GAME INFORMER

THE WORLD'S MOST BADASS VIDEO GAME MAGAZINE

...In The Membrane

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

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

Insanity is defined as doing the same thing over and over again and expecting a different result. It seems to me the video game industry just never wants to learn. We still have summers go by with the movie industry dropping some of its biggest films of the year, yet video games continue to putter along convinced that if you don't release games in a three-week period starting at the end of October and ending in the middle of November your game is doomed.

For the big franchises that typically sell millions upon millions of units, this holiday period is yours for the taking and deservedly so, but the rest of the publishers need to realize that there are opportunities for games to become blockbusters year round.

Look at this list of upcoming games that I personally consider to be potential blockbusters:

- Battlefield 3
- Uncharted 3: Drake's Deception
- Star Wars: The Old Republic
- The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim
- Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3
- Gears of War 3
- Assassin's Creed Revelations
- Rayman Origins
- Resistance 3
- God of War: Origins Collection
- Rage
- Twisted Metal
- Forza 4
- Batman: Arkham City
- Halo: Anniversary

You can't tell me that if publishers released any of these during the summer the sales would have been worse in the long run. I simply do not believe it. As games like Grand Theft Auto IV, Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic, and Red Dead Redemption proved in the past, if you release a big title during the drought, gamers will come. I believe they might even have a bigger upside considering the lack of serious competition during the summer months and the hunger gamers have for new experiences.

Plenty of other games, like the Ico/Shadow of Colossus collection and Dead Island, that will get little to no marketing, could also do better in the empty months when gamers are attacking backlogs rather than talking about the latest and greatest thing.

So why are publishers so stubbornly clinging to this relic of a release schedule? It's pure insanity.

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Borderlands 2

For Borderlands 2, Gearbox isn't content with adding a couple million more guns and calling it a day. The sequel introduces new and varied environments, a host of new enemies and AI improvements, and an even more diverse arsenal.
by Jeff Marchiafava
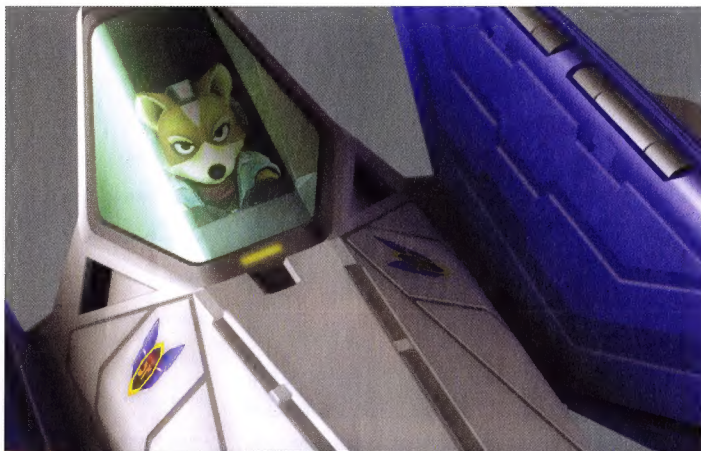
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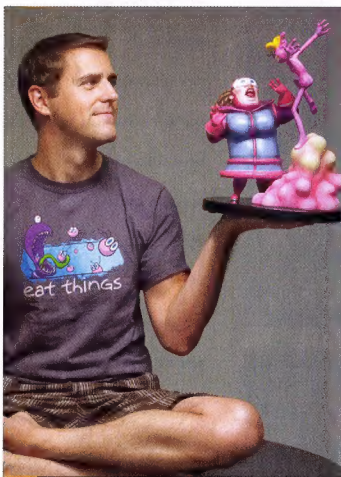
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Classic: Mario's Film Folly

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This month in Feedback, we discuss a curious character design decision in FF XIII-2, assuage inverted control users, speculate on superhero bathroom habits, and save another subscriber's life. We're just that good.

Welcome To The Dark Side

You guys have had a lot of cool covers for your magazine, but issue 219 takes the supernatural cake. Darksiders was an amazing game, and I was excited to learn about the upcoming sequel – which, after reading what you guys wrote, sounds even better than the first. Awesome cover art, you guys! Keep 'em coming!
Michael Bowling
Missouri

I just thought I would write in to tell you that the Darksiders II cover is my favorite of all the issues you've ever done! What awesome artwork! I actually hadn't even heard of the first Darksiders, but this cover artwork alone makes me want to play the new game. I also love your sarcastic senses of humor and thoroughly enjoy your responses to people.
Ken Sheaffer
Alameda, CA

While we hate passing up the chance to take credit for someone else's work, the cover was drawn by comic book artist and Darksiders II creative director Joe Madureira and colored by Jonathon Kirtz. Find out more about their work at gameinformer.com/darksiders.

Back On Track

I just wanted to say that your article on Final Fantasy XIII-2 (Lightning Strikes Twice, issue 219) gave me a lot of hope for the future of Final Fantasy. I've been a fan of the series ever since I was a kid and play them whenever I get the chance, but Final Fantasy XIII really disappointed me with how linear it was. To know that will change in the upcoming sequel – not mention what appears to be an amazing addition to an already great battle system – makes me extremely happy. You've returned my faith in Square Enix and the Final Fantasy team.
Samuel
Joplin, MO

First off, I'm really excited that FF XIII is getting a sequel. However, I have a bone to pick. I feel that Square Enix giving Serah a bow in order to "preserve her femininity" is a pretty poor design decision. Vanille was plenty girly and Lightning was totally badass, and neither had anything to do with their weapons! Final Fantasy titles have always impressed me with the amount of character development they offer; it's part of the reason I really got into the series in the first place. It will be a sad day if part of this "new treatment" relies on weapons to determine a character's personality.
Janyssa
Seattle, WA

While Square Enix's reasoning behind Serah's weapon of choice is a little puzzling to us as well, it's a small aspect of her character. Serah's personality will ultimately be defined like the rest of the characters in the series: by the plot, character exchanges, and questionable voice acting.

The Inversion Perversion

In defense of Randy Pullen's Feedback letter regarding his use of inverted controls (Yep, You're A Weirdo, issue 219), I always have and always will use inverted controls for one simple reason: You tilt your head forward to look down and back to look up. To put it in technical terms, when you're using the "look" stick, you're controlling the head. The "move" stick controls the body. It's not rocket science, it's basic physical dynamics.

Rob Dawolf
via email

While reading through Feedback, I noticed Randy Pullen had questioned his use of inverted controls. I, as a casual gamer, cannot play a single game without the inverted control scheme. I tried for three hours using normal controls and could not get past a level to save my life. Would you happen to know if there are any plans to do away with this layout? I guess I'm wondering how much longer I will be able to play video games before it becomes an abundant annoyance to us weirdos who simply cannot play with a normal control layout.

John Zennaiter
via email

Don't worry, John. As abnormal as it is to control an aiming reticle by moving your analog stick in the opposite direction you intend it to go, it's even more unimaginable that a developer would overlook giving you that option in a modern day video game. We predict you'll be messing up your buddies' profile settings well into the future during co-op sessions well into the future.

Life Preserver

Today I got back from a four-day camping trip in the mountains. I had just received issue 219 the day prior to leaving and decided to take it with us camping so that I could read it. Upon arriving at our campsite, my buddies and I discovered we forgot to bring any paper for starting the campfires. Unfortunately, I had to sacrifice my newest issue of Game Informer in order to keep us warm during our four days in the wild. I would like to thank Game Informer for printing its quality burning material and for saving our lives. You're the best.

Brian Robertson
McMinnville, Oregon

We're always amazed at the numerous uses our fans come up with for the magazine that don't actually involve reading it. Regardless, according to what we learned from *Conan the Destroyer*, the fact we saved your life means you're now obligated to fight beside us to the death. We'll call you when we're ready to launch our next invasion.

The Great Migration

After reading Joe Juba's article, The Incredible Shrinking RPG (issue 219), I just want to express thanks for showing me where the JRPGs have all gone. As a fan of PlayStation for many years thanks largely to great RPGs, I have been wondering how those classic games could possibly survive in today's market. It strikes me that this style of making cheaper titles that stay true to the core RPG experience could also easily be done with PSN and XBLA games. Thank you again for showing me that hope is not lost!

Ian Parks
via email

Joe Juba's opinion article nailed what I have been feeling with role-playing games over the years. I love the classics: Phantasy Star 1-4, Final Fantasy 4-10, the Persona and Lunar series, etc. For me, something was lost when RPGs became like Mass Effect and The Elder Scrolls. I had a difficult time putting what was missing into words until I read Joe's article. Mixing shooters and platformers for combat instead of menu options changed something I loved in RPGs. Don't get me wrong; Mass Effect is an amazing game with one heck of a story, but I don't want to be dependent on my third-person shooter skills in an RPG. When Chrono Trigger was recently released on the Wii virtual console, I was in RPG

heaven, and stopped playing everything else to relive and enjoy this timeless game. Thanks so much for the article!

Mike Smits
DePere, WI

Name That Monster

In issue 119 you asked if anyone had an idea as to what the monster is in Risen 2 (pictured below). I believe this vile creature is called a Snooki. This hideous beast can be seen in the wilds of the Jersey Shore, and recently, some have been spotted as far as Miami and Los Angeles. Legend has it that many unlucky men and women have lost their sanity and sometimes even their lives when coming into contact with this unspeakable creature.

Keith
Atlanta, GA

I believe the creature in the Risen 2 photo is my ex-wife.

Cody
via email

Just curious: How many "Your mom" responses did you get?

Chris Hanna
via email

More than we could count, Chris.

(Left) Ben Hanson, Jeff M, and Dan posed with some familiar Borderlands characters along with Gearbox's Matt Charles, Sean Reardon, Randy Pitchford, and Paul Hellquist. Claptrap is such a camera hog **(Center)** Randy also tried to teach Dan how to drive a Segway. We apologize for the damage caused to Gearbox's studio **(Right)** Screw Modern Warfare. Andy and Tony Aafedt of the National Guard recently spent the weekend shooting real Howitzers at Camp Ripley, Minnesota

CANDID PHOTOS FROM THE VIDEO GAME INDUSTRY
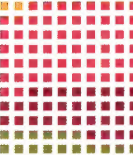
- Darksiders II Excitement **33%**
- The Incredible Shrinking RPG Praise **22%**
- Harry Potter Calendar Gag Backlash **18%**
- Co-op Versus Competitive Multiplayer **15%**
- Risen 2 Monster Jokes **8%**
- Final Fantasy VII Remake Requests **4%**

Question Of The Month:

What's your favorite video game power-up, and why?
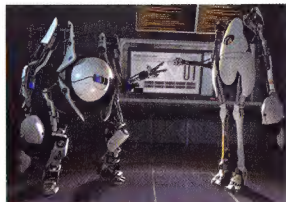
Competitive Or Co-op?

In issue 219, we asked gamers whether they prefer competitive or co-op multiplayer. The responses we received were extremely close, but in the end our readers favor teaming up with friends to going head to head. Here are some responses:

I prefer competitive multiplayer over co-op any day. The reason is simple: When it comes to gaming, I'm selfish and want all the glory. Why would I team up with another gamer to split the credit when I can independently claim the victory?

Greg Bowen

Co-op, because I am 32, and while I would do circles around these kids in Super Mario World or Street Fighter II Turbo, those days are gone and 15-year-olds mop the floor with me in Black Ops...I would rather have them on my team.

Olaf Carlsen

The pride, shame, and thrills that come from competitive gameplay cannot be matched by co-op. It's also worth pointing out that, unless playing deathmatch, competitive online play always has cooperative components, especially when it comes to clan battles. Though I play both types frequently, my fondest memories come from competitive multiplayer.

David Good

Co-op, and mostly local co-op. Why? 12-year-olds and immature d-bags get annoying after five minutes.

Tatjana Vejnovic

A Shocking Revelation

As a fan of Infamous, I am still plagued by a simple question that the series has not answered for me. I accept that Cole cannot enter water without being harmed. However, if this rule is in place, then wouldn't Zeke's invitation to come get some drinks be a painful proposition to him? Furthermore, does he constantly feel like he is passing kidney stones whenever he has the misfortune of needing to use the restroom? It's a small hitch in the rules, but it bugs me.

Jared
Bay Saint Louis, MS

In a series where the protagonist can grind on telephone wires, fall hundreds of feet without being injured, and launch electrical tornadoes, it's probably safe to assume that Cole just has some kind of magical peeing power that keeps him safe while using the bathroom.

[Left] Ben was still trying to figure out how to smile for a picture like a normal person when he and Phil met up with Marvel vs. Capcom 3 director Ryota Niitsuma at Comic-Con **[Right]** Jeff Cork challenged Supremacy MMA girls Felice "Lil Bulldog" Herrig and Michelle Gutierrez to a fight. Let's just say it ended with one of them crying. It was Jeff

1 **Charlie Mackin** Charlie and her family dropped off this amazing cake after watching our Super Replay of Tail of the Sun on gameinformer.com. Thanks to the Mackins! 2 **Cristian Lopez** At the very least, this would make getting all the viewpoints easier. 3 **Lamar Wells** Fighting game characters know only two ways to greet each other: face-to-face grimacing, or back-to-back brooding. 4 **Gabe Alsteen** What's Batman hiding under that cape? We're assuming it's his new gadget, the Bat-Segway.

DREAMLAND

THIS MONTH'S WINNER
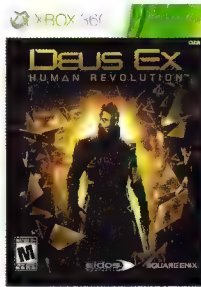
will receive a copy of
Deus Ex Human Revolution
on the system of their choosing
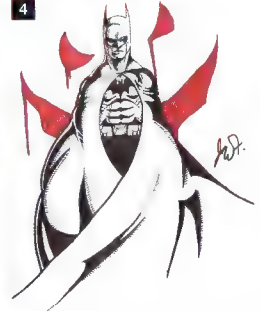
CORRECTION:
Last issue we inadvertently listed Ms. Splosion Man as coming to Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3. The game is exclusive to Xbox Live Arcade.

(Left) Ben Hanson, Ben Reeves, Dan, and Bryan recently competed in the Go Commando 5K adventure race. Guess who didn't win the "Most Coordinated" award. (Right) Square Enix North America president Mike Fischer poses alongside his framed copy of GI's "Every RPG Ever" flowchart, inspired heavily by Square Enix's games. It's the circle of life!
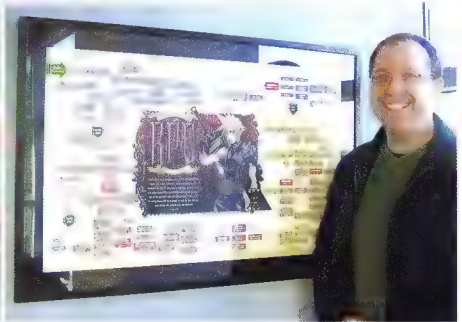
BROTHERS TO THE LAST FIGHT.

BROTHERS TO THE LAST ENEMY.

BROTHERS TO THE LAST HOUR.

BROTHERS TO THE END

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GEARS OF WAR 3
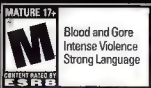
XBOX 360

Jump in.
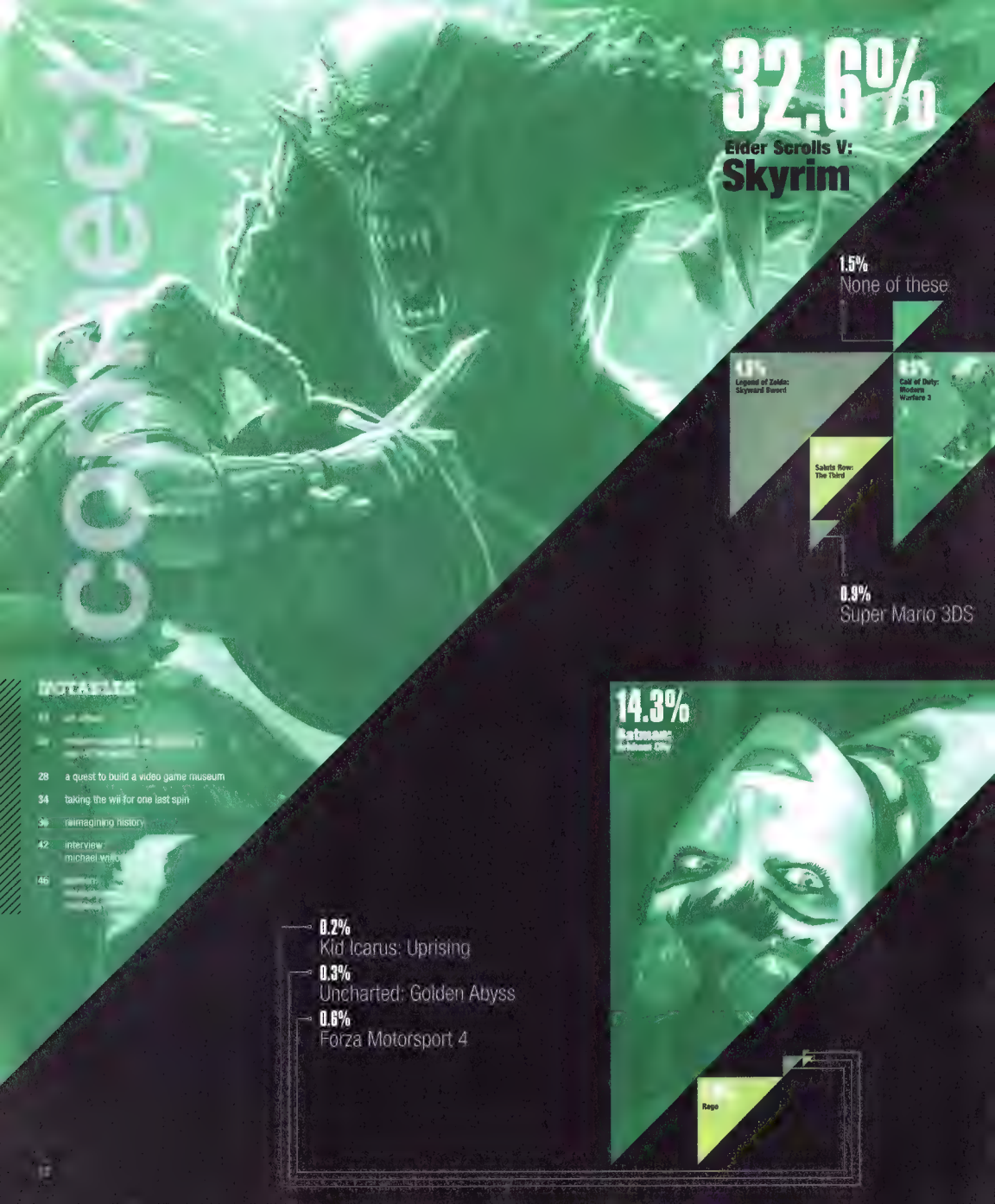
32.6%

Elder Scrolls V:
Skyrim

1.5%
None of these

4.1%
Legend of Zelda:
Skyward Sword

8.3%
Call of Duty:
Modern
Warfare 3

Saints Row:
The Third

0.9%
Super Mario 3DS

14.3%
Batman:
Arkham City

0.2%
Kid Icarus: Uprising
0.3%
Uncharted: Golden Abyss
0.6%
Forza Motorsport 4

Rage
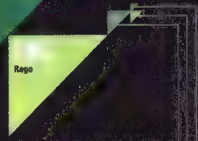
2011
Holiday Showdown
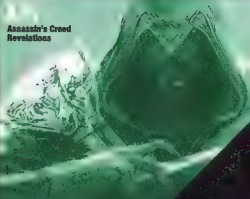
This holiday season is packed with great games and no shortage of storylines. How's it all going to play out – and which title will reign supreme?

by Matthew Kato

Assassin's Creed Revelations

12.0%

Uncharted 3:
Drake's Deception

When we asked, "Which one holiday game are you the most excited about and plan to buy?" just over 1,800 people chose The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim; making it the undisputed top choice. The game garnered 32.6 percent of the vote, and outpaced the competition – the nearest title was Batman: Arkham City at 14 percent.

Some high-profile titles surprisingly didn't register much among those who took the survey. Despite readers picking Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood as their Game of the Year in 2010 (see Issue #214, page 39 for more), only nine percent (just over 500 people) said Assassin's Creed Revelations was their number-one wanted title this holiday season. Similarly, games like Twisted Metal, The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword – and even Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3 – received scant votes.

With all due respect to our survey respondents, however, Divnich and Pachter don't believe that this holiday season will feature any sales curve balls. Games like Assassin's Creed Revelations, Uncharted 3, and other big names are expected to be hits and sell millions.

W

Percentages listed were rounded when applicable. Games listed are expected to release from October until the end of the year (therefore excluding fall titles like Gears of War 3 and Resistance 3) All release dates are subject to change.

PRICE CUTS

Will there be any price cuts to sway potential holiday shoppers? Pachter believes that if the Xbox 360's monthly year-upon-year sales decline, it could necessitate a price cut for that console. "If they're down three months in a row – July, August, and September – then I think they'll do a price cut in front of Christmas." Regardless, he sees a price cut as inevitable in the long-run anyway since he believes Microsoft will have to come out with a 360/Kinect bundle of "compelling value" in order to differentiate the system from the Wii U when it releases.

WHAT'S GOING TO BE DELAYED?

EEDAR's Jesse Divnich thinks it's inevitable that one of the holiday titles will get delayed simply because there are too many good games coming out. "We've deeply analyzed the 2011 holiday quarter," he said, "and I can say without a doubt there are too many triple-A, core-targeted games planned for the holiday season – far more than what the market can support. Either due to development or the risk of 'getting lost' on retail shelves this holiday, delays will occur. Which ones? It is difficult to predict, but most certainly the ones on the bottom of the list in terms of consumer interest. If you are interested in a title, and so are all of your friends, it is unlikely to see a delay."

Pachter agrees that the big first- and third-party titles won't move, but he sees a relatively smaller title like Saints Row: The Third benefiting from a move away from the season's heavy hitters if it were to change its release date.

NO LOVE FOR NINTENDO

Despite almost half of those surveyed saying that they own a Nintendo Wii, only 22 percent said there were going to buy The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword. In fact, Nintendo titles didn't fare well at all in our survey. Neither Skyward Sword, Mario Kart 3DS, Kid Icarus: Uprising, nor Super Mario 3DS generated any excitement when we asked if people were going to buy it this year.

VITA BEATS 3DS

It's not surprising that this late in the consoles' lifecycles that many of you aren't planning on buying another system this holiday season (68 percent of you, to be exact). But Sony's PlayStation Vita handheld is only just starting, and it seems to have captured some interest. Nineteen percent of respondents say they plan to buy the Vita by the end of the year, making it the most anticipated purchase among those surveyed. This puts it over the Nintendo 3DS, which only drew seven percent.

Despite some of the excitement over the Vita, both Divnich and Pachter think the handheld won't come out in America until 2012, so the matchup may be moot. Still, Divnich says that despite the 3DS' rough start, this holiday season may be the ace in Nintendo's pocket. "We tend to forget that console sales during the holiday season are equal to the other nine months of the year, and Nintendo has consistently dominated every holiday season over the last five years."

BATTLEFIELD 3 VS. CALL OF DUTY MODERN WARFARE 3

This holiday's big grudge match is between Activision's Call of Duty Modern Warfare 3 and Electronic Arts' Battlefield 3 (read the war of words on page 26). In our polling, an overwhelming 51 percent of people said they'd rather get Battlefield 3 over Modern Warfare 3 (at 32 percent), with 17 percent saying they don't want to buy either title. Still, 41 percent of respondents said they plan to buy Modern Warfare 3 before the end of the year.

Battlefield 3 is shaping up to be a quality title, but Divnich and Pachter believe that it won't come close to touching Modern Warfare 3 in sales. Pachter thinks this is mainly because of the popularity of the COD franchise's online multiplayer. However, he also thinks that there are enough gaming and FPS dollars to go around, so that the scenario of Battlefield 3 vs. Modern Warfare 3 doesn't have to be an all-or-nothing situation. "Battlefield's gain doesn't have to be Call of Duty's loss," he says.

PSVITA

The Legend of Zelda:
Skyward Sword

Saints Row
The Third

X360

3

Battle

Call of Duty
Modern Warfare 3

ArtAttack

How iam8bit took the Los Angeles gallery world by storm with video game-inspired art

by Matt Geigenoot
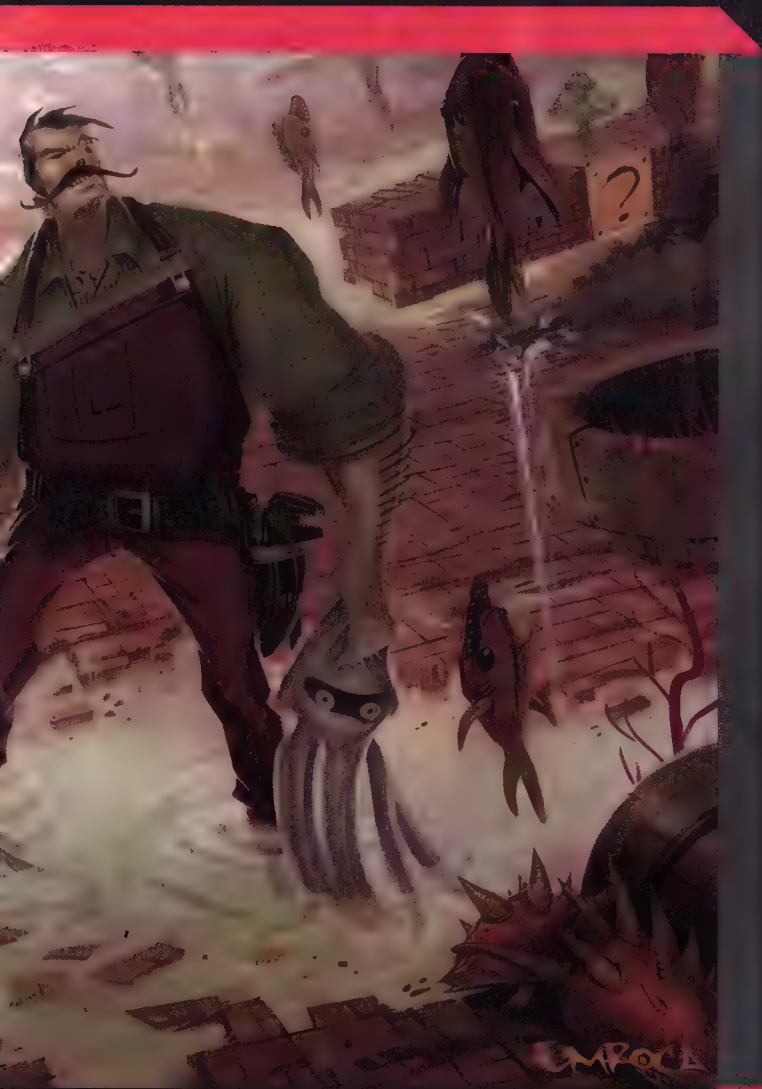
W hile the endless debate about whether video games can be considered art continues to rage, a flourishing underground of artists are creating art based on the familiar icons of video game history. Effectively turning the debate on its head, these mavericks not only believe that games are art, their work argues that gaming can be a rich source material for fine art itself. For more than half a decade, this subculture has centered around iam8bit, a recurring gallery show in Los Angeles that showcases the best and brightest artists from around the world specializing in video game-inspired art.

Iam8bit is the brainchild of Jon Gibson, a former game journalist who now serves as the head of the company he founded. Though best known for the art exhibit that bears its name, iam8bit is a multimedia marketing and promotion firm working with clients like Disney, MTV, Insomniac Games, and Nintendo. Back in 2004, iam8bit was nothing more than an idea.

"I was getting sick of pitching culture-related stories to video game magazines. No magazines were buying stories like that," Gibson recalls. "There was this burgeoning market of really young, 20-something kids who were showing their paintings in these really bizarre art shows. It would be one night only, with 50 artists showing original art for $50 a pop. They were trying to get money for weed. Crowds were coming out and really talented people were contributing. At that time, I discovered this gallery in L.A. and walked in. The gallery was next to this video game store that got busted a year later for pirating and modding Xboxes and selling illegal games. But there was a video game store next to an art gallery. That visual gave me the genesis of the idea."

As Gibson's ideas about a possible intersection between the worlds of art and video games percolated, the notion of an art show that would showcase game-inspired art evolved out of a standing weekly game night between Gibson and some friends.

"A bunch of my friends would meet up and play each week," Gibson recalled. "The Legend of Zelda: Four Swords was a big game for us. Most of the group was artists. There was this untapped reservoir of talent that no one had seen. A lot of the artists in the first show came from behind the scenes at your favorite animated shows, movies, or concept artists."

Gibson began seeking out artists that were already working in games as concept artists or doing game-related work in their spare time. Spending hours sifting through pictures and links on websites like Myspace and deviantART, he slowly recruited a roster of talent for inclusion on what would be the first iam8bit gallery show.

"It was a rag-tag group; none of the guys in the original show were really involved in the gallery scene," Gibson remembers. "Everyone was up and coming or established

in other industries and had never had their stuff hanging on a wall in a gallery. For most people, it was just about paying homage to this [hobby] they loved, not building a career in the gallery scene."

After nine months of work, Gibson opened the first iam8bit gallery show, which he staged at Gallery 1988 in Hollywood in April 2005. Though he felt confident about both the quality of art on display and the close tie with video game culture, his ambitions for the first show were modest. "We thought a couple hundred kids would show up and fill the gallery," Gibson says. "We'd sell some art and it would be great."

If that's what Gibson expected, what he got was something far bigger – and for the inexperienced curator, a bit scary. Invitations for the opening party, which were posted around the L.A. area, contained an RSVP call-back number. Within a few days, the voicemail box was full, and it was clear that the idea of having an RSVP list was a fool's errand. The night of the opening, a line stretched almost completely around the block, with show-goers experiencing two- and three-hour waits to get in the building. Original paintings, prints, and other iam8bit memorabilia sold rapidly. Clearly, the show had touched a nerve in L.A. art and video game communities.

Building on the success of the first show, Gibson quickly turned iam8bit into a cottage industry of sorts. The next three years saw annual iam8bit gallery shows, which proved so popular that it was moved to a larger space for the 2008 exhibition. While Gibson still displayed work largely drawn from a growing pool of American and international artists, the games industry began to take note of what was happening. For the 2006 show, developer Harmonix created a special version of Guitar Hero which allowed attendees to play versions of classic game music from titles like Mega Man and Ikari Warriors. For those not able to attend the shows in Los Angeles, Gibson published *i am 8-bit: Art inspired by Classic Videogames of the '80s*, a book featuring photos of some of the exhibition's best pieces as well as a forward by noted music and pop culture writer Chuck Klosterman (*Sex, Drugs, and Cocoa Puffs*). The book has nearly sold out its initial print run, becoming one of the best-selling video game-related books of all time.

While the show's range is broad – encompassing everything from paint on canvas to interactive art installations – Gibson has stood firm on one restriction: All the art in the show must be inspired by games and characters from the 8- and 16-bit eras of gaming.

"The games are incredibly archaic. The characters are a few pixels tall. There's no facial detail," Gibson comments. "It looks like they are shooting a bullet out of their arm, but they are supposed to have a gun because that's what the box art told you. Ultimately, it's artists interpreting something that allowed for a multitude of interpretations, because the source material is so empty. The limitations of the time didn't allow for anything beyond a few pixels to be put to screen."

Nick Ahrens (a former Game Informer editor who recently joined iam8bit), elaborates, "It's the artists filling in the gaps with their imagination.

