



PS3 • 360 • X360

» **Concept**
Play through whimsical retreads of the films while collecting loads of treasure

» **Graphics**
Seeing bricked-out interpretations of familiar faces and places is still a treat, even after all these years of LEGO games

» **Sound**
Characters still communicate through grunts and silly gibberish. The music is a perfect accompaniment for swashbuckling adventures

» **Playability**
It's exactly what you'd expect from a LEGO game, including a big cast of characters, light puzzle elements, and awful planning sections

» **Entertainment**
A solid entry in the series, though it lacks the overall punch that its Star Wars-themed contemporaries offer

» **Replay Value**
Moderately High

At this point in the LEGO series' lifespan, you're either on board with the concept or have already abandoned ship. LEGO Pirates of the Caribbean doesn't enhance the LEGO franchise as the Clone Wars game did a few months back, but it offers another well-executed entry.

Not surprisingly, the game loosely follows the adventures from the four Pirates of the Caribbean movies. If you didn't fully understand what was going on in the films, don't expect to gain any insight here. The minifigs' pantomimes and slapstick routines provide plenty of chuckles and odd references to pigs and carrots, but even they can't make any sense of the series' convoluted mythology. Suffice to say, all you have to worry about is slashing the bad guys, breaking crates, and collecting piles of valuable LEGO studs. You know the routine by now.

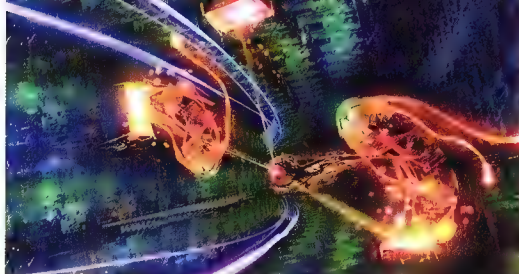
As with other LEGO games, characters are divided into several classes that define their roles in puzzles. Captain Jack Sparrow and other swordsmen can go against common sense and use their blades as levers to open doors and switches. Others can blast silver components apart with explosives, drag heavy objects, and double-jump to reach otherwise inaccessible areas. None of these feel like they add anything the overall formula, aside from the introduction of a few undead pirates who can walk on the ocean floor.

LEGO Pirates has more in common with puzzle-focused entries such as LEGO Harry Potter than it does with the more action-oriented Star Wars games. Don't worry – you'll still swap steel with more than your share of sou'w'yer dogs before the game ends. It's just that there's a whole lot of item fetching and environment manipulation between battles, which can become tiresome.

With his bizarre appearance and woozy mannerisms, Sparrow is undeniably the draw of the movies. He fills a similar role in the LEGO version of the game. One of the problems with LEGO Pirates of the Caribbean is that the campaign isn't populated with many interesting characters: during the actual campaign you're either playing as Sparrow or someone who may as well be called "Not Captain Jack."

A few months ago, I reviewed LEGO Star Wars III: The Clone Wars. That game introduced some light RTS elements to the series, along with loads of vehicle-based missions, and a huge cast of playable characters. LEGO Pirates of the Caribbean falls short of that high mark, delivering a more traditional LEGO experience. That's not to say that Pirates is a bad game – quite the contrary. It's just puzzling to see a series that has struggled to evolve take a step back. **- Jeff Cork**

For the extended review, please visit gameinformer.com



Child of Eden

A stint of synaesthesia

Style 1-Player Shooter **Publisher** Ubisoft **Developer** Q Entertainment **Release** June 14 ESRB E10+



360

Tetsuya Mizuguchi's musical shooter Rez hypnotized players with trance-inducing visuals and pulsating beats as they eradicated viruses and firewalls within cyberspace to keep an AI called "Eden" from shutting down. Roughly a decade later, a spiritual successor to the cult hit emerges to deliver a similar multi-sensory experience via Kinect.

Child of Eden is an on-rails shooter that tasks players with rescuing the endangered Lumi from viruses attacking Eden, a futuristic version of the Internet. From the introductory Matrix archive to the grand finale in Journey, players shoot a unique array of enemies while switching between homing and rapid-fire shots or using a bomb that cleanses all viruses in your path.

The game gives you the option to use either Kinect or a standard controller. With Kinect, you use your right hand to guide a blue reticle to lock onto enemies and then flick your hand to fire homing missiles. You can then seamlessly switch to your left hand to guide a purple reticle for quick fire. This seems simple at first, but when enemies begin to invade at full force, strategy comes into play when determining which type of fire will quickly clear the various types of viruses while keeping your health meter intact. I found Kinect to be the superior of the two input methods; guiding the reticle with hand gestures is incredibly accurate. If your arms need a break, the controller option works well enough.

Players move through Eden's beautiful environments at a slower, more deliberate pace to give players a chance to absorb the game's gorgeous design, which at times feels a little too slow. The game is at its best in the few high speed, frantic shooting sequences sprinkled across the archives. It wasn't until the second to last archive, Passion, that I had a true appreciation of Mizuguchi's vision. This level shows you with sensory overload, cleverly uses the simple shooting mechanics, and boasts a visual style unlike anything I have ever seen. My excitement grew as I zipped through the final archive that was captured, but like Rez, Child of Eden abruptly ends the immersive experience right when it hits its stride.

Each of Child of Eden's five archives takes a mere 10 to 25 minutes to complete, putting game length closer to those of downloadable titles. A few unlockables give Child of Eden replay value, including an additional challenge mode level, art and video galleries, and decorations for Lumi's garden in the main menu screen. However the most valuable prize is new visual effects. Selecting a different cosmetic effect drastically changes the aesthetic of each archive, giving the levels a whole new feel.

