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ANDY McNAMARA
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Read my column or
comment on this letter at
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Change It

We all know the stereotype. Gamers sit in their basements – or their parents' basements – and play games for countless hours on end. We are fat, anti-social, likely male, and haven't had a significant other in years (if ever).

Of course, many elements of that stereotype are plainly false. The fact that we enjoy weekend-long gaming marathons doesn't mean that we're all just socially inept nerds with a case of arrested development. Gamers are a diverse group, composed of males and females with various interests and backgrounds – something that I think is a testament to the appeal of the hobby as a whole.

However, there is a bit of truth to the stereotype that no one wants to admit. When it comes to the "fat" part, I don't think you can question that America (gamers included) has an obesity problem. It isn't a problem unique to gamers; in fact, I think gamers are leading the charge in changing their lifestyles, and in turn changing the stereotype for all of us. I hear the stories all the time.

"My father-in-law lost 25 pounds playing Wii Golf."

"Dance Central changed my life."

Wii Fit was a national phenomenon with stratospheric sales, the Just Dance series has topped the sales charts in recent years, and numerous other successful fitness games are available for Kinect, Wii, and PlayStation 3. Gamers are losing weight and having fun doing it.

It's the New Year, and every gamer out there should make a resolution to throw in one of the many exciting fitness or dance games out there today. Change something far more important than a stereotype: Change your life.



» 44

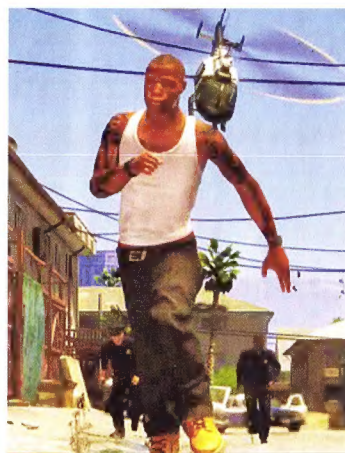
South Park: The Game

The developers at Obsidian are working closely with South Park Studios and creators Trey Parker and Matt Stone to craft the most faithful game possible. That means you can look forward to plenty of lampooned games, inappropriate humor, and all the characters you've grown to love.

by Dan Ryckert



82



60

Grand Theft Auto V



84



22

What's Happening at Capcom?



80

The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim



56



14

Interview: Dan Houser

regulars

» 6 Feedback

Readers bellyache about review scores, decry Nathan Drake's submarine sandwich peddling, and swap money-earning tips for buying this season's great games.

» 14 Connect

We sit down with Rockstar scribe Dan Houser for a chat about Max Payne 3, catch up with Chair regarding Infinity Blade II, and take a look at the recent string of troubling events at Capcom.

» 64 Previews

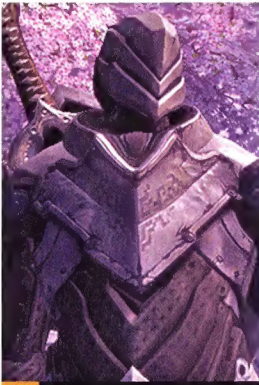
Resident Evil: Revelations impresses on the 3DS, Dante looks cool as hell in new Devil May Cry screens, and we take a trip back to Gotham City.

» 80 Reviews

The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim is one of this year's most highly anticipated RPGs, and it lives up to every bit of the buzz.
by Andrew Reiner

» 100 Game Over

How much do you know about the sleepy mountain town featured on this month's cover? Find out with our South Park quiz.
by Dan Ryckert



20 The Return of Infinity Blade



68



71



32 Afterswords: The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword



76



36



74



64



73



75

Sniper Elite V2



72

Devil May Cry



88



66

games index

Aliens: Colonial Marines	71
Assassin's Creed Revelations	84
Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3	82
Devil May Cry	72
Dirt Showdown	76
Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim, The	80
Fortune Street	92
Game of Thrones	66
GoldenEye 007: Reloaded	89
Gotham City Impostors	74
Halo: Anniversary	90
Jurassic Park: The Game	87
Kinect Disneyland Adventures	94
LEGO Harry Potter: Years 5-7	94
Lollipop Chainsaw	73
Mario Kart 7	93
Metal Gear Solid HD Collection	86
Minecraft	91
Otomedius Excellent	94
Raving Rabbits: Alive & Kicking	94
Resident Evil: Revelations	68
Sniper Elite V2	75
Spec-Ops: The Line	70
SSX	64
Stronghold 3	94
Sword of the Stars II: Lords of Winter	94
Ultimate Marvel Vs Capcom 3	89
WWE '12	88



This month in Feedback, readers complain about a high review score being too low, our average review score being too high, and the ethics of video game characters endorsing real-life products, while a few entrepreneurial gamers explain how they're accumulating cash for the holidays.

More Than Meets The Eye

GI's cover art never ceases to amaze, but issue 223's Fall of Cybertron really impressed me. I'm not sure who was responsible for it, but it was so good I separated it from the rest of the magazine and hung it on my wall as a poster. What could be more epic than Optimus Prime facing off against a giant metal dinosaur, with Cybertron literally falling to pieces in the background?

Michael Webb Jr.
Atlanta, GA

Thank you for issue 223's Transformers Primer in Game Over. I have been a fan of Transformers for most of my life, but didn't know some of the facts you shared. Your coverage of the "robots in disguise" has encouraged me to look deeper into the history. Could you suggest the best accepted media for this study?

E.D. Oakes
via email

If you're looking for more stories that tie into the two games, check out the *Transformers: Exodus* and *Transformers: Exiles* novels by Alex Irvine, and the new *Transformers: Prime* CG animated series. Not only are they entertaining, they're 100-percent Shia LaBeouf free.

Remembering The Game Doctor

I just wanted to thank you guys for the memorial piece on Bill Kunkel ("Reflections on the Passing of Bill Kunkel," issue 223). It's an incredibly sweet gesture to recognize the forefathers of any line of work, and the cutthroat aspect of today's writing world often leaves that to other people. Thanks for being the other people.

Kyle Dachik
Baraboo, WI

Matt Helgeson did the gaming community a great service by not only remembering a legend, but at the same time introducing him to the younger generation. I had never heard of Mr. Bill Kunkel before seeing last month's Classic article. After reading it, I felt like I had just learned about a remarkable and great man. He seemed genuine and down to Earth, and reading about his legacy put a smile on my face.

D.J.P.
via email



Contact Us

feedback@gameinformer.com

A Fantastic Fanatic

I'm so glad my magazine subscription is running out soon. You gave *Uncharted 2* a 10 and *Uncharted 3* a 9.5? It's just an opinion, but it's obvious you don't know what you're talking about. *Arkham City* is honestly better than *Uncharted 3*? You can play both of those together and say that with a straight face? FYI, my other friends say the same about their subs as well. Enjoy your loss of business.

Karim
via email



Considering we received your letter a week before *Uncharted 3* was released, we're guessing you're basing your opinion solely on your unabashed love of the series. Ours is based on playing the completed game. Also, who complains that a 9.5 is too low? That would be like complaining there are too many great games to play...

Cue This Guy

As a subscriber, I rely a lot on your ratings to help me decide on purchases. I was disappointed this month when, out of 16 reviews, you gave an 8 or above rating to 14 games, and a 9 or above to 8 of them! Such generous scoring discredits your reviews and thereby reduces their utility. Perhaps with the impressive advancement of game technology in general, it is time to revamp your scoring system.

Saleh Shahid
via email

We're sorry you're disappointed by the number of good games on the market, Saleh. Rather than adjusting our scoring system so that more games get negative scores, we'll just go ahead and tell developers to make their games crappier, so that we have more to complain about.

Friendship Is Magic... And Volatile

I recently read your Feedback response to Angelo's defense of *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* ("Who You Calling Frilly?", issue 233). Now, I won't harp on you (love and tolerance is key), but I'm curious; just how many emails did you receive regarding the show? I ask because fellow bronies were posting pictures of your letter before I got the issue, and a main FIM news source mentioned it as well. I just hope that they didn't spam you with hate mail; that's just rude.

David Rawls
Southbridge, MA

Hey guys, I just wanted to comment on the one dude talking about *My Little Pony*. When I read that, I just shook my head. I hope you guys don't think that all us bronies are that over-sensitive. Most of us are normal guys, girls, and even servicemen like myself! I love the show as much as anyone, but dang, that dude should learn to take a joke. "Frilly" is a pretty much the series in a nutshell – but that's what makes it great!

Michael F.
Montebello, CA

Despite never describing FIM's frilliness as a bad thing, some bronies took serious offense to our comments and responded with language that would make the show's peaceful ponies wither up and die. Most fans were surprisingly cordial, though, so in the spirit of peace and crap, we won't hold a grudge.



A Fighting Chance

I was so happy to see you guys publish a piece on the growing e-sports scene ("Pro Gaming Comes of Age," issue 223). I know that your magazine is typically a console magazine, but the growth of e-sports is something I want a bigger audience to see (especially *StarCraft 2*).

Andrew Holliday
via email

As a fan of professional gaming circuits, I'm curious why fighting game tournaments were strangely absent from the article. I too enjoy witnessing high-level *StarCraft* play, but the games which get my heart racing, blood pumping, and hooliganism surfacing have definitely been tournaments like *Evo*, which broke records earlier this year by pulling in over two million unique viewers; or *Space Battle Opera* in Tokyo, where an estimated ten thousand people each paid \$20 just so they could watch the live feed (myself included). To clarify, I thank Mr. Blessener for giving the scene some much-needed exposure, but leaving out the fighting game community in an article about the rise in popularity of e-sports is kind of like writing an article discussing traditional sports, then talking up football and basketball and forgetting to even mention baseball.

Nick Kraker
Cleveland, OH

You bring up a fair point, Nick. We chose to keep the article focused on *StarCraft 2* and first-person shooters because of their broader appeal to general gamers, but we certainly didn't mean it as a snub to fighting game fans. We've highlighted a number of pro fighters in our Gamer section in the past, and recognize the genre's considerable contribution to the popularity of e-sports.

Short Answers to Readers' Burning Questions

"Are the Short Answers to Readers' Burning Questions real?"

Yes, unfortunately.

"Your cool, wanna hang out?"

Sorry, we're busy that day.

"I got a new laptop, a Chuck Norris poster, two blacklights, and a lava lamp! Do you have any job openings?"

You already work here, Dan.

Best Crank Letter of the Month

"Nicolas Cage is not only a great actor but an even greater human being. I've had enough of your insults, so I am ending my subscription."

Worst News Tip of the Month:

"I want won for free please"

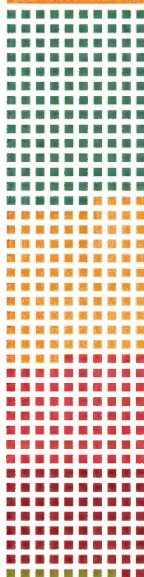


(Left) Bad idea of the Month goes to Drive a Tank's Tony Borgolom, who lived up to his company's name by letting Jeff Cork and Tim drive a tank. (Right) Bad idea #2: Letting Tim shoot that thing.

CANDID PHOTOS FROM THE VIDEO GAME INDUSTRY

GLSIFY
continued on page 8

On Your Mind



- Holiday Game Excitement 34%
- Brony Backlash 27%
- Transformers Love 19%
- "You Idiots Rated [Game Title] Too [High/Low]" 18%
- Plants Using "Rage" As A Play On Words 2%

Question Of The Month:

Did your most anticipated holiday game live up to your expectations? Why or why not?



Ubi Grateful

I just finished your Ubi Uncensored article. As a graduate of a well-known liberal arts school in Florida that, among other things, teaches game development, this is the kind of behind-the-scenes story and in-depth look into the industry I love reading about. You can't find that from just any game magazine or website. Your continued dedication to covering studios, industry personalities, new trends and markets (with your social games and downloadable content features), etc. really provides the total picture coverage of gaming and the industry that I have come to love and enjoy.

Kevin Sharp
Middletown, PA

All too often gamers view developers and publishers as faceless corporations that only care about making money. Reminding them of the individuals within these companies who do their best to make and distribute really good games is something we take great pleasure in.

Hoagies Among Thieves

I just witnessed one of my favorite and most respected video game protagonists hawk Subway sandwiches on cable television. Mr. Nathan Drake. I understand the need for marketing and that many celebrities do commercials, but Drake isn't a celebrity. He's a bona fide character, someone who lives by his own rules, seeking out adventure and treasure. It seems like a major betrayal to have him selling fast food sandwiches. What do you think?

Rich T. Wilmette, IL

We can appreciate Naughty Dog's attempts to attract a mainstream audience to its flagship series, which has served as a great introduction to the industry for many non-gamers. That being said, seeing one of our picks for 30 Characters Who Defined a Decade doing the "five dollar footlong" gesture in the multiplayer beta made us cringe more than eating a month-old sub would. On the bright side, maybe Golden Abyss will finally answer the mystery of what Nathan Drake is willing to do for a Klondike bar.



continued from page 7

(Left) This month Reiner joined Vikings players Adrian Peterson and Chris Klwe, and Ubisoft's Stone Chin to try out Assassin's Creed Revelations' multiplayer. Somehow the punter ended up the MVP!

(Right) G's news editor Jim Reilly looked mighty professional when he met Bobby Kotick at this year's Nite to Unite dinner.



continued on page 9

Paying The Bills

In issue 222, we asked gamers how they plan on paying for this season's deluge of great games. The responses we received convinced us that our readers are a creative – though morally questionable – bunch.

To pay for the explosion of new titles this holiday season, I've entered a religious congregation's essay contest for \$300. In theory, the church will be paying for my virtual adventures!

Sam Morrison

I picked up a part time job working in a corn maze scaring the daylights out of drunken men and ditsy teenagers. So much fun!

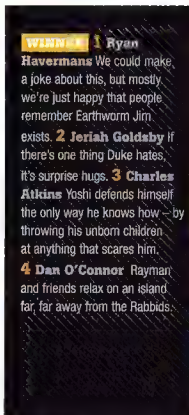
Tony Faniello

My school sells Domino's pizza at lunch for \$2 per slice. So, I'll buy a Little Caesar's pizza for \$5, stick it in a Domino's box, and sell each piece for two bucks. Trust me, people at my school are stupid, and this is teenage business-man-ship at its best.

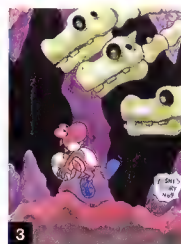
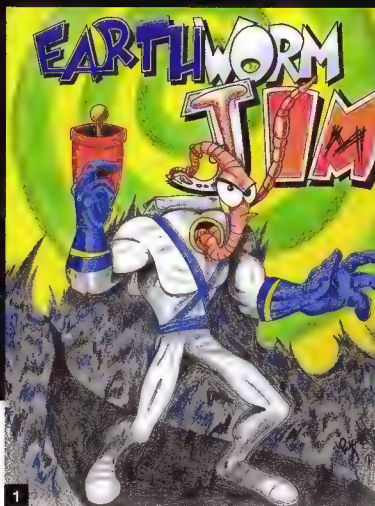
Jacob Archer

I'm selling a kidney. Thankfully, it's not mine... mwahahaha!

Andrew Sanders



WINNER 1 Ryan Havermans We could make a joke about this, but mostly we're just happy that people remember Earthworm Jim exists. **2 Jeriah Goldsby** If there's one thing Duke hates, it's surprise hugs. **3 Charles Atkins** Yoshi defends himself the only way he knows how – by throwing his unborn children at anything that scares him. **4 Dan O'Connor** Rayman and friends relax on an island far, far away from the Rabbits.



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

Game Informer
Reader Art Contest
724 1st St. N.,
3rd Floor
Mpls, MN 55401

CORRECTIONS:

As originally reported in our online review, Rocksmith received an 8.25, not an 8.5, as was stated in issue 224. We regret the confusion.

In our PlayStation Vita feature in issue 224, we incorrectly stated that the 3G-enabled model would cost \$399. In actuality, it will cost \$299.



(Left) Dan, on the other hand, looked like a professional moron when he crashed a Skyrim midnight launch dressed as Saint's Row: The Third's Professor Genki (Center) When a giant Skyrim statue arrived at the office, someone had to man up and give it a prostate exam. Enter Jeff Cork. (Right) How did Joe get so good at insulting people? By studying with the masters – like MST3K's Joel Hodgson, who is currently touring the nation with his new live show, Cinematic Titanic.

Arrested Deve

NOTABLES

- 14 interview:
rockstar's dan houser
- 20 'the return of infinity blade'
- 24 what's happening at capcom?
- 26 advanced tactics: the search for
a smarter military shooter
- 32 afterwords:
the legend of zelda: skyward sword
- 38 interview:
ken raiston
- 42 opinion:
in defense of japanese games



by Matthew Kato

Has Motion Gaming Fulfilled Its Promise?

lopment

WHEN MICROSOFT'S KINECT garnered a Guinness World Record for the Fastest-Selling Consumer Electronics Device by moving eight million units in its first 60 days on sale, a new era in motion gaming appeared to be well underway. But where have Kinect and competitor Sony's Move peripheral taken gamers? A year has passed since the release of both devices, and their software libraries have stagnated to the point that the accessories' effect on gaming seems fleeting.

Fittingly, Kinect and Move are following in the footsteps of the Wii, which after taking the world by storm has become irrelevant in the console race despite the fact that it's sold the most consoles of this generation. Kinect's amazing sales numbers over the first few months have given way to a much slower adoption rate. According to Microsoft, after Kinect shifted eight million units in the early days, the peripheral has sold only two million additional units from March until its first anniversary in November. Sony's Move has followed a similar trajectory. It hit 4.1 million units sold in its first two months on the market, and in mid-October it had shipped (not sold) 8.3 million Moves worldwide according to Gabe Ahn, developer support engineer for Sony Computer Entertainment America.

Perhaps more alarming than the peripherals' sales patterns is the underwhelming software for both Kinect and Move. Judging by Game Informer's own reviews*, only a handful of Kinect games — like Kinect Sports, Sesame Street: Once Upon a Monster, and Dance Central — have scored an eight or above. The Gunstringer is one of the few, if not the only game, that can be considered a core-focused title. Through this lens, the motion sensor mimics the Wii in its failure to offer a sustained stream of compelling and highly regarded software.

The software lineup of Sony's Move controller might appear better — more than 70 games supported by year's end as opposed to Kinect's over 60 — but that's because the peripheral's functionality has been retroactively added to games that came out before the Move's launch. While Move may appear to serve the gaming tastes of core gamers better than Kinect with games like Killzone 3, LittleBigPlanet 2, and Heavy Rain, in the good majority of these titles the Move is an alternate control scheme and not the focus.

Despite these attempts by Microsoft, Sony, and third parties to make motion gaming an integral part of our gaming experience, at this point their implementation has not significantly influenced this generation of games. The usual controller setup remains the standard, preferred way to play games.

John Koller, Sony's director of hardware marketing, is well aware of this even though he believes that for a title like Killzone 3, the Move and its Sharpshooter peripheral provide the best experience. "There are a significant amount of games that are going to be using the DualShock controller, and we are absolutely okay with that," he says.

The PlayStation 3 and Move may lack that must-have, Move-only experience, but Koller approaches the situation pragmatically



"I think ideally we'd love to see maybe more required titles that come to the platform," he admits, but he also says Sony isn't demanding that developers put Move in their games. In general, he believes that whether a game uses the peripheral as a secondary control scheme or requires it, you can't shoehorn the peripheral where it doesn't belong. This philosophy is evident in the company's larger approach to getting people to adopt Move. Most of the games requiring Move naturally appeal to a casual crowd who are more attracted to the peripheral itself as opposed to a more core gamer, perhaps, who may pick up Move because it's compatible with a title like Resistance 3 that they may already own or are planning to purchase.

Sony's flexible outlook to the Move controller is a low-pressure pitch to gamers, and for better or worse, this won't change in the near future. Koller says that while the upcoming slate of software utilizing the peripheral includes all kinds of genres (including some big first- and third-party franchises and ones that Koller says "people haven't thought of before with motion gaming"), he also strongly intimates that sports and casual titles will remain the main focus of Move in 2012.

One of those sports titles Koller could be referring to is Electronic Arts' Tiger Woods series, which is supporting Move for the third year in a row and introducing Kinect functionality for the first time. Golf is a natural fit for motion controls, and the success of the Wii versions of the series could be a road map for Kinect and Move. While the game's executive producer, Brent Nielsen, says the Kinect version is the definitive way he chooses to play the game, he also understands the lower adoption rate of the peripheral keeps publishers from supporting motion controls with most of their games. "You're definitely trying to hit the widest number of people possible, so you still want to make it compelling for those people [using a standard controller]," he says. "I don't

know that we'd ever require it, and it being the only way you could play the game."

It's not surprising that Sony and a third-party software publisher/developer like EA want to have their cake and eat it too by providing motion- and non-motion gamers alike with a product they both can enjoy. Publishers hedging their bets like this, however, could be the reason neither Kinect nor Move has a definitive title that makes those peripherals a must-have item. Scanning some of the previously announced games for the peripherals, it doesn't look like the cavalry is on its way. Kinect has titles like Fable: Journeys, Kinect Star Wars, and Steel Battalion: Heavy Armor, but the first two games have not garnered significant hype or praise so far. Similarly, Move fans are pinning their hopes on Sorcery, but that game hasn't been shown outside of an E3 demonstration. Two high-profile titles, Mass Effect 3 (Kinect) and BioShock Infinite (Move), are using the accessories, but the peripherals' integration is not why gamers are looking forward to these titles.

The most exciting ways people are using Kinect may be in non-gaming applications. Microsoft provides a software development kit, which hobbyists and non-gaming developers have leveraged for all kinds of different uses, from helping autistic kids via therapy to Kinect-created art. While nobody knows what kinds of inspiration game developers may find in these non-traditional uses of the peripheral, it's interesting that Microsoft celebrated Kinect's one-year anniversary with the announcement of the Kinect for Windows program for commercial businesses and not a gaming-related announcement.

Regardless of the slowing growth, EA's Nielsen thinks that motion gaming in general is here to stay. "It's not a fad, and it's not something that's going to be one and done," he believes. "I expect it to be a big part of gaming in the future."

The Numbers

MOVE GAMES

76 titles with Move functionality, but only a third require it.

32 First-party titles.

Number of games requiring Move scoring over 8 by Game Informer*: 1

KINECT GAMES

64 titles with Kinect functionality, 81 percent require it

9 First-party titles.

Number of games requiring Kinect scoring over 8 by Game Informer*: 7

*Game Informer has not reviewed all Kinect and Move titles.



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Rockstar Games' vice president of creative Dan Houser, who's been with the company since its early days alongside his brother Sam, rarely gives interviews. Despite his reticence to talk to the press, his work looms large over the current landscape of gaming. As a writer for many of Rockstar's biggest franchises, including Grand Theft Auto and Red Dead Redemption, he's given voice to dozens of beloved characters.

Today, Houser is hard at work crafting *Max Payne 3*, a comeback vehicle for Remedy's troubled noir hero. Recently, we had the rare chance to speak with him about his background, influences, writing process, and vision for *Max Payne*.

Rockstar has always really put a premium on pop culture. What kind of stuff were you into as a kid?

Music, TV shows, movies. I remember when we first got a VHS. My dad got one because he was a lawyer and a client wasn't paying his bill. His other client ran a video store, so we used to watch a lot of movies. One of the films [my brother Sam and I] watched obsessively was *Bruce Lee in New Guinea*. If you asked people if they liked Bruce Lee, they'd say, "Yeah, I loved *Enter the Dragon*." But we loved *Bruce Lee in New Guinea*. I could never figure out any information on it; it didn't seem to exist anywhere. Eventually, I realized that I could look it up on IMDb. It turns out it's Bruce Li, and it was a Singapore fake Bruce Lee film with dubious porn overtones, described as one of the worst films ever made. But when you're five and seven, we found it incredible. We'd try to imitate the movie and kicked a hole in our parents' '70s-style glass door. That's why we loved *The Warriors*, which was another movie that they had in this local suburban video store that we watched 100 times. It was amazing — gangsters dressed up in makeup and baseball bats.

We loved books and pop music. old TV shows. It's different now, because you can find everything. In the '80s and early '90s, when we were getting obsessed with consuming culture, part of the appeal was the obscurity of stuff, about knowing things that were hard to find — some game you couldn't get except on import or a hard-to-find book. Now, nothing is obscure anymore.

One of Rockstar's legacies is making games that felt like they were a part of the larger conversation of pop culture. Games weren't really a part of the same conversation for many years of their existence.

For us, it wasn't that we looked down on that in any respect. But we just thought games could be something else alongside that. If you take *Final Fantasy*, it has roots in anime and manga. Across a global level,

RPGs had roots in Western fantasy like Tolkien, which influenced music and other things. So, games had connections, but not to the same things that our stuff connected to. There was a cutesy, Japanese, fantastical element to Nintendo iconography, which I suppose has some roots in cartoons.

Games didn't necessarily have many roots in other kinds of fiction that were popular in books, movies, and television. Musically, we were always obsessed with film soundtracks and good music. We felt obliged to put that in. In terms of what we set out to do, it was to say that games are being made for audiences A, B, and C... but content-wise, we want to make them for another audience. An audience that's playing games, but isn't having content made for them. On a broader level, what we hopefully took out of things was that if you want to make good stuff, you have to put your heart and soul into it.

I think we've done best when we went in directions that people weren't expecting. That's something that we'd take from a broad range of cultural influences — trying to stay ahead of what would be perceived as mainstream or what people expect.

A lot of the games Rockstar has made were risky projects. Making a game about *The Warriors* is hardly like making a *Star Wars* game. Even *Red Dead Redemption*, which was a huge blockbuster, or *L.A. Noire* — who knew that people would want a Western or detective story? What's Rockstar's process for deciding what to make games about? Is it literally just what you think is cool?

It's almost that simple. It's what we think is cool and what we think

there's an interesting game to be made about it. There are things we think are cool but we can't solve some of the core mechanical riddles — or you know it's going to be a nightmare with certain tech issues so you don't bother going there.

But, fundamentally, if we think it's interesting we think we'll find a way to make the game interesting and then we'll have to figure out a way to sell it. We'll come to that much later. Our hope is that, if we make a fun and interesting game, we can find a way to make its money back and a bit of profit. That's our core responsibility as people that have been given money to do something by Take-Two. That's about it. Market research will tell you what people last played and enjoyed; you're not going to find stuff that no one's ever done before out of that. It's impossible.

One thing that sticks out about Rockstar in the industry is that it has a very strong identity. Blizzard or Valve has that to a degree, but the closest comparison I could come up with is some record labels.

We set out to have the identity of Def Jam in music. We'd grown up in the era of a lot of independent record labels that we worshipped. We wanted that kind of feeling around something. Where, we're obviously

part of a company, but we wanted independence within that company and that would be this label structure. The label would become an identity to the consumer. On a cynical level, it might convince them to buy something they wouldn't normally buy, and hopefully they'd enjoy it. But on a more interesting level, hopefully they'd feel like it was a badge of consistency and a sense of quality. There are certainly other companies that have elements of that — we're probably the only one that isn't a straightforward, if very large, developer. We absolutely started out in publishing and ended up owning development studios. It was a different approach.

I think that shows in the fact that you have a greater unity between the creative, advertising, and marketing of your games.

That was the idea of it being like a record label. It has to feel that way.

I think some developers see their own TV commercials...

And they hate them, and they aren't shown them in advance. Some places respect the money more than the developers. For us, the creative team is everything. Our marketing is showing off the game. We'll never make a campaign that's anything other than showing off the game.

Continued on page 16

Rockstar's

DAN

Comes Clean



HOUSER

About Max Payne 3 and Game Writing

You obviously have many different roles at Rockstar, but one of your main roles has been writer. Talk about your writing process.

Part of the fun of doing it in games is that there is no agreed structure. For someone that is as scatterbrained as me, a great part of the pleasure is figuring out the structure of the games. The experience isn't just a long-form, linear film. You're able to have a film plot and have this more experiential way of experiencing the game world. You traverse the world, hear what the people say, listen to the radio, speak to pedestrians, read the newspaper in

Red Dead – whatever it may be. It's figuring out how you can give the whole game world an overarching personality in as many ways as possible. That's something that games do very well that's unique to games.

With our stuff, we try to find a new way to engage the player by rewarding exploration and rewarding discovery. We made up the way the games flowed and made up the process of doing the motion-capture cutscenes and everything since then – the talk radio, the pedestrian comments. We figured that out as a group and using that as a way of writing something that has personality but isn't just revealed linearly.

Who are your influences as a writer? Or did your style evolve more from your working experience?

I fear so. There are lots of film scripts that I love but would never try to overtly copy. GTA has its own tone that's evolved over time.

It could be people that you found inspirational, not necessarily influential.

Well, I think for anyone writing gangster dialogue to say you didn't like Tarantino, you'd be lying. From a pure banter level, when we were doing GTA: London 1969 we were obsessed with *The Long Good Friday*. It's a famous English gangster film; it's got the best one-liners. It's the same with *Goodfellas*. Anyone making any kind of gangster fiction after that is influenced by that movie whether they want to admit it or not. Where they were much more about heists, *Goodfellas* was more about lifestyle. For us, our games deal in 24-hour day-and-night cycles. You're going to want to show people in different types of situations, so of course it's influential – all the classic Scorsese films. When you're not American, it's one of the best American voices.

The challenging one, I suppose, in terms of finding a tone, was Red Dead. Bully was easy, because it was easy for me to imagine being a snotty kid. With GTA, Rupert Humphries, who writes the GTAs with me, and I never had productive criminal careers, so you're always trying to imagine things while trying to make the tough guys feel ridiculous at the right level. You don't want to make them seem too heroic. But that's always more contrived. With Red Dead, it was trying to find something that would work as a period piece without the language bogging you down. You want to keep the games moving, but you want it to feel like it came from a time when people spoke more formally and in a more mannered way. Cowboys can become camp very quickly, and we were scared of that.

What's your process? Obviously you have all these bits and pieces that people can find – or not. They could listen to a certain radio station or not listen to it. They could talk to a pedestrian or not. There's the ether of the world where you get little bits that fill out the story. Then, there is the more core story that you could follow a few different paths to get to but is linear at the end of the day.

It's meandering but linear. It's linear in that you reach an

ending, but hopefully you've felt a certain amount of freedom in how you get there. The first thing we think about is where the game is going to be. The second thing we think about is who our lead character is. From that, then maybe we think about who our secondary characters are and what our lead character's core, driving quest is. Hopefully, these all feed back into the place. You want something that feels like it would make sense in New York or make sense in the Wild West or, in the case of Max, what would make sense for this character in this place. Then, as much as possible it naturally evolves out from there.

Games are very long-form as a medium. We've not made a lot of five-hour games. So, trying to get a wide-range of characters that will fit into the place and trying to link them together, but – above all – building a central theme. All the while, we're trying to think more and learn more about the time and place in which the game is set. We use all that knowledge and research and our feelings and responses to it to pepper the world with things that pedestrians might speak about, advertising, TV shows, articles in newspapers, fake products in newspapers. All that stuff hopefully has the feel that it relates to our core, central themes. But it has to have some degree of reality.

It's gathering a lot of information, turning it to our needs, and then dicing it up and spreading it out in a fun way. And remembering – at all times – that we're making an interactive experience. So, you always want to reward interactivity. Even if the reward is simply reading something fun, it's much better if you can find it in a weird place. Or, meeting someone is better than reading something, so can we give that information to a character so we can hear them speak and reward the player?

As a writer, you have to balance the demands of story, design, and gameplay. How does the collaboration between you and the developers work? As an example, "Hey, we just thought of this awesome action sequence. Could you help us incorporate that into the story?" Or do you think of certain sequences and ask them if they can accomplish it in the game?

Both ways – and all ways in between. Fundamentally, there's a story outline that we agree on with characters built into it. Usually, it exists as a Word document that reads like an overly technical short story. That gets turned into a diagrammatic chart of the game broken down by missions. Those missions are handed off to designers who build them out. We'll discuss them and see what's working and what's not working. We'll make sure they're not too similar. You want the game to have peaks and calm bits and try to build it like a series of movies that are running simultaneously. Hopefully, we'll have ideas coming in from everywhere. Once the ideas are accepted, they can be improved by someone who's iterating on them. It's very much a communal process. We've tended not to give too much power to the role of the lead designer, because we really believe in the power of the collective to solve these



roides – particularly in the design area.

Hopefully, something you will never hear me say is “My game.” It’s our game; it’s everyone here that’s working on it. That includes people in testing and people in marketing. We’re all in this together. We all have to feel ownership of it.

Max Payne 3 is different in that it's a more contemporary spin on noir, especially since the new game is set in Brazil, which isn't perceived as a traditional noir setting.

But New York is not a noir place, particularly – to me. L.A. is the noir city. But even then, two of my favorite noir films are *The Maltese Falcon*, which is set in San Francisco and *Bad Day at Black Rock*, which is set in a small town. But if noir meant anywhere, it meant L.A. – slatted shots of people smoking cigarettes in underlit rooms. So we never understood that criticism.

I didn't mean it as a criticism.

Not from you, but there was some amount of hysteria about it when we announced that this game was going to be set in Sao Paulo. Like, “How could you do that? It’s taking away the noir-ness of Max.” That part of the noir wasn’t there anyway. That was not where the noir came from. I suppose there is that image of a New York alleyway where the smoke comes up and the rats scurry around that had a noir-ish feel to it, but that’s no more classical noir than anything else.

For us, the funny thing was that we were working with Remedy on Max and Max 2, and the stronger influence on those games was Hong Kong action movies and not film noir. There was a noir veneer to it, but the Hong Kong action was in the DNA of the game – right down to the core mechanics. We wanted to keep both in there heavily. It’s funny that everyone picked up on the noir thing, but if you ever played the games that’s not what you’d take away from them. What I took away from them was the gunplay, which was very Hong Kong – and openly so. It was a bullet-time ballet of death.

Now that Max Payne 3 is a Rockstar Studios production with multiple studios working on it...

The fact is that every studio – give or take – is involved in some ways in everything now. GTA is still very much headquartered out of North. Red Dead was headquartered out of San Diego, but people were helping from everywhere. That’s strength. Max began in Vancouver and Toronto but has spread to a couple other ones as they have come off of other things.

So, are you writing for Max Payne 3?

Yes, me and some other people, most closely Mike Unsworth, who wrote on Red Dead. Luckily, he’s fluent in Portuguese, so he saved me.

Taking over a series that you didn't work on before, how is that

different? Coming in to Max, what was your goal for the writing?

Well, it was different because he existed. The other games we started from scratch, there were no existing characters. In almost every other game, we’ve changed protagonists, so I haven’t a lot of experience with an ongoing protagonist. The goals were to look at what Max was when the first two games were made, look at what they were trying to make, and see if we could make the game that was the goal they were trying to make with the limitations of the technology in 2001 and 2003. We want to use the intervening eight years of technology innovation and design innovation to make a game that stayed true to the spirit of Max. When they came out, Max Payne games were designed to be very cinematic and progressive in their design. So, to not keep that going in order to stick slavishly to Max’s 2001 design decision would have seemed not true to what the game is about.

Continued on page 18





Continued from page 17

From a narrative perspective, I think we took the decision that we wanted to include the time lapse in the story. Max 2 was supposed to be a few years after Max 1. This game is coming out several years later, so let's include that in the story. Then, we also took the decision that Max, based on the first two games, was clearly finished as a cop in New York. There was no realistic way to carry that on. If we had chosen to do that, it would have been incredibly conservative and boring. From a narrative perspective, what was Max Payne about? It was about a noir story with Max Payne and his inner demons being central to that. The hardboiled but softhearted cop who's made many bad decisions and is ready with his trigger finger, but is a good guy who's had bad luck. It's a strong and interesting character, and there are a lot of places to take that guy.

It was interesting to think about what would happen to him eight years later. How would he make a living? He's got to do something. What happens to a fallen cop? They go into private security. Every retired cop goes into private security. That's what would happen to Max. It felt very organic. We wanted to set the game somewhere different, because we felt he was done in New York. We didn't feel that a lot of violent shootouts would feel realistic in New York anymore. They don't happen here anymore. In Brazil, it felt interesting. It's not a location that has been done to death. It felt like it had a great contrast between rich and poor. It felt like the kind of place where you get this incredibly modern architecture and abject, depressing poverty, and massive corruption all intertwined. But people are [still] trying to do good in this world. It felt like a good mix of values and systems, rather than just somewhere that was overtly dangerous and psychotic – like if you wanted to put it in Afghanistan or Baghdad. We could make Max feel at once at home and very alien. That would be a good thing to play around with in a game.

Then, you start looking into crime in Brazil and it's so over the top. Some of the violence in Brazil is so [extreme] that you had to tone it down. It felt perfect for our needs and didn't feel like we were shoehorning him into this adventure. It felt like it would flow out of the game.

Did you feel like you got a good handle on Max's voice? He's an established character from the first two games. Did you find it easy to step into his skin, or has his voice changed from the first two games?

Well, it's definitely evolved for a little bit. We weren't trying to impersonate Sam Lake [of *Remedy*, writer of *Max Payne 1* and *2* and *Alan Wake* – Ed.], we were trying to keep the character alive and give him a modern feeling. We wanted him to feel like a hard-boiled Raymond Chandler-esque cop in a modern game. We wanted it to feel like the character is alive, just like any long-running franchise that's built around a character, like a *Bond* movie. With *Bond* movies, they feel like the character is consistent but the writing changes, the tone changes. We wanted it to evolve, but not throw away Max's heritage. It would be wrong to try to impersonate someone else. But there's still plenty of monologue. He's still [speaking with] a far amount of smiles and Max's view of the world. He has to feel like a strong central character in the game. But it's obviously changed a little bit in the intervening years.

Was that difficult? In some ways. But in other ways, I think we all felt that the character was so strong that it came quite easily to us – or what we felt the character was. Hopefully, other people will agree that it's Max Payne. Some people might feel that we've lost this aspect or that aspect. We had some sample levels and bits of voiceover that were what we felt the tone would evolve into. But they weren't feeling quite right. We were looking for a guy who could be, because of the way our facial technology works, both the voice and do the motion capture in the outscenes. Eventually we said, "Why don't we try it with James McCaffrey." [McCaffrey performed the voice of Max in the first two games – Ed.] And he looks f---ing perfect – he looks like Max Payne. As soon as he started reading the lines, it felt like it came to life. And he's a great actor as well, so he was great in the motion-capture outscenes. So when you have those, and then he cuts to voiceover giving his analysis of what's going on, it feels really slick. He does a fantastic job. That's Max Payne – when he starts doing the voiceover.