Twenty years later, they look back at things they played as kids, and they take their memories and put it down on canvas as art. It comes out completely different and beautiful."

Along the way iam8bit proved to be a boon for a group of talented artists that had been overlooked or generally avoided the traditional art world. Jose Emorca Flores, who has contributed to every iam8bit show, is typical of many of the artists involved. Though he studied fine art at the Academy of Art in San Francisco, he's rarely been embraced by the established art world. However, he's far from a starving artist, having staked out a successful career as a video game concept artist for companies like EA and Activision. His most recent work was for High Moon's Transformers: War for Cybertron.

"I can't believe how much it's grown," Flores says. "I thought it was a cool idea, but I didn't know how huge it was going to be. When I did my first piece, I just thought of it as a portfolio piece and didn't really think it would sell. But it got so big; I sell prints online now. That first Mario painting is the biggest seller. I'm happy to have been part of it from the first one."

Like most of the artists involved in the show, Flores takes pride in putting a unique and personal spin on classic game iconography. In an upcoming piece (on page 18), he depicts a dark, compelling scene of Mario and Princess Peach in the aftermath of the events of Super Mario Bros.

"I wanted to show more of a connection between him and [Princess Peach]," he says. "I wanted to show what their relationship is like after the whole story has gone down. Bowser is defeated; they need to eat. It's how they live, day by day. I tried to add a little drama with the expression on Mario's face. He's looking up. Maybe there's another monster to fight. It gives the viewer something to play with and add to the painting. They can finish the story in their own mind."

As iam8bit finished its biggest event to date – the 2008 exhibit at the World of Wonder Storefront Gallery in L.A. – Gibson made the surprising move of putting the show on hiatus. While this seemed odd from a commercial standpoint, he felt it was in the best interests of maintaining the brand.

"Honestly, [it was] partly boredom. It needed a break. The economy was s---, people weren't really going to art shows and buying art," Gibson says. "There was a threshold for exhausting the artists' community of their awesome ideas for '80s video game art."

Gibson also needed more time to concentrate on iam8bit's other business interests. The company was staffing up, transforming from an organization focused entirely on the art exhibit to a broad-ranging marketing and promotions firm. "As a company, we were
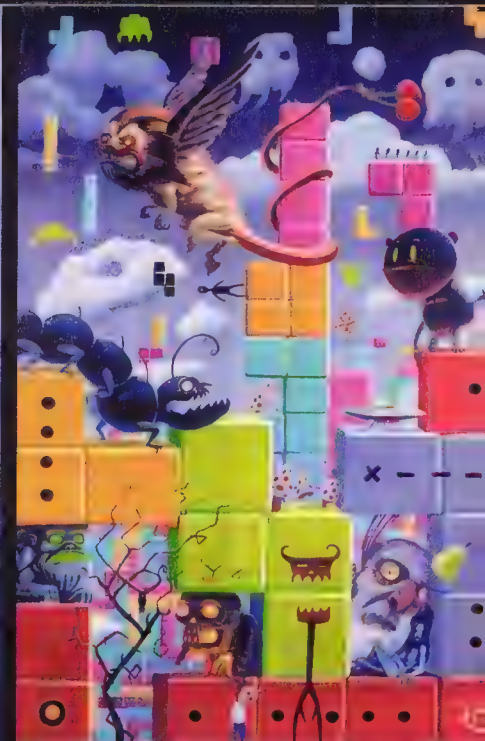
evolving as a production outfit and doing events and marketing," Gibson remarks. "We were quietly developing all this other stuff, and trying to find a home like we have now."

This new home, a large gallery and work space in the hip Echo Park neighborhood of Los Angeles simply called "8" serves as the new home for both iam8bit the company and Super iam8bit, the reborn video game art exhibition.

"We wanted to find a space that allowed us to do our day to day production work but also function almost like going to the zoo," Gibson says. "You walk in, there's a gallery that's traditional, but at the same time it's a functional work space where you can see where we work. It's like a playground. It's room to do whatever we want."

The upcoming show attempts to further expand iam8bit's artistic palette. While there will be still be plenty of game-inspired paintings (and a new work by Flores), iam8bit is also placing an emphasis on sculpture and other forms of more interactive art. While he wouldn't give details, Gibson revealed that a member of Tim Shafer's DoubleFine Productions is hard at work on an installation that will engage the crowd through the use of hacked Kinect units. "We have a couple thousand people running through on opening night, we want them to experience something a little more progressive with this experience than just looking at art on a wall," he says.

The new show promises to be the biggest ever, with over 100 artists being displayed in the new gallery. BLIK, the designer decal company, is going to transform the 8 space into "an '80s gaming wonderland." In honor of the 30th anniversary of Galaga, what is claimed to be the world's largest arcade cabinet will be in attendance. To go along with the new show, the company is also readying another art book, SUPER iam8bit, which will show off works from previous shows as well as entries from the new exhibit.

In many ways, iam8bit is a classic entrepreneurial tale. What started as a labor of love has evolved into a highly successful institution in the gaming and art worlds, spawning a full-blown business along the way. Back in 2004, Gibson's idea for merging the worlds of gaming and art may have felt like a long shot. It now seems prescient – both in the merging of gaming and other media and the small industry that's sprung up trafficking in '80s and early '90s game nostalgia. However, despite the record crowds, book deals, and strong sales, one thing has still eluded iam8bit: acknowledgement from the arts establishment.

"The traditional arts press has more or less ignored us," Gibson remarks. "There have been mentions here and there but no one has really embraced us. It's weird and I think that it's related to the fact that it's video games and not Campbell's Soup. But is there really any

difference? Warhol was painting derivatives of Mickey Mouse in different colors, whereas artists in iam8bit are painting Mega Man and Mario and Zelda. Who's to say that Mario is any less significant than Mickey Mouse in our generation? I don't think the traditional arts press views video games as something of artistic merit in any real way."

Flores agrees, but doesn't seem overly concerned with getting a pat on the head by the arts establishment. "The traditionalists probably think it's below them, but the people I know respect and love it. I don't really hang out with the elitists. [Laughs]"

For Gibson's part, he seems content that he took a small gallery show in L.A. far beyond any of his expectations. "No one could have predicted it," he reflects. In addition to the thriving marketing, event, and promotion business he built on the back of the exhibition, he has a lifetime of memories. When asked to recall his favorite moment, he offers, "There was giant Atari 2600 controller. It was six feet tall and weighed a couple of hundred pounds. It was amazing to see Nolan Bushnell touch it. The founder of Atari standing next to this massive contraption that actually functioned like the controller he made in the '70s. There are moments like that that make you realize how far the industry has evolved. But everyone that did these things is still alive and still doing things."
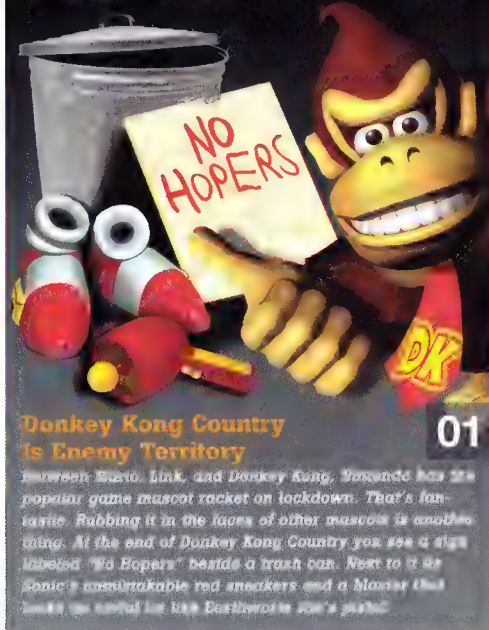
Donkey Kong Country Is Enemy Territory

01

Between Mario, Link, and Donkey Kong, Nintendo has the popular game mascot racket on lockdown. That's fantastic. Rubbing it in the faces of other mascots is another thing. At the end of Donkey Kong Country you see a sign labeled "No Hopers" beside a trash can. Next to it are Sonic's unmistakable red sneakers and a blaster that *[unclear]*

"I Can Read Your Mind!"

02

Kojima's stealth masterpiece Metal Gear Solid wowed gamers with impressive gameplay and an intriguing story. While the game was blowing minds, Psycho Mantis was busy reading them. Before Solid Snake faces off with him, the ESP-gifted madman scans the player's PlayStation memory card for other Konami games. Every Castlevania-playing Metal Gear fan remembers when the masked boss said "You like Castlevania, don't you?" then berated them for not saving enough.
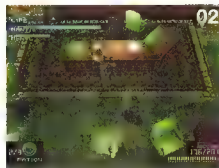
Mega Man Learns Some New Moves

03

A bizarre reward awaits Mega Man X players patient enough to acquire every item, fill up their E-tanks, and ride a speeding mine cart to a difficult-to-reach ledge housing a hidden upgrade capsule. A hologram of Dr. Light appears, but instead of his trademark lab coat, the bearded scientist dons a karate gi. X's creator then teaches him a classic Street Fighter move: the hadouken. The dragon fireball can K.O. the game's deadliest Mavericks before you can say "down, diagonal, towards."

Un'Goro Crater

What do a raging gorilla that drops empty barrels, a mustachioed man in red who wields a giant hammer, and an amnesiac boy carrying a boomerang have in common? If you said Nintendo, you'd be right. You're even cleverer if you knew all these things exist in World of Warcraft's tribute to the Big N, the Un'Goro Crater zone.

Nazi Ghosts

Pac-Man and Wolfenstein's B.J. Blazcowicz have something in common – both gaming protagonists evade enemies while attempting to escape a perilous labyrinth. In Wolfenstein 3D their worlds converge. Players can discover a hidden level modeled after a Pac-Man maze, populated with murderous ghosts and golden treasure in place of power pellets.

Duke Nukem Still Hates Space Marines

At one point in Duke Nukem Forever, our leading man examines a familiar suit of green space armor with a shiny gold visor, saying, "power armor is for p-----s." Never mind that Master Chief revitalized console shooters, won over countless gamers, and starred in an entire trilogy in the time it took to develop Duke Nukem Forever.

A Link To The Plumber

Mario has had cameos in so many games that he could fill every spot on this list. Though the plumber didn't show his cheery face in the game, Game Boy title The Legend of Zelda: Link's Awakening hosted a ton of Mario references. Link interacts with a domesticated chain chomp, battles goombas and piranha plants in 2D sections, and can even win a Yoshi doll from a claw game.
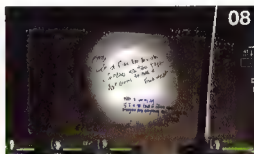
Left 4 Dead Rising

Two of gaming's biggest zombie franchises, Left 4 Dead and Dead Rising, are made by different companies. That didn't stop Valve from linking to Capcom's world with this grim graffiti written by Dead Rising's intrepid photographer: "Otis, out of film, no helicopter. Zombies are too fast. Not going to make it Frank West."

"It's A-Me."

Assassin's Creed II and Super Mario Bros. are two wildly different games sporting Italian protagonists. Despite their dissimilarities, Ubisoft Montreal injected an offbeat Nintendo reference into a reunion between Ezio and his uncle. When the Assassin asks his estranged uncle where he knows him from, the mustachioed man exclaims, "It's a-me, Mario!" before promptly returning to character.

Dante Gets Around

In Shin Megami Tensei: Nocturne, players recruit demons to fight by their side. Eventually the master demon hunter himself, Dante from Devil May Cry, challenges the Demi-Fiend to a battle. Dante brandishes his flashy dual pistols, extravagant sword flourishes, and general cockiness in the turn-based battle. To make this cross-reference even sweeter, players can recruit Dante to fight with them later in the game.
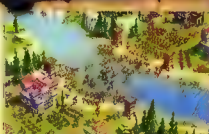
the Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

news with a sarcastic spin

Good

GoldenEye has already cemented its place in N64 and shooter history, and now non-Nintendo owners can get in on the action. The HD remake of last November's Wii update – GoldenEye 007 Reloaded – launches on September 30 for the PS3 (with Move support) and Xbox 360. The game features new AI, animations, a separate challenge mode called MI6 Ops Missions, four-player split-screen offline multiplayer, and 16-player online all for $59.99

To celebrate his 1,000th Twitter follower, Casey Hudson, executive producer on the Mass Effect series, posted this look at one of Mass Effect 3's new characters – James Vega.

Bad

Video games officially hit the summer slide, with June sales of hardware and software dropping 9 and 12 percent, respectively, from last year at the same time. Even in this slow climate, Goichi Suda and Shinji Mikami's Shadows of the Damned (published by EA) could only muster up 24,000 units of sales in the U.S. on the PS3 and Xbox 360. Is time up on Suda51's brand of nonsense?

Bad news comes in different forms this month. The Darkness II (shown) has been delayed from this October to February, but at least it's coming out.

The same can't be said for Mega Man Legends 3, which Capcom abruptly cancelled. The game was going to consist of both a prototype 3DS title released via the Nintendo eShop, as well as a full game. Now neither is coming to market.

Ugly

The International Game Developers Association (IGDA) is looking into charges that L.A. Noire developer Team Bondi overworked its staff with 100-hour work weeks and rolling crunch times. A rumor is also circulating that the relationship between the studio and publisher Rockstar is so bad that the two won't work together again. This marks the second straight Rockstar game (the other being Red Dead Redemption) that we've heard complaints about working conditions.

A PS3 owner filed a new class action lawsuit against Sony that claims the company knew the PlayStation Network was vulnerable to hacker attacks (since it had been hit with smaller attacks before the big outage), and yet it still fired key network security personnel two weeks before the April attack. The lawsuit also alleges that Sony "spent lavishly" to protect its own proprietary development server, but declined to protect consumer info.

24

Modern Warfare 3 vs. Battlefield 3

li vs. Frazier. Coke vs. Pepsi. Xbox vs. PlayStation. America loves a good rivalry, and none is hotter in gaming right now than the face-off between Battlefield and Call of Duty.

In one corner, you have the heavyweight champion of the world. Fueled by explosive single-player campaigns and the most addictive multiplayer infrastructure in the business, the Call of Duty franchise has sold more than 100 million games since its debut in 2003. With each of the past two entries raking in more than a billion dollars apiece, this FPS juggernaut is at the top of its game, but the fallout resulting from the exodus of Infinity Ward's senior leadership group has yet to be seen.

In the other corner, you have a veteran franchise that has demonstrated technical mastery during its rise to becoming a critical darling. The Battlefield series embraces large-scale warfare, with tanks, planes, and infantry all duking it out in a destructible hot zone. With a multiplayer mode that rewards team coordination over running and gunning, the game has traditionally appealed to more cerebral shooter fans turned off by the COD community. But in the past two years, its presence on consoles has grown considerably, and tapping into the mainstream is exactly what DICE needs to do to become the top shooter on the market.

With Battlefield 3 (October 25) and Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3 (November 8) releasing within two weeks of one another, the stakes have never been higher. The arms race has spilled out of the development studios and into the marketing departments, as both companies are launching huge campaigns that EA CEO John Riccitiello speculates could reach the $100 million mark. This FPS showdown is the most anticipated head-to-head matchup we've seen in years.

Armed with an impressive new Frostbite 2 engine and Battlefield's reputation for polished multiplayer, can DICE and EA orchestrate the ultimate upset and knock out the champion? The earning potential gap between the two is large enough that it isn't likely to happen overnight, but even taking a considerable chunk of the Call of Duty market could hurt the future prospects of Activision considering the publisher's dwindling library of valuable franchises and its overreliance on World of Warcraft and Call of Duty.

Only time will tell if Call of Duty will relinquish its title belt, but both sides have been chirping away at one another just like you'd expect rival camps to do before an epic bout. Here is a greatest hits collection of the inflammatory jabs each side has landed in advance of the big event.

MODERN WARFARE 3 CAMP

"So far I've only seen Battlefield 3 on a PC, I haven't seen it on a console where the bulk of the business is. If it's just a PC title, as it looks like today, that's just a small audience to participate."

— Activision CEO
Bobby Kotick (via CNBC)

"You can go out and name your engine and call it whatever you want, right? You know, I've done that before; I've seen that trick and the bottom line is, [Modern Warfare 3] will run at 60 frames a second. Not sure any of our competitors will. Not sure I've seen any of our competitors on the console especially running at 60 frames a second and I'd be a little scared at this point – in June – if I was looking forward to a particular game that wasn't on the console and running at 60. I think 60 is our competitive edge, and you just don't throw that away."

— Sledgehammer
Games co-founder
Glen Schofield (via
AusGamers)

As two of the biggest first-person shooters prepare to square off this holiday, vitriolic battle cries are emanating from both camps.

★ ★ ★   by   ★ ★ ★

BATTLEFIELD 3 CAMP

"We're going to have a clash of the titans this fall. The very fact that [Activision CEO Bobby Kotick is] trying to cast doubt on our game is a perfect example of how we got his goat. In terms of where this goes, we think our PS3 game is better than their Xbox [360] game and our PC game is better than their PC game. If that's all he's got to say, it's obviously going to evaporate as we launch all three. If you went to our press conference, you saw the PS3 footage and the Xbox [360] footage. If Bobby thinks that is PC footage, he's in real trouble."

— EA CEO John Riccitiello
(via Reuters)

"We always do 30 FPS on consoles, not possible to fit in vehicles, fx, scale and all players otherwise."

— DICE executive producer
Johan Andersson (via Twitter)

"Battlefield 3 is designed to take [Call of Duty] down."

— EA CEO John Riccitiello

"We don't want to play second fiddle or be a copy [of COD Modern Warfare 3] – no one wants to be the cover band. You want to be the star."

— DICE rendering architect
Patrick Bach (via GameSpot)

A Quest To Build A
Video Game Museum

by Ben Reeves

N ot all museums are filled with rusted swords, faded paintings, and dusty bones. R&B aficionados can visit the Motown Museum in Detroit, sci-fi junkies have the Science Fiction Museum in Seattle, and droves of fans flock to the Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, New York every year – even Hormel's Spam has its own dedicated museum in Austin, MN. But to this day, few historical treasures are dedicated solely to the video game industry. A non-profit charity committed to preserving, archiving, and documenting video game history hopes to change that. The Videogame History Museum has already collected over 25,000 pieces of memorabilia, and many of those items already tour national conventions such as E3, PAX, and Classic Game Expo each year. Now, the organization is dreaming of something bigger – a dedicated site that gamers could visit to relive the brilliant past of the interactive entertainment industry.

A number of industry luminaries, including Brown Box inventor Ralph Baer, Atari founder Nolan Bushnell, and Pitfall creator David Crane have thrown their weight behind the cause by joining the organization's board of directors. Even so, the group is still far from realizing its dream. To speed up the process, co-founders John Hardie, Sean Kelly, and Joe Santulli began a campaign in early July to raise over $30,000 for the project. By the time you read this, the campaign will only have a few weeks left to run. We talked with Santulli about his group's ambitious goals.

How did the three of you guys get started collecting video game memorabilia?
We all started as like-minded individuals who had never met. We were sort of packrat collectors and gaming fans who were teenagers when the gaming sensation first kicked in, so we were old enough to appreciate games and even afford some of the classic systems back when they were new. We had already started building little collections of our own. I guess most kids would have grown up and moved on to the next thing, trading in their old stuff or throwing it out, but none of us seemed to have gone through that pattern. We met through a project I had started, just about 20 years ago, called *Digital Press*. I had put together this little newsletter in the hopes that there were other people out there collecting and playing these vintage games. Traveling around and showing our collections to people sort of naturally evolved out of that.

What's coolest thing anyone has donated to the collection?
We haven't had a lot of donations over the years. The truth is that we've been very avid collectors. We never had a problem paying for things because we knew it would have a very good home some day. My favorite donation, though, is a ship from an Imagic game called Star Voyager. On the front of the game's box was a really cool Millennium Falcon-looking ship. Imagic's marketing team had built its own 3D model just to take that picture for the game's box, and it's bigger than you might think. It's probably about two feet wide. I love that thing, because it's a cool

example of how the process of creating games is different now than it was back in the day.

Why do you think nobody has done a video game museum before?
It would be ignorant of me to say that there aren't similar things already. For example, The Strong Museum of Play in Rochester, New York. It's massive. It's like two whole city blocks. We had heard that it was the ultimate video gaming museum in the world, so we visited it, and it is really impressive, but those two city blocks cover gaming in general. They cover everything from dolls to board games on up to video games, so you really have a vast swath of items to look at. The video game selection itself, while it's very impressive, is very minimalist compared to what we're trying to do. They provide a very nice timeline, but not much of it is interactive, and it doesn't go very deep into the people and the stories that made the industry what it was. I believe the same things could be said about the Smithsonian's upcoming exhibit, or Walter Day's project in Ottumwa, Iowa. So while there are a few similar projects trying to get off the ground, what we want to do is create a very detailed, rich vision of gaming. We don't want to just display the consoles. What we've learned over the years is that the people and the stories behind how all this happened are far more interesting than the games themselves.

How will the Kickstarter campaign help you guys out?
Our extended family of donors are all over the place. We have a storage facility in Las Vegas. We have

personal collections in New York, New Jersey, and Chicago, and then we have guys who help us with very specific parts of the museum. Chris Romero does our Vectrex displays, and his stuff is all sitting in a storage facility in southern California. So each time we do a traveling exhibit, it's a major logistical effort to pull all of the pieces that we think we need from each collection and get them into one centralized location. What we want to do is get ahead of that process and put everything in a centralized location, so that we can then mobilize from one point to wherever we need to be, which of course would be the very first block in building a museum.

How long do you think it will be before you have an actual dedicated museum?
I would foresee it happening in the next six years, realistically. I would love to see it happen sooner, but it's not a matter of logistics; it's a matter of we need

A view of The Video Game History Museum exhibit at E3 2011

In 1986, Nintendo put Famicom Boxes in stores in Japan. They allowed customers to sample up to 15 different Famicom games (Japan's version of the NES). This was a big innovation in that day

NEW **STAR VOYAGER**

Video Game Cartridge
For the ATARI Video Game System and Sears Video Arcade
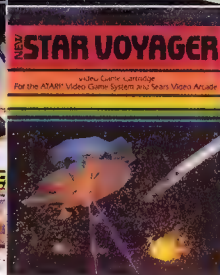
A real 3D model had to be build for the cover of Imagic's Star Voyager game. The ship itself is really just a modified version of old Star Wars toys
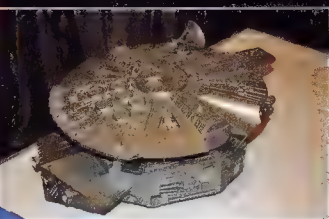
a building. It's going to take a fair amount of money or some luck to make that happen, but given a dedicated effort to keep pushing this forward within six years we should have some kind of a place that people could walk into.

How would this be different than other museums?

I'll tell you what – I don't like museums. I find them boring. I often walk into them and can't wait to get out. I'm usually there because someone else wanted to go. It's not that I'm

not interested in the history of these things; it's just that to me there is a very sleepy feeling about them. That isn't going to happen with our museum. It's an exciting industry and an exciting culture. Artwork and dinosaurs are very still images, and they are something that you can only really walk around and appreciate. But video games are generally in your face. You could just stand in a video game museum and hear a lot of things that bring about that history, and video games are almost always interactive by default, so you will be able to play a lot of these exhibits. Sometimes I even wonder if museum is the right word. If it wasn't for the fact that we are documenting, archiving, and displaying history, I'm not sure we would call it a museum. I think that this place will be so interactive that it would almost be like an amusement park.

Why do you think it's important to preserve video game history?

That's a really big question. I was talking about this with a friend the other day. What we were

realizing is that the physical medium for video games is going away. Eventually there will be no such thing as you walk into a game store and walk out with a game in your hands. A lot of people don't think that will happen, but I don't understand how that wouldn't happen. To be honest with you, I'm stunned that I can go on my PS3 and download Infamous 2. The game came out a couple of weeks ago and there it is, I just download the whole thing. We now really have to consider who is going to keep all this stuff around, so that in 10 years from now, or 20 years from now, or more, we can still go back and see what these things used to look like. Like anyone else who runs a museum, we want people to be able to appreciate the art and the culture that has built around this hobby. Whether you consider it an art form or not, it's a very big part of our culture, and a growing part of our culture since the '70s. I think that the history of gaming is as interesting as any other culture, and that's what we intend to show when our museum opens up.

Don't Just Read It...

Gods & Heroes: Rome Rising

A once-lost MMO is resurrected to great mediocrity

by Philip Kollar

I have some history with Gods & Heroes: Rome Rising, the new fantasy MMO just released by Heatwave Interactive. The game was originally announced back in 2005 by developer Perpetual Entertainment. At the time I had started a small podcast, and had somehow scored an interview with members of the team working on Gods & Heroes. I was beyond excited to conduct my first "professional" interview with game developers despite knowing very little about the MMO they were working on.

A few years later, Gods & Heroes disappeared and Perpetual Entertainment shut down. Whether due to pride at the game being part of the first step in my eventual career or genuine interest, I was sincerely disappointed by its cancellation. Now Rome Rising has resurfaced with a new developer. Being forced to play this boring, rusty relic of an MMO must be some sort of karmic payback for having used it to kick-start my career.

Gods & Heroes looks and plays like an MMO from six years ago. I don't know the details behind how Heatwave acquired the license, but I wouldn't be shocked if they purchased the exact assets and engine that Perpetual had built years earlier and gave it some minor polish before pushing it out the door.

Rome Rising works within the traditional MMO formula: You start by designing a generic character in one of four classes (gladiator, mystic, soldier, or priest). You play through a heavily scripted tutorial zone that introduces you to the basic mechanics of running quests and attacking enemies via powers laid out on an Everquest-style hotbar. As you activate each power in your arsenal, your character rolls through the same stiff animation over and over. If that wasn't bad enough, the attacks in Gods & Heroes often drain health as soon as you click the power but before the animation has played out, meaning enemies will sometimes drop dead while your character is still awkwardly swinging a sword or casting a spell.

Not everything in Gods & Heroes is so uninspired, but even the few flashes of brilliance come with some major drawbacks. An estate system tasks players with rebuilding their family home following a brutal attack, Assassin's Creed-style. Currently, though, there are no gameplay bonuses to this process and no way to invite friends into your instanced estate. This system would be a lot more interesting if players could place buildings where they want on the large, empty landmass they've inherited. Instead, buildings and landmarks sprout up of their own volition as you perform quests to unlock them.

The one aspect of Gods & Heroes that I hope other MMO developers take note of is its minion system. Shortly into the tutorial, players recruit an AI-controlled buddy to tag along behind them throughout the quests. As you progress, you can build up a whole army of allies to call upon, eventually summoning up to four at a time. Spellcasters can get heavily armored NPC buddies to take damage for them, and warriors can call up a healbot to keep HP topped off as they adventure. This system makes almost all of Gods & Heroes' content solo-friendly, which is both welcome and necessary given the game's laughably tiny player population.

Even the small, dedicated group that has seen past the problems plaguing Rome Rising is not being rewarded. As of launch, the level cap is stuck at a measly 30. Levels 31-50 are supposed to be unlocked in upcoming patches, along with about half of the game's promised zones. Other incoming, but currently absent features include PvP, crafting, and an endgame of any sort. Plenty of MMOs have been released incomplete, but Gods & Heroes is flat-out embarrassing. Heatwave would have been better off leaving this one to rot in the catacombs.

massive

Taking The Wii For One Last Spin

By Game Informer Staff

With Nintendo's focus shifting to the Wii U and the current Wii console's failure to make inroads with third parties, the writing is on the wall for Nintendo's motion-based system. There's still a little life left in this old gal yet, though. These titles give Wii owners something to look forward to before Nintendo's console rides off into the sunset
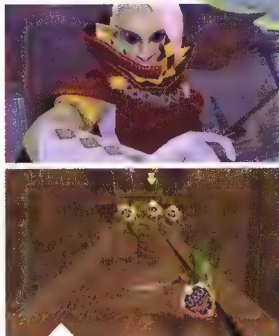
The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword

Similar to Twilight Princess, which was a great late-life Zelda title for the GameCube, Skyward Sword has the potential to be the best 3D Zelda yet. Wii MotionPlus lets the developers create interesting motion-based gameplay, with enemies that require certain types of sword strokes to defeat or quick wrist action to sneak blows past their defenses. Everyone who played it at E3 this year had nothing but praise for the game. Nintendo hasn't disappointed with a console Zelda title in recent memory, and any Wii haters will have to go deep undercover for a while after this comes out later this year.

Kirby Wii

Kirby's had his ups and downs, but lately he's been a lot more awesome and a lot less medi-ocre. Kirby Wii gives him the four-player co-op treatment while bringing him back to his enemy-sucking roots after his unusual (but excellent) Epic Yarn. Kirby Wii impressed in playable form at this year's E3 show, and should be a grand platforming time when it launches this fall.

Rayman Origins

Rayman Origins came out of nowhere to wow everyone at E3 with its unique art style, varied challenges, and airtight gameplay. Ubisoft hasn't shown its promising platformer running on Wii publicly (though *Nintendo Power* apparently saw it for a recent cover story). This cooperative 2D platformer will be a great addition to the library.

Just Dance 3

It seems odd to release another one of these games since the first two reportedly made all of the money – all of it, seriously – but Ubisoft is keeping the party alive. Shake it to more than 40 tracks featuring only the finest in booty-moving grooves later this year in the conclusion to Ubisoft's epic trilogy.

The Last Story

Pandora's Tower

The Question Marks

Xenoblade

The Last Story

Pandora's Tower

Mario Party 9
Nintendo hasn't said much of anything about Mario Party 9, other than that it's coming out for Wii. How much do you really need to know? You're going to play some minigames, roll some dice, and curse the random distribution of stars.

Fortune Street
Dragon Quest characters join the usual Nintendo roster for this Monopoly-like board game. If fewer minigames and more strategy is your thing, you can find out what has made this franchise a hit in Japan later this year.

Mario & Sonic at the London 2012 Olympic Games

All minigames, all the time! Flail away as you compete in Olympic-themed challenges with beloved members of the Nintendo and Sega rosters. Waiting for your chance to play equestrian events as a hedgehog? Wait no longer!

Rhythm Heaven

This sequel to the quirky 2009 DS title features all-new microgames for players to tap buttons in time with. The DS game won a significant following with its upbeat music and zany scenarios, so this could be a not-so-surprising hit.

Disney Universe
Bash through a variety of Disney-themed levels in this four-player cooperative action/platformer. Think the LEGO games with a little more progression via tools that grow in power as you play. Disney Universe is also coming for 360 and PS3, so hopefully this isn't a gimpy version while those are the "real" game.

Reimagining History

Development studios' research practices and inspirations augment the creation of era-specific games

As production budgets, hardware specs, and development tools have grown and evolved, they have enhanced the ability for developers to build thematic settings with a specific era in mind. Like a virtual time machine, video games let players explore past and future worlds, whether they're fictional, historical, or a blend of both. You may become a 16th century warlord fighting in feudal Japan, an agent of the early 1940s tasked with infiltrating an aerial city, a 1950s street thug rising through the gritty ranks to become a made man, or a super soldier in 2023 restoring order after an alien attack. Creating a world that sets the narrative stage for a game requires extensive research to represent the right sights and sounds. Here are some techniques employed by four talented studios during their crucial research and development process.

(The Creative Assembly)

Strategies behind the creation of virtual Japanese warfare

The Creative Assembly's latest entry in the Total War series, Shogun 2, departs from European settings and returns to its Japanese roots. In the aftermath of the Onin War, the 16th century feudal country is divided as local warlords fight for control.