Though brief, Child of Eden offers one of the most unique Kinect experiences to date. It's unfortunate our time in Eden's gorgeous confines ends too soon. **- Annette Gonzalez**

» **Concept**
Save Project Lumi from the viruses that plague Eden in this on-rails musical shooter

» **Graphics**
Child of Eden's levels, or "archives," are an aesthetically pleasing experience

» **Sound**
Tetsuya Mizuguchi delivers hypnotizing tunes from his band Genki Rockets. Shots fired make a colorful contribution

» **Playability**
Though Kinect offers a superior experience over the controller, both input methods work

» **Entertainment**
Child of Eden's multiple difficulty modes (including a God mode) make it accessible to players of all skill levels

» **Replay Value**
Moderate

Second Opinion 7.5

The LEGO version of Captain Jack Sparrow is every bit as charming and weird as his silver screen counterpart. His drunken prance is precisely captured, and his magical compass brings enjoyable treasure hunting gameplay to Traveller's Tales' established LEGO formula. The remainder of the content – while drenched in Pirates of the Caribbean tones – could easily be in any other LEGO game. Hardly any of the gameplay takes advantage of the license. Regardless of the unsprayed design, it is an enjoyable brick-building venture. **- Andrew Reiner**

Infamous 2

A heroic attempt that falls just si

8.75

PS3

» Concept

Cole MacGrath's journey continues in a convoluted but action-packed superhero story

» Graphics

New Marais is a rich backdrop for encounters with towering monsters and chaotic action. More of the story is fleshed out in finely animated cutscenes

» Sound

Cole's new voice actor better fits the character. The score deftly bounces between musical styles and is always appropriate for the mood

» Playability

Camera tracking is problematic at times, but I never had to fuss with the controls. Cole's move set has evolved to handle any combat scenario

» Entertainment

Worth playing through twice to see both stories, and you can also spend countless hours in the mission editor

» Replay Value

High



gameformer
SILVER

Style 1-Player Action Publisher Sony Computer Entertainment Developer Sucker Punch Release June 7 ESRB T

In Infamous' final moments, we learned that Cole MacGrath was destined to save humanity from a powerful being known as "The Beast." This message was sent from a future version of Cole, who had gone back in time to shape his younger self into an instrument of destruction capable of stopping the threat. This plan didn't work for John Connor or the robots in the Terminator movies, and to no surprise, it doesn't work here. When the Beast arrives in the first few seconds of Infamous 2, Cole wastes no time trying to fulfill his destiny.

Their battle consists of heart-pounding aerial combat, narrow escapes, and massive environmental damage – all beautifully framed to show a towering sense of scale. The Beast stands over 200 feet tall, and the trail he blazes leaves nothing but death and embers where buildings once stood. This awe-inspiring scene is reminiscent of the opening battle in God of War III, only with a much different outcome. Cole's electrifying blasts only seem to anger his foe. Cole is not powerful enough to win this fight. The only hope of stopping the Beast now rests in the hands of Dr. Wolfe, a scientist who believes he can amplify Cole's powers.

This brilliantly designed opening gives way to an unexpected shift in tone, where a great threat looms over the entire story and uncertainty rests in the mind of all of its major players, Cole included. His act of cowardice doesn't just give this story's opening a dark *The Empire Strikes Back*-style tone, it leads to a dramatic change of setting.

Dr. Wolfe lives in New Marais, Louisiana, which is basically this world's version of New Orleans. This city has a quaint, old-town feel and an inviting allure. Street performers line the sidewalks of the commerce district, and tourists always seem to have their cell phone cameras activated when

you run past them. The beautiful craftsmanship Sucker Punch put into this city makes it a sightseeing marvel. Battles erupt in aboveground graveyards, collectible shards hang precariously on the sides of historic neon lit buildings, and the forgotten flooded districts and dangerous swamplands lie in the shadows beyond. While New Marais lacks the architectural verticality of Empire City, its wetlands make it a more dangerous place for Cole to navigate, mostly because the protagonist has electricity running through his veins. Staying dry is an added challenge in any mission – a problem often solved by running along the tops of drowned fences or leaping and gliding across vast bodies of water.

Cole's standing in this world, and the tale that unfolds within it, is once again dictated by player choice. "Good" and "evil" options accompany most missions, and portions of the game and story close off based on Cole's choices – making it a game you'll have to play twice if you want to see it all. However, this time around, Cole isn't as emotionally invested in the plot or choices tied to it. His role is that of an organic Mega Man, powering up as he goes. The "Cole versus the Beast" plot hook isn't handled well and loses its allure as other confusing narrative threads take shape.

Although this isn't as gripping of a journey for either Cole or the player, the activities tied to both sides of the moral spectrum hammer home the feeling of being "good" or "evil," and offer up fitting gameplay variations for each. No matter the side, Cole is capable of tearing apart city blocks. He can summon tornadoes, launch lightning missiles, and for the first time, he's a force to be reckoned with in close-quarters conflicts. The biggest addition to his move set is melee weapon called the Amp, a giant electrically charged tuning fork used for clubbing enemies in overly stylish ways. The Amp changes the

combat landscape and is the perfect counter to enemies designed to get up close and personal. Cole clashes against gun-crazed military forces, mutants with razor-sharp claws, a wide variety of super-powered villains, ice titans, burrowing creatures, and on occasion, a creature that looks ripped from the pages of an H.P. Lovecraft story. It feels like Sucker Punch showed 100 comic books' worth of foes and plot twists into this game.

The overall flow is also disrupted by the machinations of other players who are connected to PSN. Infamous 2 comes packaged with a mission editor that can be accessed from anywhere in the game world. These tools, which are reminiscent of Tony Hawk's Pro Skater's, are easy to use and allow players to do practically anything they want, even break the fabric of reality with magical floating objects. I created a handful of arena battles, complete with miniature stones told through text boxes. All user-created levels reward Cole with the same experience points he earns in the main game, which are used to either buy new powers or upgrade existing ones. The level editor is a great addition to this open world experience. In my time with the game, it produced more lighthearted scenarios than the main game. Even Sucker Punch's dabbling with the editor provides a wackier tone, such as a mission where Zeke uses Cole to help him impress a lady.