It really clicks.

Exactly, when you hear the lines delivered in that way.

Based on what I've seen of Max Payne 3, it feels a little less self-consciously hard-boiled. It feels more contemporary and modern.

I think that's fair. We definitely read a lot of Raymond Chandler to try to figure out a way to give it some element of that echoing through the game. No one can do an impersonation of Raymond Chandler — it's impossible. He's flawlessly good. I know what you're trying to say, and you're correct that it's been toned down a bit. I think the reason that it was turned up in the first game was more a result of technology changes. In 2001 or 2003, doing stuff that felt too naturalistic in a game felt ridiculous because the games weren't that naturalistic — they couldn't be. You couldn't light anything; the characters looked weak; the animations were poor. At that point, everything had to be slightly self-conscious because it was so overtly obvious that you were playing a game. The second that games tried to be incredibly serious, they became absurd.

I don't think we've tried to go incredibly serious with Max 3, but the improvements in animation and fidelity mean that we are not only able to, but I would argue, obliged to go slightly more naturalistic with stuff. There is definitely a slight tonal shift. What we're trying to do, just as they were trying to make a game for the available technology in 2001, is make a game for the available technology in 2012. Things just change in that time. We try to make sure that the purpose of writing in games is to serve the overall game. The way that it does that well is by reinforcing the same tone that the graphics, animation, and gameplay are suggesting.

What's your favorite game that you've worked on? Not even the one you think is best, just the one you have the most affection for.

The minute I say one game I'd think of something else. I really love Vice City Stories, because it's the unloved stepchild of those series of games. It came out last, and I thought it did a bunch of new things with limited time and limited tech. I love Bully because it was very tough to make. The team didn't have a lot of experience, and there was constant chaos and infighting and people leaving. But I think we made something that was really great out of a tough experience. I love GTA IV, because we made it and there was a lot of chaos in the company across that console transition with various government investigations and whatever else. In the midst of all that, we held it together and made something that showed what next-generation games could be like.

Do you think about Rockstar's legacy and how the company will be remembered in the future? Is that something that's important to you?

I never really thought about that. I don't have a quick answer. [Pauses] It's hard to know with games because the technology dates them so quickly. It's not like old movies or old books, where language or being black and white dates them to some extent, but fundamentally the medium is the same. Language between a Dickens novel and a contemporary novel might be different, but it's structured like a novel. Games are getting closer, in some ways, where at least the structure is something that will hold for a fair amount of time.

But, in other ways, the graphics and

every other aspect of design are going to continue to iterate at an incredible rate, so the games will seem dated. So, you hope for something more ephemeral than the products themselves, something like the way that you cared about the games at an enormous level, style, taste, design ethos — those kinds of things. [It's] a commitment to excellence in all areas of a game's production. Hopefully, we have a lot more stuff in us. Our hope is that we've not come close to reaching our peak yet. That's the problem with all this "10 years of GTA III" stuff — you start feeling like an old man. I think, for us, we still think that what was fun at the start is still fun now. You get to do amazing stuff. You make these worlds and bring them to life. We still have a long ways to go; it doesn't feel like we're shutting up shop just yet. The legacy is still to be defined. What influence we have over people is still being determined. In some senses, it's up to guys like you to determine that stuff.

You just released the GTA V trailer. Can you talk about that project in any respect? Obviously, it looks like it's going back to San Andreas.

I've got to be real careful here, or you will drag me through the office and whip me with barbed wire. I will stick to exactly what's in the press release. It's Los Santos and the surrounding countryside — and a very big map. ♦

"We try to make sure that the purpose of writing in games is to serve the overall game."

DAN HOUSER



The Return of Infinity Blade



Only a year after the successful debut of the original *Infinity Blade*, developer Chair Entertainment launched *Infinity Blade II* for iOS. Prior to the game's release on December 1, we spoke with creative director Donald Mustard about the technology of *Infinity Blade II*, upcoming free updates, Apple, and the follow-up to Chair's other hit franchise, *Shadow Complex*.

It seems like story is a bigger focus in *Infinity Blade II* than it was in the first game.

One of the biggest requests that we've received was people wanted to know more about what's going on in the universe. Even though we just hinted at a larger universe and more story in *Infinity Blade*, we've actually been building it for years.

On the day we announced *Infinity Blade II*, we also released a digital book [*Infinity Blade: Awakening* - Ed.] written by #1 *New York Times* bestselling author Brandon Sanderson, that literally picks up right after the events of the first game. You've killed the God King and that leads up to the events of the game sequel.

What new feature are you most excited about in *Infinity Blade II*?
Probably one of the things I'm most excited about is that we've added the ability to

customize your weapons and also the three different weapon classes. We've got literally hundreds of brand new items that were in the game at launch. In addition to that, every weapon now has the ability to have slots. Every weapon can have a certain number of sockets in which you can place these infused elements. It literally will have thousands and thousands of combinations that you can choose to infuse your weapons, armor, rings, and shields to customize your own experience.

At the Apple press conference, it was announced that *Infinity Blade* has made over \$20 million in revenue. Is a decent chunk of that from players buying in-game currency?

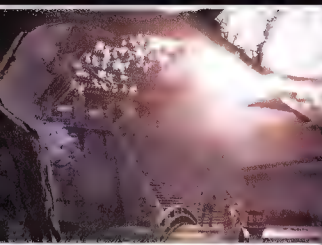
Yeah, surprisingly so. That was something we added in one of the early updates and it was requested a lot. This was our first iOS game and we learned a lot of the gamers are getting used to the idea that they can buy stuff as

opposed to having to earn it as they play. We were kind of surprised by that.

We added in the feature just like we added in the ability to scale the dodge button to whatever size you wanted. We really try to listen to the feedback of our gamers. And we added that in and have been way surprised by how many people choose to use that feature. It's great for everybody because it allows people to play the game the way they want to, and it allows us to create more content for future updates. I think it's a win-win for everybody.

It sounds like you plan on continuing the tradition of huge free updates?

Our attitude is you've bought into the game when you purchased it and we just want to give you a really fun experience. People loved it and we loved doing it so we will do the same with *Infinity Blade II*.



A big upload we've planned will include a new gameplay mode that we're calling ClashMobs where you'll be able to go online and cooperatively and asynchronously with thousands, or even millions, of other players be able to tackle these huge challenges to win really rare items, treasures, and weapons. Let's say there's this big monster that has 10 million hit points and if the collective "you" can kill this monster within 24 hours, everyone who participates in that challenge will get this rare sword.

You'll enter this ClashMob and get your chance to fight this monster. Let's say you take 10,000 hit points off of this guy before he kills you. That data is saved persistently in the cloud so the next guy who steps up to fight the monster will only have 9,990,000 and he'll start fighting him. Collectively, if everyone can take down this guy before he gets away, you'll all receive this reward. We'll have lots of cool challenges, like that—some big and some smaller.

In the *Infinity Blade* novel, *Awakening*, Siris battles multiple foes at once. Will players ever be able to fight multiple enemies at once—in an update perhaps?

Very observant. That is there for a reason. Siris will only be fighting single enemies in *Infinity Blade II*...at least for now.

What has Apple's A5 processor allowed you to do that you couldn't do in the past? It's pretty impressive stuff. The iPad 2 and

the iPhone 4S are really powerful devices. It's allowed us to craft some of the more high-end rendering techniques that you're just starting to see in *Gears of War 3*. We can turn on the dynamic light rays that are shining through the environment and sunlight filtering through the leaves. As their swords are swinging you see these dynamic light rays shining behind them and through their bodies. It just looks incredible.

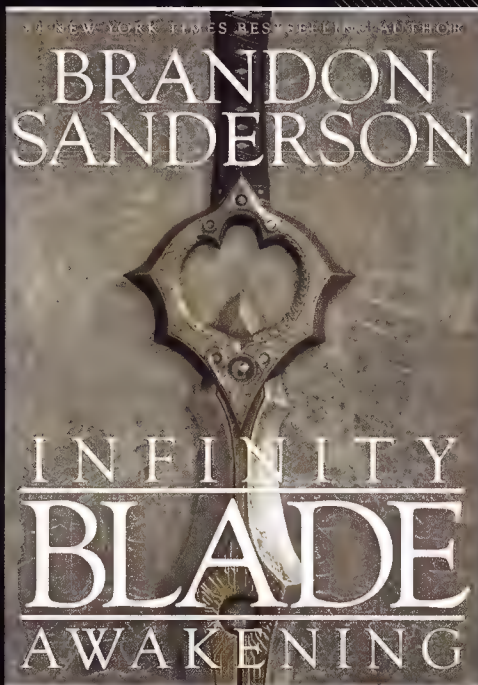
We also have been able to add full dynamic character shadowing in the game, which makes stuff look so much more amazing. The characters in the first game don't cast shadows. Now we can turn it on and they cast these beautiful dynamic shadows not only across themselves but also onto the environment. It just grounds things so much more. We're able to add a lot more dynamic particle systems. We're able to have stuff blowing in the breeze.

Why is iOS the exclusive platform for *Infinity Blade* over Android?

Honestly, iOS is an awesome platform and it's such a consumer-friendly place. It's so easy to navigate the App Store, find the games that you want, and buy them and play them. Right now, we've found that the Android Market is still pretty fragmented and there's a very high piracy rate. People aren't making any money in the Android space. We have great interest in that space and when it makes sense, we'll be there with our products.

You've spoken in the past about *Infinity Blade* originally being conceived for Kinect. With games like *Fruit Ninja* finding success in the conversion, is there any chance we'll see *Infinity Blade* on the big screen?

I guess I should clarify that. *Infinity Blade* was never in development for the Kinect. We always sit around here at Chair and try and strategize and talk about cool game ideas. We were looking at the Kinect and going, "Hmm, if we were ever going to make a game for Kinect, we would want to make something like this." It was basically a game like *Infinity Blade* or what became *Infinity Blade*, but it



was really never developed for it. We went and made it for iOS. That being said, yeah, I think *Infinity Blade* would be amazing on Kinect. I think that it would work perfectly just because of how we designed the systems. We currently do not have plans to bring it to Kinect, but I would sure love to play it on Kinect.

Epic's Cliff Bleszinski recently said that *Shadow Complex 2* is largely designed and just needs a publishing partner. What's your take on that?

Actually, I'll clarify that a bit, too. Pretty immediately after finishing *Shadow Complex* we went into a pre-production design phase of looking into what a *Shadow Complex* sequel could be. We have some really amazing ideas, designs, and prototypes for what *Shadow Complex 2* could look like.

But while we were doing that, this iOS space was blowing up and the Unreal Engine team at Epic had gotten the engine to the point where it could run on these devices. Epic approached us with the opportunity to make a game that could really show the potential of gaming on the iOS. We loved the idea of trying something new and shifted our focus to make *Infinity Blade*.

We love *Shadow Complex* and want more games in that genre. So more *Shadow Complex* is not a question of "if," it's just a question of "when." It will happen when the timing is right. ☺





What's Happening At Capcom?

After a major talent exodus and high-profile flops, the fabled Japanese publisher looks to right the ship

by Tim Turi

Few third-party video game publishers have retained relevancy as long as Capcom. The 28-year-old Japanese company's debut on NES secured a devout fan base and worldwide acclaim with fantastic licensed properties like Duck Tales and captivating original series like Mega Man. Capcom expanded its influence in the 16-bit era by kicking off the fighting craze with Street Fighter II and continuing its legacy of stellar side-scrollers. The company even made the graceful leap to 3D gaming on the PlayStation with Resident Evil, which redefined horror in gaming. Moving into the PS2/Xbox/GameCube generation, Capcom continued most of its ongoing franchises while breathing

life into the market with new brands like Monster Hunter (which is immensely popular in Japan), Onimusha, and Devil May Cry. Capcom's longevity is exemplified perfectly by its long-running series; consumers have gobbled up dozens of Mega Man, Resident Evil, and Monster Hunter games over the decades, lining Capcom's pockets so it can take chances with new IPs and resurrect old favorites.

Over the last several years, the company has fallen on hard times. Keiji Inafune, the 23-year Capcom veteran with credits including Mega Man, Dead Rising, and Resident Evil, left the company in 2010. While Capcom reshuffled its business hierarchy, Inafune was refused permission to start a subsidiary company of his own while continuing work at Capcom, so he decided to pack his bags. He

joined a long line of other Capcom luminaries who have recently departed. Resident Evil 4 creator Shinji Mikami left to work on Vanquish and Bayonetta at Platinum games, the latter of which was co-created by Resident Evil 2 and Devil May Cry director Hideki Kamiya. According to Ben Judd, former Capcom producer behind Bionic Commando: Rearmed and the 2009 Bionic Commando reboot, Inafune's departure leaves the company without the creative leadership it needs.

"All of the key creators I knew when I joined the company...all these people are now gone," says Judd, who now helps unite Japanese and Western game companies at agency Digital Development Management.

IP Performance Tracker

Here's our quick assessment of how Capcom's new and ongoing franchises are doing based off critical reception, sales, and overall enthusiasm.



Bionic Commando



Dark Void



Dead Rising



Devil May Cry



Ghost Trick:
Phantom Detective



Lost Planet

"So the creators of Monster Hunter, Resident Evil, Devil May Cry, Mega Man – all the biggest franchises that continue to be hits they commoditize – their key creators are now all gone. Inafune-san was the last one to leave."

Adding to the trouble, the company has also suffered its share of high-profile flops. The Bionic Commando reboot (Metacritic: 70) only managed to sell 700,000 of its projected 1.5 million copies, and new IP Dark Void (Metacritic: 58) moved a paltry 520,000 of a hopeful 2 million units. Lost Planet 2 (Metacritic: 65) was another big-budget dud that rocked the company again in 2010, selling only 1.5 million of its projected 2.2 million. The game's failure forced Capcom to drop its earnings estimates for the year by over 40 percent, and the reality was even more dismal. Capcom recently posted a decline of year-over-year sales, dropping from \$522 million in 2010 to \$375 million in 2011.

Fading In The East

Capcom's ailing profits are symptomatic of an even bigger problem facing Japan. Over the last two decades, the center of creativity and media spotlight has slowly shifted from Japanese developers to their Western counterparts, and revenues have followed. Japan's global market share has shrunk from 50 percent in 2002 to an eye-opening 10 percent in 2009, according to *The New York Times*.

Earlier this year, Square Enix revealed a loss of \$148 million for the fiscal year, with the rough reception of MMO Final Fantasy XIV taking most of the blame. Sega posted \$28 million in losses, citing "generally weak" demand in the West as a major factor. Even the normally infallible Nintendo took a deep hit of \$923 million this past quarter, citing the weak 3DS debut as a primary cause.

"The Japanese game creators have to admit we're behind the Western games at this moment, and try to be humble and learn why," Inafune told *4Gamer*. "Otherwise, we're not going to be able to start all over again."

Capcom's vice president of strategic planning and business development, Christian Svensson, thinks differently regarding Japan's fading significance in the global gaming market. "For me, the disconnect in the pundits' conclusion is the supposition that Japanese publishers can only appeal to Japanese tastes," he explains. "I disagree that [the death of

the Japanese game industry] is a foregone conclusion..."

Capcom's official financial reports specifically blame its under-performance on a lack of "major titles," as the only high-profile games released during that fiscal period were new iterations of existing Monster Hunter, Street Fighter, and Resident Evil titles. "Now it will be very interesting to see if Capcom is able to create original IPs that are going to be the mega hits that the Resident Evil of the heyday were," Judd ponders, "or whether they're going to succumb to sequetitis."

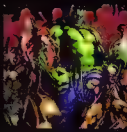
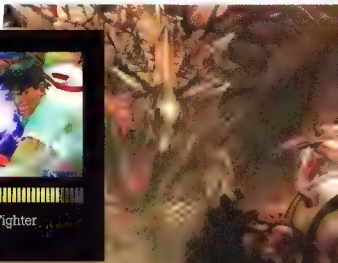
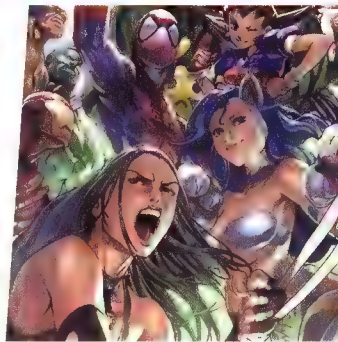
Franchise Fatigue

While its new endeavors flounder, Capcom continues to milk its popular games in the fighting genre. The company recently released the third console iteration of Street Fighter IV (Super Street Fighter IV: Arcade Edition) and dropped Ultimate Marvel vs. Capcom 3 just eight months after the original's release, which is still on the way for the PlayStation Vita's launch. A new crossover fighter, Street Fighter X Tekken, is also on the horizon.

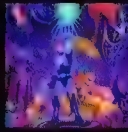
The other brand Capcom relies heavily upon is Resident Evil. In 2010 alone, the company delivered Resident Evil: The Mercenaries 3D and HD versions of Resident Evil 4 and Resident Evil Code: Veronica X. Spin-offs Resident Evil: Raccoon City and Resident Evil: Revelations are expected in early 2012. The amount of zombie overkill looks even more grotesque when you factor in a rumored impending Resident Evil 6 announcement.

"I think they want to turn Resident Evil into a Mario," says Mark MacDonald, former executive editor at *Electronic Gaming Monthly* and current executive director at 8-4, a video game localization company in Japan. "They want to make it where you can have Mario Party – which was pretty well-respected and sold well as its own thing – but it ties back into this universe. You can have Mario Kart, which is a different genre but is kind of related. I think that's what they're hoping for with Resident Evil... I think this is them still trying to crack that nut."

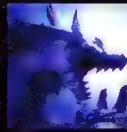
If the deluge of sequels continues at this rate, it could prove to be detrimental to the company in the long run. It wouldn't be the first time the company ran into this type of issue. Capcom is largely credited for resurrecting the dormant fighting genre with Street Fighter IV, but it's arguable the company's oversaturation of money-grabbing sequels in the '90s led to its death in the first place.



Marvel vs. Capcom



Mega Man



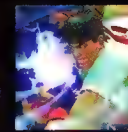
Monster Hunter



Okami



Resident Evil



Street Fighter

Where Are They Now?



BEN JUDD has taken his years of experience as a producer at Capcom over to Digital Development Management's Japan office. As the producer of Capcom titles like 2009's *Bionic Commando*, Judd helped bridge the cultural divide between the Sweden-based Grin and Capcom's Japan office. At DDM he applies this knowledge to help Japanese publishers look westward for supplemental talent. DDM works with nearly every Japanese publisher, from Capcom to Konami, helping them collaborate with developers like Ninja Theory, Obsidian, Slant Six Games, and Turtle Rock. Judd is optimistic that DDM can help slipping Japanese game companies like Capcom retain the West's attention by incorporating talent from overseas developers or hiring Hollywood scenario writers for more impactful stories.



Judd thinks this could become a problem for Capcom if game quality decreases as the number of spin-offs increases, which could cause fans to stop buying their beloved brands. He also believes franchise fatigue can be avoided by offering gamers à la carte options, similar to EA's offering of fragmented *Fight Night Champion* modes available for download individually on PS3. "A good example is a fighting game, he explains. "I love Blanka. I love E. Honda. There are certain characters I love. There are other characters I could give less of a crap about. If I was able to buy a fighting game with only the characters I knew I wanted to play, and I was able to do it for half the price that I normally would, that would be very interesting to me."

Svensson believes that the infusion of the *Tekken* universe with *Street Fighter* and *Resident Evil*'s marriage with tactical shooting action is enough to keep people invested in these series. "It is fair to say that *Resident Evil* and *Street Fighter* are two of our pillar franchises and as such we want to continue their success," he explains. "That said, we're aware of the risks of brand or even genre fatigue and we hope that by keeping things fresh, we can keep fans excited and minimize these risks."

While some are critical of Capcom's heavy reliance on spin-offs and sequels, the company has also received heat over the cancellation of two projects. Following Inafune's exit, Capcom announced the death of *Mega Man Universe*, a side-scrolling downloadable game, and *Mega Man Legends 3*, a long-teased 3DS sequel in a fan-favorite series. Normally one wouldn't fault a company for pulling the plug on games that don't live up to expectations, but this is an unusual case considering Capcom encouraged its most devoted fans to help work on *Mega Man Legends 3*'s character design, NPC creation, and other parts of the development process. Needless to say, fans who poured days of their lives into *Legends 3* felt bereft when the project was canned. They fought for their hard work to see the light of day by creating countless petitions and passion-fueled blog posts to regenerate interest in the game.

Another dedicated fan going by the handle Protocube (real name: Brian Austrin) operated the *Mega Man* blog *Rockman Corner* in his spare time. Austrin put in 15-hour work weeks and passed on some family functions to ensure the game was getting the attention it deserved. "I really

think that [Capcom's] trust bank has been shattered," he says. "As a consumer you are very powerful. Companies both fear and worship you, and all developers need to realize that we lay the foundation for everything that happens to their product."

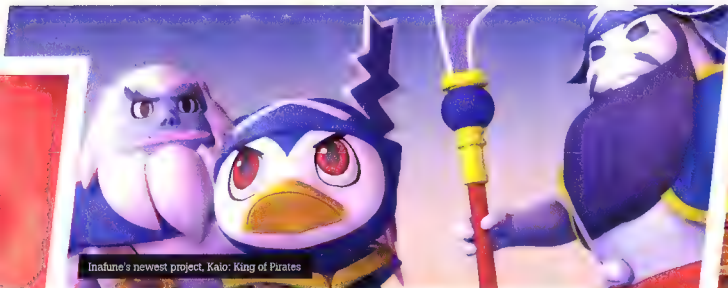
Capcom's official European Twitter account showed no fear. Adding insult to injury, days following the project's death the Capcom Twitter account stated, "...it's a shame the fans didn't want to get more involved. :(if we saw there was an audience for MML3 people might change minds." With relations between Capcom and its community at a record low, the company is feeling the pressure.

"This is absolutely an issue that keeps me up at night," says Svensson. "Unfortunately there are times that we have to make decisions that don't make sense to the community, and the fallout, while understandable, is regrettable. Our relationships with fans are extremely important and I know we've got some that are disenfranchised right now."

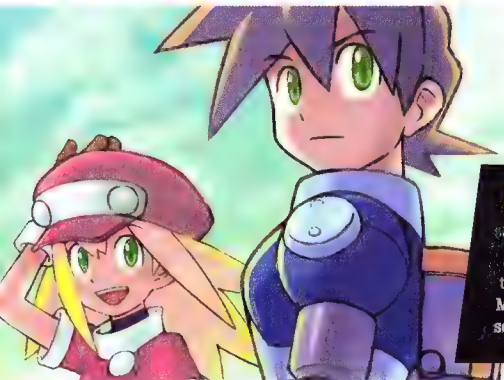
All Eyes Forward

With Capcom losing its grip on some of its most hardened fans, something needs to be done to secure its future. Learning how to create successful partnerships with Western developers appears to be the best solution. Capcom's early attempts to work with European developer Grin on *Bionic Commando* and U.S. developer Airtight Games on *Dark Void* resulted in disappointment, but that shouldn't deter the company. Inafune worked hard to bridge the gap between Western and Japanese development studios with *Dead Rising 2*, developed by Blue Castle in Vancouver, Canada. Continuing strong partnerships with foreign developers is a powerful strategy that Capcom can employ to supplement its lack of in-house creative veterans. The success of *Dead Rising 2* following Inafune's departure echoed the importance of good overseas communication, and even led to Blue Castle becoming Capcom Vancouver. Inafune hopes this trend continues at Capcom, but hints that more than good intentions are necessary for continued success.

"On a personal level, I believe [Capcom] is doing the right thing," Inafune tells us. "Then again, your mind can be set in the right direction, but making the goal come true can be very difficult, so I really hope the best for Capcom



Inafune's newest project, *Kaio: King of Pirates*



Inafune Talks Mega Man

"Even though I left the company, Mega Man is still like a child to me. There isn't a parent who doesn't wish the best for his or her child. I'm very grateful that Mega Man is still loved by so many fans. It's just sad to see Mega Man disappearing from Capcom's line-up."



KEIJI INAFUNE left

Capcom in 2010, and later that year he started up his own game company, Concept. The company places heavy emphasis on creating a harmonious relationship between developers, press, management, and of course the fans. Inafune plans to aggressively push new, creative ideas on a global scale. The first game revealed by Concept was *The Island of Dr. Momo*, destined for Japan's popular mobile gaming market. The first Concept title that should actually be on Westerner's radars is the recently revealed 3DS game, *Kaio: King of Pirates*. *Kaio* is a charming tale about war and sailing on the high seas, mixing cartoony visuals with a story inspired by *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. Regarding the choice to bring the game to the 3DS, Inafune says, "I know the 3DS is fighting a tough fight, but a samurai should never pick an easy fight. I want to participate in the fight to turn the tide of battle."

and that they will be successful in working with the West."

Judd shares Inafune's enthusiasm for Capcom's continued overseas collaboration, and agrees that the company is on the right track. "[Capcom] has made so much progress in learning how to work with the West, and no one can deny the fact that Western gaming continues to evolve and get better and better. I think that they don't give themselves enough credit as a company because when I talk to other Japanese publishers they see Capcom working with the West as a huge success. They sort of are kind of envious of that, they're like, 'How are you able to do that?' Of course a lot of that goes on to Inafune-san and his willingness to be open-minded and knowing that the Japanese industry by and of itself is not going to be able to make the games the rest of the world wants. We need to seek help and try to collaborate with other genius creators in other countries."

However, Judd emphasizes that Capcom must embrace the cultural boundaries that can impede cross-cultural cooperation. He doubts success will come easy if Capcom simply hands the reins of popular, established series over to foreign developers, as with *Capcom Vancouver*, without installing some of their best Japanese creators in the new studios. "If it were me, if it were my company, I would do whatever I could to get five or ten of my best designers or creators from Capcom and send them to go live at Capcom Vancouver. I'd say this is an additional 10 people you have on your team and there're language barriers, but ultimately you're going to learn from them and they're going to learn from you. I don't think one person is going to be able to do it."

While *Dead Rising 2* is a success story for Capcom, we'll gain better understanding of how effective the company's foreign development strategies are when *Ninja Theory's Devil May Cry* reboot and *Slant Six's Resident Evil: Operation Raccoon City* hit the shelves. Inafune played a pivotal role in bridging the cultural gap between Japan and Canada, and he is no longer able to guide Capcom with these collaborators.

Capcom's effort to collaborate on games with Western developers is a good start, but if it wants to accelerate its growth it may want to consider acquisitions. In 2009 Square Enix purchased European publisher Eidos, and the union immediately strengthened Square's Western presence

thanks to the *Tomb Raider*, *Deus Ex*, and *Hitman* franchises. Capcom is evidently taking notes, stating back in September that it's interested in increasing universal appeal by looking outside Japan for an acquisition or partnership.

The most natural way for Capcom to pull itself out of the rut is to deliver a new title that could plant the seed for a long-running series. Some think this could be *Dragon's Dogma*, a brand-new IP being developed in-house by Capcom that strays sharply from other games in the company's library. This big budget, open-world, fantasy RPG resembles the type of titles Western gamers have enjoyed from developers like Bethesda and BioWare. Capcom is straying outside its wheelhouse with this new property, and betting a sizable chunk of cash on it in the process. According to Judd, the success or failure of *Dragon's Dogma* could define Capcom moving into the future.

"It will be very interesting to see how *Dragon's Dogma* does," Judd says. "I know it has their uber-producer, Hiroyuki Kobayashi, who did *Resident Evil 4* and *Devil May Cry 4*. This guy knows how to make a game a hit. He's attached to *Dragon's Dogma* and has some of the company's most creative talent working on it. Seeing how that works out as an original title, whether it becomes the next big thing or doesn't, could ultimately determine how aggressive Capcom wants to be with original titles versus sequels."

Capcom also has another new IP, *Asura's Wrath*, in the works. This gonzo action game set in a sci-fi/ancient Japan hybrid world looks promising, but the stylized presentation and odd characters ooze Japanese quirk, which could keep it from connecting with mainstream Western audiences. More so than *Asura's Wrath*, it's obvious that *Dragon's Dogma* is the company's best shot of being a hit with the West.

Between the creative transition, financial loss, and fan fallout impacting the company right now, the success of *Dragon's Dogma* could mean a lot for the company moving into 2012. Capcom has suffered a tremendous brain drain over the last decade, and finding success with a new IP and overseas collaborations is what the post-Inafune company needs to prove itself. In the meantime, we can only wait and see how much more punching, kicking, and zombie-killing fans are willing to endure before Capcom makes its next big move. ♦



Advanced Tactics

*The Search For
A Smarter
Military Shooter*

by Jeff Marchiafava

Military shooters have a long and venerable history in video games. Before *Call of Duty* and *Battlefield* began their war for complete market domination, smaller series like *Ghost Recon*, *Rainbow Six*, and *SOCOM* provided different takes on digital warfare. These series differentiated themselves — and the military shooter genre — from other FPS franchises like *Quake* and *Halo* by emphasizing strategy and realism. Forgoing roller-coaster spectacle and nonstop action, they presented gamers with a pseudo-authentic military experience where every shot counted and tactics played a larger role in the outcome of a mission than itchy trigger fingers.

In the last few years, the first-person shooter landscape has radically changed. Guns-blazing military shooters now take center stage, with *Modern Warfare 3* selling a record-breaking 6.4 million copies on launch day. But along with the genre's newfound audience has come a redefining of what a military shooter entails. Detailed mission briefings and pre-operations planning have been replaced by convoluted storylines pasted together with all the skill and flashiness of a Michael Bay film. NPC squads of stat-differentiated team members have been reduced to exaggerated stereotypes with "follow" signs

floating over them. Dynamic, open battlefields have been streamlined into linear campaigns with action scripted down to the explosion. Online play affords gamers more opportunity for strategic thinking, but regenerating health, kill cams, super-human perks, and killstreak rewards ensure the action remains fast-paced, unrelenting, and far removed from reality.

Are strategy-oriented military shooters dead? If you're looking for a console release with the level of planning offered in the old *Rainbow Six* titles, the answer is yes. But that doesn't mean all military shooter fans have assimilated into the *Call of Duty* hordes. A small but dedicated group has switched platforms, moved online, and has been enjoying a level of realism and strategy-focused gameplay that simply doesn't exist in mainstream gaming.

The following games might not offer the bombastic moments that the current crop of triple-A military shooters do, but if you're looking for an experience that makes you feel more like a soldier than a one-man army, here are some titles worth enlisting in.



Arma II



ASK INTERNET-GOERS what the most realistic military shooter on the market is, and Arma II will be the overwhelmingly popular response. This large-scale tactical shooter for PC was developed by Bohemia Interactive Studios, creators of the original Operation Flashpoint. The game's proprietary Real Virtuality engine was so realistic that Bohemia

created a sister studio to develop VBS1, a full-fledged military simulator licensed by the United States Marine Corps for training.

After a falling out with Operation Flashpoint publisher Codemasters (which retained the rights to the franchise), BIS began working on the Arma series. The latest release

is Arma II, which uses Real Virtuality 3 to provide a level of realism its fans swear by. This includes the game's 81 real-world weapons and a comprehensive ballistics simulation that takes into account bullet drop, muzzle velocity, and realistic material penetration and ricochet depending on the angle of impact.

In addition to the arsenal, Arma II also features more than 120 accurately recreated vehicles, as well as real-world terrain constructed from topography scans, day-night cycles, and changing weather and wind conditions. Perhaps the best testament to Arma II's authenticity is the recent flub committed by the UK's Independent Television network, which aired a documentary that mistook camcorder-captured footage of the game as video from a 1988 IRA attack.

Despite Arma II's attention to detail, the game was criticized at its 2009 release for AI issues and bugs, both of which Bohemia has attempted to address with subsequent patches. In June of last year, the company released a free-to-play version of the multiplayer component of Arma II, which allows gamers to partake in its massive 50-player matches with owners of the full game.

"You have to be skilled. Most people think that all you can do is get in and start doing great when you can't. You start at an airfield and have to pick your gear and move to a targeted town through airlifting, which could be on C-130s, helicopters, or air-to-air combat in jets. You have to land a distance out, and move in with a squad and be aware. If people would like to experience realistic war, I would suggest getting this game because it's as real as it gets."

— Austin Farley, Commander of Arma II in Virtual U.S. Military class

Red



America's Army 3

EQUAL PARTS ENTERTAINMENT, education, and recruitment tool. America's Army 3 is an online multiplayer game for PC developed by the United States Army using the Unreal 3 engine. America's Army doesn't just strive for realism on the battlefield, but also in its depiction of military life; many of its gameplay features require extensive in-game training to use, based on actual military training techniques.

For instance, players must complete Basic Combat Training before going online. This tutorial not only introduces gameplay controls, but familiarizes recruits with weapons and items as well as the Army's basic code of conduct. Players can also open up new roles (i.e. classes) through Military Occupational Specialty training.

One of the more impressive training options is Combat Life Saver, which unlocks your personal IFAK (Improved First Aid Kit) for play.

America's Army features a realistic damage model, with various wound types affecting performance. Anyone can treat a fellow soldier's wounds, but reviving incapacitated players requires CLS certification and selecting the correct treatment based on the downed soldier's symptoms (which are also based on real-life conditions soldiers commonly suffer from in the field). The Army also recently added ES2 training to the game, used for properly identifying and reporting suspicious objects on the battlefield. Other training is available and must be completed before using certain vehicles and weaponry.

Although America's Army's Ballistics simulation isn't quite as complex as other titles on this list, all of the weapons in the game have been verified by Army Subject Matter Experts for how they look, sound, and are used on the battlefield. Mission objectives for each map and conduct requirements all comply to the Army's Rules of Engagement.

One area where America's Army doesn't strive for realism is in its depiction of violence, which has been toned down to ensure a Teen rating from the ESRB—a dubious decision, considering its use as a recruitment tool. America's Army has been the subject of numerous controversies, including its appeal to underage audiences and the use of taxpayer money to fund the project. Regardless, if you want a digital approximation of how the U.S. military operates, America's Army 3 is available to download and play for free.



"[The original America's Army launched] with limited maps, yet it had something I had not yet experienced, and that was the feel of being a soldier again. Most of the original maps and training aids took me right back to Fort Jackson and Bragg. The game had the power to engulf you in a realism that to my knowledge has yet to be challenged by any other platform. The game's lack of re-spawning forced all would-be Rambo type players to think and check their actions before entering any potential kill zone. The game's Rules Of Engagement was a new concept, which force those who take the game seriously to check their fire and frag."

— Christian V. Barlow, General in 82nd Airborne Division, United States Army Team

Orchestra 2: Heroes of Stalingrad

THIS REALISM-ORIENTED WWII shooter started off as a total conversion mod for Epic Games' so-far-multiplayer FPS Unreal Tournament 2004. The mod won Epic Games' and Nvidia's Make Something Unreal contest, leading to a standard retail release and the eventual sequel built using Unreal Engine 3.

A lot of Red Orchestra 2's realism is in its presentation. The PC game features a minimalist HUD to simulate a true first-person view. For example, there is no aiming reticle in Red Orchestra 2; instead players must rely solely on iron sights while compensating for gun sway and breathing. There's also no onscreen ammo indicator, so players must manually check their ammo count or mentally keep track of how many

bullets they've fired. As with Arma II, Red Orchestra 2 features full ballistics modeling, including bullet drop and material penetration.

The realism extends to Red Orchestra's 2 damage system. Wounds continue bleeding until bandaged, which doesn't actually regenerate health but at least prevents any further loss. More often than not, however, your first gunshot wound is your last.

Another lauded feature is the game's realistic simulation of tanks. Unlike most first-person shooters that feature vehicles, tanks in Red Orchestra 2 have fully modeled interiors and realistic armor (meaning where you shoot a tank matters). Tanks also require multiple people to effectively operate, via either an AI crew in single-player or fellow players online.

Like Arma II, Red Orchestra 2's single-player campaign was criticized for its poor AI. Multiplayer is where the game really shines, thanks to massive open-world maps, a 64-player limit, and a military hierarchy featuring commanders and squad leaders for each team who can issue commands and call in artillery strikes.

It's not flashy or based on Hollywood-effect warfare. The realism also is a bit humbling; you aren't blessed with perfect accuracy, and you are going to die gory, inhuman deaths frequently. It has a learning curve that rewards players who are equally concerned with keeping themselves alive as they are with killing the enemy, but perhaps most refreshingly of all it brings the player back in the core of why we're fought here. You're not asked with simply annihilating the enemy, you must seize and hold key ground, that is for the most part very difficult. The actual battlegrounds and strategic points within the city of Stalingrad are



Counter-Strike

WHILE VALVE'S DECADE-OLD FPS is less realistic, you can't put together a list of tactical shooters without acknowledging this seminal title. Counter-Strike's graphics are laughable compared to current-gen titles, but considering gamers have been playing it since before the release of the original Xbox, the team-based shooter deserves a break. Disagree? Then consider this: Counter-Strike is still one of the most-played multiplayer games on Steam, regularly topping even Modern Warfare 3 when you combine the communities of Counter-Strike 1.6 and Counter-Strike: Source.

Counter-Strike is legendary in the e-sports scene, with many professional leagues still using it as a staple title in tournaments. Gameplay consists of two teams attempting to complete or defend an objective from the opposing force. There are no weapon pickups or respawns, and regardless of whether the

objective is completed, the round ends if one team completely kills the other. As such, rounds are short, violent affairs—but also heavily dependent on team tactics. Professional teams have multiple strategies for each map, changing them between rounds to adapt to their rivals' tactics.

The strategy isn't just limited to gunplay. Counter-Strike features a monetary system for buying weapons between rounds with cash earned from in-game accomplishments. In professional tournaments, teams coordinate which weapons to use and decide when to institute "save rounds," where the entire team sticks to default equipment in order to save money for more expensive weapons in future rounds.