"Total War: Shogun 2 has benefited from a decade of research and development on the series," explains Shogun 2's lead designer Jamie Ferguson. "When the original was released, 3D graphics cards were still in their infancy and there was a lot that we wanted to achieve that simply wasn't possible at the time. Extensive research into the characters and stories from the period also influenced the retainers and finer details of the game."

The Creative Assembly spent months gathering resources, using photographs taken from Japan to get a sense of topography, flora, and fauna of the country. For geographical accuracy, they studied topographical data of Sengoku-era battlefields. The team also sought the expertise of Stephen Turnbull, a leading expert in medieval Japanese history and the life of the samurai, who also consulted with the team on the original Shogun: Total War. Turnbull brought in authentic Japanese armor to the studio for reference. The group also read a number of his books in addition to *Art of the Edo Period* from The Royal Academy of Arts, *The History of Japanese Armor* by Ritta Nakanashi, *Samurai: The Story of a Warrior Tradition* by Harry Cook, and *The Japanese Art of War: Understanding the Culture of Strategy* by Thomas Cleary, and sourced additional books about Japanese castles, weapons, and armor. In addition, The Creative Assembly spoke with the current head of the Tokugawa clan, a group that took control of the shogunate of Japan and ruled from the 1600s to the 1800s, for insight into his family lineage. The films of Akira Kurosawa, like *The Seven Samurai, Ran, and Kagemusha*, were used as inspiration as well.

As far as Shogun 2's in-game economy, aside from tapping the team's economics majors for research, The Creative Assembly studied the financial history of medieval Japan and translated first-hand accounts from the period including detailed information on payment of retainers and supplying armies. "We combined this information with our previous experience of making Total War games to create a unique, flavorsome reflection of the history of Japan," Ferguson says.
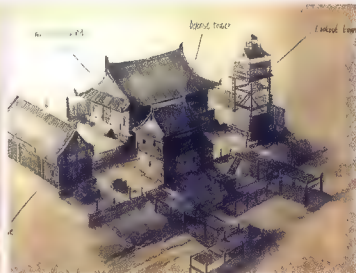
(Irrational Games)

Media shapes a 20th century city in the sky

BioShock Infinite takes the franchise in a new direction as it pulls players out of the dark depths of the Atlantic and up toward the heavens to an extraordinary location called Columbia. When conceptualizing this new world with an early 1900s backdrop, the team at Irrational Games began research by taking a look at one of their own original works.

"We started out by researching what BioShock was to some degree, because we knew that we didn't want to do another game in Rapture," explains creative director Ken Levine. "We were very interested in what *made* a BioShock game. And the things that came to us were that it had a setting – not a specific setting – but that the setting had to be a character. That was very important…. In terms of game systems and how you interact with the world, and how combat plays out, we left that until we tuned into the notion of the period."

The loss of Rapture may feel like cutting out a major character, but the process has benefits. "What we were left with was room to make a world that was a bigger and even more significant character than Rapture, but it also had the liberating effect in that we could do it anywhere and anytime," says art director Nate Wells. "So we locked into a period that we found fascinating. A lot of our interests don't just crop up when we have to make a new game. They are ongoing and the game inevitably is affected by the zeitgeist of what we are reading and are interested in."

Several members of Irrational Games read and developed great interest in *The Devil in the White City: Murder,* *Magic, and Madness at the Fair that Changed America* by Erik Lawson, a book set in Chicago around the 1893 World's Fair.

"We found it very entertaining that if you looked at the layout of the World's Fair or the Columbian Exposition of 1893, it was very similar to Rapture in that it was a sampling of different parts of the world and different parts of technology." Wells explains. "It was arranged sort of like Disney World in that you get a sampling of what they wanted you to see that feels very, very video game. The Columbian Exposition was effectively a utopian endeavor. However temporary, it was a three-year project to create a utopia in a swamp in Chicago. And it was absolutely beautiful. And the deeper irony is that it was essentially made out of papier-mâché. You have these beautiful buildings that were this thin layer of plaster over this metal framework. It was all smoke and mirrors. And that is the thing about utopias, right? You can see the connections there to the BioShock franchise."

Inspiration from the Columbian Exposition of 1893 coupled with themes from a television documentary helped BioShock Infinite and Columbia take shape.

"I was watching this great PBS documentary called *America 1900,* and it talked about all the themes that were going on in America at the time," Wells says. "In a 20-year period you'd go from a backwater farming country to a country that has electricity, cars, airplanes, phonograph records, movies, and all these amazing things. Then you think about the 20-year period we just went through, and all we have is one thing – the Internet. It is a big thing, but they had like 10 Internets in that
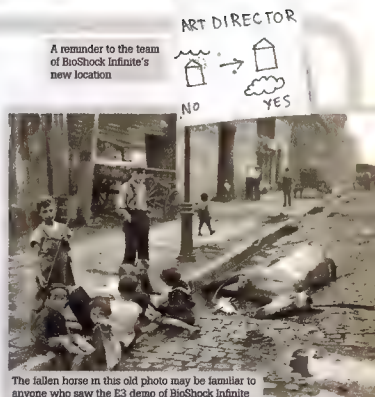
The fallen horse in this old photo may be familiar to anyone who saw the E3 demo of BioShock Infinite

period of time. The world was changing. I hadn't really tuned into what was going on historically in America. It was sort of this watershed moment of America becoming what we think of America today. It was starting to express itself on the world stage and this incredible optimism came about in that period of time about technology and America's role in the world."

Take one look at Columbia's design and you'll find no shortage of American exceptionalism: red, white, and blue line the streets, and controversial propaganda calls citizens to arms against foreigners who threaten to taint the purity of the nation.

A look at how old photos helped inspire some of the architecture in BioShock Infinite

Daddy, what did YOU do in the Great War

This propaganda poster was repurposed with major changes lying within the text in order to fit within the context of Columbia

(2K Czech)
Digging into the history of the mob

Set in the '40s and '50s, Mafia II takes place in Empire Bay, a fictional metropolis dressed to the nines with post-war propaganda, old-timey automobiles, and more tailored suits than New York fashion week. Early in the development process, the team at 2K Czech evaluated architectural and art styles, as well as subcultures of the time period to help the art and media teams set the stage for the narrative

"Our team went to great lengths to ensure that the reference material was gathered and that accents, clothing, and cultural references in the game were on point and reflected the vibe of the game and the era we were trying to recreate," says Denby Grace, senior producer at 2K Games. "In different areas of the game, there are little touches and nods to the culture of the period that come from letting the individuals on the team express themselves."

To inspire Empire City's design, team members of 2K Czech took a trip to New York and Chicago to help capture the vibe of a bustling American metropolitan area. Even though the design of Empire City is inspired by real locations, the team wanted the city to remain fictional, allowing them to take creative liberties with their interpretations. For authenticity, 2K Czech looked toward '50s films for inspiration, got in touch with weapons collectors for historically accurate firearms, and went to great lengths in licensing more than 120 music tracks from the 1930s through the '50s for the right sound.

With the stage set, 2K Czech developed a mob-driven narrative in Mafia II inspired by real-life events thanks to the wealth of information on the mob in both print and online made available thanks to the Freedom of Information Act, which makes the FBI's reports on major crime figures in the 1950s available to the public.

Historically, the Mafia initially forbade members from drug dealing as a result of harsh penalties that followed when caught; the mob bosses figured it was in the better interest of the organization to outlaw dealing and miss out on profits than risk security. On the flip side, younger mobsters influenced by the amount of scratch raked in by other criminal organizations from the drug trade decided the reward was worth the risk, setting up the rise of Mafia II's protagonist, Vito Scaletta.

(Crytek)
Looking into the future for a sci-fi world gone awry

Crysis 2 takes the series from the natural jungle to the concrete jungle as an alien uprising and the spread of an airborne disease called the Manhattan Virus ravages New York City in the year 2023. To prepare for the futuristic interpretation of the Big Apple, the team at Crytek spent six months in the "concept discovery" phase, during which they researched and collected reference materials.

"This was a totally new location for us, so essentially we started from square one," says Chris Auty, lead level designer at Crytek. "This includes prototyping gameplay and establishing the early mission structure and locations that we would need to build throughout the project. We spent a lot of time working on how best to build spaces that would feel more open and would give players a sandbox experience while playing through a traditional city space."

During the pre-production phase, members of the team flew out to NYC to gather photos and other reference materials to get a sense of the city's scale, architecture, and overall sound. According to Auty, the team collected approximately 30,000 photos and hours of video and audio recordings. Crytek also used the trip to seek locations ideal for action sequences.

"We did a lot of scouting for locations to use in the game and other elements that might be used to give the player more vertical movement or solid areas of cover," Auty explains. "For example, when we arrived we saw that just about every block was covered with huge scaffolds that arc over the sidewalks, which were pretty much perfect for climbing onto and getting a better view of the play spaces we were creating. Actually being in the city and looking around was really inspirational and gave us a lot of ideas for how to approach the kind of spaces we would later create."

Thousands of photos were taken in modern-day New York such as Times Square and Wall Street, that helped inspire Crytek's environmental design in Crysis 2. Here you can see how the photos were re-imagined in-game

It's one thing to faithfully erect a futuristic version of New York City, but extensive research also went into how to properly depict its destruction. Crytek artists gathered references of destruction sites and collapsed buildings after natural disasters to understand how the materials that make up a building – metal, concrete, and glass – fall apart.

"We use all available media to gather reference material for destruction," explains senior environment artist Simon Fuchs. "Once we figure out how the different material types behave when being destroyed, the art team goes ahead and creates several textures and reusable models for each different material type. These assets are then shared within the team and reused whenever we need to create a destroyed building, a damaged wooden bench, or any other destroyed object. By doing this we ensure that the destruction looks natural and believable and is also consistent throughout the entire game."

To help players survive within Crysis 2's highly volatile environment, they are armed with the Nanosuit, an idea carried over from the original Crysis. According to lead game designer Sten Hübler, the powerful suit was inspired by a combination of the U.S. military's Future Force Warrior concept, exoskeleton prototypes from DARPA, and the HAL Robot Suit from Cyberdyne.

As far as the forces players are up against, the alien design was inspired by deep sea life-forms, and the Manhattan Virus was influenced by real-world epidemics (both in pathology and how outbreaks are handled by the armed forces). An early inspiration for the disease was an invasive fungus called Cordyceps that can cause behavioral changes in its host for greater proliferation through airborne spores. Combined with other various forms of viral and fungal infections, this allowed the team to create something new and threatening.
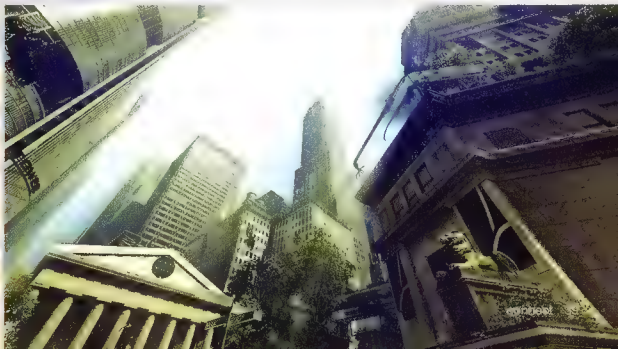
Over-the-top action for your platform of choice

I remember these big G.I. Joe battles I engaged in as a kid. By the end, all the vehicles had crashed into one another amid a cloud of fire and debris – at least, that was what happened in my head. I see that vision brought to life in Renegade Ops, the new vehicular shooter from Avalanche, the creators of the Just Cause series.

Three explosive downloadable games due before the end of the year

Burnout Crash
PlayStation Network, Xbox Live Arcade

The Baconing
PlayStation Network, Xbox Live Arcade

Renegade Ops
PlayStation Network, Xbox Live Arcade

I finally got my hands on Renegade Ops this month, and was immediately drawn to the crazy action and explosions that make it so much fun. Players drive one of several high-powered vehicles into battle, each with special abilities and a tree of upgrades to consider as you level up. My weaponized jeep went rumbling through the jungle blowing up buildings and enemy tanks with abandon. Old-timers will recognize similarities to classics like Jungle Strike and Choplifter, such as seeking out captured hostages and returning them to base. Halfway through the first level, I effortlessly switched over to a roaring attack helicopter and brought down a colossal ship bristling with terrorists. The battles are tuned to maximize the destruction and insanity onscreen, and I haven't even tried out the two-player local or four-player online co-op.

Fans bemoaned the lack of a traditional Crash mode in Burnout Paradise. The mode may not return in its original form, but a new version of the popular activity is the core of the downloadable game, **Burnout Crash**. You adopt a top-down view of a crowded intersection, into which you crash your vehicle and try to cause absurd levels of property damage. "We were very conscious to allow the game total freedom to evolve and define what it became very organically and not be limited by previous incarnations of Crash mode," explains creative director Richard Franke. "We were heavily influenced by pinball, and did a lot of experimentation with gameplay and scoring mechanisms that allowed the player to really strategize how they play the crash." Multiple game modes offer discrete play experiences. Franke calls the arcade-like rush hour mode "destruction free-for-all," while the strategic Pile-Up mode turns each intersection into a puzzle requiring the perfect route to maximum destruction. On 360, the game also integrates party-play Kinect options; you pretend to hold a steering wheel while driving into the intersection, then perform a ridiculous mix of silly gestures during crashbreakers to entertain your friends. Whether Burnout Crash can live up to the reputation of earlier incarnations remains to be seen, but I'm certainly happy to see a continuation of one of my favorite driving concepts.

It may not have its hero's name in the title anymore, but **The Baconing** is most definitely the next big adventure for the humorous goof DeathSpank. The Baconing takes the franchise in a different direction. "With the name change,

we wanted to clear the air and let people know that you do not need to have played any previous version to enjoy The Baconing," says producer Mike Inglehart. "In fact, given the changes we have made, if you are new to the series, we want you to start with The Baconing. To us it is the definitive DeathSpank experience." The new game maintains the "Monkey Island meets Diablo" vibe, but adds a layer of sci-fi silliness. Beyond stylistic shifts, The Baconing dramatically overhauls the gameplay systems to create a more challenging and robust experience on top of all the laughs. New mechanics

like shield bashing and projectile reflection help DeathSpank maintain control of the battlefield. AI has been beefed up to attack faster and respond to DeathSpank's movements and attacks. Environments are more dynamic thanks to cover points instead of wide-open fields. For me, the lackluster gameplay was the one thing that warned me away from the earlier DeathSpank games, so I'm hopeful these changes can improve the franchise. ✒

The Crafting Craze Continues

Meet Terraria, the next addictive world-building sim *by Tim Turi*

The combat is as simple as clicking the mouse to swing your sword or using the cursor to aim an arrow. (above)

Seeds can be planted in grass to grow trees, mushrooms, and other plants

The Eye of the Cthulu is best fought with allies

The similarities are immediately apparent, so I won't bother dancing around them: **Terraria** is a lot like a 2D Minecraft. But that's a good thing, because Re-Logic's deceptively simplistic crafting sandbox packs much more "game" than its 3D counterpart.

Players dig through randomly generated trees, earth, and minerals for useful crafting materials to build houses or create weapons and armor. Terraria's zoomed-out 2D perspective offers an advantage over Minecraft's first-person view, allowing players to see more of their surroundings and navigate the world without the clumsy first-person scheme. If you were to pull the camera back and behold the average game world in Terraria, you'd see a sight similar to a small home sitting on a tunnel leading to the Metroid homeworld. The game delivers the same sublime exploration and rewarding craftsmanship that Minecraft does, while injecting more goal-oriented motivation to the formula.

For example, at nightfall players' homes (assuming they were quick enough to cobble one together) are beset on all sides by zombies and flying demon eyes. Players can harvest lenses from these downed ocular enemies, which can be crafted into a demonic tool used to summon a tremendous boss. The Eye of Cthulu descends from above, putting your painstakingly crafted armor, weapons, and items through their paces. Celebrating victory in a downpour of loot is even sweeter knowing you dug down to the bowels of hell to acquire each piece of hellstone ore used to craft your flaming greatsword.

Adventuring only improves when you invite friends into your custom-built world. Up to eight explorers can join forces to mine, duel, exchange gear, or fight through a perilous dungeon. Every new world contains a unique dungeon infested with deadly enemies, rare loot, and cash to spend at the merchant's place (that is, if you build him a house to live in).

Terraria boasts all this content, endless replayability, and a dirt cheap price tag ($9.99 on Steam) after only six months of development. Creator Andrew "Redigit" Spinks and his crew have been delivering patches since its release in May, displaying an amazing dedication to their fans. Spinks says you won't likely recognize Terraria months from now. Upcoming updates like status ailments, improved inventory management, and an overhaul to the magic system will keep the ball rolling.

"People need to understand that Minecraft isn't a game anymore, it's a genre," Spinks recently told website Steam Addicts. With talented developers like Re-Logic delivering immersive wonderlands to get lost in, it's a genre that we hope keeps thriving.
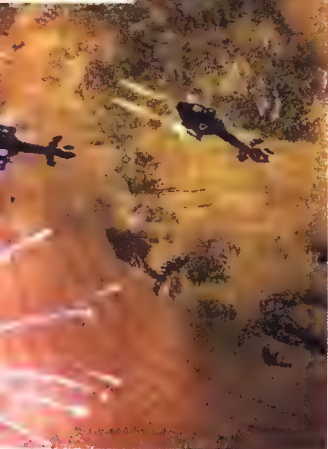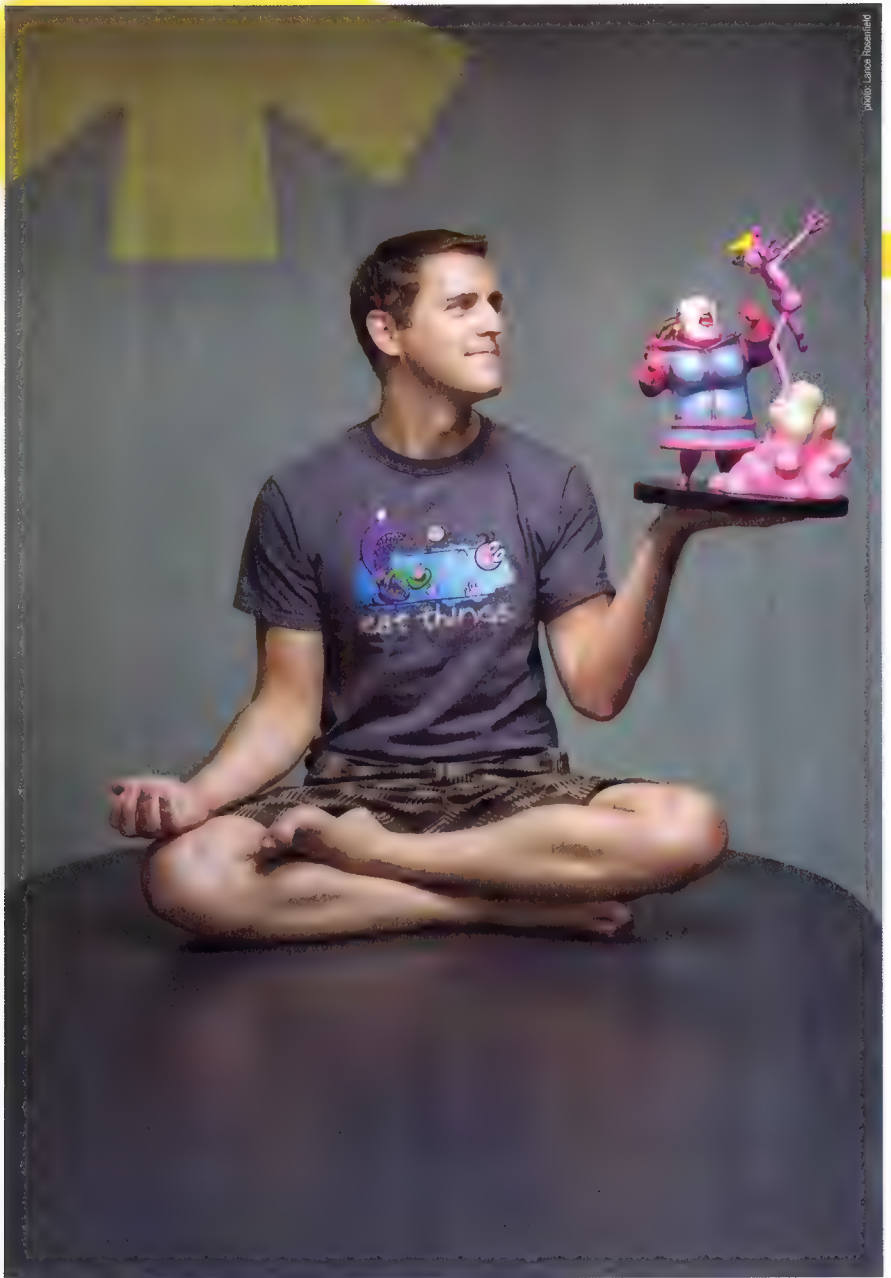
The Zen of Twisted Pixel

Twisted Pixel Games is a tight-knit studio in Austin founded by ex-High Voltage developers Michael Wilford, Josh Bear, and Frank Wilson. The studio is known for humorous, challenging XBLA games like The Maw, Splosion Man, and the upcoming retail Kinect game, The Gunstringer. We recently spoke with CEO Michael Wilford about the company's unique story, development philosophy, and view of the game industry.

interview by Matt Helgeson

You worked at High Voltage, which is known more for licensed products and porting. How did that experience inform your vision for Twisted Pixel?
It's really important, because High Voltage generally have a reputation for turning out games pretty quickly and doing a lot of licensed stuff…. While I was there the teams were small for what they were trying to do and didn't have as much time or as much money as we would have liked Ultimately, what that taught all of us – and we have several people from High Voltage – was being able to make something on a shoestring budget with no time and not many people. That's a valuable skill to have when you're making downloadable games.

Right from the beginning, it sounds like you targeted Xbox Live Arcade. Would your company even be possible without XBLA and those type of services?
Definitely not. If XBLA hadn't happened, I don't think there would have been WiiWare or PlayStation Network – or they certainly wouldn't be as important as they are now. If we would have waited a few years and done something on mobile – iPhone has broken down a lot of doors for developers – maybe that would have worked. But in 2006, without XBLA, we would have been screwed. It was part of our plan. In 2005, when Xbox 360 came out, we found out about Live Arcade and what it could do, that's specifically what we set out to do.

We were getting nowhere fast with Microsoft in the early days, but Nintendo was eager to talk to us. Back then, WiiWare was planned to be more like Xbox Live Arcade, where it's curated and developers have to submit to Nintendo. Twisted Pixel was the first company to get a green light for WiiWare. We had a game concept that we still hope to do someday, so I don't want to tell you too much about it – but we pitched a game to Nintendo that they really liked.

So what happened with that project?
A month after that green light, we get the call from Nintendo saying, "Yeah, Nintendo of Japan decided to go this route, so your green light doesn't really matter anymore. Essentially everyone is greenlit now." If we had Nintendo's backing and support for WiiWare, that would make it a lot easier to get funding. But now that it was that different model, we weren't willing to jump in. So we went back to the drawing board and started making pitches to Microsoft. It was GDC of 2007 when I met with David Edery, who was the games portfolio planner for XBLA at the time. I threw out three concepts, one of them was The Maw, and he pointed to it

and said, "I think that would be awesome." So I went back to the guys and said, "I think we got a green light."

Some developers – especially on the indie game side of Xbox Live – have said it's a hard place to make money. Have you been satisfied with the business side of Xbox Live?
Live Arcade [has] changed a lot since it first launched. There are a lot more games and it's more hit driven. That's what happens when any new and romanticized platform comes out – iPhone was the same thing, or Facebook games. There's the "morning" period where everyone's unsure about how successful it will be. Then there's the period after that where it does really well and there's a gold rush. Then after the gold rush, it starts to become way more hit driven. The dream of the "long tail" where anyone can make some kind of small, niche product and make a bunch of money over a long period of time isn't proving out to be as accurate as people originally speculated. Really, there are a small percentage of games on iPhone or XBLA that come out and do well. The rest of them are several orders of magnitude less successful. Marketing and getting buzz around your game is very important. If you don't have that, you're dead in the water.

You had a feud with Capcom over MaXsplosion, a game that was a carbon copy of Splosion Man.
We didn't know anything about it. One day our audio guy, Chainsaw, sent us an email saying, "This game MaXSplosion came out and everyone is saying it's a ripoff of Splosion Man." We started looking into it and were like, "Holy crap, this game does seem pretty similar."

The way it went down was…we did pitch Splosion Man to Capcom. It was guys we know at Capcom USA. They don't work there anymore, but they are buddies of ours. When we pitched them, they had their own legitimate reasons why they didn't want it at the time in terms of their XBLA and PSN plans. So they passed on it. From there, I have no idea where pitches go; if it gets circulated around Capcom and someone sees it and says, "That's a cool idea and we should rip it off." I'm guessing that didn't happen. It's Capcom UK that does their mobile stuff. If I had to guess it was probably a completely different, independent team of guys that decided to make something that they thought would be successful for iPhone. I definitely talked to the guys that I know at Capcom USA, who had nothing to do with it. They were more shocked and more pissed than I was.

You seem to have a real affection for humor and slapstick comedy. What are some of your inspirations, and how did you decide

to go that route instead of the dark, edgy atmosphere that so many games have?
We wanted to be focused on character and personality. When we were growing up there were games like Mario and Sonic and Earthworm Jim and games with iconic mascots we'll all remember until the day we die. I don't think that's happening anymore. We wanted to bring back those memorable characters. As we do that, because of our sense of humor and who we are, we find a lot of ways to get humor in the games. We prefer to be silly rather than take ourselves too seriously.

The Gunstringer is coming out as a retail Kinect game. Was that something you sought out or an opportunity that arose?
It was definitely something that arose. Gunstringer was originally supposed to come out on XBLA earlier this year. Around that time, Microsoft did a retreat where all the executives all went off to someplace. The entertainment was supposed to be Gunstringer and some other games for them [to play] after the meetings. Don Mattrick and Phil Spencer were playing the game and loved it. One thing led to another and [Microsoft] asked us if we wanted to take the game to retail. We were excited about it. One thing we constantly run up against when we're making games is getting to the end and realizing that the game could be so much better if we just had a little more time and money. That's basically what we were able to do with Gunstringer.

Was the game conceived for Kinect or did you transition it to Kinect?
One idea [we'd] been talking about was a puppeteering game. There was no main character or anything at that point. Before it was Kinect, Microsoft invited us to a summit where we could see the Project Natal tech. Once we learned what we could do, we immediately thought about the puppet game we'd always been talking about.

The funny part was that we were having dinner with Microsoft right after we were done at the Natal summit. We were at this restaurant called The Matador in Redmond. Microsoft took us there. They all went to the bathroom at the same time, so me and [Twisted Pixel CC] Josh Bear were sitting there by ourselves. We said, "We have to pitch them this puppeteering game right now, but we don't have a character yet." We're looking around, and above the bar there was this cool painting of the Old West style skeleton. I said, "Do you want to pitch that?" and he said, "Cool, let's go with that." When they came back to the table, Josh said, "So the idea we've had for a long time is this gunslinger marionette undead puppet." They totally bought into it; they thought we'd been working on it for a long time. [Laughs]

Razer Hydra

Sixense Motion Controller

Serving a need that may
not exist, Razer's Hydra
revolves Wii-like motion
controls to the PC

Razer's magnetic motion sensing technology feels more precise than a Wii remote, but the ultimate benefits of PC motion controls will be left up to game developers.

As of press time, the Hydra is compatible with 125 titles such as Amnesia, Civilization V, and Fallout 3. The Hydra also comes with a version of Portal 2 that's bundled with an extra batch of motion control-enabled DLC. These missions do a great job of showcasing the Hydra's capabilities. With motion controls, players can manipulate objects within the environment or alter the geometry in new ways. For example, you can stretch a cube into a plank and use it as a makeshift bridge, or slide portals down walls or around corners with the flick of a wrist. Unfortunately, this level of support for the Hydra's motion controls is rare.

Each of the Hydra's twin handles features an analog stick and face buttons, allowing users to play games as if they were using a standard controller. They fit comfortably into your palm, but our biggest gripe is that these controls aren't wireless – each controller is tethered to a base station. The Hydra works best in single-player campaigns, and its additional controls come in handy for switching weapons and using items in shooters like Call of Duty: Black Ops and Bulletstorm. Just don't expect to have the responsiveness necessary to compete in online multiplayer matches.

The $140 price tag makes the Hydra a steep gamble, since we can easily imagine developers abandoning support in a year or so if it doesn't catch on. The Hydra offers a different way to play your favorite games, but we doubt PC purists will readily embrace the technology unless more developers start designing their games from the ground up with motion controls in mind.

AVERAGE ■ ■ ■

$139.99
store.razerzone.com

44

1 Cyborg amBX Gaming Lights

Cyborg's PC amBX setup is an evolution of the technology that Philips has used in many of its televisions for years. These two multi-positional lights automatically set the mood lighting for all your favorite games, movies, music, and videos. Cyborg amBX has a range of 16 million colors, and we found that the lighting effects often enhanced the effect of action sequences and explosions. These high tech lighting effects may not be a game changer, but they produce some fun effects for those who are obsessed with atmosphere.

AVERAGE

$99.99
cyborggaming.com

2 Gears of War: The Board Game

Few tabletop games capture the spirit of a licensed product like the new Gears of War board game, in which up to four players team up cooperatively to bring down the Locust Horde. A smooth and fast-paced combat design keeps the action moving as waves of enemy combatants assail the heroes. It may not be powered by Unreal, but this is one entry in the Gears canon that deserves your attention.

$69.95
fantasyflightgames.com

3 Metal Gear Solid Peace Walker Play Arts Kai

When bullets and fists won't get the job done; the world's deadliest field agent organizes a walk-a-thon for peace. At least that's what we assume Peace Walker is about. Place this 10-inch figure of Snake, in full battle dress, in a variety of aerobic poses. Everyone who finishes is a winner.

$49.99
sotatoysonline.com; square-enix-shop.com

HOBO WITH A SHOTGUN

All he wanted was to make an honest living pushing a lawn-mower, but the dirtbags of Scum City pushed this vagabond into becoming a shotgun vigilante
$29.99
ca.hobowithashotgun.com

LOCKE & KEY VOLUME 4: KEYS TO THE KINGDOM BY JOE HILL & GABRIEL RODRIGUEZ

Stephen King's son tells a suspenseful tale about a family named Locke and their adventures in a house filled with dozens of magical keys. This is one of the best ongoing comics on the market
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SUPER MARIO: HOW NINTENDO CONQUERED AMERICA BY JEFF RYAN

This historical recounting of Nintendo's rise to power is filled with little-known facts and details about some of video games' most beloved franchises. A fascinating read.
$29.95
us.penguingroup.com

TRANSFORMERS VAULT

Explore the history of everyone's favorite warring robots, from cartoons and movies to toys and comics, in this exhaustive history of the franchise
$35.00
abramsbooks.com

Managing Your Mistakes:
Rethinking Failure In Video Games

by Jeff Marchiafava
Associate Editor,
Game Informer

In the early years of gaming, losing always meant the same thing. Whether it was Mario plummeting down a hole or Pac-Man getting cornered by his ghostly adversaries, your two choices for life after death were to start over or stop playing. The last 30 years have seen gaming evolve into a form that barely resembles its early days; developers have become a new breed of storyteller, their legitimacy recognized by everyone from the Smithsonian Institute to the Supreme Court. Fail to meet an objective in one of their games, however, and your options are the same as they were in the 1980s. The time has come to rethink what losing means in video games.