The more I played Infamous 2, the more I found myself disengaged with the story, instead enjoying the experience solely for its amazing open-world superhero fights. The game sacrifices its narrative flow for more fantastic elements. This isn't a necessary ill; a bad thing; it just ends up being more about the action and random moments than Cole's journey. **Andrew Reiner**

The Witcher 2: Assassins of Kings

Putting the R/P back in RPG with style



gamerformer.com
GAME OF THE MONTH **GOLD**

Style 1-Player Role-Playing **Publisher** CDProjekt/Atari **Developer** CDProjekt **RED** **Release** May 17 **ESRB** M

Gorgeous, ambitious, and not afraid to kill you dead, *The Witcher 2* can be a harsh mistress. This dark, unique world is so well realized and populated with interesting characters that it's easy to lose yourself in its environs. Yet, if you're anything like me, you'll hate portions of the game with a burning passion. The driven Polish developers at CDProjekt boldly cut their own path in creating *The Witcher 2*, and their vision is one well worth sharing despite a few snags along the way.

Legendary monster slayer Geralt of Rivia is the fulcrum around which the fates of entire kingdoms pivot. As Geralt, the player makes decisions that dramatically impact the direction of momentous events. You're not just affecting a portion of the ending cinematic. You're picking between radically different paths with hours of divergent gameplay. Save this man, kill another, solve a town's problems or don't—nearly everything you do has a real, noticeable impact on the world around you. RPG players have dreamed of this level of interactivity since the medium's inception, and the deftness with which *The Witcher 2* pulls it off makes a mockery of the rest of the genre. Your choices shape the 30-plus hours of this heroic adventure to an unprecedented degree, but the ending leaves much to be desired.

The most alluring part of the game is exploring the finely crafted, endlessly detailed world. The audio-visual presentation is second to none, which certainly helps, but the writing puts a soul behind the pretty face. You can (and should) spend hours poking around towns, reading books, talking to the inhabitants, gambling in smoky basements, and getting so drunk that you wake up with a godawful neck tattoo. The world is rich with people to meet, stories to hear, and secrets to unearth, and many of them have consequences down the line.

As amazing as the role-playing is, the gameplay is merely adequate, with infrequent (but stinging) set piece moments and too-common frustrations. The third-person action-oriented combat is brutally difficult in the beginning. The game is tuned to be "realistic," where just a few blows from any old longsword can ruin your day. Things get easier as you level and unlock new powers, but even a powerful witcher is two mis-clicks away from reloading his last save in most encounters. It's all too easy to accidentally target something you didn't want to and lock yourself into a long leaping attack animation. Allies are also known to come up behind you and prevent you from dodging away from an incoming strike. When the combat goes the way you want it to, it can be amazing and rewarding, but expect to regularly curse a blue streak when it doesn't.

Inventory management is a disaster. The lame crafting system clogs your bags with hundreds of nearly useless items and rewards tiny incremental upgrades for hours of effort. You're better off ignoring the whole thing and just picking herbs to mix with monster parts for always-useful bombs and potions. Interacting with the world is often a pain as well; targeting specific objects in the environment is so finicky that I found myself regularly shuffling back and forth and swinging the camera around to get at a plainly visible container.

The one system that I can endorse with no reservations is the character development. Each point you spend has a dramatic effect on gameplay. Some boring percentile increases exist, but

at least they're noticeable—10 percent more damage is no joke. Other abilities, like doubling the distance covered by dodge rolls or adding area effects to magical signs, are great perks that can completely change the way you approach combat situations. The three-and-a-half skill trees are extensive enough that you have to make tough choices, and creating a skill set that complements your style of play is great fun.

You can pick apart the small missteps in the nuts and bolts of *The Witcher 2* all day, but you'd be missing the forest for the trees. I play role-playing games to explore fantastic worlds, interact with interesting characters, and pull off badass stunts that only a world-saving hero could accomplish. *The Witcher 2* obliterates all but the best competition on those criteria. As frustrating as it can be at times, this adventurer's charms vastly outweigh its ills. **Adam Bissene**

An expanded review can be read at gamerformer.com



9.25

Concept

Cast the player into a dark, dangerous fantasy world but give them all the tools they need to survive and prosper

Graphics

This is the best-looking game I have ever seen. The art is fantastic and varied, and the engine is capable of meticulous detail, stunning vistas, and amazing cinematic scenes

Sound

The score is a fine backdrop, but the excellent voice work is the real audio highlight

Playability

Responsiveness during combat is the game's weak point, and there are some profoundly stupid elements to the extensive menu system

Entertainment

Screamingly frustrating at times, this is nonetheless one of the most engrossing, creative role-playing games I've had the pleasure of playing

Replay Value

Moderately High

The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time 3D

The new best way to experience an all-time classic

9.25

3DS

» Concept

Make subtle improvements to the classic while maintaining its original feel

» Graphics

The 3D effect is great, but you'll want to turn it off when aiming

» Sound

Ocarina's classic melodies sound as great as ever, but Navi is even more annoying thanks to her repetition of Nintendo's "You should take a break!" company line

» Playability

Managing inventory and gear on the touchscreen is a welcome improvement to the original menu system

» Entertainment

It may be over a decade old, but Ocarina of Time still plays wonderfully

» Replay Value

Moderately High



Style 1-Player Action Publisher Nintendo Developer Grezzo/Nintendo Release June 19 ESRB E10+



Zelda games have traditionally aged very well, but if there's one that could use a tune-up, it's Ocarina of Time. The gameplay holds up 13 years later, but as one of the first 3D console titles, the visuals look rough. With Ocarina of Time 3D, one of the greatest games of all time looks and plays better than ever. This is the perfect way to introduce it to a new generation of gamers.