Counter-Strike enthusiasts take the game so seriously that a rift still exists between the two aforementioned versions of Counter-Strike, with many veteran 1.6 players refusing to upgrade to the newer version. Valve hopes to unite the communities with Counter-Strike: Global Offensive, a new downloadable title coming to Mac, PC, Xbox 360, and PS3 (featuring cross-platform play for all versions except Xbox 360). Valve has been performing extensive testing of GO with Counter-Strike veterans in hopes of winning over the skeptics, and has delayed a planned 10,000-player beta while it incorporates early feedback. Both the beta and the retail product are expected to be released in 2012. ♦

The game is about personal skill and precision with the weapons you purchase, not spending your time ranking up to level 80 and calling in an AC-130 to do your dirty work. There are no tanks, and the maps are smaller with no obscure hiding spots. You only get one life per round, so you have to make it count. It all comes down to your team versus the enemies in a battle of aim and teamwork, and getting that one-bullet AK-47 headshot from across the map is infinitely more satisfying than calling in an airstrike could ever be!

—Kyle "Ksharp" Miller, professional e-sports player

3

High-Style Indie Games on the Horizon

by Matt Miller



Guacamelee
PlayStation Network, Xbox Live Arcade

One of my favorite 2011 downloadable titles was Tales From Space: About a Blob, a clever PSN-exclusive action/puzzler. As I mentioned in this column a couple of months back, the team at Drinkbox Studios is already hard at work on a sequel called Mutant Blobs Attack, which is headed for Vita. The developer also has a second iron in the fire, a humorous action-platformer called **Guacamelee**. The upcoming downloadable title stars a Mexican wrestler named Juan Aguacate who is deeply in love with El Presidente's daughter. When she is kidnapped, the luchador brawls his way to the rescue. Embracing the world exploration and platforming of a game like Metroid, Guacamelee eschews ranged combat in favor of a deep, close-range battle system. Numerous wrestling moves fling your enemies around the world, and those same moves double as navigation tools. For instance, the uppercut functions as a double jump. A fun 2D art style and classic (if stereotypical) Mexican tunes kept me smiling as I played a lengthy demo. However, the coolest feature is the use of multiple dimensions. Juan can flip between three overlapping worlds on the fly – the World of the Living, the World of the Dead, and the World of Nightmares. Different platforms and other environmental features appear in each incarnation of a location, and rapid-fire flipping back and forth is the key to progression through many stages.

The game also supports two-player cooperative play on the same screen. Guacamelee's combination of absurd humor, strong combat controls, and unique twists on traversal all point to a potential success. Drinkbox hasn't nailed down a platform quite yet, but the team is hoping to hit PlayStation Network and/or Xbox Live Arcade.

Guacamelee shares some striking visual and stylistic similarities to Klei Entertainment's recent Shank, but the grim setting and characters of the latter set it apart.

Shank 2 continues the revenge-fueled fantasy of a man brutally cutting a swath through the

ranks of the criminals who dared to cross his loved ones. Klei has taken to heart some of the criticisms pointed at the original game, and the new project is already extremely polished. The team's award-winning animation is in full effect, depicting Shank as he leaps and fights his way through new 2D platforming levels. Bosses exhibit less repetition than last time, and a greater variety of moves and weapons keep the regular battles from losing their potency. The first Shank game included a separate cooperative campaign; the sequel scraps that concept, introducing a new arcade-like cooperative mode. You and a buddy fight waves of enemies and protect strategic points around the screen from bombers. Strong showings earn you money that goes toward special weapons like air strikes and turrets. I enjoyed the highly stylized violence and cartoon presentation of the first installment, and it's awesome that Klei is getting another shot to hammer out some of the gameplay kinks that held back that game. Given what I've seen so far, I'm more than ready to sign up for another bloody and action-packed ride when Electronic Arts publishes the game early in 2012.

Klei isn't the only small studio getting EA's attention. Electronic Arts is also throwing its weight behind a new developer called Trapdoor. The studio's debut console project is a charming but shockingly graphic puzzle game called **Warp**. Embracing the likelihood of an M-rating in the United States, Warp tells the story of a cute little orange alien named Zero who has been captured by a villain named the Commander, and is subsequently experimented upon mercilessly. When Zero escapes, he has no qualms about destroying any and all who get in his way. Warp plays as a top-down action/puzzler in which Zero has the ability to teleport short distances to navigate through the environment. While he can easily boost past a pesky wall or doorway, he also can pop into the body of a gun-toting guard and blow him up from the inside, or enter an explosive barrel and wreak havoc on the surrounding area. Many of the puzzles I saw in action allowed for multiple pathways to completion. Players can also opt for a no-kill stealth approach as an alternative to all the gory kills. I've yet to play an extended demo, but my early impressions of Warp's gameplay are very positive. Smart puzzle design, excellent art and animation, and the cool teleportation mechanic all have me eager to see more. Warp is headed to PSN, XBLA, and PC in the beginning of 2012. ♡

Looking for more information on downloadable and independent games? Check out gameinformer.com/inpulse for daily updates on the best games for PlayStation Network, Xbox Live Arcade, and WiiWare. For more on downloadable games in this issue, don't miss our feature on Jonathan Blow's post-Braid project – *The Witness* starts on page 56. For downloadable game reviews in this issue, look for *Minecraft* on page 91.



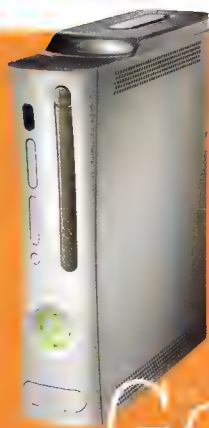
Shank 2
PlayStation Network, Xbox Live Arcade, PC



Warp
PlayStation Network, Xbox Live Arcade, PC



If you think this holiday season's glut of good games was an isolated convergence, think again. Various companies have already announced new installments for the Call of Duty, Saints Row, and Battlefield franchises. None of these should be surprises to anyone, so until further notice, consider the golden goose still very much alive.



Microsoft celebrates the sale of 57 million Xbox 360s worldwide after almost six years.

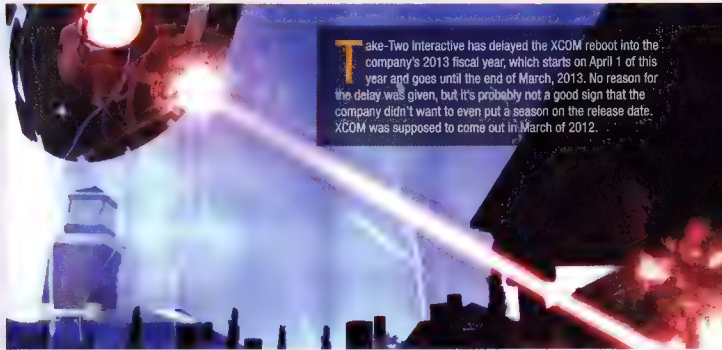
million PS3s sold, and Nintendo and the Wii are still number one with almost 90 million units sold around the globe.

Good



the Bad

Electronic Arts and developer DICE removed the free version of Battlefield 1943 that was supposed to be included on the PS3's Blu-ray disc. PS3 owners are allowed early access to Battlefield 3 DLC, but this was something that was already announced before Battlefield 1943 was pulled, and is not a new gift meant to compensate.



Take-Two Interactive has delayed the XCOM reboot into the company's 2013 fiscal year, which starts on April 1 of this year and goes until the end of March, 2013. No reason for the delay was given, but it's probably not a good sign that the company didn't want to even put a season on the release date. XCOM was supposed to come out in March of 2012.

Quotable



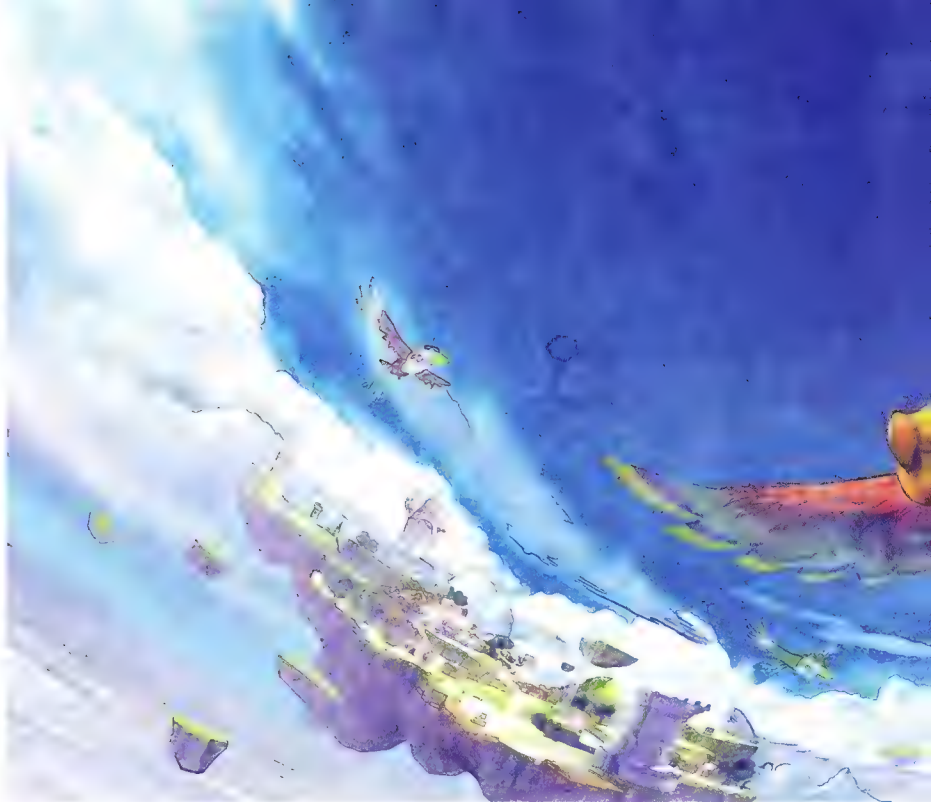
"Unfortunately, we have not been able to build a satisfactory revenue model in our target group, and therefore, have decided to close the game."

Jesper Vilstrup
vice president of Lego Universe explains the MMO's demise

Ugly



Canadian developer Silicon Knights cut over half its workforce after an unnamed publisher pulled out of a project with the studio. Although Silicon Knights says it is continuing the project, and it also promises one of its future games will be "one of its most requested titles for the next generation." That had better be referring to Eternal Darkness 2 (Eternal Darkness: Sanity's Requiem shown) and not Too Human 2.



The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword

Skyward Sword sticks to the Zelda series' tradition of excellence, but it may be the biggest departure from the core formula that Nintendo has ever attempted. We talked to producer Eiji Aonuma and sound group manager Koji Kondo about their approach to evolving this beloved franchise.

Because it's so tied to the motion controls, do you have any concern about future gamers being able to play and discover Skyward Sword the way that they can use the Virtual Console to play titles like Ocarina of Time or A Link to the Past?

Eiji Aonuma: I think that motion control devices will continue to be attached to Nintendo hardware going forward. I'm not worried about that...I hope [laughs]

The characters and storytelling and the musical themes tied

to some of the characters are reminiscent of classic Disney movies. Was that something you were drawing inspiration from with Skyward Sword?

Koji Kondo: My impression of what it is to be Disney-esque may be something different than your impression. One of the reasons you may have come to that conclusion is that this is the first time we've used orchestrated music within a Zelda game. We've used it throughout the game - I think there's about 30 songs total that are orchestrated. Because of that, I suspect maybe that the

soundtrack itself feels a little bit closer to movies or animation than it does to past Zelda games.

Skyward Sword's story doesn't follow the predictable path of earlier titles. As you create more Zelda games, do you have the desire to create stories that stand out from the more simplistic tales that the series started out with?

EA: I wouldn't say that we were striving to create a deeper story this time around necessarily. We started with the idea for the overall game.

One of the main themes that drove us this time was wanting people to explore the world. The impetus for Link going out and exploring the world became Zelda falling down below and Link needing to find her. But of course the challenge with a story like that is, once you find her, there's no longer any need to continue exploring. We looked for ways to draw that experience out... so when it seemed like you were just about to get back together with Zelda, something would happen, and it would shift. The goal has really been not necessarily making



the story deeper, but making it more interesting so that it keeps the player wanting to play all the way through to the end of the game.

Why did you decide to pursue a love story angle and increase Zelda's role in Skyward Sword?

EA: The game is The Legend of Zelda, so every time we're making a new game, we struggle with how we're going to portray the title character. This time what stood out for us was that Link and Zelda start off as childhood friends. We felt it was important to make that clear to the player. We look at this game as the earliest in the Zelda timeline, so we wanted to create a story where Zelda had a role that would help explain why it is The Legend of Zelda.

As far as the love story goes, it wasn't that we wanted to create a romance between Link and Zelda as much as we wanted the player to feel like this is a person who's very important to me, who I need to find. We used that hint of a romance between the two to tug at the heartstrings.

Do you see any possibility for more games in the Skyward

Sword style or taking place in the same world?

EA: With Wind Waker, the graphics were suited to handheld gaming. Also the game ended with Link embarking on a journey, so it left open the possibility of what comes after the game. With Skyward Sword, positioning it as the first Zelda game means everything else connects to it and comes after it. It becomes a little bit difficult to do something else within that world and certainly much more difficult to do something that comes before it.

Were there any gameplay elements you'd hoped to get in to Skyward Sword that didn't quite make it?

EA: Yes, there are things that were cut, but I can't talk about them, because we'll probably use them in the future. [laughs] Among all the things we were experimenting with early on, we took the ones that were the most fun and put them all into the game. The things that were cut were interesting ideas but needed a little more time fleshing them out and figuring out how they might work. I think that what we included ended up as the deepest and most robust Zelda game we've ever made.

Do you see a place in the future for voice acting in the Zelda series, or is that something that you'd still like to avoid?

KK: The most important thing about the Zelda series is that the player becomes Link. One of the challenges with full voice is that if we're trying to convey the player's emotion through Link, but you hear Link talking in somebody else's voice, that creates a disconnect between you and the role that you're taking on.

EA: One of the challenges with going full voice with the other characters is that because Link doesn't talk, if you create a game where everybody else in the game speaks but Link doesn't, it emphasizes the fact that he is silent and draws more attention to it. It's a big challenge to find that balance between how you portray the other characters versus what you're doing with the player's character in a way that doesn't make it seem awkward or out of place.

Of course, this was the first time we went with fully orchestrated songs in the game, and we've seen what that can do to help bring the world alive and make the game that much more fun. We're continually looking at ways that we can evolve the

series. We're not confident that we can find the right balance with full voice, so we'll see. The other issue is that everyone would be speaking Hylian, so even if you heard them speak, you wouldn't understand them. [laughs]

Having proven with Skyward Sword that the Zelda series can evolve while maintaining the classic structure, what's your vision for the future of Zelda?

EA: I started working on the series not at the beginning, but part-way through its history. I think because of that, early on I was more looking objectively at the series and how we could change small, individual elements within it, rather than looking at how the series should evolve. As time has passed – particularly in the last few years – I've started to think a lot more about how I can take the series and really make it my own Zelda and evolve it further. As Mr. Miyamoto has allowed me to take the reins on the Zelda series, ultimately that's what I need to do. Perhaps some people will think it's a little bit late for me to start thinking about that, but as time goes by, that's becoming more of a theme in how I'm approaching the series. ♠

Battlefield 3



DICE vice president and general manager Karl Magnus Troedsson discusses Battlefield 3's rough launch, multiplayer particulars, and why the single-player mode is so linear.

For the past three releases, DICE and EA have had major server issues at launch, leaving many excited gamers who just dropped \$60 to experience the frustration of repeatedly failing to get into matches. Why is this a recurring issue?

Any highly complex system like this containing global data centers of servers, massive databases of users and game data, and layers of security makes for a very complex launch, which is bound to have some testing issues. But we support Battlefield 3 as a software service. When gamers purchase Battlefield 3, we want them to enjoy this service for years to come.

Even with a successful beta, systems under load will reveal new opportunities for optimization. We would rather move immediately and create short term inconveniences to improve the long-term experience for all players. The importance is how we as a service provider deal with the challenges. At DICE and EA, we're dedicated to attacking these head-on and fixing them as soon as humanly possible.

How does DICE determine the number of maps to ship in a game?

Many different factors influence the number of maps that go into a game, especially what kind of variation of settings and environments we want in there. We first look at what we want to build/achieve, we listen to what we hear from our fans, and of course we look at what maps have been played the most in the past and what makes them so popular. In the end, we as developers are of course also limited to development time.

The way we develop our maps here at DICE is actually quite interesting. We start out with our level designers doing quick briefs on the type of environments and gameplay they would like to build for the levels. Then everyone else on the team gets to pile on their comments and they

can also submit their own ideas. The most promising multiplayer map ideas get built into early mockups that we playtest heavily. From there, we take only the very best and refine them, and also make sure that the full game ships with a variety of maps that complement each other and fit every play style and game mode in the game. It's almost like a competition between the different level ideas. Only the best of the best make it into the game.

How do you customize your Russian soldier in the main menu? This is something we're looking into addressing, since you should be able to customize both teams.

What was the rationale for removing the multiplayer frontend out of the in-game menu and into a web browser?

The launch of Battlefield 3 is just the start of a service. This means we plan to support the game and our fans for a long time, and hence it's in our interest to have the most scalable and dynamic platform possible. This, in combination with creating a social layer, led us to move this out of game. The result is that we now have a platform we can continue to grow and update as we want to without affecting the actual game client or server code.

Many fans have lamented the decision to move away from the series' core strengths (scale, teamwork, and vehicles) in the story campaign in favor of adding the heavily scripted single-player template set forth by Call of Duty. Why did you go in this direction?

Our ambition was to build a dramatic single-player experience with an authentic tone. We opted for a more controlled experience and letting the player experience several different scenarios and settings. It's a fine line balancing between scripted experiences and open-ended action, and different player types take to this differently. In Battlefield 3 we welcome gamers who want to experience the chaos of all-out war to play our

multiplayer. For those that want a blend between single-player and multiplayer we recommend playing some co-op. Our three available modes in Battlefield 3 are not meant to bring the same type of experience, but rather complement each other.

Was there ever a discussion to incorporate co-op into the campaign, or was it always planned as a standalone mode?

When designing the co-op mode for Battlefield 3 we did discuss if we wanted to make a single-player campaign version or something more standalone. In the end we went for the latter to create something more uniquely balanced for a custom-built two-player experience.

Why didn't you include a way to import all your PSN, Steam, Origin, and Xbox Live friends into the Battlog?

Importing friends from various places is a feature that will be available in Battlog at a later date. Just like with any online service, Battlog is a platform that will continually evolve and be refined.

Controlling the jets is very tough. Do you have any advice for new pilots?

Keep practicing and don't forget to switch between the first- and third-person cameras. First-person is naturally better for precision shooting and third-person can help you keep your spatial awareness up.

Why did you opt against adding in an in-game voice chat system for the PC version? The Party Chat doesn't integrate with the game much, and third-party chat systems don't allow you to switch between chatting with friends and your squad members.

We have heard the feedback and will look into what can be done.

Why are conquest flags so close together? It seems like you're not using the totality of the maps. Historically, the Battlefield 2 maps

with the largest distance between flags were the least played and offered the lowest player satisfaction. For Battlefield 3 we have focused on clustering a few flags to create combat zones, while also including flanking routes and perimeter flags to give players additional tactical and strategic decisions. This gives players plenty of space to roam about, and allows players a central hub where they can usually find a fight.

The mix of long-distance flags in more open places and closer placed flags is intended to allow for a good vehicle and infantry gameplay on the same level. We know that we have quite a mixed audience and if we can provide good gameplay for both parties, and reduce the long transport time that we've been told by the community to minimize, I think we're onto something good.

Why did you dumb down the Hardcore mode to include a minimap and killcam?

With a number of new team play gadgets that are more or less dependent on the minimap, and the addition of spotting enemies that was previously absent in Hardcore mode, we felt that it was a natural step to include it in the default Hardcore version of the game. For a server to be officially tagged Hardcore we asked that the minimap is on and that the kill cam is off. Based on recent community feedback, we have decided to remove the requirement for minimap on Hardcore servers, so by the time you read this, there should be plenty of minimap-less Hardcore servers to play on.

What sort of issues do you hope to address with the next game patch?

We're focusing our updates on stabilizing the experience, fixing newly exposed crash bugs, improving the experience on how people get in and out of the game together with friends, and generally just fixing as many of the smaller issues as possible. ♦



Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3 vs. Battlefield 3

THE AFTERMATH

SALES

According to Activision, the game sold 6.5 million copies in its first 24 hours in both the U.S. and U.K., making \$400 million. This figure doesn't include the two trucks-worth of games hijacked by French thieves worth an estimated \$1 million. Nevertheless, the blockbuster-level sales set the record for the biggest entertainment launch ever. This topped Call of Duty: Black Ops' first day take of \$360 million, which in turn was bigger than Modern Warfare 2's \$310 million. Activision says that after five days, the game had grossed \$775 million.

"Life-to-date sales for the Call of Duty franchise exceed worldwide theatrical box office for *Star Wars* and *The Lord of the Rings*, two of the most successful entertainment franchises of all time," boasted Activision CEO Bobby Kotick.

EA says that the game sold five million copies in its first week worldwide, and calls it the fastest-selling game in EA history. Sales trackers NPD say that Battlefield 3 sold two million copies in the U.S. in the month of October (after coming out on October 25).

Although Battlefield 3 hasn't sold as much as rival Modern Warfare 3, that wasn't something even EA itself thought would happen. "At no point did I say we're going to take them out this year," Frank Gibeau, EA Labels president, told the *Wall Street Journal*, "but we're going to compete with them." That's exactly what EA is doing.

SCORES

We gave the game a 9.0 (see page 82 for our review), and its Metacritic rating as of the time of this writing breaks down as follows: 89 (Xbox 360), 88 (PS3), and 81 (PC).

The PC version of the game got a 9.5 from Game Informer (9.25 on console), and this was slightly higher than the other Metacritic aggregate scores: 84 (Xbox 360), 86 (PS3), and 89 (PC).

LAUNCH SNAFUS

Activision's Call of Duty Elites stat-tracking service had issues due to high demand that exceeded the company's estimates, causing gamers to have log-in and account registration problems. Activision offered a free 30-day membership extension and continued eligibility for Founder status as compensation to paid Premium Elite members.

Once again, DICE had server issues when the game launched, but Electronic Arts stabilized the situation through Battlefield 3's first weekend in the wild. Some gamers also had problem with EA's Origin digital delivery service on the PC version during the first 48 hours.

Wakfu

Square Enix's strange European MMO stands out from the crowd



H

ave you ever wanted to get involved with your nation's law-making policies? Perhaps run for office? Maybe study and contribute to the growth of the local ecosystem? Sure, you could do all of that stuff in real life, or you could do it in Wakfu, the colorful new MMO from Square Enix and French studio Ankama Games.

I went into the Wakfu beta with virtually no prior knowledge of the game and no expectations. I discovered something unlike any MMO I've played previously – a game that showcases some truly unique features.

Wakfu is a follow-up to the equally silly-named Dofus, a Flash-based MMO that Ankama released back in 2004. That title became popular for its cartoon-inspired visuals and easy accessibility from less powerful computers, eventually garnering 25 million registered accounts. For the follow-up, Ankama, now backed by publisher Square Enix in North America, is sticking to the look and combat of Dofus while expanding the side activities into realms normally unexplored in this genre.

The first thing I noticed about Wakfu was its bright style, with visuals clearly informed by European animation. While plenty of MMOs go for an exaggerated look (World of Warcraft and Star Wars: The Old Republic), and some even go cel-shaded (Champions Online), I've never played one that looks so much like I'm playing a cartoon. Animation is such a key element of Wakfu that one of the primary quest rewards is new emotes, which are acted out in astounding, charming detail by the characters.

The look of the game is cutesy, but I quickly discovered an overwhelming amount of depth beneath that innocent exterior. Wakfu's eccentric world is viewed from a top-down angle. Areas are split into giant chunks of land in the sky that look similar to the floating worlds of the downloadable hit Bastion. Players move across these landmasses on a grid, and although movement takes place in real-time, once combat is initiated, the game shifts to a turn-based system.

Turn-based, tactical combat in an MMO sounded crazy to me. Amazingly, though, it works. The system grants players more control over when they get into combat. Once fighting, they must position themselves to effectively use a number of element-based attacks. Each individual attack gains experience and levels up separately from the overall character level.

Combat is a much smaller part of the overall experience in Wakfu compared to other MMOs, however. A complex crafting system allows players to gather materials from both the world and the creatures inhabiting it. For example, if you choose to "harvest" one of the early-game sheep enemies before fighting it, you'll receive seeds. Plant them and new sheep creatures

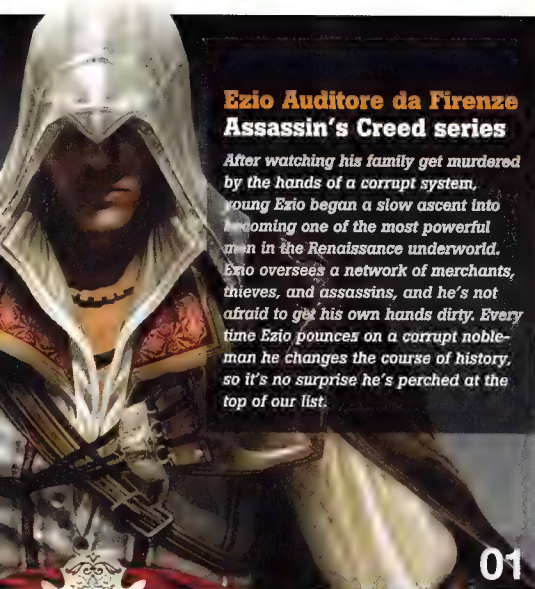
will grow. Each zone in the game features a delicate balance of flora and fauna that will be affected by the harvesting and planting choices that players make.

In addition to playing a strong part in the ecosystem, players also control the game world's economy and government. Rather than earning Wakfu's primary form of currency – called Kama – through quests and loot drops, players must mine various materials and mint their own currency through the use of special machines. The success or failure of this economy depends entirely on the player base.

Likewise, players can vote in a governor in each of the four nations of Wakfu. Players must decide early on which nation they want to become a part of, and they must be citizens of a nation to vote in its election. Governors serve a two-week term and are in charge of many aspects of the region, including taxes, laws, and international relations. Governors can enact laws making it illegal to kill certain creatures or encouraging citizens of that nation to fight against another nation in PvP to win citizen points.

All of this adds up to make Wakfu one of the most fascinating and impenetrable MMO experiences I've ever had. I won't lie: In the 15 or so hours I spent with the beta, most of it was a daze of trying to figure out these interlocking systems. Wakfu may sport a kid-friendly appearance, but it's likely to be the most complicated and unguided MMO released next year.

Although I found it difficult to get my bearings, I don't think that's necessarily a bad thing. Not everyone wants the hand-holding quests and arrows on your map that have become the norm in this genre. If you're looking for an MMO that gives you the power to affect the world and the other players in it, look past Wakfu's goofy top layer and give it a chance. ♦



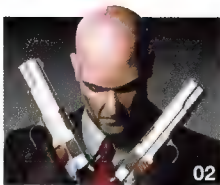
Ezio Auditore da Firenze
Assassin's Creed series

After watching his family get murdered by the hands of a corrupt system, young Ezio began a slow ascent into becoming one of the most powerful men in the Renaissance underworld. Ezio oversees a network of merchants, thieves, and assassins, and he's not afraid to get his own hands dirty. Every time Ezio pounces on a corrupt nobleman he changes the course of history, so it's no surprise he's perched at the top of our list.

01

Agent 47
Hitman series

Agent 47's upbringing would make even Jason Bourne toss in his sleep. Raised in a government cloning facility to become the ultimate killer, he took to his work like a true artist. Agent 47 cuts a terrifying figure – if you can catch a glimpse of him. His bald, bar-coded head gives him a distinct look, but when he needs to disappear, he seamlessly blends into any environment.



02

HK-47
Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic series

This droid's lack of social graces and bloated arrogance make for some humorous exchanges, but don't let HK-47's personality deceive you. This machine is a soulless killer. Constructed by the Dark Lord of the Sith to be a Hunter-Killer assassin droid, HK-47 spent years travelling the galaxy, snuffing out anyone who threatened galactic stability. Even when he's on your team, it's hard to feel comfortable around such a notorious killer.



03

Jack
BioShock

The illegitimate son of a wealthy industrialist and an exotic dancer, Jack was psychologically programmed to be an unwitting pawn in Rapture's civil war. Jack proves to be a deciding factor in this conflict as he willingly alters his genes and does whatever it takes to achieve his goals. But the eleventh hour revelation behind why Jack has been killing everyone that stands in his way makes you rethink everything you know about this sleeper agent.



04

Wander
Shadow of the Colossus

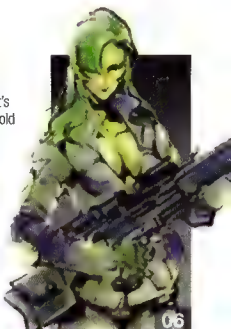
Whatever dignity Wander once possessed was slowly stripped away as a dark obsession consumed him. In order to save his love, Wander systematically murdered the remnants of an ancient species of colossi. His initial motives may have been noble, but as he single-handedly commits genocide to fulfill this quest, he simultaneously sacrifices his humanity.



05

Sniper Wolf
Metal Gear Solid

In a list dominated by men, it's nice to see a lady who can hold her own. Sniper Wolf was raised amidst the gunfire, sirens, and screams of a country split apart by guerrilla warfare. She became a sniper in order to survive the large conflicts of her life, but part of her has always been trying to fight a world engulfed in conflict.



06



07

Thane
Mass Effect 2

In a future where snipers can remove the hairs on their target's head from miles away, it takes a truly skilled assassin to get up close and personal with his victims. Clever and calculating, Thane is also a deeply spiritual man, and his proper mannerisms give him a disarming personality.



08

Harman Smith
Killer 7

Harman Smith may initially seem like a frail old man bound to a wheelchair, but this cryptic killer actually possesses demi-god like powers. When he was younger, Harman undertook a series of assassination contracts from the government, but he didn't just kill his targets, he absorbed their personalities into his own consciousness. Harman Smith isn't just an unstable assassin – he's seven.



09

Rikumar
Tenchu series

One of the early stealth action titles, Tenchu's gameplay hasn't withstood the test of time, but that doesn't change the fact that endless nobles have felt the point of Rikumar's blade. This ninja remains as stoic as a totem pole, but he dispatches his targets with the flourish of a skilled swordsman. Just don't taste his rice.



10

Mega Man
Mega Man series

Designed to be a symbol of humanity's advancement, the Blue Bomber is really a killer with a heart of cold fusion. In every game, Mega Man is given a list of robot masters to defeat, but he doesn't just eliminate these "contracts" like some kind of demented serial killer – he dismantles them, then turns their signature ability against his next target. If you're a robot with some kind of theme, Mega Man probably has you in his crosshairs.

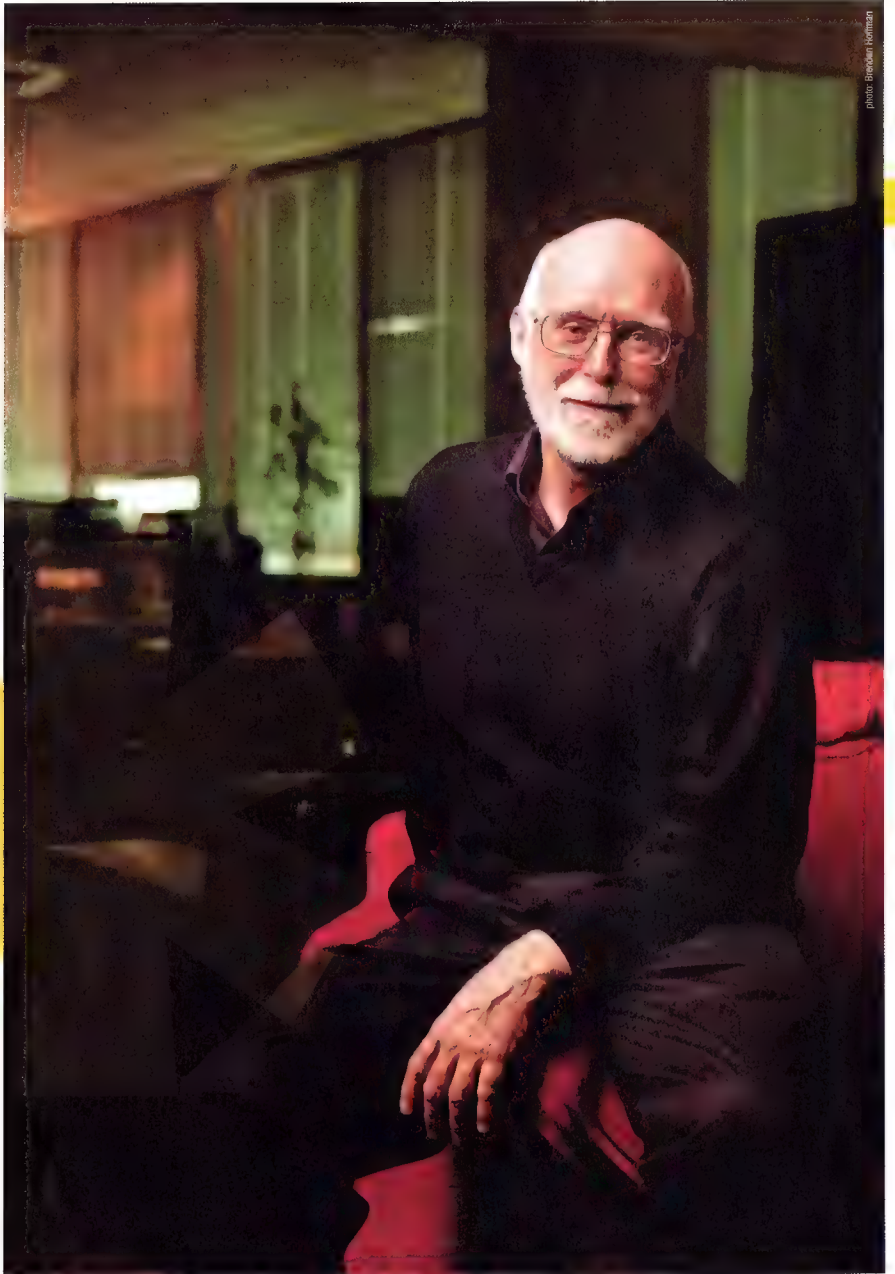


photo: Benjamin Hörmann

The Man Behind the Fantasy

CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

From pen and paper roleplaying to Elder Scrolls to the new Kingdoms of Amalur, **Ken Rolston** has been working behind-the-scenes on the latest and greatest RPGs for over 25 years. We recently talked to him about his approach to RPG design, his feelings on Elder Scrolls, and whether or not he'll be retiring any time soon.

interview by Phil Kollar

When working on massive RPGs like the Elder Scrolls games, it must be hard to step back and look at the big picture. Now, years later, how do you feel about Morrowind and Oblivion? Is there anything you wish you could change?

I'm very happy. I do have a perspective on those products. I often liken Morrowind to *Moby Dick* whereas Oblivion is *Titanic*, the movie. Morrowind was a vast, overly ambitious project, but glorious in many ways – but tragically inaccessible as a result. It had a much smaller audience because it was odder and less generic and less what people expect. With Oblivion, we knew what people expected and deliberately made our product a lot more comfortable for them.

Morrowind was more ambitious and more of a “jazz” project in the sense that there were a lot of notes and some weren't the best notes but you got a great, overwhelming sense of spirit. I think Oblivion has less of that jazzy, explosive experience, but it's a much smoother, more comfortable thing to play. I can't go back and play Morrowind because the software isn't that good, but I would love to. I don't think I'd be drawn to play Oblivion quite so much.

Are you planning to play Skyrim?

Oh, certainly. Maybe not for two or three months, though. I have been thinking about going on Steam and downloading it and having it on my drive. Maybe I would love playing it, but I'm too busy now to enjoy it. I would feel guilty if I had that much fun playing a game. I haven't played Minecraft! I should be playing Minecraft, but I'm not touching it until I'm finished with Reckoning.

After Oblivion, it was announced that you were retiring from the game industry. Then you signed on with Big Huge Games to do Reckoning. What was it that convinced you to come back?

Once I found out that the Big Huge people were so wonderful, it wasn't very hard for them to suck me back in. I admit that I can't really answer the question, because I was really, really done when I quit Oblivion, and those four months of freedom were as good as they could be. But I think that the joy that I get from being good at what I do is probably not something that I could unconsciously give up as easily as I was able to consciously give up.

In 2009, drama with THQ occurred and Big Huge Games nearly closed. If 38 Studios hadn't stepped in, all the work you had done would have gone to waste. What was going on in your mind at that time? Were you worried that the game

you came out of retirement to work on might never see the light of day?

When you're in the trenches, you block out any anxiety that isn't productive. Also we had something that was so good that I couldn't imagine that it wouldn't get done... The way I look looking at it is that we have sloppy luck. We have spectacularly good but sloppy luck. Every time we have a tragedy, we trade up for something better. I want to assume it's because Big Huge is as good as it is, that it can continue to be successful.

I was lucky enough to sit in on the “RPG Influencers” breakfast at GDC, where you talked about game design with BioWare's Ray Muzyka and Greg Zeschuk. It was clear that you disagreed with the doctors on some key points. What would you say separates your approach of making an RPG from the BioWare approach?

Our products are very different. They are much bigger believers in the narrative along the vector of story and character. I'm much more in the belief that the player should write his own story by wandering through the world. His response to the themes in the world is what makes his story. That's probably our primary divergence. Since they believe in character and storytelling, they believe in dialogue and a heavy investment in that. What I regard an anathema is long periods of time spent in dialogue interfaces.

A lot of people think of RPGs as very narrative-heavy games and assume the people behind them must want to focus on narrative, but that's not the case with you. Do you think that view of RPGs is false?

Reckoning is not only formed by my vision. Luckily, there are advocates within Big Huge for the BioWare style of gaming. At the end of the day, I want a project that's fueled by the passions of many different visions. If I have a gift, it's that I want people to have ownership of their part of the game and feel tragically responsible for it. In that sense, maybe I want all things – which is always stupid; don't try to do everything. But what I want is the knowledge that we're trying to do many different things and then have interface and the player choices handle that gracefully – ideally, invisible to the user and wherever necessary, so it's easy for the user to tell where he's making the choice that he doesn't find it frustrating.