Despite the growing complexity of games in virtually every modern genre, botching a mission still almost always results in restarting from the last checkpoint, save file, or – in the worst case scenario – the beginning of a mission. While these systems for saving progress are still invaluable mechanisms for ensuring players aren't wasting their time in modern games, using them as a blind "do-over" opportunity simply isn't conducive to storytelling.

When was the last time you read a novel or watched a movie where the protagonist was perfect? Where, regardless of the scope or severity of the obstacle at hand, the main character navigates the twisting plot without

a misstep? The very concept contradicts the fundamentals of good storytelling, which necessitates character growth – usually attained through making mistakes and learning from them.

Not in video games, however. When players make too big of a mistake or deviate from the intended outcome of an objective, the game sweeps their performance under the rug, resetting the world to an earlier time. Players are expected to pretend their actions, along with the associated gameplay, never happened, all for the sake of the story. And yet, over the past few years we have seen video game stories that support more complexity. Morality systems

have become a new standard in gaming, where a player's path is defined by the choices he or she makes along the way, molding a more flexible story arc.

Instead of once again navigating through the gray haze of moral choice, I would much rather play a game where the shifts in the story come from my successes and failures. If I fail to protect a key character from an incoming raid, or prevent my nemesis from detonating a bomb in the city, show me the aftermath: the effect it has on the story, the environment, and my character. Make my choices and performance matter. Don't just rewind the story and give me a mulligan.

Early forays into this concept have been promising. In Heavy Rain, a deadly encounter with a creepy doctor can be skipped entirely if the player practices good judgment. Ideally, this missed gameplay would be replaced by something else, but having the ability to read a situation and make a meaningful decision makes a lasting impression on the player. Later in the game, character deaths are permanent, and significantly affect the final scenes. This level of flexibility wouldn't be right for every series – Halo wouldn't be much of a game if you replaced Master Chief in the first mission due to an ill-timed plasma grenade toss. Likewise, not every moment of gameplay should be potentially detrimental to the story. Tying key plot points to gameplay, however, would instill the player with a sense of ownership over the events.

The end of Mass Effect 2 gave us a taste of the tension that can be attained when player choice matters. Sure, the variations were caused by Choose Your Own Adventure-style decisions and not gameplay. But the loss of your crewmates – and the knowledge that it was because of your actions – made the story personal. Similarly, the potential for blowing a case in L.A. Noire may be frustrating for perfectionists, but it adds a greater sense of significance to the much-lauded interrogations.

For video game narratives to evolve, developers aren't the only ones who will have to rethink losing in a video game. Players will, too. For this storytelling approach to work, players have to be willing to make the transition from being flawless heroes to fallible human beings. If that leads to more nuanced and meaningful storytelling, however, I'm more than willing to live with my mistakes.
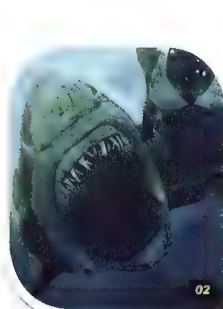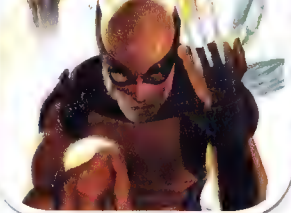
September

01 September Belongs To Gears of War
If you're in a store, chances are you're going to run into Gears of War merchandise. NECA Toys is bringing a new series of action figures to the market, as well as key chains, messenger bags, replica props, skullcaps, and wristbands. Fans should also be on the look for Gears of War 3 Heroclix.

02 The New Jaws?
Killer shark movies all end up being indistinguishable from one another. Today's release, Shark Night 3D, could be different, mainly because of the creative team. The director of The Final Destination and Snakes on a Plane and the producers of both Hostel and The Texas Chainsaw Massacre are putting a new spin on the old "stay out of the water" formula. As long as a bunch of teenagers get eaten, we'll be happy.

06 New Releases
› Dead Island (PS3, 360, PC)
› Disgaea 4: A Promise Unforgotten (PS3)
› Might & Magic Heroes VI (PC)
› Resistance 3 (PS3)
› Warhammer 40,000: Space Marine (PS3, 360, PC)

07 Universe Reboot
Starting this month, DC Comics' long-running comic universe is starting anew. Every comic book, whether it's Batman, Superman, or the Justice League, is resetting to the first issue, offering the perfect opportunity for newcomers to jump onboard. In total, DC's new universe

kicks off in 52 different books. On this same day, Marvel is introducing a new character wearing the Spider-Man outfit in Ultimate Spider-Man #1.

08 The NFL Returns
After months of legal bickering, the NFL and NFLPA ended the lockout on July 25. Players, who spent the entire offseason sunbathing at their beach homes or pursuing secondary careers as boxers, soccer players, and dancers, had less than a week to sign new contracts and get in shape for training camp. When the New Orleans Saints take on the defending Super Bowl champion Green Bay Packers tonight, we'll see which players indulged on too many Dunkin' Donuts and who took their HGH.

13 New Releases
› Bit.Trip Complete (Wii)
› Bit.Trip Saga (3DS)
› Call of Juarez: The Cartel (PC)
› Camping Mama: Outdoor Adventures (DS)
› Chuck E. Cheese's Super Collection (Wii)
› The Cursed Crusade (PS3, 360)
› Face Racers: Photo Finish (3DS)
› Gabrielle's Ghostly Groove (3DS)
› God of War: Origins Collection (PS3)
› The Gunstringer (360)
› Harvest Moon: Tale of Two Towns (3DS, DS)
› NHL 12 (PS3, 360)
› Nicktoons MLB (360, Wii, DS)
› Penguins of Madagascar:
   Dr. Blowhole Returns (PS3, 360)
› Pinball Hall of Fame: Williams Collection (3DS)
› Star Fox 64 3D (3DS)
› Supremacy MMA (PS3, 360)
› Thor: God of Thunder (3DS)
› White Knight Chronicles II (PS3)

17 Relive Gaming's Past
Every Saturday morning, the Game Informer staff hosts a show called Replay, a Mystery Science Theater-like look back at gaming's past. Each episode focuses on a specific game. As an added bonus we wrap up the show with a look at a second game, usually one that no one knew existed, or is of substandard quality. If you can't find a Saturday morning cartoon to watch, hop online and take a trip back to gaming's past with us!

20 New Releases
› Deca Sports Extreme (3DS)
› F1 2011 (PS3, 360)
› Frogger 3D (3DS)
› Gears of War 3 (360)
› Jimmie Johnson's Anything with an Engine (PS3, 360, Wii)
› Kirby: Mass Attack (DS)
› Shin Megami Tensei:
   Persona 2 Innocent Sin (PSP)
› Silent Hill Re-Mastered Collection (PS3)

21 New Mutants
In the first issue of Marvel's highly anticipated Ultimate X-Men series, writer Nick Spencer and artist Paco Medina run us into the future of mutants in a world where Professor X, Magneto, and Cyclops are dead. Who are the new X-Men? Did their mutant powers awaken or were they created in a government lab?

23 On The Fringe
J.J. Abrams' television series Fringe kicks off its fourth season today. If you haven't watched this show yet, catch up as quickly as you can. Fox

moved it into the dreaded Friday night death slot last season, and viewership plummeted. This is a fantastic show that should appeal to anyone to fans of The X-Files, Lost and The Twilight Zone. Help keep Fringe alive!

23 Statham, Owen, & De Niro
When Jason Statham signs on to a new movie, he doesn't even need to read the script. He's going to kick a lot of people, do some backflips, and fly through a window. Then he's going to beat up the bad guy, who in today's Killer Elite is Clive Owen ...with an awesome moustache. Owen kidnaps Robert De Niro, which is the only unrealistic part of the plot. Like all Statham movies except Dungeon Siege, this looks great.

27 New Releases
› Cabela's Big Game Hunter 2012 (PS3, 360, Wii)
› FIFA 12 (PS3, 360, PS2, PSP, 3DS)
› ICO and Shadow of the Colossus Collection (PS3)
› Skylanders: Spyro's Adventure (PS3, 360)
› Splinter Cell: Classic Trilogy HD (PS3)

30 Leave Hillbillies Alone
What if the crazed hillbillies in horror movies were just living their lives in their derelict cabin? And what if a bunch of teenagers thought they were crazed killers? Today's release Tucker & Dale vs. Evil answers these questions. Turns out, the kids kind of kill themselves.

BACK TO PANDORA

by *Jeff Marchiafava*

The end of the first Borderlands brought radical change to the bleak world of Pandora. Four opportunistic vault hunters released the Atlas Corporation's death grip on the dusty planet, slaughtering bandits, beasts, and an entire private military along the way. Their steadfast pursuit of a legendary treasure uncovered a mystical race of aliens, but left them empty-handed. Five years have passed since the secrets of the Eridian vault have been unleashed on the world, and a new figure has emerged from the rubble. A man named Handsome Jack has taken credit for the quartet's actions, buying the Hyperion Corporation with the spoils and rising to power with his promise to rid Pandora of its seamy underbelly. The only problem? Handsome Jack's definition of seamy includes anyone outside of the protection of his corporate umbrella, including Pandora's civilian population and our four forgotten heroes. Now a new crew will take up the cause. With the help of some old friends, they'll take down Pandora's new dictator, save the planet, and pick up a hell of a lot of loot along the way.

WELCOME BACK

For veterans of the first game, the beginning of Borderlands 2 will be a fitting reunion with the deadly world of Pandora. Thanks to some smart prospecting, Handsome Jack has amassed vast wealth and power. Like any bored dictator, his taste for entertainment has a wicked streak. He likes watching contestants fight to the death in his own personal gladiatorial arena. Players start at the bottom rung of the cruel tournament, working their way towards a familiar goal: a priceless cache of loot.

As the new contestants prove themselves in Handsome Jack's arena, the egomaniac begins to see their success as a threat to his power and popularity. He shows his true colors at the end of the tournament, denying their prize and leaving them for dead in the icy tundra. A familiar voice – Pandora's mysterious Guardian Angel – explains that you must kill Handsome Jack and save the hapless citizens from Hyperion's unrelenting industrialization of the planet. Whether the enigmatic character has ulterior motives is inconsequential, since the only motivation you need is the opportunity to claim Handsome Jack's riches for your own.

Even with an insane new arsenal at your disposal, toppling the dictator isn't going to be as easy as strolling into a ramshackle bandit town and decreasing its population. To have any hope of success, you need the help of all four of the original vault hunters. Five years is a long time on a desperate planet like Pandora, and the team has scattered to new areas of the world.

Your first order (aside from making it out of the tundra alive) is to track down the original cast.

This premise provides the opportunity for developer Gearbox Software to fix one of the biggest criticisms of the first game. "Lots of fans and critics gave us the business on the story," says Gearbox's game design director, Paul Hellquist. "When we took a look at what we had done last time, we said, 'We can do way better than that.' So story has been, from the very first day, one of the most important things that we wanted to improve in Borderlands 2."

The original Borderlands provided virtually no backstory for its four protagonists, instead defining their personalities by their appearances, play styles, and the one-liners they would spew during battle. Despite this lack of story, players still grew attached to their characters. With the sequel offering up a fresh set of playable characters and transitioning the original cast into supporting NPCs, Gearbox is seizing the opportunity to flesh out the vault hunters players are already familiar with, but still know relatively nothing about.

"One of the things that we're hoping players will enjoy is actually learning who the vault hunters were and are now," Hellquist says. "We want the players' characters to be the players. We don't want to say 'You're Sam Fisher,' or 'You're Master Chief.' You will create your Borderlands story as you play this game – who you are and what you're all about. But once we realized that we wanted to create new charac-

ters, we realized that our vault hunters are now available to us and we can start telling their stories, and what has happened since you last inhabited them."

To accomplish this, Gearbox is also improving its delivery, with numerous changes to how missions are presented and characters interact. The NPCs of the first game were not very active or talkative, serving mainly as quest dispensers. In Borderlands 2, these characters are now fully animated and inhabit their world. They move around their locations, interact with their surroundings, and respond to your actions. An early prototype Gearbox showed us involves Borderlands' opportunistic gun peddler, Marcus. Instead of being hidden away behind a counter, the portly merchant roams

around the outside of his shop, fiddling with a radio and playing a game of darts (with combat knives, naturally). When the player begins an impromptu skeet shooting session with a machine that launches explosive objects into the air, Marcus strolls up and casually mocks his performance. It was an early example, but the character was already spouting a healthy amount of one-liners as he went about his business.
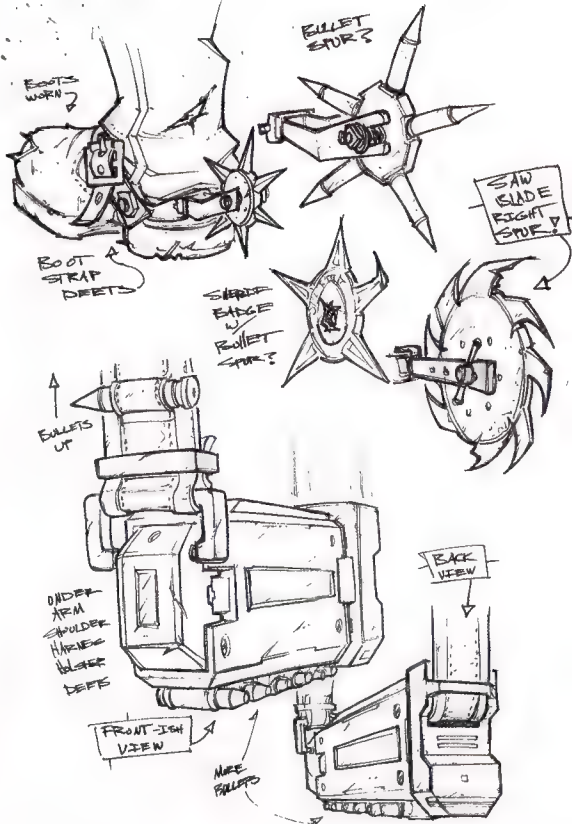
NPCs who give out missions also chat more, providing feedback on your objectives as you're carrying them out, and dialogue now supports mission briefings. Gearbox says that the goal is to tell a richer story without having to resort to cutscenes or other elements that take players out of the action. "For the people who want to just blaze through missions and get things done, all of that is still going to be possible," Hellquist says. "We don't want the story to get in the way of Borderlands. The story isn't going to lock you down and force you to listen and watch…it gives you the information while continuing your adventure."

MEET THE GUNZERKER

Gearbox demonstrated these storytelling improvements with a mission set a third of the way into the game, involving the rescue of a familiar face: Roland. The Crimson Lance member turned vault hunter has run afoul of the Bloodshot bandits, a gun-worshipping clan that's holding the soldier captive atop a gigantic dam in hopes that the Hyperion Corporation will pay a hefty ransom. Handsome Jack is not one to pay for what he wants, and instead sends in mechanical henchmen (the continued evolution of Hyperion's Claptrap project) to kidnap him. Your mission is to interrupt the attempted kidnapping, hopefully taking advantage of the chaos between the two warring factions.

This mission introduces us to one of the new playable characters of Borderlands 2, a stout, bearded man named Salvador, who serves as a fresh take on the Berserker class, the Gunzerker. One of the perks of creating new characters is the ability to introduce new skill trees (more on those later), as well as active abilities. Salvador's active ability, dual wielding, is sure to be a favorite for fans.

"We would say 'dual-wielding in Borderlands' to people, and they would say, 'Yes, please. Can I play as that guy?'" says Borderlands 2's art director Jeramy Cooke. "So we knew there was something there. We didn't know what yet, but that was the seed that got us rolling."

Activating Salvador's dual-wielding ability sends the dwarf-like gunslinger into a timed rage mode similar to Brick's Berserk mode, allowing him to shoot two weapons independently using the left and right triggers. The player's accuracy is decreased due to the inability to use iron sights in this mode, but the tradeoff is the ability to use any two guns in the game together.

"We went back and forth, thinking 'Can he only wield certain weapons?'" says concept designer Scott Kester. "But we were like, 'No, he can dual wield anything. Dual rocket launchers? Okay. Dual miniguns? Sweet.'"

Gearbox knows of the potential balancing complications that could be caused by giving players this freedom, but is willing to risk it. "In a lot of games, a skill tree is about being as balanced as possible," Cooke tells us. "And while we care about balance, if we have to sacrifice fun or overpoweredness, we're just going to let it be overpowered, because we want people to have a great time."

Before beginning the search, the player peers over the dam to reveal a mixture of grassy hills and industrial equipment. The view is composed entirely of other playable areas in the game, part of Gearbox's attempt to create a more unified world. This and later areas we saw are not only larger than the environments in the first game, but feature more detail and ambient animations as well, from smoking steam pipes to gang banners fluttering in the breeze.

After soaking in the view, Salvador makes his way down a metal stairway that overlooks a few patrolling Bloodshot bandits. Observing these enemies gives us our first look at the animation improvements in Borderlands 2, which come thanks to a state-of-the-art motion capture studio Gearbox has recently built. All of the mo-cap work in Borderlands 2 is captured in-house by 24 T-100 cameras recording at 16 megapixels. Animation producer Trey Davenport says this setup provides much smoother

BULLET SPUR?

BOOTS WORN?

SAW BLADE RIGHT STUF?

BOOT STRAP DEETS

SHERIF EDGE W/ BULLET SPUR?

BULLETS UP

BACK VIEW

UNDER ARM SHOULDER HARNES HOLSTER DEETS

FRONT-ISH VIEW

MORE BULLETS

How does a man with unlimited wealth and power express his superiority over the lowly citizens who happen to share a planet with him? By building a supply base on the moon, of course.

"Once I knew Jack was going to be this huge industrial millionaire, I knew I needed him to do something really big to Pandora that we didn't like," says Borderlands 2's art director Jeramy Cooke. "The moon is ever-present in Pandora because of the way our day and night cycle works in the game. The moon never moves and it's the source of light. So I wanted him to blot that out by putting his giant Hyperion 'H' right in front of it. I wanted players to be like, 'Damn, those jerks, they're s----ing all over my Pandora.'"

In addition to being an eyesore, the base serves a functional purpose. Robot enemies and supply crates will blast down from the satellite, destroying anything unlucky enough to be in the landing zone. Like Hyperion's iconic Claptrap, the moon base features a gigantic lens that will watch players regardless of where they travel, an omnipresent symbol of the oppression Pandora's inhabitants suffer from under Handsome Jack's reign.

and subtler animations compared to the first game. The tech upgrades also shine through in combat; as Salvador sprays a clip of bullets at the unsuspecting enemies, their reactions seem more responsive and lifelike compared to the stiff bullet sponges in the original.

Just beyond the fallen enemies, a large set of doors opens to reveal Roland being held by a Hyperion construct commander (also known as W4R-D3N), a mobile jail cell that begins floating its way through the level. Hyperion's forces have begun their attempt to kidnap Roland, and the danger caused by the Bloodshot bandits is overshadowed by a host of new mechanized adversaries rocketing down from the Hyperion moon base, the ultimate symbol of Handsome Jack's power (see sidebar).

These robots are quicker and leaner than the mech-like devastators introduced in the Secret Armory of General Knoxx DLC, and sport the AI improvements Gearbox has implemented for the sequel. Enemies can now dodge incoming fire and traverse more complex environments, which two WAR loaders demonstrate by hopping onto a stack of large metal containers in front of Salvador and firing a barrage of missiles that would make a Gundam pilot blush. Dual-wielding a new Bandit brand assault rifle (which

feature the largest magazine capacity of any manufacturer) and a Torgue assault rifle that shoots mini-rockets (called gyrojets) helps bring the robots down, but a self-destructing automaton called an EXP loader flanks Salvador and explodes. Salvador slows down another incoming EXP loader by shooting off its legs, leaving it to crawl towards the player Terminator-style before erupting in a shower of fire and sparks.

These savvier enemies may have been defeated, but they succeeded in their ultimate goal of slowing down the player while the construct commander makes off with its prisoner, and Salvador must now hurry to catch up. The sense of urgency isn't manufactured, as Borderlands 2 features dynamic, branching missions. In the Roland rescue mission, if players take too long in pursuing the captive soldier, the plot will change, requiring them to deal with their failure in a later mission. The next platoon of incoming loader bots isn't going to make rescuing the vault hunter any easier, thanks to some even more advanced tactics at their disposal.

A NEW BREED OF ENEMY

As Salvador continues the pursuit of his captured ally, another wave of enemies brings a new machine to the forefront, dubbed the surveyor. This unassuming droid floats around the level similar to the Lance probes in General Knoxx, only these new machines can do more than attack. When alone on the battlefield, surveyors deploy an energy shield that reflects incoming fire back at the player – it's up to you to decide if the collateral damage is worth taking to bring it down. If other robots are in the area, however, surveyors switch to a supporting role, repairing injured allies with its energy beam. This is not a scripted behavior: Injured enemies will actually call for repairs, denoted to the player by an icon over the wounded foe's head. Players can use the visual clue to identify and take down the enemy before the surveyor can start healing, or focus their fire on the preoccupied helper, as surveyors are incapable of deploying shields and repairing teammates at the same time. Enemy tactics like these should add a new layer of strategy to the first Borderlands' rock-paper-scissors elemental damage-based gunplay.

After taking down the last of the WAR loaders, Salvador passes a giant statue of Marcus, built by the Bloodshot bandits as an homage to their living deity – we weren't kidding when we said the deranged faction worships guns. The statue has Marcus in a seated position with half a dozen arms, each pointing an oversized firearm into the sky, and mirrors the irreverent sense of humor of the first game. No one is laughing when Salvador finally corners the construct commander, however; the floating machine spawns two badass-class WAR loaders, whose towering size dwarfs the stocky character. As Salvador enters dual-wielding mode, the pair of intimidating machines unleash a comical number of missiles and heavy weapon fire, ending our first demo in a shroud of mystery. Luckily, the Roland mission wasn't all we saw during our visit.

A second demo, requiring the player to activate a transmitter beacon in the area below the dam, shows off Borderlands 2's improved objective variety. All of the missions in the original Borderlands were static, meaning the player's list of objectives couldn't change during gameplay. This rigid structure led to a lot of fetch quests, which isn't a problem in the sequel, as evidenced by an impromptu twist in the mission. It turns out the sound that the beacon makes is similar to the mating call of a new class of monster, the gluttonous thresher. As Salvador approaches the beacon, the *Tremors*-esque land worm erupts from the ground, sending up deadly tentacles in the neighboring vicinity. Salvador takes aim at the thresher's limbs, but the worm swallows the beacon and retreats back into the soil, leaving a dirt trail above the ground as it burrows its way into the distance.

The player's objective now shifts to chasing the thresher, which smashes its way through a wall, revealing a new location (Gearbox says world discovery is a new focus as well, and uncovering new locations on the world map grants XP). The demo concludes with the thresher teaming up with some of its smaller counterparts, but it's far from the end of the mission. After recovering the beacon from the threshers, the player will bring it to a shanty town called Overlook. The dusty town is more evocative of the bandit towns of the original Borderlands, and plays home to a defense scenario which involves protecting the beacon from invading forces. All of these gameplay segments are part of one mission. "The story missions in Borderlands 2 are about three times the scope of a single story mission in the first game," Hellquist says. "And they twist and turn

throughout; your gameplay is changing, your goals are changing…it will be a much more dynamic experience compared to last time."

After walking us through the two main scenarios, Gearbox showed off a variety of other segments, each focusing on other improvements. In a snowy region of Pandora we see the Bandit Technical, a new class of vehicle. Gearbox is blunt about its design goal for four-wheeled transportation in Borderlands 2, summing it up as "vehicles that don't suck." This includes higher resolution models and textures for vehicles, the ability to powerslide, and most importantly, better collision detection. Gearbox also wants to make four seats standard in each vehicle, so that people playing with the maximum number of co-op partners don't have to leave anyone behind.

While taking the Bandit Technical for a spin, another new creature rears its ugly head: the arctic bullymong. This four-armed, ape-like creature climbs around the level's architecture with ease, and is capable of leaping great distances. Like the other enemies we saw, the bullymong also has a unique ability – it can pick up

objects in the environment and hurl them at the player. The bullymong chucked a giant chunk of ice dislodged from a nearby stalagmite, as well as a full-sized vehicle. Like the behavior of the surveyors and WAR loaders, these attacks unfold naturally as the enemy's AI actively seeks out objects in the environment and decides when to throw them.

The object-chucking antics of the arctic bullymong are later overshadowed by two other enemy AI examples focused on communication. In the first example, Salvador is swarmed by a pack of pup skags. As players of the first game know, these pint-sized beasts aren't much of a threat, even in larger groups. After quickly dispatching the weaker enemies, Salvador fights another group, along with a badass fire skag. This blazing version of the adult monster wastes no time in blowing a jet of fire across the battlefield, engulfing its miniature brethren in flames. Instead of damaging the pup skags, however, the attack works like a power-up. Like their grown-up counterpart, the flaming pup skags now sport greater offensive and defensive capabilities, in addition to being invulnerable to fire damage. The pack of pup skags ambushes Salvador, as the badass fire skag hangs in the distance. After a few tense seconds that mostly involve the player retreating, the buff wears off and the pup skags are extinguished. Without missing a beat, the lingering badass skag calls to the now-weakened enemies (indicated by another icon over its head). The pups run back in front of the adult, who lights them up for another assault.

A separate sequence reveals a new bandit class called the nomad. Nomads are slow, rotund bandits who sport large metallic shields that protect their entire bodies. Getting around this protection is challenging, but a variation on the enemy called the nomad torturer introduces a chink in the armor. The lumbering foe has a midget psycho chained to the front of his shield to soak up damage. By focusing fire on the chains, however, players can free the deranged prisoner, who will then turn on the nomad, providing an invaluable opportunity to flank the preoccupied adversary. Enemy designer Ruben Cabrera says the team is still deciding on the midget psycho's behavior after the nomad is defeated, debating whether it will attack other enemies in the area or follow the player as a temporary ally. Whatever the final decision, these enemies display more variety than those of the first Borderlands, and hinted at some exciting tactical opportunities for the player.
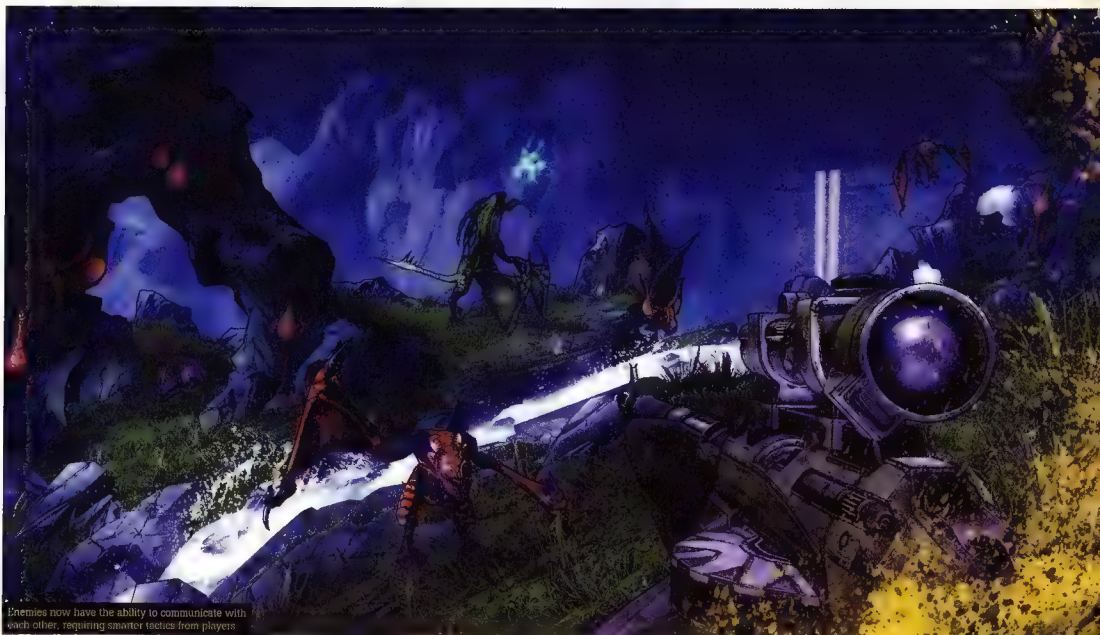
Enemies now have the ability to communicate with each other, requiring smarter tactics from players

THE SPICE OF LIFE

In the first Borderlands, Gearbox introduced features like class mods and elemental damage to change up the gunplay. For the sequel, the studio is enhancing those systems and adding extra game-changing tweaks in hopes that players will have more distinct experiences.

The largest differences stem from the class skill trees, which maintain the first game's three-branch structure, but feature more defined abilities as opposed to simple stat boosts. One of Salvador's skills makes his weapons fire increasingly faster the longer he holds down the trigger. This skill improves guns that suffer from a slow rate of fire, as well as guns with extended magazines. In addition to working with any weapon in the game, the skill also affects Salvador's dual-wielding ability. The team is creating skill trees with this kind of cross compatibility in mind, despite the potential design complications. "I'm not sure we're going to really be able to predict all the outcomes," says Cooke. "But it would be boring if there was a best build right off the bat. Hopefully players are constantly innovating and finding new and better strategies."

Gearbox is also adding a new element to the sequel. In the first game, guns could do bonus incendiary, shock, explosive, or corrosive damage, to which enemies could be particularly susceptible or resistant. The new element is called Eridium, and doesn't add any damage to the base attack value. Instead, the alien material augments other elemental damage. Again, the end goal is more tactics on the battlefield, be it one of your friends hosing down enemies in a supporting role while you blast away, or Gunzerker players pairing an Eridium-based weapon with another elemental weapon when they activate their dual-wielding ability. Layer on another skill, like one that increases Salvador's accuracy when dual-wielding weapons of the same class or doubles damage for weapons of different classes, and the possibilities multiply.

Enhancing guns isn't the only purpose Eridium serves. Because of the alien element's strange properties, it also serves as a form of super currency in Pandora. Gearbox teases that the most powerful weapons in the world can only be purchased with Eridium, which is scattered throughout the planet. Finally, Eridium is also the key ingredient in a variety of new power-ups, providing players with temporary buffs such as increased health, defense, and damage. These power-ups are designed to be used immediately on the battlefield, and are available to enemies as well; trigger-happy players will even be able to shoot or grab these items off of adversaries before they can use them.

Class mods and artifacts are also making a return, and being changed with gameplay in mind. Without going into specifics, Gearbox says that class mods are aimed at introducing more tweaks to subclasses by allowing players to activate more skills in their skill trees, while artifacts now act as a catch-all for any idea that didn't fit into the other systems. "Our goal with the artifacts this time around is every time one drops, you say, 'I can't wait to see what this one is going to do,'" Hellquist says. "We basically have no rules for what it can affect." Possible artifact ideas include a percentage chance that shots don't cost ammo, increased afterburner length in vehicles, and an aura of healing around the player.

WHERE'S CLAPTRAP?

Despite all of the gameplay, environments, and characters that Gearbox showed us during our studio visit, Borderlands' iconic mascot was nowhere to be seen. Luckily, Gearbox's game design director Paul Hellquist assured us that the comedic automaton will be back for the sequel, and that the studio has big plans for the little robot.

"So where is Claptrap now? Well, he tried his uprising [in the Claptrap's New Robot Revolution DLC], he tried to stop Hyperion… and the vault hunters crushed him. But Claptrap's view of the world is a bit different than everybody else's…his [view] of what happened is that it's not Roland's fault or Lilith's fault. It's those bastards at Hyperion. So his point of view on the world is a totally skewed view of what's actually happening. Hyperion is the villain for you, Hyperion is the villain for Claptrap. How Claptrap deals with Hyperion is very different than the way that you're going to deal with Hyperion, and you're going to have lots of interactions with him to see how he's dealing with things."