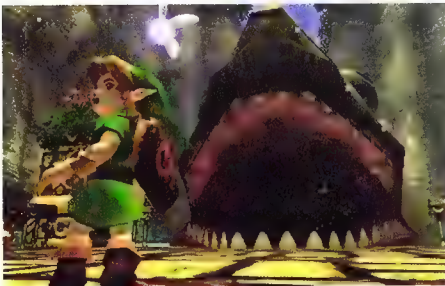
Ocarina of Time 3D is a faithful recreation of the classic, and its slight tweaks are all welcome. My favorite is the implementation of gyroscope controls for aiming. It may sound like a gimmick, but aiming your bow, hookshot, or slingshot by moving the 3DS feels more natural than any aiming mechanics of the Wii remote or

Move Controller. It's extremely responsive, and offers quicker and more accurate aiming than the circle pad. Once you've played the shooting gallery or Phantom Ganon fight this way, you won't want to go back to the traditional method.

Another great change to the classic formula is the improved inventory interface. Having all of your items accessible on the touchscreen means players can spend more time playing and less time organizing their stuff. The original only offered three C buttons for items, but the 3DS has four customizable item slots, and another button is permanently dedicated to your ocarina. Switching shields, tunics, or swords is only a couple taps away, and you can also view the overworld and dungeon maps on the bottom screen. While it's nice to see the map blown up in this manner, the live area map that shows your location is relegated to a tiny overlay on the top screen's HUD. I would have preferred to see this on the large map in the bottom screen, but it isn't a huge inconvenience.

The improved inventory mechanics are especially helpful in the dreaded Water Temple. Originally, the iron boots were in the gear section of your menu, meaning players had to constantly pause the game whenever they needed to equip or unequip them. This time around, players can assign a specific button to the iron boots just like any other item in the game. In addition, new colored lines make the location and function of the water level switches more evident. If you need the water level at a specific point, it's far easier with this minor tweak than it was when nothing was marked. The temple is still a beast, but it's less infuriating than it was in 1998.

Longtime Nintendo fans have been frustrated by the company's recent insistence on including super guides, and a version of this concept appears in Ocarina 3D in the form of Sheikah



stones. These stones appear in the Temple of Time and near your home in Kokiri Forest, and Link can crawl into them "to receive a vision of the future." These short video clips blatantly show you the solution to a puzzle or section of a dungeon. I can't imagine being so stuck in a dungeon that I'd rather hike back to Kokiri Forest than stick around until I figured out the solution, but it might be helpful to gamers unfamiliar with the series.

One place you won't find the Sheikah stones is in the Master Quest. Unlocked after beating the original game, this re-done version was originally released as a pre-order incentive for Wind Waker Dungeons maintain the same room layout, but puzzles are completely different and it's much more difficult. In a new twist on Master Quest, the 3DS version also mirrors the entire map, which shakes up the experience further. The Master Quest adds to the replay value considerably, and Nintendo also includes a gauntlet-style boss challenge mode that unlocks after conquering the Master Quest.

Ocarina of Time 3D is my new favorite way to play one of my top 10 games of all time. Its updated visuals look great in 3D, the touchscreen streamlines inventory issues, and aiming with the gyroscope feels like much more than a gimmick. Whether you're a newcomer to the series or a Zelda veteran, this game needs to be in your 3DS collection. **Dan Ryckert**



Cartoon Network Punch Time Explosion

Someone stole the Smash Bros. recipe, but they forgot to add the fun

Style 1-Player Fighting (1 to 4-Player Online) **Publisher** Crave Entertainment
Developer Papaya Studios **Release** June 21 **ESRB** E10+

The concept behind Punch Time Explosion is a clever one: assemble a group of iconic Cartoon Network characters, cram them into a Super Smash Bros. clone, release it on Nintendo's hot new kid-friendly handheld, and rake in the cash. However, only two kinds of people are likely attracted to this formula — those who have never played a party fighter, and fans so entrenched in the Cartoon Network that their brains break thinking about Dexter vs. Samurai Jack. Everyone else will likely tune out before you can say, "Don't touch that dial."

Every non-Adult Swim Cartoon Network star you'd expect is here, from Dexter to Ben Tennyson. Instances like the glutinous Chowder mistaking a Powerpuff Girl for something delicious-sounding are entertaining, but even fans of the animated shows may find the dry story lacking. If you're playing a fighting game for the story, however, you're doing it wrong.

Anyone who has played a hectic brawler will likely be disappointed the moment they throw their first punch. Movement is slow and unresponsive, resulting in sloppy brawls with players accidentally rolling off cliffs and facing the wrong direction. As in Smash Bros., players have a percentage that builds as

they take damage, increasing the odds of getting knocked off screen. Sometimes I was sent careening off the stage despite my low percentage, leading to repeated frustration. Even worse, when playing multiplayer you can only view the damage of the enemy you're presently fighting, and in single-player you can only see your damage percentage.

The single-player campaign spans across every iconic world and incorporates each character. Traditional bouts are mixed in with platforming sections that stretch the game's imprecise physics to their limits. I faced off against tired clichés such as rolling barrels, crumbling bridges, and flaming boulders that materialized out of thin air (an annoying bug). You must complete this mode to unlock the game's best characters — such as Captain Planet and Dexter's dad — for use in the bare-bones multiplayer, but that's hardly worth the trouble.

Punch Time Explosion had a good opportunity to impress 3DS owners hungering for a worthwhile experience following the handheld's weak launch lineup, but it simply falls in line with the other disappointments. Cartoon junkies may love seeing their heroes in action, but those used to Smash Bros. polish will want to pass on this one. — **Tim Turri**

4.75

Concept

Copy and paste the Smash Bros. schema, but swap out Nintendo characters with Cartoon Network favorites

Graphics

You'll stop caring about the three-dimensional visuals after the first few moments. The character models are loyal to the cartoons, but everything else feels generic

Gameplay

If you didn't already know each character's catchphrase, you'll have them memorized in no time

Playability

Imagine playing Smash Bros. but without the tight controls, reliable physics, or chaotic action