Compared to the average developer in their 20s or 30s, you've devoted a huge portion of your life to this industry. You've been around the world of gaming for 25-plus years. What's the biggest change the industry has been through in that time, for better or worse?

In the paper game industry, we believed that role-playing would change the world – that one day there would be copies of our role-playing games put next to Shakespeare's

collected works. I don't think that's the case anymore. I am not sure about whether there will be copies of computer games next to Shakespeare. We may now be at the point where George Melles was at with *A Trip to the Moon*, one of the earliest films – which were novelties, engaging experiences that displayed technological wonders and were good toys. But it's certainly not a mature industry for producing. Despite my skepticism based on my experience with role-playing games, I believe that it's still an open question. I'm still not sure whether computer games will ever become a major form of cultural expression in the same way that film or books have.

Is there a direction or path that game designers need to go down if they want to achieve that?

My thought is that they simply have to be better game designers. That's a trivially true thing. They don't need to have a goal in order to become better at what they do. I would expect them to do that – to become more professional and broaden their skills... I have no investment one way or the other. For example, I'm not bitter that pencil-and-paper role-playing games aren't sitting next to Shakespeare. That doesn't in any way reduce my joy at having made those games. It's the same for computer games. If they end up being just another bourgeois entertainment, that's fine. I've never wanted to write Shakespeare. I've never wanted to have that relationship to what I was doing. I want to have fun. Maybe games are fundamentally too trivial and lighthearted to be major works. But, like I said, it's an open question, and not one I'm suited to answer.

When I interviewed you for our feature on Reckoning, you dropped some hints that – when this game is done – you could end up returning to that interrupted retirement. How are you feeling about that now? Will this be your last game?

I am currently widely on record, most importantly with my wife, that I'm probably going to be working forever until I go into the grave. I believe I've been on a pilgrimage from the point that I retired from Oblivion. I think I really was burned out and ready to stop. What's happened is that I've found a method of working, a group of people to work with, and a mature attitude about what I do that allows me to have enough of a life, while doing the obsessive, goes-way-too-far work in game design. That's a unique thing that I can do – I can get away with stuff that other people can't do. But that's the condition for me wanting to stay in the industry. Now that I've figured out the formula for it, I think I could easily be rolled up and down the hallways with my fruit cup on my tray and still doing meaningful work. ☺

1992
LEVEL UP

After leaving his job as a high school English teacher years earlier, Rolston takes his first full-time position in the pen-and-paper industry at West End Games. He helps create and popularize the sci-fi tabletop role-playing game Paranoia

1994

TASTE OF FAILURE
Rolston joins the game industry as lead designer at the Washington D.C. based Magnet Interactive Studios. He pitches and begins development on several projects, all of which end up canceled

1997

GAINING EXPERIENCE
One year after joining Bethesda, Rolston finally ships his first game. Battespire, an action-focused spin-off of the Elder Scrolls series

2003

CREATING A CLASSIC
Rolston steps into his biggest role yet, serving as the lead designer of The Elder Scrolls IV: Morrowind. The huge RPG becomes a fan-favorite on PC and Xbox

2006

NOT FINISHING DONE
After quitting work on The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion, Rolston announces that he is retiring from the industry. A little over four months later, he comes out of retirement to join Big Huge Games in creating the studio's first RPG

2009

TURMOIL
THQ decides it cannot afford to continue production on the mystery RPG project from Big Huge Games and announces it will shut the studio down if a buyer cannot be found. 38 Studios steps forth and buys the developer, turning Big Huge's game into the debut of the Kingdoms of Amalur IP

2012

COMPLETE
With help from Curt Schilling, R.A. Salvatore, and Todd McFarlane, Rolston and his team at Big Huge Games will launch Kingdoms of Amalur: Reckoning in February

EXPLORING SONY'S NEW DIMENSION

Sony Bravia 46HX729

PROS: A minimalist design and slickly concealed buttons keep the TV's presentation simple. The 46-inch 1080p display clocks in a refresh rate of 240Hz and delivers high definition gaming in all its vivid glory. Equip your-

self with a pair of 3D Active Glasses (\$69.99 apiece), and the crisp visuals carry over into an immersive 3D gaming experience. Shadow of the Colossus pops in high definition; I marveled at each individual blade of grass on the first Colossi's back. In our tests Sony's machine didn't produce a single muddy visual. Integrated Netflix, YouTube, and Pandora are enough to make this TV an investment you won't regret.

CONS: Despite being a Sony product, the Bravia doesn't pack the PlayStation 3-enabled SimuView feature, which allows players to view their own full screen action instead of split-screen multiplayer by wearing separate sets of 3D glasses. Also, buying the glasses separately is a pain on the wallet and they're a little intrusive for folks already sporting eyewear.

PlayStation 3 Display

First announced at E3, Sony finally released its game-centric 24-inch 1080p, active 3D-enabled display, which comes bundled with a pair of 3D glasses (\$69.99 apiece), and MotorStorm Apocalypse. Sony tries to make up for the system's size with SimuView—a feature that allows two players their own views of the multiplayer action if they each wear active 3D glasses. While it's cool that two players can have their own full screen, only Gran Turismo 5, Killzone 3, and MotorStorm Apocalypse support it, and it doesn't make up for the screen's small size, comparatively large price, or lack of remote. If you're in the market for a new 3D TV, there are more fully featured sets out there.

LIMITED APPEAL  **\$499 | store.sony.com**

Some doubt that 3D games and movies are a worthwhile investments for their homes, but the Bravia HX72 struts into your living room like it should have been there to begin with.

\$1,499 | store.sony.com



by Tim Turi and Ben Reeves

SONY



1 PlayStation 3 Wireless Stereo Headset

After years of letting gamers run wild and explore third-party headset options, Sony is offering its own official PlayStation 3 branded headset. The plug and play setup is so easy that trained monkeys could get these headsets up and running (maybe you've played Modern Warfare 3 with a few of them online). The thick body hides most of the headphone's controls without spoiling its elegant yet comfortable design. The microphone pickup and speaker output are above average, and the internal battery will hold out for a half day's worth of gaming. Unfortunately, the virtual 7.1 functionality sounds hollow. But, if you're looking for a cheap stereo headset, Sony's PlayStation 3 Wireless Stereo Headset is a remarkable deal.

WIRELESS | 

\$99.99
us.playstation.com/ps3/accessories



2 The Legend of Drizzt Board Game

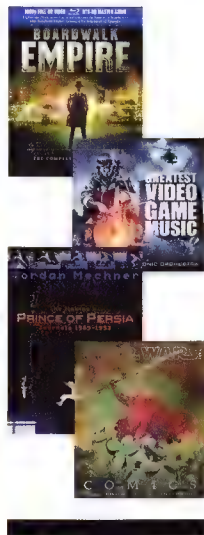
R.A. Salvatore's *New York Times* best-selling *Forgotten Realms* novels detail the adventures of Drizzt Do'Urden. If you're tired of reading about this friendly drow and his flowing silver mane, have a Drizzt adventure of your own. Wizards of the Coast's newest cooperative board game allows up to five players to team up as Drizzt and friends to explore dungeons, battle fearsome foes, and win treasure and glory. This unique game ruleset is also compatible with other Wizard of the Coast's board games, such as *Castle Ravenloft* and *Wrath of Ashardalon*.

\$64.99
wizards.com

3 Mass Effect 3 M-8 Avenger Assault Rifle Replica

If you have a rabid Krogan to put down, try the M-8 Avenger. Replica manufacturer Triforce built these official life-sized models of Mass Effect 3's M-8 Avenger, perfectly replicating their appearance from the upcoming game. Made from a polystone cast, the M-8 Avenger replica weighs 20 pounds and measures 34 inches in length.

\$650.00
projecttriforce.com



BOARDWALK EMPIRE: THE COMPLETE FIRST SEASON

The *Sopranos* writer Terence Winter and Academy Award-winning director Martin Scorsese deliver this lavish period drama about the political and criminal mastermind who ran Atlantic City's underworld during prohibition.

\$79.98
store.hbo.com

THE GREATEST VIDEO GAME MUSIC

The London Philharmonic Orchestra performs reworked classical orchestrations of some of the best known video game themes, including *Super Mario Bros.*, *Call of Duty*, *Legend of Zelda*, *Halo*, *World of Warcraft*, and *Angry Birds*.

\$9.99
x5musicgroup.com

THE MAKING OF PRINCE OF PERSIA

Like a time capsule, this ebook reprinting of Jordan Mechner's personal journal from the '80s recounts the challenges and frustrations the designer faced while working on one of the most influential computer games of the era.

\$7.99
jordannechner.com

STAR WARS ART: COMICS

Star Wars comics have been around as long as the films, and such a rich history deserves to be collected. This 244-page limited edition book details the history of Star Wars comics and includes art from some of the industry's brightest luminaries.

\$40.00
abramsbooks.com

In Defense Of Japanese Games

No one is shocked when I tell them that two of my top three games of all time were created in Japan (Super Mario Bros. 3 and Final Fantasy VI, for the record). Why should that be surprising? The Japanese side of the industry has produced some incredible games – in the past. In recent years, I’ve noticed a growing trend of gamers writing off Japanese developers, saying they’re stuck in the past, they embrace archaic design, and they aren’t putting out interesting games.

Well, I beg to differ. In fact, allow me to make a controversial statement: I think that the most intellectually and artistically interesting non-indie games on the market today are being developed in Japan.

One obvious example is Dark Souls, a distinctly Japanese title that is actually getting the attention it deserves. As most publishers lean toward simplifying games and putting in loads of tutorials to make sure the player understands every aspect of what’s happening, From Software had the courage – some might say stupidity – to simply throw players into the world it created. The developer has faith that we can figure it out on our own. And with a bit of work, we can.

Atlus’ Catherine provides another example of a Japanese game doing things Western games rarely attempt. I have some problems with the core gameplay of this title, but those issues don’t detract from how fascinating it is. Atlus built a whole game around the idea of being scared of commitment. Protagonist Vincent doesn’t carry a gun and doesn’t have powers or some great destiny. He’s a boring, not terribly likable guy with relationship issues. Sure, things get more supernatural as the plot starts twisting, but the concepts Catherine is dealing with remain more down-to-earth and relatable than anything you’ll find in your average multi-million-selling military shooter.

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



Of course, some Western games are equally artistically adept, so what separates the design philosophy of the average Western developer from a Japanese studio? As best I can tell, the answer is the end goal – bringing a careful, exact idea to fruition versus trying to create something that everyone can play and appreciate. Where a Japanese developer is more likely to focus on a narrow, specific (and often fresh) style or theme, Western studios tend to look for a shotgun blast of accessible gameplay that hits the widest audience possible.

This difference is most evident in the Western game market’s intense focus on iteration. Sometimes this works out for the better (the improvements between Mass Effect and its sequel) and sometimes for the worse (the decline between Dragon Age and its sequel), but almost every Western publisher is hell-bent on iteration and expansion as the best business plan. From Madden to Call of Duty to Assassin’s Creed, yearly releases are becoming the expectation from major franchises.

Compare that to the Japanese market. We’re lucky to get two or three releases per console generation from major Japanese franchises like Zelda and Final Fantasy. We’ve been waiting since the launch of the PS3 for a single game from the visionary Team Ico. Outside of Blizzard and Valve, how many U.S. or European developers are willing or able to give themselves that much time to focus on a single game?

Yes, Japan has severely iterated games coming out as well – especially from publishers that are openly trying to Westernize themselves, such as Capcom – but the top-ranked Japanese releases are consistently more intellectually engaging to me than the biggest Western releases. The visual beauty of El Shaddai and the gonzo humor of Shadows of the Damned are unmatched by developers on this side of the world save for some of the top-tier indie-developed Xbox Live Arcade and PlayStation Network releases.

So why is it so increasingly common for a wide swath of gamers to be dismissive toward games with Japanese sensibilities? Is it because these titles don’t attempt to appeal to as many people as possible and, as such, aren’t as financially successful? Shadows of the Damned and El Shaddai are notorious poor sellers, and the even more successful Japanese titles like Dark Souls and Catherine will never put out Call of Duty numbers. But do they need to? Is making the most amount of money from the widest audience possible the only thing games should aspire to?

As much as I love plenty of Western games, I’m glad there are still developers like many of those in Japan who are willing to stick to their vision for a game regardless of whether that closes it off to a portion of the audience.

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





03
Anarchy Reigns



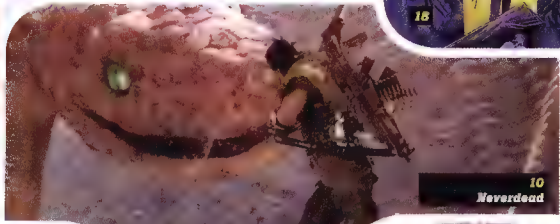
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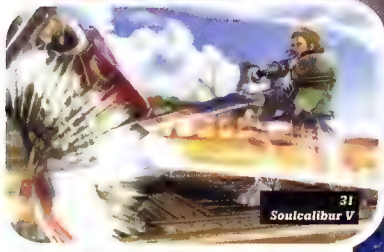
18



05



10
Neverdead



31
Soulcalibur V



31
Final Fantasy XIII-2



20

January

03 New Releases

- Anarchy Reigns (PS3, 360)
- Armored Core V (PS3, 360)
- Justified: Season 2 (Blu-Ray, DVD)
- Siegehammer (360)

05 Magfest Returns

If you find yourself in National Harbor, Maryland, between January 5 and 6, make sure you check out Magfest for four days of video games and video game music. Nobuo Uematsu, composer of the Final Fantasy games, will be there with his new band Earthbound Paps.

10 New Releases

- Birds of Steel (PS3, 360)
- Blades of Time (PS3, 360)
- Deadliest Warrior: Ancient Combat (PS3, 360)
- Primal: Volume 3 (DVD)
- National Geographic Challenge! (PS3)
- Neverdead (PS3, 360)

11 X-Men Harry Potter

While DC Comics has been stealing many of the comic book headlines lately, Marvel Comics quietly launched one of 2011's best surprises, *Wolverine and the X-Men*. This book comes across as a mix of smart X-Men storytelling and whimsical Harry Potter school antics. This may sound like a horrible combination, but it actually takes the X-Men in an interesting and enjoyable new direction.

17 New Releases

- Jungle Speed (Wii)
- What's Your Type? (DS)

18 Diablo In The New Year

As Blizzard Entertainment puts the finishing touches on the highly anticipated Diablo III, fans can bone up on the universe's fiction through DC Comics' new Diablo comic book series. This five-issue arc tells the tale of a new hero named Jacob, who, in true Diablo style, is trying to loot a sword from a cave.

20 Are Vampires Still Popular?

Just when you thought it wasn't possible to be less interested in the Underworld series, Kate Beckinsale makes her (long-awaited?) vampire return in today's *Underworld: Awakening*. We're not sure if this is the fourth entry in the series, a reboot, or a prequel! All we know is it has vampires, werewolves, and humans trying to figure out where they fall on the food chain.

20 George Lucas Returns To The Silver Screen

Say what you want to about the Star Wars prequels, but the space battles were cool...well...except for when baby Anakin blew up a ship by himself. Today, George Lucas and director Anthony Hemingway take to the skies in *Red Tails*, a World War II epic about the Tuskegee Army. Imagine the Battle of Britain IV, but replace X-Wings with old-timer fighter planes. The trailers make it look great, but be warned: This is a George Lucas story.

31 New Releases

- Final Fantasy XIII-2 (PS3, 360)
- Soulcalibur V (PS3, 360)

» Platform:
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360

» Style:
1-Player Role-Playing

» Publisher:
Obsidian Entertainment

2012





GOING DOWN TO SOUTH PARK

Trey Parker
and Matt Stone
team with
Obsidian to
give the long-
running series
the game it
deserves



Since arriving on the pop culture radar in the mid '90s, *South Park* creators Trey Parker and Matt Stone have had one of the most remarkable runs in the history of modern television. The unwavering success of *South Park* has ensured that the duo hasn't had to stray from their lucrative series, but they've also demonstrated an uncanny knack for stepping outside of the familiar confines of television to fantastic results. Their work ethic and production schedule may be certifiably insane, but there's no denying the success (both critically and commercially) of ventures like *Team America: World Police* and *The Book of Mormon* Broadway musical, which took home nine Tony Awards, including Best Musical, in 2010.

If you watched the "You're Getting Old" episode from *South Park* this season, you most likely caught the not-so-subtle hints that the duo is tiring of riffing on the same formula they've used for 15 years. They may be weary of the annual grind of episodes, but a new project will let them play with *South Park*'s cast and brand of humor in an entirely new way. Just like they shook up the format in 1999 with the film *South Park: Bigger, Longer, & Uncut*, a new collaboration with RPG developer Obsidian Entertainment is expanding the horizons for the show that put Comedy Central on the map.

by Dan Ryckert



It's no secret that Trey and Matt have a love of video games. From the Okama Gamesphere to "Make Love, Not Warcraft," the duo has injected *South Park* with countless gaming references that indicate an impressive familiarity with the medium. That knowledge will come in handy as the duo tries its hand in game development with *South Park: The Game*.

While this isn't the first *South Park* game (see sidebar on page 54), the collaboration with Obsidian marks the first time that Parker and Stone have participated directly in the game conception. With the duo writing the script and dialogue, it could accurately be called the first true *South Park* game. This is a far cry from the kart racer, first-person shooter, trivia, and tower defense titles we've seen in the past.

After years of shopping the idea around to developers and publishers, they finally found a good match with Obsidian, a veteran developer with a history of working with licensed products and previously established IP.

Developing *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic II* and *Fallout: New Vegas* is one thing, but this *South Park* project is unlike anything the company has worked on in its eight-year history.

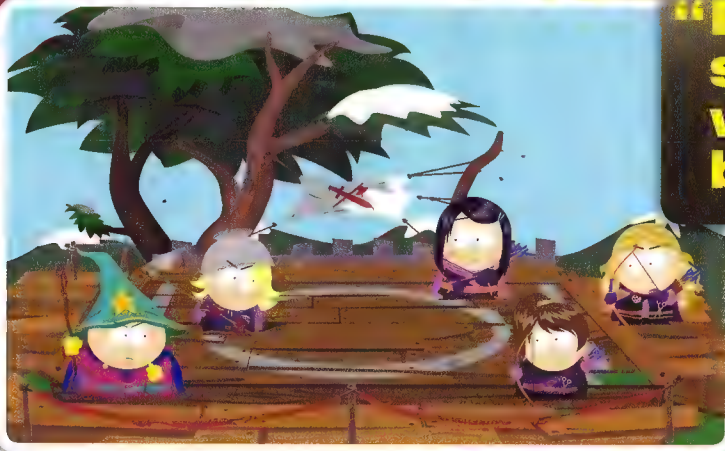
Parker and Stone never hold back when it comes to offensive, outrageous, or absurd content, and the video game will be no different. Knowing this, Obsidian sent out a company-wide email to determine which employees would be interested in (and comfortable with) working on the project. Some declined, citing religious conflicts or issues with the show's content, but the majority of the studio was fully on board.

After THQ signed on as the publisher, Parker and Stone received the green light to progress from rough conceptualization to writing the script in earnest. While specific pieces of dialogue and entire scenes are prone to change in a moment's notice when the team is writing the show, the duo knows for sure what genre they want their game to fit into. Growing up with a fascination of single-player experiences like *Ultima*, Parker has always gravitated towards role-playing games. Leveraging his extensive knowledge, *South Park: The Game* is a turn-based RPG that serves as equal parts tribute and parody to the pillars of the genre.

Role-playing makes up the heart of the gameplay, but it's also central to the story. As the game begins, the children of *South Park* are deeply involved in live-action role-playing, wandering through the town's snowy parks, sidewalks, and treehouses wearing ramshackle armor made out of towels, duct tape, and tinfoil. They assume character classes, engage in quests, and keep rivalries between individuals and factions alive while rarely breaking character.



“Building a sand castle with a bulldozer”



The central *South Park* cast of Cartman, Stan, Kyle, and Kenny are all involved, but instead of taking control of these familiar faces, gamers assume the role of a new character. “The big conceit is that there’s a new kid that’s moved to South Park, and it’s hard to be a new kid in a new town,” Parker says. “It’s about working through the game to the point where you’re going from this little douchebag that no one cares about to standing there with the four boys at the bus stop. It’s about everything a kid has to go through to be socially accepted, and how critical that is to a kid’s life. Plot-wise we go a million places, but that’s really the theme of this game.”

Parker has always preferred RPGs that feature silent, customizable protagonists. “One of my least favorite parts of RPGs is having some character stand there and talk, and me not being able to hit a button and skip past,” he admits. “That’s one of my main things when I first came into the meeting. I was like ‘Okay, your character, whoever you’re playing in the RPG, can’t talk.’ That’s why I love *Zelda* so much. You can just fill in the blanks of ‘Well, here’s what I would say right here.’ Whenever I’m playing an RPG and you hear this voice go ‘Well, what am I gonna do about this?’, I think, ‘That’s not what I sound like. That’s not what I would say.’ It always pisses me off and takes me out of it.”

Players have full control over the creation of their character thanks to a customizable avatar editor that far exceeds the options of online alternatives. Once you’ve selected your gender, name, skin color, hair, and facial features, your story begins.

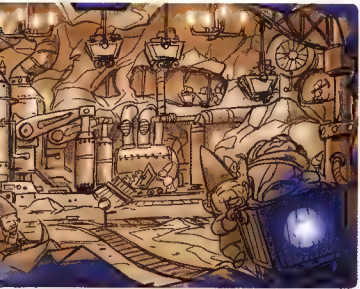


As the new kid on the block, your initial objective is the same as any newcomer – make friends. Considering how hostile *South Park*’s children (especially Cartman) can be to each other, this task is easier said than done. *South Park Studios* and Obsidian envision a story that begins with your character taking part in a neighborhood game and evolves until you’re embarking on a real adventure. Obsidian was unwilling to share details, but it promises a full quest with events progressing far past the LARPing of the early scenes.

Role-playing and fantasy are large components of the game, but you’re still playing as a fourth grader in the modern world. As such, your number of friends and current standing with various kid factions are tracked via a Facebook-like app on your character’s smartphone. On top of serving as a great vehicle for parodying the popular social networking site, the smartphone also functions as your primary game menu.

Eric Cartman makes his presence known early in the game, greeting your character in full wizard regalia. This is when you determine your character class, with Cartman giving standard options such as wizard, paladin, adventurer, and rogue. We can’t share details, but the unconventional fifth class is obviously one of Cartman’s own creations.

South Park may have started with construction paper and stop-motion animation, but the team at *South Park Studios* is now working with advanced animation technology that Matt Stone describes as “building a sand castle with a bulldozer.” A similar situation is occurring with the game, as Obsidian is utilizing the *Dungeons & Dragons* Siege III engine. Given the flexible creative environment Parker and Stone work in on their television show, the studio is trying to accommodate for script rewrites by making the engine as flexible as possible. They developed dynamic lip-syncing tools so animators don’t have to keyframe new mouth movements if Parker and Stone decide to insert or change lines of dialogue. All of the children in *South Park* are being put together on the same rig, so heads, limbs, and clothing can be swapped out at a moment’s notice. In a move that is helping Obsidian’s animators tremendously, Parker and Stone made 15 years of *South Park* assets available to them, along with a detailed list of approved textures and colors.





Once players receive their initial quests, it's time to explore Colorado's sleepy mountain town. If you were to stumble into the room while someone was playing the game, nothing about the perspective would tip you off that it wasn't an episode of the show. Characters walk with the same herky-jerky style, and the environments come directly from 15 years of South Park Digital Studios assets. All enemy encounters are visible on the map, and the player can choose to engage or ignore them.

Many elements of the combat system are reminiscent of

Paper Mario and the Mario & Luigi games, with first strikes granted if the player initiates combat in the field; the players begin the fight on defense if the opposite occurs. Like the classic Final Fantasy encounters, battles are presented from a side view. Hitting the X button causes your character to swipe with a melee weapon, but well-timed successive inputs result in multiple hits. Timed inputs occur on defense as well, with players taking reduced damage if they block in the nick of time.

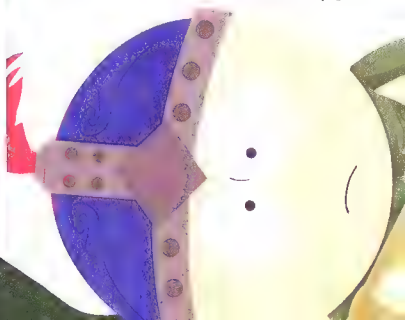
Obsidian doesn't want the player to press a button and have to sit back to watch an animation play out, so the

team is incorporating dynamic camera angles at certain times, such as when your character stuns an enemy with Ro Sham Bo (a kick to the crotch). The player also retains control over the characters in the party rather than being forced to watch lengthy attack animations.

Other RPG mainstays are present in the combat as well, such as critical hits, cash rewards, receiving experience after each victory, and consumables. In one demo, we saw a d-pad icon that featured soda as health potions and Tweak's coffee as a haste-inducing item.

Early fighting demos were deemed too tame by Parker, who wanted more blood to drive home the idea that the kids of *South Park* are terrible to each other. Obsidian originally wanted to create impressive, shiny armor as potential outfit choices, but Parker turned it down with one of his frequent requests to "make it crappier." He's adamant that weapons and armor look as homemade as possible, so expect to see things like a football helmet/pushbroom combination representing a Spartan helmet, shoulder pads made out of noodle strainers, and oven mitt "gloves."

continued on page 51



An Interview With Trey Parker and Matt Stone

The concept of this game has been floating around for a while. How did it finally come together?

Trey Parker: I really loved RPGs growing up, and even now I really love them. We started kicking around the idea of a *South Park* RPG a long time ago when we did an episode about *Lord of the Rings*. I think since then we've talked about how cool a big, real RPG with the kids playing a game within the game could be. We had been kicking around the idea since then.

Did you ever flirt with the idea of other genres, or was it RPG from the very beginning?

Matt Stone: We've been thinking about this RPG the whole time we've seriously thought about a game. I don't think we've ever really considered anything else. It's the best way to tell the story, we can get some real writing in there.

Parker: The other games, we just kind of found a company and were like, "Go ahead and make a game." Whatever it was, we just weren't super involved. The best way for us to be involved and have actual writing in it is to do an RPG.

Considering how the previous games turned out, do you feel this will be the first game to really do the *South Park* name justice?

Parker: Hopefully it will. It'll definitely be the first one that has us working as hard as we do on the show. We really didn't have any big reason we'd have to do it, except that we're both just huge gamers and it was sort of another area. Especially when the show first came out, there were video games that we weren't super proud of and we

were always like "Well, if we ever got the chance to spend the time and do it right and do it big, this is sort of what this is all about."

Stone: We've done this so long that Xbox 360 and PS3 are like the new consoles considering we were doing video games before. We even did a Nintendo 64 game, I think. There was this thing that happened where we realized that even though not everyone sees the show in HD, we produce *South Park* in HD and we have for like three years. I watch it in HD and Trey and I both think about *South Park* as a 16:9, HD show. So now with both of the systems, we can finally have a character walk into the scene and it really does look like you're in *South Park*. Compared to the old days where they were sort of 3D, but it didn't look like *South Park*. We had to have some sort of weird 3D engine to make the game work. This is really gonna have the look of *South Park*. It'll look like you're in a show. That wasn't possible until the new systems like Xbox 360 and PS3 came out. That was another thing that got us really excited to do a game.

Did you have developers in mind that you wanted to talk to? How detailed was the pitch?

Stone: Not as detailed as all the story we have now, but we had kind of a general concept that we were talking to people about. It's kind of like doing a game with an existing license, and there's always a problem because you've

got us and all we care about. We'd like them to make a good game, and you have Comedy Central that has a license they need to sell. I think developers are somewhat hot and cold. They have a certain prejudice against licensed things, I mean. Some people do it great. Some licensed games are awesome, but some are duds. We're hoping we can keep it in the awesome category. So that was a little bit of a sticky thing, going out and selling the game.

How topical can you be with this? It's not a situation where you can write a joke about current events and have it air six days later. Do you have to keep the references more general or do you plan on lampooning games more than pop culture?

Parker: There are plenty of games that have lampooned games, and we're not really doing that. I think we're talking about a lot of the things specifically in RPGs and how big and bombastic they can get sometimes. The truth is, with this show we can get topical and when we do, people really notice because it shows how quick we do the show. Then there are tons and tons of shows that we do that aren't topical at all, and don't have the reference of the week in it. This is something we're not used to, and there's so much more lead time, and for the first time we kind of have to put something down and let people work on it for a few months before it comes out. We're just

trying to keep everything really fresh and funny and be topical without being too much of whatever is happening today. We're still airing *South Park* right now, so whatever is happening today, it's going in this week.

You're used to creating 22-minute episodes of the show, but this is going to be a full-length RPG. How does it compare to be working on something this lengthy?

Parker: It's definitely been a lot for one single thing. I think we're still just getting into all that we're gonna have to end up doing for it.

Stone: We're still learning ourselves, definitely.

Would you say it's comparable to making the jump from TV to film?

Parker: We actually kind of started in film, so film for us is one of the easiest things to do. The format of *South Park* is really a three-act sort of movie structure. We just kind of make a little mini-movie every week. This is definitely, besides Broadway, the biggest learning curve for us. Learning how this stuff works and how you have to do it, it's definitely a whole different thing.

Stone: We're used to telling stories like, "this happens, and then this happens." Not, "this happens, and then a person can go do this or this." That's a whole different thing, you know. So far, it's pretty cool.

Matt Stone (left) and Trey Parker (right)

Interview continued on page 50

Parker: It has that same thing, just like with the musical where you can say, "Okay, we're gonna do a Broadway show for the first time!" You can go, "Okay, here's what I love about Broadway shows." And when we make a movie, it's like "Okay, here's what we know we love about movies." That's always what we try to stick to. With this game, we're really trying to stick to that and go, "Okay, here's what we really love about games, and here's what really drives us nuts about games. Let's really try to focus on one and not the other."

With the show, you guys do everything in-house. You don't have to ship anything out for animation. What is it like working with Obsidian, and how does that relationship work? Have you had to adjust to that?

Stone: So far it's been great. They're in Irvine and we're up in L.A., so it's not that far. So far it's just been spittingball sessions with the guys from there and guys from here. Kind of all getting an outline of what the game is gonna be, and in the next few months we're going to get

into the lines and stuff. It's been fun. We'll sit there and go, "Hey, we've been playing games for a long time and this is what we think a game is," and they'll go, "Yeah, kind of, but here's what it really is." We have our theories of storytelling, and if you get in a room with us we'll all say, "You always gotta do this," and whatever kind of stuff that we've formulated over the years that we think are our rules. We think they're their rules, but it's kind of an interesting learning experience. Right now, we all just get in a room and jam on ideas, which has been fun.

Some episodes have featured abrupt changes in visual style ("Good Times With Weapons," the live-action hamsters in "Pandemic," the Heavy Metal parody). Will we see any of that in the game or will it be more of a consistent art style throughout?

Parker: What was cool when we decided on this was when we saw the first few-second long playable demo. Someone was sitting there with an Xbox controller making this character walk around, and you would

think you were just watching an episode of *South Park*. What's nice is that we have this simple kind of 2D style that allows us to really make the game look exactly like the show, except that you're in control of it. I think that we're really gonna stick with that. Even though it's gonna have this sort of world-within-a-world thing in it with the RPG thing, and the fact that they're playing a game within this game. We know people don't wanna buy the *South Park* game and then see this wildly different animation. There are people that do way cooler 3D dragons than we ever would. We're not gonna do anything like that. We're gonna really let people be in the world of *South Park* and make that the most important thing.

Has putting together a concrete map of the city changed how you view the town in your head?

Parker: It already has, even just from the talks. It's kind of cemented it in my head now. Like, "Okay, this is over here and that's over there." I'm sure it'll happen even more, which isn't a bad thing. It's good for me to finally know where everything is.

Have there been any lapses in your gaming history, or has the interest been a lifelong thing?

Parker: Lifelong. We both have Xboxes and PlayStations in our offices and at home. A lot of times we're here and waiting for animation to come in, and we're doing a lot of our gaming. I was a diehard PC gamer only because I got so used to playing Oblivion and stuff with a keyboard and mouse. I never thought I'd make the switch, but I have Skyrim on Xbox 360 sitting on my desk and I'm taking it home today. I've completed every *Zelda* game. I'd say I can call myself a pretty serious gamer.

Stone: I played the Infocom games and Wizardry. I finished Wizardry like every day after school in 8th or 9th grade. I love the big open-world games like Arkham City, Infamous, Grand Theft Auto, and Red Dead Redemption. Totally unrelated, but for some reason I love hockey and soccer games. I just like the kind of games where it doesn't stop, and you can just

keep kicking the ball around. FIFA basically is my poker night with my friends, we just get together and play FIFA. I play online against some kids and they always have English accents and they always kick my ass.

Parker: One of the reasons I grew up loving RPGs and still do is because I never wanted to play with other people. It was my one time I could get away from everyone. For me, an RPG was the greatest version of that. I control the whole party, and when it comes around to MMOs and stuff like that, I really didn't get it. The last thing I want to do is play with other people.

Stone: I'm more of that button masher guy. Remember that game Serious Sam? I play games like that for hours. Shoot s---, blow s--- up. That being said, I'm playing Arkham City right now. It's not an RPG, but it's a little more involved than a shoot-em-up. I like the ones that balance it well. I haven't played RPGs in a few years because I just got so sick of walking around with a sword and looking for stuff to kill and people to talk to. I just hate that s---

Is there any game you point to as your favorite?

Parker: I just remember playing Oblivion and being like, "This is exactly what I've been waiting for my entire life." There was no online thing, it was just the greatest RPG ever. That's probably the best time I've ever had playing a game.

Stone: I've had so many games I like and get super into. I sound like a broken record, but I'd be lying if I didn't say FIFA. Since FIFA 06 maybe, every time it comes out in October, I get it. I get the off-year World Cup versions and all that. That's just the game that I completely subscribe to. I love how the yearly tweaks to it are so nuanced but essential.

Parker: Rest assured, the *South Park* game will be a brilliant cross between Elder Scrolls: Oblivion and FIFA.

Stone: Finally.

Parker: You gotta go kill a bunch of monsters and s--- but you can only use your feet.





Weapons may be crude in South Park, but Obsidian is pushing for them to be more than just toys. Players have access to both melee and ranged weapons in most combat situations. As you progress, magic items like the lightning-powered Okama Gamesphere become available. In a system that Obsidian describes as similar to Final Fantasy VII's materia, your weapons can be augmented to grant various abilities like fire, electricity, and poison. Whether these attacks are actually happening or simply occurring in the kids' imagination isn't clear, but South Park has never been terribly concerned with explaining itself.

It wouldn't be South Park if combat was restricted to playground-style wooden sword duels, so Obsidian also built a summon system. Neither Obsidian nor South Park

Studios are willing to share specifics, but the series' insane situations and colorful characters are a perfect mine to tap for interesting cameos. We can only imagine how the flow of combat will change if characters like Mr. Hankey, the Super Best Friends, Terrance & Phillip, Santa Claus, Cattatofish, Mecha Streisand, or the tao that defecates ice cream join the fray.

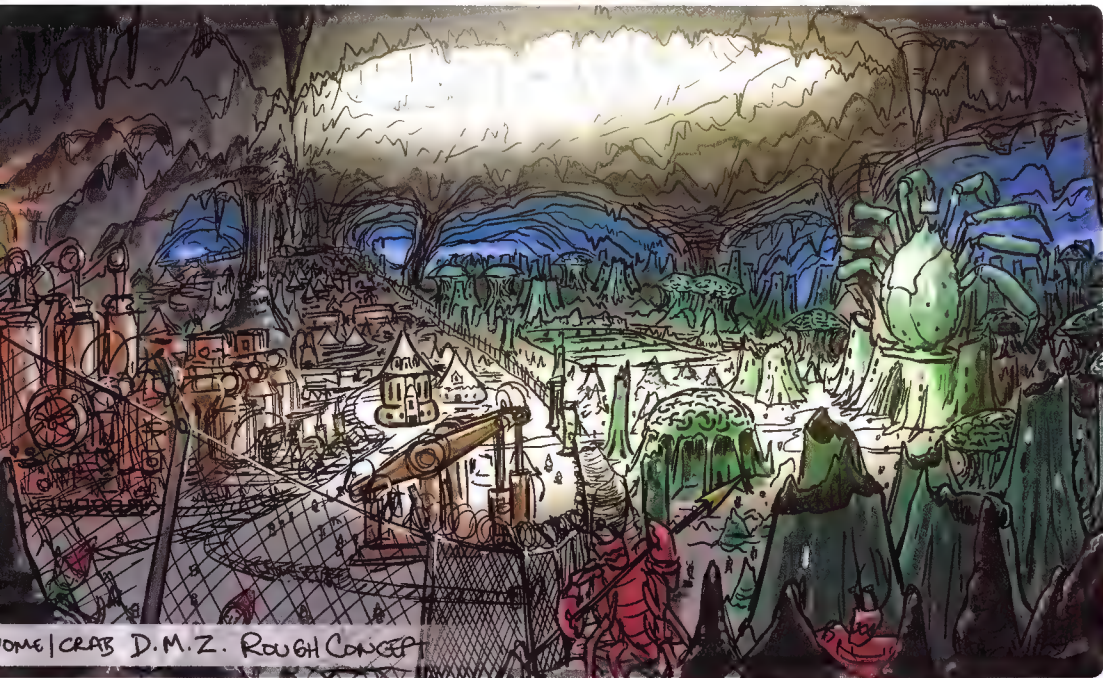
A modern Colorado town is a drastically different setting than Obsidian's previous large-scale RPGs, and it took the team a while to readjust its focus.

"[At first] we were like, 'How about you go find this cave and there's this giant bat creature, and Ike can ride this



bat creature, and it's this huge boss! And you're not fighting kids, you're fighting orcs?," explains project director Zane Lyon. "We did all that and showed it to Matt and Trey, and they were like, 'This isn't South Park. This is just a generic video game. [South Park] is about the kids and their interactions with each other. Bring in Mr. Kim, go to the City Wok, do things that the kids do in South Park. Cartman's not sending you on a quest to defeat a giant bat creature, he's sending you on a quest to go get Kung Pao chicken.'"