Many of Salvador's skills will also apply to his dual-wielding ability, doubling their potency

LET THERE BE GUNS

Borderlands 2 touts a significant number of exciting improvements that introduce more variety to Pandora. But what do you do for a feature that already has an overwhelming abundance of variety?

"[With Borderlands] we made a game with millions of guns, and for the sequel we decided to throw them all away and start over again," Hellquist says. "We weren't content to just add a few little bits to what we had before; we want to really bring it to a new level."

One of the major initiatives for the gun system in Borderlands 2 is to give each firearm manufacturer its own sense of identity. Few gamers realized that manufacturers had unique characteristics in the first game buried in the stats of each weapon. For instance, Jakobs guns featured higher damage but slow firing rates, while Hyperion weapons featured greater recoil reduction and accuracy. For the sequel, each gun manufacturer has a theme that includes stat changes like these along with a unique visual style. The goal is for players to be able

to instantly identify a gun's manufacturer, and its quality, simply by looking at it. For example, Vladoff weapons feature the highest rates of fire, and as such you'll see spinning barrels on Vladoff assault rifles, submachine guns, and rocket launchers.

Other manufacturer themes have more direct gameplay implications. Tediore guns are the disposable razor of Pandora's weapon industry. Rather than reloading a Tediore gun, the player throws the firearm onto the battlefield, where it explodes like a grenade. A handheld digistruct (the same in-game tech used for spawning vehicles) will then create a new copy of the gun with the next magazine loaded in the player's hand. As absurd as the premise is, it presents an interesting twist to gunplay: Throwing a gun early will cost you its remaining ammo, but will result in a larger explosion.

In addition to more definitive themes for each of the guns, Gearbox is vastly improving the visuals for weapons, including a new

material system that supports reflective patterns, improved textures, highlighting, shadows, and transparency effects. These additions also relay a gun's quality. Gearbox showed us an example of a wooden Jakobs rifle that looked dirty and scuffed, then compared it to a shiny gold-plated version.

Gearbox is also drastically upping the number of unique guns in the world, which can now feature custom decals and enhancements. For example, a gun belonging to Nine Toes may have his missing digit taped onto the weapon as an ornamental keepsake. Other accessories will even feature new firing modes.

Despite not being final designs, the weapons we saw already suggested Gearbox is on the right track to meet its goals. Vladoff assault rifles have a distinct AK-47 look, while Dahl rifles sport a military design that would fit right into a Modern Warfare title. For players who got tired of the sameness of weapons late in the first game, the increased variety of Borderlands 2 should hopefully keep them eager for finding the next treasure chest.

FRIENDS WITH BENEFITS

Borderlands' four-player co-op turned out to be just as important of a selling point as its

Gearbox is putting a lot of effort into improving how vehicles handle, and all rides will now accommodate four passengers

distinctive art style and massive arsenal. The first title was praised for its smooth drop-in/drop-out support and pervasive leveling and loot systems, which will provide a solid foundation for Borderlands 2's multiplayer. While Gearbox wasn't ready to talk about specific changes to multiplayer, the developer said it plans to fix some of the nagging problems of the original, including the cumbersome split-screen support, and certain missions being ineligible for players depending on their level or place in the story. Gearbox also stated that character dialogue will now be more responsive – instead of characters spouting off one-liners that are completely disconnected to other players, there will be more back and forth, similar to the characters in Left 4 Dead or Dragon Age. As for more significant additions, Gearbox is keeping its grand multiplayer schemes under wraps for now.

Though still early in development, Borderlands 2 is full of exciting possibilities. Rather than just throwing a few million more guns at the player, Gearbox is tackling all of the shortcomings of the first game and dreaming up creative ways to improve upon its strengths. Pandora is no longer a bleak and static dustbowl, but a massive world of varied terrain and settings. Enemies have evolved from stumbling bullet sponges to responsive and clever adversaries. The vast but repetitive arsenal is becoming more powerful and distinctive. Whether Gearbox's attempt at crafting a more robust plot will succeed in drawing in story-focused gamers is unknown, but for now we've already seen plenty of reasons to look forward to next year's return trip to Pandora. ✧

Go to gameinformer.com/borderlands throughout the month for in-depth features on Borderlands 2, including more information on the Gunzerker class and skill tree, video interviews with Randy Pitchford and other Gearbox studio members, exclusive concept art, and much more

The
Future of

With no sure-fire hits in its lineup, the 3DS launch library didn't inspire Nintendo fans to bash down the doors of their local retailers this past March. The tepid sales that have continued since were only partially mitigated by a few quality titles like Super Street Fighter IV: 3D Edition and The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time 3D. The good news? Better games are coming. Nintendo has pulled its primary development focus away from Wii and DS and aimed it squarely at 3DS, and third parties have joined the cause with several enticing projects. Read on for a look at some of the hottest upcoming games that could help turn things around for Nintendo's latest portable. by Bryan Vore

3DS

Frogger 3D

Frogger adopts a new 3D isometric view that feels classic, yet updated at the same time. Players start out in the traditional cityscape and hop around maps to land on different goals. Achievements and collectible coins satiate those shooting for high scores, and the Forever Crossing mode allows players to see who can make it the longest distance in the old-school arcade game.
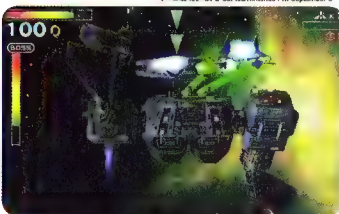
Star Fox 64 3D

The Nintendo 64 classic returns, following in the footsteps of The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time 3D. While classic steering is still available, a new gyroscope mode allows players to maneuver the Arwing by rotating the 3DS system. Four-player versus battles provide a live feed of your rivals' faces using the internal facing camera. This feature is local-only, but download play means only one person needs to own the cart.
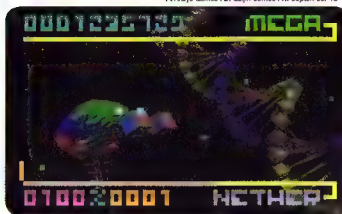
Bit.Trip Saga

All six acclaimed Bit.Trip games finally become available in one convenient package, appearing at retail for the first time. The pixelated visuals and chiptune soundtrack may look old school, but the gameplay is completely fresh. Series hero Commander Video shares the spotlight with cameos from other indie heroes like Super Meat Boy and Mr. Robotube.

Doctor Lautrec and the Forgotten Knights

Doctor Jean-Pierre Lautrec may remind gamers of a certain puzzle-solving professor, but isometric, third-person exploration and Pokémon-style battles help set him apart. The impressive animation makes the cutscenes shine, but the challenge and uniqueness of the puzzles will make or break the good doctor.

James Noir's Hollywood Crimes

L.A. Noire meets Professor Layton in Ubisoft's murder mystery puzzler set in '60s Hollywood. Players take on the role of a puzzle expert appearing on a popular TV game show. You're also helping the F.B.I. track down a devious killer who's slaying former contestants. Over 150 puzzles are included to test your mettle, and adaptive difficulty should hopefully keep things tough enough without causing you to pull out your hair.

2D image of Nintendo 3DS game

Tetris

Hudson Soft is back for a third time after the two Tetris Party entries on WiiWare and DSiWare. The company is pulling out all the stops for this 3DS retail release, with over 20 different variations on the puzzle classic. Traditional marathon mode is there, but you can also play a one-minute speed run, a Tetris-meets-Picross mash-up, a jigsaw puzzle variant, augmented reality Tetris, and much more.
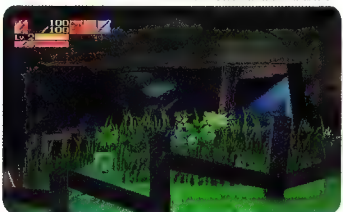
Cave Story 3D

Over the years, Cave Story has risen from a beloved freeware game to a critical darling on WiiWare and DSiWare. Now the pixelated Metroid-esque title is making the jump to polygons with expanded stages, more hidden items, and a remastered soundtrack. The game was originally supposed to come out in the summer, but has been pushed back to November 8. If you can't wait that long, download the classic version on the Nintendo eShop.
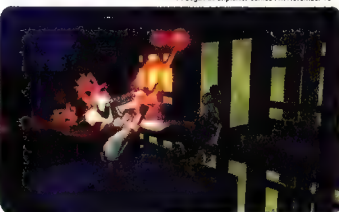
Shinobi

Get ready for classic 2D ninja action platforming this November with an all-new entry in the Shinobi franchise. Players take the role of Jiro Musashi, father of classic hero Joe, as he unleashes melee attacks, projectiles, and ninja magic. The biggest change to the Shinobi formula is a new parry on the right shoulder button that blocks enemy attacks if you time it just right.

P: Nintendo | **D:** Nintendo

Super Mario 3DS

Since the 3DS lineup is so full of remakes, having a brand new Mario game on the horizon certainly excites. Developed by the Galaxy team, the game returns Mario to the third dimension, but it contains classic side-scrolling elements like the Tanooki suit and jumping on flagpoles to complete a stage.

P: Namco Bandai | **D:** Namco Bandai
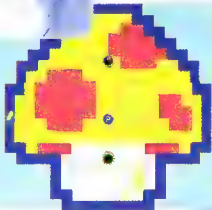
Ace Combat 3D

Namco Bandai's flight series is headed to 3DS with surprisingly spiffy graphics. We're hoping that the addition of 3D doesn't induce players to reach for the barf bag, but touchscreen targeting sounds like a welcome addition.

P: Nintendo | **D:** Nintendo

Mario Kart 3DS

It wouldn't be a Nintendo system without a Mario Kart game. This time around the dev team is focusing on kart customization – both cosmetically and functionally. For example, different tires work better on different surfaces. Hang gliding and underwater sequences also add some much-needed variety to the races. Both online and local multiplayer are confirmed.
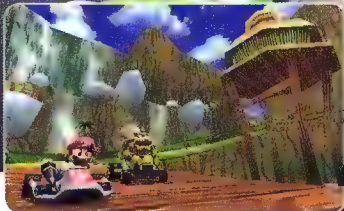
Kid Icarus: Uprising

The Kid returns after a couple decades off as a third-person shooter akin to Sin & Punishment and Panzer Dragoon. Smash Bros. developer Project Sora is on the case, which may account for the cutscenes with full voice acting (a rarity for Nintendo titles).

Metal Gear Solid 3D Snake Eater

Big Boss' jungle adventure is getting the 3DS remake treatment as well. Hands-on time at E3 showed that the missing buttons from the PS2 version makes the controls more complicated (especially the lack of a right analog stick). However, producer Yoshikazu Matsuhana recently stated that the free-roaming camera from MGS 4 and Peace Walker is being implemented to smooth things out.
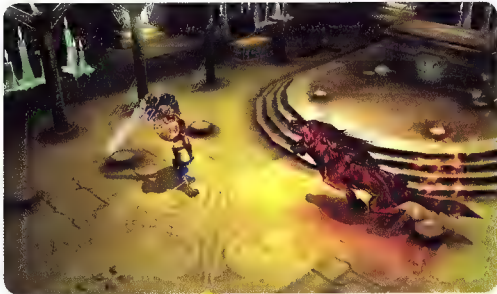
P: Namco Bandai | **D:** Namco Bandai

Tales of the Abyss

This remake of Namco Bandai's 2006 PlayStation 2 entry in the long-running Tales franchise provides a boost to the new handheld's JRPG quotient. The North American release is currently targeted at early 2012.
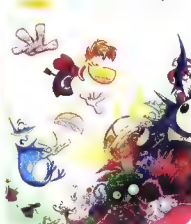
Heroes of Ruin

Square Enix's strong support for handhelds comes forward with a new concept rather than another Final Fantasy remake. Players choose from four classes ranging from Gunslinger to Alchitect (read: mage) to take on quests in this action/RPG solo or with a team of up to four online. You can even chat with the 3DS mic! Expect it in early 2012.

Rayman Origins

Ubisoft's gorgeous platformer is making an appearance on 3Ds in addition to the PS3, 360, Wii, and PS Vita. While the home console versions hit this November, the portable games won't release until early 2012.

LEGO City Stories

LEGO City Stories made a big splash as one of a handful of Wii U-exclusive game announcements at Nintendo's E3 2011 press conference, but this open world game starring everyone's favorite toy building blocks is headed to 3DS as well.

Mario & Sonic at the London 2012 Olympic Games

Sure, these minigame collections aren't our favorite, but they're more entertaining than traditional Olympic games – and they sell like hotcakes. This batch of summer activities includes soccer, equestrian challenges, swimming, table tennis, and more.

Resident Evil: Revelations

Resident Evil: The Mercenaries 3D provided a nice arcade sidestep for the franchise, but Revelations has fans excited for more traditional single-player scares and puzzles. Most of the game takes place on a ship that Jill Valentine believes to be Chris Redfield's last known location. Resident Evil's stop-and-shoot controls fit well with 3DS' single analog stick since you don't have to mess with the camera or dual stick aiming.

Luigi's Mansion 2

This unlikely sequel to the GameCube launch title was probably the biggest software surprise of Nintendo's 3DS E3 lineup. Luigi once again meekly takes the starring role to vacuum up ghosts in the spookiest mansions he can find.

Contra

Konami promised a 3DS Contra game when the system was announced, but we haven't heard much since. During the company's pre-E3 press conference it debuted a teaser trailer for a Contra game with a flaming "C" and the phrase "They're Coming" underneath, but it's unclear if this was tied to the 3DS game or a wider Contra initiative.

Paper Mario

Paper Mario was announced back at E3 2010, but there wasn't much more this year outside of a new trailer to show the action/platformer/RPG is still rolling forward. No release date has been announced yet.

Animal Crossing

As it did for every other Nintendo platform, Animal Crossing is coming to 3DS. Not much has been revealed, but the trailer indicates it has all the house decorating and butterfly catching a fan could want.

Tekken

Namco Bandai only showed off a tech demo of the 3DS Tekken at E3 2011, but that at least showed how nice the fighters will look when this title debuts in the future.

Kingdom Hearts 3D: Dream Drop Distance

Unlike Kingdom Hearts: Birth By Sleep and 358/2 Days, 3D takes place after Kingdom Hearts II and Re:coded. Finally, the story is moving forward! Expect slick graphics on par with BBS, battle system improvements, and jumping back and forth between playable Sora and Riku.

Professor Layton vs. Ace Attorney

This amazing collaboration was announced last October, but we haven't heard much about the project since. Layton, Luke, Phoenix, and Maya battle it out in some kind of witch trial, though we're sure the two sides join up by the end to take down some larger evil. So far the game has only been announced for Japan, but we'd be very surprised if this meeting of the adventure game titans didn't make its way westward.

Professor Layton and the Mask of Miracle

The good professor is a busy guy these days. This fifth game in the series came out for the 3DS in Japan this past February. While it hasn't been confirmed for the U.S., Nintendo of America is publishing Professor Layton and the Last Specter (the fourth game) on DS this fall, so we're hoping Mask of Miracle isn't far behind. These two games form part of a prequel trilogy that's set before the previous three entries.

🏛 HIGH PROFILE CANCELATIONS

Mega Man Legends 3
Capcom recently announced that the long-awaited 3D entry in the Mega Man Legends franchise is canceled. A prototype version of the game that was supposed to be downloadable through the Nintendo eShop has been canned as well. Capcom denies that this and the cancelation of Mega Man Universe earlier this year are related to the departure of Mega Man creator Keiji Inafune from the company.

Assassin's Creed: Lost Legacy
In an interview with Joystiq, Assassin's Creed Revelations lead writer Darby McDevitt explained that the concept behind this planned 3DS game (announced at E3 2010) "morphed" into ACR.
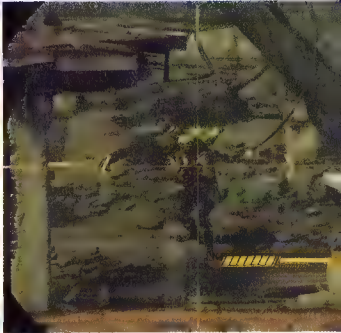
Resistance 3

Escape from St. Louis

Our cover story for Resistance 3 concluded with protagonist Joseph Capelli and Dr. Malikov's boat coming under attack by a massive Goliath just as they reach St. Louis. The home of the Gateway Arch is infested with Chimera, the alien menace that has wiped out the majority of humanity. Insomniac recently showed us the next development in the story, revealing what happens to the duo after they pull themselves from the wrecked vessel. Armed with a vaccine for the Chimera virus, Capelli and Malikov continue their journey to New York. The Big Apple is home to a tremendous Chimera

wormhole, linking our world to the unknown, and the vaccine must be used to stop it all.

Malikov, the creator of the vaccine, has been badly wounded, and Capelli leads him through a destroyed St. Louis. Capelli finds a zipline – evidence of the resourceful survivors calling themselves the Remnants – and uses it to access an out-of-reach area. He finds the Atomizer within, a weapon that looks like it's from Tesla's lab. Capelli uses the electrical device to fry waves of scorpion-like Leapers. Launching the Atomizer's secondary fire creates a swirling vortex that sucks foes into a perpetual spin-cycle.

Emerging on a rooftop, Capelli spots a group of Remnants in the distance repairing a VTOL aircraft. Chimera dropships descend and pollute the area with ground forces, and Capelli drops a few infantry with a sniper rifle before sliding down a zipline to fight from the ground. He reaches for the Atomizer, fires an incapacitating vortex near a cluster of enemies, then pulls out his shotgun for some target practice with his new incendiary upgrade (see sidebar).

A lull in the battle presents Capelli with an opportunity to introduce himself to the Remnants, but the meeting is cut short after a

Evolving Weaponry

Weapons increase in power the more you use them in Resistance 3, with a total of two enhancements for each (including multiplayer). Insomniac wants you to take advantage of the returning weapon wheel and juggling guns means you'll have most of your arsenal upgraded by the end of the game. Completing the campaign gains they didn't fully upgrade into a new playthrough. The following weapon descriptions straight from Insomniac give you an idea what to expect.

Bullseye

Primary fire: Customized Chimeran energy machine gun

Secondary fire: Embeds a tag into enemy, which automatically directs all primary fire towards it

Upgrade 1: Exploding Rounds – Primary fire is enhanced with increased damage and explosion on contact, which harms nearby enemies

Upgrade 2: Triple Tags – The secondary tag shot now explodes on contact, splintering into a dozen individual shards which can attach to three enemies

Magnum

Primary fire: Shoots armed rounds that lodge into enemies

Secondary fire: Detonates any magnum rounds in enemies or environment

Upgrade 1: Supercharged Rounds – Bullets are more deadly on impact, and secondary fire explosions become more powerful the longer you wait to detonate them

Upgrade 2: Overkill – Armed bullets explode on contact, splitting into smaller charges, which are detonated for a colossal explosion

Rossmore Shotgun

Primary fire: Powerful buckshot

Secondary fire: Concussion grenade that knocks back nearby enemies

Upgrade 1: Combustion Rounds – Fire-enhanced shells set enemies ablaze

Upgrade 2: Arsonist Grenades – Secondary fire lobs incendiary grenade, which immolate huge groups of enemies

The Atomizer is a deadly, efficient weapon

dropship unleashes a seemingly infinite number of Chimera. Capelli and the Remnants retreat to a nearby building, sealing the doors against the oncoming assault. The survivors take pot shots and lob grenades through the boarded windows, trying to ward off the invaders. A few enemies break through the doors, but the capable Remnants make short work of them.

With the immediate threat subdued, Capelli asks the St. Louis survivors if they can mend the injured Malikov. The ragtag group decides that their leader, Charlie, may be able to help. The Remnants lead the duo to the remains of a car. "Exit" is written across the hood – when opened, it reveals an underground tunnel network.

The path leads to a lobby of an old office building. Stairs descend to an open space below, and pillars frame the entire room. Out of nowhere, a gorilla-like Brawler smashes into the room on a rampage. One Chimeran fighter shouts at Capelli to aim for the spots on the Brawler glowing red with energy. The beast reels in pain as the weak points are surgically destroyed, crashing through columns in its death

throes and destroying the room.

The group members dust themselves off and continue toward Charlie's location. As they draw closer, Capelli overhears that Charlie bluffed his way into becoming the Remnants' leader, claiming to be a high-ranking military official. When Capelli finally meets up with Charlie, the man's self-preserving personality is immediately apparent. He's willing to offer Malikov penicillin to fight his wounds' infections, but for a price. Capelli must help the Remnants retrieve a power cell from the Chimera to get the busted VTOL back in the air.

Left with no choice, Capelli joins Charlie in a battle to secure the precious power source. The two fight through the dense ruins of St. Louis, fending off a huge arachnid Windowmaker in the process. The struggle to escape St. Louis looks to be a harrowing one, but gamers have to wait until Resistance 3's imminent release to continue the journey. » **Tim Turi**

Check gameinformer.com to watch us play through the first 30 minutes of Resistance 3 with Insomniac

A Sneak Peek At Resistance 3's Multiplayer Beta

I spent a night in Insomniac's private Resistance 3 multiplayer beta, kicking ass as both the human resistance and Chimera in the 16-player matches. I leveled up as my kill count swelled, and I unlocked the ability to customize my loadout and upgrade specific weapons. Investing in the Bullseye's exploding rounds upgrade not only raised my kill count, but also gave me a sense of ownership over the weapon. Players can buy new perks like a dummy doppelganger, or unlock passive abilities like starting with two weapons instead of one.

In a train yard map set in Colombia, I checked out the new Chain Reaction mode. Several Chimeran wormhole devices are scattered around the map which are points of contention for humans and aliens. This conquest-type mode results in clustered, frantic battles around the wormhole machines. Tossing a hedgehog grenade just as an enemy launches a bubble shield causes the trapped spiky bomb to shred everyone inside, which is one example of the sadistic fun I enjoyed.

Long, covered bridges connect two sides of another map set on a seaside village in Wales. The map's symmetry makes it perfect for Team Deathmatch. Beautiful rolling hills populate the background in contrast to the carnage. Numerous bombed-out buildings litter the battlefield, providing quick cover if you take fire while traversing the map. Snipers will love taking advantage of demolished walls or the bridges' roofs to discover inventive lines of sight.

XCOM

Classic strategy title reborn as epic shooter

The classic strategy title X-COM is returning to video games, but not as you might expect. In addition to losing the hyphen from the title, the new XCOM is actually a first-person shooter created by 2K Marin, the studio that spearheaded the development of the divisive BioShock 2.

Rebooting a franchise is a tricky proposition – especially one that veers so far from the original as this. In XCOM, 2K Marin hopes to create a shooter that appeals to contemporary gamers while maintaining the overall atmosphere and strategic gameplay of the original.

The game casts the player as William Carter, a special agent tasked with recruiting the original XCOM force in 1962 to battle an alien attack on Earth. In this way, XCOM functions as a prequel of sorts to the original. Managing your force is key to survival against the aliens. You can upgrade your team of agents much like a party in an RPG; agents earn experience points in missions that allow you to upgrade certain skills and evolve them up a number of skill trees including combat, tech, etc. Players handle these tasks from XCOM headquarters, which serves as a central hub where you choose missions, research tech, and manage your war efforts.

Having a good balance in your team is crucial, as the gameplay also attempts to add a bit of strategy depth to the familiar shooter template. Squad orders can be issued in real time or during a slow-motion in-battle screen. This view of the game allows you survey the battle and plan your squad's movements at a more deliberate pace. It's very similar to the mechanic used by BioWare in games like Jade Empire and Dragon Age. The developer hopes that these nods towards the strategy lineage of XCOM will help satisfy

old-school fans while providing newbies all the action they require.

Another novel aspect that carries over is the ability to both use and research alien weapon technology. The invaders' armaments are impressive; the giant geometric shapes assemble themselves in cool animation sequences before dispensing deadly attacks. If you're not too awed by their grandeur, you can take control of alien weapons and shields, but it comes with a price. If you use them in battle, you won't be able to take them back to your headquarters to research, which will impede your technological progress. On one hand, this balancing act forces

the player to make substantial decisions on the battlefield. On the other, it deprives players who want to place an emphasis on R&D of the joy of using enemy weapons. It seems odd that you don't have the more logical option of using enemy weapons in battle, then studying their design later back at the lab.

Still, we applaud any developer that is willing to think outside of the box in the shooter genre. With the X-COM franchise's rich history to draw upon, and a unique design that seeks to blend strategic and action gameplay, 2K Marin is creating a title that has us very curious.
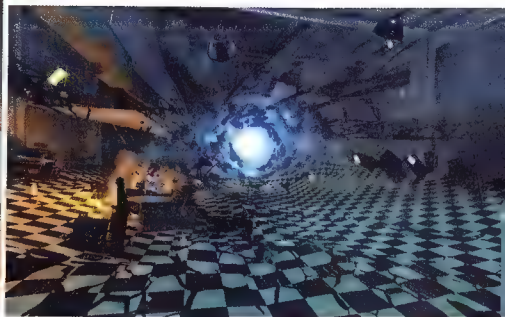**Matt Helgeson**

Operations

Your headquarters acts as a hub where you can research new-tech and accept missions

Agent Selection

The squad mechanics add tactical depth to the shooter action

Dragon's Crown

Vanilaware resurrects the fantasy brawler

Even if you don't know Vanillaware by name, you may recognize its distinctive art direction from titles like Odin Sphere and Muramasa. Now the developer's stylish hand-drawn 2D sprites are making their way to PlayStation 3 and Vita with Dragon's Crown, a co-op adventure in the tradition of side-scrolling arcade brawlers.

Tapping into the vibe of classics like Sega's Golden Axe and Capcom's Dungeon & Dragons titles, Dragon's Crown has players teaming up to explore dungeons and kill monsters. Unlike similar games that are separated by stage, Dragon's Crown has a quest structure that repeatedly sends players into dangerous locations to accomplish feats like obtaining a certain item or defeating a powerful foe. Choosing from classes like fighter, amazon, and wizard, four players can band together and undertake these missions to gather loot and level up.

Dragon's Crown has six classes, but players aren't forced to select different roles. If you want to play in a group of four amazon warriors, go ahead. However, remember that each class also has special skills along with strengths and weakness, so creating a balanced party is a key part of your success. Two NPC classes – thief and fairy – also play roles in the action, but Vanillaware hasn't revealed the full details on these allies yet.

Since your character's power is heavily dependent on items and weapons, players of varying levels can still play together. Similar to games like Borderlands, a large level gap means you can't defeat the toughest monsters, but you can complete quests as a team, and the lower-level character will probably get some better gear in the process. If you get in over your head, you may even be able to flee; high-level boss encounters have escape routes built in, just in case you accidentally wake up a slumbering dragon before you're able to put up a fight.

Dragon's Crown is coming to both PlayStation 3 and Vita, but the best news is that it supports cross-platform play, meaning that you can team up with anyone regardless of which version they are playing. Gamers who own both systems can transfer save data between them, though this may require purchasing two versions of the game. While that may be too much of an investment for some, the gorgeous art and co-op gameplay should be enough to make gamers consider purchasing Dragon's Crown at least once. **Joe Juba**

The [...] & [...] [...] the [...]
(or his hair, at least) Players can also choose dwarf and sorceress.

You can play solo or team up for four-player co-op

Fans of Odin Sphere and Muramasa will recognize Dragon's Crown's distinctive art style

NBA 2K12

The lack of competition and a league lockout won't keep NBA 2K12 off the court

Platform
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360

» **Style**
1 to 4-Player Sports
(10-Player Online)

» **Publisher**
2K Sports

» **Developer**
Visual Concepts

» **Release**
October 4

In a stunningly realized reflection of its legendary cover athlete, Michael Jordan, the NBA 2K series soared to new heights last year, earning 14 sports game of the year awards, appearing in the NPD top 10 sales charts for nine straight months, and racking up over five million sales. Looking to build further on its well-deserved success, developer Visual Concepts isn't going to let a league-wide lockout or lack of competition from EA get in the way of its pursuit of greatness.

Critics widely praised NBA 2K11's core gameplay, but that didn't stop the dev team from going back to the drawing board. Last year's new branching animation system helped players feel like they had more control of their actions, but it didn't always feel natural or fluid. Collisions especially weren't always believable, so Visual

Concepts is adding a new physics system that takes player size, speed, and direction of movement into consideration. Don't expect to see a pint-sized guard like Steve Nash barrel over a hulking big man like Dwight Howard when driving the lane anymore. The team has also rebalanced the post game and developed a new play system that accounts for primary, secondary, and tertiary passing options based on what the defense gives you.

The changes I'm most excited about are coming on the oft-overlooked defensive side of the court. Visual Concepts has removed the magnetic guarding assist that occasionally drew me out of position when trying to rotate off the ball and added an element of physicality to on-the-ball defense. Now if a strong defender like Chauncey Billups is guarding a less-talented ball handler like Sebastian Telfair, he can use his superior size to smother the guard and force him into making mistakes. This should help create more realistic steal scenarios.

The help defense is also being tweaked. Defenses do a better job of anticipating plays like the pick and roll, bring help from the backside more readily when star players are in isolation, and better execute zone schemes. Visual Concepts is also surfacing some defensive commands formerly buried in menus so players can assign double-teams and change individual pressure settings for opposing players on the fly.

The NBA 2K series has always prided itself on presentation, and judging from our first look at 2K12 it's still head and shoulders above most sports games. The first live demo, which featured the Dallas Mavericks and Miami Heat, demonstrated the new level of polish Visual Concepts is bringing to the NBA Finals presentation. Just like the broadcasts on television, NBA 2K12 has unique playoff packages that speak to the magnitude of the occasion. A montage of highlights featuring the star players kicks off the

Game Four festivities, and player introductions break down each positional matchup with full 3D player models. You can feel the playoff intensity spill out from the rowdy crowd, with Dallas fans in full blue-out mode and cheerleaders pumping up the enthusiasm before tip-off. The situational commentating also looks to be improved. During pre-game analysis, announcers Clark Kellogg, Kevin Harlan, and new addition Steve Kerr discussed the series' history and broke down the keys to the game at hand.

These gameplay and presentation changes sound promising, but if Visual Concepts wants to top its effort from last year the team must focus on NBA 2K11's most glaring weaknesses – the laborious My Player mode, and the lack of a competitive online infrastructure. Look for information on how it plans to alter its approach in the coming months. » **Matt Bertz**

A Legendary Trio

One of NBA 2K11's most talked about features was the Jordan Challenge mode, which allowed players to relive basketball history by playing the games that defined the career of NBA legend NBA 2K11 cover athlete Michael Jordan. With the wild success of last year's game and the labor dispute hanging over the league, 2K Sports decided to leverage Jordan's marketing power for back-to-back covers but this time he's bringing along some friends. NBA 2K12 features three distinct covers depicting arguably the three most influential players of the modern era – His Airness, Magic Johnson, and Larry Bird. Though Visual Concepts wasn't ready to talk about whether these players would star in a historical mode like the Jordan Challenge, we can't imagine a scenario where the studio wouldn't leverage their participation in a manner worthy of their stature. Look for an announcement on how the developer plans to capitalize on these players' involvement in the coming months.

NHL 12

Playing at full strength, NHL 12 backchecks to clean up its shortcomings

The addition of retired jerseys this year guarantees you won't see grinders skating with a #99 jersey in Edmonton

Given the short development time for yearly sports titles, studios frequently choose to use their limited resources to make a major leap forward in one area of the game rather than spreading a host of minor innovations across the gameplay and various game modes. Thanks to a strong foundation provided by its earlier entries, EA Canada has the luxury of taking the latter approach with NHL 12. No mode is being ignored this year.