Entertainment

I can see no one but extreme Cartoon Network fans enjoying this

Replay Value

Moderately low

TURN YOUR PASSION FOR GAMING INTO A CAREER

Game Art

Character Design
Environment Design
Level Design
Storyboarding

Digital Design

Gameplay Design
User Interface Design
User Experience Design

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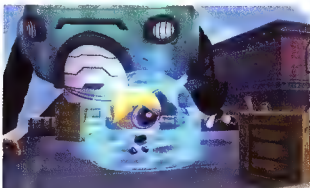
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the score

7.75 *DUNGEON DEFENDERS 2*

Platform PS3 • 360 Release June ESRB E10+

Dive into the co-op with your friends to see all of the fun, strategy, and depth Dungeon Defenders has to offer. If you're more interested in a single-player experience, look someplace else. — Joe Juba

7.75 *Banquai-O HD:*

Platform PS3 • 360 Release May 4 ESRB E10+

Banquai-O superfans and hardcore shooter nuts should enjoy the many challenges, but others should think twice before jumping into this extremely difficult gauntlet of death. — Bryan Vore

6 *Doggerdale*

Platform PS3 • 360 Release May 25 ESRB T

Doggerdale has all the elements to make a fun dungeon crawler, but poor design decisions, questionable tech implementation, and repetitive, unoriginal action keep the game from delivering. — Matt Miller

5 *Thor*

Platform 360 Release May 24 ESRB E10+

A charming cast of characters does a great job of moving this Kinect title's story mode along, but occasional lag in full body combat sequences, a noticeable lack of polish in minigames, and off-putting difficulty spikes do little to make the user feel like a kung fu master. — Annette Gonzalez

4.5 *Thor: The God of Thunder*

Platform PS3 • 360 Release May 3 ESRB T

If you're looking for another Thor experience after seeing the film and paging through the character's 50 years worth of comics history, this game won't satisfy you. In fact, you'd probably have a more authentic Thor experience if you ran through a renaissance festival with a hammer and a cape yelling "verily!" — Ben Reeves

7 *MX vs. ATV: Supercross*

Platform PS3 • 360 Release May 10 ESRB E

MX vs. ATV's one-of-a-kind racing remains, but Alive has a void because parts of it have been removed. Free Ride areas are smaller and less interesting, freestyle and Supercross are absent, and I had to work too hard for XP to unlock too little content. — Matthew Kato

8 *Advance Wars: Dual Strike*

Platform 360 Release May 11 ESRB E10+

As much as I enjoy the striking Advance Wars-esque graphics, tight twin-stick shooter mechanics, and entertaining upgrade system, my enthusiasm slowed later in the campaign when things got repetitive. — Bryan Vore

7.5 *Fancy Pants*

Platform PS3 • 360 Release April 20 ESRB E

Original design and a quirky style keep Fancy Pants enjoyable throughout, but some significant features need a little tweaking before this sketchy hero can stand with the big platforming heavyweights. — Matt Miller

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Volume XXI • Number 7 • Issue 219

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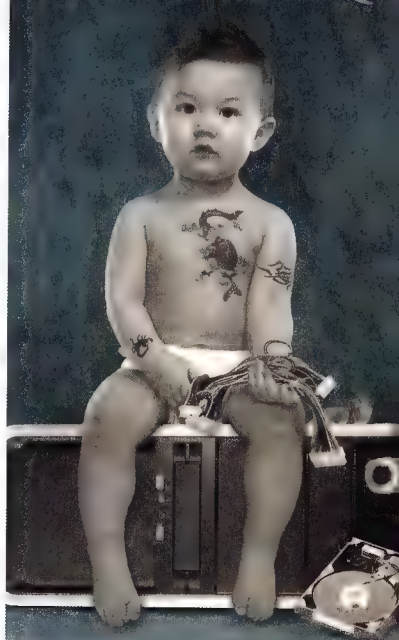
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A first-hand account of the gutsy, borderline illegal tactic that transformed Electronic Arts from a PC game



Reverse Engineering Success

It's tough to imagine the game industry without Electronic Arts. From groundbreaking titles like *The Sims* to the yearly cash cow *Madden*, many of the company's games have driven innovation and crossed over into mainstream pop culture. Just this year alone, the publishing juggernaut has released critically acclaimed titles *Dead Space 2*, *Fight Night Champion*, *Bulletstorm*, and *Crysis 2*. The void the company's absence would create is considerable.

But EA wasn't always a major player on home consoles, and it may never have been if a risky gambit to reverse engineer the Sega Genesis hadn't succeeded.

publisher into a console-dominating giant by Matt Bertz

A Midas Touch

The sun is piercing through the Red Rock Casino windows as I take a seat across from former Electronic Arts chief creative officer and current Kleiner, Perkins, Caufield, & Byers partner Bing Gordon. The previous evening at the DICE Summit, the Academy of Interactive Arts & Sciences honored Gordon's impressive career by giving him the Lifetime Achievement Award. Looking at his resume, it's easy to see why he was up for the accolade. From his leadership role in growing the EA Sports brand to his integral involvement in driving investment for social games pioneer Zynga and mobile gaming company Ngmoco, he's demonstrated an uncanny ability to bet on winners throughout his career. With Gordon beaming proudly and in a nostalgic mood, I took the opportunity to ask him about Electronic Arts' cloak and dagger approach to breaking into the console market, a story we've heard mentioned vaguely over the years – but never from someone intimately involved with the operation.

"Electronic Arts missed cartridge video games," Gordon openly admits. "We had this belief in Moore's Law and we launched only on floppy discs even when computer games were mostly on cassette. We just believed that was the future and the future was going to win."

For the most part, EA was winning. Founder Trip Hawkins started the company in 1982 with a unique strategy that strove to treat its development talent like artists and rock stars. With a willingness to market the talent behind the game, the company attracted many of the best and brightest in the business. EA splashed onto the scene with landmark games like Bill Budge's Pinball Construction Set and The Bard's Tale. Thanks to its forward-thinking marketing campaigns, strong relationships with retailers, and deep pool of executive and developmental talent, EA became a mainstay on the PC charts.