The boys may be the stars of South Park, but the town itself – and the ridiculous events that frequently occur there – are just as important to the series and game. We've seen episodes that take the boys to space, Hell, Imaginationland, and into the virtual world of Facebook, but the Colorado town always remains at the core of the franchise. Despite its importance to the show, even its creators didn't know exactly how its various locations fit together.



HOME | CRAB D.M.Z. ROUGH CONCEPT



"It was really funny for us because we had to figure out things for the first time like, 'Where's school in relation to Stan's house?'" Parker says. "We've always seen them go to the bus stop and get on the bus and end up at school, but now our player can sort of walk around and get to that. It's pretty funny because we've just had South Park on any given week go from a town with four buildings in it to a town with Best Buy and all this stuff. Even to sit there with the map and figure out, 'Okay, what's where?' has been really fun. It's going to keep developing, but hopefully because it's fun for us, it'll be fun for fans."

Players can explore South Park in between quests, and like most RPGs, navigating it won't require platforming. "We played with jump early on, but the thing about *South Park* is that those kids don't even have knees," Lyon says. Much of the exploration takes the characters from the left to the right (and vice versa), but branching paths occasionally take them into the background or foreground to prevent the game from becoming overly linear.

Considering the distinct art style of *South Park*, design-

ing the environments proved a unique task for Obsidian's animators. "It can be a huge pain, because everything is hand-illustrated and hand-animated," says lead animator Shon Stewart. "We've done levels and realized the perspective is just not right. We have to redraw that level now. There is no tile set for *South Park*. That's kind of the danger of this sort of stuff. If it doesn't look quite right, it's literally back to the drawing board for the whole thing."

Other games allow animators the luxury of slight shifts in camera perspective, but the hand-drawn style of *South Park* requires the team to get it right or restart from scratch. Adding to the challenge is the fact that the look of various areas has frequently changed throughout the show's 15 seasons.

"Our very first test that we ever did for South Park was to show [Parker and Stone] the look of the world," Lyon says. "You go into Stan's living room and pick up an item while Randy is playing guitar in his underwear, and that's it. I asked 'Can you tell me everything about Stan's living room?' They're like 'Well, sometimes there's a staircase there, sometimes there's not, and sometimes this goes into the kitchen.' I'm like, 'Okay, maybe I'm worrying about this a little too much.'"



Colorado Collectibles

As you take the new kid through the town of South Park, look for the various collectibles strewn about the environments. Some appear throughout the duration of the game, while others will be confined to specific areas. An example of the former is Chinpokomon dolls, the notorious desirable made famous in a season three episode. In gifting Obsidian with all of the show's assets, South Park Digital Studios has included numerous Chinpokomon models that were cut from the episode. We saw an example of another collectible when a boy asked the player to grab some magazines for him, adding "and I'm not talking *Boy's Life*."



Many weapons will be made from household items



South Park's Gaming Timeline



1998: South Park
(Nintendo 64, PSone, PC)

This first-person shooter was published by Acclaim and ran on the Turok 2 engine. Armed with plunger guns, farting Terrance and Phillip dolls, and urine-soaked snowballs, the boys take on countless waves of turkeys, aliens, and robots in an effort to stop a comet from destroying the town.



1999: Chef's Luv Shack
(Nintendo 64, PSone, Dreamcast, PC)

Long before the Wii made minigame collections a frequent occurrence, Chef's Luv Shack had players facing off in trivia and minigame challenges. In between questions about the show were parodies of Donkey Kong ("Bad Kitty"), Asteroids ("Asses in Space"), and Paperboy ("Pizza Patrol").



2000: South Park Rally
(Nintendo 64, PSone, Dreamcast, PC)

Kart racers were a hot item in the days of Mario Kart 64 and Diddy Kong Racing, and Acclaim threw its hat into the crowded ring with South Park Rally. Players could choose between the four boys, as well as characters like Starvin' Marvin, Mr. Garrison, and Jesus.



2009: South Park Let's Go Tower Defense Play!
(Xbox Live Arcade)

After a nearly decade-long hiatus from gaming, South Park returned via this XBLA tower defense title. Despite its simplistic gameplay, it holds the distinction of being the only South Park game (thus far) that actually resembles the show's art style. The classic construction paper look was used during rounds of tower defense, while an anime-inspired style was used for cutscenes.

Making the game look authentic is no easy task, but the most important hurdle is making a comedy-driven video game experience. Game developers have attempted it in the past, but few developers have elicited genuine chuckles from gamers over extended periods of play. Valve delivered on both gameplay and humor with Portal 2, and Stone took note.

"[Portal 2] felt like an organic, great joke," he says. "It worked on a big scale, and the dialogue worked on a line-to-line scale. Comedy is all about timing, and it's a hard thing to be in control of in a game. If [Portal 2's] dialogue

were on top of a s---y game, you might not like it so much. Having a good, engrossing game and then having these well-written lines, the whole story is really intriguing."

As mentioned earlier, Parker hates unskippable cutscenes, and that sentiment carries over to the jokes he hopes to make in South Park. "One of the top five rules of comedy is to never stop momentum for the joke, or else no one's gonna laugh," he says. "You can't stop the game so that everyone can sit there and watch the scene, or it's gonna start making you crazy."

Some jokes on the show revolve around something as simple as Cartman tormenting Kyle, but much of the



You'll battle against various factions throughout the game.



humor is focused on current events. With a substantially longer development cycle than an episode of *South Park*, the game script is much less topical. Instead, Obsidian suggested that Parker and Stone focus more on the games they have played in the past to inform the narrative.

The show's humor has always been controversial, and we expect the game to be no different. Parker and Stone have frequently battled the MPAA and standards and practices over subjects like Mohammed's cartoon depiction and Team America's puppet sex. Obsidian CEO Feargus Urquhart already has a plan for the inevitable conversation with the ESRB

"Their humor is allowed on television, and that's going to be part of the argument," he says. Parker is a veteran of

these discussions, and he doesn't seem too worried about rating issues. Speaking of the ESRB, he says, "We feel like we're pretty good at dealing with those people. We've come up against worse."

To call *South Park*'s storylines and jokes "subject to change" would be generous. Fans were excited years ago to see a commercial advertising a new Lemmings episode, only to learn it had been changed to "AWESOM-O" in less than a week. We've also learned that Parker and Stone rarely take things in a predictable direction. An episode lampooning *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* famously devolved into a third act story about underground crab people. Characters like Kenny and Mayor McDaniels have died and returned with dubious explanation (or none at all).

Continuity, realism, and sometimes even coherent narratives are afterthoughts for *South Park*, but it always manages to be funny. We wouldn't be surprised at all if the final *South Park: The Game* product varies significantly from what we saw during our trip to Obsidian, but we're sure it will make us laugh.

Parker and Stone have extended their brand of humor to numerous mediums, and their stellar track record should make us confident that they can pull it off again. After being nominated for (and awarded with) Emmys, Oscars, Tonys, and almost assuredly Grammys next year for *The Book of Mormon* soundtrack, they're finally putting serious work into a medium they've adored their entire lives. "Video games are the last thing I have for pure entertainment," Parker says. "I don't have to sit there and think about how it all gets put together. I'll probably ruin that with this game."

Visit gameinformer.com/southpark for video interviews and additional content for *South Park: The Game*



» **Platform**
PC • iOS
(Consoles TBD)

» **Style**
1-Player Puzzle

» **Publisher**
TBD

» **Developer**
Thekla, Inc.

» **Release**
Late 2012

Seeking an Identity

THE WITNESS

is unlike any project currently in the works, and that fact alone should be enough to make you sit up and pay attention. In a market filled with sci-fi action, first-person shooters, and massive open-world RPGs, it's hard to imagine a place for a contemplative and solitary journey through a series of puzzles. What's that you say? The puzzles are all about tracing lines? How is that fun? Jonathan Blow, the lauded creator of *Braid*, and his growing team at Thekla, Inc. are asking the same question, and challenging you to find the answer.

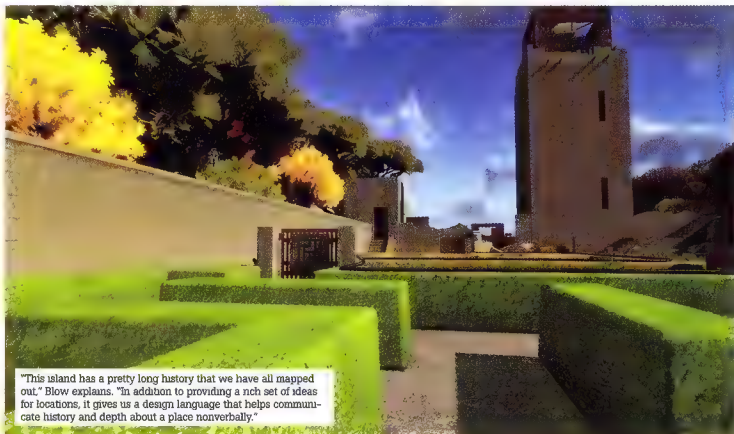
"It's a first-person game. You discover that you're on an island where there's nobody else," game director Jonathan Blow tells us. "You're slowly unraveling the mystery of what the hell this place is and why you're there."

On the surface, it's not a new idea. Many adventure games of the 1990s, like *Myst* and *The 7th Guest*, were built around a similar template. What makes *The Witness* different? "The *Witness* is definitely inspired by *Myst* and games like that, but at the same time very strongly a reaction to them," Blow says. "The adventure game genre has kind of died out, whereas other genres have prospered. Adventure games didn't really change how they worked. They have better graphics, but they're still fundamentally the same experience. One of the most basic problems of older adventure games is:

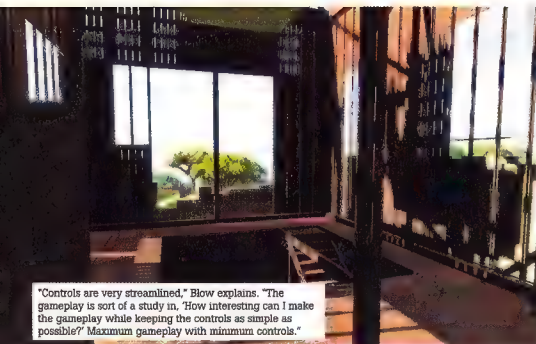
'I'm stuck. I can't get any further in this game. I'm not even sure what I'm supposed to do.' The design of *The Witness* is about looking at that, and asking: 'How do I make something that is so different in its design, that not only does it solve these problems, but it's not even really an adventure game anymore?'"

Describing *The Witness* and what makes it so captivating is problematic. The foundational gameplay concept is so simplistic that it's initially hard to imagine anyone would want to play it for more than a few minutes. Every puzzle in the game is built around tracing a line from one place to another. "That's part of the secret sauce of the game, I think," Blow laughs. "It's really hard for people to see that and think it would be interesting. On the other hand, it is actually super-interesting."

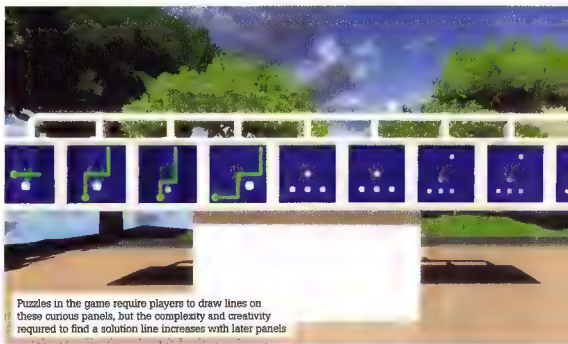
by Matt Miller



"This island has a pretty long history that we have all mapped out," Blow explains. "In addition to providing a rich set of ideas for locations, it gives us a design language that helps communicate history and depth about a place nonverbally."



"Controls are very streamlined," Blow explains. "The gameplay is sort of a study in, 'How interesting can I make the gameplay while keeping the controls as simple as possible?' Maximum gameplay with minimum controls."



Puzzles in the game require players to draw lines on these curious panels, but the complexity and creativity required to find a solution line increases with later panels

Consoles?

Jonathan Blow's new team at Thekla is several times larger than the single artist he brought on to help with Braid. However, even that increased team size wasn't enough to assure the game could be prepped for console release. That may be changing. "My current idea is to launch on PC and iOS, and then maybe one of the consoles, which has not been decided, and later to bring the game to all other platforms," Blow says. "We can only do a certain number of platforms at launch because we're small. A few months ago, I was doing all these interviews, and I didn't think we were going to do a console at launch. But we're hiring two more programmers, which will have a huge impact on what we can do. So now the idea is open again that we might do a console launch, but what exactly that is depends on all sorts of business things that we just haven't figured out yet."



"The game is heavily non-linear," Blow says. "At any time, you could decide, 'You know what? The laboratory is pretty hard. I'm going to leave off and go over to that wrecked cargo ship over there and explore that.' We've designed the game to give them as much freedom as possible."

The game begins in a mysterious empty hallway. A blue panel marks the only exit. Interact with the panel, trace a line from one point to another on the monitor, and the door swings open. Outside, more blue panels await, each slightly more complex than the last—tiny mazes to trace to completion. Like teaching a child the alphabet, these puzzles are building a nonverbal vocabulary for the player. "The idea is to do the kind of thing that you get from other genres of games, like platformers or first-person shooters, where you see an object, you learn early on how it behaves, and then that behavior is consistent through the remainder of the game," says Blow. "It reduces confusion in puzzling, and then you're able to make puzzles out of actual deeper things that the player interacts with in a confident and streamlined way."

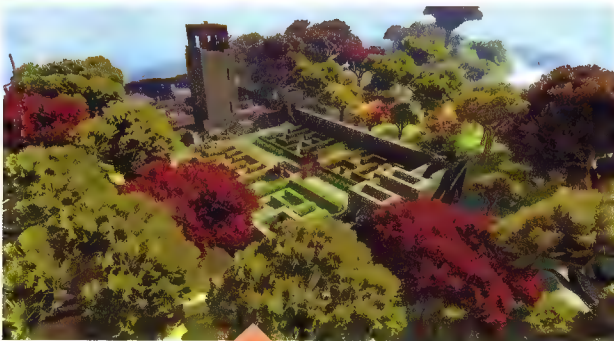
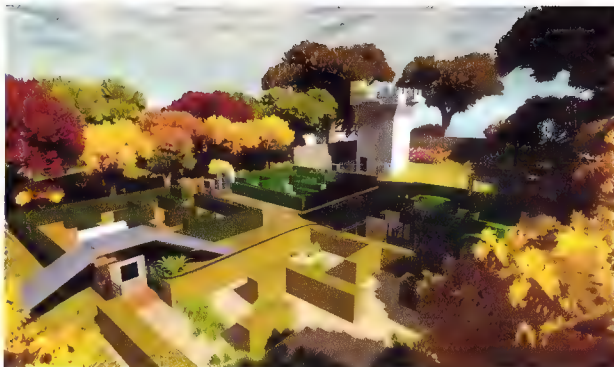
As The Witness unfolds, you always know how to interact with these panel puzzles. There's no inventory of seemingly meaningless items to combine, no strange levers to pull in particular combinations, and no ancient devices that that may not be central to progression. Players aren't forced to confront the minutia of figuring out what to do next; The Witness puts the same question in front of you every time,

but the answer is always different. Here is the puzzle, but what is the line that must be drawn to a solution? Discovering that answer is where things get interesting.

Every one of the hundreds of puzzles is unique. One requires you to listen to the sounds in an area for clues. Another seems impossible until you observe the landscaping of the bushes in the area. Blow describes one area dominated by a lonely monastery: "There's a pathway along the side of the monastery, and three panels along the pathway, and they're blank," Blow explains. "You don't really know what's going on there. You can try tracing some things randomly, but you won't get the answer, because they're complicated enough that you can't just guess. But at some point you get inside the monastery building and you find that by standing in the proper location and looking out through these engravings in the wall, that the engravings cover up all the parts of the panel where you don't want to go, and you can see exactly the places you do want to go. It tells you the answer." That's just the first panel. What do you do for the others if some of the engravings have broken off and fallen to the ground, or if a tree has collapsed and completely destroyed

one of the panels? Creativity and imagination are necessary to complete the full sequence. "The game doesn't ever give you filler," Blow continues. "Now that you've done this looking through a wall puzzle, it's not going to give you 50 looking through a wall puzzles—because you've got the interesting part down. It's going to go on and do something else. The game keeps branching out in different directions, over and over. It lets us explore this whole variety of things you can do, all with this simple situation."

Alongside this smorgasbord of puzzles, players also explore distinct sites on the island, from castles to factories, each filled with its own secrets. Chief among those secrets is the presence of scattered audio recordings, left behind by a previous inhabitant. "There's this one guy who has been leaving all these messages for you, or whoever comes to the island after him. As you go from location to location, the attitude and nature of those audio logs changes," Blow tells us. "So in the factory they might be recordings from when the guy felt especially utilitarian and he had some things that he wanted to get done, and he's making plans on how to make them happen. If you go to another location, it might have a lot of glass, with a lot of reflections.



Form Meets Function

One of the most fascinating features of *The Witness* is its world design. Specifically, Thekla has brought on two architectural firms to help inform in-game building design, outdoor landscaping, and even the general shape and form of the island. "The ideas that the architects bring to the table feed into the puzzle design. I think that makes the puzzles feel more grounded in the world," Jonathan Blow tells us. With the help of trained architects, the game world includes locales that feel unique, but also part of a unified whole. Note the images above. The top image shows a small subsection of the island before involvement from the participating architects, while the bottom image represents changes made with their participation.

Audio logs in that location might be a lot more pensive, looking back on things that happened, very introspective and questioning."

The nature of these recordings hints at the deeper layers of meaning that Blow aims to communicate through the game. The recordings relay the musings of a man wondering why he's created all these puzzles, and sometimes speaking directly to the person who might be solving them. "As you go through the entire island, and solve all these puzzles, you're getting to know the island, but you're also getting to know this character through this prism of all these different angles," Blow says. There's a meta-level to the way the game communicates with the player, breaking the fourth wall between player and developer as these audio logs ask questions about the nature of the challenges you're encountering. "If you strip things down to their most basic level, and you're a guy walking around a world where you can do things,

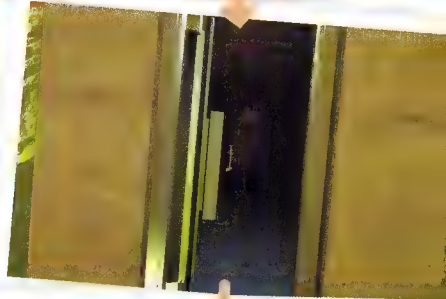
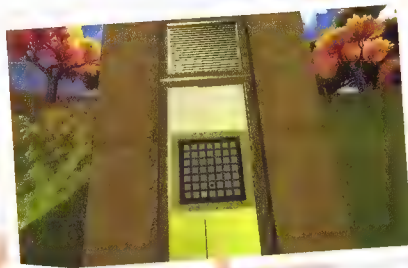
what does that actually mean? What are the things that can happen there? What is the point of that?"

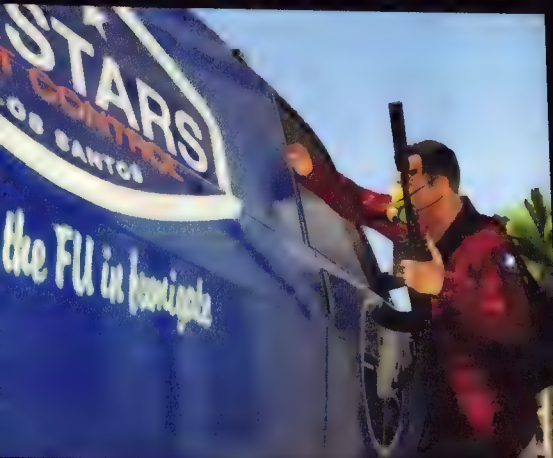
Those questions circle back to a fundamental theme. Even as Blow's previous work on *Braid* dealt with issues of time and memory, *The Witness* tackles the more existential question of personal identity. Who is the witness? And what did he or she witness? "You don't know who you are or why you're there, and that's something you discover over the course of the game," Blow details. "The game has a lot to do with questions of identity and questions of purpose—how your picture of your identity might affect what you think your purpose in life might be." Blow and the development team at Thekla are betting that these are subjects that video games are ready to tackle.

More importantly, they're betting that these are topics that gamers are ready to play. ♦

Solving a Puzzle

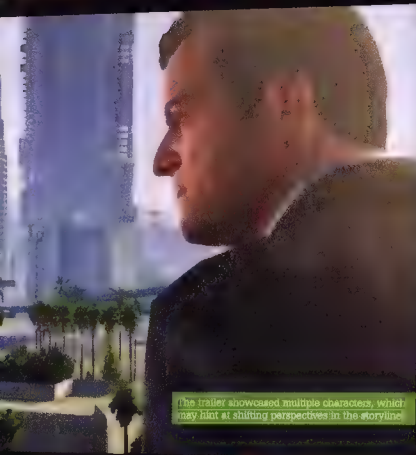
Solving a puzzle will often open a path to new locations in which yet more puzzles or secrets await







Extracurricular activities like jet skiing are making a comeback.



The trailer showcased multiple characters, which may hint at shifting perspectives in the storyline.



Could golf be a new minigame in GTA V?

grand theft auto V

AFTER MOONLIGHTING WITH the amazing Western, *Red Dead Redemption*, and the gritty '40s crime drama, *L.A. Noire*, the Houser brothers are back working on the project that put Rockstar on the map. For the worldwide reveal of *Grand Theft Auto V*, the company released a teaser trailer that captures the vibe of its latest project.

In *Grand Theft Auto*, the cities take the starring role. Even in comparison to memorable characters like Tommy Vercetti and CJ, Rockstar's painstaking recreations of '80s Miami and '90s California stole the show. For the latest entry in the series, Rockstar is painstakingly making a Los Angeles doppelganger.

The majority of the trailer takes place in Los Santos, the first city players encountered in *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*. Though some city districts return from the last game (including the affluent Hollywood facsimile Vinewood), Rockstar is exploring new territory as well. The trailer introduced us to the Pleasure Pier on Vespucci beach, which looks to be a play off Venice Beach, and Little Seoul, the GTA equivalent of Koreatown.

Though this is the city where the stars come out to play, not all of Los Santos is about glam and glitz. Well removed from the luxurious mansions of Vinewood residents, several areas are ravaged by homelessness and the struggling American economy. In multiple shots, the GTA V trailer features street people lining the walls of an underpass, hopeless tent towns, and a character putting up a foreclosure sign in his front lawn.

At this juncture we have no idea if GTA V will expand its setting to Los Venturas and San Fierro like *San Andreas* did, but even if it stays in the Los Angeles metro area there looks to be ample room to roam the countryside. The trailer showed off an impressive mountain range, a vineyard staffed by immigrant workers, and a large expanse of rolling hills littered with wind turbines and dirt roads.

As is to be expected after watching a 90-second trailer, we still have many questions about *Grand Theft Auto V*. You can bet Rockstar will share more details soon.

ROCKSTAR RETURNS TO SAN ANDREAS

- » Platform: TBA
- » Style: 1-Player Action (Multiplayer TBA)
- » Publisher: Rockstar Games
- » Developer: Rockstar North
- » Release: TBA

by Matt Bertz

Prognosticating the Plot

After both *Red Dead Redemption* and *Grand Theft Auto IV* told stories about characters trying to outrun their past, many of us hoped for a fresh new narrative direction. But judging from the voiceover, *Grand Theft Auto V* doesn't stray too far from this convenient convention:

"I wanted to retire from what I was doing, you know, from that — that line of work," the character says.

"Be a good guy for once, a family man. So I bought a big house. I came here, put my feet up, and I thought I'd be a dad like all the other dads. My kids would be like the kids on TV. We'd play ball and sit in the sun. But, well, you know how it is."

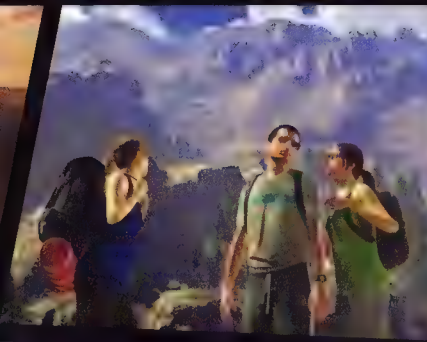
Though this setup has many similarities to past Rockstar protagonists, we also noticed that several characters make recurring appearances in the trailer. While I enjoyed Niko Bellic's tale in *Grand Theft Auto IV*, I gained a deeper appreciation for the game after experiencing Liberty City through the eyes of the motorcycle club member Johnny Klebitz and bodyguard Luis Fernando Lopez in the two expansions. Given Rockstar's experimentation with player perspective with those projects, *Red Dead Redemption*, and *L.A. Noire*, I wouldn't be surprised if Rockstar opted to develop shorter, intersecting narratives that star different playable characters.

Grand Theft Auto Mechanics

Many fans cried foul when Rockstar failed to include controllable planes in *Grand Theft Auto IV*. Judging by this trailer, they return in a big way for *GTA V*. Rockstar features three aircraft in the footage — a crop duster, a charter plane, and a fighter jet that looks very similar to the Hydra VTOL in *San Andreas*.

The trailer also showcased a few other new motorized toys, including a sexy convertible sports car, a jet ski, and a blimp hovering over Los Santos. Blimp killing spree? Where do I sign up?!





Players will visit areas outside Los Santos as well, like mountain ranges and vineyards.



Like San Andreas, GTA V features the same set of mechanics as the previous game.



Judging from the trailer, flight is coming back in a big way.

The Great American Heist

No one in video games is better at lampooning American culture than Rockstar. The signs visible in the trailer indicate that the company's sense of humor is still alive and well. A real-estate development of downtown condos is called the Mile High Club, the pest control van the characters use as cover for an assault features the slogan "Putting the FU in fumigate," the postal van slogan says, "We ain't not to lose it," and the police car has "Obey and survive" stenciled on its side. Rockstar even sends up the legendary In-N-Out Burger and the Simpsons' Rainer Wolfcastle with an Up-n-Atom Burger truck.

PLAY HARD

In Grand Theft Auto IV, players could kill time by going bowling, hitting up the strip club, playing pool, throwing darts, attending a comedy show, or even by sitting in your dingy apartment watching television. Three possibilities for new side activities the GTA V trailer introduces are yoga, hiking, and golf. Golf, you say? The Ballad of Gay Tony featured a mission where Luis hit golf balls at a union official at a Liberty City driving range, so they have already explored the mechanics. Given how seriously the company takes these side missions (the poker in Red Dead Redemption was better than most games dedicated to the card game), I wouldn't put it past them. The inclusion of body maintenance—that so many people loved in San Andreas. We also noticed a dog on the beach boardwalk—a first for the series. Could Rockstar be introducing pets? ☹



SSX

Reinvigorating an extreme sports classic

Platform
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360

Style
1-Player Sports
Multiplayer TBA)

Publisher
EA Sports

Developer
EA Canada

Release
February 14

My love of the SSX series extends back to the original entry. I had no interest in snowboarding, but as the first person in my group of friends to own a PlayStation 2, I picked up SSX. I didn't realize this innocent purchase would lead to a years-long habit of spending a healthy amount of time with my friends playing the most recent SSX iteration almost every weekend for the next four years.

The journey of falling in love with SSX wasn't much different for Todd Batty, the creative director in charge of the long-needed series revival. "I remember going to parties, and SSX and Tony Hawk were the two games people would be playing," Batty reminisces. "I would watch them playing and say, 'Holy s---, they're great! I need to be able to do that!' There haven't been many games like that in this generation of consoles."

As Batty sees it, the dawn of online gaming on consoles changed everything, and that's the reason the SSX series has been dormant for so long. "It certainly hasn't been for lack of wanting to bring it back," he explains. EA needed to figure out how to make this series relevant in a digital age where gamers are more concerned about social networking than crowding around a TV in a friend's basement.

EA Canada knew it needed to bring some massive changes to make SSX a hit again. The reboot began with Mountain Man, a proprietary program that helps quickly build level layouts based on NASA data of real mountain ranges around the world. "We came up with a way where we could build a really big game on a relatively limited budget," Batty explains. He sees this process – "coming up with new ways to create

big games at more affordable prices" – as something that will be a necessity of making games in the future, and SSX is his proof of concept.

Once EA Canada began pulling in the NASA data, it created a physics system similar to previous SSX games. Early tests revealed a problem, though. "In our game, we don't have fences that prevent you from riding up side walls, and we don't have rocks or trees that prevent you from exploring parts of the core geometry of mountains," Batty says. "There were missing things in the original physics system, and we realized we could let players do some really cool stuff if we just let them ride up walls."

To allow for these changes, EA tweaked the SSX physics in a way that Batty says is "hard to quantify or explain until you get your hands on a controller." Basically, the new system allows



players to easily ride up and trick off of any piece of debris or bump in the terrain. You'll no longer be stuck saving up your tricks for the big air provided by ramps alone.

One change that EA Canada won't be bringing to the traditionally over-the-top series is realism, despite the gritty announcement trailer from late 2010. Batty knows that some fans watched that trailer and expected the new game to be more in the style of EA's Skate series, but he doesn't believe that's the right direction: "I think Skate is a fantastic game, and they did great things, but for myself, playing Skate—I've never been a skateboarder. I don't know who the famous skateboarders are. I don't actually know the names of all the real life tricks, so I don't know what makes one of them cooler than another one."

The SSX team isn't interested in tackling these problems, and Batty believes that fans would be disappointed if they tried. "SSX has never been that way in any way, shape, or form in the past," he says.

Since the developer isn't worried about making things realistic, it's bumped up the RPG-lite aspects thanks to a simple leveling up system and thousands of pieces of gear. Characters level up individually, but rather than having their own stats that improve, levels allow access to new tiers of gear that have stats attached to them. Characters have a level cap of 10 at launch, but EA Canada may boost the cap via DLC or patches later.

Gear ranges from snowboards—over 700, many of which feature community-created art—to boosts, which are tiny mods that act like



perks, giving slight bumps to speed, spins, or other abilities. Some tracks require specific gear. For example, an area with thin air might require that a character equip an oxygen tank, while an area with dangerous big jumps could task you with using the game's new wingsuit. Gear is limited by level in online events, so although you may be level 10, you might be asked to pick out level 3 gear.

I discussed SSX's online functionality extensively in my preview in issue 223, but in this discussion Batty emphasizes the way it will be accessible outside the game itself. "We are planning to build an iPhone app that communicates directly with the game," he says, hesitating briefly to caution that the app isn't officially up

and running yet. When it is, though, this add-on will provide constant access to in-game information, such as your records on each of the game's 150-plus drop points, whether or not friends have beaten you recently, and whether you've made any money from friends' attempts to beat you while offline.

With all of the changes to SSX related to online and the game's physics, EA Canada still wants to prove to long-time fans that they have a grasp on the style and tone that helped make the series so popular. As such, they've licensed a remix of the iconic Run-DMC song "It's Tricky" by popular DJ Pretty Lights. In addition to this franchise classic, SSX now gives players the ability to port custom music. You can play your own tracks via your 360 or PS3's hard drive, and as you make big jumps, the music fades out and come crashing back in. As you grind rails, the music skips and scratches just like the official licensed songs.

Everything that I've seen, heard about, and played of SSX so far makes me think this is the revival I've been wanting for years. Batty and team believe so as well. "We certainly hope that it's the beginning of the franchise being back again," Batty admits. "We're hoping we can keep working on SSX for quite some time." Batty says the future of the series could be DLC-focused, with new tracks and mountains, or they could do an SSX Tricky-style version 1.5 depending on how players react. Either way, the sun is finally rising over this long-dormant mountain, and the future looks bright. > Phil Kollar



A Game of Thrones

A Song of Ice and Fire comes to life



Platform
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360 • PC

Style
1-Player Role-Playing

Publisher
Atlas

Developer
Cyanide Studios

Release
April

If you haven't heard about *A Game of Thrones* yet, be prepared to relinquish your nerd card. Since the first book released in 1996, George R.R. Martin's fantasy series has developed a strong and devoted following, selling over 15 million copies worldwide. By concentrating less on overused Tolkien tropes in favor of complex political machinations, backstabbing, and a fearless plot that kills off popular characters at will, Martin's series found enough mainstream appeal that HBO developed a fantastic television adaptation. It was only a matter of time before a game publisher brought Martin's world of intrigue to video games. After EA let its licensing deal expire, little-known French developer Cyanide Studios swooped in to grab the rights. Following on the heels of its poorly received RTS game *A Game of Thrones – Genesis*, the studio is prepping the release of a full-blown role-playing game. To learn more about the project, we spoke with Cyanide Studios project manager Thomas Veauclin.

Matt Bertz

Looking at Cyanide's back catalog, it seems the studio is most well known for its simulation and strategy games. Does the team have experience working on RPGs?

Cyanide has been interested in RPGs for a long time, but for many years we did not feel ready to take on the experience. About six years ago, we began with *Loki*, a hack & slash, and we

learned a lot from our mistakes. A few years later, we started working on the prototype of an RPG called *Renaissance*, which has now become *Of Orcs and Men*. When we got to work on the *Song of Ice and Fire* license, we decided to change our methods, to grow, while still retaining a human scale. We've played every RPG there is to play and we knew what we wanted to do with the license, the style we wanted to invest it with, and we knew that we were ready to give our best on *GoT*.

What compelled you to seek out the *Game of Thrones* license?

Patrick Pilgersdorfer, our CEO, is very proactive about acquiring IPs, and as we were all fans of the books (and the board game) it seemed like a natural thing to do. When we first contacted George R. R. Martin over seven years ago, we didn't have an RPG in our sights, but as negotiations took some time and the studio continued to grow, by the time we acquired the rights we were ready for an RPG. Patrick really showed some flair by going after the IP all those years ago, as it has now become a hot property.

How did you convince George R.R. Martin that your studio was the best fit for the game adaptations?

Persistence! We kept knocking on the door and George realized that we were, above all, fans of the books. That counted for a lot.

How long has this title been in development?

The development started two years ago. It is the longest game development cycle in Cyanide's history.

How fortunate did you feel when the HBO show debuted to stellar critical ratings? Did you feel it put more pressure on you to succeed with this project?

We were delighted with HBO's success, but the pressure was on long before the series came out. It was no flight of fancy that led us to take on the task of developing an RPG based on George's historical fantasy universe. We knew that it was a massive undertaking, and so we were already under pressure to succeed.

How did HBO come into the fold for the RPG?

We knew that the HBO series would define the look and feel of Westeros in the eyes of many. Although our game is neither a carbon copy of the book nor the HBO series, we thought that it would be a good idea to see if we could work together. It was therefore Cyanide who made contact with HBO.

How much input does George R.R. Martin have in the game development?

We were able to present our project to George over two years ago, with our first ideas on scripts

and character design. He tweaked a few things here and there, but basically let us get on with it. When we had the complete scenario and some fully implemented chapters we went to see him in Santa Fe; again he tweaked a few things, but he liked what he saw. What was funny and reassuring is that when we presented all the twists of our story, he laughed and told us that he had gone even further in terms of complex storylines.

Tell us about the plot – when in the Westeros timeline is this game set?

From the beginning, we wanted to write a story that ran parallel to the first book in the series. For us it was impossible to build a game using the main characters of the license; their destiny lay in George's hands. Moreover, we did not want to do a cut and paste adaptation of the book; it would hold no interest for fans of the series. We wanted to find a new angle, with new characters and a level of uncertainty. Fortunately, the world of Westeros is massive and so there were plenty of niches from where we could begin to weave our own web.

Our story starts the same place as the book, just before Jon Arryn's death, and I won't be giving too much away by telling you that our storyline is built around King Robert's bastards. For reasons of gameplay and unlike the books, we could not have a plethora of leading characters and we therefore limited ourselves to two main heroes. They are diametrically opposed to each other and they are separated from each other at the outset. It is the actions of the player that brings them together. The story unfolds in the same way as in the books, with each chapter focusing on a different hero until their two stories combine.

Who are the familiar faces from the book and television series that players will encounter?

Without naming every character, you will serve Queen Cersei, obey Lord Commander Mormont, and have dealings with Varys.

How are you telling the story? Can your choices affect the outcome of the narrative, or does the plot follow a linear path?

A strong storyline means that a linear path will be followed, but that does not exclude meaningful

choices. However, there will be more than simply choosing between the door on the left or on the right. Would you like to decide between losing a right hand or a left foot?

Which well-known locations will players visit in the game?

While we have invested a lot of time and effort in creating our own story and unique locations, players will be able to stroll through the streets of King's Landing or freeze their hands on the Wall.

What kind of role-playing game is this?

On Game of Thrones, our main concern was to build a strong central story. So if comparisons are to be made, it would be Dragon Age or Mass Effect. However, we also wanted to retain the principles of a "traditional" action RPG, and some key elements cannot be avoided. One should not overemphasize the "action" side of things, though; GoT offers plenty of action, but it is first and foremost an RPG.

Talk about the "active slowdown tactical combat engine." How does this work?

The combat system offers both tactical and strategic choices while, at the same time, providing a feeling of action. You can therefore slow down the game at any time for an unlimited duration. When the game is slowed, a skill wheel is displayed on-screen showing the abilities unlocked by your character. You can then stack up to three abilities that will be automatically executed by your character. Of course, when your two heroes are together you can switch between them to manage both at the same time. Many RPGs let you pause the action entirely, which eliminates the need to make fast, sound decisions in combat. There is added realism and excitement with knowing the clock is still ticking, albeit more slowly.

The Song of Ice and Fire books have elements of magic, but for the most part are grounded in very humanistic portrayals of combat. Will players have access to the more supernatural powers in this game or is it based around more straightforward sword and shield combat?

We had to remain faithful to the books, but George's world does provide some leeway for "sexy" features. Our first hero is therefore a



skinchanger and the second is a red priest. Both have supernatural powers.

Is there a class system in this game? If so, what are your options?

There is. Both of our two heroes can choose from among three classes that are unique to each. A class determines the character's main fighting tree, plus a future fighting tree that can be unlocked later in the game.

Is there a leveling system? If so, what skills can you upgrade or unlock?

Affirmative on that one as well! Each of your heroes gains XP over the game, depending on combat and quest resolution. You can unlock skills, abilities, fighting trees, characteristics, and some special traits that can only be obtained by accomplishing certain heroic feats.

What is your approach to conversations with the NPCs? Does the game take inspiration from the conversation systems in games like Mass Effect or is it a more classic approach to dialogue?