The primary area in need of a renovation is the popular Be A Pro mode, which has received minimal treatment over the last few years. One of the most glaring faults was the predictably worthless teammate AI on offense, which preferred to stay along the perimeter rather than offer puck support or move into scoring position. Thanks to the new Signature Traits system, which makes AI players react and anticipate like their real-world counterparts, the developers are confident that your teammates are now smart enough to contribute instead of letting you do all the work. Snipers will snipe, passers will pass, and power forwards will clog up traffic and provide screens in front of the net.

The new 18-level progression system also provides better opportunities to boost your skills. Instead of simply earning XP based on your game stats, you can rack up bonus XP by completing tasks assigned by the coach before each game and during key situations. These objectives can vary from scoring a game-tying goal in a key situation to shutting down an opposing team's red-hot power play. The bonus XP will go a long way towards hastening your development. If you'd rather take the slow approach, you can start your career at the age of 15 in the CHL and work your way through major juniors and earn your first NHL contract.

As you progress through your career, every other level unlocks a new legend like Wayne Gretzky and Ray Bourque for use in any of the offline game modes. A total of nine legends are available, and if you can accomplish Legend Tasks (like breaking Gretzky's single-season goal record) with your created player, a video starring The Great One will unlock where he talks about the historic feats.

If you prefer to manage a full team in the Be A GM mode rather than strive for individual glory, you also have improvements to look forward to. The mode took a step forward last year with the introduction of the CHL license and a revamped free agency system, but many decried its broken trade logic that rejected sensible deals and proposed offensive, one-sided offers. This year EA Canada reworked the trade logic so it better distinguishes the value of superstars like Steven Stamkos, future prospects, and career fourth liners. The rebuilt sim engine should also yield more realistic results when simming through the seasons and fix the broken award logic that always gave the Conn Smythe trophy to goaltenders last year.

The EASHL online league boasts an array of oft-requested upgrades as well. The new 18-level progression system allows your player to improve more incrementally (last year there were only five levels). No more playing defense with a player tailored to score goals down low, either. You can save unique skill loadouts for center, left wing, right wing, and defense so you're ready to play in any situation. In addition to the monthly team champion banners introduced last year, in NHL 12 the top five percent of all players at each position will receive monthly All-Star accolades as well.

This laundry list of improvements guarantees that no matter which mode you prefer to play, you can look forward to some exciting changes when the puck drops this September. » Matt Bertz

Building The Next Ultimate Team

Hockey fans created over 120,000 teams in NHL 11's Hockey Ultimate Team mode last year. To lure players back into in NHL 12, EA Canada is introducing a host of fan requested improvements. The two most popular are likely to be a new matchmaking option that allows you to take on friends more easily and the addition of a new card type that lets you change the position of a player to boost your line chemistry.

Many users played offline games last year, which didn't pit them against the crazy custom teams players were creating online. With EA's new HUT 24/7 feature, NHL 12 will automatically download an array of user-created opponents daily from the servers so you have more variety to your matchups

Guild Wars 2
The future of MMOs begins here

In my first-ever hands-on time with Guild Wars 2, I create a Charr Warrior. Choosing the character's race and class is pretty basic stuff, but that's not all I learn about my character. Despite his monstrous appearance, he can talk his way through any situation. I discover which clan of Charr he belonged to and what that meant to him. I know who his best friend was. I even learn the tragic story of his parents, a bit of family drama waiting to be resolved.

In Guild Wars 2, character creation is about a whole lot more than just looks. After getting through the same class, race, and visual basic customizations similar to virtually every MMO out there, Guild Wars 2 surprises me with a series of multiple-choice questions. An NCsoft representative explains that the questions help determine aspects of your starting storyline and how NPCs react to you. As your character's personal story progresses, special NPCs ask new biography questions that further set your story apart from other players.

Think of it this way: With Star Wars: The Old Republic, BioWare says that each of the eight classes has a unique storyline that will play out over several hundred hours of MMO gameplay. With Guild Wars 2, ArenaNet claims there are 15 unique starting storylines that continue branching, eventually spinning out into over 1,000 possible variations. Building on that with enough voiced dialogue to fill over 60 feature-length films,

Guild Wars 2 demonstrates that Old Republic is not the only MMO pushing the storytelling front.

While Guild Wars 2 doesn't feature traditional quests, it has special missions that unlock every level or two to help reveal more of your character's personal story. With a level cap of 80, that's an awful lot of story to get through. Beyond that, players can take part in dynamic events that happen around the world, often briefly taking out certain towns or points of interest until adventurers set things right. After I express some worry over seeing adventures repeated, NCsoft tells me the final game will contain over 1,500 events, all of which are contextual for their areas.

Story innovation isn't the only reason Guild Wars 2 stands out. Within five minutes of play-time, it simply feels better than most MMOs. Yes, there is a row of buttons containing various abilities lining the bottom of the screen, but it's cleaned up into a mere 10 options. When I choose one, the attack happens instantly, and my character can keep moving while he swings his weapon.

Double tapping a movement key makes my character dodge to the right or left, and getting out of the way of enemy attacks causes them to miss. The mix of classic MMO mechanics with the dexterity you'd expect from an action game feels fresh in a way that no other MMO I've played this year has achieved.

Noticing that I'm enjoying the combat, the NCsoft representative who's watching shows me a trick. Opening up my inventory and character sheet, I equip a second weapon set. In one setup I have a sword and shield, while my other wields a giant, two-handed axe.

Here's the awesome part: A single button allows me to switch weapon sets, which auto-swaps the action buttons on my hotbar, even while in combat. I can open with a devastating axe blow, then switch to my sword/shield combo to get defensive, or chip away at an enemy's health with the smaller weapon and then change to the axe to knock out the last chunk as quickly as possible. The fun, action-packed, strategic options are flashing before my eyes as I play, and I couldn't be more excited to figure them out.

That's when the NCSoft rep pulls me away from the mouse and keyboard. After spending a mere 15 minutes with Guild Wars 2, this is easily my most anticipated MMO. Games like World of Warcraft and Star Wars: The Old Republic continue refining the same basic structure that made me fall in love with the genre, but Guild Wars 2 is one of the first I've seen that offers something that feels both new and familiar, unique and polished. Don't be surprised if this game comes out and blows everyone away. » **Phil Kollar**
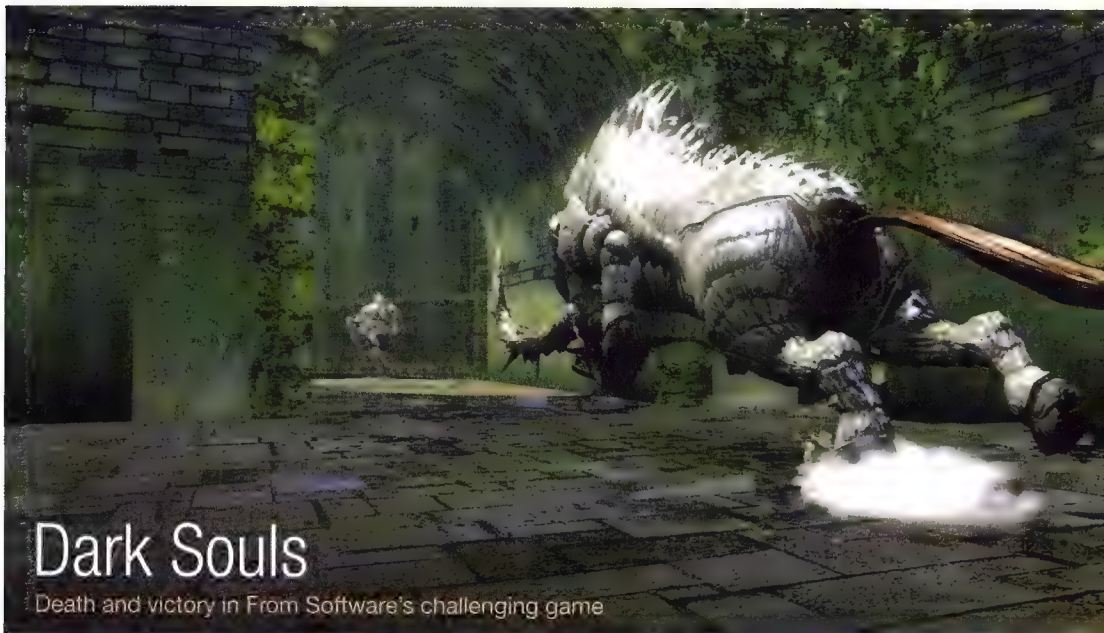
Dark Souls

Death and victory in From Software's challenging game

In my first hands-on with this brutal follow-up to From Software's PS3-exclusive Demon's Souls, I brave a level called the Undead Parish. The name references the various zombies and skeletal soldiers haunting the once-holy grounds, but those aren't the only horrors I have to endure. Turning onto a bridge, two things immediately stand out in my field of vision: several shiny pieces of loot laying on corpses just out of my reach, and a flame-breathing wyvern not much farther back.

I run the opposite direction up a set of stairs, sticking close to a wall on the right-hand side. Suddenly a spear shoots out of said wall and kills me in one hit. As my character falls, I spin the camera around. A skeleton stares victoriously from a passageway hidden on the side of this stairwell.

Dark Souls lesson number one: Pay attention to your surroundings.

Making my way past this foe and more skeletons farther up the stairway, I enter a courtyard. As another skeleton approaches from the right, the screen rumbles. I look to the north. A giant armored boar is running toward me. Surprised, I fumble in my attempt to dodge, accidentally rolling right into the boar's path. He runs me down, and I die again.

Dark Souls lesson number two: Learn the dodge and block commands, and be ready to use them at a moment's notice.

After the boar kills me several more times, I ascertain that my regular weapons are useless against this imposing creature. I have a small number of spells, but with the speed that the boar pursues me, I have no time to cast them. At a loss, I head back to the bridge and decide to run for some of the loot. As the wyvern

stomps angrily in my direction, I grab one of the items: a lure. An obvious plan of action dawns on me as the wyvern bathes me in fire, killing me. Luckily, the item stays with me when I resurrect.

Dark Souls lesson number three: Use every item at your disposal.

Heading back to the boar, I carefully toss the lure to the side. He runs for it, and I bolt past him and up a set of stairs to the right. Up top, I'm nearly defeated by an undead warrior backed up by a few skeletal archers, but I survive. I'm now on a scaffold overlooking the courtyard where the boar harassed me. Smiling, I select my first spell and toss it down at the boar from above. The fire quickly eats away at the oversized pig, who cannot reach me to retaliate. He dies, finally.

Dark Souls lesson number four: Savor your victories wherever you find them.

Unsurprisingly, this boar encounter reminds me of what I loved so much in Demon's Souls. That game was unfairly pegged as extremely difficult, but I wouldn't say it (nor Dark Souls) is hard in a traditional sense. These games expect more out of their players. It takes time and patience to work out a path for survival through an area, but you're rewarded with moments of great triumph. After taking down the boar, I had to resist the urge to spike the controller on the ground and start screaming in mockery of my fallen enemy.

New players aren't the only ones who will be dying a lot in Dark Souls. Namco Bandai senior global brand manager Brian Hong has been playing the game for months, but when I hand him the controller, he dies just as often as me. In his attempt to rush through the demo and save time, he's not playing smartly or patiently,

and the game punishes him for it.

After some setbacks, Hong eventually makes it through the Undead Parish level and into the Undead Church. Ignoring another heavily armored mini-boss, he bounds up a ladder and heads onto the roof of the church, where a major boss fight awaits. Upon walking onto the church's roof, two stone gargoyles come to life and fly down to attack. One breathes fire while the other has a sharp axe for a tail. They're both larger-than-life enemies that require a serious strategy to take down, and in his distracted state, Hong is quickly defeated.

Hong explains to me, "The team at From Software really wants players to pay attention." Don't think of death in Dark Souls as a failure; think of it as learning a lesson. **Phil Kollar**

Soulcalibur V

Project Soul resets the stage

An untended property can grow stale quickly, and since Soulcalibur is coming up on its fifth numbered entry (sixth if you count the original Soul Blade title), developer Project Soul knows it has to do something to change up the series. Its solution is to set Soulcalibur V more than 17 years after the series' previous entries. This means many mainstays such as Mitsurugi and Siegfried appear much older and play differently. Project Soul also has the opportunity to create a scattering of new characters with ties to Soulcalibur's classic cast.

Namco showed us a couple of the fighters, the first of which is fan favorite Ivy Valentine. Ivy's return for Soulcalibur V isn't surprising, but Project Soul wanted to make her easier to use. Her attacks have been streamlined, making it easier to string together her various whip and sword moves. While many of the characters have aged 17 years, Ivy seems to be an exception in that she has not physically changed. Project Soul says that the reason for this anomaly will be explained in the story.

We also saw a new character named Natsu. Natsu is a fast female fighter, which isn't surprising since she is an apprentice of the veteran ninja Taki. Taki has been one of the series' fastest fighters, but Project Soul claims that Natsu is

even faster. Her fighting style allows her to perform a lot of visual tricks and teleportation moves; the team has been working to increase the game's overall speed, and Natsu embodies this design focus.

The final character Namco revealed was Z.W.E.I., a mysterious renegade. Project Soul hasn't revealed what the acronym stands for, but the publisher admitted that this fighter is a bit of an experiment for the series. While Z.W.E.I. uses a cross-shaped short sword for many of his attacks, the character's main weapon is a spirit pet called Ein who materializes out of thin air during many of Z.W.E.I.'s combos. German speakers have probably realized that "ein" and "zwei" mean "one" and "two" in German. Project Soul declined to elaborate on this detail, but it did say that the significance of these character's names would be revealed during the game.

Namco Bandai also showed us a few of the new features in action, like the Soul Meter that builds up as characters fight. Players can use a portion of this Soul Meter to perform Brave Edge attacks. This classification of moves allows players to do a number of different things, such as power up a normal attack, break through an opponent's guard, or string together a longer combo. Players can also unleash the full power of the Soul Meter with

character-specific Critical Edge attacks – game-changing super moves that shave off a large portion of your opponent's health.

A few tweaks to the series' fighting mechanics will likely make the game more welcoming to newcomers. Soulcalibur has always been known for its eight-way run, which lets players move across the fighting arena in all directions, but Project Soul felt that the strafing controls could be simplified. In past entries, players had to double tap a direction in order to move freely across the board, but now players can simply hold down the directional stick in whichever direction they want to move and their character will automatically initiate an eight-way run. Double tapping the stick now initiates a quick evade move where your character sidesteps their opponent.

The series' guard impact ability has also been simplified so that players only need to tap block the moment before an enemy's attack connects in order to parry the attack and leave the opponent open for a counterattack. When the game releases early next year, Namco Bandai is hoping its updated controls and roster of new characters capture the attention of new players while appeasing its legion of longtime fans. **Ben Reeves**

Natsu

Prototype 2

Evolve or die

Prototype, the 2009 open-world game that put players into the shoes of heavily mutated, revenge-seeking anti-hero Alex Mercer, was clearly a game that appealed to a lot of people. I am not one of those people.

Going into my first developer-led look at the game, I wear this skepticism on my sleeve – literally the sleeve of a shirt for Infamous, another super-powered open-world game built up as Prototype's primary competition. I unintentionally wear the shirt to my meeting with Prototype 2 developer Radical Entertainment, and thankfully they laugh off the coincidence. Radical head Ken Rossman doesn't believe that Infamous and Prototype are meant to be rivals, and he also believes that the studio has learned lessons from Sucker Punch's game as it moves forward on Prototype 2.

Though Prototype 2 again takes place in New York City, Radical wants to fix the bland sameness that plagued the city last time around and inject it with the variety of real-world NYC. "You should be able to tell the difference between when you're in uptown and when you're in midtown," Rossman explains.

This remodeling effort includes splitting the city into three distinct zones. The red zone is a section of the city where the mutation virus from the last game has completely taken over. The yellow zone is a slightly safer industrial district. Finally, the green zone is where the military has set up camp in its efforts to win back the city. Rossman explains that in the first game, every building and area in the city had to be built around having both a regular and "infected" look. With things more split up now, the team can spend more time building recognizable landmarks and giving each part of the game world a unique feel.

Another major lesson from Infamous? Side missions. In the original Prototype, activities outside of the main story didn't make a lot of sense in the context of the game. From rooftop races to gliding and landing in a target area, Alex Mercer had no real motivation for these activities. In Prototype 2, side missions will have better story and gameplay hooks.

Part of the draw for the new side missions is the revamped upgrade system in the sequel. Rather than building up tons of points and flipping through a seemingly endless list of moves to figure out which is right for you, Prototype 2 will reward players with new powers and mutations after completing missions.

Infected lairs provide another lucrative distraction for protagonist James Heller. These underground infection breeding zones are found purely through exploration. Once discovered, Heller can infiltrate them and attempt to survive an arena-style fight against waves of enemies, including one powerful mutant boss. When the big bad is destroyed and consumed, one of Heller's powers is upgraded.

Speaking of powers, Radical isn't ready to reveal all of the new tools that set Heller apart from last game's protagonist, but I was shown one incredibly powerful and bloody new ability called the bio-bomb. Heller sneaks up on an unsuspecting enemy, infects him with a silent stab, and gets out of the way. A short time after being stabbed, tendrils explode from the enemy, piercing any other nearby foes and pulling them closer. Once all the tendrils have gathered, the whole mess erupts in an explosion of gore. I'm not sure how often players will be able to use this over-the-top ability, but it's the kind of thing that should give fans of Prototype's stylized violence plenty to cheer about.

Rossman describes the goal of Prototype like this: "If you've had a s----y day at work, you come home and play Prototype to feel awesome." I'm definitely not opposed to crazy power fantasies when they're done well. Radical hasn't crushed all of my concerns yet with the sequel, but the studio has taken some smart steps in the right direction. With another nine months of polish ahead (and without Infamous to go up against), perhaps Prototype 2 will be that rare sequel to a middling game that earns its second chance. » **Phil Kollar**

Unraveling The Conspiracy

Prototype's complex back-story was doled out in an unorthodox but effective manner. Alex Mercer could hunt down and consume certain key targets to get flashes of the true story behind his past. This "web of intrigue" system remains in Prototype 2, but as with much of the game, it has been revamped. Players will have more motivation and better means of tracking down targets of interest. Heller acquires a sonar ability that allows him to hunt down web of intrigue targets, similar to the blast shard radar in the Infamous games. Once targets are absorbed, they provide story tidbits and may also unlock new missions.

Sly Cooper: Thieves in Time

Sanzaru Games' labor of love brings back our favorite raccoon

The game's boss battles stick close to platformer traditions
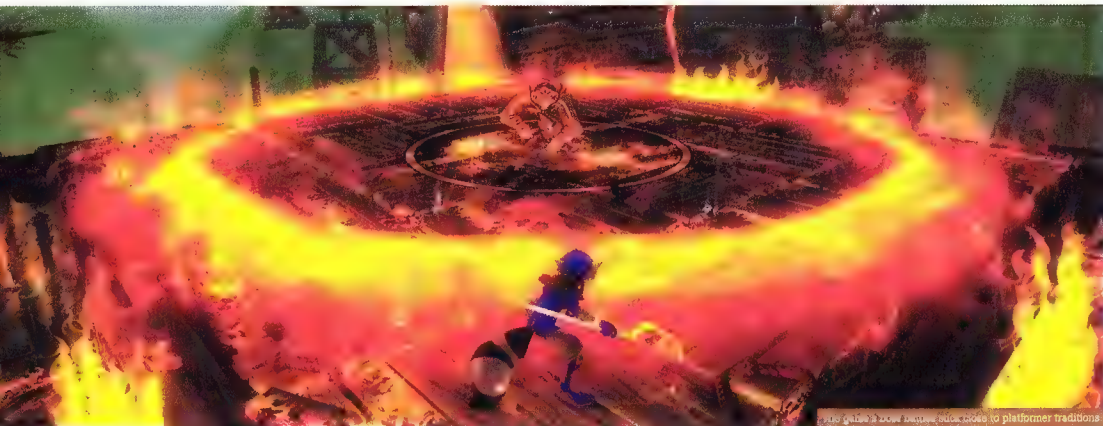
Platform
PlayStation 3

Style
1-Player
Action/Platforming

Publisher
Sony Computer
Entertainment

Developer
Sanzaru Games

Release
2012

The Sly Cooper franchise lived in the shadow of the Ratchet & Clank and Jak and Daxter series, but remains one of my favorite PS2 series for its colorful, cel-shaded graphics and expert blend of stealthy thieving and comic mischief. Thankfully, I'm not alone. Sanzaru Games, the team behind the HD remake trilogy The Sly Collection for the PlayStation 3, is working on the raccoon's return in Sly Cooper: Thieves in Time.

The project's origin story is as charming as the game itself. Sensing that Sly creators Sucker Punch were too busy with their current blockbuster, Infamous 2, to do another Sly game, Sanzaru decided to spend its own time and money creating a demo that showed its vision of what a next-gen Sly Cooper experience would look like. After impressing both Sony and Sucker Punch with its work, the team was given the chance to create The Sly Collection. After that project was well received, Sanzaru got its dream assignment: making an all-original, all-new Sly Cooper game for the PlayStation 3.

As you might expect coming from such fans of the series, Thieves in Time looks back to the series' past for its inspiration. This is not a "reboot" in any sense; the gameplay we've seen so far could very well be culled from the original trilogy if not for the more elaborate HD graphics. In a gaming scene overrun with overly serious first-person shooters, that's a good thing.

While we don't know much about the plot, the central story revolves around Sly, Murray, and Bentley's efforts to recover the lost pages of the Thievius Raccoonus, which have been scattered throughout time (hence the title). To do it, they'll gallivant through various time periods in Bentley's time machine. We expect other familiar characters from the franchise's history to appear in the game as well; so far we can confirm Dmitri (who was shown in a teaser trailer during Sony's E3 press conference) and Carmelita (who was revealed in a piece of artwork).

Sony showed us one level of the game, which takes place in feudal Japan. It starts with some classic stealthy gameplay, as Sly and Murray work separately to solve puzzles and avoid myriad deadly traps in an interior level that showed off the improved lighting effects possible on PlayStation 3.

Sly eventually comes face to face with an evil tiger dictator named El Jefe, who is voiced by the ubiquitous Nolan North and bears a pretty striking resemblance to Master Tigress from Kung Fu Panda. In this boss battle we witnessed a host of classic platforming tropes. El Jefe is armed with magic-infused samurai swords that he uses to dispense familiar attacks like radial and forward blasts, which leave him temporarily immobile. While it's all very "platforming 101," it looks fun and well done. The battle is multi-tiered, forcing Sly to platform his way through treacherous fire traps on his way to El Jefe's next location.

While much is unknown about Sly Cooper: Thieves in Time, it's clear that Sanzaru Games has a great affection for the series. Based on what we've seen so far, that love shows through in a game that brings Sly Cooper into the modern day without compromising the gameplay and humor that made him a star to begin with. » Matt Helgeson

Thieves in Time features many familiar Sly characters, including Murray

God of War: Origins Collection

For when a handheld Kratos just isn't enough

Ready at Dawn's God of War titles are two of the best games on PSP. Even though Sony had issues consistently providing quality software for the system, Kratos' handheld appearances gave hardcore gamers a reason to pour time into their PSPs. Chains of Olympus and Ghost of Sparta flesh out the mythology and characters of the God of War series, and now PS3 owners can experience the complete saga.

God of War: Origins Collection collects both of the PSP games on a single Blu-ray disc, but they aren't just straight ports of the originals. The remastered HD graphics run in 1080p, both games have full trophy support, and you can play in 3D if you have a compatible television. These tweaks ensure that the games look and play well on PS3 without sacrificing the original experience.

I played both titles at E3, and as a longtime fan of the series, I came away impressed. The graphics were excellent on PSP, but they are even better now and comparable to the PS2 entries. As long as you don't expect anything on the level of God of War III, you're in for a visual treat. The 3D support didn't do much to enhance the gameplay for me, though the effect is admittedly cool when Kratos is performing airborne throws.

The most notable improvement is delivered via the PS3 controller. Since the PSP didn't have two analog sticks, Kratos' dodge roll had to be performed with the shoulder buttons – a mechanic that never felt natural for me. That move is now mapped to the right analog stick (just like in the other console installments), polishing away my only major gameplay complaint.

After the conclusion of God of War III, the future of the franchise is uncertain. Whatever Sony's plans may be, fans of the series should be excited about this opportunity to jump back into the God of War universe and relive some of Kratos' best moments. » Joe Juba

Platform
PlayStation 3

» **Style**
1-Player Action

» **Publisher**
Sony Computer Entertainment

» **Developer**
Ready at Dawn Studios

» **Release**
September 13

PlanetSide 2

Another shot at the shooter MMO we've always wanted

PlanetSide broke new ground in 2003 by bringing classic first-person shooter action to a massively multiplayer online world. It presented huge-scale battles and inter-faction politics beyond anything available at the time, but for all its innovation, it didn't age well. Balance issues and uneven player populations proved difficult problems to address once the shiny newness wore off. Many gamers remember PlanetSide fondly regardless, and the dream of someone pulling off a kick-ass MMOFPS has never died. Sony Online Entertainment is taking another stab at the subgenre with PlanetSide 2, and the company is talking a big game about how the sequel recaptures the original's magic while benefitting from several years of design experience and technical advances.

Forget about hotbars, sticky targeting and other common MMO conceits. Your twitch reflexes determine the efficacy of your laser blasts and hovertanks. The class-based skill system and equipment management provide a certain level of RPG-lite persistent progression, but PlanetSide 2 is an action game for action gamers.

"Our gameplay is 100 percent PvP, and therefore 100 percent player-driven," declares creative director Matt Hirdt. "Players decide where to fight, whom to fight, how to increase their empire's territorial control, et cetera." PlanetSide 2 is not a theme park ride. Instead of forever collecting bear asses to satisfy an NPC's endless need to feed his nonexistent starving children, you'll be assaulting strategic objectives because the players in your faction decided that it would look better with your flag flying over it than the existing banner. Controlling territory gives your faction strategic bonuses, though SOE has yet to go into the specifics.

A dynamic mission system pushes players toward the action by rewarding them for participating in nearby battles. "Further levels of the mission system allow commander players to insert missions to help coordinate battles," Hirdt says. These commanders will have earned their status through in-game deeds, and as in the first game have special chat channels and privileges to help them coordinate assaults ranging from small skirmishes to global assaults.

The mission system and strategic rewards for controlling territory are just pieces of SOE's larger strategy to solve the population concentration problem that every PvP-centric MMO wrestles with. Having three factions rather than two helps somewhat, as the two smaller sides can gang up on the biggest army to try to even the odds. Hirdt has further plans beyond that as well. "We're definitely going to be rewarding combatants on lower population empires through mechanics such as proportionally increased advancement rates and resources and we'll be attempting to balance the overall empire saturation on each server as much as we can without force-restricting folks from being able to play with their friends," he says.

The new engine looks solid and there's definitely space in the market for a game like PlanetSide 2. We're still a ways out from getting any kind of playable version of the game, but the concept is interesting enough that I'll be jumping on that opportunity as soon as it presents itself. ⌐ **Adam Biessener**

Hopefully the weapons break out of the usual shotgun/assault rifle/et cetera groupings

SOE's new Forgelight engine pushes out modern

Might & Magic Heroes VI

Reinventing a strategy classic

Using your hero to support your armies in battle is crucial
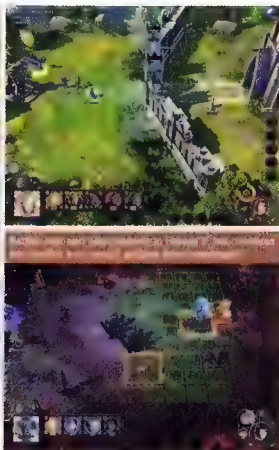
S tart with chess-like tactical battles. Replace the chess pieces with stacks of fantastical creatures like gremlins and dragons. Add unique heroes leading the armies with their attendant RPG progression mechanics. Finish it off with an empire-building strategy layer where the creatures are recruited, armies maneuvered, and castles improved. The Heroes franchise is on its sixth game because the core concept is just that awesome.

As with any strategy game from the '90s, though, the good bits of Heroes came with a fair amount of tedium and fluff. Crucial mines had to be defended from the unending stream of low-level heroes enemies would send to steal them. Each week's production of creatures from each town had to be transferred to the front lines. Spellcasting heroes had to make pilgrimages to every town in your empire to gain the spells from each mage guild. These may not have been mind-numbing chores – especially in the context of PC strategy games – but Ubisoft is taking an axe to many of Heroes' legacy design elements in search of a more streamlined experience.

All of the examples above are gone in Heroes VI. Having played a fair amount of the ongoing closed beta, I'm generally in favor of the changes made to the formula (go to gameinformer.com/mag for a more nuanced discussion of the specific mechanics in question). The game still feels like Heroes even though you're forced to fight over

castles themselves instead of chasing enemy heroes all over the map. The combat is still tactically interesting with creatures broken into core/elite/champion units rather than seven distinct tiers, and the units I've seen so far are more fun to use than the troops from older games.

Most importantly, the basic gameplay loop works as well in Heroes VI as it ever has. Stomping around the map bashing on neutral armies to get at the mines, treasures, and special buildings they guard is how any aspiring hero starts. Building up your castles, recruiting increasingly powerful creatures, and eventually invading enemy territory is the same progression I fell in love with 16 years ago. The slow build of your commanders from weak figurehead to earth-shattering archmage (or army-crushing swordmaster) through skills, stats, and artifact collection is still a blast.

Heroes VI still has more to prove before its September 6 launch. Can developer Black Hole Entertainment move past the over-scripted, linear missions of Heroes V and deliver a fun campaign? Will the AI be any better than the pushover from V? Will this crazy Conflux thing (see sidebar) take off? I don't have any answers to these questions, but I can't wait to find out.
› Adam Biessener
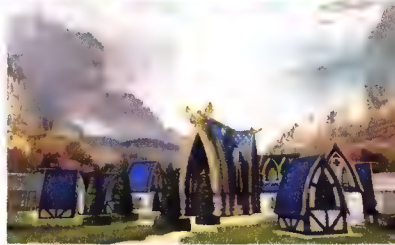
For a more in-depth discussion of the Heroes VI's mechanics, head to gameinformer.com/mag

The Conflux

Ubisoft is putting a lot of effort into creating persistent progression for Heroes VI. Accomplishments in games give your "dynasty" experience and rank up your online profile, though the effects aren't yet clear. You can also spend your "dynasty" tokens in the campaign, which appears to be tied to your profile. An "Altar of Wishes" that rewards currency and unlocks with a reward structure, Civilization-like features like achievements and friends lists are present. It's all very vague, unfortunately, and as of press time Ubisoft hadn't detailed how the dynasty works any further. Even so, a quality online metagame can only improve Heroes VI.

Ultimate Marvel vs. Capcom 3

Twelve new fighters make for the ultimate fighting bundle

After releasing Marvel vs. Capcom 3: Fate of Two Worlds earlier this year, Capcom planned on producing a steady stream of downloadable characters. However, the natural disasters that struck Japan back in April changed the company's plans. Instead of following through with a DLC schedule, Capcom is releasing a retooled version of the game packed with reimagined stages and a dozen new fighters.

Ultimate Marvel vs. Capcom 3 includes 50 total combatants. the 36 original fighters, 2 post-release DLC characters, and 12 new combatants. The full roster of new challengers includes Firebrand (Ghosts 'n Goblins and Gargoyle's Quest), Strider Hiryu, Ghost Rider, Hawkeye, Vergil (Devil May Cry), Phoenix Wright, Nemesis (Resident Evil), Frank West (Dead Rising), Doctor Strange, Rocket Racoon, Nova, and Iron Fist (see sidebar for additional information).