A Hitchhiker's Guide To Consoles

When Nintendo brought the NES to North American shores in 1985, EA was skeptical of its chances for success. The video game market had just crashed in 1983, bankrupting many North American gaming companies and permanently scarring market leader Atari in the process. A quick recovery seemed unlikely, especially when the PC platform offered so much more computational power. Why take the chance on an inferior technology?

"Nintendo came out and we felt it was dirty and kind of a step backwards," Gordon recalls. "We had mixed feelings in the company. There were some who said, 'You don't get it, this is



way more fun.' Middle school kids and suddenly presidents were playing games instead of just nerds."

Instead of flopping, the NES exploded, making Mario a household name and earning the company the undying allegiance from a new generation of young gamers who saved their weekly allowances to buy the must-have console. Despite Nintendo's newfound success, some EA execu-

tives still questioned the viability of publishing on the platform. "EA was in deep denial," Gordon admits. A courtesy visit to the retailer Toys "R" Us in 1988 changed the hearts and minds of the remaining reluctant executives.

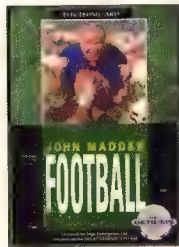
Behind closed doors, Toys "R" Us showed EA its monthly sales numbers for every product in the store. When they arrived at the games section, it wasn't hard to see the breadth of Nintendo's reach. Running down the list of the best-selling games, the first PC title didn't show up until the third page. The rest were Nintendo games. "It was like, 'Oh my god, this is data we can't ignore,'" Gordon remembers.

After this rude awakening, EA knew it couldn't ignore the home console's earning potential. But when it approached Nintendo about obtaining a licensing agreement, it became clear that making money on the NES wouldn't be easy thanks to the Japanese company's unwavering approach to third parties.

"Nintendo was operating with near monopoly power," Gordon says. "They had like a 95 percent share of the console business, and they had earned it because they took a huge risk."

If a publisher wanted to get in bed with the NES, they had to fly to Japan, state its case for a development system, and if Nintendo deemed it worthy there was only one deal on the table. Nintendo would sell the company a dev kit for what Gordon calls "a ridiculous price," and after a game was finished the publisher had to send it to Nintendo, which would ultimately decide whether or not it would be manufactured.

"Wait, we spend all this time and we build a game but we don't know if we can bring it to market?" Gordon remembers asking. "They said, 'That's right, and if we decide to bring it to market, we manufacture it and we'll tell you how many we'll build. You pay us half the cost, and then we manufacture it when we feel like it. When it's done in Japan you pay the second half of the cost and we release it and you figure out how you want to ship it.'"



By exerting near total control over any publisher who wanted to work on its platforms, Nintendo essentially operated like a legal extortionist under the guise of the license agreement. Even if you created a game that would fly off store shelves if given the opportunity, Nintendo could freeze you out of the market if it didn't like the game, decided it was too similar to one of its own games and thus cut into their profits, or felt the content didn't fit with its vision of the console.

EA wasn't interested in willfully participating in this punishing one-sided relationship, so it started looking for other options. Sega had just released a new 16-bit console called the Genesis and it would soon debut in North America. EA just happened to have several successful 16-bit titles from the Commodore, Amiga, and IBM PC that would be a natural fit.

A Modest Proposal

When EA inquired about publishing its games on the Genesis, the executives felt their proposal would be met with open arms. After all, Sega's Master System flourished due to a shallow game catalog, garnering a mere three-percent market share. With EA's developmental chops and library of proven games on board, the Genesis would have a fighting chance.

"We said, 'You're coming out with this system and you're nowhere, but we have games,'" Gordon recalls. "We'll make a bunch of games, but you have to give us a different license than Nintendo because you're nowhere. We're your lone partner."

Instead of embracing the logic in EA's proposal, Sega of America president Mike Katz had other ideas. Sega wanted to emulate the Nintendo licensing agreement system, leaving little to no negotiation room for third-party publishers.

"Sega said, 'No. We're going to be as important as Nintendo and we're not going to back down,'" Gordon remembers.

Sega's stinging response amazed EA. "You're so stupid," Gordon recalls thinking. "You can get to the majority of the market with third-party support. Change the rules or we can't commit."

The discussion went back and forth for nearly a year, until a Sega executive boldly told Gordon, "If you want a different deal you're going to have to reverse engineer the system, aren't you?"

"I didn't say anything, but I went home and took notes in case of deposition – because it turned out that we had a few engineers," Gordon says.

Sega had thrown down the gauntlet, and EA gladly picked it up. Under the guidance of its legal counsel, the company

A Sega executive boldly told EA:
"If you want a different deal you're going to have to reverse engineer the system, aren't you?"

"It was a stroke of brilliance from Jim Nitchals and then total go-for-it courage from Trip Hawkins"

- former EA chief creative officer Bing Gordon



gave two of its most talented engineers the green light to attempt a clean room reverse engineering job on the Genesis.

"The way you do it is you have to have some engineers who do whatever they want with the system," Gordon explains. "They can basically hack the system any way they want, try to figure out how it works, and then they're now dirty. What they have to do is give instructions on how to work the system without giving away any proprietary information. They write it up and it's got to go to a lawyer and say, 'Write to this memory location,' but it couldn't show any of the proprietary stuff that was in the system."

Once the lawyers receive the instructions, they double check the notes to make sure they don't reveal any infringing information and hand them off to the clean set of engineers to build the systems. Since they didn't have the official hardware blueprints, the clean engineers essentially started guessing at how it all tied together. Steve Hayes and Jim Nitchals (who tragically died of a brain hemorrhage in 1998 at the age of 36) worked diligently on the project to no avail for a few months, and then Nitchals had an epiphany. "He thought to himself, 'If I was doing it maybe I'd do this memory location,'" Gordon remembers. It worked. Suddenly EA was in possession of a rogue Sega Genesis.

In the following weeks EA's hardware group built several reverse engineered development systems. Unbeknownst to Sega, EA ramped up production on several Genesis games.