Conversations often present players with key choices that determine how the dialogue unfolds. Will Mors respond to a character, or will it be Alerst? They're very different people with different backgrounds and motivations, so often one response or the other will result in dramatically distant results. The system will be familiar to anyone who has played the Dragon Age or Mass Effect games.

Will you have NPC sidekicks or is this a solo adventure?

Gameplay will always involve two characters. When our heroes are separated, it will be possible to create a duo using an NPC; when our heroes are united they will form a duo.

Do you control your party members' progression as well?

It is possible to control minor party members in combat situations by choosing the skills they use, but you have no control over their progression.

Will the game support co-op?

No! We thought long and hard on this one, but we believe that a typical adventure RPG should be played alone. The player wants to live his own adventure and make his own choices without having to justify his decisions. And believe me; there will be choices to be made!

What sort of release date are we looking at – maybe April to coincide with season two of the HBO adaptation?

Oh! What a great idea [winks].



Resident Evil: Revelations

A hopeful future for Capcom's series and the 3DS

Platform
3DS

Style
1-Player Action
(2-Player Online)

Publisher
Capcom

Developer
Capcom

Release
February 7

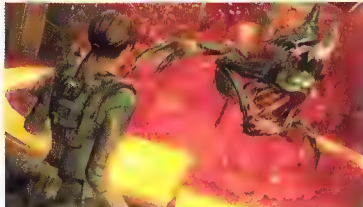
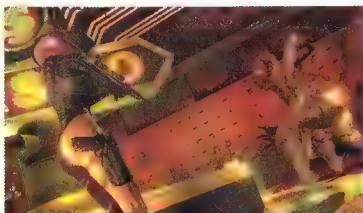


Like one of the franchise's disgusting monsters, the Resident Evil series has been mutating at an alarming rate. One of those offshoot growths is the handheld Resident Evil: Revelations, a title that combines the classic survival horror formula with the reliable gunplay we've come to love since Resident Evil 4. After spending several hours with the campaign, I'm happy to say this is shaping up to pack all the fun you'd expect in a console sequel. Here are some of the features, characters, and heart-pounding moments you can look forward to when the game hits the 3DS early next year. **— Tim Turi**



HELL ON HIGH WATER

The unfortunately named civilization of Terrorgrigia plays a central role in the plot of Revelations. The floating utopia was the first city capable of sustaining itself on solar energy harnessed by a high-tech satellite. The civilization was crippled when bio-terrorists flooded it with deadly hunters. These mutant reptiles proved to be an uncontrollable menace, spreading disease and death across Terrorgrigia. The FBC turned the city's own solar satellite against it in effort to scorch the outbreak, wiping out the entire population in the process. The decision created a rift between the FBC and BSAA, which opposed the measure. With mysterious, biohazardous bodies washing up on shores near the city's ruins, it seems the drastic steps may have not been enough.



NEW TO THE NIGHTMARE

Genesis

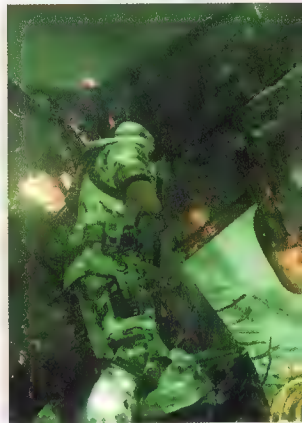
This wonderful toy allows the player to scan the environment for hidden ammo, health, and weapon upgrades. Combining over the environments adds to the game's sense of survival. It also enables you to analyze fallen enemies. In one section Jill uses the Genesis to investigate strange masses of flesh that washed up on the shore nearby Terrorgrigia. Analyzing each specimen builds up a percentage. Reaching an analysis rate of 100 percent rewards the player with a recovery item and nice sense of accomplishment.

Weapon Customization

Firearm upgrades are hidden throughout the game. Collecting these and bringing them to a weapon locker allows you to assign perk-like upgrades to your weapons. For instance, you can modify Jill's pistol to do extra damage, increase the fire rate, and shoot two-round bursts. You're free to swap out these useful enhancements among any of your weapons.

Raid Mode

Revelations features a separate cooperative mode playable online or locally. Playing as Jill and Chris, survivors gun down enemies to earn loot in this arcade-esque shooting gallery. Enemies sport health bars and damage is indicated by onscreen numbers, offering visual feedback for the effectiveness of your evolving load out. Blasting your way through levels earning experience points to spend on new weapons and upgrades sounds great. We loved the addictive customization element added to Resident Evil: The Mercenaries 3D, and Raid Mode looks to deliver the same excitement.





AN INTRIGUING CAST

Former S.T.A.R.S. members Jill Valentine and Chris Redfield take leading roles again, but the old partners pair up with new protagonists in their fight against a new enemy.

Parker Luciani

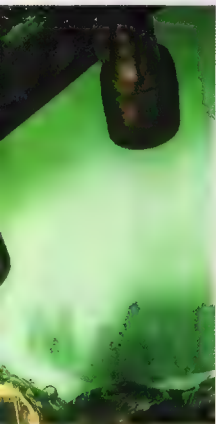
This beefy, bumbling BSAA (Bioterrorism Security Assessment Alliance) agent joins Jill as they search for Chris on a huge infested ship designed by the architect of the Spencer Estate. Parker formerly served the FBC (Federal Biohazard Commission), a government-sanctioned agency responsible for wiping out the mutant-overrun city of Terrorigria. He's since joined up with Jill and Chris, helping to punish bioterrorism and cleanse the world of the hideous legacy spawned by Umbrella.

The Mysterious Veltro

This gas-masked terrorist may remind you of an Umbrella operative, but he represents the extremist faction Veltro. While his true identity is unknown, his voice-modulated broadcasts demand the truth over the tragic obliteration of Terrorigria. This lunatic possesses enough T-Abyss virus to infect five percent of the world's water supply. The potent mutagen is capable of turning harmless sea life into flesh-eating monstrosities.

Jessica Sherawat

A former FBC agent like Parker, Jessica teams up with Chris as they trek through snowy mountains in an effort to meet up with Jill and Parker. She comes off as more of a ditzy reality TV show starlet than a trained counter-terrorist specialist, but her vapid one-liners amused me. Making things even more interesting, she appears to harbor a tinge of jealousy over Chris' past partnership with Jill.



THE SCENT OF CHRIS' BLOOD

Chris and Jessica are tracking the location of Veltro base hidden among a snowy mountain range when a crumbling ledge sends Mr. Redfield plummeting to certain doom. I assume control of the resilient hero after he crumples to the floor of an icy cavern. I quickly realize Chris' legs are out of order at the moment. Using only my trusty pistol, I take aim on a pack of infected wolves that emerge from the whiteness to capitalize on my new handicap. I was relieved to find that the monsters recoiled with each impact, allowing me to bounce between targets and keep the crowd at bay. The tension and desperation of this last stand (sit?) is made greater as the wolves appeared to creep closer toward me thanks to the 3DS' glasses-free 3D. When things got really hairy I used the 3DS' handy touchscreen to select my special bait grenades, lob one into the pack, and wait for the fireworks. Jessica eventually made her way down the mountainside to me and helped me to my feet. Always the tough guy, Chris shakes off the injury and I continue on my mission.



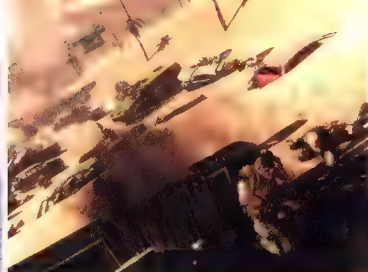
SENDING OUT AN S.O.S.

Being stranded in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea on a ship filled with monsters isn't the greatest, and Jill and Parker eventually decide to find the communications room and call for assistance. Making my way through the ship, I began to hear the distorted cries of someone calling for help. I followed the garbled, disturbing voice to a food storage room sealed with heavy chains and a padlock, the door nearly bursting off its hinges. I could hear what sounded like a demonic radio operator yelling "mayday" over and over. Fighting every last shred of common sense I had, I shot the padlock and freed a raging, gargantuan monster with a buzzsaw arm. I let Parker deal with the lesser monsters emerging from nearby vents and lured the boss towards the explosive containers littered throughout the area. I was amazed at the tension I felt wondering if an enemy would strike from behind while I waited to line up a shot on one of the combustible tanks. Making the battle harder was the bellows of the mutated crew member insisting that he's still human and needs to be saved. After finally silencing the sad creature's moans, I read through the former communications officer's journal. The entry, reminiscent of the infamous "itchy tasty" diary from the original Resident Evil, chronicled the infection's torturous effect on the poor man and made me feel a bit of remorse.



GET TO THE CHOPPER

One sequence tasks Parker and Jessica with escaping the doomed city of Terrorigria back when they were still with the FBC. I got a rush trudging through the hunter-infested skyscraper towards the helipad. This action-packed segment kept me on my toes as waves of the ravenous reptiles charged through glass windows, begging for every last machine gun round and shotgun shell. I liked how blasting hunters feels similar to early Resident Evil games, with the impact of each shell knocking groups of the beasts on their backs before they spring up again with renewed bloodlust. After finally finding the elevator leading to the helipad, I cut down packs of hunters as I waited for the lift. Revelations showed off its surprising difficulty when I turned my back to the pack of hunters upon hearing the promising "ding" of the elevator. No outscene would save me here. I had to hold my ground and thin out the last few hunters before piling into the elevator, which proved to be a harrowing but necessary precaution. My rewards were a helicopter ride to safety, a gorgeous cinematic showcasing the city's destruction, and the satisfaction of watching the remaining hunters disintegrate under the weaponized solar rays.



Spec Ops: The Line

Drawing a line in the sand

» Platform
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360 • PC

» Style
1-Player Action Shooter
(Online Multiplayer TBA)

» Publisher
2K Games

» Developer
Yager Development

» Release
Spring 2012

Spec Ops: The Line is striving to separate itself from the Battlefields and Call of Duties of the video game landscape by offering a narrative-focused game in a bizarre, sometimes unsettling location.

The demo opens with Captain Martin Walker narrating his relationship to the recently missing Colonel Konrad. Konrad was sent to Dubai to assist with evacuation efforts in preparation for a huge sandstorm. He was ordered to abandon his mission, but Konrad decided to stay behind for reasons unknown. It is now your task as Walker to seek him out and bring him home with the assistance of accompanying soldiers Lt. Alphonso Adams and Sgt. John Lugo.

With very little transition between the story and gameplay, I suddenly found myself embroiled in a fast-paced helicopter battle, weaving in between the skyscrapers of a sand-torn Dubai. You get a brief glimpse of the city in the sandy haze, but it's not until the copter crashes and you find yourself on the ground that the true state of the city is revealed.

Dubai is the real-life metropolis of the future. Huge skyscrapers with strange artistic architecture reach into the sky, but here in *The Line*, it is presented as a deserted city covered in sand. The city has not been abandoned for centuries as you would see in a game like *Fallout*, but it looks as though it's about to be. The setting of *The Line* is one of the most enticing elements of the game, and likely what will allow players to mentally separate this game from other third-person military shooters. The entire game takes place in this sand dune version of Dubai, so players will get plenty of opportunity to explore the city in its new state and get to know it.

Sand plays a role beyond just accenting an already stunning city. You can also use it in combat. Throwing grenades kicks up huge amounts of cover that make visibility difficult. On occasion you will find enemies conveniently positioned below glass buckling from plies of sand on top, and you can shatter the glass with your bullets to take out several at once. Sand is

plotted so high throughout the city that often you don't realize just how high up in the air you truly are. On multiple occasions I found myself looking down onto the streets from vantage points I didn't even realize I had. Sand storms will pick up in the middle of a gunfight, masking the battlefield with thick layers of orange fog. It's scary to fight in almost zero visibility, and reminiscent of the changes that Silent Hill will spring on players without explanation.

The combat is familiar third-person cover shooting. You will be ducking behind cover and popping out to shoot bad guys. Every time you get a fatal head shot, the game slows down for a moment – just long enough for you to notice and marvel at your handy work. It's an interesting way to visually reward your well-placed shots. You will also get help from your teammates. Lugo is a sniper who will pick off enemies that you highlight for him from behind cover, and Adams, the demolition expert, can stun enemies in certain locations. The shooting plays similarly to most third-person shooters, and from what I've seen thus far, does little to set itself apart.

The main focus of the game, beyond the interesting setting, is the story, which is taking cues and inspiration from the Joseph Conrad novel *Heart of Darkness*. Our demo covered the first half of *The Line*'s campaign, and the sense that something isn't right accompanied almost every second of it. Konrad is not the soldier you remember him to be, and he seems to have gained some sort of mad power that he is using to kill many people in a city abandoned by the outside world.

The Line is a linear game, but not when it comes to narrative. The player will encounter organic decisions about where to take the story, which will ultimately lead to one of a few possible endings. You will never select a choice from a conversation menu or be told possible incentives. It all happens within gameplay. In my demo, Konrad forced me to kill one of two people. I walked up to two men hanging by their

bound hands below a bridge, with two snipers focused on each. The man on the right was caught stealing water, and the man on the left, a soldier, arrested the man, but in the process killed his family. My first choice was to walk forward and ignore the decision, but the snipers attacked my squad mates and then killed me. When the checkpoint reloaded, I moved my reticle over one of the snipers and contemplated killing them, but figured if I killed one of them, the other three would kill the two prisoners being offered to me. Ultimately, I decided to kill the soldier, but my squad was not happy with my decision. After the demo concluded, Lulu LaMer, senior producer behind *The Line*, told me that I was the first player she had seen who attempted to run. LaMer then informed me that I could try to take out the snipers, or shoot down the ropes that bind the prisoners. The game will not automatically end if you don't choose a prisoner to kill. All are viable options.

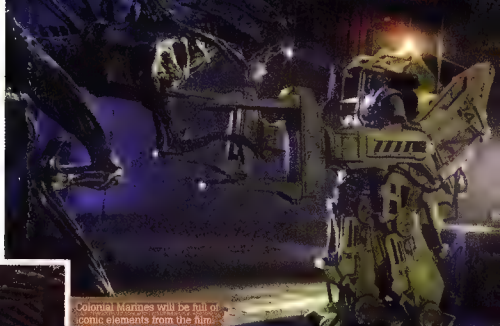
The decisions outlined above will apparently be the most straightforward choice the player will have to make. I was given two options, and was even given an opportunity to contemplate them, but other situations in the game will not be so obvious. According to LaMer, some decisions will have to be made within seconds of their presentation, and the outcomes may not be immediately apparent. It's all about forcing players to react emotionally with their guts and think about decisions in regard to the story, not how they will benefit player statistics. They are meant to be difficult and are being described as bad or worse decisions.

Developer Yager wants to tell a personal story with *The Line*. When it comes to military shooters, we often experience many forgettable characters witnessing giant setpieces, and while *The Line* has some large explosions, there is a clear emphasis on personalizing all of it. In my time with *The Line*, I was more interested in the motivations of Walker than any of the soldiers featured in the *Call of Duty* games.

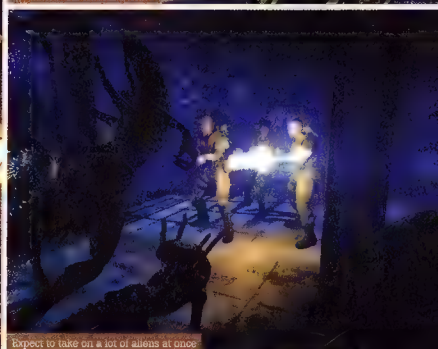
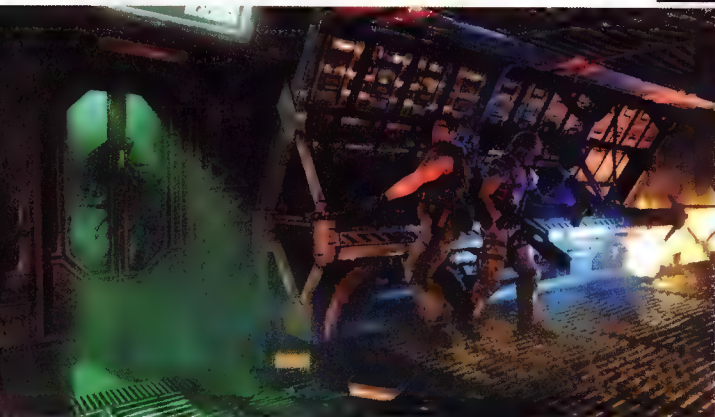
» Kyle Hilliard

Aliens: Colonial Marines

Gearbox readies its playable sequel to *Aliens*



Colonial Marines will be full of iconic elements from the film.



Expect to take on a lot of aliens at once.

Three years and nine months ago, we featured *Aliens: Colonial Marines* on our cover with a tentative release date set for 2009. Due to Sega's shuffling of licensed *Alien* games, that initial launch window has long since passed, but given Gearbox's excellent track record with games like *Borderlands* and *Brothers in Arms*, we have faith the extra time allowance is being put to good use.

For those unfamiliar with the game or in need of a refresher, this squad-based first-person shooter takes place months after *Aliens*. Gearbox and Sega are striving for the utmost authenticity in recreating several familiar locations from the films. The studio is working closely with 20th Century Fox to make sure everything, from the sound effect of the motion tracker to the general coloring of the visuals, sounds and looks just like the movie.

To make sure the game script preserves the sense of tension that made the franchise a runaway success, Gearbox hired writers

Bradley Thompson and David Weddle, sci-fi vets who both worked on the successful reboot of *Battlestar Galactica*. Gearbox consulted Randy Pitchford says when they consulted with *Alien* director Ridley Scott, he shared some never-revealed history about the mysterious Space Jockey alien corpse seen in the original film. Look for the game to shed light on this shrouded piece of franchise lore that is also rumored to play a role in *Prometheus*, Scott's highly anticipated return to sci-fi filmmaking.

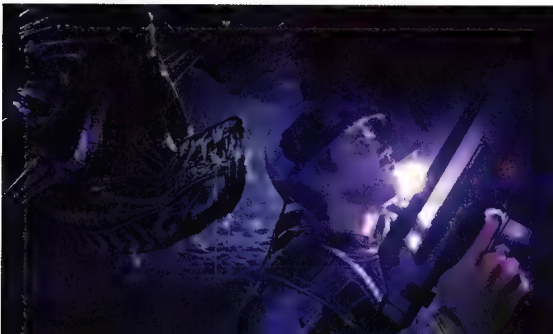
Players control a new group of space marines sent to investigate what exactly happened on the U.S.S. *Sulaco* that was left abandoned at the beginning of *Aliens 3*. As the story progresses, the marines will journey down to the planet LV-426, and eventually explore the derelict spacecraft originally uncovered in *Alien*. During the missions players can switch between all four marines in the squad, each of which has different skills and primary weapons.

Thanks to a dynamic AI system that sounds a lot like Left 4 Dead's "director," the aliens will attack and react differently every playthrough. Tons of aliens were crawling all over the place in the footage shown this past August, not all of which were the standard Warrior xenomorphs. Variants on the standard alien included bull-like xenomorphs with impenetrable foreheads, facehuggers, and smaller, faster xenomorphs called runners. To help you survive the waves of these fearsome creatures, the game supports both two-player offline split-screen co-op and four-player drop-in, drop-out online co-op.

Aliens: Colonial Marines is slated to release next spring, but we're still waiting for intel about the multiplayer and hands-on time with the campaign. More delays are always a possibility, but given how long the wait has already been we're hoping the game is almost ready to be scrutinized by the franchise's ravenous fans.

» Kyle Hilliard

- » Platform
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360 • PC
- » Style
1 or 2-Player Shooter
(4-Player Online)
- » Publisher
Sega
- » Developer
Gearbox Software
- » Release
Spring



It would probably be in your best interest to keep that glass intact.



Devil May Cry

New looks at Ninja Theory's reboot

- » **Platform**
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360
- » **Style**
1-Player Action
- » **Publisher**
Capcom
- » **Developer**
Ninja Theory
- » **Release**
2012

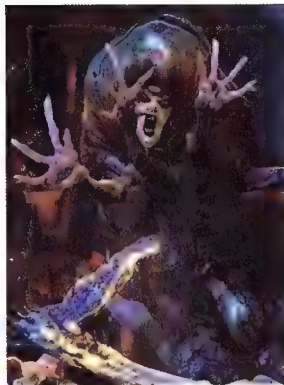
When Capcom released the first images of Ninja Theory's Devil May Cry reboot, many fans cried foul over Dante's drastic makeover. However, some doubters have started turning into believers as more media is released for the upcoming action title. We walked away from its GamesCom build thoroughly impressed, and these new screens only make us more excited to play Dante's new adventure.

Several shots showcase Dante's axe, scythe, and iconic dual handguns, but we also get a glimpse of a large chain weapon. Players can utilize it for both platforming and navigation, similar to Gabriel's combat cross in Castlevania: Lords of Shadow. We saw Dante use it to pull

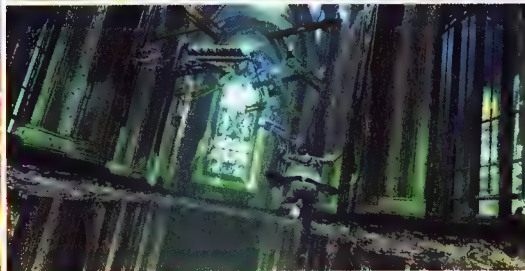
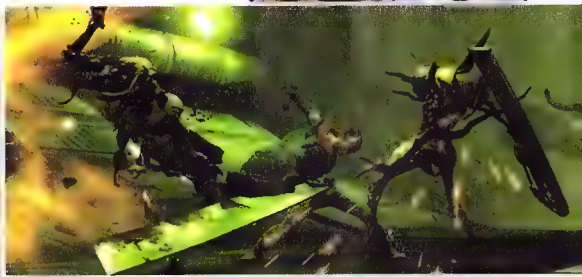
enemies closer to him in a manner similar to Nero's Devil Bringer in Devil May Cry 4.

Our hero may look like a new man, but the action should be as fast-paced and stylish as ever. Early looks at the game have featured tons of aerial combat, with Dante executing insane combos on demonic foes without his feet touching the ground. The new screens also show off the return of his Devil Trigger, which tones down the color of the surroundings and makes Dante's signature red coat shine brighter than ever.

Capcom hasn't provided a lot of deep gameplay details, but here's hoping they keep updating us with more images and video as we get ready for release. » **Dan Ryckert**



Dante's Devil Trigger is back, which now alters the colors of the world.



Aerial combat will be a bigger focus than ever in this reboot.





Lollipop Chainsaw

Ten reasons to fall in love with Lollipop Chainsaw

Juliet is one of the most popular kids at San Romero High School. She's friendly, perky, and loved by all. Her only problem is that zombies have invaded her school. To make matters worse, it's her 18th birthday, so while most girls are hanging at the mall with their besties or trying to sneak into a college frat party, Juliet is battling legions of undead and trying to find a cure for her classmates.

Warner Bros. Interactive made *Buffy The Vampire Slayer* fans perk up when it announced Lollipop Chainsaw. Since then we've received a slow drip of information, but many of these details may have gotten lost in the holiday chaos. To get you up to date, we rounded up the juiciest tidbits in this easy-to-digest list. — Ben Reeves

Its director is a little crazy
Suda 51, the surrealist director behind games like *No More Heroes*, *Killer 7*, and *Shadows of the Damned*, is finally realizing his vision for a zombie game.

It has character
The game takes clear inspiration from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. Juliet descends from a long line of proud zombie hunters. She's spunky, and cute, but unlike many female protagonists, she doesn't seem like a total cardboard cutout.

It's not a typical action game
Juliet has a series of basic Cheer attacks that do a small amount of damage, but are great for shepherding the zombie crowds. Once corralled, Juliet can perform more powerful attacks that take out multiple zombies at once.

It has style
Like *Shadows of the Damned*, Lollipop Chainsaw takes some of its visual style from

modern action-horror/exploitation films like *Grindhouse* and *Machete*, but Lollipop Chainsaw sprinkles in a dose of color. Zombies burst into a shower of sparkles when Juliet cuts them in half, and rainbows of blood gush forth after she lops off a few heads.

James Gunn
The Hollywood writer and director behind films like the independent cult classic *Tromeo and Juliet*, the *Dawn of the Dead* remake, and the campy hit *Slither* is fleshing out Lollipop Chainsaw's bizarre and somewhat offensive script.

It has sweet moves
During a few of the game's trailers, Juliet is seen performing quick platforming motions, bounding over buses, and jumping off zombie heads. We don't know how involved these platforming moments are, but they could offer a nice break from the action.

It has musical skills
Lollipop Chainsaw features a score from renowned composer Akira Yamaoka, who has previously worked on the Silent Hill series and *Shadows of the Damned*. We're interested to see how Yamaoka's signature haunting tones blend together with Lollipop's glitter-sparkled visuals.

It has progression
Defeated zombies drop medals for Juliet to pick up. The better Juliet performs in combat, the more medals she'll collect. Warner Bros. has already hinted at an upgrade system, so presumably these medals will be spent to upgrade Juliet's chainsaw and purchase new attacks and items.

These zombies are smart
The hordes in Lollipop Chainsaw won't just mindlessly shamble towards you. Warner Bros. says they work together in clever ways to attack Juliet in groups, but the publisher isn't ready to divulge details on this new AI system.

It's absurdly funny
Slapstick humor pervades the entire game. Not only do stars, rainbows, and pink hearts explode across the screen every time Juliet carves up a group of undead, we watched one boss shout into a microphone to generate giant words that knocked over our heroine. During another gym sequence, Juliet runs across the basketball court and cuts off a series of zombie heads, which fly up into the basketball hoop.

- **Platform**
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360
- **Style**
1-Player Action
- **Publisher**
Warner Bros. Interactive
- **Developer**
Grasshopper
Manufacture
- **Release**
2012

Watch the game's most jaw-dropping scenes, plus the sweet glimpses of what you'll see in a junkyard and parking lot, so hopefully we'll see some new areas soon





You'll have to stay awake to survive in this town. Fortunately, there are loads of different ways to get around.

Gotham City Impostors

If you can't beat 'em...

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

» **Style**
1-Player Shooter
(12-Player Online)

» **Publisher**
Warner Bros. Interactive

» **Developer**
Monolith Productions

» **Release**
January 10

Rarely is there a dull moment in Gotham City. As Batman and the Joker recuperate from their latest outing in Arkham City, fans are taking to the streets in the downloadable shooter Gotham City Impostors. It may not have the name recognition of a Call of Duty or Battlefield, but its madcap action looks like a nice alternative for folks tired of blasting terrorists in the desert.

One of the most exciting things about Gotham City Impostors is how the maps incorporate elevation and traversal. Members of the Bats and Jokerz gangs can quickly zoom around on skates, use ziplines to escape enemy fire, or even swoop around with wings. Players will need to stay nimble to avoid attacks from weapons such as jack-in-the-box mines, Batarangs, and the perennial favorites, shotguns.

The game has all the bells and whistles expected from a modern multiplayer experience, including unlockables, character progression, and customization. For instance, you can change your calling card, which is what players see when you blast them into bits. Even though the characters cover a wide array of shapes and body types, Warner points out that it's not a class-based shooter. That big guy might move a bit slower and can absorb some more damage, but he isn't the only dude who can use the heavy machinery.

Gotham City Impostors includes the industry

standard team deathmatch mode, but applies its own clever twist on other familiar game types. Fumigation is Monolith's take on the familiar king of the hill mode, where teams scramble to control three gas-spewing nozzles. Winning teams are treated to the sight of the losers getting fatally swarmed by bats or suffocated by the poison cloud. Psychological Warfare bears more than a passing resemblance to the tried-and-true capture the flag mode FPS fans have battled in for years. In a nice Batman twist, however, the flag proxy is a battery that each team tries to bring home to power their loudspeaker setup. When your team has control, you'll hear positive affirmations; when you're lagging behind, expect to hear amplified taunts.

Much of Gotham City Impostors seems like a layer of clown makeup painted across a familiar face. That said, the stylish presentation and frenzied action definitely set it apart from its peers. We won't find out if the game can develop enough of an online following to stay interesting until January, but while you're waiting, check out these new screens and figure out if you're on team Bats or the nefarious Jokerz. » **Jeff Cork**





In this game, patience and observation are as critical as being an accurate marksman.

Sniper Elite V2

Rebellion reloads in another trip to World War II

Now that developers are fixated on contemporary warfare, it's been a while since shooter fans visited World War II. You'd be forgiven for saying that's a good thing, since at the height of this historical time period's popularity far too many developers took lackluster gameplay, added Nazis, and called it a day. For its reimagining of the 2005 sharpshooting game Sniper Elite, Rebellion is heading back to Nazi Germany.

Sniper Elite V2 shares the same basic premise as its predecessor, but everything else has been completely overhauled. Players take control of Karl Fairburne, a secret agent infiltrating Berlin during the waning days of the war. As Russian and Allied forces work to recruit Germany's advanced rocket scientists, Fairburne must help tip the scales toward America's side one bullet at a time.

The game takes a methodical approach toward combat, requiring players to survey the scene before taking action. Fairburne first has to determine if engaging the enemy is even necessary as he slinks through ravaged streets, avoiding detection. If it is, players must prioritize targets and wait for the optimal time to strike. Sometimes this means waiting for a thunderclap to mask your shot. Other times, it means quickly surveying the scene and picking off entrenched enemies. Regardless of the situation, you're first and foremost a sniper. Running and gunning is a fantastic way to familiarize yourself with the game over screen.

When you take a good shot, you're rewarded with a gruesome look at your efforts via the kill cam. The camera tracks the spinning bullet as it hits its target, highlighting the internal damage it makes with a cutaway view of the victim. It's graphic stuff, with eyes bursting, spines cracking, and lungs tearing as the bullet courses through the human body.

Sniper Elite V2's slower pace and focus on on-the-ground tactical decisions give it a distinct feel compared to other shooters. It's certainly a respite from games with guys in desert camo breaching doors and dropping laser-targeted bombs. **— Jeff Cork**



- » **Platform**
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360 • PC
- » **Style**
1-Player Shooter
(Multiplayer TBA)
- » **Publisher**
505 Games
- » **Developer**
Rebellion
- » **Release**
2012

geeked at birth



You may speak the language,
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Rebellion

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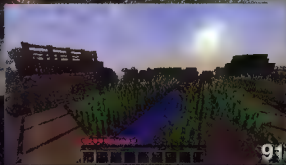
Dirt Showdown

Racing with a new purpose



Note: All images are target visuals

gameinformer
GAME OF THE MONTH



Minecraft

91

gameinformer
GAME OF THE MONTH

80 The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim

The land of Skyrim is dangerous, with its inhospitable weather, bandits prowling the roads, and hulking dragons circling the skies. Even in the face of these hazards, a gamer couldn't ask for a better world to explore. Bethesda has crafted a masterpiece that gives players a seemingly endless flow of quests and rewards, held together by fun combat and satisfying character progression. Oblivion set a high bar for this generation of open-world RPGs, but Skyrim surpasses its predecessor and becomes the best entry in the long-running Elder Scrolls series.

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 soon 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	Hopeless

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.

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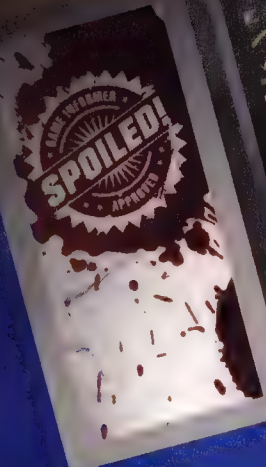
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The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim

An RPG worth shouting about

9.5

PS3 • 360 • PC

» Concept

Bethesda's long-running series returns with its best chapter yet

» Graphics

Everything looks great from a distance, but some textures are muddy when viewed up close. Texture pop-in also occurs frequently

» Sound

One of my favorite soundtracks ever. Voice acting quality is still inconsistent, but at least there are more than six people providing voices

» Playability

The combat and world exploration are incredibly fun. The streamlined menu and favorites system works like a charm

» Entertainment

You can easily sink 100 hours into this game and still find yourself overwhelmed by the amount of content remaining

» Replay Value High



game of the month
GAME OF THE MONTH

gold
GOLD

Style 1-Player Role-Playing Publisher Bethesda Softworks
Developer Bethesda Game Studios Release November 11 ESRB M

The Elder Scrolls has always had a dedicated following, but given the success of Oblivion and the expectations for its sequel, I assumed Bethesda would play it safe and deliver a slightly enhanced continuation of the franchise. Instead, I walked away feeling I had played the next evolution of the series.

I wasn't so optimistic as the game opened. Skyrim's story begins with a political prisoner's beheading at a public execution. This sequence is worrisome, not because my character was the next in line to feel the axe, but due to the choppy narrative flow. The intensity that is supposed to accompany this scene is stripped away by robotic character animations, confusion over who is talking at any given point, and uncomfortable lulls in the pacing. Making this scene feel real requires just as much imagination as a Dungeons & Dragons session. Cinematic

storytelling has never been Bethesda Game Studios' strong suit, and I find it surprising that the team decided to make it such a prominent component in Skyrim's introductory moments.

This disappointing sequence concludes with an unexpected yet praise-worthy series of events. Before my character's head was permanently separated from his body, a dragon swooped in and burned as many of the poorly established characters as it could. This awesome moment transitions to an escape sequence that plays out similarly to a Call of Duty "follow" mission. As I ran in the opposite direction of the thrashing beast, it smashed through walls in pursuit, implying that I was the target all along. Again, this exacting approach seems out of place in an open world Bethesda production, but it ends up being a great transition that sets up the true heart of this adventure. After its rocky first steps, Skyrim's story and gameplay find their stride.

From the moment the attack subsided and my character emerged safely onto Skyrim's mountainous terrain, I found myself in awe of the world around me. All of Bethesda's releases this generation have given me that "I'm not in Kansas anymore" feeling once the open world is revealed, but not to the degree that Skyrim does. This world has that Rapture or Arkham Asylum allure, and is as much of a star of this adventure as any of the characters, dragons, or gameplay.

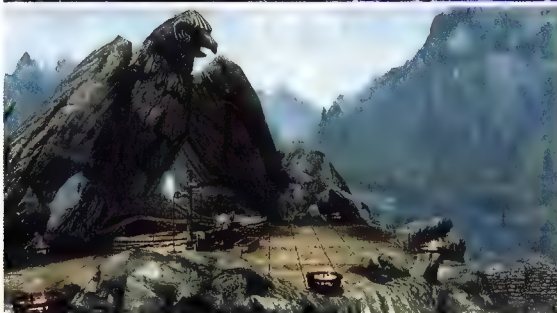
While Skyrim's landscape doesn't have the fantastical elements of the aforementioned places, excitement

and a true sense of discovery are tied to the secrets hidden within. I climbed a mountain to find a long-forgotten tomb, crossed a frozen tundra in search of powerful masked adversaries linked to one of this world's greatest mysteries, and found myself riding my steed with haste toward a village under dragon attack. Much of the content the world offers is worth devoting time to, whether that leads to an enchanted sword or a settlement filled with side quests.

The frequency with which you obtain new quests is astounding. At one point, I had 14 main quests and 32 miscellaneous quests active at once. This huge list turned me into an antisocial outcast; I stopped approaching other characters for fear of getting more quests from them. Even this strategy wouldn't work, as messengers would hand me documents containing new quests, and some NPCs rewarded jobs well done with additional tasks. After completing the narrative quest and logging over 100 hours into the game, I still found myself overwhelmed by the amount of uncompleted quests, NPCs I neglected to talk to, and areas of the map that I hadn't visited yet.

A story thread accompanies almost every quest. Some of these tales tie into the main conflict at hand (your character is the "Chosen One" tasked with cleansing the kingdom of dragons), while other side stories stand on their own or flesh out the world history. In a way, the game feels like a gigantic collection of short stories. The main campaign is superbly penned and is Bethesda's best effort to date. All of the scenes involving the greybeards are fantastic. I also thoroughly enjoyed Skyrim's take on the Dark Brotherhood, and I got a big kick out of being a part of the Bard's Guild (my evil character





The Ending

If you think you just completed the story campaign, but the credits didn't roll, trust your gut. Given the expansiveness of the side quests, Bethesda chose to throw you right back into the game world rather than force you to watch 25 minutes of credits. If you want to see the credits, there's an option for them in the main menu.

had music in his heart all along). Even the books scattered across the kingdom, of which there are a dizzying amount, have great tales to tell.

Most of these story threads took me to new places on the map. Oblivion was knocked for its lack of variety in its dungeon designs. This isn't the case with Skyrim. Yes, there are repeated textures and rock formations, but the composition of each dungeon is largely unique and individualized – in some cases with one-off Indiana Jones-like puzzles or traps. The dungeon designs also factor in player convenience with easily accessible exits. That's right, you no longer have to endure extensive backtracking to return to the overworld.

I planned to create a tank character who relied on a sword and shield combination, but quickly became addicted to the brilliantly designed spell casting. It empowered me with the feeling that I was a medieval Emperor Palpatine, capable of decimating foes by blasting fire and electricity simultaneously out of two outstretched hands.

Since your character is Dragonborn ("Dovakiiin" in the game's ancient dragon language), he or she can also bellow powerful magic-like shouts. The fact that the simple act of yelling can engulf a handful of enemies in deadly flames is hilarious, bad ass, and an amazing new power added to the Elder Scrolls mix.

The variety of spells and shouts is extensive and fun to experiment with (try rocking fire, ice, and electricity at the same time). I also found myself experimenting more with my skill types than I have in any other Elder Scrolls game, thanks to the rewarding new perk system.

All of the game's spell and weapon management is handled exceptionally well through a streamlined menu system that is the most user-friendly solution I've seen in an RPG. Any spell or weapon can be added to a favorites list and magic weapons can be recharged with soul gems with just a few button clicks. I wish inventory management were handled better in a broad sense, since I had to spend too much time finding vendors who would accept certain items and have the adequate funds to buy them. Not being able to sort items in the chest is also a time-consuming pain.

Combat showcases just as much improvement as the spell functionality. In Oblivion, I exploited enemy AI by backpedaling and firing spells as foes haplessly tried to reach me. This tactic no longer works in Skyrim. Enemies on the offensive move faster than your backpedaling character. While their pathfinding can still be exploited in certain situations – such as an enemy being unable to navigate a table successfully – combat is largely a test of skill. Every facet of the combat system works well. Swords clang violently, shields are the lifesavers they should be, and thanks to your ability to multitask, healing spells can be cast at the same time as striking.