In addition to the new fighters, Capcom is redesigning all of Marvel vs. Capcom 3's stages. For example, the Mega Man Legends stage from the original release took place at night under a shower of fireworks. For Ultimate MvC 3, Capcom has redrawn the stage so that it takes place during winter as snow flies across the screen. While Ultimate Marvel vs. Capcom 3 doesn't include any new stages, director/producer Ryota Niitsuma says that many stages have undergone such a transformation that fans might not recognize them. Ultimate Marvel vs. Capcom 3 has a projected $40 price point, which is an impressive deal for those who missed this epic fighter the first time around. · **Ben Reeves**

Hawkeye

As one of Marvel's Avengers, Hawkeye is a capable hand-to-hand combatant. He is also a strong ranged fighter who makes heavy use of his bow. Up close, however, players might find that Hawkeye functions a bit like Taskmaster, with a flurry of fast and powerful strikes.

Ghost Rider

Hell on wheels, Marvel's Ghost Rider is a demonic stunt driver possessed by demonic power, making him a brutish powerhouse. Ghost Rider makes use of his iconic chains performing long range whip attacks and using them to pull opponents towards him. In some ways, Ghost Rider plays like Nathan Spencer, but his motorcycle attacks and Penance Stare set him apart.

Firebrand

Strider

Aliens: Infestation

Sega forces you to fight the monster within

A century after the events of the *Aliens* film, Earth's authorities have finally realized that Ripley's investigation of the colony on planet LV-426 has gone awry. A second team of heavily armed marines is sent to the planet to investigate and clean up the mess. These marines discover that the original survey ship is now filled with a brood of deadly Xenomorph aliens and androids built by the Weyland-Yutani Corporation. Curious to find out what's been going on over the last hundred years, the marines begin digging through the complex for answers.

Functioning like Metroid and Castlevania titles, Aliens: Infestation sends players through a labyrinth of 2D corridors to collect items and weapons that unlock new areas.

Infestation's unique twist is how it handles its list of protagonists. Players start the game managing a squad of four marines, but they only control one marine at a time. If that marine dies, they can't be resurrected. Instead, players take command of another marine in their squad. Nineteen additional soldiers can be found scattered throughout the game, and players can add these characters to their squad. Since each character has a unique backstory and traits, the story sequences vary depending on which character players are currently using.

The broad roster creates interesting squad dynamics when it comes to combating Xenomorphs. If a marine is subdued by an alien, player control shifts to another marine back at home base. This marine has a limited amount of time to run to the aid of the stricken comrade. If you're fast, you can cut compromised marines out of the alien cocoon before any harm comes to them. If you take too long, the marine gets impregnated with an infant Xenomorph. You can continue to play with that character for a short time, but before long, the marine's chest will burst open and the rest of the squad will have a new menace to deal with.

We played through the opening sequence, and walked away eager to get our hand on more of the game. WayForward has a few solid handheld titles to its credit, like Contra 4, Sigma Star Saga and, more recently, Thor: God of Thunder for DS (whose glory outshined its console brethren). If everything comes together, we'll be happy to have this alien hug our faces. **» Ben Reeves**
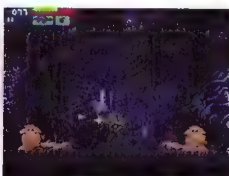
Dragon Quest Monsters: Joker 2

Slime hunting season begins again

D ragon Quest and Pokémon are two of the most popular franchises in the role-playing genre. If you mash together the core elements from each series, the result is Dragon Quest Monsters. While Pokémon isn't formally represented, the idea of recruiting monsters and leveling them up forms the central pillar of gameplay, with classic Dragon Quest creatures like Slime and Dracky standing in for Pikachu and Charmander. The result is a collection-focused RPG formula that's coming back to DS after a four-year absence.

The original Dragon Quest Monsters: Joker came out in 2007, and after playing the introductory hours of the sequel, I can say that all of the key components remain intact. A roster including hundreds of monsters from the Dragon Quest series ensures that you're always adding new combatants to your menagerie of allies (the game calls it "scouting"), and the story pulls you from one location to the next while giving you enough time to tend to your growing collection.

After stowing away aboard an airship bound for a scouting tournament, the silent protagonist is discovered and forced to join the ship's crew. His indentured servitude doesn't last long, since the airship crashes on an unexplored landmass, leaving him to wander through forests and caves in search of survivors. Along the way, players learn the basics of scouting, which involves impressing enemies with a show of force. If your attacks are strong enough, the opponent will join your ranks.

Scouting is critical, because the main character doesn't engage in combat directly. Building up a stable of mighty allies is the only way you can win difficult fights, and most monsters you encounter are potential party members. As they fight, they gain experience; higher levels lead to the expected increase in hit points and power, but it also earns your monsters skill points that you can distribute to tailor their attacks toward different specialties. Even better, you eventually unlock the ability to fuse monsters (similar to the Persona series), creating even more impressive beasts to fight in your name.

It may not sound like the most original idea, but combined with layers of addictive RPG systems and a massive list of monsters to recruit, Dragon Quest Monsters: Joker 2 could keep aspiring heroes scouting for hours. **Joe Juba**

Tyrantos attacks!
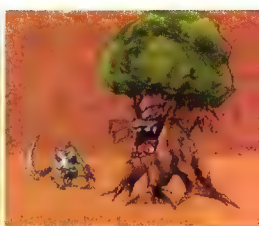
Resident Evil:
Operation Raccoon City

Another detour through the infamous infected city

Platform
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360 • PC

Style
1-Player Action
(2 to 8-Player Online)

Publisher
Capcom

Developer
Slant Six Games

Release
Winter

Capcom is changing the way we play Resident Evil with their action-focused return to the streets of Raccoon City. SOCOM: Confrontation developer Slant Six Games is infusing tactical military shooting with the infected nightmares of Resident Evil. The game centers on class-based, 4 vs. 4 online multiplayer with an emphasis on cooperation. Fans can finally play as the bad guys, controlling Umbrella operatives as they wipe out all traces of the outbreak, including series icons like Leon S. Kennedy. The U.S. Spec Ops forces do what they can to stop them while also battling vicious monsters roaming the battlefield. We recently had a chance to take a closer look at the exciting shooter, and there's plenty of news to share. Tim Turi

TWO NEW OPERATIVES ENTER THE FRAY

Capcom previously confirmed four U.S.S. agents: Vector, the illusive recon man; Bertha, the sadistic medic; Beltway, the foul-mouthed demolitions expert; and Specter, the team's sniper and keen-eyed surveillance man. Now two new badass ladies join the fight.

FOUR-EYES:

Like any good Umbrella scientist, this killer puts the lives of everyone behind her desire to improving her research. Her knowledge in virology and weapon proficiency makes her an asset in taking on the gnawing, clawing biohazards of Raccoon City. Given her deep understanding of Umbrella's B.O.W.s, Four-Eyes can fire a special dart into fearsome creatures like hunters and lickers to assume control of the beasts. She can also toss a pheromone grenade which lures anything tainted by the T-Virus.

LUPO:

This femme fatale is a seasoned special operative from France. Her countless hours in the field have hardened her combat prowess, but she still has a soft spot for her teammates. Frequently referred to as the Wolf Mother of the U.S.S. squad, Lupo is as deadly as she is protective of her team. Being a master of assault, she boasts special abilities like unlimited ammo, increased accuracy, enhanced damage, and armor boost.
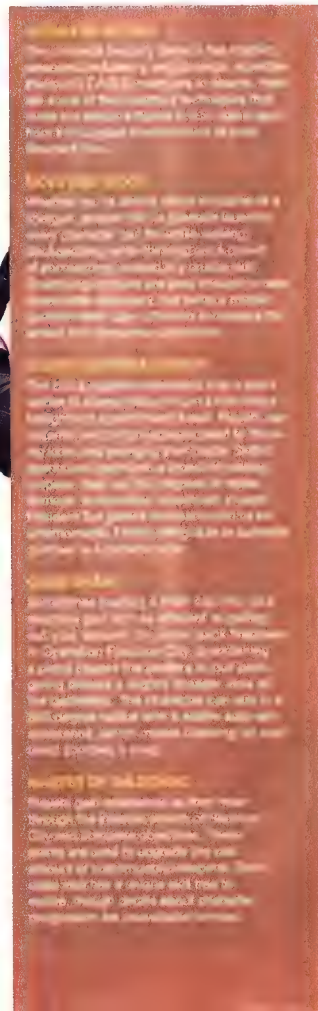
REWRITING HISTORY

Have you ever wondered what would've happened if Leon failed to make it to the Raccoon Police Department, or if Claire Redfield never met Sherry Birkin? As an Umbrella operative, killing these Resident Evil icons is not only an intriguing option, it's your job. While Capcom hasn't confirmed any other characters yet, the game takes place during the events of Resident Evil 2 and 3, which places Jill Valentine, Carlos Olivera, Barry Burton, and other important characters somewhere in Raccoon City. We can't wait to find out how killing one of these heroes will affect the rest of the game.

BECOMING THE WALKING DEAD

One of the most intriguing perils of Operation Raccoon City is the risk of infec- ... advantages. When you become completely infected zombies ignore you, allowing you to charge the enemy's position head on. Because you're technically dead, you benefit from temporary invulnerability, allowing you to wreak havoc until the AI kicks in and turns you into an undead liability. Losing control of your zombified character means your former teammates can easily mistake you for your former self, opening them up to attack and further infection. A sympathetic headshot from a comrade is the only cure, and results in a quicker spawn time.

THE OTHER GUYS

Capcom hasn't released any specific information on the U.S. Spec Ops units, the direct opposition to Umbrella's forces. The U.S.S. agents have demonstrated Operation Raccoon City's emphasis on class-based teamwork, so we assume the Spec Ops soldiers will be similarly structured for co-op action. Hopefully Capcom will reveal names, faces, and details about these mysterious good guys in the near future.
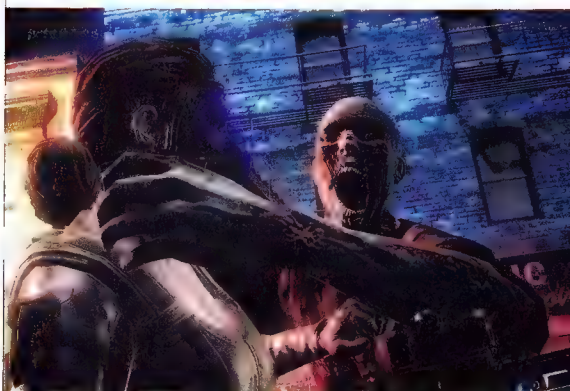
91 Bastion

Another grand adventure has arrived on Xbox Live Arcade in the form of Bastion, the debut title from developer Supergiant Games. Travel through a mysterious world and watch as it comes back to life during your journey. Along the way, a narrator tells the story you're playing as it unfolds. Simple, beautiful, and great fun, Bastion is one of the finest downloadable games ever released.

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 redeeming in a game of this caliber, it's buried beneath agonizing gameplay and uneven execution in its features or theme.
7	Average. The game's features may work, but are nothing that even casual players haven't seen before. A decent game from beginning to end.	**2**	Broken. Basically unplayable. This game is so insufficient in execution that any value would be derived in extremely small quantities, if at all.
6	Limited Appeal. Although there may be fans of games receiving this score, many will be left yearning for a more rewarding game experience.	**1**	Worse than a busted air conditioner during a heat wave.

AWARDS

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

El Shaddai: Ascension of the Metatron

A kaleidoscopic journey through the Book of Enoch

9

gameinformer
GOLD

Style 1-Player Action **Publisher** Ignition Entertainment **Developer** Ignition Entertainment **Release** July 26 **ESRB** T

Second Opinion 9

In some ways, El Shaddai feels like the polar opposite of Bayonetta, another character action game created by a Devil May Cry veteran. Sawaki's colorful masterpiece foregoes complex, combo-heavy combat for simple one-button brawling that proves surprisingly satisfying. Likewise, it gives up the typical action game machismo, replacing it with borderline homoeroticism that's a breath of fresh air (if a little shocking, given the game's Biblical setting). Though the fighting and platforming will keep most gamers happy, the real reason to play El Shaddai is its visual flair. The wide-eyed joy of witnessing each new level for the first time is more of a reward than any angel-filled cutscene. El Shaddai's engine may not have the pure power of Uncharted or Gears of War, but this is easily the most beautiful game I've played this generation. » **Phil Kollar**

I've never taken hallucinogenic drugs, but after playing El Shaddai: Ascension of the Metatron, I may be able to relate with people who have. I traversed colorful landscapes with melting skylines, ascended seemingly endless staircases, battled an angel who tried to seduce me with dance, leapt over a happy humanoid hot dog on a beach ball, and overheard the Devil gabbing on a cell phone with God Almighty. I often felt like I was immersed in the dreams and nightmares of a contemporary artist who had just fallen asleep after reading The Bible. It was a weird and unrestrained journey, but one that stands as a stunning work of art. El Shaddai is a visually arresting experience I wholeheartedly loved.

This odd pilgrimage is the brainchild of Takeyasu Sawaki, previously known for his character work on Capcom's Okami and Devil May Cry. Sawaki and his team at Ignition Entertainment didn't just create an art piece. El Shaddai's striking visual style blends beautifully with a fascinating story based on the Book of Enoch, a religious work that follows the great-grandfather of Noah. In the game, Enoch must round up angels who, through their fascination with humans, have abandoned Heaven for Earth. If Enoch fails his mission, the Heavenly Council will unleash a great flood to purify the land.

Returning the angels is no easy task. They are holed up in a magical tower where every floor is its own visually unique reality – places Sawaki and crew successfully paint to be wondrous, weird, moving, and occasionally beyond human understanding. The art direction doesn't stick to an Old Testament script; like a series of independent art exhibits, it jumps between a surrealistic version of Tron, a children's storybook, and other striking styles. Few games achieve such a feeling of walking into a new plane of existence.
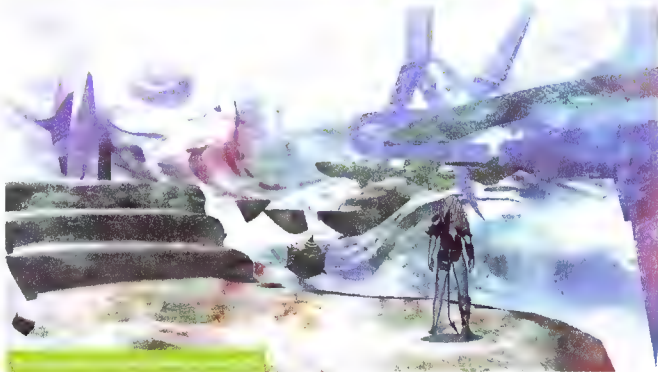
The story and world unite to create a unique backdrop for gameplay that any self-respecting gamer can pick up and play within seconds. That's not to say it is easy, but it is composed of familiar mechanics. Half of the action involves arena-based combat, where Enoch takes on three or four enemies at once. All of Enoch's attacks are handled with one button, and while this may sound like it limits your options, I was surprised how many different combos I could chain together. The combos are tied to timing; if you initiate a strike in the middle of an attack animation, Enoch might respond with another quick slash. If you strike at the end of an attack, Enoch may launch his foe into the air or deliver an overhead strike. This system has a satisfying rhythm that fits nicely with all three of Enoch's weapons: the arch (a bowed blade), the gale (a large ring that shoots darts), and the veil (a circular Captain America-like shield that splits into two powerful, gauntlets). Each weapon has its own timing and combos to master, and additional strategy is tied to purifying the weapons and calling on Uriel, a

heavenly figure who augments Enoch's attacks.

Keeping with the game's strange vibe, enemy damage is displayed through their armor and clothing. You'll know they are close to defeat when they are nearly naked. The same goes for Enoch. A large portion of this game is spent watching scantily clad men who look like Gap models.

Different enemy types and bosses are scattered throughout stages, but the true variety comes from platforming. The colorful vistas Enoch traverses are loaded with chasms and moving land. Thanks to a nicely designed jump mechanic and camera tracking that does a great job of framing each jump opportunity, Enoch can bound across dangerous paths and up shifting towers with speed and grace. When the arch weapon is equipped, he also gains the ability to float at the end of his jump, a technique that I found cheapens the difficulty in a game that is already far too liberal in its checkpoints (usually the platform you fell from, or in close proximity to it). The platforming is a nice diversion, but most of the thrills in these sections are tied to crazy environment designs and not the gameplay.

Each chapter of the game is as linear as can be. A few collectible items and hidden levels are tucked off to the sides, but the majority of Enoch's time is spent heading in one direction that is free of puzzles, locked doors, or any activities outside of fighting, leaping, and listening to shirtless men talk. The environments are beautiful, but I wish there would have been more reasons to explore them further.

When the credits began to roll, I felt like I traveled to the Guggenheim with Charlie Kaufman on one arm and Timothy Leary on the other. Although the story delivers a cohesive narrative arc, the singular tangential moments of peculiarity, abstract level design, and well-crafted combat are the main attractions. El Shaddai is a rare treat of a game and a celebration of video games as an art form. » **Andrew Reiner**

Captain America: Super Soldier

7.5

Unlike most superheroes, Captain America was created in a lab. Scrawny patriot Steve Rogers was selected to take part in a secret government project called Operation: Rebirth, a scientific study that attempted to alter the genetics of everyday men and turn them into super soldiers. After Steve Rogers' transformation, a Nazi spy sabotaged the operation, making Rogers the sole beneficiary of the program. But what if this spy had acted sooner? What if he had sabotaged the government's experiment in the middle of the process? Perhaps the allies would have ended up with a soldier that functioned a bit like Sega's movie tie-in: a brawler capable of getting the job done but far from super.

After infiltrating Baron Zemo's Bavarian castle, Captain America sets off on a multi-tiered special op to disable the Hydra forces entrenched there, sabotage German scientist Arnim Zola's plans to create a master race, and kick in the Red Skull's teeth.

Marvel Comics has put its talent in the writer's chair for many of the Marvel games released within the last few years. While this practice sounds noble, the storytelling needs of a game are different from a comic, and the recent Thor and Iron Man titles are proof that a comic writer's talents don't always benefit a game. Thankfully, Christos Gage fares better with Captain America. Super Soldier is filled with many classic video game tropes, but also rolls out some genuinely dramatic moments that had me excited to see how Cap was going to save the day.

In terms of combat capabilities, Captain America is often matched up against DC's Batman. Both heroes are examples of men at the peak of human fitness possessing supreme fighting capabilities. As such, it's fitting that Super

Soldier's combat system resembles the one in Batman: Arkham Asylum. This contextual action system doesn't respond well to button mashers, but those who pay attention to their surroundings can orchestrate many impressive combat sequences. Throwing Cap's shield to take out three or more snipers in a row never gets old, and Cap has a crippling strike meter that he can build up to unleash single-hit takedowns and room-clearing combos. Cap delivers counterattacks and uses his shield to ricochet incoming bullets back at his attackers with effortless grace most of the time, but occasionally an enemy will make Cap look like a rookie by interrupting a counter.

The game's platforming sequences also highlight Captain America's physical grace, but these on-rails segments don't make players feel as capable. While Cap is flying through the air, jumping across beams, and swinging from poles, players perform timed button presses that make Cap move faster through the jungle gym. Rarely does a player have to worry about

missing a jump or even plotting a course. This straightforward design may have saved time during development, but it removes any sense of exploration, accomplishment, or danger from these choreographed action moments.

Still, Cap's platforming abilities are inoffensive compared to his hacking skills. Structured to look like Cap is hacking the Nazi's enigma machine, these minigames require players to match symbols from a jumbled web of lettering. They start out boring and quickly turn tedious. The level design also has its hiccups. Baron Zemo's castle is a massive complex for players to traverse, but you end up doing so in a linear fashion. The few times I had to backtrack, I got lost.

Despite these annoyances, Captain America: Super Soldier is a fun, if sometimes mindless, action roller coaster. The game doesn't stray too far from tried and tested gameplay mechanics, but its lack of creativity ultimately holds it back, and it lacks one final level of polish needed to shine. » **Ben Reeves**

» **Concept**
A solid action game with mediocre platforming sequences that isn't completely ruined by its movie license

» **Graphics**
Next Level Games has done a good job bringing a 1940s German military complex to life, and most enemies have interesting designs

» **Sound**
Most of the game's voice acting is solid, and the punchy sound effects punctuate the action. Cap's verbal asides, designed to help players if they get stuck, feel like they were torn from a book on old school game design

» **Playability**
The combat system is fast and tight, but some of the platforming sequences are boring and the hacking minigames late in the game get tedious

» **Entertainment**
Better than most video game movies or even many comic book games. Next Level Games has scattered enough collectibles throughout the game to justify searching every corner of every level

» **Replay Value**
Moderate

Some of the game's boss fights can get a little frustrating

Cap will have to find a way around enemy's shields, or use them to his own advantage

Bastion

Rich storytelling ma~~~es a~~~~ a~~d role-playing fr~~~ ~~~~

9.25

Concept
Rebuild a shattered world with the help of an omnipresent narrator

Graphics
Watercolor characters and backgrounds are filled with color and life

Sound
Captivating music is accompanied by frequent voiceovers from the gravelly toned storyteller
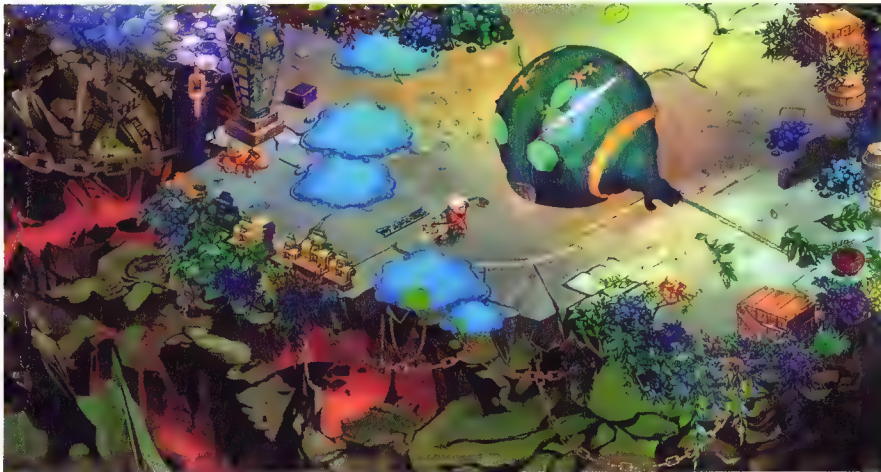
Playability
Easy to understand controls and adjustable difficulty keeps the game accessible and fun for everyone

Entertainment
A fascinating journey into a mysterious world has all the hallmarks of a future classic

Replay Value
Moderately High

gameinformer **GAME OF MONTH**   gameinformer **GOLD**

Style 1-Player Action/RPG **Publisher** Warner Bros. Interactive **Developer** Supergiant Games **Release** July 20 **ESRB** E10+

Supergiant Games' debut effort isn't just good – it's a must-play. Bastion's surface concept is familiar – explore a fantastical world, kill monsters, level up, and collect rewards. Those elements are implemented extremely well, but they aren't the main draw. Instead, it's the realization and implementation of the world and its characters that entrances players. By wrapping every gameplay element around story conceits, Bastion becomes something new and exciting. As the well-written narration, excellent music, and bright visuals draw you in, the game feels like a storybook in which you control the outcome.

The sensation of discovery is at the heart of Bastion, so sharing story details is prohibitive. Here are the basics: you play as the Kid, who wakes up on an island floating in the sky to find his world destroyed around him. A horrible calamity has befallen his people, and he must rectify the situation. As he wakes, a distinctive voice begins to speak, telling the Kid's story as it unfolds. Walk one path, and the narrator tells you why the Kid chose that way. Walk the other path, and the voice might foreshadow what lies at its end. Choose a combination of weapons to take out on your journey, and he comments about that particular load-out. Retry a challenge, and he remarks about the Kid's indomitable resolve. The excellently written and smartly acted narration lend a new layer to the sense of progression. You don't just want to complete that challenging mission or get that elusive piece of gear for its own sake; you also want to hear what the narrator has to say about it when you do.

The game is split up into discrete levels of the broken land through which the Kid must travel. Individual stages feel different from one another thanks to a broad selection of environmental art and clever design twists. Where one level falls apart as you run for safety through the city, another is a dangerous jungle where your enemies are obscured amid the overgrowth. Many areas move the story forward, introduce new weapons, and send the Kid deeper into the wilderness. Other short challenge stages offer a chance to test your weapon skills to win prizes, helping to break up the story with side events. A few particularly intriguing optional levels put a twist on the familiar enemy wave arena-style fights; each wave unlocks a new revelation about one of the main characters' backstories.

As the story continues, several rewarding upgrade options become available. Killing monsters earns you XP for increased health, but it also unlocks slots to apply additional tonics that boost your fighting ability. The Kid can carry two weapons and equip one special ability at a time, and you can find large numbers of both along your journeys. Weapons are creative and varied, running the gamut between explosive ranged devices and devastating melee, and each can be upgraded along a limited branching progression. Players can also ratchet up the overall difficulty in exchange for increased money and XP by calling on ancient, but capricious, gods that alter enemy capabilities.

Battles are a lot of fun, even if they don't always have the depth, speed, or complexity of a true action game. Exploring the world and uncovering its secrets is equally engaging, but like the battles, it's limited in scope. With the exception of a few short side routes, most levels have a relatively linear progression. While the idea of a floating world that comes into being as you walk toward it is cool, you'll get frustrated more than once as you fall off the edge. But don't worry too much – you'll only take a small health hit for your misstep.

The more subtle design elements are what make this game magical – the moments of discovery that peel away the layers of story, the thrill of coming across an abandoned weapon left behind by the old world, and the startling choice that closes the game. The sounds and images stick in your mind after you complete the game just like when you closed the final page on a favorite childhood picture book. Bastion makes a good case for the idea that simple gameplay, straightforward design, and a clear guiding vision for art, music, and story can go a long way to making a good game great. » **Matt Miller**

From Dust

Ubisoft's god game is a breath of fresh air

8.75

gameinformer
SILVER

A tribe embarks on a perilous journey to recover the knowledge of an ancient civilization and explore uncharted territories. With the forces of Mother Nature working against them, the tribe requires aid from "the Breath," a higher being with the ability to manipulate the earth and elements. Out of This World creator Eric Chahi successfully realizes his ambitious vision of allowing players to control a living, breathing world in From Dust. Fans of god games are in for a unique downloadable experience when staving off disasters while helping the tribe survive

From Dust is less about building a civilization and more about controlling the environment to protect it, so if you are looking to create and customize villages, look elsewhere. As the Breath, you create paths for migration toward different totem poles by absorbing land, water, and lava, then strategically placing it to clear paths, redirect water or lava flow, or create bridges. Manipulating elements is as easy as moving an airy cursor over the desired matter, using the left trigger to absorb it, then using the right trigger to release. Leading five AI-controlled tribesmen to a totem causes them to automatically populate a village at that location, granting you special powers such as increasing matter absorption, or quickly dousing fires (all of which are mapped to the control pad).

The concept sounds simple, but later maps in From Dust put your puzzle-solving skills to the test. The difficulty surfaces as you attempt to populate all totems in an area against timed natural disasters like volcanic eruptions and tsunamis. Quickly figuring out the most efficient strategy to gain the powers to proceed toward each totem across wildly different environments – plus creating and maintaining a safe haven for tribesmen until the area is cleared – makes for addictive and frantic gameplay.

From Dust sometimes suffers from pathing problems that make leading AI tribesmen frustrating since players have no control over which direction they take. The villagers occasionally get stuck in geometry or take the least-efficient route despite your best environmental efforts, costing you precious time between timed natural disasters and leading to do-overs. These issues aren't frequent enough to detract from the overall experience, but are annoying on the more challenging maps later in the game.

From Dust also offers challenge maps to complement the main campaign. The maps give players bite-sized timed tasks such as safely leading villagers across canals or dousing raging fires with water. While the challenges offer some light entertainment, you'll likely sink the most time into playing deity in the main game. With a great variety of maps and tons of secrets to uncover, From Dust's amorphous sandbox ensures a consistently entertaining journey. » **Annette Gonzalez**

> » **Concept**
> Establish villages and aid a tribe in their survival against the dark forces of nature
>
> » **Graphics**
> The morphing effects are impressive, and the environments are varied enough to remain interesting
>
> » **Sound**
> Crashing waves, tribal tunes, and the call of your tribesmen are heard throughout
>
> » **Playability**
> Accessible controls allow you to easily experiment with the constantly changing environment
>
> » **Entertainment**
> Fans of god games or strategy titles are in for a good time
>
> » **Replay Value**
> Moderate

Insanely Twisted Shadow Planet

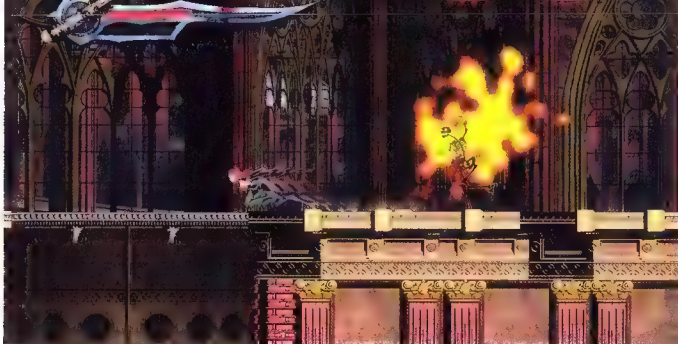A nice place to visit, but you can't stay forever

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Don't listen to those egghead astrophysicists who tell you that the cosmos is full of wondrous marvels. One thing I learned from video games years ago is that space is only filled with hideous creatures, perilous worlds, and weapon upgrades. Insanely Twisted Shadow Planet reinforces these lessons constantly as it follows the formula for exploration popularized by Metroid and carried on by the likes of Castlevania and Shadow Complex.

Guiding a tiny spacecraft through nightmarish passages, you gain new tools, blast through hostile alien life, and uncover a sprawling map. I loved observing the bizarre areas and enemies, and the confrontations with the huge bosses are intense and entertaining. The team at Fuel Cell nails these fundamentals, and the fascinating art direction keeps the adventure stylish from beginning to end. Don't be fooled by the fact that this is a downloadable title; beating the game will take at least a few hours, and even more if you're driven to uncover the entire map.

While the game gets the basics right, it stumbles on delivering a satisfying sense of progression. The weapons - like the buzzsaw and telekinetic beam – are unconventional and interesting, but most of these accessories function primarily as keys to open particular doors. You need missiles to open gates blocking parts of the map, lightning to open others, and so forth. They also have combat applications, but most of the weapons feel like pegs designed to fit into specific holes. Even if your ship is packed with weapons, they don't make you feel powerful because they don't stack or work together – you always use them independently.

This segregation of weaponry wouldn't be a problem if they improved along the way. Apart from your shields and main gun, however, none of your abilities can be upgraded. Your buzzsaw never gets stronger, or bigger, or longer, and you won't find any mobility powers that improve your ability to navigate the environment. This also means that shield and gun upgrades are the only worthwhile trinkets to seek out on the map, though you can go out of your way to collect a bunch of concept art highlighting the striking visuals.