The Gambit

In preparation of the big reveal, EA booked a booth at the 1990 Consumer Electronics Show, with plans to showcase seven titles. In those pre-E3 years, CES was the go-to convention for gaming companies. Riding the success of its recent Game Boy launch and the NES' dominant market share, Nintendo planned to show off the legendary title Super Mario Bros. 3. At the same time, Sega was planning a proper introduction to the Genesis, which had just launched in August, and NEC was touting its new TurboGrafx-16 console as a must-have device thanks to a new title called Bonk's Adventure.

The night before the show began, Trip Hawkins met with Sega CEO Hayao Nakayama and informed him of his company's bold feat. "We basically said, 'We're going to run our own licensing program unless you agree to our terms,'" Gordon says.

Sega was caught in an uncomfortable position. If EA went ahead with its licensing program, the console manufacturer would be losing a significant portion of the profit that traditionally comes with the territory. EA could essentially reach out to other publishers and offer better returns and cheaper manufacturing costs than Sega was willing to do. The meeting lasted through the night, and in the morning Sega acquiesced.

In exchange for agreeing to join Sega's licensing program, EA would be allowed to manufacture its own Genesis cartridges, could make as many games as it wanted, and received a more favorable royalty rate. The next day at CES there

was a wall of 16-bit Electronic Arts titles running on the Sega Genesis.

"When we announced the Sega deal, the stock went down because the market was so ignorant about what was going to happen," Trip Hawkins later told Steven Kent in the book *The Ultimate History of Video Games*.

After the deal was in place and EA joined the licensing program, the engineers realized they dodged a major bullet. "What we didn't know, and it turned out later, that we hadn't figured out all the workarounds. Sega still had the ability to lock us out," Gordon says. "It just would have been a public relations fiasco."

In June of the same year, EA released its first two console titles for the Genesis, Peter Molyneux's *Populous* and Budokan: The Martial Spirit. In the fall, John Madden Football branched and changed sports games forever.

"It turned out that was the best thing that ever happened to Sega, because Madden became a killer app," Gordon says. "Nintendo never needed third-party killer apps. Sega and the power of a slightly open platform vaulted the Genesis."

Gordon was right. Objectively, EA's gutsy gamble benefited both companies. EA carved a considerable niche in the console space with a slew of Genesis hits like *Jungle Strike*, *Road Rash*, and the popular titles under the EA Sports label. Thanks to these games, Sega's new platform boasted an impressive library of games that could stand head to head with the best the Super Nintendo had to offer when it launched a year later.

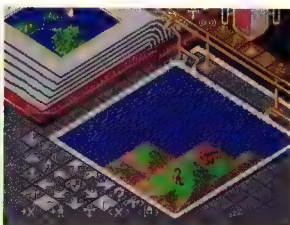
"It was a stroke of brilliance from Jim Nitchals and then total go-for-it courage from Trip Hawkins," Gordon proclaims.

The rest, as they say, is history. ♦

The Tale Of The Yellow Stripe

When EA signed a licensing agreement that allowed it to manufacture its titles, the company knew it wanted to give each cartridge a visual signifier that immediately told you the game you were holding was an Electronic Arts title. Chief creative officer Bing Gordon and vice president of marketing services Nancy Fong brainstormed and eventually settled on the famous yellow stripe.

"We wanted to have a visual identifier, and we never explained it," Gordon says. "Later we heard people in focus groups say, 'EA games are better because they got bigger chips. That's why they got that yellow stripe, to hold it together.'"



Left to right: Budokan: The Martial Spirit, John Madden Football, Populous

Life Beyond Gaming

Some video games are so time-intensive that playing them feels like a full-time

job. You may assume that the men and women who create these games do so at the expense of their personal lives, but many of the industry's leading developers know the importance of having interests outside of the video game realm. Here are the extra jobs, side projects, and hobbies of some of gaming's most popular developers.

by Jeff Marchiava



+ John Carmack

Making video games isn't rocket science – according to id Software co-founder John Carmack, it's a lot more complicated. He should know, in addition to creating some of the most advanced FPSs in the industry (as well as the birth of the genre itself), he also founded his own aerospace company, Armadillo Aerospace. With Carmack acting as lead engineer, Armadillo Aerospace completed Level 1 of NASA's 2008 Lunar Lander Challenge, winning \$350,000 with its experimental VTVL (vertical takeoff/vertical landing) rocket. The following year his team completed Level 2, earning \$500,000. If you think video games and rocket science makes Carmack the ultimate nerd, don't say it to his face: He's also well versed in judo and Brazilian jiu-jitsu.



+ Will Wright

Will Wright is best known as the creator of *SimCity* and *The Sims*, games that task players with tending to the needs of virtual citizens and cities. In his personal life, Wright hasn't always been quite so responsible. In 1960, Wright won the US Express, an illegal coast-to-coast race that served as the successor to the Cannonball Run. The race stretched from Brooklyn, NY to Santa Monica, CA, which Wright and his co-driver Rick Doherty completed in just 33 hours and 9 minutes despite getting pulled over by the police in Indianapolis. Nowadays Wright fosters a decidedly less-dangero-ous hobby. His company, Studio G Pers Club, aims to foster "complete symbiotic unity" between humans and robots – mainly through the sharing of silly YouTube videos or robots.



+ Patrick Söderlund

DICE is best known for its military FPS series *Battlefield*, but its CEO Patrick Söderlund has earned a reputation on the racetrack as well. Söderlund is a professional racer for Team Need For Speed. EA's international association of professional drivers and builders. Since 2009, Team NFS has performed in Formula Drift, GT3, North American Time Attack, and endurance races in the United States and Europe. Although a back injury kept Söderlund from participating, Team NFS won the 24H Dubai endurance race in January.