As terrifying as it is to see a dragon rain fire down on people fighting to save their homes and families, early fights with these beasts don't pack much excitement or challenge. Despite their menacing appearance, dragons don't have much defense for sword or spell strikes to the leg or wing. These flying pigs are easy to cheese... early on. More powerful dragon types come into

play as the game goes on, even after the critical path's conclusion.

The biggest problem Skyrim runs into has plagued every Bethesda-developed game I've played: It's buggy. Not to the degree that Oblivion was – Bethesda makes headway in delivering a more stable product, but I ran into numerous bugs that forced me to reload previous saves. The auto-save system charts several recent points, which can be a relief, but losing progress is annoying and can erase significant victories and character development. If you play the game for dozens of hours, you'll likely run into setbacks like these a few times. Some of the glitches can be quite funny. For instance, one of my followers floated behind me horizontally like Han Solo trapped in Carbonite. I also killed a dragon in one hit, yet its skeleton remained alive and invincible in the world (I named him Broken, the fearsome).

These problems, as unwanted as they are, don't hold Skyrim back from being Bethesda Game Studios' finest release to date. This is one of those games that I go into with a clear idea of what I want to accomplish, but somehow along the way find myself on the other side of the continent with eight hours of gameplay under my belt and no checkmarks next to my planned tasks. Skyrim ruled my life for two straight weeks, and I wouldn't be surprised if it becomes a fixture in my gaming rotation for the remainder of the year. It's one of the biggest, most content-rich games I've had the pleasure of playing. » **Andrew Reiner**

Review Stats

I spent 11 days within the world of Skyrim. Here are a few of the stats from my playthrough:

Time:	105:08:59
Quests Completed:	126
People Killed:	847
Animals Killed:	225
Creatures Killed:	354
Undead Killed:	467
Daedra Killed:	13
Automatons Killed:	67
Dragon Souls Collected:	43
Shouts Learned:	19
Shouts Unlocked:	20
Shouts Mastered:	9
Times Shouted:	855
Words of Power Unlocked:	46
Favorite School:	Restoration
Favorite Spell:	Fast Healing
Favorite Shout:	Fire Breath
Total Lifetime Bounty:	48,111
Largest Bounty:	14,080
Locks Picked:	137
Potions Used:	309

Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3

A restructured Infinity Ward pulls off another solid sequel

9

PS3 • 360

» **Concept**

Give fans reason to return to the annual blockbuster

» **Graphics**

A few standout setpiece moments, but the visual style of the series is becoming predictable

» **Sound**

The orchestrated, high-energy soundtrack is indistinguishable from previous Call of Duty games, and the multiplayer audio isn't radically improved

» **Playability**

You won't find any issues with the controls. The core gameplay feels as tight as ever

» **Entertainment**

Though the early portions of the campaign are poorly presented, the multiplayer offers enough subtle improvements to satisfy fans

» **Replay Value**

High



Style 1 or 2-Player Shooter (18-Player Online) Publisher Activision Developer Infinity Ward/Sledgehammer Games Release November 8 ESRB M

It would be easy to dismiss Modern Warfare 3 as just another iterative update to the massively successful shooter series. After attending a preview event this summer, I left with concerns that the Infinity Ward/Sledgehammer Games collaboration shelved the multiplayer innovation Treyarch introduced with Black Ops in favor of more minor, underwhelming updates. Some of my early concerns proved valid, but many of the incremental tweaks are smart additions to the multiplayer experience.

Modern Warfare 3 does little to fundamentally change the well-known franchise formula, but it offers enough enhancements to recommend it to any fan.

On the surface, this Call of Duty experience is similar to the other Modern Warfare games. If a casual fan sat down for a few rounds of team deathmatch or domination, it would be easy to forgive them for mistaking this for a map pack. Its visuals are familiar, most of the weapons are recycled from previous games, the tight gunplay

feels similar, maps are still fairly cramped affairs for the most part, assembling a party operates the same, and many of the killstreak rewards return. Modern Warfare 3's most noteworthy tweaks may be smaller changes, but they add up to contribute in a big way.

Custom classes are as crucial to online play as always, and players can choose between three new strike packages for their loadouts. Assault is for offensive-minded players, as its rewards are mostly death-dealing instruments like remote control assault drones, devastating air strikes, and the proximity-based I.M.S. (Intelligent Munition System). If you're outfitted with this package, your killstreak progresses as always — it builds as you rack up kills, but resets to zero once you're taken down. Considering I'm usually heavy on offense, I stuck with the assault package for my first few hours of multiplayer.

The Support package killstreaks are defensive in nature, like SAM turrets, recon drones, and counter-UAVs. They don't have the flash of the deadly assault rewards, but they're still helpful. Unlike the assault package, this package's killstreak count doesn't reset upon death. You wouldn't normally reach one of the crazy 18-kill assault rewards without dying, but now it's feasible to earn the most valuable support items in a single game. This package was even more appealing to me when I unlocked a few offensive rewards, like the remote sentry turret, the B-2 bomber, and the recon juggernaut suit. Once I realized the value of this package, it became my reward for the majority of my future rounds.

The final package, Specialist, is for tacticians who strategize formulas for specific game types.





You can expect the campaign to last approximately six hours.

Specialist allows you to unlock a specific order of perks as you rack up kills. For instance, let's say you want to create a specialist package for use in Domination. You start with whatever three perks you normally have available, but you could then unlock Extreme Conditioning after a few kills to help you sprint from flag to flag. If you live long enough to capture a few flags, you'll probably be running low on ammo. Not a problem — you can set your specialist package to unlock Scavenger to help you pick up more ammo. To reap the rewards of this killstreak package, you have to analyze how you play and where you'd benefit from the unlocked perks most. For the hardcore crowd, this is an ideal pick.

Other new multiplayer features contribute to overall mode improvement as well. Completing objectives like flag capture adds to your killstreak count, and players can cycle through killstreak rewards with the d-pad and select them in the order they wish. Prestige mode counts for something now, as players earn coins to spend on new custom classes, double XP time, or special callsigns. Leveling individual weapons unlocks proficiency abilities like reduced kick or faster fire rate. Customizable private matches allow for absurd and entertaining variations of Juggernaut, Infected, and Gun Game. You won't respawn in the middle of a massive air strike nearly as often, either. Players won't notice many of these changes if they're just popping in for a quick round, but those who spend a lot of time in multiplayer will appreciate them.

Call of Duty's bread and butter has always been its deep multiplayer, but the campaigns deliver their fair share of memorable moments as well. Modern Warfare 3 doesn't stray from the oft-emulated Call of Duty 4 formula. This large-scale, linear, global, and sometimes controversial campaign can be finished in less than six hours.

For the first two or three hours, the game hurries from country to country with a jarring narrative that doesn't succeed in getting much information across. All you know is this Makarov fellow is a bit unsavory, and he wants to kill a lot of people. In your efforts to find and kill him, the game finds excuses to have you shoot up the floor of the New York Stock Exchange, protect the Russian president on a jet, attempt to stop a chemical attack in Paris, and watch a supposedly offensive scene that's essentially a less effective and less necessary version of Modern Warfare 2's "No Russian" mission. These early scenarios are more concerned with topping the big set piece moments from previous entries in the series than with putting forth a coherent narrative. In one scripted sequence that's awesome, terrible, and hilarious at the same time, I was even forced to shoot a hyena multiple times in the head while I was in a church.

My concerns with the early portions of the campaign have as much to do with gameplay as narrative. It's a constant "run here, trigger the enemies, now click between the trigger buttons until everyone is dead" experience. As much as the first few hours disappointed me, it gets its

act together around the halfway mark. You learn some more about your primary character and his motivations, and the latter half of the campaign isn't filled with the convoluted double-crosses of Modern Warfare 2. Setpiece moments become more intriguing from a gameplay perspective, with one mission involving an approaching sandstorm and an air assault mission that switches perspective back and forth from the ground to the air. By the time the credits roll, the globe-trotting orifice meets a satisfying conclusion.

If you've wrapped up the campaign and want a break from the standard multiplayer, Spec Ops serves as a great third pillar. This mode is broken into two distinct sections now, with one dedicated to co-op missions like those seen in Modern Warfare 2 and another that's essentially a Horde mode variant. This survival mode is a blast with soldiers, dogs, and vehicles that are far more engaging than plodding zombies. Plus, it has its own in-game economy and ranking system.

When it comes down to it, Modern Warfare 3 meets expectations. The core elements of multiplayer and the campaign remain fundamentally unchanged, but the game serves as a great example of how many subtle tweaks can add up to an improved overall product. Even with the recent turmoil at Infinity Ward, the remnants of that team (in conjunction with Sledgehammer) have put together a worthy sequel to one of the most successful franchises of all time. **> Dan Ryckert**

Should You Enlist in Elite?

Activision's new Call of Duty Elite service is an overwhelming in-depth feature with many different tools. The team at Beachhead has created a performance tracker that is equal parts comprehensive stats database, clan management system, loadout customization tool, social networking site, and improvement guide. You can see graphs of how your kill/death ratio is trending, customize your clan's callsign and tag, analyze the map locations where you die the most, add friends directly from your XBLA/PSN/Facebook accounts, and even push a new custom class to your console from a free app on your phone. All of the uproar about a premium membership fee seems to be misguided after seeing the final product, as the large majority of the content is free. Members of high-performing clans [of which you can only be a member of one at a time] may want to consider the premium membership, as they make you eligible for prizes like cameras and a free trip to Paris if you're good enough. If you're a casual Call of Duty fan, you can still have a fun time in multiplayer without ever touching Elite. However, this new feature is a boon if you're the type that likes to prestige multiple times.



The unlock in this location right here is how close you are to your next killstreak reward.



Assassin's Creed Revelations

New ideas aren't always good ideas

8.75

PS3 • 360

» **Concept**
Conclude the tales of Ezio and Altair in a dramatic adventure through Constantinople

» **Graphics**
Detailed cityscapes and intricate animation work continue to maintain a high standard for open-world games

» **Sound**
Another excellent soundtrack accompanies the smartly acted dialogue

» **Playability**
Basic navigation and combat controls are stronger than ever, but some features and minigames are awkward to manage

» **Entertainment**
Even with some itchy new ideas, Assassin's Creed is hard to put down

» **Replay Value**
Moderate



Style 1-Player Action (8-Player Online) Publisher Ubisoft Developer Ubisoft Montreal Release November 15 ESRB M



Assassin's Creed Revelations lives up to its name. For those who have been following the journeys of Desmond, Altair, and Ezio, this installment makes good on the promise implied by the title and serves up some big reveals about the ever-growing fiction. The core missions offer a level of cinematic immersion and tight design that is new to the series, and the plotline pulls together dangling story threads into a satisfying whole while simultaneously setting up the next game. While some questionable side missions and new gameplay concepts slow down the fun, they are only small flaws against the backdrop of a thrilling adventure.

Though Revelations touches on all three of the major protagonists introduced in the story so far, Ezio is still the star. The boy who once sought revenge for his family has become a man in search of meaning and wisdom. Now a venerable mentor over the entire Assassin order, that quest for understanding takes him from his home in Italy to the distant metropolises of Constantinople. While there, his story follows a double path. One embroils him in the web of intrigue surrounding the power struggle between the conquering Ottoman Empire and the unseated Byzantines. The second thread traces his meeting of a beautiful stranger as she aids him in tracking down the lost legacy of his predecessor, Altair. Both story-driven quest lines are rewarding and excellently written, with a host of new characters and an entertaining narrative. Equally important, these missions are some of the best designed in the series so far. Action-packed chases mix with stealthy tails through busy city streets. Incite riots one moment and

infiltrate an enemy fortress the next. New, cinematic camera angles occasionally accentuate the drama. It all comes together in the end through an extended conclusion that offers some of the most captivating moments in the series.

Along the way, an array of side missions and exploration gives players plenty of reasons to get distracted. A rich but simple economic simulation once again lets you revitalize a city and purchase new upgrades. Collectible items, purchasable upgrades, and task challenges offer a break from the mission content. Also like in Brotherhood, you recruit a coalition of assassins to answer your commands. These troops not only answer your call to do battle around the city, but you also send them out across the known world to level up and retake cities in the name of the Assassins. The expanded options for your trainees are a lot of fun, especially the new content that unlocks as they reach higher levels. You now gain special missions tied to your chief recruits and fight at their side as you lock down districts of the city.

New equipment options are also on display. A hook blade offers a few new tricks in both combat and navigation, including the ability to flip over enemy combatants, zoom across zip lines, and grab distant ledges. It doesn't revolutionize gameplay, but the device is still fun. A new bomb system is also compelling, giving you new tools to distract enemies or kill them outright. I don't have the same fondness for the crafting of the bombs themselves, a system that is pushed really hard through the presence of dozens of ingredients scattered through the world. While there may be hundreds of options for how to mix and match your bomb recipes, they all come



Existing sequence encounters break up the Assassin's Row

Second Opinion 9.5

Despite starting in three Assassin's Creed games in as many years, Ezio hasn't worn out his welcome with me. Revelations doesn't deviate drastically from the formula established by Brotherhood, but I still love the stealth, intrigue, and action at the heart of the series. The city of Constantinople is a worthy successor to picturesque settings like Venice and Rome, and the accompanying narrative resolves many of the lingering mysteries in a (mostly) satisfying way. Returning systems, like building an army of assassins and gaming control of districts, are deeper and more addictive than ever. The addition of bombs and the hook blade don't add as much to combat as I had hoped, but they don't detract from the fun of chain-killing a posse of Templars. The tower-defense minigame (which is completely awful) is the only pace where Revelations' design stumbles, but you don't need to suffer through it as long as you keep your notoriety under control. This isn't difficult if you make it a priority. Apart from that sore spot, Revelations has a compelling plot, several memorable moments, and cool multiplayer additions. It has everything fans expect... but I hope that the next installment has a few more surprises. - Joe Juba

down to just a few fundamental effects, so it's hard to get excited about building new varieties.

Ezio's role as a general to the Assassin order is a central theme, but one of the manifestations of that idea turns out to be the worst feature to show up in the series so far. In an ill-advised departure from standard gameplay, you'll regularly be called on to participate in a tower-defense style minigame to defend your Assassins from Templar attack. The gameplay for these sequences is sloppy and hard to control, and moreover feels inconsistent with the tone of secrecy and subterfuge that has always governed the battles between the Templars and the Assassins. Careful monitoring of your notoriety in the city can reduce the likelihood of dealing with these awkward battles, but the whole concept should have been scrapped.

Even as Ezio's adventure unfolds, our other two heroes each get to step into the light. In an interesting twist, Ezio's investigations give him the unusual ability to look back through history and witness milestones in Altair's lifetime. These brief but illuminating excursions finally show

us the fate of the first game's hero, and let us control him one more time. I would have been interested to see deeper dives into Altair's experiences, not to mention some more variety to the locations for his scenes, but the short sequences we do see are some of the most memorable in the game.

Meanwhile, players also get some follow-through on Desmond after the dramatic events that concluded Brotherhood. A new and optional side trek follows Desmond's journey as he repairs the shattered remnants of his mind that remain trapped within the Animus. We're along for the ride to finally uncover the details of Desmond's early life. These sequences play out as first-person puzzles in a surreal landscape of geometric shapes. It's a fascinating attempt to transform a character's abstract, emotional memories into gameplay, but the action and puzzles themselves are lackluster. First-person platforming is a tricky business, and these missions are limited because of that constraint.

The excellent multiplayer introduced in Brotherhood returns in Revelations with some

subtle but potent improvements. A new deathmatch mode offers tense stalking of targets with only small hints to enemy locations. Artifact assault plays similarly to capture the flag. New game modes like these join old returning styles of play, all set amid a variety of excellently designed maps, so there's a lot of content to dig your teeth into. Outside of gameplay, the multiplayer system also feels more rooted in the story of the game world, with new secrets about the Templar order that get revealed as you level up. Throw in a much improved UI and increased customization, and I have nothing but praise to offer this installment's multiplayer.

A number of new features attempt to make Revelations feel new and different from its predecessors. In that quest for broader variety and a unique identity, Revelations makes some missteps that are hard to ignore. However, the game offers more of what has been great about the franchise, and that should be enough to bring most fans to the table, even if it is a poor starting point for new players. - Matt Miller

Metal Gear Solid HD Collection

Polishing Metal Gear to a mirror finish

9

By Mike Kropf

Concept

Several old Metal Gear games with a new layer of polish

Graphics

Great visuals and a smooth framerate have these titles looking better than ever

Sound

I hope you like codec conversations, because you're going to hear a lot of them. Thankfully, the voice acting is top-notch

Playability

The controls don't age particularly well, so it may take some time to get re-acclimated

Entertainment

Each game stands well on its own, but getting them all at once means hours upon hours of fun

Replay

Moderately High



Style 1-Player Action (6-Player Online) **Publisher** Konami **Developer** Kojima Productions/Bluepoint Games
Release November 8 **ESRB** M (MGS 2, MGS 3), T (Peace Walker)

The Edge

The PlayStation computers have been the native home of the Metal Gear series for years, so it's no surprise that the HD versions of the HD Collection has a few advantages. Firstly, the Xbox 360 controller doesn't pressure-map the buttons, so certain actions have been awkwardly mapped (like pressing down to stab with your knife or Snake Eater). It doesn't drastically impact the gameplay, but longtime fans will likely rejoice since previous versions already complicated matters. Secondly, each of the games has a full complement of trophies on PS3, but the 360 version offers some achievements unique to the Xbox 360. MGS 3 groups it as a single title easily, if you're playing on PS3, you have the ability to transfer your Peace Walker save to and from the PSP version of that game using the bizarrely named "transfer" feature

Not to brag, but I got all of the dog tags in Metal Gear Solid 2 and shot every Kerotan in Metal Gear Solid 3 when the games released on PlayStation 2. Maybe those hours could have been better spent, but I loved playing and replaying both titles until I knew them backwards and forwards. The Metal Gear Solid HD Collection gives fans like me a chance to embark on enhanced versions of these classic missions – and I'm still not sick of them.

The collection includes five Metal Gear games for \$50: MGS 2, MGS 3, Peace Walker, and the original MSX versions of Metal Gear and Metal Gear 2: Solid Snake (those last two are included as bonus games on the MGS 3 menu). You don't just get the games – MGS 2 and 3 are based on the Substance and Substance releases respectively, which means a few perks are included, like VR missions and Snake tales. The only notable omission is the multiplayer of MGS 3, but Peace Walker picks up the online slack with cooperative and competitive multiplayer options.

The HD collection includes a lot of content, so I'm not going to dissect each title individually; these are essentially the same games you remember, but with nicer visuals and a smoother framerate. The story in MGS 3 holds up as my favorite, and the end of MGS 2 still goes absurdly off the rails. You'll listen to codec conversations, dupe dozens of enemy soldiers, and experience some of the best boss battles in gaming history. Readopting the button layout in MGS 2 and 3 took me a while; I understand the desire to keep these titles true to their original forms, but the option to use alternate control schemes would have helped them wear their age better. That's more nit-picking than a genuine complaint, since the HD Collection is a superb way to satisfy your nostalgia and relive key moments in the Metal Gear saga.

Peace Walker deserves to be singled out, since it is the title that benefits most from the HD overhaul. Moving from a portable device to the big screen is the best thing that could have happened to this handheld side story. Using the dual analog sticks takes the burden off of the face buttons (which controlled the camera in the PSP version), making it much more intuitive to aim and guide Snake through the environments. Since Peace Walker first came out in 2010 and took some cues from MGS 4 on the control front, its gameplay feels more modern than its PS2-era counterparts. Playing with a friend in co-op is still entertaining (and practically necessary for certain boss fights), and the Versus Ops mode lets you test your competitive spirit in online combat.

For all of its advantages and improvements, Peace Walker is the weakest link overall. The story involves the series' least developed characters, the boss fights are all against robots and vehicles, and the missions are short affairs (and you can only save between them). This doesn't mean it's a bad game, but it stands out from the other titles in the HD Collection as a distinctly different kind of Metal Gear – especially without its predecessor, Portable Ops, on the disc.

The Metal Gear series has one of the most convoluted storylines in gaming, spanning 50 years and involving a huge cast of characters with competing agendas. If you're already a fan, this collection is a great way to get reacquainted with Solid Snake and Big

Boss. However, newcomers should be warned: Because the package doesn't have the original Metal Gear Solid or Portable Ops, substantial parts of the story are not included. Imagine if you bought a boxed set of the Harry Potter movies, but films 1 and 5 were missing; it doesn't diminish the quality of the other entries, but it does make the collection less appealing as a whole. I can't say that Konami didn't include enough content, but the choice to leave out certain games (instead of splitting all seven games into separate Big Boss and Solid Snake collections, for example) eliminates the sense of completeness that often comes from compilations.

The Metal Gear franchise has a long history and many exceptional moments. While this collection doesn't give you the complete picture, it highlights many of the reasons this series has such a devoted following. The fight against The Boss, Colonel Campbell going nuts, the haunting tune as Chrysalis flies by – these are the kind of memorable events that define Metal Gear, and they are just as awesome as you remember. **Joe Rubin**



Jurassic Park: The Game

Telltale's latest adaptation gets lost in the jungle

Style 1-Player Adventure Publisher Telltale Games Developer Telltale Games Release November 15 ESRB T

5.5

Jurassic Park is one of those films that terrorized summer box offices for months and irrevocably shaped a generation of young minds. To say I bought into its hype would be putting it mildly. I daydreamed about the movie weeks before it hit theaters, and I still remember the tingle of goose bumps crawling up my arm as the theater lights dimmed and the film started. Jurassic Park didn't disappoint. I was so dinosaur obsessed that I even read Michael Crichton's novel. I have a feeling that Telltale Games has a similar love for the franchise. The studio's Jurassic Park game is filled with interesting scientific asides, quirky characters, and a number of movie references. The team's love for Jurassic Park is apparent — I just wish love was all you needed.

Jurassic Park: The Game follows Dennis Nedry's Barbasol can full of dinosaur embryos through a series of events that take place after the film's closing credits. Unborn dinosaurs are a hot property, and genetic research company BioSyn sends a couple of professional smugglers to Isla Nublar to retrieve the specimens. This simple retrieval mission turns into a heaping pile of dino droppings when the smugglers get attacked by a pack of venom-spewing dilophosaurus. Sole survivor Nimba Cruz eventually meets up with Jurassic Park's chief veterinarian Dr. Gerry Harding — one of the only characters from the book/movie to make it into the game (aside from Nedry's bloated dead body). Harding and his daughter got stuck on the island when the storm knocked out the power, but their journey to get off the island quickly becomes a fight for survival.

Jurassic Park's narrative isn't bad, but it's not very deep either. The story features a few interesting character moments spread across several hours of play, but most of the action contains hints of slapstick comedy. I watched a pteranodon kick a chopper out of the sky, several



theropods hop aboard a rollercoaster while it was still in motion, and a tyrannosaurus fling a metal door like a discus at a man hiding in a tree. Thanks to these hokey *Land of the Lost*-like antics, the action has no tension at all.

Even if Telltale had added more weight to the storytelling, taking this game seriously would be difficult. It looks like a game that jumped out of the '90s. *Jurassic Park*'s nearly two-decade-old effects are still convincing. On the other hand, Telltale's cartoony, PS2-level graphics have trouble building the kind of immersion that enthralled audiences in 1993.

Telltale freely admits that it molded Jurassic Park's gameplay off 2010's innovative *Heavy Rain*. Critics lauded Quantic Dream's title because it gave players new ways to interact with a detailed world, allowing them to make real choices in a fluid narrative. Jurassic Park strings together a series of pass-or-fail button-press sequences. Many of these feel sluggish and lethargic, like a victim of a compognathus attack; I actually had to perform a QTE to navigate a character down a flight of stairs, retrieve a case of tranquilizer darts from a car, then go back inside. A few dialogue sequences break up this action, but Jurassic Park's world isn't

rich enough to deserve exploration, and its few puzzles rarely require thought. You rearrange carts on a roller coaster, decipher a door code, and play a matching game using a number of maps to figure out where you are. Then it's back to the quick-time events.

Despite its many disappointments, Jurassic Park might offer fans a few thrills. I got a kick out of exploring the underground service tunnels and park locations never seen in the movie. I smiled at some of the clever dialogue. And I perked up when I caught a hint of a mosasaurus' scaly tail inside Jurassic Park's underground marine facility. Unfortunately, many of the best action scenes and character moments happen so late in the game that many players likely won't have the patience to see them.

Telltale's flawed but entertaining approach to the Back to the Future license left me hopeful for the developer's take on Jurassic Park. Despite some early reservations, I still felt like that goose-bumped 13-year-old boy as the game's opening theme started and Jurassic Park's logo popped on screen. Unlike my younger self, however, I was in for a disappointment. » **Ben Reeves**

Concept

Revisit another classic movie franchise. Unlike with *Back to the Future*, Telltale fails to hit the right nostalgic notes

Graphics

Telltale's graphics are as smooth as a stegosaurus' ridged back; the game looks more dated than the film it's based on

Sound

The voice acting is solid, but many of the story moments feel hollow due to the lack of an ambient soundtrack. Also, Telltale failed to make use of *Jurassic Park*'s outstanding and iconic score

Playability

Most of the game functions like an interactive movie thanks to quick-time events. The puzzles won't hold anyone back from reaching the credits, but the treading pacing might

Entertainment

Like blood flowing from a raptor victim, all tension is drained from the action scenes

Replay Value

Low



WWE '12

A rough road to Wrestlemania

5.5

THQ

Concept

Reboot the long-running series with one of the most frustrating story modes in years

Graphics

The new "Predator Technology" makes little difference, but character models are still spot-on

Gameplay

Michael Cole and Jerry Lawler seem to be watching entirely different matches, frequently spouting lines at inappropriate times

Playability

Glitchy gameplay sometimes causes you to restart matches. AI gets confused and attacks friendly characters, matches rely too heavily on hitting brief reversal windows, and some finishers won't connect even if you perform them correctly

Entertainment

Smackdown vs. Raw may not have revolutionized the series with each new entry, but at least it didn't suffer drastic drops in quality like this one

Replay Value

Moderate



Style 1 to 4-Player Fighting (Xbox 360), 1 to 6-Player Fighting [PlayStation 3] (12-Player Online) Publisher THQ Developer THQ/Yuke's Release November 22 ESRB T

Like clockwork, every year THQ releases a WWE game, with Smackdown vs. Raw serving as the core franchise since 2004. With so many entries, longtime wrestling fans have started to wonder what new elements can be introduced outside of aesthetic updates and tweaked gameplay mechanics. When THQ announced WWE '12, the publisher trumpeted it as a reboot rather than another incremental update. It certainly feels different than the previous games in the series, but most all of these differences are negative. Thanks to a severely downgraded story mode and a lack of substantial improvements, this is the weakest WWE title in years.

Recent titles in the series touted Road to Wrestlemania as the marquee single-player mode, where players choose their superstar and follow their career through a months-long story that culminates at the Wrestlemania pay-per-view. WWE '12 instead presents a larger 18-month campaign that features three different stories. Players start with Sheamus and his tumultuous alliance with the new United Kingdom faction, then move on to Triple H's

quest to recapture the WWE championship, and end the Road to Wrestlemania by playing as rookie Jacob Cass (represented by a created character) as he takes on a posse of former WCW stars

I appreciate the attempt to present a lengthy, ongoing campaign instead of the smaller stories of previous games, but it's thoroughly unenjoyable. In an attempt to make the game resemble WWE programming more, matches rarely end in a simple pinfall victory. Instead, they are littered with run-ins, disqualifications, and backstage brawls. These may be frequent elements of Raw and Smackdown episodes, but they don't translate to an entertaining gameplay experience. Most matches boil down to hitting your opponent with strikes and grapples until a prompt appears above their head that triggers the post-match cutscene. Instead of feeling like you won the match, you feel like you're doing a chore to unlock the inevitable disqualification cutscene.

It would be one thing if these moments were limited to DQs and run-ins, but the method of triggering these events is the worst part. The majority of matches require annoyingly specific actions that detract from the experience. During a triple threat match involving Big Show and Alberto Del Rio, my objective was to finish off Big Show in the ring. Naturally, I tried to beat him up and pin him for a three-count. Confused at why the pin button wasn't working, after I landed another finisher I realized it was disabled because the scripted outcome required Big Show to pin Alberto Del Rio, making it an unwinnable match.

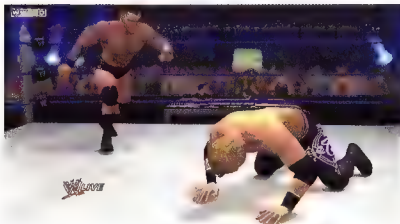
Frustrations like this occur in most Road to Wrestlemania matches. The game disables basic actions like pins and tags without warning you, you're forced to trigger cutscenes in poorly

explained areas, scenes usually require loading times that take you out of the match, and you often endure a ridiculous segment involving getting beaten up in the same backstage area. Throughout all three of the stories, I rarely was allowed to simply wrestle a standard one-on-one match without frustrating requirements.

If you forgo the painful Road to Wrestlemania, there's less frustration involved in exhibition matches, online play, and the returning WWE Universe mode. At the very least, these allow you to partake in strict matches without having to follow a strict script. WWE '12's new control scheme is fairly solid, but the omission of the training arena from the previous two entries is baffling. Practicing controls in an open ring was helpful, but it's nowhere to be seen in this reboot.

THQ is fond of hyping its new "Predator Technology" animation system, which allows for animations to be interrupted easier. Unfortunately, it also adds a floaty feel to punches and kicks. While it stops players from "warping" to the center of the ring when certain moves are performed, these jarring cuts still happen frequently when Road to Wrestlemania cutscenes are activated.

WWE '12 only introduces a few welcome elements. Setting up opponents for finishers with wake-up taunts is fun, the new comeback moments are a nice way of getting back into the match, players can now target specific limbs during grapples, and new creation options (like the new create-an-arena) make the series more customizable than ever before. However, none of these can make up for the awful Road to Wrestlemania. If WWE '12 represents THQ and Yuke's going back to the drawing board, let's hope they grab some erasers and start from scratch for WWE '13. » Dan Ryckert



GoldenEye 007: Reloaded

Still not the GoldenEye remake fans were hoping for

**Style 1 to 4-Player Shooter (16-Player Online) Publisher Activision
Developer Eurocom Release November 1 ESRB T**



Last year Activision released GoldenEye 007 exclusively on Wii in hopes of recapturing the love and excitement Nintendo fans felt for the original N64 title with a modern remake. Ultimately, the new GoldenEye 007 suffered from problems familiar to most FPS Wii titles: clumsy motion control implementation, fuzzy graphics, and subpar online support. Activision succeeded in fixing these shortcomings with GoldenEye 007: Reloaded, but it only highlights the larger dilemma facing this re-imagining: It's not the GoldenEye you loved, and as an unrelated title, it pales in comparison to other shooters on the market.

There's a right way to update a beloved title for an HD console, and then there's the way Reloaded does it. Most HD remakes port the old game people know and love into a new engine and sprinkle in a healthy dose of improvements and fan service. Instead, developer Eurocom tried to create a modern shooter from scratch that remains faithful to GoldenEye's aged story and level structure. The result is a game that feels unpleasantly dated while simultaneously lacking the nostalgia it tries so hard to cash in on. Like a bad dream based on the events of the

previous day, Reloaded only vaguely resembles the GoldenEye you remember. You'll recognize plot points, character names, and locations in the single-player campaign, but won't feel like you're reliving precious memories from the N64's glory days. The HD graphics are a welcome improvement over the Wii version, but the level design betrays its original platform as the environments lack the depth or scale expected from modern shooters.

Multplayer was a major component of GoldenEye's popularity, but Eurocom's wholesale revision leaves little of the classic formula intact. A few multiplayer modes, weapons, and levels carry over to Reloaded, but don't expect your knowledge of the layout of the original Facility and Archives maps to come in handy.

Multplayer gameplay now feels like a slow take on Call of Duty, which isn't surprising, considering the adoption of regenerating health (which can be turned off), a perk system, and customized loadouts. Loadouts create the biggest schism between the old and new GoldenEye, as players no longer vie for weapons placed around the map — instead you're relegated to whatever weapon you choose to spawn with or pick

up from a dead opponent. These differences aren't inherently bad, but they won't appease GoldenEye fans, and CoD fans have better alternatives on the market.

Eurocom did embrace other aspects of the original GoldenEye, including the use of Bond villains in multiplayer, which now sport unique stat boosts and abilities to great effect. The game features a wide array of classic and new multiplayer modes, which you can configure to your liking and apply ridiculous modifiers to. I also give props to Eurocom for including four-player splitscreen multiplayer. Even if it doesn't fully capture what made the original GoldenEye so addictive, it's still fun with the right crowd.

Considering all of the extras Eurocom added to Reloaded, I have no doubt the developer tried to make the definitive version of a modern day GoldenEye. However, I still feel like I would've been happier playing a \$10 downloadable HD remake of the original game, similar to last year's XBLA release of Perfect Dark. GoldenEye 007: Reloaded still entertains, but stripped of its nostalgia it fails to reach the status of an elite agent. — **Jeff Marchiava**

7

PS3 • X360

» Concept

Bring The Wii's recent GoldenEye remake to consoles that support HD graphics, normal controllers, and competent online networks

» Graphics

The HD graphics are an obvious improvement, but the levels are so basic that they still fail to impress

» Sound

Gun sounds are hit or miss, as is the voice acting

» Playability

Exactly what you've come to expect from a modern FPS. The limited sprint is annoying

» Entertainment

Reloaded is a decent shooter, but contains little of what made the original so entertaining

» Replay Value

Moderate

Ultimate Marvel vs. Capcom 3

A mob of new fighters can't hide a lack of innovation

**Style 1 or 2-Player Fighting (2-Player Online) Publisher Capcom
Developer Capcom Release November 15 ESRB T**



Ultimate Marvel vs. Capcom 3 takes the shotgun approach to rejuvenation by injecting 12 new fighters into the series. While most of these new characters are unique, the lack of innovation beyond them may leave owners of the original feeling unsatisfied when the honeymoon stage with the new cast ends.

On the Capcom side we see the return of Strider, whose wall-jumping and lengthy sword swipes make nimbly cutting down opponents a treat. Newcomer Phoenix Wright is the most fascinating fighter since Super Street Fighter IV's oily Turk, Hakan. The bumbling lawyer specializes

in clumsy indirect attacks while collecting evidence and swapping between investigation and accusation modes. In Marvel's corner we have the debut of superheroes like Hawkeye, Ghost Rider, and Doctor Strange. Ghost Rider's clunky melee combat is compensated for by a screen-clearing chain whip that can be used to pummel foes with the flames of Justice. Capcom reached deep into Marvel's backlog for Rocket Raccoon, an anthropomorphic varmint armed to the teeth with entertaining weapons. I loved clobbering fools with bear traps, laser rifles, handguns and log pendulums that would make the Ewoks proud. None of these new fighters are self-contained powerhouses like Sentinel or Phoenix, but they go a long way to jazz up the already solid tag-team combat.

While a host of colorful new heroes is cool, there isn't much else that makes this iteration

Ultimate. Online play adds a spectator mode, which should have been there to begin with. Capcom included new color palettes and a new camera angle for certain stages, but these additions feel trivial in the end. Where is the replay channel or tournament structure that made Super Street Fighter IV such an improvement over the original? Lastly, I'm befuddled by Capcom's decision to leave DLC characters Jill Valentine and Shuma-Gorath off the disc.

Ultimate Marvel vs. Capcom 3 is the perfect choice for curious fighters to check out the most complete entry in the series. Along with the new fighters, hardcore veterans may appreciate the tweaks Capcom has made to damage and combo timing in an effort to rebalance the game. Midding fans who already played a bunch of the original and are only interested in new characters for novelty value will likely be left wanting. — **Tim Turi**

Head to gameinformer.com for an extended review

8

» Concept

Gave Capcom's crossover fighter a shot in the arm with a dozen new combatants

» Graphics

Crisp and frantic, just like the original. The heavily shaded models still impress

» Sound

The music is largely forgettable, but the fighters' quips earn the occasional chuckle

» Playability

Playing with an arcade stick is the true way to experience this game. If you're used to playing fighters with a controller, however, you'll find no issues here

» Entertainment

With slew of new colorful characters, this version presents a great jumping-on point for newcomers, and the subtle gameplay tweaks may interest veterans. Everyone else who bought the original may be left wanting

» Replay Value

Moderate



Halo: Combat Evolved Anniversary

Melding the old and the new

8.5

gameformer
SILVER

Style 1 or 2-Player Shooter (16-Player Online) Publisher Microsoft
Developer 343 Industries, Saber Interactive, Certain Affinity Release November 18 ESRB M

Concept
Relive the classic shooter with some added modern touches

Graphics
The graphical overhaul is impressive, but doesn't match the detail of a brand-new game

Sound
Whether you listen to the original soundtrack or the remastered version, the iconic musical themes establish a perfect mood

Playability
Halo set the standard for modern console FPS controls, and that excellent layout has made a fine transition to the 360

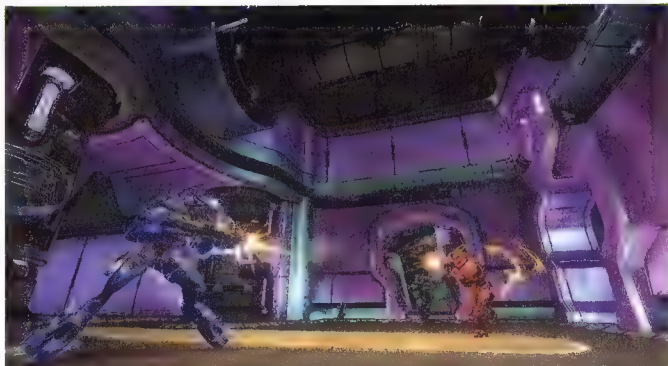
Emotional Appeal
Though it shows its age at times, Halo's combat is still meticulously paced and thrilling

Replay Value
Moderately High

Ten years ago, Halo single-handedly managed to make gamers sit up and pay attention to the fledgling Xbox. Redefining the potential scope and ambition of a console FPS, Bungie's original game established a benchmark for control, pacing, universe-building, and multiplayer options that would be emulated for years. The revamped anniversary edition of the game does an excellent job of honoring that legacy, even if the project as a whole feels like it's seeking an identity in the middle ground between new and old.