I don't mean to imply that Insanely Twisted Shadow Planet isn't fun or well-made, but it isn't as full-bodied an experience as exploring Zebes or Dracula's castle. I wanted more goals to pursue, and more ways to showcase my growing power. In the absence of another great game in the vein of Super Metroid or Castlevania: Symphony of the Night, ITSP deftly scratches the itch that many gamers have for this breed of 2D exploration and combat. It's worth playing for any fan of the genre, but it isn't the brightest star in the sky. » **Joe Juba**

> » **Concept**
> Follow in the footsteps of Samus Aran without having to leave the comfort of your spaceship
>
> » **Graphics**
> Nightmarish and bizarre visuals make even the most mundane areas and enemies interesting
>
> » **Sound**
> Atmospheric and unobtrusive music and sound effects set the right mood
>
> » **Playability**
> The quick-swap buttons for weapons work well, but using the weapon wheel for the non-mapped abilities isn't great
>
> » **Entertainment**
> Satisfying exploration and a compelling setting are at odds with the lackluster sense of progression
>
> » **Replay Value**
> Moderate

BloodRayne: Betrayal

Cheap deaths and bottomless pits, oh my!

Style 1-Player Action **Publisher** Majesco **Developer** WayForward **Release** August 30 **ESRB** T

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B loodRayne has an interesting past. The first two games garnered decent reviews from critics and fans, but the series all but died in 2004. In the seven years since, Uwe Boll's awful trilogy of movies dragged Rayne's once good name through the mud. Now Majesco is trying to bring the franchise back by re-teaming with WayForward to deliver the same magic the developer sparked with A Boy and His Blob.

At first glance, BloodRayne: Betrayal seems like a slam dunk. The tone of a Castlevania game blends effortlessly with the gameplay of NES-era Ninja Gaiden. Rayne's beautifully animated attacks slice through foes, while her guns offer ranged blasts. A variety of combos offer an assortment of attacks for pushing enemies away, launching them in the air, and stomping down from above. Rayne's dash (in mid-air or on the ground) is absolutely essential for platforming and dodging attacks or projectiles. Sucking certain enemies' blood gives you a satisfying and vital health boost, and a brief suck infects foes, allowing them to be detonated at will. All of this adds up to wild fights with plenty of options. Most of the large-scale boss battles offer a healthy challenge, but after a few failed attempts you can usually identify their patterns and overcome them.

Adding to the variety, Rayne can also transform into a raven to fly through spike tunnels and dodge hazards such as large buzzsaws. If you've ever played the notoriously tricky electric seaweed swimming level in the original Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles NES game, you know what to expect here. Surprisingly, these sections rank relatively low on Betrayal's difficulty scale. This game loves to punish the player.

So many parts of this unrelentingly hard game will haunt my dreams forever. Outrunning a speeding buzzsaw while jumping across pits of acid as moving platforms get ever smaller. Battling several

waves of enemies while electricity zaps random sections of the screen and then fighting a boss immediately after with no checkpoints. Hopping between small bugs to stay in the air over an enormous pit while dashing past moving buzzsaws. The list goes on and on. Many sections feel like WayForward just tried to think of the most torturous levels possible. Rather than enjoying myself as I progressed, I started to dread whatever new merciless deathtrap was waiting around the next corner.

It's not just the agonizing level design that fuels the frustration. The jumping works fine for combat, but it's too floaty for the intense platforming the game demands. Rayne also goes from standing to sprinting immediately, so it navigating small platforms is more stressful than necessary. When combat mixes with hazards, it's too easy to accidentally do the dash combo and suffer an instant death.

I feel proud for beating BloodRayne: Betrayal, but I can't recommend it for anyone who lacks an ocean of patience. Majesco's plan for BloodRayne's resurrection looked great on paper, but the arbitrary and unnecessary difficulty spikes unfortunately keep this half-human half-vampire in her coffin. **Bryan Vore**

Concept
Bring BloodRayne back from the dead with a tough-as-nails 2D action platformer

Graphics
The character designs, animation, and backgrounds look fantastic

Sound
The gothic metal soundtrack fits well, and Rayne's voice actress sings an Evanescence-style song over the end credits

Playability
The difficulty borders on torturous for most of the second half of the game

Entertainment
What starts as a fun, bloody romp quickly becomes unforgiving. You usually earn an "F" grade for all your trouble

Replay Value
Moderate

Alice Madness Returns	6.75	Jul-11
Bangai-O HD: Missile Fury	7.75	Jul-11
Bionic Commando Rearmed 2	7.25	Apr-11
Blood Drive	4.5	Jan-11
Brink	6.75	Jul-11
Bulletstorm	9.25	Apr-11
Cars 2	7.75	Aug-11
Catherine	7	Aug-11
Chime Super Deluxe	8	May-11
Create	5	Jan-11
Crysis 2	9	May-11
de Blob 2	8	Apr 11
Dead Space 2	9	Feb-11
Dirt 3	8.75	Jul-11
Dragon Age II	8.25	Apr-11
Duke Nukem Forever	6.75	Aug-11
Dungeon Defenders	7.75	Jul-11
Dungeon Siege III	8	Jul-11
Dungeons & Dragons: Daggerdale	6	Jul-11
Dynasty Warriors 7	6	Jun-11
Earth Defense Force: Insect Armageddon	8	Aug-11
Echochrome II	7.25	Feb-11
F.E.A.R. 3	7.75	Aug-11
Fancy Pants Adventure, The	7.5	Jul-11
Fight Night Champion	9	Apr-11
Fight: Lights Out, The	6.5	Jan-11
Gran Turismo 5	9	Feb-11
Green Lantern: Rise of the Manhunters	6.5	Aug-11
Hard Corps: Uprising	9	Feb-11
Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows: Part 1	5.5	Jan-11
Homefront	7	May-11
Infamous 2	8.75	Jul-11
Killzone 3	9	Apr-11
Knights Contract	7	Apr-11
Kung-Fu Live	6.5	Feb-11
L.A. Noire	8.75	Jul-11
LEGO Pirates of the Caribbean The Clone Wars	7	Jul-11
LEGO Star Wars III: The Clone Wars	8.5	May-11
LittleBigPlanet 2	9.5	Feb-11
Magic: The Gathering – Duels of the Planeswalkers 2012	8	Aug-11
Major League Baseball 2K11	6	May-11
Marvel Pinball	8.5	Jan-11
Marvel Super Hero Squad: The Infinity Gauntlet	6.75	Feb-11
Marvel vs. Capcom 3: Fate of Two Worlds	9.25	Mar-11
Mass Effect 2	9.5	Feb-11
Might & Magic: Clash of Heroes HD	7.75	Jun-11
Mindjack	5	Mar-11
MLB 11: The Show	9.25	Apr-11
Mortal Kombat	9.5	Jun-11
MX vs. ATV Alive	7	Jul-11
Nail'd	8	Jan-11
NCAA Football 12	9	Aug-11
Operation Flashpoint: Red River	6	Jun-11
Outland	9	Jun-11
Pac-Man Championship Edition DX	9	Jan-11
PlayStation Move Heroes	6.5	May-11
Portal 2	9.5	Jun-11
Red Faction: Armageddon	7.25	Jul-11
Rush'N Attack: Ex-Patriot	6	Mar-11
Shadows of the Damned	9.25	Aug-11
Shift 2 Unleashed	8.5	May-11
Shoot, The	6	Jan-11
Slam Bolt Scrappers	7	May-11
SOCOM 4: U.S. Navy Seals	7.75	Jun-11
Spare Parts	6	Mar-11
Splatterhouse	5	Feb-11
Stacking	8.5	Mar-11
Super Street Fighter IV: Arcade Edition	7.75	Aug-11
Swarm	7.25	Apr-11

9.25 | Shadows of the Damned

Platform PS3 • 360 **Release** June 21 **ESRB** M **Issue** August '11

Shadows of the Damned is unapologetically adolescent, but instead of trying to be cutely ironic and wink at players, the humor comes off as genuine, playful, and fun. Even if you don't find the idea of a sniper rifle called "the Big Boner" funny, you should still enjoy the solidly designed shooting and bit of thought required to play the game. – Phil Kollar

Tales From Space: About A Blob	8.75	Apr-11
Test Drive Unlimited 2	8.5	Mar-11
Thor: God of Thunder	4.5	Jul-11
Tiger Woods PGA Tour 12: The Masters	9	May-11
Time Crisis: Razing Storm	6.75	Jan-11
Top Spin 4	8.5	May-11
Transformers: Dark of the Moon	7.5	Aug-11
Trinity: Souls of Zill O'll	6	Mar-11
Tron: Evolution	4.5	Jan-11
Two Worlds II	7.75	Mar-11
WWE All Stars	7.5	May-11
Yar's Revenge	7.5	Apr-11
You Don't Know Jack	8	Feb-11

A World Of Keflings	8.25	Jan-11
Adventures of Shuggy, The	8.25	Aug-11
Alice: Madness Returns	6.75	Jul-11
Bangai-O HD: Missile Fury	7.75	Jul-11
Beyond Good & Evil HD	9.25	Apr-11
Bionic Commando Rearmed 2	7.25	Apr-11
Blood Drive	4.5	Jan-11
Body and Brain Connection	5	Mar-11
Brink	6.75	Jul-11
Bulletstorm	9.25	Apr-11
Carnival Games: Monkey See, Monkey Do	5	Jun-11
Cars 2	7.75	Aug-11
Catherine	7	Aug-11
Child of Eden	8	Jul-11
Create	5	Jan-11
Crysis 2	9	May-11
DanceMasters	4	Jan-11
de Blob 2	8	Apr-11
Dead Rising 2. Case West	8	Jan-11
Dead Space 2	9	Feb-11
Dirt 3	8.75	Jul-11
Dishwasher: Vampire Smile, The	8.5	May-11
Dragon Age II	8.25	Apr-11
Duke Nukem Forever	6.75	Aug-11
Dungeon Defenders	7.75	Jul-11
Dungeon Siege III	8	Jul-11
Dungeons & Dragons: Daggerdale	6	Jul-11

Dynasty Warriors 7	6	Jun-11
Earth Defense Force: Insect Armageddon	8	Aug-11
F.E.A.R. 3	7.75	Aug-11
Faery: Legends of Avalon	6	Feb-11
Fancy Pants Adventure The	7.5	Jul-11
Fight Night Champion	9	Apr-11
Gatling Gears	8	Jul-11
Green Lantern: Rise of the Manhunters	6.5	Aug-11
Hard Corps: Uprising	9	Feb-11
Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows: Part 1	5.5	Jan-11
Homefront	7	May-11
Ilomilo	8.5	Jan-11
Islands of Wakfu	7	Jan-11
Joy Ride	7	Jan-11
Kinect Adventures	7.5	Jan-11
Kinect Sports	8	Jan-11
Kinectimals	8	Jan-11
Knights Contract	7	Apr-11
Kung Fu Panda 2	5	Jul-11
L.A. Noire	8.75	Jul-11
LEGO Pirates of the Caribbean	7	Jul-11
LEGO Star Wars III: The Clone Wars	8.5	May-11
Magic: The Gathering Duels of the Planeswalkers 2012	8	Aug-11
Major League Baseball 2K11	6	May-11
Marvel Pinball	8.5	Jan-11
Marvel Super Hero Squad: The Infinity Gauntlet	6.75	Feb-11
Marvel vs. Capcom 3: Fate of Two Worlds	9.25	Mar-11
Michael Jackson The Experience	7.75	Jan-11
Might & Magic: Clash of Heroes HD	7.75	Jun-11
Mindjack	5	Mar-11
Mortal Kombat	9.5	Jun-11
Ms. Splosion Man	8.75	Aug-11

4.5 | Call of Juarez: The Cartel

Platform PS3 • 360 • PC **Release** July 19 **ESRB** M

Moving to the modern day is a serious step back for the series that made its name in the West, as The Cartel is an unenjoyable mess. It's generic at best, broken at worst, and falls short in its attempts to innovate cooperative play. – Dan Ryckert

8 | Dungeons of Dredmor

Platform PC **Release** July 12 **ESRB** RP

Judging Dungeons of Dredmor solely on its charm and wit would make it a Game of the Year contender. The rest of the game doesn't clear that high bar, but this indie roguelike hits enough of the right notes to be one of the best five-dollar gaming options for your PC. – Adam Biessener

7.75 | No More Heroes: Heroes' Paradise

Platform PS3 **Release** August 16 **ESRB** M

If you don't own a Wii or want to start from the beginning, this HD upgrade of the original No More Heroes is a solid but flawed brawler that will introduce you to the goofy plight of Travis Touchdown. For everyone else, don't hesitate to skip right to the far superior Wii-exclusive sequel. – Phil Kollar

8.25 | Half-Minute Hero: Super Mega Neo Climax

Platform 360 **Release** June 29 **ESRB** E10+

Unlocking every possible level and storyline requires some serious outside-the-box thinking, and I found myself obsessively puzzling over certain levels repeatedly in an attempt to discover new paths. With a handful of super-difficult levels new to the XBLA version, Half-Minute Hero goes well above and beyond its name with the amount of in-game content it delivers. – Phil Kollar

6.5 | Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows, Part 2

Platform PS3 • 360 **Release** July 12 **ESRB** T

I can't figure out what kind of person could be satisfied by this unceremonious end to the movie-based Harry Potter titles. Gamers will be bored by the mechanics and fans of the lore will be disappointed by the ham-fisted depiction of the series' climax. – Joe Juba

5 | UFC Personal Trainer: The Ultimate Fitness System

Platform 360 **Release** June 28 **ESRB** E

I sweated through several of Personal Trainer's routines, and by the end, felt the comfortable muscle burn you usually get after a workout. I suppose that is one of the goals of any fitness program, but UFC Personal Trainer fails to deliver in every other way. – Ben Reeves

MX vs. ATV Alive	7	Jul-11
Nail'd	8	Jan-11
NCAA Football 12	9	Aug-11
Operation Flashpoint: Red River	6	Jun-11
Outland	9	Jun-11
Pac-Man Championship Edition DX	9	Jan-11
Pinball FX 2	9	Jan-11
Portal 2	9.5	Jun-11
Red Faction: Armageddon	7.25	Jul-11
Rush N Attack: Ex-Patriot	6	Mar-11
Section 8: Prejudice	8	Jun-11
Shadows of the Damned	9.25	Aug-11
Shift 2 Unleashed	8.5	May-11
Spare Parts	6	Mar-11
Splatterhouse	5	Feb-11
Stacking	8.5	Mar-11
Super Street Fighter IV: Arcade Edition	7.75	Aug 11
Swarm	7.25	Apr-11
Test Drive Unlimited 2	8.5	Mar-11
Thor: God of Thunder	4.5	Jul-11
Tiger Woods PGA Tour 12: The Masters	9	May-11
Torchlight	8.5	May-11
Transformers: Dark of the Moon	7.5	Aug-11
Trenched	7.5	Aug-11
Tron: Evolution	4.5	Jan-11
Two Worlds II	7.75	Mar-11
Venetica	5.5	Mar-11
WWE All Stars	7.5	May-11
Yar's Revenge	7.5	Apr-11
Yoostar 2	6	Apr-11
You Don't Know Jack	8	Feb-11

Wii

Babysitting Mama	3	Jan-11
Bit Trip Flux	8.25	May-11
Conduit 2	6	Jun-11
Create	5	Feb-11
de Blob 2	8	Apr-11
Epic Mickey	7.75	Jan-11
Flip's Twisted World	3.5	Jan-11
Ghost Recon	4.5	Jan-11
LEGO Pirates of the Caribbean	7	Jul-11
Lost In Shadow	7.5	Feb-11

Mario Sports Mix	4.5	Mar-11
Marvel Super Hero Squad: The Infinity Gauntlet	6.75	Feb-11
Michael Jackson: The Experience	6.5	Jan-11
Sonic Colors	7	Jan-11
Tiger Woods PGA Tour 12: The Masters	9	May-11
Tron: Evolution Battle Grids	6	Jan-11
You Don't Know Jack	8	Feb-11

PC

Alice: Madness Returns	6.75	Jul-11
Anomaly: Warzone Earth	8	Jun-11
Bejeweled	9	Jan-11
Brink	6.75	Jul-11
Bulletstorm	9.25	Apr-11
Create	5	Jan-11
Crysis 2	9	May-11
Darkspore	8.5	Jun-11
Dead Space 2	9	Feb-11
Divinity II: Flames of Vengeance	7.75	Jan-11
Duke Nukem Forever	6.75	Aug-11
Dungeon Siege III	8	Jul-11
Dungeons	7	Apr-11
F.E.A.R. 3	7.75	Aug-11
Homefront	7	May-11
Magic: The Gathering – Duels of the Planeswalkers 2012	8	Aug-11
Magicka	7.5	Apr-11
Operation Flashpoint: Red River	6	Jun-11
Portal 2	9.5	Jun-11
Section 8: Prejudice	8	Jun-11
Shift 2 Unleashed	8.5	May-11
Sims Medieval, The	7	Jun-11
Total War: Shogun 2	9.5	May-11
Two Worlds II	7.75	Mar-11
Warhammer 40,000: Dawn of War II – Retribution	7.75	May-11
Witcher 2: Assassins of Kings, The	9.25	Jul-11
Yar's Revenge	7.5	Apr-11

NINTENDO DS

Cars 2	7.75	Aug-11

Dragon Quest VI: Realms of Revelation	8.5	Mar-11
Ghost Trick: Phantom Detective	6	Feb-11
Kingdom Hearts Re:coded	6.75	Feb-11
LEGO Star Wars II: The Clone Wars	6.5	May-11
Monster Tale	8	Apr-11
Okamiden	8.75	Mar-11
Plants vs. Zombies	8.25	Feb-11
Pokémon Black/White	8.75	Mar-11
Radiant Historia	8.75	Mar-11
Sonic Colors	8.5	Jan-11

PSP

3rd Birthday, The	6.75	May 11
Dissidia 012 Final Fantasy	7	Apr-11
Final Fantasy IV: The Complete Collection	8.5	May-11
LEGO Star Wars II: The Clone Wars	6.5	May-11
Lord of Arcana	7	Mar 11
Patapon 3	6.75	Jun-11
Tactics Ogre: Let Us Cling Together	9	Mar-11
Ys: The Oath in Felghana	8.5	Jan-11

3DS

Cartoon Network Punch Time Explosion	4.75	Jul-11
Ghost Recon: Shadow Wars	8.25	May-11
Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time 3D, The	9.25	Jul-11
LEGO Star Wars III: The Clone Wars	6.5	May-11
Madden NFL 3DS	6	May-11
Nintendogs + Cats	6.5	May-11
Pilotwings Resort	7.25	May-11
Resident Evil: The Mercenaries 3D	8	Aug-11
Ridge Racer 3D	7.25	May 11
Steel Diver	4	May-11
Super Street Fighter IV 3D Edition	9	Apr-11
Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell 3D	5	Jun-11

Mario's Film Folly

The true story behind Hollywood's biggest gaming blunder

by Ben Reeves

For all their absurdity, the Super Mario Bros. games follow a straightforward template. An Italian plumber adventures in a magical land, fights evil monsters and rescues a princess. It's simple, but Nintendo's vibrant fairy tale could have been fertile ground for a Hollywood fantasy epic. Instead, when *Super Mario Bros.* released in 1993, it portrayed a version of Mario that was worlds away from Nintendo's vision. The Mushroom Kingdom had been turned into a neon-lit cyberpunk city where dinosaurs had evolved into humans. Bowser was a leather-suited politician fascinated by mud baths. The iconic goombas had become eight-foot tall lizard warriors with shrunken heads. *Super Mario Bros.* stands as one of Hollywood's worst adaptations, but the story behind the film is infinitely more bizarre than the one the movie tells.

David L. Snyder, the art director behind *Blade Runner* and the original *Battlestar Galactica* television show, turned an abandoned cement plant in North Carolina into a cyberpunk city

Fire Flower Sale

By 1990, Super Mario Bros. was one of the biggest intellectual properties on the planet. Super Mario World had just released in Japan, and the face of Nintendo's chubby plumber had been slapped on everything from T-shirts and comic books to cereal boxes Mario's name alone was worth millions. It didn't take long for the motion picture industry to come knocking on Nintendo's door.

As always, Nintendo was cautious with its property. The publisher knew Super Mario Bros. didn't have a deep narrative. How would a movie studio translate the simple formula into a 90-minute film? Producer Roland Joffé thought he could figure it out. Joffé's Lightmotive production company was inexperienced, but Joffé had directed the Oscar-nominated films *The Killing Fields* and *The Mission*, which gave the studio some clout. Nintendo was intrigued by Joffé's ideas, but it was more interested in the fact that Joffé had agreed to let Nintendo retain merchandising rights from the film. Joffé walked away with a $2 million contract. In a rare moment for the character, Mario's future was now partially out of Nintendo's control.

After securing the rights to the film, Lightmotive immediately set to work trying to sign high-level talent. The studio approached Danny DeVito to both direct the film and play Mario. Both Arnold Schwarzenegger and Michael Keaton were approached for the role of King Koopa. All three

Directors Rocky Morton and Annabel Jankel on set

passed on the project.

According to *Super Mario: How Nintendo Conquered America* by Jeff Ryan, Tom Hanks briefly signed on to play Mario, but some executives thought that Hanks was asking for too much money, so they fired Hanks in favor of English thespian Bob Hoskins. Hoskins was hot off the success of films like *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* and *Hook*, and the producers felt that he would be a more bankable star. Within a matter of years, Tom Hanks would win Oscars for both *Philadelphia* and *Forrest Gump*, becoming one of Hollywood's most respected actors. Hoskins is now best known for his television work.

While Lightmotive continued its search for actors and directors, it commissioned the first of many scripts. Barry Morrow, one of the Academy Award-winning writers of *Rain Man*, took first crack at the plot, but his treatment was deemed too dramatic and the project was passed over to the writing team that had worked on *The Flintstones* and *Richie Rich*.

This version of the script was more in line with Mario's roots. Mario and Luigi traveled to a magical land reminiscent of *The Wizard of Oz* and *Alice in Wonderland*. In this world, the evil King Koopa – an actual green lizard king – had kidnapped a Princess named Hildy and made her his bride, so that he could access the magical Crown of Invincibility. The Mario brothers and their sidekick Toad set off on a quest to rescue the princess and prevent Koopa from getting his hands on the artifact.

This script was likely the closest the film would ever get to emulating the playful world imagined in Nintendo's games. However, Lightmotive had already signed a directorial team to the project, and these visionaries would take the film down some wild rabbit holes.

Scripting Disaster

Directors Rocky Morton and Annabel Jankel didn't have many movie credits to their names. In fact, the husband and wife team had only directed one other film, a critical and commercial bomb called *D.O.A.*. The duo cut their teeth directing commercials for Coca-Cola and Hardee's restaurants, eventually finding small success after creating the television series *Max Headroom*. Lightmotive loved Max Headroom's zany vibe and felt that Morton and Jankel had the right imagination for a film like *Super Mario Bros*.

Morton and Jankel's vision for the film was much darker than the Nintendo game series. They wanted their film to take place in an alternate reality version of New York, a place called Dinohatten. After an asteroid struck Earth 65

million years ago, all of the planet's dinosaurs had been banished to a dystopian version of our world, but the two realities were still connected by a portal under New York. As the eons passed, the dinosaurs slowly evolved into humanoids and grew to hate the mammals that blissfully walked around Earth prime.

Nintendo's hands were off the project by this point. "I met with the game's designer [Shigeru Miyamoto] very briefly, like for a half an hour meeting or something, but that was about it really," director Rocky Morton told us. "Nintendo let us do whatever we wanted. They just put a crushing deadline on the project. The movie had to be made by a certain date, otherwise there were all these financial penalties, which added a lot of extra stress to the project."

As the production rushed toward principal photography, the directors and producers struggled to agree on a script to match the movie's new direction. More rewrites were issued. One action-packed treatment seemed inspired by *Die Hard*. The script itself contained a scene in which Bruce Willis could make a cameo, scurrying through the air ducts above King Koopa's office. Another script featured *Mad Max*-style death races. It seemed that the *Super Mario Bros*. film was pulling inspiration from everything except the game series that shared its name.

Double Vision

By mid-1992, production was well under way. Holding to the director's inspiration for a darker film, Lightmotive agreed to hire the art director who worked on *Blade Runner* to transform an abandoned cement plant in North Carolina into a cyberpunk wonderland. Campaign posters portrayed Dennis Hopper's version of King Koopa kissing babies. Street vendors served kabobs of flame-broiled lizard. A club called the Boom Boom Bar advertised hot blood cocktails. Electric cars trailed sparks as they buzzed through the city's main artery.

"I wanted the film to be more sophisticated," Morton said. "I wanted parents to really get into it. At that time, there was a very hardcore movement against video games, and a lot of anti-video games sentiment. I wanted to make a film that would open it up and get parents interested in video games. It's completely different now, but back then it was taboo to make a movie based on a video game."

Not everyone shared Morton and Jankel's vision for the film. The studio was expecting a lighthearted kids film, and most of the cast and crew had signed on with similar expectations. The tensions between these two visions began to tear apart the production. The studio felt that the movie was too dark, pressuring Morton and Jankel to lighten the tone. Lightmotive brought in the writer from *Bill & Ted's Excellent Adventure* to write yet another version of the script.

"We were forbidden to work with that writer," Morton recalled. "And that was only a couple of weeks before we went into principle pho-

tography. I'd already had the set built and a lot of characters with prosthetics had already been made, so that script came in and a lot of it didn't match what we'd already started working on."

By this point, at least nine writers had worked on the film, and rewrites would continue long after the cameras started rolling. The script ballooned into a rainbow of confusion as the production crew was continually handed new color-coded daily edits.

"The script had probably been rewritten five or six times by the time I arrived here," Dennis Hopper told the *Chicago Tribune* back in 1992. "I don't really bother with it anymore. I just go in and do it scene by scene. I figure it's not going to hurt my character."

The Flying Squirrel Show

Despite Morton and Jankel's vision for a movie that sounded nothing like Nintendo's series, the duo attentively worked in several video game references. Yoshi appeared as King Koopa's pet, and spray-painted SNES Super Scopes functioned as portable devolution guns during the film's climax. One key reference almost didn't make the cut; Morton and Jankel didn't want the Mario brothers to appear in their classic red and green overalls.

They fought with the producers about the costumes for weeks but finally consented, allowing Mario and Luigi to don their familiar outfits about three fourths of the way through the film.

From the crew's point of view, Morton and Jankel were micromanaging every facet of the production. At one point, Morton allegedly poured coffee on an extra because he didn't think the actor looked dirty enough for the scene. According to a 1992 Chicago Tribune article, the crew began calling the directors derogatory names behind their back. One of their favorites was "Rocky and Annabel, the Flying Squirrel Show."

Filming was scheduled to last 10 weeks, but it slowly stretched into 15. Everyone had different ways of dealing with the frustrating production schedule. John Leguizamo, who had been cast as Luigi, started drinking. In his biography, *Pimps, Hos, Playa Hatas, and All the Rest of My Hollywood Friends: My Life,* Leguizamo describes how he started doing shots of scotch with Hoskins between scenes. During a scene in which Leguizamo was driving a van, the actor was reportedly drunk and braked too hard, causing the sliding door to smash shut on Hoskins' hand. During certain sequences of the film, Hoskins can briefly be seen wearing a pink cast.

Mario and Luigi discover Dinohattan for the first time

MEL (Makeup & Effects Laboratory), the production company that designed many of the films creatures, turned Mario's classic Goomba enemies into eight-foot tall lizard warriors

Concept art for some of the film's cars, which were inspired by the film *Mad Max*

Concept art for the film version of Goombas

Other members of the crew saw the chaotic production as an opportunity. Fisher Stevens and Richard Edson, who played Koopa's henchmen Spike and Iggy, started writing their own dialogue, and even convinced the studio to film a rap scene starring them that was ultimately cut from the theatrical release. At one point in the original script, Koopa had their characters devolved into goombas, but the actors sold the directors on the idea that their characters should be further evolved to become super smart instead. Plot changes like this weren't just common – they were happening on a daily basis.

"They were like a double act," Morton said of Stevens and Edson. "They were young and enthusiastic and inventive, and they definitely came up with stuff for their characters. You know, there were flaws in the script that had to be plugged and worked on while we were shooting, so there was a lot of rewriting and ad-libbing to try and make sense of everything."

Over budget, behind schedule, and managing a cast and crew that was either drunk, working off-script, or completely belligerent, *Super Mario Bros.* had run completely off rails. But this train hadn't wrecked yet.

Dropping the Bob-Omb

The end of *Super Mario Bros.* was a hack job. Morton and Jankel had hoped to film an epic battle sequence on the Brooklyn Bridge. Storyboards were drawn up in which the two realities would start to merge as Mario faced off against Bowser on the iconic structure. Mario eventually won after dropping a Bob-Omb down Koopa's throat then kicking him into the river before he exploded. The scene would never be filmed. The film's producers were tired of spending money on the production. Instead, Koopa was blasted with the Super Scope guns and reduced to a primordial sludge.

"You have to remember that CGI technology was a lot cruder back then," Morton explained. "It was very expensive and hard to do, and we were running out of money, so we couldn't do a lot of the elaborate effects and stuff that I wanted to do."

After principle photography ended, the film's producers tried to cut Morton and Jankel out of the picture. Lightmotive had gotten two other production companies to buy into the film, and

now there were three sets of producers that had money at stake if the movie bombed. Many producers felt that the film needed more action, so a second unit set out to film a couple extra action sequences. Morton and Jankel weren't invited to those shoots, but that wasn't the only thing the directing duo was shut out from.

"I was locked out of the editing room," Morton said. "I had to get the DGA [Director's Guild of America union] to come and help me get back into the editing room. I tried to get the editor to cut it digitally, but they refused. They wanted to edit on Moviola and Steenbeck machines, so the

process was laboriously slow, which didn't help us get the special effect cut in on time."

Super Mario Bros. released to theaters on May 28, 1993. The film cost $48 million to make and grossed less than $21 million. Going up against hit summer films like *Mrs. Doubtfire*, *The Fugitive*, and *Jurassic Park*, the movie probably never had a chance to make back its money. Even Tom Hanks' new film, *Sleepless in Seattle*, out-grossed Mario by $200 million. No one was happy.

"The worst thing I ever did? *Super Mario Bros.*," Hoskins told *The Guardian* in an interview back in 2007. "It was a f---in' nightmare. The whole experience was a nightmare. It had a husband-and-wife team directing, whose arrogance had been mistaken for talent. After so many weeks their own agent told them to get off the set! F---in' nightmare. F---in' idiots."

"From everyone's point of view, the film was a mess," Morton admitted. "It just got rushed into production with a script that had been written two weeks before principle photography, and which had no input from either Annabel or myself. Most of the actors had signed up on the old script, not the new script, so it was very hard to coax them into this new one. I don't think anyone was really happy with the end result."

A lot of excuses can be made for *Super Mario Bros.* It was made during a different era. No one had tried to make a big-budget video game movie before. Video game companies didn't know how much input they should have on the production. And special effects technology limited directors' abilities to portray some of the more fantastical elements often found in a game. However, it's hard to escape the fact that *Super Mario Bros.* was a bad film – a byproduct of a hundred bad choices and unfortunate mishaps. *Super Mario Bros.* should stand as a testament for the wrong way to make a video game movie. Maybe the industry will figure out how to do it right some day. ◆

KNOW YOUR CIDS

a ___   f ___
b ___   g ___
c ___   h ___
d ___   i ___
e ___   j ___
        k ___

If you've played a Final Fantasy game, you've probably encountered a character named Cid.

Forget moogles and chocobos; a Cid has appeared in every Final Fantasy except the original, making it one of the most common recurring references in the series. Next to each letter above, write in which Final Fantasy (II through XIII) featured the corresponding Cid.

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