+ Ken Rolston

Gamers might know Ken Rolston as the lead designer for the *Morrowind* and *Oblivion* installments of the *Elder Scrolls* series. When he isn't helping to create rich fantasy RPGs, Rolston travels the world singing and playing music. For 20 years Rolston sang in a New Jersey-based quartet called *We Still Ain't Got No Band Supper Club And Living Room Music Emporium* (conveniently called *WSAAGNSCALRME* for short), and this past January Rolston toured

through South Africa singing with an amateur choral group, Village Harmony. Rolston also regularly sings and plays guitar with his wife Pat (vocals), and fellow game designer Brian Reynolds (piano).



+ Steve Papoutis

Few executive producers are as cool as Steve Papoutis. While his most recent video game project was *Visceral Games' Dead Space 2*, Papoutis was also the original bass player for the punk band *No Use For A Name*. Papoutis played with the group from 1987 to 1995, contributing to four full length albums, including the band's breakthrough LP, *Leche Con Carne*.



+ Glen Schofield

As the creator and executive producer of the original *Dead Space*, Glen Schofield knows a thing or two about creating violent, nerve-racking experiences. That makes Schofield's second passion all the more surprising: He's an accomplished landscape painter. Schofield received a Bachelor of Fine Arts from New York's Pratt Institute, and runs his own art website where he sells the acrylic paintings he's done of various landscapes and seascapes.



+ Brian Soderberg

Zipper Interactive's president Brian Soderberg may favor golf nowadays, but in his earlier years his sports of choice were a little more extreme. Soderberg started riding motocross bikes in junior high, eventually participating in Pro Motocross races in the Pacific Northwest. He has also competed in the Seattle Kingdom Supercross series multiple times, and won the CMC Open Pro Motocross (500cc). In the off-seasons Soderberg switched to freestyle skiing, and won second place in the Northwest aerial skiing finals.



+ Ray Muzyka

With franchises like *Knights of the Old Republic*, *Dragon Age*, and *Mass Effect*, BioWare has enjoyed a level of success few developers ever reach. Co-founder and CEO Ray Muzyka has been equally skilled at the poker table. In addition to winning the 2006 and 2010 D.I.C.E. Summit poker tournaments, Muzyka nabbed first place in the 2009 Western Canadian Poker Classic, and placed in the top 400 (out of 7,500) in the 2010 World Series of Poker Main Event.

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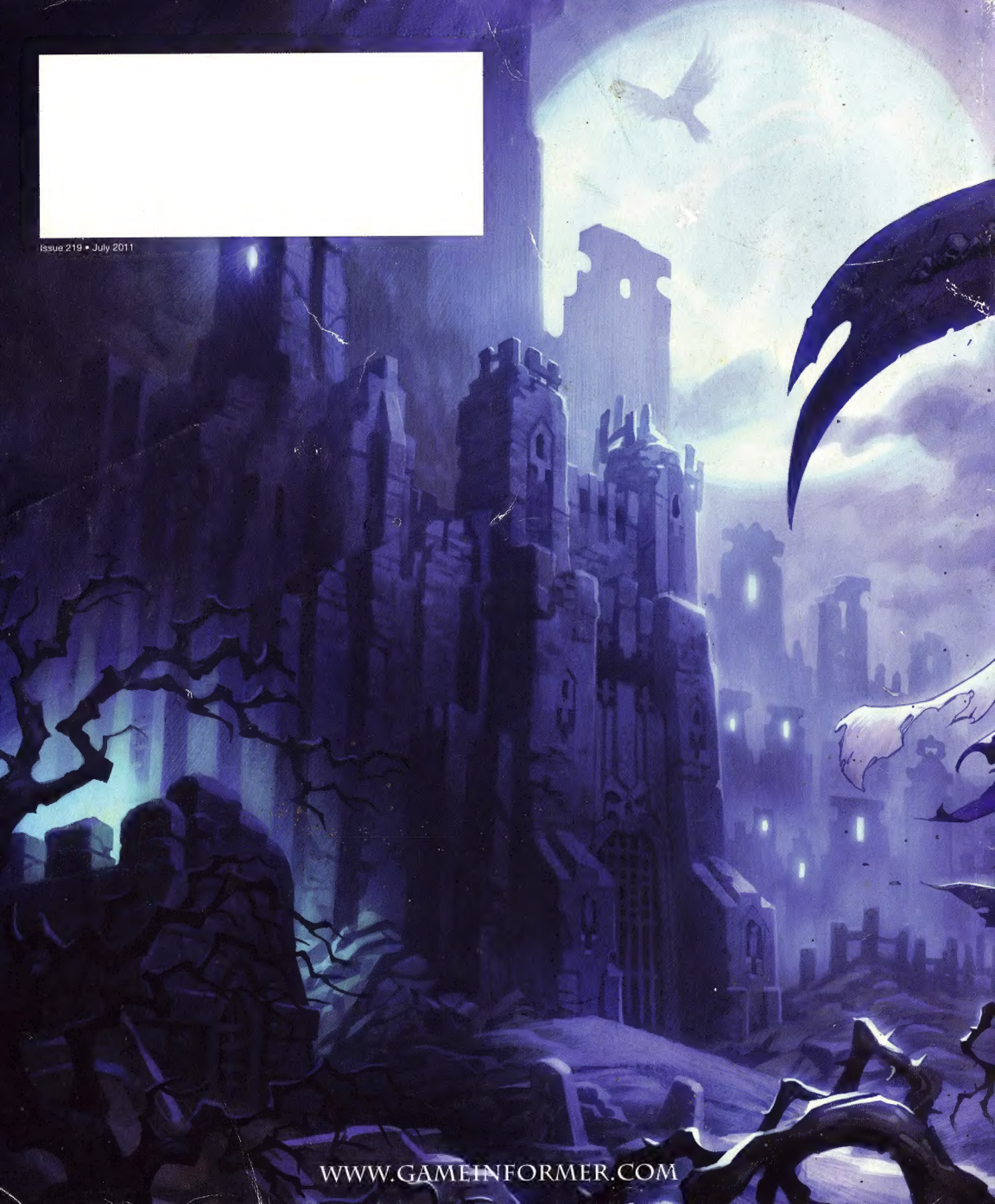


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Issue 219 • July 2011



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