While longtime fans will remember *Combat Evolved* as the birth of the series, newer players should note that Anniversary picks up the story right where Reach left off. Master Chief awakes from cryosleep as a Covenant armada descends on the ship from which he escaped Reach. The armored hero and his shipmates crash land on a mysterious ring world and begin to unravel its secrets. While the story remains nearly untouched, keen-eyed players will note the addition of some new story content through several scattered terminals. Each triggers a cinematic that expands on the Halo fiction in new ways, offering untold details about the Flood, the Forerunners, and other story points.

Halo's campaign levels and combat are exactly as you remember them, and that's good and bad. Battles are furious and intense, with one combat zone after another feeling distinct and challenging. I love the scope of the fights, with dozens of enemies, plenty of space, and choices about where to make your stand. The signature weapons of the series are all in place, from the joy of sticky plasma grenades to the overwhelming power and precision of the pistol. An urgency and excitement pervades the action, and it's easy to get caught up in the flow of the



fights and career from one encounter to the next. Speaking as a player who has made his way through these levels many times before, the charm hasn't worn off. Those looking for a new challenge will find that gameplay-altering skulls have been added to the game. Track these hidden collectibles down, and you can change up the action in interesting ways, like doubling enemy health or disabling auto-aim. I'm also pleased with the two-player cooperative play over Xbox Live; co-op has always been my favorite way to experience this game, and I love having local and online options.

Unfortunately, because the game play has been left unaltered, players are also stuck with one of Halo's less fondly remembered features: Disastrous checkpoint placement can regularly derail the fun. You'll backtrack through almost every level in the game at some point. Shields recharge slowly, and the health system often leaves you badly damaged right before a big fight. The lack of objective markers will often have you searching through empty corridors long enough to push your patience to the limit.

We were more accepting of these flaws a decade ago, but time and advancing design make the frustrations more noticeable.

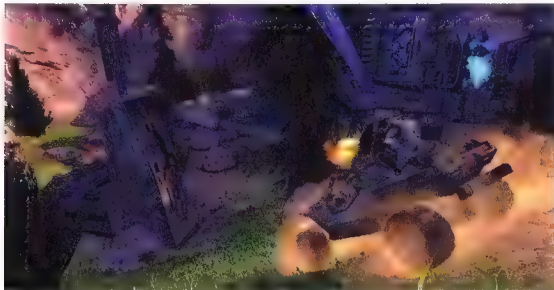
I love the improvements that have been made to the game's visuals – from surface textures and lighting to distant environmental vistas and character art. Your memory can play tricks on you, convincing you that it doesn't look all that different. That's why the ability to tap the Back button and switch to the original visuals on the fly is so much fun. I regularly found myself pausing to flip back and forth between the two styles, and marveling at how far games have

come in a decade. For those with the necessary display, the game can also be played in 3D, but it doesn't add anything to the experience.

I was surprised that I enjoyed another new feature: Kinect support. Far from the invasive motion nonsense I was worried about (which you can use in the menus, if you care), Kinect owners will have access to a cool voice-activated scanner. Analyze a weapon, enemy, or other notable feature, and it enters a library where you can learn more about it. It's a small but enjoyable addition, especially for collectible-oriented players.

Even as Halo's campaign has been meticulously recreated, the same can't be said for the multiplayer experience. Instead, several classic maps have been remade for play in the Halo: Reach multiplayer system. I enjoyed these remakes quite a bit, as well as the new Firefight map that's been added, but punts would be right in calling foul. This is not the multiplayer experience of the original game. On the other hand, Reach's excellent leveling, matchmaking, weapon balancing, character customization, and game modes are hard to complain about. You can play these maps from either your Anniversary disc or by using an included map download code to play in Reach. For those only interested in playing multiplayer, it's worth noting that the Anniversary map pack for Reach can be purchased over Xbox Live separately for only \$15 rather than Anniversary's full \$40 price tag.

Halo Anniversary sits in a middle ground between faithful remake and spirited reinvention. Players who want an exact replica of the original will be frustrated by the absence of a faithful multiplayer experience. Hardcore modern gamers could be annoyed by the dated nature of the campaign design. However, for the majority of players who fit in the space in between, this classic game has received a new coat of paint and gives you reason enough to re-enter the fold. **—Matt Müller**



Minecraft

MORE THAN JUST A GAME FOR THE KID



IGN **GAME OF THE MONTH** GAMESPOT **GOLD**

Style 1-Player Action (Multiplayer Varies By Server) Publisher Mojang
Developer Mojang Release November 18 ESRB RP

9.25

RP

» Concept

Set players loose in an infinite, random world that can be reshaped in any way you can imagine

» Graphics

The eight-bit style visuals are primitive but charming. I recommend finding a texture pack mod that's to your liking, though

» Sound

The minimalist music is great, and hearing monster sounds when you're hundreds of feet below ground is a fantastic tension builder

» **Playability**
Exploring, mining, building, and fighting all work wonderfully from the first-person viewpoint

» **Entertainment**
You mostly have to make your own fun in Minecraft, but the tools it gives you to do so are incredibly powerful

» **Replay Value**
High

Despite ostensibly being a PC game, Mojang's unprecedented indie smash hit has more in common with an eclectic box of toys than with *Skyrim* or *Warcraft*. Like a well-rounded set of trucks, balls, blocks, and figurines, *Minecraft* gives you the tools you need to bring your imagination to life. But with a real-time simulation constantly running, this is more like *Toy Story* than a LEGO set.

Minecraft has been out in beta form for several months, but officially released on November 18 with the addition of more RPG-like elements (thus this review, which speaks solely to the current version of the game). Those additions are a mixed bag at best, but *Minecraft* is an amazing achievement regardless.

Wandering the infinite, randomly generated 3D world of *Minecraft* is a game in itself. The mathematical magic Mojang has working inside the game's code creates fantastic vistas, sprawling cavern complexes, towering mountains, and much more while relying on very few pre-defined pieces like the buildings that make up NPC villages. Every world is unique, fascinating, and bursting with possibility. Whichever direction you choose, wondrous adventure awaits. It can take innumerable forms: befriending a pack of wolves, clearing out a monster-filled dungeon, creating a mountainside terrace farm, planting a forest, or sailing across a sea are just the beginning.

Interacting with the world takes two fundamental forms: removing and placing blocks, and combining materials to make new tools/blocks/decorations/weapons/etc. When you start out in a fresh world, you'll likely build a rudimentary shelter with a single torch lighting the interior to hide in during the monster-filled nighttime. A few dozen hours later, a skilled builder could have a mountaintop castle (built block by block with quarried stone) with a redstone-powered automatic farm (carved into the land by hand, with harvesting machines built from rare deep ores). Persistence leads to dungeons with traps set to kill the monsters that spawn within (including controlled flooding to deposit all the drops in a central location), and even a high-speed rail system to quickly travel through expansive mines.

Alternatively, you could build *whatever* you can imagine. The interactions between your

character, machines, plants, animals, and monsters can be combined to bring just about anything to life. However, if you're more of an adventurer than a builder, getting the materials in the first place is more than half the fun.

Despite having very few explicit goals, *Minecraft* generates fantastic scenarios. Once, while following a vein of ore a few meters below my underground home, I stumbled across an enormous abandoned mine. The crumbling mineshifts converged on a hundred-meter tall waterfall. While carving a path along the cliff face with my mining pick to try to reach the other side, skeletal archers began peppering me with arrows from above. I tried to retreat to safety, but an arrow knocked me from my hastily carved ledge and I plummeted to my doom—or would have, had the waterfall not poured into a giant lake that cushioned my fall.

Utterly lost, low on the wood needed to craft more torches, and a mile or so below the surface, I was having an amazing time without being told to advance on the glowing arrow marking an enemy position or collect a dozen bear pelts to help a poor hunter. The sense of accomplishment when I finally made it back home with my inventory full of fabulous rare metals was unparalleled.

The beauty of *Minecraft* is that no two players' experiences are alike. What I just described was the natural outcome of my randomly generated world, the path I took through it, and a healthy dose of random die rolls. You'll have an entirely different adventure, but *Minecraft*'s unrivaled content generation means that no matter your world, you always have something awesome to do.

The final piece of the *Minecraft* puzzle is the community. That auto-farming castle—wouldn't it be cooler if your friends could admire it? Find a good multiplayer server (or run one of your own) and that becomes reality. Network performance is occasionally problematic, with any hint of latency or overstressed servers causing frustrating desynchronization, but on a good server it's a non-issue.

The millions-strong global *Minecraft* community has made the game far more than the sum of its download. Gamers collaborate to design amazing machines for you to draw inspiration

from and modders make everything from texture packs to whole new dimensions and power sources. *Minecraft* is more of a platform than a game in some ways. Diving into the mod scene can extend *Minecraft* miles beyond the base game.

While the toybox/platform side of *Minecraft* is incredible, the "game" side of it is lacking. The few explicit goals it dangles in front of you by way of its achievement and enchanting systems are lame, unwelcome distractions from the goals you set for yourself. The hellish Nether dimension is a fun place to explore but lacks content, and the boss fight at the end of the game isn't worth the effort to get to it. If you can't make your own fun or are heavily slanted toward achievement rather than exploration or building, *Minecraft*'s lack of structure may disappoint you.

Reviewing a game that sold four million copies before its official release may seem like an exercise in futility, but *Minecraft* is a phenomenon that deserves all of the many accolades it has already received. I'd love to see achievers thrown a bone at some point, and for NPC villages to have some kind of interaction, and for more interesting monsters to appear, and for Mojang to give me a pony. Focusing on what isn't present is doing *Minecraft* a grave disservice, though, because Mojang has created a unique and wonderful star in the greater gaming sky. —Adam Blesener



Mario Kart 7



GameFormer
SILVER

Style: 1-Player Racing (8-Player Local or Online) Platformer Nintendo Developer Nintendo Publisher Nintendo December 4 ESRB E

If you've played one Mario Kart, you haven't played them all – but you could go directly from the SNES original to this brand-new 3DS version without missing a beat. The mechanics are almost identical, though the formula benefits from a few decades of balance tweaks and subtle improvements. The hatin' half of the game-playing population can make as much fun of me as they want, but I can't help but fall in love all over again with Mario Kart when Nintendo executes the classic gameplay this well.

As always, players are encouraged to find a rally-like rhythm of powerslides through the zaniest courses Nintendo could dream up while dodging gonzo power-ups and environmental hazards. Races naturally stay close as players in worse positions get better items. The occasional total screw job (for example, getting blue shelled, then lightning bolted during a jump right before the end of the race) is frustrating, but skill wins 90 percent of the races. I rarely placed poorly because of random chance rather than driver error – tough though that may be to admit.

Mario Kart is almost exactly how you remember it, but what tweaks have been made are generally positive. Powerslide-boosting (blue sparking, in the vernacular) is now dependent

on the degree of the slide instead of d-pad gymnastics, meaning that boosting down straightaways is a thing of the past. Heavy characters no longer steer like drunken camels, so you can play as DK or Bowser without unintentionally activating hard mode. The much-hyped glider and underwater segments are minimal and kind of neat, and it's cool that they adapted the retro stages to fit MK 7's gameplay systems. I'm less convinced that the return of coins has much effect on gameplay; I think they make you go faster? If nothing else, I dig having something else to aim for during the race.

The new tracks range from good to excellent. Including races that consist of three unique sections instead of three laps is a wonderful choice, that adds much-needed variety. New hazards like airships firing oversized Bullet Bills regularly show up, and alternate paths abound. As much as I adore the Double Dash tracks, this set is the new high water mark for the series. The retro tracks don't have the same wall-to-wall quality, but I appreciate that they have a few new tricks dropped in as well as glider sections.

First-person mode surprised me. I was prepared to hate on the new perspective and its gyroscopic driving controls, just like I despise Mario Kart Wii's motion controls, but it works

well enough to win 150cc races. I'll be sticking to the traditional method, but I can honestly recommend this to people who like first person views or motion control.

Battle Mode is, of course, still stupid and boring. I have never understood why anyone would voluntarily spend any time in this poorly balanced, luck-of-the-draw mode that may as well assign a winner by a random die roll. I guess it's amusing to nail a well-placed green shell shot, but you can do that and have an otherwise fun experience in a proper race.

Nintendo's other big push for Mario Kart 7 is in online play. It seems to work as advertised, but I'm hardly inspired by racing against strangers with no persistent leagues or overall ranking structure to validate my progress. The ability to create communities of users with custom rules (no blue shells, for example) is neat, but the functionality is limited enough that I would rather just race with the default rule set. I see MK 7's online as much more of a distraction than a destination.

Mario Kart 7 isn't 100 percent golden, nor is it going to make believers out of anyone who wrote off the series years ago. Taken on the whole, though, this is one of the best entries in the series. As a fan, I'm thoroughly pleased. **Adam Biesen**

8.5

Concept

Mario leads his pack of friends back to the track to prove they still have the knack

Value

The rock-solid framerate is worth a thousand shaders, and Nintendo is still world-class at building colorful settings

Sound

The audio cues for incoming projectiles are convenient. Donkey Kong's new voice is just awful

Playability

Yep, it's still Mario Kart. The slide-boost mechanic is better balanced this time around, as are the weight classes of racers

Entertainment

This is a fantastic portable edition of the franchise, but there's very little here we haven't seen before

Replay Value

High



PLAYSTATION 3

Ace Combat: Assault Horizon	8.25	Dec-11
Alice Madness Returns	6.75	Jul-11
Bangai-O HD: Missile Fury	7.75	Jul-11
Batman: Arkham City	10	Nov-11
Battlefield 3	9.25	Dec-11
BloodRayne: Betrayal	7	Sep-11
Bodycount	5	Oct-11
Brink	6.75	Jul-11
Burnout Crash	7.5	Nov-11
Call of Juarez: The Cartel	4.5	Sep-11
Captain America: Super Soldier	7.5	Sep-11
Cars 2	7.75	Aug-11
Catherine	7	Aug-11
Crysis	8.25	Dec-11
Dark Souls	8.75	Nov-11
Dead Island	8.5	Oct-11
Dead Rising 2: Off the Record	9.5	Nov-11
Deus Ex: Human Revolution	8.5	Oct-11
Dirt 3	8.75	Jul-11
Diagea 4: A Promise Unforgotten	8.25	Oct-11
Diney Universe	6.5	Dec-11
Driver: San Francisco	8	Nov-11
Duke Nukem Forever	8.75	Aug-11
Dungeon Defenders	7.75	Jul-11
Dungeon Siege II	8	Jul-11
Dungeons & Dragons: Daggerdale	6	Jul-11
Earth Defense Force: Insect Armageddon	8	Aug-11
El Shaddai		
Ascension of the Metatron	9	Sep-11
FEAR 3	7.75	Aug-11
Fancy Pants Adventure, The	7.5	Jul-11

RIFA 12	9	Nov-11
God of War: Origins Collection	9.5	Oct-11
Green Lantern: Rise of the Manhunters	6.5	Aug-11
Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows, Part 2	6.5	Sep-11
House of the Dead: Overkill Extended Cut	8	Dec-11
loo & Shadow of the Colossus Collection, The	9.75	Oct-11
Infamous 2	8.75	Jul-11
I.A. Noire	8.75	Jul-11
LEGO Pirates of the Caribbean: Lord of the Rings	7	Jul-11
War in the North	5.5	Dec-11
Madden NFL 12	7.5	Oct-11
Magic: The Gathering - Duels of the Planeswalkers 2012	8	Aug-11
MX vs. ATV Alive	7	Jul-11
NASCAR Unleashed	7	Dec-11
NBA 2K12	9.5	Nov-11
NCAA Football 12	9	Aug-11
Need for Speed: The Run	7.75	Dec-11
NHL 12	8.75	Oct-11
No More Heroes		
Heroes' Paradise	7.75	Sep-11
Okabu	8	Dec-11
Playday: The Heist	6.5	Dec-11
Pro Evolution Soccer 2012	9	Nov-11
Rage	9	Nov-11
Ratchet & Clank: All 4 One	8.75	Dec-11
Rayman Origins	8.5	Dec-11
Red Faction: Armageddon	7.25	Jul-11
Renegade Ops	8.25	Nov-11
Resident Evil 4	9.5	Nov-11
Resident Evil Code: Veronica X	8.5	Nov-11

8.5 | Rayman Origins

Platform PS3 • 360 Release November 15 ESRB E10+ Issue December '11

If you only know about Rayman from his affiliation with the now-ubiquitous Rabbids, that probably wasn't the best introduction. Rayman Origins is the proper way to catch up with the character, who finally has a game that puts him squarely in the majors. — Jeff Cork

Resistance 3	7	Oct-11
Rock of Ages	7	Nov-11
Rocksmith	8.25	Dec-11
Saints Row: The Third	9	Dec-11
Shadows of the Damned	9.25	Aug-11
Sims 3: Pets, The	7.5	Dec-11
Spylanders: Spyro's Adventure	9	Dec-11
Space Generations	8.75	Dec-11
Spider-Man: Edge of Time	6.5	Dec-11
Super Street Fighter II: Arcade Edition	7.75	Aug-11
Thor: God of Thunder	4.5	Jul-11
Transformers: Dark of the Moon	7.5	Aug-11
Uncharted 3: Drake's Deception	9.5	Dec-11
Warhammer 40,000: Space Marine	8	Nov-11
X-Men Destiny	7	Nov-11

XBOX 360

Ace Combat: Assault Horizon	8.25	Dec-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
Bastion	9.25	Sep-11
Batman: Arkham City	10	Nov-11
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Captain America: Super Soldier	7.5	Sep-11
Cars 2	7.75	Aug-11
Catherine	7	Aug-11
Child of Eden	8	Jul-11
Crimson Alliance	8.75	Oct-11
Dance Central 2	8.25	Nov-11
Dark Souls	8.75	Nov-11
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FIFA 12	9	Nov-11
Forza Motorsport 4	9.25	Dec-11
From Dust	8.75	Sep-11
Fruit Ninja Kinect	8	Oct-11
Gating Gears	8	Jul-11
Gears of War 3	9.5	Nov-11
Green Lantern: Rise of the Manhunters	6.5	Aug-11
Guardian Heroes	8.25	Dec-11
Gunslinger: The	8	Oct-11
Half-Minute Hero: Super Mega Neo Climax	8.25	Sep-11
Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows, Part 2	6.5	Sep-11
Hulk Hogan's Main Event	1	Dec-11
Insanely Twisted Shadow Planet	8	Sep-11
Just Dance 3	6	Dec-11

the score

7.5 | Kinect Disneyland Adventures

Platform 360 Release November 15 ESRB E10+

Disneyland Adventures is essentially a series of minigames based on familiar park attractions, all wrapped up in a faithfully realized recreation of the Magic Kingdom. It might not offer the same sights and sounds as an actual trip to Anaheim, but families that are looking for a way to escape the winter blues with a vacation (even a virtual one) should check it out. — Jeff Cork

4 | Stronghold 3

Platform PC Release October 25 ESRB T

I wish I could say something positive about Stronghold 3. The closest I can come is to call it Stronghold 1 with better graphics. Even that is unfair to the 2001 original, which at least worked on a basic level — a task sadly above Stronghold 3's capabilities. — Adam Biessener

7.5 | LEGO Harry Potter 5-7

Platform PS3 • 360 Release November 11 ESRB E10+

LEGO Harry Potter 5-7 is a charming farewell to the series. As with a lot of Traveller's Tales' games, you won't see a whole lot of crazy gameplay innovations or surprises, but it's reliably entertaining and appropriate for a wide range of gamers, Potterphiles or not. — Jeff Cork

3.75 | Otomedius Excellent

Platform 360 Release November 8 ESRB T

Otomedius Excellent is absurd, puts far too much emphasis on breast size, and will not make sense to anyone who speaks English as their first language. Also, it's no fun to play. — Kyle Hilliard

5 | Raving Rabbids: Alive & Kicking

Platform 360 Release November 8 ESRB E10+

Raving Rabbids: Alive and Kicking delivers the same gross-out minigames and stupidity that the franchise is known for, with a twist: This one uses Kinect. It also adds low load times, poor controls, and a palpable sense of déjà vu. — Jeff Cork

3 | Sacred 2: The Fallen Lords of Winter

Platform PC Release October 28 ESRB T

I weep because the feature list reads like the space empire fantasy I've imagined since I was old enough to dream of conquering the galaxy, yet developer Kerberos utterly fails to make most of them work, much less combine them into a compelling game. — Adam Biessener

I Have No Mouth, Screaming

When David Sears heard that publisher Cyberdreams was adapting one of Harlan Ellison's short stories into a game, the longtime fan's mind began racing. "I was thinking 'Oh, it could be 'Repent, Harlequin! Said the Ticktockman'; or maybe 'A Boy and His Dog'; and it's going to be some kind of RPG or something,'" Sears recalls. "And they said, 'No, it's 'I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream,' and I was like 'What?' At the time, in the game-development community, people said, 'Oh I love Ellison's stories, but there's no way you could turn that into a game.' I thought, 'Wow, what have I gotten into?'"

To make the task even more daunting, this was Sears' first job in game development. Previously, he was a writer and assistant editor at *Compute* magazine. A feature he wrote on Cyberdreams' H.R. Geiger collaboration *Dark Seed* led to a job writing a clue book for the adventure game in the pre-Internet era of 1992, which in turn led to the current offer. Spend a week with the notoriously prickly author Ellison and distill his iconic work — one of the top 10 most reprinted stories in the English language — into his first game-design document.

Finding An In

Sears says that Ellison immediately made him feel welcome. The two talked for a while about Ellison's writings, science fiction, and other areas of common interest. Sears' fears of being seen as a fanboy or as being ignorant were

unfounded. "I don't want to damage his reputation, because I'm sure he spent decades building it up, but he's a real rascal with a heart of gold — but he doesn't tolerate idiots," Sears says.

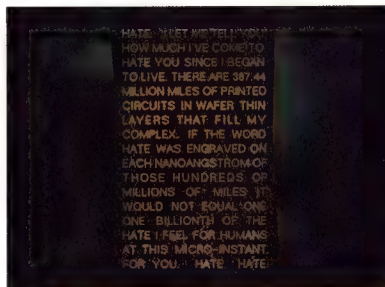
Now came the tough part: turning a tale set in a hopeless world featuring five characters with no real histories into something playable. The story ends with four of the characters dead, with the remaining survivor transformed into a shapeless mass of goo (see sidebar). Super Mario Bros., it wasn't. The breakthrough came with a simple question. "The question David posed to Harlan that got them started was 'Why were these people saved? Why did AM decide to save them?'" recalls David Mullich, who produced the game. Ellison was put off by the question, which he told Sears he'd never been asked before. Realizing they were onto something, the pair began working on their concept. The story would be split into five vignettes, each based on one of the characters.

"That was going to be the premise of the game — finding out why these characters had been chosen by AM to be tortured and resurrected endlessly and forever," Sears says. "And then he immediately sat down and started typing on his Olympic

manual typewriter."

Over the next few days, Ellison and Sears began fleshing out each of the five characters, creating deeper histories for them and delving into why they were selected. "I went to work, and I started making my notes, but he had to go first and come up with a premise," Sears says.

"Harlan wanted to touch on controversial themes," Mullich recalls. "Each one dealt with a very strong theme." Some of the issues the game explored included the nature of guilt, sexual assault, and, perhaps most famously, the Holocaust. It was an early attempt to tackle genuinely mature subject matter in an era where "mature" typically meant showing a



and I Must

am

by Jeff Cork

While some younger readers might find it hard to believe, our culture's interest in post-apocalyptic settings didn't originate with the *Fallout* series. Harlan Ellison's 1967 short story "I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream," is an early landmark, offering readers an unimaginably bleak look at humanity's future, with five desperate souls enduring the constant torture of a deranged AI. Despite its sparse characterization and lack of a traditional narrative, it was adapted into a computer game of the same name in 1995. Here's the story of how Ellison and a pair of designers transformed the story into one of the most disturbing point-and-click adventure games of all time.

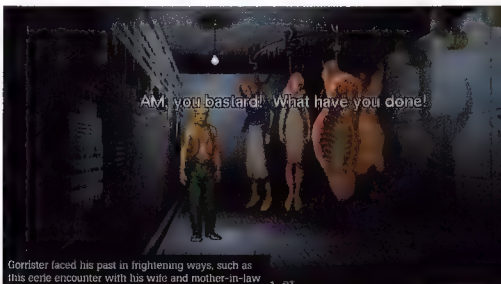
heroine in a bra.

Since Ellison was responsible for steering the adaptation's creative direction, Sears found himself with free time in that first week while he waited for Ellison's notes. The writer would offer Sears distractions, such as recommending that he go out onto the home's balcony and enjoy the view. When those didn't work, Ellison dug into Sears' interests. "What do you like to read? Do you like comics?" Sears recalls Ellison asking, with Sears replying that he liked Neil Gaiman's *Sandman* series. "Dialing from memory he makes a call and says 'Hey Neil, this is David, I'm collaborating with him on a game for Cyberdreams. He's a fan and he'd love to talk to you about your work.'" So Neil

Gaiman talked to me for about an hour, straight off the plane from Mississippi." Later, Sears had lunch with *Babylon 5* writer and producer J. Michael Straczynski, and was among the first to see the show's pilot episode. "Harlan went out of his way to be a great host."

Of course, there was still plenty of work to do. "I worked with [Ellison's notes] over the course of a week in collaboration with Harlan to turn out what we both thought was a really, really good design document," Sears says.

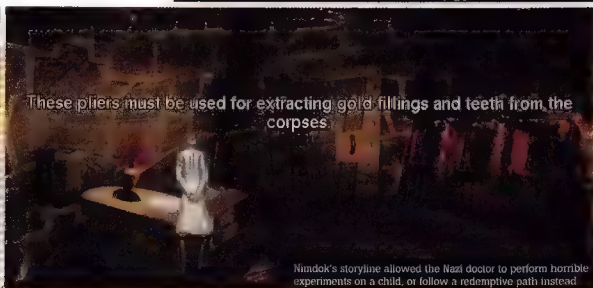
"Cyberdreams disagreed, and they said it was just a proposal." Sears collaborated with Ellison for an additional week before returning home to Mississippi, where he finished his work on the document over the next six weeks.



Gorrister faced his past in frightening ways, such as this eerie encounter with his wife and mother-in-law.



Ted is wise in trusting his instincts.



Nimdek's storyline allowed the Nazi doctor to perform horrible experiments on a child, or follow a redemptive path instead.

Screenshots courtesy of Mike Parks

Shaping The Story

Shortly afterward, Mullich, a producer at Cyberdreams, got involved in the project. For him, the opportunity to work with the license was the realization of a dream. "I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream" is my favorite short story of all time," he recalls. Coincidentally, Mullich learned about the game during a talk at a gaming industry conference. "There was a presentation there with David Sears and Harlan Ellison talking about this great game that they had developed, and I was in the audience for that. I was thinking at the time 'Harlan is my favorite short-story writer, this is my favorite short story, and who's this guy David Sears? I've never heard of him before. I should be the one doing this game!' So that's how I came into it."

Mullich whipped Sears' inaugural work into shape for Cyberdreams. "It wasn't organized in the way that a typical game design document is. As I went through it, the story was great and I loved how he'd adapted the work, but I could tell that it was overly simplistic. There weren't enough puzzles in it, there wasn't enough dialogue, and it wasn't formatted in a way that would be easy for a programming team to understand it." It was up to Mullich to meet with

Ellison and revise the document. There, he got a dose of the Ellison that fans are more familiar with. Mullich was preparing to give a presentation of an early build of the game on a PC in Ellison's kitchen. Ellison made a vague gesture toward an outlet, which was hidden under a potted plant, behind a booth. Noticing Mullich's difficulty in finding it, Ellison muttered, "Another one of the Cyberdreams' brain trust."

Fortunately, Mullich was able to establish a friendly working relationship by talking about his desire to make games that were intellectually stimulating, such as his Apple PC game based on *The Prisoner* television show. That led to a more productive environment.

Mullich would go to Ellison with proposed dialogue, and Ellison would revise it. "He'd come out 20 minutes later with pure gold. And other times he'd leave stuff and I'd say Harlan, this is terrible. You can do better than this. He'd go 'Ack, you're right,' and he'd go back and revise it. We established a working relationship of mutual respect where we could criticize each other, which was good. Because there was a lot of creative work I had to do." Mullich estimates that Ellison wrote about 20 percent of the game's dialogue, with the remaining 80 percent split evenly between Sears and himself.

Turning It All Into A Game

Ellison wasn't a gamer, which meant that Mullich sometimes had to explain some of the medium's conventions to the author. One of Gorrister's puzzles, for example, involved his wife and mother-in-law trapped in a freezer, dangling from meathooks. Gorrister's story revolved around the character forgiving his family for a string of traumas, and Ellison thought he had come up with a great mind-teaser. "To solve the puzzle you have to let her off the hook," Mullich remembers Ellison saying. "You metaphorically have to take her off the hook. In order to let it go, you physically have to do that. No one will think of that!" Mullich had to break it to him gently that players were acclimated to doing just that. "Harlan, that's the first thing that the player is going to do," Mullich told him. "They go in, they click everything they can, and that's the first thing they're going to do."

Even if Ellison didn't know much about game design, his pragmatism and flexibility made the process much easier. "The reason he told me [he got involved with the project] was he'd never done a game before and he was interested in taking on the challenge," Mullich says. "Fortunately he was really good at knowing what was practical and what wasn't. This

The Characters

To say that adapting the short story into a game was challenging is an understatement. Aside from a few descriptive sentences and skeletal backstories, the story's five characters are essentially sketches. This is how Harlan Ellison and designers David Sears and David Mullich transformed those stark outlines into fully realized characters with individual plotlines.



Ellen

"She was tortured. Black women in video games? Someone suffering the psychic fallout of being brutally raped? Again, kind of a groundbreaking character," Sears says. "I most remember staying up late across several nights, and writing the dialogue for the conversation for the confrontation between Ellen and her rapist," says Mullich. "My infant son was undergoing chemotherapy at that time, and he would have week-long stays in the hospital. I'd stay with him overnight on those occasions, and we'd share the hospital room with another child cancer patient. One time we shared a room with a teenage girl whose chances weren't good, and she knew it. One night she woke up terrified and had to speak to a nurse to calm her down. I channeled that memory when trying to imagine the terror Ellen would have gone through in confronting her rapist."

Nimdok

"What I most remember about Nimdok is waiting for the controversy that never came about his story involving the Holocaust," Mullich recalls. "He was blessed and cursed with a memorable name, and one of the most diabolical back stories," Sears adds. "Certainly, if we wanted to do something like that [now] we would spend a lot more time defining the lines we wouldn't cross, careful presentation of this character, and we certainly couldn't let people know right away what he was. You'd have to build an affinity for him and then we'd slowly reveal these horrors. At the time, we were still on the frontier. The industry was still small enough where publishers would take crazy chances on stuff and see if it stuck." Some of those crazy chances include allowing the player to take on the role of a Nazi doctor, performing spinal surgery on a child in a concentration camp, and the Holocaust setting itself.

Ted

"I remember having some questions about the storyline David Sears had written for Ted, but when I showed it to Harlan, he said that Sears had written a story very different from what they originally discussed," Mullich says. "However, when I asked him to tell me about the story he and Sears had originally planned for Ted, Harlan said he couldn't remember it. We discussed several ways of altering the story. Unfortunately I don't remember any of the details, but I do remember that I made one suggestion that caused Harlan to give me his most cutting insult: 'You're thinking like a television producer!'" Sears' memories are as foggy as Ellison's were at the time, though he offers a possible explanation for Ted's fashion choice of a sweater: "Ted around his neck: 'Tupples were popular at the time.'"

Benny

"This was my least favorite of the storylines, although I don't quite remember why I didn't much care for it," Mullich says. Benny's storyline focused on redemption and forgiveness, as the character found himself haunted by people he betrayed as he explored a brutal tribal society. "Someone recently reminded me that Benny was the character who was the most altered from the original story, in which he was a homosexual scientist. Looking back, I think it might have been a lost opportunity to write a story about someone struggling with the challenges of being homosexual." Sears recalls the gay angle, and says that he remembered it being present in his initial draft, even though Benny mentions having a wife. "I believe he was still gay in our version. Even if you have a wife, that doesn't mean you're not. It might have been a 'dropped thread.'"

Gorrister

"This was my favorite of the storylines. I loved the artwork — the desert, the iron Zeppelin — and I found the story to be the most metaphorical and dream-like," says Mullich. "Gorrister's world was indeed rich with memorable locations, which he navigated while struggling to cope with feelings about his estranged wife. When asked what he remembers about Gorrister's storyline, Sears is quick to respond: 'Meathooks,' he says, laughing. "I think I'm revealing a little more about how my mind works than I'd intended." He also remembers an appearance from one of the game's memorable NPCs, a talking jackal. "I do remember thinking we need a talking head in here, and it ended up being a jackal. I don't remember if that was Harlan or me."

I have no mouth...and I must scream.

The Story

"I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream" was first published in the magazine *Asimov's Science Fiction* in March 1967. It's set 109 years after the collapse of human civilization following a war between the U.S., China, and Russia. A group of computers called AM, short for Allied Mastercomputer, became self-aware, taking control of the war effort and eliminating everyone on the planet aside from five survivors. Those remaining few have spent the intervening years being continually tortured physically and psychologically by AM. The story concludes with the characters attacking one another after being led on a fruitless hike with the promise of food at journey's end. When they arrive at their destination, they discover canned goods, but no can opener. The five attack and kill each other, with AM intervening just before the story's narrator, Ted, is able to take his own life. In retaliation, and to prevent his last plying from harming himself, AM transforms Ted into a blob of goo. The story ends with the titular line, "I have no mouth, and I must scream."

far along, he wouldn't take something that he wasn't happy with and Jettison it completely, he'd try to make adjustments to it and adapt it so that it would work at least a little bit better. He was great to work with."

Sears had a similar experience when working on the game's multiple endings. He had to explain to Ellison why players wouldn't have been satisfied if all paths led to crushing defeat. "OK. This is the thing about games," he explained. "We can't have only negative, punishing endings. We can have an optimistic ending. Yeah, we're giving humanity another shot, but at the same time it's Harlan's universe, and there's every chance these people are going to screw it up again."

Once the game design was completed, Cyberdreams made the decision to shift development away from its internal team and have Dreamer's Guild take the reins. Mullich says the studio already had an internal game engine that was appropriate for *I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream*, which made the decision easier.

The Aftermath

The game was published on Halloween, 1995, an appropriate release for a game that dealt with uncomfortably realistic horrors. Critics raved about the game's often depressing content and the willingness to tackle previously taboo topics. As both Sears and Mullich said time and time

again, though the subject matter was gruesome and Ellison was at times notoriously tough to work with, their work on *I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream* remains a creative high point in their careers.

Sears, now a creative director at Ubisoft working on the new *Rainbow 6 Patriots*, actually credits Ellison for his career. About eight weeks after finishing his work with the game, Sears says he got a call from the author. "Hey listen, I'm the keynote speaker at GDC," Ellison said. "I want you to speak on a panel with me, and I want you to have a job in Los Angeles, because you're too good to spend your time in Mississippi."

After finishing the pre-keynote dinner, Ellison took the stage and made an announcement: David Sears was great to work with, and he needed a job. Before Ellison was going to give his presentation, he wanted everyone to bring their business cards up to the stage and put them in a glass fishbowl that he'd brought with him. "And he's like 'I'm not kidding,'" Sears says. "And after the keynote, David will draw one card from the bowl, and that's who he will work for." I'm pretty comfortable talking in large groups, but at the time not so much. We filled up half the fishbowl, so I had a full Rolodex just for showing up. Three days later I had a job at Virgin Games.

"If he called me today and said, 'I need you to fix the plumbing in my bathroom,' I'd be on a plane." ❖

The game's gritty visuals were a perfect match for the content

Cracked linoleum. Broken fixtures. Disgusting

And yellow. Always yellow. Why does yellow make me sweat?

I hope that AM isn't leading me on another futile trip through a lava field!

Talk to

AM is insane. Why do you think it brought you live down here? You gave it life; it took its own sentence, but it has been denied mobility. I can think. It can funnel and scream, but it cannot dream or aspire to be a star or enjoy a sense of its own reality. It is quadruple. A thing that thinks it is a thing with skin. Got steadily crazier every moment. Has playing with you

It will be an honor to work under you, Dr. Nimmoak

Talk to the anesthetist

Know Your South Park

Think you're an expert on the history of Trey and Matt's "quiet mountain town?" Test your knowledge with these South Park trivia questions.



- South Park's original short, "The Spirit of Christmas," was included as a hidden file on the first printing of what EA game?
 - SSX
 - Tiger Woods PGA Tour Golf
 - Sled Storm
 - Madden '99
- Which South Park character is not performed by Trey Parker?
 - Mr. Garrison
 - Officer Barbrady
 - Randy Marsh
 - Butters Stotch
- How many seasons of the show have been completed?
 - 13
 - 14
 - 15
 - 16
- Which South Park game had you input codes into a Cheesy Poofs-branded decoder?
 - Chef's Luv Shack
 - South Park Rally
 - South Park
 - South Park Let's Go Tower Defense Play!
- Trey Parker and Matt Stone created another show for Comedy Central. What was it?
 - Crank Yankers
 - That's My Bush!
 - Krod Mandoon
 - Kid Notorious
- Which episode featured the boys trying to prevent an altered re-release of *Raiders of the Lost Ark*?
 - "Free Hat"
 - "Good Times With Weapons"
 - "Quest For Ratings"
 - "Medicinal Fried Chicken"
- What celebrity was featured as the host of "Fightin' Round The World" in the episode "The New Terrance and Phillip Movie Trailer"?
 - Kanye West
 - Rob Reiner
 - Russell Crowe
 - Colin Farrell
- What console never featured a South Park game?
 - Game Boy Color
 - Dreamcast
 - Nintendo 64
 - PC
- What actual in-game *World of Warcraft* item was used as the visual basis for the *Sword of a Thousand Truths* in "Make Love, Not Warcraft"?
 - Ashbringer
 - Thunderfury
 - The Hungering Cold
 - Quel'Serrar
- What gaming character never appeared in the *Imaginationland* episodes?
 - Wario
 - Ganondorf
 - Akuma
 - Sackboy

PHOTO: SOUTH PARK

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